

A study on the concept of group pressure

Summary

Jan Dirk de Jong & Frank van Gemert

VU University Amsterdam, Department of Criminology

In society, behaviour that is perceived as deviant (or even as criminal) often emerges out of a group. It is possible the individual comes to a deviant act out of free will, but in other instances he may experience some form of *group pressure*. In criminology the question remains unanswered in what way a person can feel pressure in a group, and subsequently come to delinquent behaviour through this pressure. In this research the concept of group pressure is studied theoretically from three social-science perspectives: criminology, sociology and social psychology. Several theories will be discussed and brought together in one model in order to answer the following questions:

What is group pressure? What are the consequences of group pressure for the individual? How can group pressure be recognized? How is group pressure exercised, and how do individual group members experience this pressure? How can group members free themselves from group pressure? What can a group do to reduce group pressure? Is it possible to influence group pressure from outside the group?

Theory shows that, to a certain extent, everyone adapts his behaviour to what he thinks the group expects from him. This behavioural adaptation can be a free choice. It is also possible that implicit or explicit group pressure influences this social situation.

In the case of *implicit* group pressure an individual conforms himself to the behavioural norms of the group because he feels the urge to do so, without other group members explicitly putting pressure on him to conduct deviant behaviour. He does what he thinks the group wants him to do, because he is afraid other group members will react in a negative way, for example by looking down on him.

In the case of *explicit* group pressure an individual conforms himself to the behavioural norms of the group, because other group members force him to do so. He adapts his behaviour because of the sanctions with which he is threatened, such as ridicule, physical or material damage or exclusion. Group pressure doesn't develop only within a group. The processes in which group pressure emerge are also influenced by what happens between a group and other groups or society at large. Processes *between groups* contribute to the fact that a group as a whole feels threatened in certain social situations, which intensifies the group pressure.

Based on a theoretical model on group pressure, it is possible to point to ways of reducing the effect of a group having a grip on individuals. It is a very complex task, if not an impossible one, to change a 'bad' group into a 'good' one. Therefore, the emphasis lies on what an individual person can do himself. The possibilities to escape from implicit group pressure mainly lie in the mental skills of the person. He needs to become aware of what happens to him when he is part of a group and take measures to feel less dependent on (the actions of) other group members. When it comes to explicit group pressure, the person can speak up, create discord and seek support for a new position. By questioning the validity of the behavioural group norms, he may find support within or outside the group. Finally, a person can become aware he is too dependent on one particular group. In that case, the individual has a strong identification with that group. Through orientation on other groups, or more general, maintaining valuable relationships outside the one group, the individual arms himself against the dangers of group pressure.