

Chapter 4

Psychological Perspectives on Perceived Safety: Social Factors of Feeling Safe



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Abstract What makes people feel safe? How do people conclude whether a certain situation, choice, or behavior is safe or not? In the present chapter we take the view that social factors influence perceived safety. We discuss the social determinants of perceived safety both as a general subjective state and as a safety-related estimation or judgment. From this perspective, we first discuss what humans *need* to feel safe. We present psychological insights on basic human needs and argue that the fulfillment of those needs is a general condition for the state of perceived safety. Second, we discuss how social factors (i.e. what others do and say and how one relates to these others) influence safety judgments and decisions. We illustrate how individuals adapt their judgments and behaviors to group norms and discuss why group discussions can lead to extreme judgments and decisions. We aim to complement the existing literature on perceived safety by highlighting the importance of social factors of safety perception.

Keywords Perceived safety · Social influences · Human needs · Need to belong · Social identity · Group conformity · Group polarization · Safety judgment

4.1 Introduction

Do you feel safe? Before reading on, please spend a moment to answer this question for yourself. You are probably able to quickly make a rough statement on whether you generally feel safe or not. However, safety is a complex, multi-layered construct, and the question can be answered in multiple ways. Safety refers to very different areas of human life, such as one's current health status, experienced

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exposure to crime, financial situation, and social relationships. We argue (and this is a main emphasis of the present chapter) that social relationships are of importance for a person's well-being in general and safety perception in particular. For example, students could feel unsafe at school or university because they fear not being accepted by their peers or because they are afraid of not meeting the given performance expectations. Likewise, interpersonal conflicts within one's family or at work might lead to the experience of fear and uncertainty. The list of such social factors that can make us feel safe (or not) goes on. In the first section of the present chapter, we aim at going into detail about what humans *need* to feel safe, with a particular emphasis on interpersonal aspects.

In the second section, we discuss how safety-related judgments and decisions can be shaped by social factors. When people face safety-related questions such as whether certain sports, foods, medical treatments, journeys, or investments are safe, they are typically not in isolation. Instead, people tend to make such judgments and decisions in social contexts, as part of groups such as their families, friends, colleagues, or simply the people who surround them by chance in the train, at the airport, or in the supermarket. People often adapt their judgments and decisions to what is suggested or seen as normal by their surrounding groups. In the second section of this chapter we discuss a number of insights from social psychology that help us understand how social contexts can affect safety perception.

4.2 What Do We *Need* to Feel Safe?

Humans are loss-averse and thereby motivated to make decisions in such a way that losses are avoided or minimized. Per prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1973), human decision-making is to a considerable extent based on the subjective perception of losses and gains. Humans are more sensitive to losses than to gains and thereby loss-averse. Safety perception relates to the motivation to avoid losses because it generally describes a state of protection from harm that is presently experienced as well as expected for the future. The etymology of the term safety (Old French: *sauveté*, Latin: *salvus*) refers to a condition of not being in danger, of being unharmed (see Oxford Dictionaries 2015). In order to understand the conditions under which humans feel safe and unsafe, we therefore need to understand what really endangers and harms people—or, expressed positively, we need to know and understand the most fundamental human needs and how humans respond to the satisfaction and deprivation of these needs. We need to know what humans *need* to be able to feel safe. Thereby, we suggest broad concept of perceived safety as a state in which a person's most important needs are satisfied and it is expected that this state will remain stable.

The term *need* is well-established in psychological literature. As per Kurt Lewin's field theory, needs release energy, increase tension and thereby motivate a person to behave in a certain way (Lewin and De Rivera 1976). If a need is unfulfilled, one perceives actual harm (Baumeister 2012). "Not getting something

you need means more and is worse than not getting something you merely want” (Baumeister 2012, p. 124). This specification highlights the immediate relation between basic human needs and safety, which we have introduced as a condition of being unharmed. Advances in psychological research during the last decades, especially within social psychology, have created a considerable knowledge base on what humans most fundamentally need. Aiming to widen the understanding of the conditions under which people generally feel safe, we first give an overview about various basic human needs. After that, we take a closer look at need to belong theory, which is particularly important concerning the perception of (social) safety.

4.2.1 Overview of Basic Human Needs

Soon after Maslow (1943) proposed his hierarchy of needs, the theory became widely known and was later described as one of the most popular theories in the literature of management and organizational behavior (Wahba and Bridwell 1976). The core of Maslow’s theory consists of five need categories ranked in a hierarchical order. The needs pyramid illustrated in Fig. 4.1 became the symbol of recognition for the theory—although Maslow himself never used that illustration. The wide acceptance and popularity of Maslow’s theory is especially interesting considering that there is to date sparse empirical evidence supporting the theory. There is especially poor evidence for the suggested hierarchy (i.e., that people seek

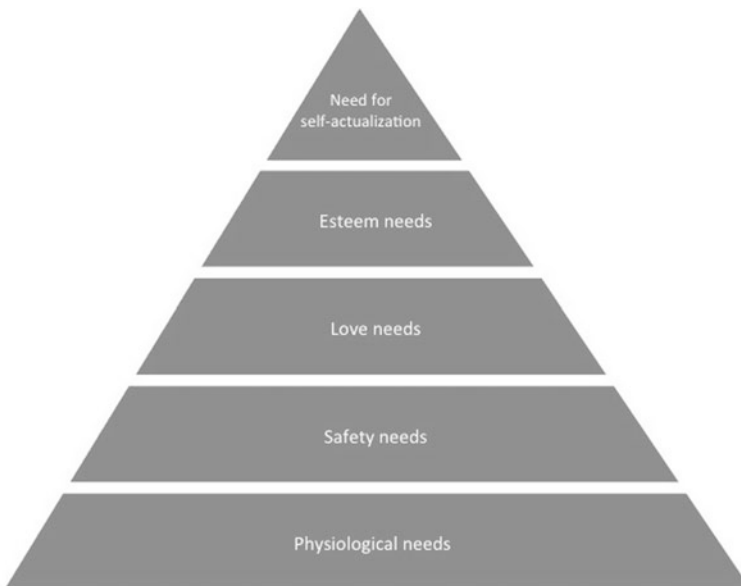


Fig. 4.1 Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Needs categories as introduced by Maslow 1943)

need satisfaction in a specific order; Wahba and Bridwell 1976). However, Maslow's hierarchy of needs illustrates the numerousness and diversity of human needs and provides a broad overview of a number of them. Thus, the theory can be a good starting point to understand what really matters to humans.

The following five needs categories form Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943):

1. *Physiological needs.* Maslow described physiological needs, including hunger, thirst, and fatigue, as the most pre-potent needs category. "For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food and he wants only food" (Maslow 1943, p. 5). In line with our understanding of safety perception, we reason that a presently experienced and further expected satisfaction of such physiological needs is a fundamental precondition for perceived safety.
2. *Safety needs.* Maslow's concept of safety refers to threats of personal security, health and financial security such as crime, murder, extreme weather conditions and severe illness but also unemployment as well as generally insufficient predictability and order (Maslow 1943). By classifying safety needs as the needs category of the second highest order, Maslow's theory highlights the high importance for humans to feel safe and the strong motivation to attain a state of perceived safety: "Practically everything looks less important than safety (even sometimes the physiological needs which being satisfied, are now underestimated). A man, in this state, if it is extreme enough and chronic enough, may be characterized as living almost for safety alone" (Maslow 1943, p. 6). We go beyond Maslow in arguing that safety perception requires the satisfaction of further basic human needs.
3. *Love needs.* The needs category of love, affection and belongingness includes the need for stable relationships with one's family and friends as well as romantic relationships. Maslow (1943) stresses the importance of affection and belongingness by referring to the relation between social isolation and mental disorder. As the main emphasis of this chapter lies on the materiality of social relationships, we discuss social needs in general as well as the various negative effects of lacking social relationships in a later part of this section. At this point, we want to capture that affection and belongingness are fundamental human needs and—in line with our broad concept of safety—are preconditions for safety perception.
4. *Esteem needs.* Maslow identified a stable, high evaluation of oneself as a basic human need (Maslow 1943). "All people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others" (Maslow 1954, p. 90, as cited by Huizinga 1970). The esteem needs thereby include both a need for self-respect as well as for respect from others (Huizinga 1970). Based on the assumption that the dissatisfaction of all basic human needs results in actual harm (Baumeister 2012), we argue that perceived safety requires also the satisfaction of such needs that exceed mere physical integrity and predictability.

5. *Need for self-actualization.* Maslow differentiates between deficiency needs and growth needs, whereby the four previously introduced needs categories are deficiency needs. As soon as the deficit (e.g., hunger, criminal threat, loneliness, lack of recognition) is gratified, the need is satisfied, and the person is no longer motivated to improve the situation. We would argue, instead: As soon as the deficit is gratified, the person feels safe. However, in the case of growth needs, the fulfillment of the need remains attractive regardless of how much it has already been satisfied (Huizinga 1970). Maslow introduced the need for self-actualization as a growth need: “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow 1954, p. 92, as cited by Huizinga 1970).

Regarding the deficiency needs, we find it important to bear in mind that the point of fulfillment of these needs is in many cases not objectively defined. There are numerous factors that can influence individual aspiration levels of different needs. We believe that besides innate physiological needs such as hunger and thirst, aspiration levels can be socially determined such that others influence the point of fulfillment of one’s needs as well as how that fulfillment can be achieved: What is an attractive income? What is a friend and how many of them do I need? What sort of romantic relationship makes me happy? What kinds of achievements are seen as valuable? What indicates personal development? (...) Cultures, societies, families, circles of friends, peers, schools, universities, companies, etc. suggest different answers to these questions and can thereby shape (or confuse) individual aspiration levels. Depending on the culture, region, family, and zeitgeist one was born in, the concept of valuable relationships, success, personal development, etc. might be completely different. We argue that the existence of certain needs, the perception of whether these needs are fulfilled or not, and convictions on how these needs can be fulfilled are to a large extent socially mediated beliefs.

In addition to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, psychological research has identified further basic needs and motives that are of fundamental importance to humans and therefore fundamentally influence human well-being and behavior. For example, self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985) suggests the existence of three universal human needs that predict human well-being across cultures: (1) autonomy (i.e., being a causal agent regarding what activities a person engages in and how), (2) competence (i.e., perceived effectiveness in one’s activities), and (3) social relatedness (i.e., perceived closeness to others; Deci and Ryan 2008a; Sheldon et al. 2001). Environments (e.g., at work, in hospitals, or at home) that facilitates the satisfaction of these three basic needs motivate people effectively and are related to positive psychological and behavioral outcomes, whereas environments that do not allow for the satisfaction of these needs reduce both motivation and general human well-being (Deci and Ryan 2008b). We claim that these three motives overlap at least to a certain extent with the motives introduced by Maslow (especially his love needs, esteem needs and the need for self-actualization). Further psychological needs have been identified, such as a need for pleasurable stimulation (as suggested by Epstein’s cognitive-experiential self-theory; see Sheldon et al. 2001), the human

desire and need for control in terms of explainability, predictability, and influenceability (Frey and Jonas 2002; Streicher et al. 2012) such as for appreciation, fairness and meaningfulness (Frey et al. 2011), and many others.

We believe that all these basic human needs are to a certain extent essential for the perception of structure, predictability, self-confidence and thereby safety. We claim that feeling safe depends not only on physical integrity but also on many further factors such as whether one has positive and stable social relationships with others, whether one feels fairly and respectfully treated, whether one is satisfied with oneself and able to develop in a desired way, whether one has influence on a given situation and is able to anticipate the ongoing development, whether one has a certain freedom in what to do and how to do it, etc. In the following we want to consider more specifically the basic human need that was described by Maslow as *love needs* and by Deci and Ryan as *social relatedness*: The need for social belongingness.

4.2.2 *Need to Belong—Why We Need Relationships to Feel Safe*

Need to belong theory (Baumeister and Leary 1995) says that humans have a fundamental need to belong with others and thus establish and maintain social relationships. More specifically, humans seek stable, caring relationships as well as regular interactions. Baumeister (2012) stresses the high priority of the need to belong with the observation that humans often take physical risks in order to impress others. Riding a motorbike without a helmet, smoking cigarettes, and sunbathing can be seen as examples for such behaviors that illustrate that the need to belong can outperform other fundamental needs (Baumeister 2012). We want to discuss such obviously risky behaviors to explain the safety perspective we take in the present chapter: Riding a motorbike without a helmet, smoking cigarettes and sunbathing are all behaviors that are generally seen as unsafe. Of course, one can argue that people engage in these behaviors simply because of a certain need for pleasurable stimulation (see Sheldon et al. 2001). However, we believe that these behaviors can also be explained through the *social safety* they promise: While these behaviors are indeed unsafe as far as their effect on one's physical health, we argue that under certain conditions, such behaviors might be safe options in relation to one's need to belong: Smoking might be attractive in certain contexts as a safe strategy to impress peers or even to make or keep friends. Comparatively, riding a motorbike without a helmet and sunbathing might be effective strategies to make a certain impression on others and thereby to satisfy one's need to belong.

The great importance of belongingness for human well-being became apparent through many experimental studies demonstrating the drastic effects of social exclusion. For example, scholars induced social exclusion in groups by having participants in a group choose another group member as his or her partner, and then

telling certain individuals that he or she had not been chosen as a partner by any other group member (Baumeister 2012). Other experiments used the context of a ball game where the group members suddenly stop throwing the ball to a particular (socially excluded) participant (see Williams and Jarvis 2006). People's immediate reactions to threats to their need to belong usually are negative affect (i.e., socially excluded persons perceive negative emotions) as well as lower self-esteem (i.e., social exclusion harms a person's subjective evaluation of his or her own self; Smart Richman and Leary 2009). However, further responses to exclusion vary over a broad range from antisocial behavior (Warburton et al. 2006) to socially avoidant behavior and even prosocial behavior (Lakin and Chartrand 2003).

Excluded persons simultaneously experience the following three motives, given here in order of strength of influence: First, excluded persons perceive a heightened desire for social relations—either with the rejecting person(s) or with others who can provide social relatedness. Second, excluded persons feel angry and urged toward aggressive, antisocial responses with the aim of self-protection and harm toward the source of rejection. Third, socially excluded persons can be motivated to isolate themselves from social contacts to avoid further rejection and the related pain (Smart Richman and Leary 2009). A set of factors determines which of the three motives dominates people's responses to social rejection (e.g., are there alternative relationships available? How pervasive is the exclusion? Is the exclusion perceived as unfair?). Thus, as social exclusion threatens a person's need to belong, there is a certain willingness toward cooperation and thus approaching the group. However, when people do not see a way to reintegrate into the group, they use antisocial responses and/or withdrawal as strategies of self-protection.

Interestingly, culture also seems to affect how people respond to social exclusion. People from collective cultures such as Turkey, India and China were shown to be less affected by social exclusion than people from individualistic cultures such as Germany and the United States. People from individualistic cultures tend to respond more strongly to exclusion than participants from collective cultures, with increased heart rates, higher levels of negative mood as well as more prominent antisocial and avoiding behavior (Pfundmair et al. 2015a; b).

The effects of social exclusion demonstrate the enormous importance of social belongingness for humans. Being accepted by the people who surround us seems to be a fundamental condition for feeling safe. Another research stream indicating the high significance of social relatedness for safety perception is that around attachment theory (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991; Bretherton 1992). Empirical work in the field of attachment theory has indicated that the quality of a child's early attachment to his or her parents (or another primary caregiver) can have remarkable effects on the child's social and emotional development as well as present and future emotions and behaviors (Grossmann and Grossmann 2014). In that context, a key feature of parenting is described as “the provision by both parents of a secure base from which a child or an adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and to which he can return knowing for sure that he will be welcomed when he gets there, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened” (Bowlby 2005, p. 11). This first section of this chapter shall illustrate the

importance of social relations for human well-being in general and safety perception in particular. Being accepted and liked by the persons who surround us is of such importance for us that it has a material impact on our everyday judgment formation and behavior. In the following, we discuss further how social factors influence our perceptions and judgments on how safe or risky a certain situation is.

4.3 Social Influences on Safety Judgments and Decisions

We have illustrated social belongingness as a basic human need. It is therefore not surprising that we find ourselves well-embedded in social relations in most parts of our daily lives: We usually live in close interaction with our families and friends, work in teams or cultivate business relationships, and also seek contact with others in our leisure time such as when we participate in sports, engage in cultural events or use social media. As our everyday lives are dominated by social relations and interactions, it is no surprise that we consider what others say and do when making safety-related judgments and decisions. When we face questions like *is it safe to go swimming today*, *do I need accident insurance for my children*, *should I wear a helmet when riding my bike to work*, *is this a safe trip*, or *should I buy shares of that company*, we naturally consider how others deal with these issues. Thus, we might have a look at the sea and check if there are other people swimming, ask our friends if they have accident insurance for their children (and why), consider whether our colleagues wear a helmet when they come to work by bike, search for reports of travel experiences on the internet, or discuss investment options with our colleagues.

Per social perception theory (Bruner and Postman 1948), perception is a process of constant testing of the assumptions people have about their surroundings. People consult the behavior of significant others to verify or disprove their assumptions, such as about how safe a certain situation, technology or activity is. It is also a basic concept of social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) that people evaluate their opinions and assumptions by comparing them to those of others. Humans want to make correct judgments and decisions and compare their assumptions with the statements and behaviors of others as a sort of social validation strategy. It is a main element of dissonance theory (Festinger 1962), that humans seek the support of like-minded people when uncertain about their judgments or decisions. Especially in uncertain, fearful situations, one seeks to affiliate with others (see Schachter's affiliation experiments; Schachter 1959). Thus, people base their safety-related assumptions and judgments (such as whether a certain food is poisonous) to a high degree on the statements and behaviors of others. In the following, we discuss psychological findings on how social factors in general and groups in particular affect our everyday safety judgments and decisions. We go on to discuss how our personal safety perception depends on the behaviors and expressions of the people who surround us.

4.3.1 Group Conformity—Groups Make Us Think More Equally

One of the earliest experiments demonstrating how dramatically human judgment can be affected by social factors was conducted by Sherif (1935). In his experiment, participants were asked to estimate the distance covered by a (seemingly) moving point of light in a completely darkened room. Of course, without any three-dimensional context information, there was no indication that would justify a particular assessment: It was absolutely arbitrary whether participants estimated the distance as rather short (because the light was assumed to be close to the participant) or rather distant (because the light was assumed to be far away from the participant, see Fig. 4.2). It is therefore no surprise that Sherif's participants expressed totally different distance estimations. Sherif's remarkable finding, however, was that as soon as he asked his participants to estimate the distance covered by the light in a group setting, the expressed estimations became more equal. Notably, the higher convergence of the estimated distances remained when participants were asked to re-estimate the distance individually afterwards. The experiment shows that groups build certain common norms and that these norms affect both our group and individual judgments in such a way that the convergence of individual judgments increases. Sherif's participants implicitly agreed on a shared understanding of how far the light was away. That norm affected not only the distance estimates within the group but also the subsequent individual estimations (Erb et al. 2002; Sherif 1935).

Many of the safety-related questions that we face in our everyday lives can be of similar difficulty to the ambiguous task in Sherif's experiment. Common norms of what is generally perceived as safe or risky can facilitate answering such difficult questions. Common assumptions within groups can affect the safety judgments of individuals regardless of whether the group has a right or wrong understanding of the situation. It has been shown that the risk categories of technological, chemical and environmental risks tend to be in many cases overestimated (Renn 2014). When a group collectively assumes that new technologies generally entail high risk, this common norm can also influence the safety perceptions of individual group members (as indicated by Sherif's experiment).

Fig. 4.2 Illustration of Sherif's (1935) experiment demonstrating the effect of group norms

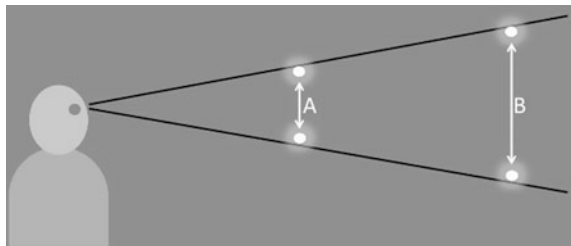


Fig. 4.3 Illustration of Asch's (1951) test material for demonstrating the effect of group conformity



While the experiment conducted by Sherif (1935) demonstrated the effects of group norms on both group and individual judgments when faced with a highly ambiguous task, it was later demonstrated that group norms also affect human judgments in apparently non-ambiguous situations. In 1951, Asch conducted an experiment in which participants were asked to indicate which of three lines were of the same length as a reference line (see Fig. 4.3 for an illustration of the test measures). Participants were asked to make multiple judgments of that type in groups of six persons. For every task, each of the group members was asked to express a solution one after another. The twist in Asch's experiment was that all but one participant in each group were actors instructed to express a solution that was wrong but consistent amongst all actors. As a consequence, many participants adapted their answers to the obviously wrong judgments of their peers. Asch's experiment provides drastic evidence for the phenomenon of group conformity: Even though the correct answer was clearly recognizable, many participants expressed obviously wrong solutions that conformed to the solutions suggested by the other group members. The inclination to act in conformity to the group was strong enough that participants expressed solutions which they knew were wrong (Erb et al. 2002).

A real-world phenomenon that reflects Asch's findings and can be currently observed in (middle European) winter skiing resorts is that up to 95% of skiers and snowboarders wear helmets, whereas only a few years ago, almost nobody wore skiing helmets (Focus online 2015). While the initial cause of this impressive trend reversal is presumably mostly attributed to the success of skiing equipment producers in making helmets appear more attractive, we argue that a changed common norm within the group of skiers and snowboarders also played a role in this self-reinforcing process: When a majority of skiers and snowboarders adopted wearing helmets, it became *normal* and thus *right* to do so. Not wearing a helmet accordingly came to be seen as abnormal, reckless behavior that would provoke critical questions. This is the opposite of a few years ago, when not wearing a helmet was perceived as normal (and thus right) and wearing one would have provoked skeptical glances. Of course, the actual risk of skiing and snowboarding (with and without a helmet) did not significantly change during this timeframe. The only thing that changed was the group norm about wearing helmets.

Asch's experiment and the winter skiing resort example demonstrate how the behavior of majorities can affect individual perceptions of how safe a situation is

(*If everybody wears a helmet not wearing one must be risky!*). And it is not only majorities such as in Asch's experiments but also minorities that can have an impact on our judgment formation. The experiments of Serge Moscovici on the influence of minorities demonstrate that the latter can have influence on other group members' judgments and decisions, especially if their behavior is consistent within the minority. Minorities can thereby provoke cognitive conflicts and induce others to rethink their current positions and judgments (Moscovici and Faucheux 1972; Moscovici et al. 1969). When considering how the high willingness to wear a helmet amongst skiers and snowboarders might be created in other contexts such as amongst cyclists or roller-skaters, the consistent wearing of a helmet by smaller groups can have the effect of convincing others to wear one also, simply by provoking critically questioning of the current group norms.

So far we have pointed out that groups can significantly affect the perceptions, beliefs and behaviors of their members. How can this remarkable phenomenon be explained? People identify themselves not only as individuals but also as group members. This is the core of the so-called social identity theory introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1986). Social identity describes an individual's self-conception based on perceived membership of social groups as well as on how this membership is evaluated (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Individuals quickly learn what kind of behaviors are expected and desired within a group of which they consider themselves to be a member. What happens next is often described as the phenomenon of *depersonalization* or *self-stereotyping*: The person starts redefining her current individual perceptions and beliefs in a way that closely aligns with what is assumed to be the perceptions and beliefs of the group. The person *self-stereotypes*, moving from her individual perspective to the (assumed) perspective of the group. Characteristics of the group become characteristics of the individual. Further, the perception of other ingroup members as similar to oneself enhances the willingness to trust their views and follow their examples. Being part of the same group makes people perceive themselves as relatively similar. Because of the perceived similarity, group members tend to think that they *ought* to have similar views and *ought* to agree easily and quickly. Thus, group members express what they believe is expected from the group and confirm what others in the group suggest (Turner and Reynolds 2011).

4.3.2 *Groups Make Extreme Judgments*

We have seen that the mere existence of a group has a certain effect on our perceptions, judgments and decisions. Because safety-related questions are often complex, we often seek the advice of others or aim to discuss certain issues within groups. In fact, when making important safety decisions such as whether to buy insurance, travel to a certain country or take a certain vaccination, most people seek advice from family, friends or professionals. Professional safety decisions, such as on public or corporate safety, are also rarely taken alone by individual persons.

Rather, there are special councils, committees and working groups that discuss the issue in detail and then reach an agreement. In the following, we illustrate that such group discussions and decisions entail the risk of biased judgments.

In 1961, Stoner asked his participants to judge the risk of various rather safe and rather risky options. He first asked each of the participants for an individual risk estimation and then had his participants discuss and judge the options in a group. Finally, he asked his participants again individually for their judgments. Stoner thereby discovered an astonishing phenomenon: Both the group estimations and the average of all individual estimations after the discussion were riskier than the individual judgments before the discussion. Something had happened during the group discussion that convinced his participants of a higher risk judgment. The discovered phenomenon was later called *risky shift* and describes how group discussions can have the effect of a shift towards more risky decisions (Stoner 1968).

The risky shift can be considered as a special case of the more general phenomenon of group polarization, which has been described by Moscovici and Zavalloni (1969): During group discussions, both group judgments but also average individual judgments shift in the direction of the initial average tendency of the group members before the group discussion. If the group members' initial average tendency was riskier, a group discussion amplifies that risky tendency with the result of a riskier group judgment (as it was the case in Stoner's original experiment). However, the effect can also cause a shift in the other direction: If the group members' initial average tendency was more cautious before a group discussion, the group discussion enhances that initial tendency, with the result of an even more cautious group judgment and average individual judgment. This form of group polarization is called *caution shift* (Schulz-Hardt et al. 2002; see Fig. 4.4 for an illustration of risky shift and caution shift).

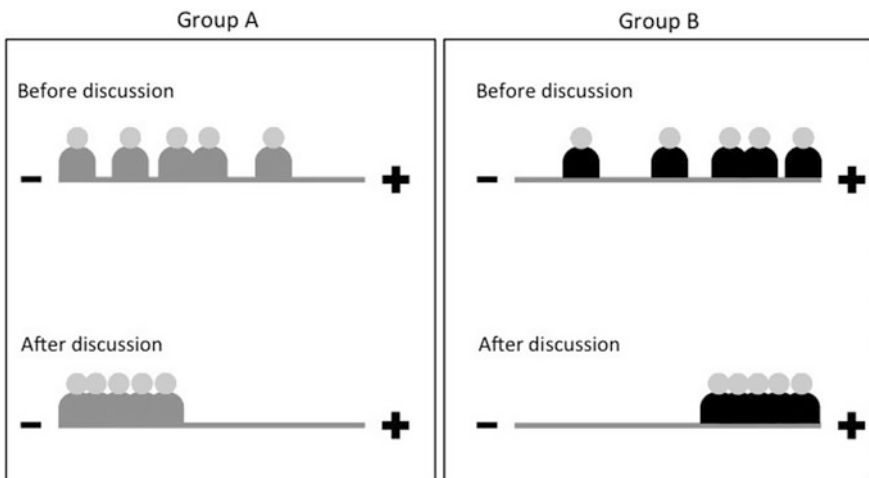


Fig. 4.4 Illustration of caution shift (A) and risky shift (B)

How is this shift in people's risk judgments possible? We have learned that people are particularly sensitive to expected behaviors within groups. Because humans seek acceptance within groups, they are willing to adapt their judgments and behaviors to these expectations (Turner and Reynolds 2011). In group discussions, the tendency to express statements that conform with the group norms can lead to group polarization: Many group members express arguments for the same position or opinion and thereby convince the group of a more and more extreme version of the initial position. Furthermore, in order to be considered an active group member, it is an effective (and popular) strategy of individual group members to express statements that are similar to these of the other group members but somewhat more extreme. This, of course, has an amplifying effect on the group's judgment such that the assumptions and judgments within the group become more and more extreme (for an overview, see Sunstein 2005).

Groups are heavily influenced in their judgments by their initial tendencies. When authorities or thought leaders express their opinions or assumptions in the beginning of a group discussion, it is likely that the group will adopt that view as a starting point, and many group members will express arguments speaking for the same position. In the end, the group is likely to come to a conclusion that is similar but somehow more extreme than what was initially suggested by the thought leader. Under the heading of the *yale attitude change approach* studies, Carl Hovland conducted several experiments with the aim of identifying (amongst others) personal characteristics that allow persons to influence other people's attitudes. The studies indicate that both the credibility (which comprises expertise and trustworthiness) and the attractiveness of a communicator can significantly influence people's attitudes (Hovland and Weiss 1951). Thus, groups tend to adopt the opinion of persuasive individuals and even intensify that view through group discussions. Because being accepted and loved by the people who surround us is of such fundamental importance, people are willing to adapt to groups' norms and expectations. Group conformity and group polarization are two examples for how such social effects can influence a person's safety judgments and decisions.

4.4 Outlook

The present chapter is an attempt to illustrate and summarize how social factors influence human safety perception. We have suggested that safety perception depends on social factors in multiple ways. In particular, we have illustrated that social relatedness is an important condition for feeling safe. Also, we have seen that groups influence one's judgments and decisions on safety-related questions. Figure 4.5 provides an illustration of some of the most important content and relationships we suggest in this chapter.

We have introduced perceived safety as a state that exists beyond any fundamental experienced or feared threats to a person. Thus, we argue that feeling safe relies to a large extent on the satisfaction of the most basic human needs. While we

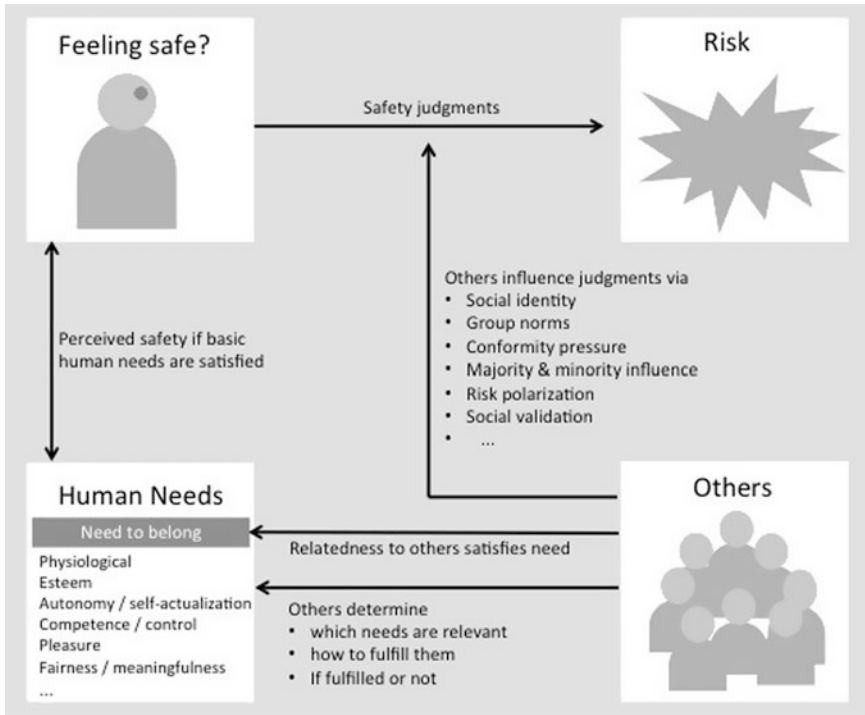


Fig. 4.5 Illustration of social factors of safety perception

argue that all basic human needs relate to the perception of safety, we lay particular emphasis on the need for social belongingness. With reference to need to belong theory, we argued that someone will only entirely feel safe when the need for social belongingness is satisfied. We have illustrated the intensity of that need with the drastic, mostly negative effects of social exclusion that have been demonstrated repeatedly by scholars. Given the strong pain people perceive when not being accepted by the persons and groups who surround them, it is even possible to explain seemingly risky behaviors (we have mentioned smoking cigarettes, riding a motor bike without a helmet, and sunbathing as examples) via the strong motivation to be accepted by others.

Making people feel safe is (or at least should be) a basic goal of decision-makers in all parts of private, professional and public life. How we can ensure that people feel safe in their families, at their school, in their work places, in our cities, etc. should be a major concern. We suggest that considering basic human needs is a valuable and constructive perspective for effective improvements in all these contexts. In this chapter, we have laid particular emphasis on the need for social relatedness, and we do believe that facilitating social relatedness is an important means for the creation of perceived safety. However, a considerable number of further basic human needs need to be considered, such as the need for autonomy,

competence, pleasure stimulation, control, fairness, and meaningfulness. To provide guidance for practical implementation, Frey's ethical leadership model might be a valuable starting point for practitioners who aim at increasing perceived safety. The model is a practice-oriented approach that is based on the principle of aligning leadership according to human needs such as meaningfulness, transparency, autonomy and participation, constructive feedback, stimulation, personal growth, and fairness (see Frey and Schmalzried 2012; Frey et al. 2012). We believe the model can provide valuable guidance for the implementation of practical interventions to make people feel safe.

The second part of the present chapter builds on the observation that important safety-related decisions are either made by groups (e.g., councils, committees, or working groups) or by individuals who implicitly consider the behaviors of others or explicitly ask for advice for the decisions they make. Thus, safety judgments and decisions depend on social factors. We have presented and discussed a number of classical psychological experiments demonstrating how individuals adapt their judgments, decisions, and behaviors to group norms. As soon as others are present, being accepted by those people can be more important than making an accurate judgment. Thus, safety decisions such as whether to wear a helmet, whether to buy a safe vs. an impressive car, or whether to cancel a sports event due to questionable weather can be biased by our beliefs on what others expect. We have discussed how common norms, such as within a certain culture, company or family, affect what is perceived as safe and what is perceived as not safe.

Within a discussion group, the tendency to state facts, opinions and arguments that conform with the group's overall position can lead to the phenomenon of group polarization: Groups tend to make extreme judgments and decisions and thus agree on an understanding that a certain situation or opportunity is either very risky or very safe. Therefore, it should generally be questioned when closed groups quickly come up with clear and easy responses to complex questions. An approach that can help reduce such social effects in discussion groups is to structure the process of group discussions and decisions. For instance, it can increase the quality of a decision to ask different persons about their perspective individually and anonymously and then decide based on the collected opinions and arguments in a second step (see Lerner et al. 2014).

Our chapter illustrates that humans are social beings in need of belongingness and in search of approval from others for their judgments and decisions. Some of the presented findings may create the impression that groups generally bias safety estimations and that one should therefore better make important safety decisions alone. It is important for us to emphasize that the social validation we seek for our daily judgments and decisions is in the majority of cases a very functional strategy. Adapting one's behavior to what works for others is efficient and leads in most cases to good results. However, we also presented examples for how such group effects can worsen the quality of a safety judgment (e.g., when a group uncritically adopts the view of a thought leader and reinforces that view through numerous consistent statements in a group discussion). Being aware of these mostly

unconscious social effects on safety perception is a precondition for consciously making safety-adequate decisions, both in groups and individually.

To finish, we want to stress that the best safety decision is not always the most conservative one. An overly overt focus on safety bears the risk of constraining freedom and can impede experiments, new ideas, and innovation. We have illustrated that our conception of safety in general and also the many related constructs (e.g., human needs, the respective aspiration levels, and whether and how they are fulfilled) are to a large extent determined by what other people say and do. Bearing in mind that existing safety convictions are sometimes not necessarily based on evidence or reason, this chapter encourages critical questioning of the status quo of safety beliefs and behaviors.

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