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2011

# Group membership and its adverse psychological effects in *The Ox-Bow Incident*

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### Recommended Citation

Plach,, Casey '15, "Group membership and its adverse psychological effects in *The Ox-Bow Incident*" (2011). *Outstanding Gateway Papers*. Paper 1.

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Group membership and its adverse psychological effects in  
*The Ox-Bow Incident*

In 2003, about two thirds of Americans supported President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq (Patterson 480). The attack was based on the belief that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks it was reasonable for Americans to want to take extra precautions. Bush called this preemptive war, where a country could attack another in the face of a dangerous threat (Patterson 472). However, no one was ever entirely sure that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and eight years later we have found nothing. With this in mind, Americans have withdrawn their support, declaring that President Bush did not look at other alternatives, that he interpreted evidence in a biased manner, and was too confident to listen to criticism. Why, then, did the majority of America support the decision eight years ago? After the attacks on the Twin Towers, America was scared. Emotion overcame reason and critical thinking, and those who did not agree found it hard to speak up against the majority. A similar process occurs in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*. In the novel, men from the town of Bridger's Wells form a posse to kill the three rustlers who were claimed to have murdered fellow townsman, Larry Kincaid. Excitement builds up in the group to go out and "serve justice," but they end up making a rushed, poorly reasoned decision. At some point each of the men is hesitant about the job, but no one can find it in himself to speak up. Fear of being an outsider leads each member of the lynch mob to conform to the group, and the pressure of conforming results in their irrational thought processes and final decision to hang three innocent men.

It only takes one person to catalyze a group, and in the case of the *Ox-Bow Incident*, it is young man named Greene. He spreads the word around town that Kincaid has been shot in the head, and everyone starts to panic. Later we find that his story is not even true, but the town is in an uproar and emotions start to flair. Kincaid's friend Farnley starts talking about revenge, other riders insist they have to protect the town, and Bartlett gives an emotional speech about their duty to uphold justice. Art, the narrator, describes his speech as follows:

Thinking about it afterward I was surprised that Bartlett succeeded so easily. None of the men he was talking to owned any cattle or land... Some out of that many were bound to have done a little rustling on their own, and maybe one or two had even killed a man. But they weren't thinking of those things then any more than I was. Old Bartlett was amazing. (36)

This shows that in the heat of the moment, one can easily be swayed to join a group. It may not even be a cause that one would normally support, but the right leader can move a crowd by appealing to the people's emotion and self-worth, and directing their attention to the importance of the issue. And once a crowd is riled up, it is hard to not join in.

In his speech, Bartlett asks the men, "Are we going to slink on our own range before we do anything?...it's not just rustler we're after, it's a murderer" (35). Clearly he outlines the gravity of the situation, but it is his use of "we" throughout his speech that gets the men to join. If a man does not go, he will not be part of the "we" who protect the town; he will not be respected by the rest, but instead will be looked down upon and possibly even blamed. Art, the narrator, and his friend Gil are not from the town and feel they have join to clear their names. Another character named Gerald feels obligated to go because his father, Tetley, is the leader. Nobody can afford to be an outsider, and besides, it is much easier to go with the group, especially when everyone else is. As Art puts it, "Most men are afraid of being thought cowards than of anything else" (57). This is the power of conformity, the process where one "alter(s) (his)

behaviors or opinions to match those of others or to match social norms” (Gazzaniga 547). The so-called “posse” in *The Ox-Bow Incident* is actually a lynch mob, and all the men know it, but they mentally trick themselves into believing that it is acceptable. Once they commit to the group, the men do not think about what they are doing—all they can think about is getting the job done. It is easier to be in the group than be called “yellow,” even if it does compromise one’s morals. Gerald is one of the first to make this observation; on the trip through the Ox-Bow, he says to Art, “We’re doing it because we’re in the pack, because we’re afraid not to be in the pack. We don’t dare show the pack our weakness; we don’t dare resist the pack” (106). It is easier to join a pack than stand against it, but conforming under the pressure of a group and not making an informed decision can lead to regret.

Irrational thought processes emerge within a group too because once the group has gained support, the members will become overconfident and not second-guess themselves. Davies, the town shop keeper and the only man of the group who openly opposes their actions, almost gets everyone to reconsider the mob when he points out that the only information Greene actually had was that Kincaid had been shot. This is all turned around, however, when Amigo comes and claims to have seen three rustlers in Bridger’s Pass. Amigo is not from the town and is a friend of Tetley, the malicious, commanding leader, so he is not the best source of information. But the crowd does not care—they have what they need now to prove Davies wrong. They choose to listen to the information that confirms their beliefs, a process called confirmation bias. Sheriff Risley is not in town, leaving no one to deputize the men so they are a posse rather than a mob, but the men find a way around this too. Mapes is acting deputy and legally has no right to deputize the crowd, but they insist that it is the only way to “observe true justice” (93). Nothing can stop the men of Bridger’s Wells now; they all agree that the job has to

be done. In describing Davies' last desperate attempt to get the mob to stop and consider all the evidence, Art says, "he looked around again, but he didn't find any friends. I didn't look at him myself. We knew what we were after now" (92). This consensus in the group and confidence that they are correct is a result of what social psychologist Irving Janis calls groupthink (Gazzaniga 546). The members just want to agree to maintain the group's "cohesiveness" and do not stop to think realistically about their other options (Gazzaniga 546). They take any information and twist it to support their own ideas. The consequences of such actions can be severe—in the case of the *Ox-Bow Incident*, a hasty, unreasonable decision leads to the death of three innocent men.

During the journey, multiple members of the group express concern to Art over whether the lynch mob is doing the right thing. Gerald, Tetley's son, says, "if we get those men and hang them, I'll kill myself. I'll hang myself" (107). Sparks, a black minister, even tells Art, "Ah wish we was well out of this business" (118). Clearly the members of the lynch mob have doubts, but they still go on in order to be accepted in the group. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance examines the "uncomfortable state due to conflicts between attitudes...and behavior," and can be used to explain the characters' actions (Gazzaniga 527). The dissonance the men have between upholding their morals or being accepted by the group motivates them to either change their attitudes or change their behavior. It is usually easier to change one's attitude, which is exactly what the men do. They convince themselves that it is okay to hang the rustlers, especially since when they find them they have Drew's cows and Kincaid's gun. And again, since everyone else is doing it, the doubters begin to believe that they must act in accordance to the majority's decision. Davies urges Gil not to think about anything but the way he really feels about the situation, to which Gil responds, "My feelings haven't got anything to do with it" (179). He chooses to ignore his feelings and just act, but later looks back with regret and tells

Art, "I knew it didn't feel right" (189). The decisions one makes to correct his cognitive dissonance is often just another instance of conforming to the group without thinking everything through. And in the end, this can only lead to regret like that which Gil and all the other members of the mob feel when they return to town and realize they are wrong.

One often loses his sense of identity and responsibility when in a group situation. Davies warns the crowd from the beginning that "the consent of the majority lessen(s) personal responsibility" (49). He explains that under the mask of a group it is easy to feel anonymous, and that can lead to rash or reckless behavior. Such deindividuation, "the phenomenon of low self-awareness, in which people lose their individuality and fail to attend to personal standards," is the result of group membership (Gazzaniga 545). The men get aroused by the idea of the group and the support that everyone seems to have, and then they lose themselves. They no longer see themselves as responsible for their own actions because they are concealed by a group. Just before the hanging Art says, "Most of the men had made up their minds, or felt that the rest had and that their sympathy was reprehensible and should be concealed" (178). None of the men are comfortable with the lynching, but they repress their feelings. They tell themselves that they are not completely responsible because the blame can be put on the group, or their leader Tetley. Davies warns of this too before the group sets out, claiming that men will often look for a "scapegoat" to carry the blame. However, no one gives a thought to his warning, which proves deadly in the end (57).

Conforming to a group leads to foolish decisions because individuals lose their ability to think rationally and independently. Men join a group because it may sound appealing and everyone else is doing it, but more often than not they will change their attitudes and behavior to not be rejected. Even if they do not fully support the group's purpose they will often compromise

their beliefs and go along with it because of the pressure of being an outsider. Davies is an outsider because he goes against the group and tries to convince them to think rationally, but the consequence for this is that people doubt his character. “The trouble with Davies is that he can’t see no profit in this,” says a townsman named Smith, claiming that Davies does not support the mob because he cannot make any money off it (37). Others are convinced that he must not want to protect Bridger’s Wells and uphold the town’s name. Only after the men of the mob find that they were wrong do they feel regret and realize that they acted too soon. Group membership pressures people to conform; they forget who they are and what they really think. They change to be accepted. The consequences of being an outsider can be severe, so it is natural to want to be part of a group. But this is why groups are so dangerous— they lead to irrational thought processes like confirmation bias, groupthink, and deindividuation where people change just to fit in. The psychological effects of group membership are so powerful that even the most strong-minded individuals can give in.

All of the characters fall prey to the mental traps of group membership at some point in the novel, but this is especially critical for Gil because he is the one man who could sway the rest of the group if he stood up and took action. He is one of the more emotional and thoughtful characters in the *Ox-Bow Incident*, but nevertheless he gives into the pressure of the group and it all takes off from there. He and Art are from a different area, and when rustling is the talk of the town, it is not good to be a stranger. This is Gil’s motive for joining the mob— he needs to clear his name. However, conforming to the group is his first mistake because as the mob gains momentum it becomes harder and harder to back out. As a member, he is influenced by the emotion around him to believe Amigo’s story, become overconfident in their mission, and lose his sense of responsibility. At one point he says to Tetley, “If you got any doubts let’s call off

this party” (157). Tetley is firm, and demanding but “this was the first remark that had made any impression on Tetley’s cool disregard” (157). Even so, Gil ends up stepping back for fear of looking “yellow” in front of the rest of the men. As explained previously, Gil ignores his feelings and later regrets his actions, but he does not take responsibility for what he did— Tetley is the “scapegoat” for the mistakes he made. It is because of characters like Gil who conform to the groups and do not speak up that regretful decisions are made and men die.

Clark demonstrates through *The Ox-Bow Incident* the nature of group membership. Groups are powerful and forceful. They can be built on a false consensus because everyone is trying to agree with what they believe the whole believes. Groups can become so confident that in their eyes everything they do is right, so there is no need to stop and think things through. Clark is suggesting through the occurrence in the Ox-Bow that groups can become too powerful and too set in their own beliefs, and this can lead to disastrous consequences. Conforming to a group can result in irrational thought processes, so the importance of approaching everything with an open mind and considering all points of view before acting is emphasized. The three men the mob lynched were innocent. There was no solid proof for either side, and all the men felt uneasy about hanging them so quickly. So why did the one man who spoke up not make a difference in their minds? Clark seems to be suggesting that the pressure of a group is too strong to overcome. People are too worried about their reputation and fitting in—they are too worried about being outsiders. But sometimes, outsiders are exactly what the world needs. Whether it is the lives of three in the Ox-Bow or the lives of thousands in Iraq, someone needs to speak up so the most reasonable decision can be made.

#### Works Cited



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## **CITIZENS AND STRANGERS**

GATEWAY FALL 2010

ESSAY #3

Write a 5-7 page essay on ONE of the following topics. Your essay is due in class on TUESDAY October 4.

Be sure to include page numbers and a title that conveys your thesis. Bring TWO copies of your paper to class. I will have one copy to review and share with you at our FRIDAY October 7 conference. The revised version of your paper is due in the box outside CLA 251 by 4 PM on MONDAY October 10.

This time your audience is not a class member, but an average American citizen. Imagine that your essay will appear in the book review section of the Sunday newspaper. Your audience has not read the book. Let us imagine that they will want to read it after reading your essay. Your essay will take as a starting point one of the following two key interpretive themes.

1. *The Ox-Bow Incident* is a book about how members use and abuse their privileges. The book tells the story of a lynch mob. Clark uses the various motivations of the mob's members to explore the causes of the abuse of power.

Write an essay analyzing the motives and causes driving the *Ox-bow* mob. Be sure to answer the question: what does this book say about the nature of group membership?

2. *The Ox-Bow Incident* was written in 1940, in the darkest days before World War II. Fascism was at its height, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark wrote the book to promote a cosmopolitan point of view.

Write an essay analyzing the Davies' view of the law and his anguish over his decision not to shoot Tetley before the lynching.