

Name: _____ Class: _____

Herd Behavior

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"Herd behavior" is a term used to describe the tendency of individuals to think and act as a group. As you read, take notes on the causes of herd behavior.

Background

- [1] The term "herd behavior" comes from the behavior of animals in herds, particularly when they are in a dangerous situation such as escaping a predator. All of the animals band closely together in a group and, in panic mode, move together as a unit. It is very unusual for a member of the herd to stray from the movement of the unit.



"Herd of Goats" by Unknown is in the public domain.

The term also applies to human behavior, and it usually describes large numbers of people acting the same way at the same time. It often has a connotation¹ of irrationality, as people's actions are driven by emotion rather than by thinking through a situation. Human herd behavior can be observed at large-scale demonstrations, riots, strikes, religious gatherings, sports events, and outbreaks of mob violence. When herd behavior sets in, an individual person's judgment and opinion-forming process shut down as he or she automatically follows the group's movement and behavior.

Examples of Herd Behavior

Herd behavior in humans is frequently observed at times of danger and panic; for example, a fire in a building often causes herd behavior, with people often suspending their individual reasoning and fleeing together in a pack. People in a crisis that requires escape will attempt to move faster than normal, copy the actions of others, interact physically with each other, and ignore alternative strategies in favor of following the mass escape trend.

Another commonly cited example of human herd behavior is the phenomenon of stock market bubbles. Large stock market trends often begin and end with a mass frenzy of buying (bubbles) or selling (crashes). Many observers see these stock market trends as examples of herding behavior because individuals are driven by emotion rather than reason to "join the crowd"; greed drives mass buying frenzies, and fear drives crashes.

1. **Connotation (noun):** an idea or quality that a word expresses in addition to its meaning

Behavior in Crowds

- [5] A more obvious example of human herd behavior occurs in dense public crowds or mobs. Crowds that gather because of a grievance or protest can involve herding behavior that becomes violent. Psychologists posit that a “group mind” can overtake a mob and embolden people to act in ways they would not individually, increasing the likelihood that situations become violent.

Sporting events can also create herd behavior on a violent scale. The football hooliganism prevalent in Europe in the 1980s is a well-known example of sports-related herding behavior and violence. Overzealous fans of football teams often engaged in unruly or destructive behavior in the name of supporting their team and intimidating the rival team, to the extent that people involved could be badly injured or even killed.

Some historians believe that Adolf Hitler purposefully took advantage of herd behavior psychology by planting a significant number of undercover German officers in the crowds at his speeches. These officers would enthusiastically cheer for Hitler, and the rest of the crowd followed suit, making it seem as if the entire crowd supported Hitler. These speeches would then be broadcast to a larger public audience, magnifying the effect.

Everyday Decision-Making

Herd behavior does not always have such harmful effects; it can be influential in people's everyday, simple decisions. For example, suppose that a family is walking down the street looking for a restaurant to have dinner. If they pass a restaurant that is empty and one that is relatively crowded with patrons, they are far more likely to choose the crowded one, on the assumption that it's better because there are more people there. Herding can be subtle in this way; it simply involves people's tendency to follow a crowd rather than carve out an individual path in many situations.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes the central idea of the text?
 - A. Even when acting alone, humans are not as advanced as we would like to think.
 - B. Herd behavior suggests that there are limits to human beings' free will.
 - C. The actions of a large group can greatly influence an individual's decisions.
 - D. Crowds always become violent and chaotic when individuals begin to panic.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "All of the animals band closely together in a group and, in panic mode, move together as a unit" (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "When herd behavior sets in, an individual person's judgment and opinion-forming process shut down" (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "Herd behavior in humans is frequently observed at times of danger and panic; for example, a fire in a building" (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "suppose that a family is walking down the street looking for a restaurant to have dinner" (Paragraph 8)

3. Which statement best describes the relationship between the stock market and herd behavior?
 - A. Stock market employees work in a constant state of anxiety, much like herding animals.
 - B. Herd behavior contributes to stock market surges and crashes because it compels stockbrokers to act on emotion rather than reason.
 - C. Both herd behavior and the stock market are motivated mainly by greed, which prevents people from using logic and reason.
 - D. Stock market bubbles and crashes are sometimes caused by herd behavior but are most often caused by fear.

4. Why does the author likely include the final section titled "Everyday Decision-Making" in the article?
 - A. to show how not every case of herd behavior is necessarily negative or violent
 - B. to show that herd behavior also occurs in smaller groups
 - C. to demonstrate how herd behavior allows individuals to avoid risks
 - D. to acknowledge that herd behavior is a problem that everyone faces

5. How does paragraph 7 contribute to the development of ideas in the article?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Think of a real-life example you have seen of herd behavior. What do you think caused the people in your example to think or act as a group? Do you remember seeing anyone who chose to do something different from the rest of the group?
2. Think of a movie or a book in which someone has to stand up to a group. Why does this character refuse to follow along and engage in herd behavior? In other words, what makes this character different? What would you have done if you were in this character's shoes?