Herd Behavior
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Herd behavior is a term used to describe the phenomenon of complying with the conduct of others. The following article discusses the roots of herd behavior in animals, as well as how it occurs with people. As you read, take notes on the causes and effects of herd behavior.

Background

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

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

Examples of Herd Behavior

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

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

A more obvious example of human herd behavior occurs in dense public crowds or mobs. Crowds that gather because of a grievance or protest can involve herding behavior that becomes violent, especially if confronted by an opposing racial or ethnic group. The Los Angeles riots of 1992, New York Draft Riots, and Tulsa Race Riot are infamous examples of herding behavior that turned violent. Psychologists posit that a “group mind” can overtake a mob and embolden people to act in ways they would not individually, increasing the likelihood that situations become violent.

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

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

Everyday Decision-Making

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

1. The Los Angeles riots began on April 29, 1992, after a jury acquitted four officers of the L.A. police department of assault and the use of excessive force--despite having been caught on tape beating a man named Rodney King. The riots continued for 6 days, resulting in the deaths of 55 people, with about 2,000 people injured.
2. The New York City draft riots (July 13–16, 1863) took place following new laws passed by Congress to draft men into the American Civil War. About 119 people died in those riots, the main victims having been black, targeted as scapegoats. The riots are considered one of the largest civil, racial insurrections in U.S. history.
3. The Tulsa race riot was large and racially motivated, in which a group of whites attacked the black community of Tulsa, Oklahoma on May 31 and June 1, 1921. The massacre resulted in numerous fatalities (which are debated, varying from 36 to 300) and several counts of arson, including at two black hospitals.
Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
   A. Even when acting in groups, humans are not as civilized as we would like to think.
   B. Herd behavior is proof that free will does not exist in human beings.
   C. The actions of a large group can greatly influence an individual’s decisions.
   D. Crowds tend to be very violent and chaotic when they begin to panic.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “All of the animals band closely together in a group and, in panic mode, move together as a unit” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “When herd behavior sets in, an individual person’s judgment and opinion-forming process shuts down” (Paragraph 2)
   C. “Sporting events can also create herd behavior on a violent scale.” (Paragraph 6)
   D. “suppose that a family is walking down the street looking for a restaurant to have dinner” (Paragraph 8)

3. In paragraph 4, what is the relationship between the stock market and herd behavior? [RI.3]
   A. Stock market employees work on complicated subjects and in a constant state of anxiety, much like herding animals.
   B. Herd behavior creates stock market surges and crashes, because it causes many people to act on their emotions rather than reason.
   C. Rather than logically making decisions, the stock market is based entirely on emotional decisions, just like herd behavior.
   D. Stock market bubbles and crashes may be driven by herding behavior, but are most likely caused by fear.

4. Which of the following statements best explains why the author includes the final section titled “Everyday Decision-Making” in the article? [RI.5]
   A. to reveal that not every case of herd behavior is necessarily negative or violent
   B. to show that herd behavior occurs in even smaller groups
   C. to prove that some decision making does occur in herd behavior
   D. to demonstrate that herd behavior is a problem that everyone faces
5. How does paragraph 7 contribute to the development of ideas in the article?
Discussion Questions

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

1. Think of some examples you have seen of herd behavior and describe them.

2. Why do people follow the crowd? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.