

The Power of the Situation

Kitty Genovese: New York, 1964

- *“Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police”*
- how could that happen? what is wrong with people in our society today? is the isolationism and rugged individualism of our techno-dependent soulless modern society turning us all into selfish people who don't care about our neighbours?

Diffusion of Responsibility

“someone else will do it”

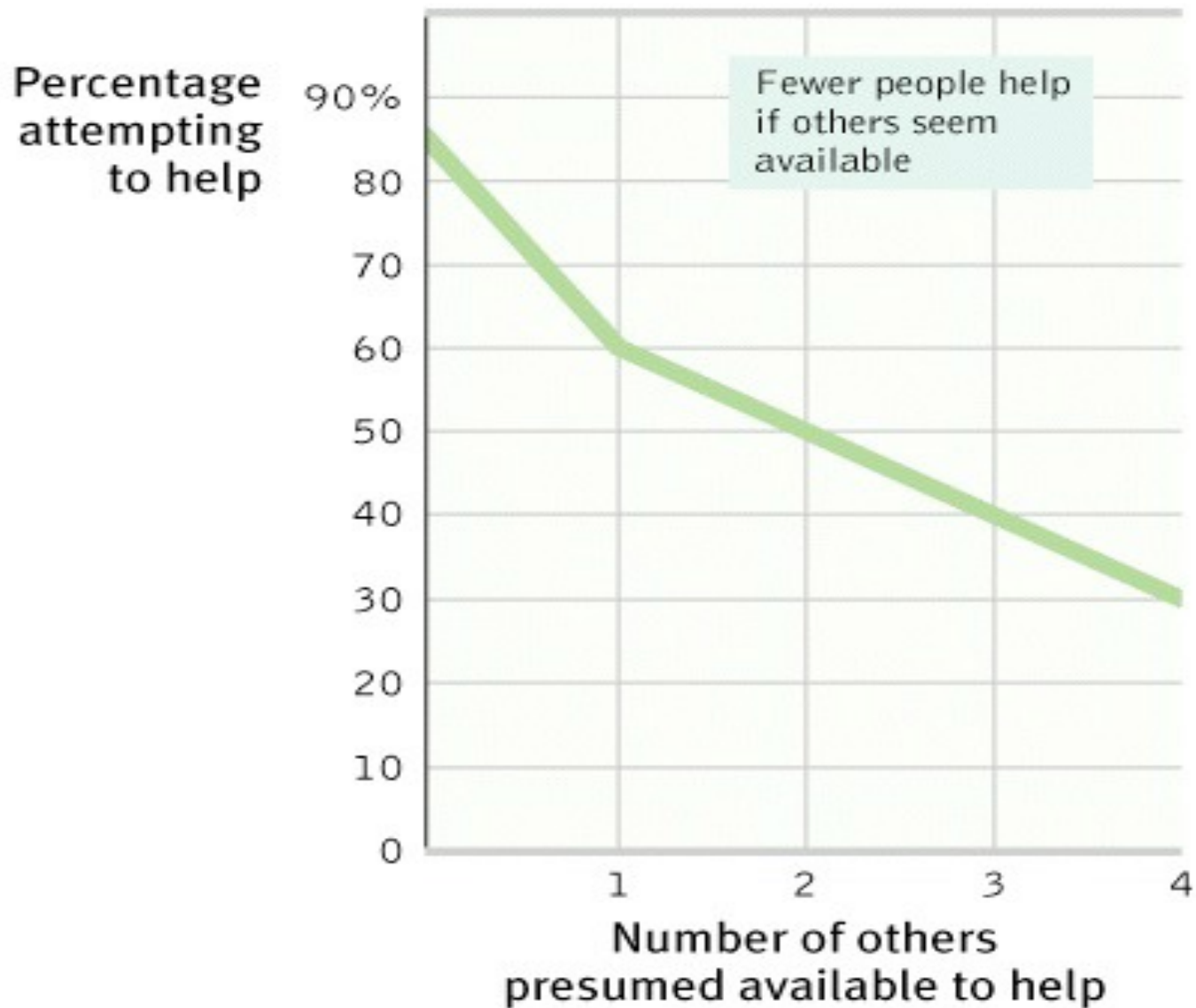
individuals take responsibility (e.g., self-awareness studies on \$, hallowe'en candy, value-congruence)

but “group members” can act very differently, losing their individual identity in the group and thereby feeling excused of their actions as the group members validate each other's perspectives

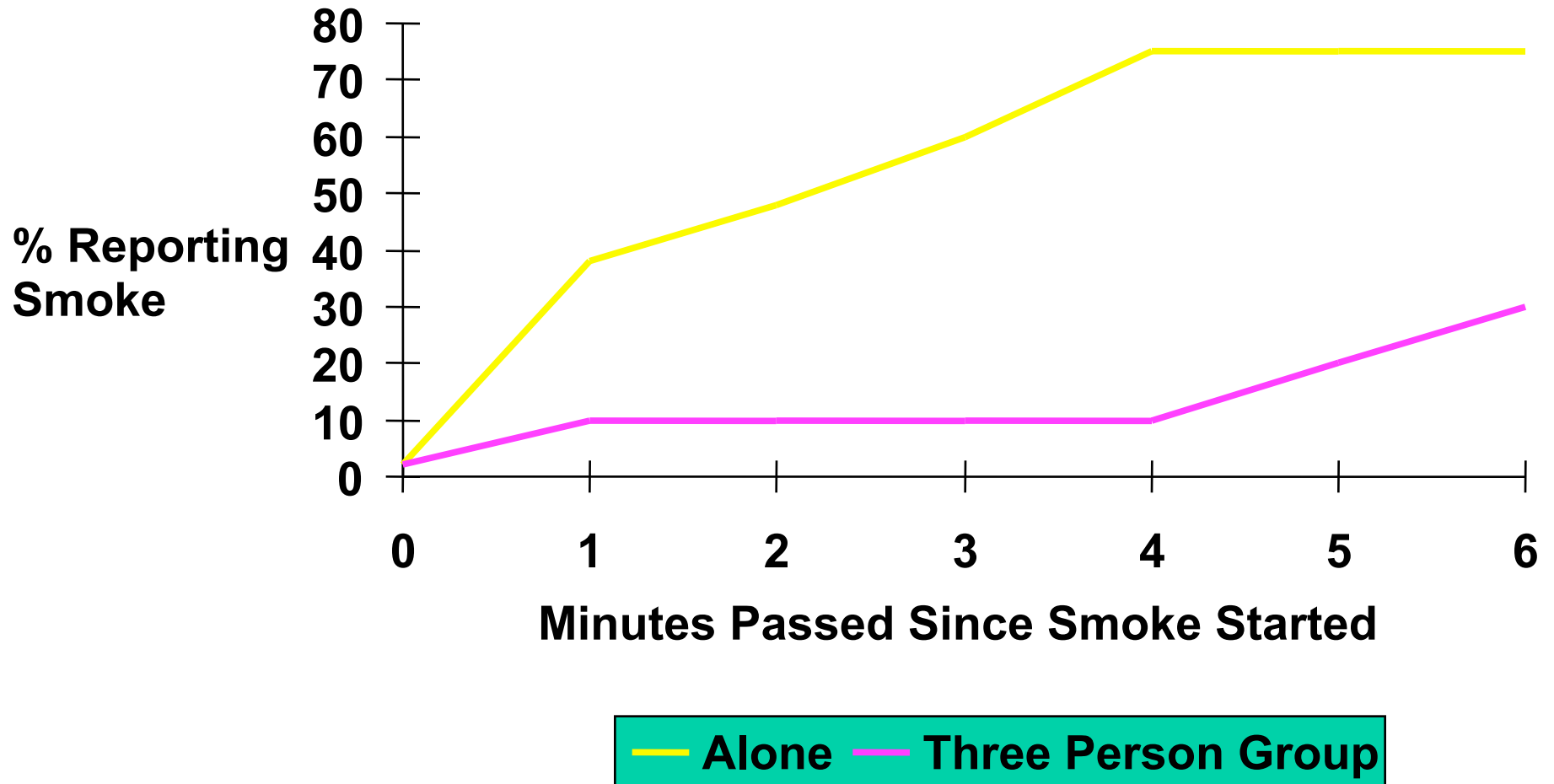
Being violent and nasty AND “doing your best,” helping, making a difference, standing up for what’s right are MUCH easier to do in a group.

It’s hard to act alone.

Seizure Study



Smoke Filled Room



Sitting in a Smoke-Filled Room

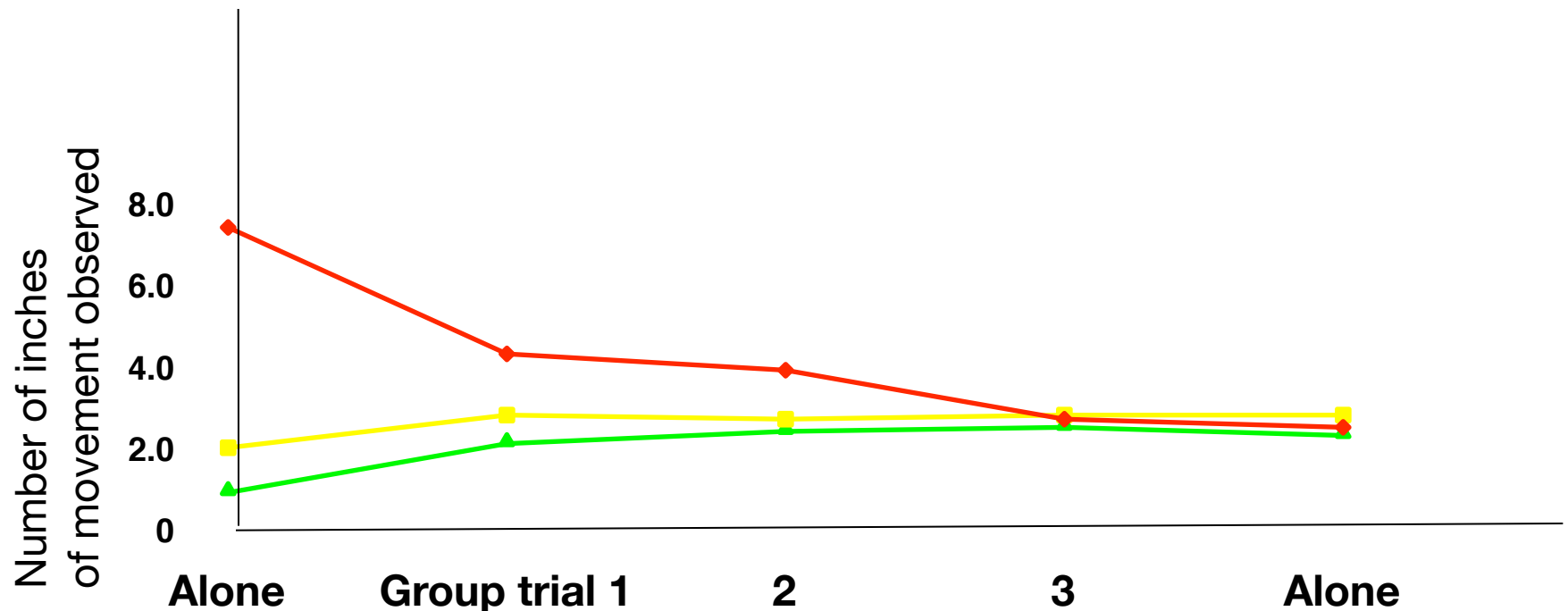
- Pluralistic ignorance: disjunction between private beliefs and public behaviours

also applies to repressive political systems, destructive social patterns (e.g., racism), unhealthy behaviours (e.g., binge drinking), not putting your hand up in class, not taking action on climate change.....

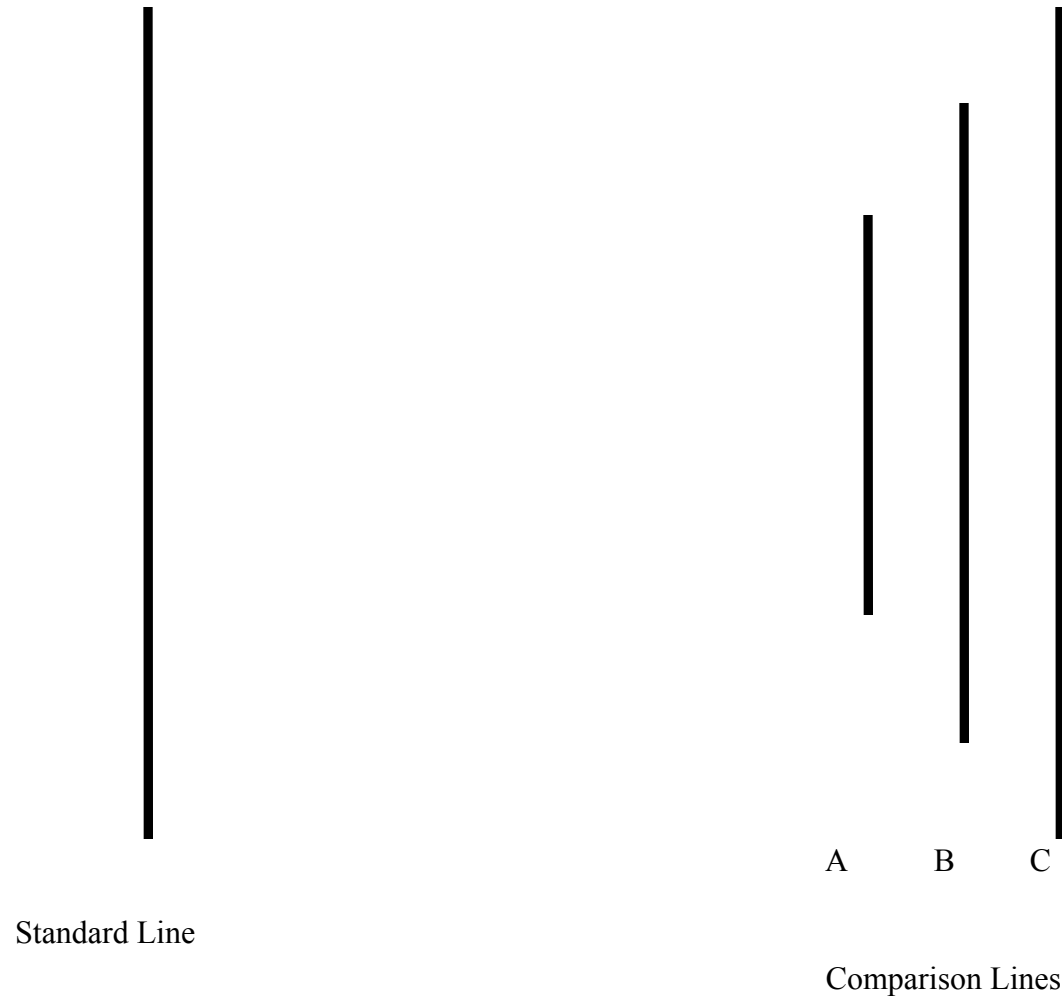
Uncertainty & Social Norms

When situations are ambiguous and we're not sure what to do or what is right, we rely upon others to help us make these judgements, and we come to believe in these judgements.

The emergence of norms and their subsequent influence (Sherif, 1935)



Conformity: Asch study



Conformity: Asch study

Results?

75% of people conformed at least once

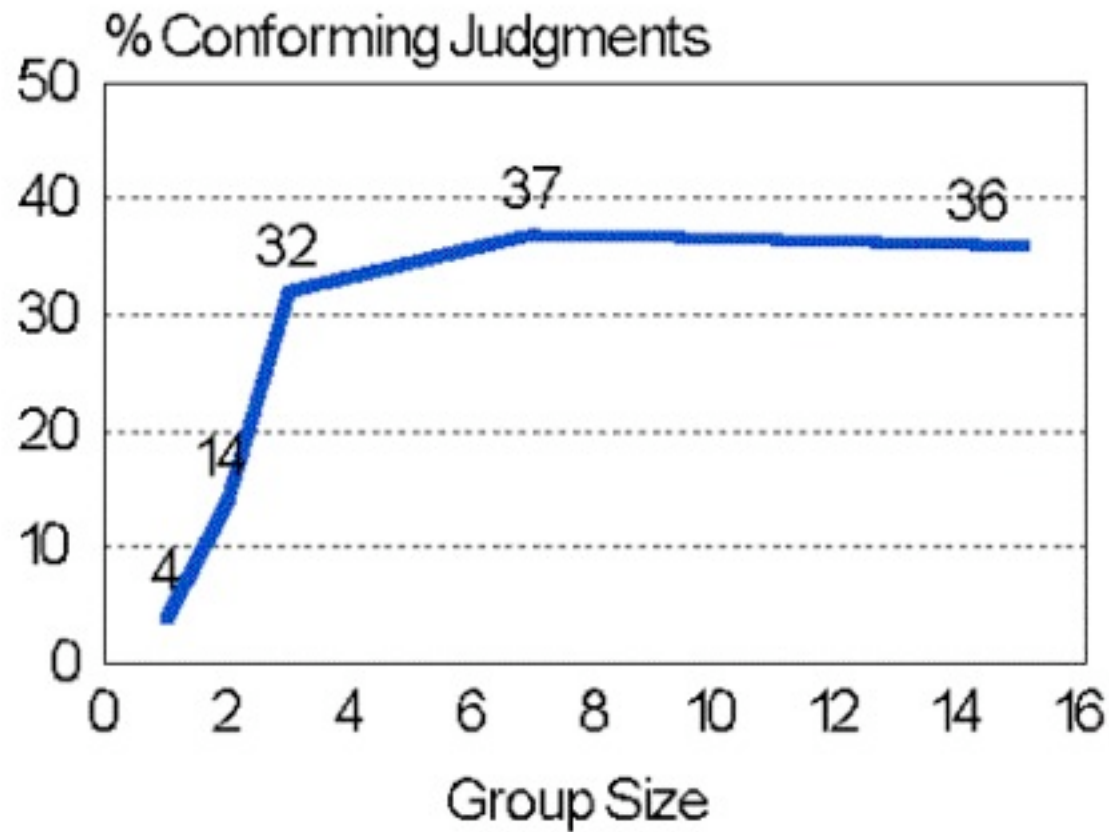
On any given trial, conformity occurred 1/3 of the time

The Power of Groups

Therefore, even when we know what is right,
it's hard to go against a group, and we often
conform just to fit in.

How many people does it take to get us to
conform?

Conformity & Group Size



Dissent: The Power of One

How difficult is it to empower someone to resist normative pressures?

....actually, it's pretty easy....it just takes a single dissenter (in the Asch situation, that is), to massively reduce conformity rates, even if the dissenter still has a different opinion from the subject

Dissent: The Power of One

Therefore, groups are most powerful when they are UNANIMOUS. But break this unanimity and you empower others to do likewise.

Zimbardo Prison Study

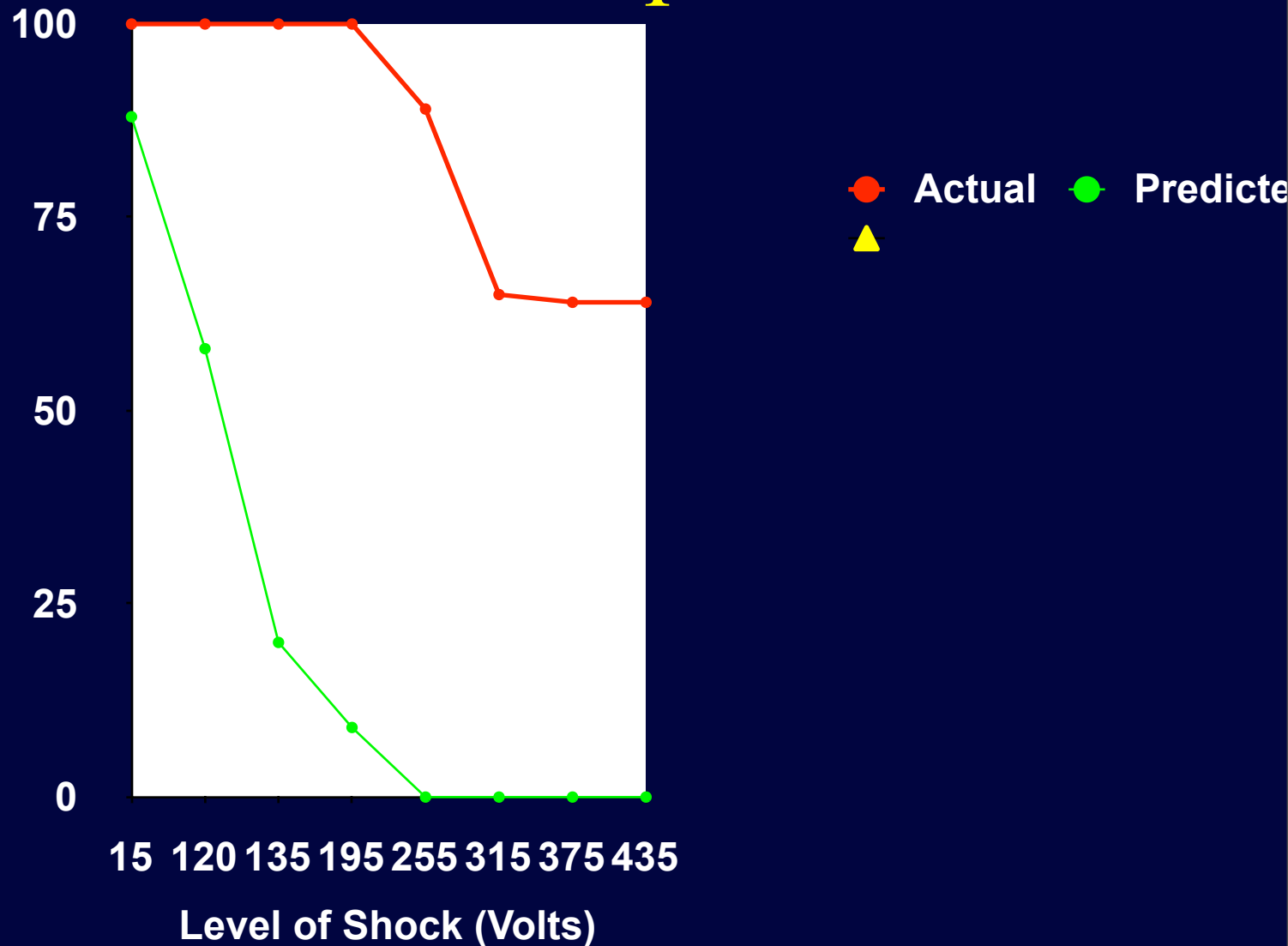
The Power of the Situation

Conclusion?

We need to respect that situations have enormous power over people's behaviour. Put good people into bad situations, and they will very often do bad things. Give them a role to play, and they will play that role, even to the point of quickly losing hold of their own identity.

(and, help them emphasize group identity over self --> self-awareness fades --> getting 'caught up in' group-driven actions)

Shattering Our Assumptions About “Normal People”



I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, shuddering wreck, who was rapidly approaching nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his ear lobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered 'Oh God, lets stop it'. And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end.

Milgram

This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

-- Milgram

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

-- Viktor Frankl

Cultures Provide Frameworks for Meaning

Cultures provide general frameworks of meaning, shared understandings, myths, stories, etc., all of which guide our thinking and provide an interpretive frame to help us 'make sense' of our experience.

It is not that different from a collective mind. And just like "mind" is an adaptive organism, seeking to "fit" the organism to its circumstances, cultural trends arise for good reason, and much can be learned by taking a functionalist approach to the study of culture.

Cultures as Adaptation

Dov Cohen “Different economies and ecologies lead to different cultural adaptations. Important work has been done to show this, and any consideration of cultural differences must take this as a starting point. Just as different ecological niches have led to different adaptations in animal species, so have different environmental niches led to differences in cultural adaptations.”

The Culture of Honour

Archival data:

more argument-related murders in South (esp. in hills & dry plains, compared to moist plains)

“hawkish” international policy, right to bear arms, capital punishment

Survey data:

e.g., killing in defense of your home, or to avenge an attacked family member (23% vs. 47%); hiring a murderer if related to honour

The Culture of Honour

Experiments:

“asshole study”: %change in testosterone: control vs. exp.

North:

South:

Chicken study: control vs. exp.

North:

South:

why would this culture of honour have evolved?

The Terrible Twos

in North America, the emergence of the self is universally accompanied by insanity!

screaming fits, rage, “NO!”, extreme volatility

and this is seen as good! It's the healthy emergence of the will, and negotiating this stage successfully leads to a secure child who is appropriately assertive, etc.

A Dominant Theme (so far)

the individualist – collectivistic distinction:

some cultures (e.g., US, Australia, Canada) emphasize personal distinctiveness, pride, self-reliance, freedom, competitiveness

other cultures (e.g., China, Japan, S. American cultures, SE Asian cultures, African cultures, indigenous people everywhere, etc.) emphasize personal effacement, humility, social roles, group harmony, cooperation

Note: Indiv's only account for about 20% of the world, but the VAST majority of psychology studies have been done on the most extreme Indiv's (young, urban, educated, North Americans)

The Twenty Statements Test

this broad difference in cultures can be found at the individual level, in terms of the self-concept (i.e., how people tend to think about themselves)

I am ...

Individualists

vs.

Collectivists

The relative proportion of personal vs. interpersonal descriptors is a window into the degree to which people think of themselves as individualists and as collectivists.

And as it turns out, I & C people differ on many important psychological processes.

We're blends of individualism & collectivism

Even hard-core Individualists have Collectivist components to their self-concepts. And in fact, these are extremely important!

E.g., social inclusion & depression, suicide, schizophrenia etc....

Our identities depend, to a large degree, on our associations with others.

We “identify” with our friends, family, school, home team, clubs, religious groups, and yes, our nation (even Canadians!)