CHAPTER 1

Conventional Wisdom

The notorious third-person effect has emerged over the past decade as a prominent paradigm for the examination of relationships between public opinion and the mass media following several years of obscurity. It was introduced by W. Phillips Davison in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1983, and refers to the inclination of people to assert that others are or have been or will be influenced by the stimuli presented by the mass media while they themselves remain beyond and—in their minds, the evidence suggests—above such manipulation. It has attained the status of a truism; the public is skeptical of the capability of others to resist the entreaties of the media but individuals generally are confident of their own ability to do so.

I. THE THIRD PERSON

The empirical evidence that attests to this phenomenon has five important characteristics. The first characteristic is a high degree of consistency among data collected by a variety of methods from different populations; the

third-person effect replicates again and again. The second is its extension to behavior—it occurs not only in regard to the exertion of influence on opinion but in judgments of the degree to which the media are used constructively. The third is the documentation that the underlying rationale in some circumstances may lead to blaming the media for adversely affecting public thought and behavior. The fourth is the implication for public policy and media behavior: if such influence is so common, and thereby presumably so powerful, perhaps something should be done to constrain the media. The fifth is the prominent role of perceived social disparity in the alleged vulnerability of others, with the attribution of such an effect increasing as others are perceived to be less well educated, intelligent, or energetic and active in processing the messages of the media.

The evidence, of course, is not without attributes calling for commentary or requiring qualification. Most importantly, the data invariably represent what people are ready to reply when asked a question about the likely response of themselves or others to the media.

The typical circumstance is a survey in which a sample is asked, by questionnaire or interview, how they believe they or others typically behave in regard to some category of media content that might be expected to influence opinion or behavior. Examples include brand name advertising for products and services; news coverage of politics, public affairs, and controversial issues; political campaign advertising; and various types of entertainment that might be thought to affect viewers or readers, such as dramas that are violent (which might encourage aggressive behavior) or portray dishonesty and corruption in high places (which might contribute to loss of faith in government or business). Less often, a sample is asked about the likely effects of a very specific product of the media, such as a particular political commercial attacking an opponent or the news coverage of a particular event or series of events.

In either case, there are three important consequences. One is that we learn only what people are ready to say when asked a question in which they may well have scant interest and to which they very well may have given little previous thought. We do not learn what they might say or think after careful reflection. The second is that we learn nothing about the actual relationship between the effects of the media on the respondent and on others. We learn only what people have to say—and thereby, what they appear to think—about such effects. The third is that we do not learn what they would conclude after extensive public debate or argument over the influence of the media. We learn nothing of the possibly mitigating effects of heightened interest in and greater knowledge about media influence.

A. The Evidence

Nevertheless, evidence in behalf of third-person effects has been produced so consistently that there can be little doubt about the public's perception of the media: the media are powerful, although, as the evidence also shows, that power is seen as dependent on the vulnerability of their audiences. Third-person effects have been recorded among children (Henriksen & Flora, 1999), college students (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Perloff, 1989), and adults (Hoffner et al., 1999; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999); certainly display no geographical limitations; and have been produced by experimental methods in which subjects are asked to respond to the influence of particular stimuli such as advertisements or news coverage (Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), and by surveys in which respondents are simply asked for their opinions (Salwen & Dupagne, 1999).

They also have been observed for an extraordinarily wide range of topics, so that they easily escape the onus of being limited to one or a very few categories of possible influence. These include advertising, product commercials, and public service announcements (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Henriksen & Flora, 1999); news coverage, political campaigns, and commercials for political candidates (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Cohen & Davis, 1991); news reports of violent events and violent television dramatizations (Hoffner et al., 1999; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Scharrer, 2002); and a miniseries dramatizing the hypothetical defeat of the United States in a war with the once-evil empire, the Soviet Union (Lasorsa, 1989).

For example, Henriksen and Flora (1999) found both in a survey of about 570 seventh-grade pupils and in an experiment in which about 665 fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade pupils were presented with either cigarette or anti-smoking commercials that the children and adolescents said they believed other young people were more influenced by cigarette advertising than they themselves were. Cohen and Davis (1991) found in an experiment with about 100 undergraduates as subjects that those seeing a television commercial attacking a candidate they supported were more likely to believe that others were influenced than to attest to influence on themselves. Driscoll and Salwen (1997) found in a survey of about 600 adults that the respondents believed that others were more influenced by media accounts than they themselves were in judging whether O.J. Simpson was guilty or innocent. Hoffner and colleagues (1999) in a survey of about 250 adults found that they believed that others were more affected by television violence than they were themselves, and this held for both of the types of effects inquired about—aggressive behavior and the belief that the world is mean and dangerous.

Such perceptions embrace not only what the media do to cognitions and emotions (a likely component when judgments of criminal guilt and support for political favorites are involved) but also behavior in regard to media. Peiser and Peter (2000) found among a sample of 200 adults in southwest Germany that there was a tendency to perceive others as more likely to engage in less constructive modes of television use. Specifically, these adults believed that others watched more television, more often watched to avoid loneliness, more frequently viewed as a matter of habit, were more likely to use the medium as a means of escaping from problems, and were more likely to be seeking entertainment, while they perceived themselves as more often choosing programs purposively and as more likely to be seeking information about current events. In the language of Comstock and Scharrer (1999), others were perceived as engaging more in ritualistic viewing and as motivated more often by the desire for diverting escape while self-perception emphasized instrumental viewing and the motive to keep abreast of what was transpiring in the world.

B. Rationality

People on the whole tend to be quite rational in pursuit of the consequences of these perceptions. They hold the media responsible for distorting reality in certain circumstances, and in other circumstances, when these effects are thought to be harmful, they become more willing to censor the media. Both Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) and Perloff (1989) found that those with highly partisan views—in these cases, pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian young adults—when shown exactly the same televised news coverage of controversial events open to some interpretation were likely to perceive the coverage as distorted, and that the distortions favored the opposing partisan view. This has become known as the *hostile media phenomenon*—the belief among partisans that media coverage better serves their opponents.

Salwen and Dupagne (1999) found in a survey of about 720 adults that belief in the influence on others of television violence, televised courtroom trials, and negative ("attack") political advertising in each instance was associated with the endorsement of imposing restrictions on the media. The same pattern has been reported by Gunther (1995) for erotica, by McLeod, Eveland, and Nathanson (1997) for rap lyrics, and by Rojas, Shah, and Faber (1996) for television violence. We term this the *media constraint phenomenon*—the belief that the solution to undesirable outcomes of media behavior lies in new rules, regulations, or statutes. Both follow logically from the belief that the media have a widespread influence on what people in general think and how they behave.

The key element responsible for the third-person effect is social disparity, but it has a number of dimensions, and among these is a central place for the

enhancement or protection of the observing individual's ego. It is certainly easy to believe that a person who supports a political candidate will be fearful of the effects of attacks on the candidate's character, performance, or positions on issues and that a person with a strong stance on a particular issue will be sensitive to the possibility that news coverage contains elements unfavorable to that person's position. However, the root of these concerns in our view is not at all obvious. It is not the potential for an unfavorable outcome, although that is certainly present, but in both instances a crucial factor is the presumption that many other people are less well equipped to deal with the communicatory stimuli to which they have been exposed because they lack the requisite ideology to judge them accurately. The effect rests on the disparity between the observer and others.

The evidence in behalf of this broad proposition is striking and conclusive. First, there is the distinction that appears between others who are known or similar and others in general. The third-person effect, although present, was truncated among adults for "acquaintances" compared to "most others" (Peiser & Peter, 2000) and among children for "best friends" compared to "others" (Henriksen & Flora, 1999). The underlying basis, we infer, is not merely familiarity but the similarity in circumstances and background that is likely to lead to the same outlook and perspective. The result is a greater degree of trust, and thus such persons are believed to be better equipped intellectually and emotionally to make good judgments while others in general are believed to be less well equipped. Second, among adults the belief that one is knowledgeable about current events enhances the third-person effect. This enhancement is greater when the perceived knowledgeability pertains specifically to technical or legal issues of which many with some justification may be thought to be ignorant or uninformed (Driscoll & Salwen, 1997). Again, the implication is that others would be less able to make good judgments. Third, a major component of the social disparity upon which third-person effects are contingent among adults is the greater amount of media exposure that is believed to occur among those others perceived as more influenced by the media (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999). Again, others are seen as functioning in an informational milieu—in this instance, greater media use—that leaves them less able to make good judgments.

There also is the considerable frequency of reports that responses that often would be judged to earn social esteem tend to elicit a first-person (or "reverse" third person, in the phraseology of some) effect, so that the third-person effect depends on the lower competence, control over impulses and thoughts, and cognitive command among those whose response is in question. Children and adolescents believe they are more influenced by antismoking commercials and less influenced by cigarette commercials than others (Henriksen & Flora, 1999), and among adults third-person effects consistently—if not

invariably—have been found to be more likely for undesirable responses whereas first-person effects are more likely for desirable responses (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). In this context, it is not surprising that a shift to the less invidious term *stimulated* from the manipulation-implying *influenced* in one survey attenuated the third-person effect for television commercials but not for television news (Brosius & Engel, 1996). Complying with the former (which is what the term *influenced* asserts) represents a nasty impact for a genre held in approbation and skepticism as to credibility by the public (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999) while *influenced* and *stimulated* are not so easily distinguishable in regard to desirability as responses to the news. Individuals are more likely to attribute wise, sound, and socially esteemed responses to themselves and responses that are otherwise to others. This was exemplified when a particularly suspect vehicle, such as the television commercial, was the source of ostensible influence. Finally, there are a number of surveys of adults in which those who are better educated are more likely to perceive third-person effects in others (Gunther, 1995; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Havice, Rosenfeld, Silverblatt, & Tiedge, 1991; Willnat, 1996), presumably because they would consider others less able to analyze critically what they encounter in the mass media—although the absence of an enhanced effect for those with greater education in some studies (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Peiser & Peter, 2000; Salwen, 1998) warns that as a variable education may function irregularly.

The ego-defensive aspect of the third-person effect extends well beyond the mass media. It is not an expression of the social properties of the media but a fundamental bias of individuals that occurs with concrete regularity in regard to the media. This is amply demonstrated by Perloff and Fetzer (1986), who found in an experimental design that college students judged themselves and those close to them as less vulnerable to risks and harmful events, and this occurred with sufficient consistency to be repeated across 10 separate, distinct negative events. In accord with the principle of social disparity, the "average person" or "average college student" was seen as more vulnerable than the subject, closest friend, sibling, or same-sex parent. The third-person media effect is a specific instance of a general phenomenon, and rather than a prodigy of communication research is a borrowing from social psychology.

C. Hindsight

Benefiting from hindsight (for which 20-20 vision is the norm), we think there are two areas in which some wariness is called for. One area is education and the other is subject matter.

We believe some irregularities for education should be expected. Our reasoning is that the greater confidence in one's own judgments (compared to those of others in general) that would be expected to derive from greater education in some circumstances may be thoroughly undermined by the superior knowledge or the values induced by that education. For example, education might enhance third-person effects beyond what would be attributable to the relative superiority of the self in regard to television violence and television advertising. This enhancement would derive from the greater knowledge bestowed by education of the research on television violence and of marketing campaigns in which commercials seemingly played a significant role. In both cases, greater education would contribute to a rationale for the expectation of some influence.

This will not always be the case. For example, public service announcements promoting the use of seatbelts, cessation of cigarette smoking, voting, dietary changes, restraint from substance abuse, and financial contributions to socially (and often hugely geographically) distant charities—causes that have little promise of precluding or ameliorating any threat to the immediate environment of the audience member—are well known to have small, meager effects other than to inform a portion of the public that such campaigns are underway. Better-educated persons are much more likely to be aware of this, and therefore might be more skeptical of widespread third-person effects (while sometimes, when the cause is not an affront to intelligent self-interest, displaying the first-person or reverse third-person effect).

Greater education also may instill values that truncate a third-person effect. Thus, Salwen and Dupagne (1999) found that a belief in the harmful effects of television violence increased support for restraints on the media. This belief arguably would be more common among the better educated familiar with the research on the topic, but support for restraints would be undercut by the enhanced allegiance to freedom of expression associated with greater education.

Similarly, in addition to social desirability and the satisfaction of placing oneself in a superior position, personal welfare or self-protection may sometimes figure in first- and third-person effects. Two examples are shown by Salwen and Dupagne (1999) and Price, Tewksbury, and Huang (1998). The former found that belief in a mean world media influence—that violence in television entertainment and news promotes the perception that the world is mean and dangerous—was associated with a first-person effect ("me more than others") in the readiness to impose restraints on television news coverage, whereas the belief that such content increases aggressiveness heightened a third-person effect ("others more than me"). The latter found that college students believed themselves in greater opposition than others in general to the publication in a student newspaper of an advertisement denying the

occurrence of the Holocaust. In each of these instances, there is arguably an element of social desirability and a display of moral superiority but there is also the benefit of living in an environment free from such troubling messages and images that at least partially may explain the first-person effects observed. Economists would call this an *existence value* (Hamilton, 1998)—a preferred state that enlists personal advocacy.

D. Central Elements

The central and overriding conclusion is that people in general perceive comparably greater influence of the media on others than they do on themselves, except under particular circumstances. These circumstances occur when an act connotes goodness or superiority, social desirability, or a more pleasant environment free of offensive communicatory stimuli.

This third-person effect pivots on the disparity between the observer and the observed. Attributes that place the self in a comparatively superior position for the seeking out and processing of communicatory stimuli govern the effect. Those who are observed—"others," "most others," "people in general"—are judged as less well equipped by talent, effort, and resources to be able to reach valid judgments about what they encounter in the mass media. Thus, outcomes for which a third-person effect have been recorded often include those that explicitly assign to others a decided vulnerability that escapes victimization only by the absence of dire consequences—buying products that aren't needed, letting the media do their thinking for them, and being distracted from worthwhile activities (Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfeld, 1991). As has been observed throughout the almost two decades since the introduction of the concept, there is at work a self-serving allegiance to the ego in the service of the third-person effect, with the observer invariably displaying greater perspicacity (Davison, 1983; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Perloff, 1989).

The significance, from the perspective of the influence of the mass media (and in particular the news media) on public opinion and the voting public, is that individuals from their own perspective place themselves largely beyond the influence of the media. When influence is perceived as occurring, it is confined to morally good, socially endorsed, or environmentally beneficial judgments.

These varied data supporting the third-person effect are often interpreted, if sometimes only implicitly by the absence of any assertions to the contrary, as representing a perceptual bias. Individuals are credited with self-expertise. They are presumed to be right about themselves but wrong about others, most others, and people in general. The basis for this interpretation is that people can judge accurately the stimuli that affect their behavior. In fact, by the logic of mirror imagery, if they are right about themselves by extension they are

wrong about others, because each of those others would repay the compliment by perceiving themselves as comparatively less affected than others in general.

The corollary is that proposed actions based on these perceptions of others are misguided, and would be better formulated if based on perceptions about the self. Media executives and their spokespersons often embrace this theme, arguing that the third-person effect is evidence of a stage falsely and dangerously set by public misperceptions for the imposition of guidelines, restraints, rules and standards, V-chips, or reforms in regard to television violence, media advertising, and news coverage of politics and public affairs. This attribution of expertise about the self strikes us as naïve. If it were accurate, we could abandon almost all of experimentation and much survey research in favor of simply asking people what influenced them.

On this point, the studies we have examined are largely mute. Accuracy of perception is ignored. Two exceptions are the experimental inquiry into the perceived damage done by defamation by Cohen, Mutz, Price, and Gunther (1988) and the survey of community standards for sexually explicit materials by Linz and colleagues (1991). In each case, the judgments attributed to others were harsher than the judgments offered by the experimental subjects or the survey respondents. Because the judgments of community members are the commodity at issue, the authors make a good case in these instances for a distorting bias; that is, many would argue, as they do, that community standards should equal the average of the judgments reached by the individuals that make up the community. In both cases, estimates of the opinions of others led to more restrictive judgments and thus were "wrong" by the criterion of what people in the community actually thought. For the most part, however, no criteria for judging accuracy are offered. If tacitly, the hypotheses of self-expertise and other-naïveté seem to be widely accepted. Thus, Salwen and Dupagne (1999) find "encouragement" in the resistance of the better educated to restraints on the media and Davison many years ago (1983) explored his creation as a cognitive sin.

As we begin to make clear in the next chapter, our view is somewhat different. We are skeptical of self-expertise. We similarly do not think that individuals are necessarily accurate about the views of others, although we have some doubts about the wrongness of "community standards" when compared to the sum of individual opinions. Nevertheless, one of the three central elements historically of a psychology of politics and media has been the stout belief on the part of individuals in their comparative immunity to media influence and their symmetrical stout belief in the vulnerability of others to such influence. The other two central elements are the degree to which public opinion and voting behavior conform to the perceived opinion, behavior, and expectations of others and the degree to which they are rooted in personal experience.

II. CONFORMITY

A wide variety of empirical evidence from research on public opinion, individual judgments made in the context of group decision making, and the responses of individuals to disconcerting requests made by persons exhibiting the trappings of authority seemingly points to the exertion of considerable power over the individual by the opinions, behavior, and expectations of others. Quite recent data derive from the spiral of silence hypothesized by Noelle-Neumann (1993; Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). Earlier widely cited and debated data come from the social psychological research of Sherif (1936, 1947), Asch (1951, 1952, 1956), and Milgram (1974; Blass, 2000b). Conformity, these data suggest, is the norm. The interpretation frequently extended to the decision making of individuals about public affairs and politics is that the perceived behavior of others often has a governing role.

A. Spiral of Silence

The spiral of silence was introduced more than three decades ago by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974), a prominent German pollster. The theory shouldered two enormous burdens: a recognition of powerful media effects when minor and limited effects had become the language of choice in the social and behavioral sciences (Baran & Davis, 2000; Littlejohn, 1999; McQuail, 2000), and the hypothesis that published polls can curb the expression of individual opinion when most pollsters defensively were asserting that polls merely recorded what representative samples said (Crespi, 1997). These impediments proved insufficient to bestow obscurity on the spiral of silence, and 16 years later one informed commentator (Kennamer, 1990a) declared it "one of the most influential recent theories of public opinion formation." We begin with its major dimensions, and then turn to the ostensible role of polls and news coverage, the conditions on which their influences are contingent, and the psychological mechanism that is said to be behind the disinclination under some conditions to speak out.

1. Major Dimensions

Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1984, 1993) proposed that individuals regularly survey their social environments for cues about the prevailing balance among contending viewpoints. This was said to be a "quasi-statistical" process by which individuals would reach an approximate but certainly not carefully deliberated estimate of the support for a particular position or political candidate. This estimate would be sensitive enough for a person to form an impres-

sion about which among contending viewpoints had the most support as well as which were rising or declining in public enthusiasm.

These estimates derived from personal experience, which the spiral of silence defined as conversations with others, the firsthand observation of events and symbols, such as political rallies, parades, and bumper stickers, and use of the mass media. The motivation for this quasi-statistical surveillance was ascribed to social survival—a desire to avoid being perceived by others as out-of-step, ill-informed, and as a consequence experience the unpleasant anxiety of feeling isolated from others. Thus, the spiral of silence would be set in motion by the attractiveness of being comfortably part of the social fabric.

This ostensible surveillance of public opinion becomes most intense when opinions are perceived as colliding. That is, when major issues are being debated, in times of crisis, and during elections when the first becomes ritualistically enshrined and the second is often seen by partisans as transpiring. The outcome of this motive to be one with others and the consequent quasi-statistical tracking of public opinion was hypothesized by Noelle-Neumann to be a willing suppression of the expression of opinion on the part of individuals who perceived themselves as confronting a growing majority with an opposite or different viewpoint. In turn, this would affect personal experience. The articulation of views in opposition to the majority becomes muffled or silent. Events and symbols representing the minority consequently are less often encountered. News coverage implies and polls report lowered support for the minority viewpoint. Thus, the spiral of silence holds that (a) those in the minority will curb the expression of their views, with (b) the result that the impression of public opinion resulting from the tripartite of personal experience—others, events, and media—will be distorted toward an overestimate of support for the majority and an underestimate of support for the minority. The "silence" is the consequence of finding oneself in the minority, and the "spiral" is the exaggerated effect on the judgment of the balance among conflicting viewpoints.

Noelle-Neumann (1984, 1993) advanced two kinds of evidence in behalf of her theory. One was the data from polls during closely contested German elections. She identified instances in which small shifts in voter support for the two leading parties in published polls, and consonant changes in the emphases of the news media, were followed by detectably reduced expressions of support in subsequent polls for the party now in the minority. The other evidence was made up of responses in various polls to questions such as the "stranger on a train" item. Respondents were asked whether they would be willing to discuss one or another controversial issue with a stranger they met on a train. Those who held views that seemingly were declining in public favor were consistently less willing to do so. Much later, Glynn, Hayes, and Shanahan (1997) would record in a meta-analysis covering 17 surveys in six countries with

more than 9,500 respondents that there was a small but statistically significant correlation between perceived support for one's views and willingness to express them as hypothesized by the spiral of silence.

2. Polls and News Coverage

The spiral of silence assigns a central role to the mass media. They are the means by which the public is informed of the results of polls, which constitute an unambiguous articulation of the balance among contending viewpoints. News coverage is equally important. It is in regard to its emphases that the quasi-statistical process is seen as entering most forcefully. The amount of attention given to a partisan group, viewpoint, candidate, or political party signals its importance. Mode of coverage then is said to govern the perceived public support the group or person enjoys. Explicit declarations of approval, the degree of public favor implied by imbalances in the number and stature of those quoted as advocating one or another position, the journalistic framing of occasions as representing success or failure, the adept adjective ("harried," "triumphant," "subdued")—all these are presumably summed by the voter to achieve some sense of which viewpoints are in the ascendancy and which are in decline. In the case of television, camera treatment was said to have an influence by varying in the degree to which a candidate was portrayed as powerful, in control, able to command the attention of the public, articulate, informed, a convincing communicator, admirable and likable, and a man or woman able to lead.

Underlying political allegiances of the various media would shape coverage, but coverage also would be influenced by variations in public support for one or another contending viewpoint. Those perceived by the media as falling in public favor would be treated less favorably. The increasing reluctance to speak out would reinforce this trend. Personal experience would become largely dominated by polls and the mass media. What was encountered directly, by conversation and through observation, was said to be of comparatively small significance in most circumstances, and in the degree of expressed opposition to the majority presumably would be diminished by the same factors afflicting the observing individual.

A key element is the similarity in the emphases of news coverage across different media that commonly occurs. Everywhere (roughly speaking), Noelle-Neumann argues, the hypothesized quasi-statistical process engaged in by individuals usually is responding to essentially the same stimuli. With this condition met, the spiral would be set in motion. The ascendancy or decline of one or another viewpoint would be exaggerated. Thus, the theory hypothesizes a role for polls and the news media in which the latter are scurrying about to provide what they think are appropriate accounts of what is taking place without the entry of calculated bias, but reserves a subversive capacity for

those instances in which some components of the media would trumpet a particular perspective in order to advance its public support.

3. Contingent Conditions

The spiral of silence is contingent on the presence of circumstances that would favor the curbing of the expression of opinion by those who perceive themselves in the minority. As Noelle-Neumann (1984, 1993) pointed out, such circumstances are not always present. Thus, the spiral of silence is a theory of situational factors, and the perception of facing an opposition that is growing stronger is insufficient to bring it into play.

Two factors on which the hypothesized spiral is contingent are the degree of publicly visible support for a particular viewpoint and the degree to which holding such a viewpoint puts an individual at risk in his or her relations with others. Noelle-Neumann (1984, 1993) specifically drew attention to the first. In our view, the second is a corollary.

When a minority position on an issue enjoys widespread attention from the media, and that attention includes argumentation on its behalf by individuals who are authoritative and prestigious, an individual taking that position will not feel the isolation necessary for the hypothesized spiral to occur. The reason is that the very public support, and the respect implied by the attention of the media, will legitimate the viewpoint despite its minority status.

Similarly, issues that have become institutionalized over time as the subject of widespread disagreement become less likely to be subject to a curbing of expressed support. Thus, we would not expect the death penalty to provide data in the United States supportive of the spiral of silence. Its opponents (and supporters) receive ample coverage in the media; include chiefs of police and penologists who manage prisons, religious leaders, and well-known and respected academics; and there is no shortage of publicly available argumentation for both sides. There is no reason for those who oppose the death penalty to falter in expressing their viewpoint even though they have become a minority.

The second factor represents the degree to which negative consequences may follow from the expression of a point of view. In the United States, the most prominent example during the twentieth century was the "Red scares" in which the identifying of individuals as sympathetic to communism led to a loss of job, occupational blacklisting, social ostracism, and harassment. When one side bears the banner of patriotism while the other carries the burden of disloyalty, subversion, and un-Americanism; when judgment can be called into question or motives impugned; or when a position can be marginalized as unacceptably radical, then the willingness to express support for the target of such vituperous rataplan will be sharply curtailed. Thus, added to the feeling

of isolation, and giving it a frightful thrust, is the trespass into normatively unacceptable territory.

Our reasoning thus leads to a qualification in regard to institutionalized issues. Their exemption from the spiral of silence depends on the character of media attention. It must include sufficient argumentation by authoritative individuals with the consequent legitimization of opposition to the majority to supply the necessary social support. When there is an event that draws public attention and raises public passions, such as a particularly repellant crime in the case of the death penalty, an institutionalized issue may become subject to the influence of the second factor: it will fall victim to ideological vituperation, and the spiral will be initiated.

Most of the time, news coverage by the media and published polls will be the predominant source for the quasi-statistical process that is said to lie behind the spiral of silence. Ordinarily, personal contacts will be inadequate to counter their influence. This is partly because they will be diminished in opposition to the majority as part of the spiral, and partly because they will be neither forceful nor uniform enough in opposition to the majority. However, as Noelle-Neumann (1984, 1993) observed, there is one exception. That occurs when an individual is part of a network of others who are cohesive, loyal, and among themselves consistently express support for their viewpoint. Whether this expression of opinion extends beyond this inner circle to the stranger on a train would depend on the degree to which negative consequences are likely to result.

Thus, the spiral of silence essentially is contingent on two factors, although they may take different forms. The first is the absence of social support. The second is the severity of likely sanctions. As the former declines, or the latter increases, so too does the hypothesized probability of a curbing of expression and the initiation of a spiral of silence.

4. Psychological Mechanism

The psychological mechanism specified as responsible for the disinclination of those finding themselves in the minority on a controversial topic to voice their opinion is the avoidance of aversive feelings of aloneness and isolation. Noelle-Neumann (1984, 1993) was quite insistent that the motivation was the reward of being part of a larger social entity. People do not wish to seem out of step. They follow in the footsteps of others because this ensures a self-satisfying confidence in behaving correctly. Thus, the behavior is driven by a psychological need of the individual that finds sociological representation in the expression of opinion among large aggregates holding contending viewpoints.

This formulation by Noelle-Neumann goes somewhat beyond the hypothesis generated by impression management theory that individuals would avoid

expressing minority opinions because they wish those with whom they are speaking to think well of them. Instead, Noelle-Neumann finds the key element in the importance of belonging, which presumably would be diminished by adhering to a perspective that is tumbling out of favor.

We know of only one instance in which this aspect of the theory has been empirically tested. Mohn (1991) surreptitiously obtained by an apparently unrelated questionnaire the viewpoints on two controversial issues of experimental subjects. The principal experimental treatment consisted of the dramatic presentation of overnight poll results indicating that their point of view now represented the majority or the minority. On one of the two issues, the Star Wars defense initiative of President Reagan, she obtained evidence of both a reduced willingness to express arguments in behalf of their point of view and increased scores on a psychological scale of need for affiliation as a consequence of holding a viewpoint now in the minority. Thus, there was a match both on the hypothesized spiral and the imputed psychological mechanism. Because the other issue was the death penalty, where we would not expect much in the way of spiral of silence effects, this finding gives some credence to Noelle-Neumann's formulation.

The theory does not directly address whether those who refrain from expressing their opinion change their views. Instead, it proposes that public opinion is affected by the consequent underestimation of the support for the position perceived as falling into the minority, with individuals more likely to adopt an opinion with growing than declining support. Some presumably would desert the position with weaker support, but effects would be more likely among those making up their minds and seeking the psychological surety of siding with a majority. However, self-perception theory (Bem, 1972; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) directly predicts that individuals would become less committed to views they are disinclined to express. The rationale is that to some extent people infer what they think and feel from how they behave. In terms of the spiral of silence, this means that those who forego the expression of a viewpoint would become less firmly committed to it. Thus, there is some possibility that the spiral would function directly by reducing conviction, and indirectly by altering the perceived balance among competing viewpoints.

B. Sherif, Asch, and Milgram

Muzafer Sherif, Solomon Asch, and Stanley Milgram are household names within social psychology (Jones, 1998), enshrined as classics by every textbook (Korn, 1997; Miller, 1995). Their research remains central to the examination of the power of conformity in the behavior of individuals despite an astonishingly long history—more than 60 years in the first instance (Sherif,

1936), more than 45 years in the second (Asch, 1951), and more than 35 years in the third (Blass, 2000a; Milgram, 1963, 1965, 1974). Together, the three present a strong case for the lasting vitality of social and behavioral science when certain commanding elements are in place: a compelling paradigm, crafty and impeccable implementation, and outcomes bearing fundamentally on the way people in our culture behave.

1. Paradigms

The Sherif paradigm is almost always described as making use of the "autokinetic light" illusion (for brief but good accounts, see Jones, 1998; Mutz, 1998; and, Taylor, 1998). This reference to the apparently active, lively behavior of a light in motion identifies a perceptual error—a stationary light in a dark room will be seen as moving about, and thus the phenomenon has earned the label of a self-propelled light. Of course, the self in which the motion resides is actually the observer, which is the key factor in the Sherif paradigm.

Although the exact combination of the order of experiences and the number of subjects varied somewhat, there were essentially four variants:

1. The single subject alone
2. The single subject alone before joining one or two additional persons
3. The single subject alone before joining one or two additional persons and again alone
4. A group of two or three subjects followed by one or more of these subjects alone

In each variant, the subject or subjects in a series were asked to say when the light began its journey, identify its itinerary, and describe its travels. Occasionally, the other person or persons with whom a subject participated were accomplices of the experimenter who had been instructed how to respond; most of the time, they were simply other subjects offering their own judgments.

The Sherif paradigm called for decision making under conditions that varied in social makeup. The stimulus that was the subject of the decision making was unfamiliar and ambiguous, and the decision making occurred in settings that varied in regard to the participation of other persons. It permitted the examination of judgments made alone, as part of a group, and again alone after having participated with others in the making of such judgments. Thus, it provided an opportunity to examine the role of others in the reaching of judgments by individuals.

The Asch paradigm substituted for the errant light the announced judgments of a substantial number of other persons that diverged from the physical evidence being evaluated by an individual. The social setting in which

decision making occurred, rather than a cooperative endeavor (as it had been with Sherif), confronted subjects with a two-stage process. There was first an evaluation of the physical evidence, followed by a decision of whether to publicly announce a judgment counter to the majority (for brief, good accounts, see Jones, 1998 and Mutz, 1998). In the Asch paradigm, the key factor was the conflict between individual experience and group decision making.

The decision making task in this instance was to choose which of three lines matched a fourth line in length. There was no ambiguity. Only one of the three lines was the same length as the fourth line. The other two clearly differed. The group in each case consisted of 4 to 16 and most often 6 to 9 people, with the lone subject the only one not following the earlier covert instructions of the experimenter as to how to respond. There were typically 18 repeated trials in one experimental session, with two major variants:

1. The consistent majority condition, in which the confederates of the experimenter unanimously would choose a line that did not match the fourth line on 12 of the 18 trials.
2. The diluted majority condition, in which one or more of the confederates would accurately match the lines on those dozen trials.

The single subject in each experimental session invariably announced the choice among the three lines after having heard the choices of the other participants; thus, the subject perceptually loyal to the properties of the lines sometimes stood alone when faced with making an announcement.

The Asch paradigm confronted an individual with decision making by a group that did not adhere to the physical evidence. There was no ambiguity in the properties of the objects. Judgments were public. The lone subject's announcement followed those of the experimenter's confederates, who varied from complete to somewhat diluted unanimity. Thus, the focus was on the response of a lone individual when faced with erroneous decision making by a group.

The Milgram paradigm substituted for the authority of the group the forceful prescriptions of the psychological experimenter, who demanded that the individual subject perform a series of increasingly distasteful if generically similar tasks. In the initial experiment, the model for many subsequent ventures by Milgram (1974) and others (Blass, 2000b), subjects were males between the ages of 20 and 50 recruited by a newspaper advertisement. Each subject individually was asked to assume the role of a teacher who would notify his pupil of errors by delivering progressively painful electric shocks. The ostensible purpose was to study the effects of punishment on learning. As the shocks escalated, the sounds of physical agitation and sometimes cries of pain representing distress and pleas for mercy became intrusive. The subject typically became increasingly hesitant to proceed beyond a threshold at which life

seemingly might be threatened and intense pain certainly assured (for a thorough description, see Miller, 1986, and for an update, see Blass, 2000a). The key factor in the Milgram paradigm was the response of the individual subject when authoritatively assigned a task that was repugnant, ethically and morally questionable, and counter to the everyday norms of human interaction.

The victim, a confederate of the experimenter, was strapped in a chair and connected to electrical wires. The teacher was instructed to read a series of words to the student. For each one, the student supposedly would attempt to choose the previously learned correct match from an assortment of four. When the student erred, the teacher was instructed to notify him by delivering an electric shock. The shock generator had 30 switches, ranging from 15 to 450 volts, with a "mild" label at the lowest level and a "danger" label at about 400 volts, with some switches beyond the 450 level marked "XXX." With each error, the teacher was asked to increase the level of shock. There were several variants:

1. The baseline design, in which the student, located in another room and addressed by intercom, pounded on the wall at 300 volts and failed to respond to the stimulus word at 315 volts
2. Victim proximity, in which the student's locus was changed from an adjoining room to the same room and, in the most extreme case, to a position adjacent to the teacher who now faced the unsavory task of placing the student's hand on the shock plate
3. Experimenter distance, in which the supervisor's physical presence was reduced by giving instructions by telephone from another room
4. Legitimacy of the setting, in which the auspices and site were changed from Yale University to a private research firm operating out of a somewhat shabby low-rent office building in an industrial city
5. Gender of subjects, with later experiments including females as well as males

The lone subject often questioned whether it was proper to continue, usually citing the possibility of severe harm to the student. The experimenter was insistent that the experiment continue and that there was "no tissue damage" to the student, and he employed four progressively demanding prods that (as described by Korn, 1997) left the subject with only one option:

> At the first sign of balking, "Please continue . . ."
> Next, "The experiment requires that you continue . . ."
> Then, "It is absolutely essential that you continue . . ."
> Finally, "You have no other choice, you must go on . . ."

If the subject then failed to persevere, the experiment was halted (and the subject consigned to the roster of the nonobedient). There were, of course, no actual shocks.

The Milgram paradigm focused on the conditions under which individuals would engage in behavior that violated social norms. There was hardly any doubt that voltages of 300 and above were distressful to the student. The experimenter applied what one observer has called "extreme and unrelenting pressure" (Jones, 1998, p. 31) to gain the teacher's compliance. The subject matter, then, was obedience to authority and circumstances that might ameliorate it.

2. Implementation

The experiments of Sherif, Asch, and Milgram have not prevailed as landmarks in social psychology because they were technically superior to the experimentation of others but because the way they were conducted led to important conclusions. The design, in each case, fit the problem under investigation.

Sherif's subjects interacted together over a period of several days. The task they were asked to perform truly presented them with an ambiguous stimulus. It was an undertaking in which the decisions made by others might be helpful. Thus, the two major factors that would make the results meaningful were in place: the extended opportunity to draw on the opinions of others and the motive provided by ambiguity to do so.

Asch's subjects found themselves confronted by a quite different situation. The stimuli were unambiguous, so that perception unaccompanied by interfering stimuli invariably would lead to a correct choice. The interfering stimuli in this case were the prior judgments of a substantial number of other persons. These judgments were correct one-third of the time, so they were not devoid of verisimilitude. This situation offered group decision making that was not without credibility, and made conformity on the part of the individual subject unambiguous when it occurred and thus a tractable event for scrutiny.

The Milgram subjects found themselves asked to serve as an experimental assistant within a very confining set of circumstances. They were continually admonished to adhere to a rigid set of procedures. The experimenter, who usually wore a white lab coat, was unrelenting in his insistence that the subjects continue to deliver increasingly severe shocks. The shock generator, an enormous device by contemporary standards (for a photo, see Marsh, 2000, p. 151), extended an ominous credibility to the harm delivered, as well as to the scientific nature of the enterprise. Legitimacy and expertise—the scientist at work—thus combined to provide the circumstances to study the willingness of individuals to obey outrageous authority.

In each case, there was a sizable measure of what in social psychology is called *mundane realism*—a representation of events likely to be taken at face value and possessing the credibility of an occurrence that is neither more nor less than it seems to be (Aronson, Wilson, & Brewer, 1998). There were

judgments to be made about what the experimenter (Sherif) knew to be the autokinetic light illusion. There was the matching of lines in face of what the experimenter (Asch) knew to be an often erroneous consensus. There was the delivery, in the context of the study of the effects of punishment on learning, of progressively severe electric shocks that the experimenter (Milgram) knew to be bogus. None represented an experience likely to be encountered in everyday life, but each presented a plausible task within the context of psychological research.

These are circumstances that would lead to unfeigned, honest responses that would permit inferences about human behavior in similar circumstances. A stimulus of uncertain properties and the availability of the opinion of one or more other persons (Sherif), group decision making that often seems to ignore the evidence (Asch), and a task imposed by the authority of legitimacy and expertise that is counter to the wishes of an individual (Milgram)—these are all part of human experience, although fortunately for most persons in descending order of likelihood.

3. Outcomes

The paradigms of Sherif, Asch, and Milgram are represented not only by their own experiments but by many dozens of additional experiments by those who followed their examples. Ironically, social psychology has been a field in which innovative research that makes stars of its originators leads to widespread conformity in applying the nascent paradigm (Jones, 1998). The outcomes of these experiments, taken together, present strong testimony in behalf of the influence of others on the judgments and behavior of individuals. They also variously offer evidence on the conditions under which such influence is likely to rise or fall.

Sherif's primary hypothesis was that human interaction leads to the development of norms that guide thought and behavior. The data were thoroughly supportive.

The judgments of when the light moved, in what direction, and how far by individual subjects acting alone were much more varied than when they were making judgments in the company of one or two additional persons. When an individual subject made judgments in the company of one or two additional persons after making judgments alone, the variation in the subject's judgments decreased and they came to resemble those made by the other person or persons. When an individual subject made judgments alone after having done so in the company of one or two additional persons the judgments approximated those that had been made in the company of one or two others.

This occurred whether or not the individual subject had made judgments alone before doing so in the company of one or two additional persons. These

constructed norms also showed great vitality across generations of subjects. When naïve subjects replaced confederates (who, in this case, had guided the norm construction), they quickly adopted the established norm, and this norm adoption persisted for a remarkable five sets or generations of replacements (Jacobs & Campbell, 1961). Judgment then is a social product when the opinions of others are available and there is some ambiguity or uncertainty about the matter under evaluation.

Asch intended to focus on the roots of independence, and his paradigm was an opportunity to examine resistance to erroneous group decision making (Korn, 1997). He was certainly successful in creating a set of conditions that consistently produced wide variations on the part of individual subjects in their conformity to the errors expressed by the other participants.

About one-third of responses overall conformed to the unanimous but erroneous majority. About one-fourth of the subjects were consistently independent. About one-fourth conformed to the majority on two-thirds or more of the critical dozen trials. About three-fourths conformed at least once, but the most frequent response was a judgment independent of the other participants. When the majority was diluted even by a single dissident, the degree of conformity dropped very sharply. However, three unanimous confederates offering an erroneous decision were sufficient to produce as sizable an effect as 15 confederates. Unanimity or absence of deviance was the key. Subsequent debriefings indicated that the individual subjects experienced some alarm and tension when faced with the unanimous misjudgments of the rest of the group, wondered sometimes about their perceptual ability or comprehension of the instructions (perhaps it's the width of the lines), and often felt uncomfortable at voicing a judgment counter to the announcements of the others (Asch, 1956).

The emphasis in the interpretation of these outcomes in social psychology textbooks (Friend, Rafferty, & Bramel, 1990) and summaries of Asch's research (Moscovici, 1985; Ross, Bierbrauer, & Hoffman, 1976) generally has been on the ease by which dramatic instances of conformity have been elicited, although a few have recognized that there was a substantial amount of independence in the face of aberrant, unified opposition (Campbell, 1990; Mutz, 1998). There is nevertheless no question that when others in the vicinity voice judgments that unanimously depart from the physical evidence, the willingness of an individual to announce publicly a judgment that conforms to his or her perception can be subverted.

Milgram's intention was to demonstrate that an individual placed in the role of an agent under the supervision of someone exhibiting authoritative insistence in a setting bestowing legitimacy on the enterprise could be induced to inflict severe physical distress on another party. Thus the primary purpose of the experiments was to document the degree to which individuals under

certain conditions would perform contrary to their own wishes and generally accepted norms. This is quite clear from his own words:

> There is a propensity for people to accept definitions of action provided by legitimate authority. That is, although the subject performs the action, he allows authority to define its meaning. (Milgram, 1974, p. 145).
>
> Men who are in everyday life responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority, by the control of their perceptions, and by the uncritical acceptance of the experimenter's definition of the situation, into performing harsh acts. (Milgram, 1965, p. 74)
>
> I would say, on the basis of having observed a thousand people in the experiment and having my own intuition shaped and informed by these experiments, that if a system of death camps were set up in the United States of the sort we saw in Nazi Germany, one would be able to find sufficient personnel for those camps in any medium-sized American town. (On CBS's *Sixty Minutes*, March 31, 1979; quoted in Blass, 2000b).

Milgram offered two criteria for obedience: the percentage of subjects who would deliver the maximum level of shocks (450 volts) and the average maximum. In a typical baseline condition at the Yale University laboratories, the obedience rate was 65 percent with a 405 volt average maximum. With increased proximity of the victim, these figures dropped to 40 percent and 312 volts when the student was in the same room and to 30 percent and 268 volts when the teacher had to place the student's hand on the shock plate. Experimenter distance similarly reduced the obedience effect. With the reduction in the legitimacy of the setting, the figures declined to 48 percent and 312 volts. Most of the subjects were males between the ages of 20 and 50, but when females were used in the baseline design the obedience rate was the same and the average maximum shock level only somewhat lower.

By Milgram's criteria a substantial majority were obedient in the baseline design, and substantial minorities were obedient with an increase in victim proximity, an increase in experimenter distance, and a reduction in the legitimacy of the setting. Thus, there is a consistent willingness on the part of individuals to accept the dictates of a situation and the person in charge once they have willingly assumed the role of a participant.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence and the social psychological research of Muzafer Sherif, Solomon Asch, and Stanley Milgram present a strong case for the influence of the thought and behavior of others on what an individual will say or do. Whether the specific issue is the willingness to express unpopular views, the formation of opinions and judgments, readiness to adhere to physical evidence in disagreeing with others, or submission to rather ruthless instructions, the evidence points to a considerable degree of conformity. The seeming implication for the decision making of the individual about politics and public affairs is that what others think, say, and do matters.

III. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The empirical documentation of voting patterns that began to accumulate after World War II—in what are often called the "classic" voting studies—makes a strong case for a substantial role for personal experience in the political behavior of Americans. This personal experience typically has been interpreted as contrasting in scope and power with what might be experienced and learned from use of the mass media. It thereby joins the immunity that individuals perceive themselves as enjoying from the influence of the media as a further indication that significant barriers—an "obstinate audience," in Bauer's (1971) classic formulation—render the media ineffectual in affecting the political allegiances, views, and judgments of the public.

The first of this evidence on a large scale came from the surveys of voters that have become looked upon as landmarks in the empirical study of political behavior: Erie County, 1940 (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948) and Elmira, New York, 1948 (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). At the time, they were regarded as opportunities to examine the various influences on the political decision making of voters with clinical accuracy.

There were some surprises. Despite the role of newspapers everywhere as the major means by which news of politics and public affairs was conveyed to the public, their sometimes anxiously anticipated endorsements (by candidates and supporters, certainly, but also occasionally by the public), and the well-established place of commentators and news discussion forums on radio (Kobland, 1999), the authors concluded that influence of the mass media was slight. What mattered most was personal history, which had its strongest expression in party allegiance. People repeatedly voted for the candidates of the same party.

Four out of five voters made up their minds before presidential campaigns began (Katz, 1971). This further insulated the individuals from external opinions, whether from media or associates. Maverick voters were not only rare but tended to fall into three categories. One group was made up of the politically unanchored, who were uncertain and undecided while usually uninformed and largely uninterested in politics, and who often in the end would not vote. We would call the second group the prodigals, who frequently reverted during the campaign from a choice different in party from those they had voted for previously. They strayed, but only temporarily. The third group was made up of those who persisted in their defection.

People usually discussed politics with those similar in outlook and perspective, and thus these experiences usually reinforced initial beliefs. Later research (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) recorded that information from the media often was filtered through others. These "opinion leaders," as they were called, usually shared the same outlook and perspective as those with whom they

conversed. The result was that most of the information reaching the individual ordinarily had a congenial and reinforcing cast.

The role assigned to personal history became even more prominent in political decision making with the apparently clear identification in the evidence on political socialization of the family as the major influence on children and adolescents (Hyman, 1959; Kraus & Davis, 1976). Political dispositions were not only typically stable, but were acquired during childhood from those looked upon with respect—parents. Thus, party allegiance usually had been established before the young citizen reached the age of enfranchisement. Growing attention to the role of rational behavior, with voters choosing candidates on the basis of their holding views on issues similar to those of the voter (Key, 1961, 1966) did not significantly alter the role ascribed to personal history. This was because the differences between the two major parties would act to ensure that the compatibility on issues between voters and their preferred candidates would continue the hegemony of party allegiance.

We argue, beginning in the next chapter, that this conventional and widely accepted view of the place of mass media in American voting patterns no longer holds. Nevertheless, to understand what has changed since the middle of the twentieth century, it is necessary to give a thorough reading to what at one time seemed immutable. We begin with the early evidence on political socialization. We then turn to party allegiance, social influence, and issue voting.

A. Political Socialization

The data from the 1950s and 1960s on the transmission of political values and political behavior to the young seemed to support a strongly linear and highly hierarchical process. The paramount role was assigned to the family (Braungart, 1971; Easton & Dennis, 1969; Hess & Torney, 1967; Hyman, 1959; Maccoby, Matthews, & Morton, 1954–55). The family was seen as exerting influence early, before the child gave much attention to other sources, and then continuing to do so as additional sources gained in relevance. The initial step was the arousing of political interest (Johnson, 1973), presumably in emulation of the interest in politics expressed by parents. Peers generally provided reinforcement because the commonalities of outlook traceable to neighborhood, region, and similarities in socioeconomic class usually would lead to children associating with other children whose parents were much like their own in political disposition.

School played a supplementary role, although the factual information and positive constructions invariably placed on such institutions as the presidency, the Congress, and the Supreme Court were thought to add importantly to the

political outlook taking shape among the young (Easton & Dennis, 1969). Attitudes toward authority figures, such as the president, which typically were favorable if somewhat more idealistic than those held by parents (Greenstein, 1960), were a central part of this socialization and became well established by the years just prior to entry into high school (Hess & Easton, 1960).

As Kraus and Davis (1976) insightfully observe in their extraordinarily comprehensive (if sadly out of print) examination of the empirical evidence on the effects of mass communication on political behavior, the mass media largely were perceived as conveyors of events whose importance lay in their inherent characteristics and not in their construction or framing by the media or in the fact that without the media they would secure the attention of far fewer children and adolescents. Thus, the importance of the president, presidential election campaigns, and the first televised presidential debates between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 were all interpreted as having some role in political socialization, and in particular in drawing the attention and interest of young persons to political events, but they were not seen as particularly representing phenomena attributable largely to the mass media (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Hess & Torney, 1967).

B. Party Allegiance

The single most forceful and lasting inheritance owed the family in political socialization was thought by many to be a preference for and at least a tacit affiliation with a political party (Greenstein, 1965; Hyman, 1971; Maccoby, Matthews, & Morton, 1954–55; Searing, Schwartz, & Lind, 1973). We see this process as having two aspects: the development of a philosophical outlook that would favor the candidates of one or another party because of their point of view, and a less ideologically grounded preference for any candidates bearing the label of a particular party (such as the yellow dog Democrat, who would vote for a yellow dog if he or she were on the party ticket). Thus, it is composed of both ideology and loyalty. This was construed to occur quite early in childhood as part of the process of creating an interest in politics, at least in terms of a disposition if not a well-thought-out position or articulable allegiance, and to remain for most unchanged in regard to partisan preference throughout adulthood.

The data on voting behavior in four of the five presidential elections between 1940 and 1956 (1940, 1948, 1952, and 1956) that entered the empirical literature after World War II were highly supportive of the major role for party allegiance among adults (Berelson, Gaudet, & Lazarsfeld, 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). It was consistently and by a large

margin the best predictor of the candidates for whom an individual would cast a vote. The empirical evidence seemingly supported four propositions strongly enough that they could be considered laws (Katz, 1971; Klapper, 1960):

1. Early decision making—A large majority of voters made up their minds before the presidential campaign began in earnest.
2. Party loyalty—Individuals cast votes for the candidates of the same party in election after election.
3. Regression to the past—About one out of five of the minority of voters who early in the campaign professed some likelihood of deviating from the party whose candidates they had supported in previous elections reverted during the campaign to their earlier preference.
4. Reinforcement from the mass media—The potential influence of the media in undermining party loyalty was undercut by the tendency of voters to choose media content congenial to their outlook, and this exercise of selective exposure presumably would be aided by selective perception by which uncongenial information would be reinterpreted so that it was more in accord with the beliefs and opinions already held by a voter, so that the media typically reinforced the political opinions of their consumers.

C. Social Influence

The empirical evidence from this period on the influence of associates, friends, and neighbors assigns them a prominent role that can be thought of as an extension of the family. That is, they largely reinforced beliefs and opinions bequeathed by earlier socialization (Berelson, Gaudet, & Lazarsfeld, 1948; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In certain respects, they governed the influence of the news, acting as interpreters of what appeared in the media then: newspapers, radio, and magazines.

As with the mass media, peers largely provided information that reinforced preexisting beliefs and opinions (McClosky & Dahlgren, 1959). In general, they shared both among themselves and with the individual, the same background and outlook. Communication between persons generally occurred within social strata and groups with established norms. Group norms, echoing often but also elaborating on and sometimes redefining those of the strata, were expected to lead to the rejection of messages that were contrary to them. These group memberships and allegiances—to unions, professions, clubs, neighborhoods, and (in the area of politics in particular) to political parties—thus functioned to maintain the status quo. Party allegiance was merely the foremost example of how affiliations with social groupings created barriers to changes in the political thinking of individuals.

The selective exposure that operated in the choosing of media to ensure that content was congenial attitudinally had its parallel in the inevitability with which those with whom one associated were similar in background and outlook. In both cases, the likelihood was reduced that viewpoints, and argumentation and information in support of those viewpoints, that were counter to presently held beliefs and convictions would be encountered.

The multistep process by which the messages of the mass media were filtered through the interpretations of others thus typically increased the role of social influence in maintaining the status quo. Most commented upon and probably most common was the two-step flow in which a person designated as an opinion leader—by those studying the phenomenon—served as a conduit and interlocutor for information and opinion collected from the mass media (Lazarsfeld & Menzel, 1963). Such leadership seldom exemplified a paternalistic hegemony over a variety of topics. Instead, it usually was topic specific (Merton, 1949). Possibly, greater access to the media (the conduit role) was joined by perceived expertise (the consultant role) in the elevation of individuals to opinion leadership.

Opinion leaders were found in all social strata and groups (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This had two important consequences. One is that opinion leaders almost invariably were similar in background and outlook to those to whom they passed on their impressions of the content of the media. The other is that they almost invariably coalesced with those to whom they passed on these impressions in the norms to which they adhered. In the case of politics and other topics, these data—selective exposure, multistep flow, similarities among those participating—were properly interpreted as largely representing discussions and exchanges between those of approximately like minds (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954).

Sometimes, a preliminary series of exchanges were observed in which two or more persons exchanged impressions before they were passed on to those who, because they themselves did not consistently play a role in the relaying of what had been initially acquired from attending to the media, were considered followers (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954); thus, the process usually represented by the two-step flow was sometimes a many-step flow. There also was a paradox in regard to learning about what had transpired without the addition of evaluation and judgment (Lazarsfeld & Menzel, 1963). The mass media played a larger role than other persons when what was being conveyed was merely information without interpretation about what had occurred—that is, knowledge of newsworthy events. Thus, the data began to hint that the media would have considerable influence under two conditions: when such knowledge was sufficient to sway opinion, and when personal sources were absent.

What at the time relegated such possibilities to the rare and unlikely was that the first seemed decidedly uncommon and the second appeared to be

confined largely to those with a scant interest in politics and public affairs and thus those with a low likelihood of giving any attention to the news media. Neither certainly could be expected to occur with any frequency. The overall picture, then, was one in which social influence delimited the power of the mass media, provided reinforcement for the beliefs and opinions of the individual so that they would persist and prevail over the ideological competition, and served, within each network of individuals, to maintain a relatively stable perspective in regard to political outlook.

D. Issue Voting

The evidence soon began to point to an even more extensive role for personal experience. Personal convictions and beliefs about issues joined the broader ideological aspect of party allegiance to guide voters. Specific passions thus joined fundamental dispositions. The analyses of post–World War II elections by V. O. Key (1961, 1966) were particularly prominent in advancing this interpretation. The title of his posthumously published *The Responsible Electorate* was intended to emphasize the thoughtful sorting through of issues by voters in choosing among presidential candidates. Voters made rational choices, observable in the match in the empirical data between the views of the candidates for whom they cast a ballot and their own opinions.

Events experienced by voters were critical in Key's interpretation, and thus party loyalty seemingly was diluted by the issues that voters might employ in discriminating between the candidates. This perspective was seen by some (Kraus & Davis, 1976) as an enormous challenge to and essentially a refutation of the view that voting represented stable behavior traceable to political socialization, party allegiance, and personal experience devoid of influence from the mass media. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that in fact it is quite compatible with such a viewpoint.

The choices of a rational voter presumably would reflect the three major influences on voter behavior set forth in the recent and masterful review of the social psychology of voting by Kinder (1998):

1. Material interests
2. Sympathies and resentments
3. Political principles

The first represents the endowments of class, race, gender, and age: what is in the best interests of an individual as a consequence of being blue or white collar, worker or professional; black, white, Hispanic, Asian, or otherwise identifiable as to ethnicity or national origin; man or woman; beginning to work, in midcareer, or facing retirement and its attendant medical and financial

needs—pocketbook voting. The second represents the expression of dispositions toward others who may benefit from or be damaged by various social policies endorsed or opposed by candidates: affirmative action, welfare, Head Start, health care, Social Security, prescription drug policies—symbolic gesture voting. The third represents adherence to the ideology usually inculcated jointly with a preference for one or the other of the major parties by parents in the process of political socialization—ideological voting.

These three pillars on which rest the voting behavior and political actions of individuals do not, by themselves, stray from the governance of personal experience. They are the concrete expression of the cognitive legacies of political socialization, party allegiance, and social influence. Socialization, allegiance, and the influence of those with whom one associates would create the framework of values and loyalties, dispositions and preferences, and evaluations and judgments by which pragmatic interests, symbolic gestures, and the adoption of a particular political philosophy translate into specific opinions and votes.

The rationality of voters, then, could be readily interpreted as the consequence of personal experience. The challenge that issue voting seemed to offer to the stable, constrained, and norm-dominated behavior of individual voters thus was sharply forestalled by the very factors on which this voting was founded. The key elements were the political party and the ideology that led to a preference for one or the other of the two major parties.

Preference for and allegiance to a political party were products of upbringing dating back to childhood, the maintenance of which was dually located in the delimited influence of the mass media and the personal influence both of those who interpreted and passed on information and of those with whom one associated. The party embraced a catalogue of views that would be largely consonant with one another and would be in accord for the most part with the material interests, sympathies and resentments, and the political principles of most of its adherents.

The recognition of an important role for rational voter behavior in the form of issue voting did not at all immediately undermine the factors that had so clearly been at work in shaping voting patterns in the election studies that began to appear after World War II. Instead, the rationality of voters simply meant that considerable reasoning joined habit and that loyalty was under some constraint from ideology in determining the final decisions of voters when they entered the polling place.

Nevertheless, there were forces at work—primarily, stunning changes in the allocation of leisure time and use of the mass media associated with the introduction of television—that would somewhat change the balance among the factors influencing voters. The 1950s saw the widespread diffusion of television among American households. In 1960, the first of what eventually

would become an American political tradition—televised presidential debates—occurred. By the 1970s, the data on personal experience as a predictor of voting behavior indicated that significant changes were taking place.

Two corollaries of issue voting that began to appear with greater frequency were the discriminating voting booth behavior of ticket splitting and a greater independence from party labels. Voters more often split their tickets among candidates from different parties (DeVries & Tarrance, 1972) and became more volatile in shifting between parties from election to election (Dreyer, 1971–72; Rusk & Weisberg, 1972). When voters hold candidates responsible for advocating views that they themselves favor, party labels over time become somewhat less decisive in influencing votes because parties are less flexible and ideologically athletic than candidates. A seeming consequence was a progressive rise in the proportion of the public eligible to vote who saw their primary political identification as separate from the parties—independents (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976).

The authority of factors other than ideology and issue voting nevertheless has not so much declined as assembled in behalf of revolutionary shifts among large blocs of the electorate. The factors comprising personal experience have not withered away. In contrast, they would become central in historically significant alterations in voting patterns that would take place during the last half of the twentieth century. Greater volatility certainly became a fact, but there were realignments that were equally striking in which voters with similar backgrounds in the aggregate moved from one party to another.

The most substantial of these instances was the transformation of the South from a Democratic bulwark to a Republican bastion with the success of Ronald Reagan in winning the support of white blue-collar workers. This realignment did not rest on the disappearance of the factors comprising personal experience apart from ideology and issues. In fact, it depended on them. It was on the shoulders of personal experience that Reagan was carried to victory.

Earlier socialization, the ideology that originally favored the Democrats, and social influence both furthered this realignment. The policy options and the philosophies of the two parties changed in the degree to which they were appealing and congenial to this large and politically important social stratum. With these changes, factors comprising personal experience were marshaled in behalf of a shift toward the Republicans.

The crucial question is whether this change is best interpreted as rooted in the shared experiences of a particular social grouping or should be attributed to newly independent political thinking, and we believe the first is by far the more plausible. The public adjusted to new realities. The party that best served material interests, sympathies and resentments, and political principles changed. Thus, the traditional forces identified in the early voting

studies—socialization, party, and social influence—continued to exert force. With the new millennium only two dozen calendar pages away, Kinder (1998) in his social psychological analysis of voting concluded that they still exerted sufficient authority to be fundamental in understanding the process of political decision making on the part of the public in contemporary America.

IV. THREE PROPOSITIONS

This highly varied body of social and behavioral science research ranges over more than six decades, extending from the recent inquiries into the third-person effect and the spiral of silence to the pioneering work of Sherif in the 1930s on the role of social norms in the making of judgments about ambiguous stimuli. Its legacy has been considerable skepticism over the ability of individuals to act effectively on the basis of their political beliefs and convictions. While in many respects the individual appears to be insulated from the "impersonal influence" of the mass media—a term we owe to Mutz (1998)—the evidence points in a distinctly different direction when it comes to other people. Here, influence looms large. Moreover, even the media have some role in conveying what others are thinking or in creating impressions of which points of view are gaining or losing ground as exemplified by the spiral of silence.

Three propositions crudely but efficiently summarize the resulting wisdom:

1. Although the mass media are often central in the dissemination of news about what has transpired, their influence on the judgments and opinions of individuals is small.
2. Political dispositions are largely rooted in personal experience where socialization by parents, the resulting allegiances to one or another political party and ideological outlook, and the social influence of those with whom one associates play major roles.
3. There is a strong tendency to conform to the expectations of others.

When the conformity studies are combined with the data on the role of social influence in voting, the result often has been a cause of alarm. Individuals are seen as ignoring their own perceptions in deference to group opinion and as ready to violate humane standards of conduct when authority so demands (Blass, 2000b; Moscovici, 1985). It often has been remarked that if in the Asch paradigm so much could be achieved by so little (in the way of authority, expertise, and pressure), the potential for eliciting conformity when more forceful factors are in place (as many would say occurred in the Milgram paradigm) is enormous (Ross, Bierbrauer, & Hoffman, 1976). Most interpreters have sided with the late Richard Pryor in regard to vulnerability to manipulation: "Who you gonna believe? Me, or your lyin' eyeballs?"

We take a different view. We reject those three propositions as well as the alarmism over conformity. In regard to politics, public affairs, and the individual, we believe the evidence has been misapplied and misinterpreted, and the media have been misunderstood.