
BENNINGTON COLLEGE STUDY

Definition

The Bennington College study was conducted by sociologist Theodore Newcomb from 1935 until 1939. The study examined the attitudes of students attending the then all-female Bennington College early in the college's history; indeed, the study began during the first year that the college had a senior class. The study is notable not only for the findings it yielded in relation to group influence on individual attitudes, but also because of its methodological significance in being the first major study to interview the same group of individuals about their attitudes on multiple occasions across time.

Background and History

The social climate at the time that the study was conducted was one of change and controversy. Many of the students came from affluent families with very conservative political attitudes. The faculty at Bennington College, however, were predominantly male, social activists in their 30s with liberal social, political, and economic attitudes.

Beginning in 1935 with the incoming freshman class, Newcomb measured the Bennington College women's attitudes toward nine social and economic issues. He then reassessed the women's attitudes each year until 1939. Most of the women's attitudes changed from conservative to liberal. Newcomb concluded that the college's social climate was liberal enough that students perceived liberal, as opposed to conservative, attitudes as the social norm, a norm that then became their reference group.

A few individuals, however, did not change their attitudes in the liberal direction. Two things seemed to predict who would and would not change their attitudes. The first was the degree of involvement of the student in the college community. Students who desired more independence from their families and who wanted to take a more active role in college activities changed their attitudes more than those students who desired to maintain close familial ties. The second, but related, factor was the personality of the individuals who did not change their attitudes. These individuals tended to have lower self-esteem, be more socially insecure, and be more socially isolated.

Importantly, the attitude change observed among the majority of the Bennington College students was quite stable. In 1960–1961, Newcomb conducted a follow-up study with the women who participated in the initial study. The correlation between the women's attitudes at the time of graduation and their attitudes in the early 1960s was .47, suggesting remarkable consistency in the attitudes over the 20+ year span of time. Additional follow-up studies up to 50 years later showed similar patterns of stability in attitudes over time.

Importance and Consequences

The fact that the majority of the women's attitudes changed from conservative to liberal over the course of their 4 years in college, remained remarkably consistent from that point on suggests that late adolescence is a key time for change and influence in people's social and political attitudes. More importantly, however, the Bennington College study highlights the influence of a group on individual attitudes and preferences. The salience of the liberal group norm at the college, in combination with students' willingness to break with existing beliefs and a desire to assume leadership positions within the group, facilitated the ease with which the majority of women changed their attitudes from conservative to liberal.

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See also Attitudes; Reference Group

Further Readings

- Newcomb, T. (1943). *Personality and social change: Attitude formation in a student community*. New York: Dryden.
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BETRAYAL

Definition

Betrayal refers to situations in which individuals (victims) believe that a relationship partner (a perpetrator) has harmed them by knowingly violating a norm

governing their relationship. In this context, norms refer to expectations about how the relationship partners should treat one another. Typical betrayals might involve witnessing a romantic partner flirt with somebody else at a party or learning that a good friend has lied to you about something important. Although betrayals are especially likely to be experienced in close relationships, they can also be experienced in more casual relationships. For example, individuals may feel betrayed when a casual acquaintance spreads nasty gossip about them.

Norms vary in the degree to which they are generally accepted in a given culture versus distinctive to a particular relationship. In 21st-century American culture, for example, most individuals agree that having an extramarital affair and lying to one's partner about it constitutes a betrayal. In contrast, other norms apply only within certain specific relationships (e.g., "We must check in with one another at least once every three hours"). Victims experience betrayal when they perceive a norm violation by the perpetrator, regardless of whether the norm is commonly accepted in the culture or distinctive to that particular relationship.

The Experience of Betrayal

Severe betrayals are among the most painful experiences individuals endure during their lifetimes, frequently resulting in negative emotions such as anger and/or sadness and in motivations to enact revenge and/or to avoid the partner. In extreme cases, betrayals can color all aspects of victims' lives for an extended period of time, leaving them in a state of pain, confusion, and uncertainty. Even in more mild cases, betrayals are upsetting, frequently causing victims to experience impulses toward grudge and retaliation.

As a consequence of its negative effects on victims, betrayals create an interpersonal debt wherein the perpetrator owes some sort of compensation to repair the damage. Imagine that Linda and James are involved in a happy romantic relationship until James lies to Linda about something important. This betrayal temporarily alters the dynamics in their relationship: Linda becomes hurt and angry; James may well experience guilt and remorse. Both partners experience a sense that James has the primary responsibility to get the relationship back on track. In a sense, James owes Linda something, perhaps acknowledging the responsibility to "make it up" to her with gifts or other considerate gestures.

The situation is complicated, however, by perpetrators' and victims' tendencies to experience betrayal incidents from strikingly different perspectives. In a process termed the *empathy gap*, both the victim and the perpetrator engage in self-serving distortions of perspective that allow them to view themselves in the most positive light. Relative to perpetrators, victims regard perpetrator behavior as more arbitrary, incomprehensible, and gratuitous; experience greater distress; describe the transgression as more severe; attribute responsibility more to the perpetrator than to the self; and report that the transgression exerted more damaging and enduring effects on the relationship. Perpetrators experience greater guilt than victims do but also tend to regard victims' reactions as somewhat excessive and out of line with the magnitude of the transgression.

Responding to Betrayal

Victims of betrayal are faced with a difficult decision: to act on the basis of retaliatory impulses or to overcome them in favor of more forgiving responses. Although forgiveness generally predicts enhanced relationship and personal well-being, it is typically incompatible with victims' gut-level impulses. In addition, forgiveness cancels the interpersonal debts created by the betrayal, which is likely to benefit the relationship but also to strip the victim of a privileged status.

Research has identified many factors that promote victims' willingness to forgive betrayals. For example, certain personality characteristics of the victim (e.g., empathy, self-control, lack of entitlement) predict tendencies toward forgiveness. Second, certain properties of the betrayal event itself (e.g., low severity, minimal implication that the perpetrator disrespects the victim, the victim's belief that the betrayal was unintentional or uncontrollable) seem to make forgiveness easier. Third, certain characteristics of the perpetrator-victim relationship (e.g., trust in and commitment toward the perpetrator) predict the willingness to forgive betrayals. Finally, forgiveness is more likely if the perpetrator accepts responsibility for the betrayal by sincerely apologizing and making genuine efforts to atone.

A Benefit of Betrayal

Although relationships are generally better off to the degree that they have a smaller rather than a greater number of betrayal incidents, there is one substantial relationship benefit that can emerge from the

experience of betrayal: Betrayals, and both partners' behaviors in response to them, provide excellent opportunities to evaluate the partner's motivations toward the self.

Because betrayals tend to pit the victim's and the perpetrator's motives against one another, they frequently provide circumstances in which individuals can evaluate the partner's willingness to work toward the betterment of the relationship. For example, if a perpetrator of a betrayal is clearly distraught by the pain caused to the victim and atones sincerely, the victim might actually become more confident in the relationship than before the betrayal was perpetrated. Similarly, if the victim forgives the betrayal despite having every right to hold a grudge, the perpetrator learns valuable information about the victim's devotion to the relationship. In short, although betrayals are frequently harmful to relationships, they can sometimes provide the opportunity to strengthen them.

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See also Forgiveness; Interdependence Theory; Norms, Prescriptive and Descriptive

Further Readings

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- Worthington, E. L. (2005). *Handbook of forgiveness*. New York: Routledge.

Neuroticism (vs. Emotional Stability), *Extraversion* (or Surgency), *Openness to Experience* (also called Culture or Intellect), *Agreeableness* (vs. Antagonism), and *Conscientiousness*. As a memory aid, note that the first letters can be rearranged to spell OCEAN, a term that suggests the vast scope of this model in encompassing personality traits.

The Big Five Dimensions

Personality is structured hierarchically; at the broadest or *domain* level are the Big Five, and below them, at a lower level of generality, are narrower traits or *facets*. Thus, each of the Big Five dimensions is a combination of several distinct but closely related traits or characteristics. For example, most people who like to cooperate with others are also more honest and compassionate. Although there are individual exceptions to this rule, the associations among these characteristics in the general population are strong enough to justify combining them under the broader category of Agreeableness. When specific facets are formally included in a Big Five model, the term *Five-Factor model* is commonly used to describe the hierarchy.

People who score high on Neuroticism are emotionally sensitive; they become upset easily and frequently experience negative emotions. Individual facets include sadness, anger, anxiety/worry, self-consciousness, vulnerability to stress, and a tendency to act impulsively. People who score low on Neuroticism are emotionally stable and calm. Even under stressful conditions, they remain confident and experience few negative emotions.

Highly extraverted people are warm, talkative, and generally like to be around others. They are assertive, active and full of energy, cheerful and high in positive affect, and they prefer stimulating environments. Introverted people, in contrast, like to be alone or with a few close friends. They rarely want to lead others. They are reserved and serious, value their independence, and prefer quiet environments.

People who score high on Openness to Experience are curious, imaginative, have broad interests, and easily embrace unconventional ideas and values. Other facets include sensitivity to aesthetic experiences and fantasy, as well as a rich emotional life. People who are low in Openness have a narrower set of interests and are more conventional in their outlook and behavior. They are closed to new ideas, actions, and value or belief systems. They also experience their emotions less intensely.

BIG FIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS

Definition

The Big Five personality traits are the most basic dimensions that shape the structure of human personality and underlie the regularities in people's thinking, feeling, and behavior. The Big Five are dimensional, which means that each of them describes a continuum between two extreme poles. All people, regardless of gender, age, or culture, share the same basic personality traits, but people differ in their relative standing on each of the traits. The individual Big Five are