Collective Behavior

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Chapter 10

Rumors, Urban Myths, and Urban Legends: Procter & Gamble, the Devil, and Amway

As discussed in Chapter 7, a *rumor* is unconfirmed information that is often passed through informal social communication. The person who hears it cannot or does not verify the information. It may be quite simple to find out if a *rumor* is true or false, but most who hear the rumor don't bother to do so. A person hears or reads a rumor and accepts it as factual *without* any further investigation. They believe the rumor is true and repeat it to others. Some rumors eventually turn out to be true, but most are false.

Rumors tell us something about the people who tell rumors and about those who believe them. *Tellers* consider the information important or interesting and feel a need to pass the rumor on to others. Tellers do not always believe the rumors are true. In fact, research seems to indicate that social outsiders repeat rumors when they are in an awkward social situation (Koenig 1985). They tell the rumor to gain attention, to gain status, or simply to provide some entertainment and excitement.

Believers consider the information plausible and accept it as fact. People accept rumors that fit their world view and reject those that do not. We tend to decide whether or not we believe a rumor based on our own beliefs, knowledge, and any existing information that we may have about the subject. Rumors are accepted as fact when they confirm what is already believed on some level.

There is something about popular rumors that appeals to people, and looking at which rumors spread gives us clues about the beliefs, hopes, fears, etc., of the people who spread and believe them. People do not repeat a rumor that is boring, so we know that the tellers find something interesting about the rumor that they pass along to others. Likewise, people do not believe rumors that go against ideas and beliefs that are important to them, so we indirectly learn what believers think about the world from the rumors that they accept as true.

Enduring Rumors: Urban Myths and Urban Legends

Some rumors get passed around for so long that hundreds or even thousands of people accept them as fact. These persistent, enduring rumors can be called *urban myths* or *urban legends*. The Urban Legends Resource Centre defines an urban legend as

> a story that has had a wide audience, is circulated spontaneously, has been told in several forms, and which many have chosen to believe (whether actively or passively) despite the lack of actual evidence to substantiate the story (Wells 2000).

There are several websites on the internet devoted exclusively to debunking urban legends that have been reported as fact by some "reliable" source. Urban myths and legends are sometimes reported in newspapers and on radio or television newscasts as if they were true.

Urban legends are told in the form of a story. They give specific details about an event that has supposedly occurred. For example, there is a legend about a man who wakes up in a bathtub full of ice. He finds a note left by the attractive woman he met at a party or bar the night before. She has purportedly stolen his kidney, and the note says "dial 911 or you will die." This urban legend gives specific details (that may change every time the story is told) about a particular event that is alleged to have occurred.

Urban myths do not recount a specific event. Instead, they give general information pertaining to a specific "fact." They outline something that is either supposed to be happening over and over, or something "unknown" about some person or group of people. For example, the rumor that a tooth left in a glass of cola will dissolve overnight is an urban myth. It persistently spreads throughout American society, is believed by thousands of people, and is simply not true. Unlike a legend, however, it does not recount the actions of any people. Instead of recounting an event, a myth supposedly reveals a "truth."

Urban myths and urban legends often support each other. The biggest difference lies in whether a person believes that something is true (a myth) or they believe that a specific, detailed incident took place (a legend). Though

slightly different in format, urban myths and urban legends are both forms of persistent, enduring rumors.

Examples of Urban Myths

One example of a persistent rumor that has grown into a myth claims that a vast web of organized "Satanic cults" abduct and sacrifice thousands of babies and young children every year in the United States. Thousands of fundamentalist Christians believe this myth. Numerous books and websites "reveal" the horrific statistics. There is only one problem: It isn't true. The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigations) classifies it as an unfounded, untrue story.

The FBI spent years investigating these allegations and never found one single case of a child abducted or killed by members of any organized satanic cult. Perhaps most telling of all, the number of children supposedly abducted and killed by these cults every year is significantly higher than the total number of children reported missing (Wells 2000). Despite this, many still believe in an "organized network of Satanic cults" and their "sacrifices."

Who would persistently believe this rumor even after legitimate authorities spent years seriously investigating it and found it to be unfounded? There are certain related "facts" that a person must believe in order to accept this rumor. A person must believe that large numbers of people in the United States worship Satan. The person must believe that satanic cult members kill young children and babies. The person must believe that thousands of children go missing every year and vanish without a trace. The person must believe that society has become so decadent, evil, or chaotic that effective law enforcement is virtually impossible. The individual must believe that mainstream popular media sources are covering up the stories of these families and the disappearances. Finally, the individual must believe that law enforcement officials at the state and federal levels are either corrupt, too inept to uncover the baby killers, or covering up the "truth" for some reason.

Another example of an enduring rumor that has achieved urban myth status is being spread almost entirely by e-mail. The message claims that feminine hygiene pads and tampons contain asbestos. The message alleges that manufacturers know that the asbestos makes women bleed more during their period; therefore, the asbestos is used to increase the sale of the products. Further, the message asserts that the U.S. FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and the manufacturers know that this causes cervical cancer and "womb tumors," but they don't care because "the powers that be" don't consider the products worth regulating because they are not ingested orally.

This myth is also absolutely false. The FDA has received so many calls about the story that their webpage (www.fda.gov) contains a detailed explanation and denial. Asbestos is not a component, trace or otherwise, in any feminine hygiene product. It is illegal to include it in any such product. Further, neither the FDA nor the makers of feminine hygiene products are willing to allow women to be subjected to carcinogenic ingredients that will make

them bleed. If such a story were true, major corporations would be liable to massive lawsuits that would quickly bankrupt them.

So why would someone spread this story if it is obviously not true? The anonymous version of the e-mail that I received contained specific information on how to order "cotton tampon alternatives," including 1-800 telephone numbers for Organic Essentials and Terra Femme, as well as "catalog sales" internet addresses for GreenMarketplace.com and Botanical.com (authors' files). Neither Organic Essentials, Terra Femme, nor GreenMarketplace.com claim that tampons and feminine pads are toxic. However, the webpage for Botanical.com (which is a "news" site, not a catalog sales address) does contain an article about asbestos and other toxic ingredients in tampons and pads (www.botanical.com, 9/27/00). In the article, the operators of the site claim to have spoken to someone at Johnson & Johnson and the FDA. Although the story notes that both sources denied the story, it then goes on to argue that neither source is reliable, and provides information about using organic cotton pads and tampons.

The e-mail message also included specific instructions like "buy and use only organic cotton pads and tampons," and phrases such as "we are being manipulated by this industry and the government." It is currently impossible to determine if this myth is being perpetuated by someone who works for or runs the companies that make or sell the alternative products. No one at the companies I called was willing to admit starting the rumor. However, it is a distinct possibility that someone who sells the organic products is using the myth to promote sales of these company's own products. Competitors often turn out to be the sources of negative rumors related to businesses (Keonig 1985).

In order to believe this myth about feminine hygiene products, a person must believe that the federal government and hygiene industry do not care about women, are willing to intentionally kill their own customers, and that lawmakers are so inept or corrupt that they are unwilling to do anything about it. Many urban myths related to "dangerous" products rely on similar beliefs.

Examples of Urban Legends

Urban legends, though more specific in detail than urban myths, can endure just as long. For decades, many people in the United States have believed that a teenaged babysitter on drugs actually roasted an infant. The legend, as it is usually told, says that a "hippie girl" showed up at the parents' home acting a bit spacey. The parents, while out to dinner, called home to make sure everything was okay. The girl answered that "everything is fine and the turkey will be ready soon." When they returned to their house, they found that the babysitter, in a drug-induced state, mistook the baby for a turkey and roasted the infant in the oven. You may have heard this story at least once. It apparently started in the early 1970s, but it is often told as if it took place within the last few years (Brunvand 1981, Wells 2000).

In order to believe this legend, people must also believe several things. They must believe that "hippies" are untrustworthy, that drugs are dangerous, that society is changing in bad ways, and that young people are "different" from themselves. They have to believe that drugs could make it possible for someone to confuse a live infant with a frozen turkey. The story, like most urban legends, carries moral lessons: Don't take drugs, don't trust hippies, and don't trust teenagers. Some might also add "and don't go out to dinner when you should be at home taking care of *your own* children."

Another example: Authorities discovered the charred remains of a scuba diver in a tree in the middle of a burned-out forest fire. The deceased was wearing a full wetsuit, scuba tank, snorkel, and so on. An autopsy revealed that the man did not burn to death, but died of massive internal injuries. Authorities were able to identify the body through dental records. They discovered that he had been scuba diving off the coast of California (or France, depending on which version one hears) over twenty miles away. Authorities then realized what happened: a fire-fighting helicopter carrying a giant bucket scooped up the diver, along with plenty of water, and dumped him over the raging flames. Sound familiar?

Like the babysitter tale, this legend is totally false. No scuba-diver's body has ever been found in the middle of a charred forest in California or France, or anywhere else. Fire-fighting helicopters do not drop their buckets into the ocean, nor do they scoop up water in areas where people are swimming, diving, or boating. No person has ever been accidentally picked up by a helicopter with a bucket attached to it. Still, the story has been revived several times since it first appeared in the late 1980s (www.snopes.com 9/17/2000, Brunvand 1989).

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to examining a specific example of a persistent rumor about a major corporation and its alleged ties to the Church of Satan. It is probably the longest-lasting, most publicized, and most expensive rumor in recent American history. The event will be described and then analyzed utilizing Turner and Killian's Emergent Norm Perspective.

Procter & Gamble, the Devil, and Amway

The Birth of a Rumor

In 1980, Procter & Gamble began to receive phone calls and letters from Minnesota about the company's ties to satanic causes. The company was able to trace this rumor to three sources. Paul Martin, director of the high school club division of a Youth for Christ Office in Willmar, Minnesota, claimed that the Procter & Gamble logo could be found on a "Satanic church" in St. Paul. The "Satanic church" was actually a bookstore, and the logo above their door was a simple crescent moon, not the elaborate man-in-the-moon and stars of the Procter & Gamble logo. The second source was Jim Peters, a St. Paul fun-

The rumors about Procter & Gamble and the Church of Satan all began because someone claimed that the company's Man in the Moon logo contained satanic elements.

damentalist Christian crusader against rock music. Peters claimed that the company logo appeared in a book called *Amulets and Superstitions* (Budge 1978). It does not. Both men admitted to making these allegations, and backed down when confronted by representatives from Procter & Gamble. A Minnesota minister named Wynn Worley admitted telling people that the Procter & Gamble logo symbolizes witchcraft. He maintained his belief despite denials from Procter & Gamble (Koenig 1985).

The Rumor Grows

Once the connection between the Church of Satan and Procter & Gamble was made in peoples' minds, word began to spread. The rumor was fully formed into an urban legend by October of 1981. A story spread amongst fundamentalist Christians throughout the Midwest that "the owner of Procter & Gamble" appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* and admitted giving 20 percent of the corporation's profit to the Church of Satan (Asher 1999, Drought 1999, Koenig 1985). Some versions of the rumor added the fact that he admitted making a pact with Satan and gave all credit for his success to the Devil (Koenig 1985). In fact, Durk Jager, the CEO of Procter & Gamble from 1970 until July of 2000, had *never* been a guest on *any* television show prior to October of 1981 (Koenig 1985).

Even those who believe that Satan exists and that He makes pacts with businessmen should have found the story difficult to believe because the same exact rumor had circulated in 1977, with Ray Kroc of McDonald's as the villain. Kroc was alleged to have appeared either on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, 60 Minutes, 20/20, Phil Donahue, Merv Griffin, Tom Snyder,* or *The Today Show* (depending on who you asked) and announced that he was giving 35 percent of his earnings to the Church of Satan. Most of those who claimed to have seen the show themselves backed down when confronted by company representatives. However, many who admitted that they did not see it still believed that it had actually occurred. The rumor only died when it

was replaced by the worm contamination rumor discussed in Chapter 7 (Koenig 1985).

By 1982, the Procter & Gamble rumor was spreading throughout the southern United States. Like the McDonald's–Satan rumor, it was spread primarily by clergymen who did not bother trying to confirm the rumor before spreading it. Church newsletters all over the country called for parishioners to boycott Procter & Gamble. Around that time, reports also began to claim that "666" ("the mark of the Beast," a sign that something is of or for Satan) could be found in two places within the company logo. Procter & Gamble began to receive five hundred inquiries per day, forcing them to hire four employees just to deal with the letters and phone calls (Koenig 1985).

Because the primary source of the false information was fundamentalist Christian newsletters and clergy, nationally known fundamentalist ministers Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham, and Donald Wildman were enlisted to help fight the false rumor. They distributed letters and other materials to their followers, members of the Moral Majority, and others, categorically denying any link between Procter & Gamble and the Church of Satan. Ann Landers and "Dear Abby" both ran letters about the rumor with strong responses, calling the rumors ridiculous. *Christianity Today* ran a story about the rumor, disclaiming it. Each of these sources not only explained that the rumor was false, but also chastised people for spreading unfounded rumors in the first place (Koenig 1985).

On July 1, 1982, Procter & Gamble held a press conference and announced that they would pursue lawsuits against anyone intentionally spreading the rumor. By the spring of 1982, calls about the rumor to the company had dropped to a couple hundred a month. However, the rumor resurfaced again in 1984. Procter & Gamble received three thousand calls in the month of October alone. This time, the rumor seemed to be spread primarily through Catholic, rather than fundamentalist, networks. Further, the rumor picked up a new detail: Reports now claimed that "the head of Procter and Gamble" stated on television that "there aren't enough Christians left for me to worry about a boycott" (Koenig 1985).

As a result of the ongoing nuisance and expense dealing with the rumor, Procter & Gamble pulled the logo off of all their retail products. The logo remains on the company stationary, but it can no longer be found on store shelves (Asher 1999, Koenig 1985).

Charismatic Capitalism and Corporate Competition

The dramatic rise, spread, and revival of the Church of Satan story alone would make the persistent Procter & Gamble rumor a fascinating case study. However, the saga continues and there is another twist: Procter & Gamble traced the resurgence of the rumor throughout the 1990s to several Amway distributors (Asher 1999, Neff 1995, Staff 1990). Amway is a direct-marketing company that manufactures and sells many products that com-

pete directly with Procter & Gamble: soaps, shampoos, detergents, and so on. Amway bills itself as a Christian-based company with a "mission to do good" that offers not just a job but a lifestyle. The company emphasizes a powerful sense of renewal, purpose, and fellowship. They call this approach, which supposedly emphasizes humans over profit, "charismatic capitalism" (Anderson 1993).

Many Amway distributors work by selling to or recruiting salespeople within their workplace. Distributors often make more money signing up new salespeople than from selling the products themselves. They also focus specifically on church congregations. In fact, in 1994 the Reverend Tom Logan, of Abbotsford Parish, in Clydebank, Scotland, resigned his ministry when ordered by his superiors in the Dumbarton Presbytery to stop trying to sell to his parishioners, several of whom had complained (Drought 1999).

In 1990, Procter & Gamble filed a lawsuit again James and Linda Newton of Parsons, Kansas, for promoting the Church of Satan rumor in order to boost their own sales of Amway products (Staff 1990). The couple circulated a flyer repeating the rumor and offering information about "alternative [Amway] products." Eventually, the Amway Corporation was added to the lawsuits. Procter & Gamble alleged that the large number of distributors circulating the rumor were actually following suggestions from corporate management to encourage boycotts of Procter & Gamble products (Asher 1999, Neff 1995, Staff 1990).

Amway, which has never denied that the distributors spread the rumor but claims that the company tried to keep it from happening, also had other legal problems. They were sued in 1996 by eleven major record labels for copyright infringement (Horak 1996), and the company was convicted of defrauding the Canadian government out of millions of dollars in customs fees (Schmertz and Meier 2000). However, the Procter & Gamble lawsuits against Amway were dismissed for lack of evidence. Procter & Gamble attorneys were able to prove that several Amway distributors were responsible for spreading the rumor, but they could not prove that the company endorsed the technique nor that they intended malice (Olgeirson 1999, Staff 1999, Tedford 1999).

There are still thousands of people who believe that Procter & Gamble gives money to satanic causes. One of my own students recently insisted that he, himself, had seen "the head executives from Procter & Gamble" announce on Oprah Winfrey's talk show that "they belong to a coven of witches and give all their money to satanic causes." The next time that student came to class, he insisted that it was his wife who told him *she* had seen the show. A week later, he said that his wife's sister told her about it, and he acknowledged that it might not be true. (No one from Procter & Gamble has ever appeared on *Oprah.*) Why does this rumor linger? Why do so many people believe the bizarre story when they hear it? Even if Amway did intentionally boost the rumor, it had spread like wildfire throughout the United States at least twice without any intentional assistance. Perhaps the Emergent Norm perspective can shed some light on the phenomenon.

Analysis

The Emergent Norm Perspective

Turner and Killian's Emergent Norm Perspective, discussed in Chapter 3, argues that collective behavior occurs when people conform to new, emerging norms within an unusual situation. The theory enables a researcher to understand why people might engage in behavior that seems odd or unusual. Collective behavior participants follow situational norms that may be totally at odds with those of the dominant culture.

As the reader will see, the Emergent Norm Perspective does not apply to a diffuse situation like a persistent rumor as easily as crowds of people who gather in the same place and time. Chapter 11 will apply the same theory to more traditional crowd behavior.

Tuner and Killian argue that the factors leading to any type of collective behavior are Uncertainty, Urgency, Communication of Mood and Imagery, Constraint, Selective Individual Suggestibility, and Permissiveness. This analysis begins with *uncertainty*.

Uncertainty

The key to the Emergent Norm Perspective is confusion or *uncertainty*. Confusion creates doubt, and doubt makes people likely to follow others who seem to know what to do. In the case of a rumor, the uncertainty has to do with the truth of the rumor itself. A person hears new information, and is uncertain as to whether or not it is true. Many people in this situation ask someone they know and trust if they have heard the rumor, not necessarily asking if it is true (Koenig 1985). This act effectively spreads the rumor. Many people, uncertain as to whether or not the Procter & Gamble rumor might be true, also told other people about it "just in case it were true" (Koenig 1985). In other words, even if they weren't certain that the rumor was true, they told other people about it both to restore their sense of security and to find out what other, trusted people thought of the rumor.

Gordon Allport and Postman (1946) call the people who care about a rumor, both tellers and believers, a "rumor public." Members of the rumor public are unsure about something, and the rumor seems to give them some concrete information. However, most of the people who spread the rumor about Procter & Gamble and the Church of Satan did *not* seem uncertain at all. Early tellers like Paul Martin, Jim Peters, and Wynn Worley were all quite certain that they were correct (Koenig 1985). Even when confronted by representatives from Procter & Gamble, Worley stood by his belief that the logo was indeed satanic in nature. Those who spread the fully-formed version of the rumor also seemed to be quite certain that the information was true. At first glance the Emergent Norm perspective does not seem to account for this apparent certainty.

However, as Koenig (1985) suggests, the uncertainty may lie between those who believe the rumor and their relationship with the rest of society. Most of those doing the spreading were at odds with mainstream American culture. They believe that the country has lost its way, is decadent and decaying, and has abandoned the conservative Christian values that they themselves hold dear. In times of such uncertainty and fear about what is happening in one's society, a rumor about a major corporation working on behalf of the Devil may actually help an individual make sense out of the perceived rise of evil. The uncertainty is generated by distaste for the present and fear and trepidation about the future.

Urgency

Along with uncertainty, collective behavior participants must experience a sense of *urgency*. They have to feel as if something must be done, soon. In the case of the Procter & Gamble rumor, those who spread the story did so with a great sense of urgency. Newsletters and flyers all indicated that the "Satanic conspiracy" was a great danger to all of society, and if decent Christians did not act quickly (by boycotting Procter & Gamble products), the Devil would win another victory and America would be lost (Koenig 1985). Tellers didn't just believe that the rumor was interesting, they believed that it was extremely important, worth sharing, and required immediate action.

This urgency was probably magnified by the historical conditions of the early 1980s. The economy was in a sharp decline while unemployment and crime rates were going up. News stories constantly focused on stories about drugs and crime. Politicians, celebrities, and news anchors talked incessantly about "crack babies," "welfare dependency," and the dangers posed by the Soviet Union. Although the actual social conditions were not as bad as many believed, the fact that they *believed* the country was rapidly falling apart gave those spreading the Procter & Gamble rumor a greater sense that things were spiraling out of control. The rumor provided not only a way to make sense of this perceived decline, but a quick course of action to reverse it through product boycotts.

Communication of Mood and Imagery

When there is uncertainty and urgency, the communication that does occur within the crowd begins to focus. Crowd members (the *rumor public*) talk about little besides what they think is happening, what is likely to happen next, and what actions and attitudes are important. Participants are able to reach a common understanding and definition of the situation.

In this case, word of mouth seems to have played a secondary role. The primary source of communication of this particular rumor involved church newsletters and direct-mail flyers (Koenig 1985). There was remarkable consistency in these printed reports, all of which repeated the story about the al-

leged television appearance, and then followed with a suggestion for action. Ironically, the list of products to boycott usually contained just a few items, while Procter & Gamble manufactures literally thousands of household products. In addition to the soaps and shampoos often listed (such as Prell, Pert, Ivory, and Coast), Procter & Gamble also manufactures such items as Charmin, Puffs, and White Cloud bathroom tissue, Clearasil, Cover Girl, and Max Factor cosmetics, Crest toothpaste and Scope mouthwash, Pringles chips, Sunny Delight and Hawaiian Punch beverages, and a host of other food products. They also make and sell prescription drugs, colognes and perfumes, laundry detergents, and various other household items. The list goes on and on. Anyone trying to eliminate Procter & Gamble from their home would have to go to extraordinary lengths to do so. The people spreading the rumor seemed unaware of this fact. The boycott lists were usually short and limited to soaps and detergents, products that Amway also produces.

The rumor spread from one geographic region to the next, starting in Minnesota, and traveled almost exclusively through fundamentalist Christians in the South in the first wave, Catholics in the second (Koenig 1985), and still travels mostly in fundamentalist Christian and Southern Baptist circles (Asher 1999, Neff 1995). The rumor travels through people who already share a view of the world that makes the rumor seem plausible. The rumor public includes people who believe in a literal Satan who has many humans helping him in his work to destroy American society. As Koenig said, "... for many fundamentalist religious groups, the rumor about Satan and his followers helps explain what is happening better than anything else" (1985:28). The Procter & Gamble rumor justifies and verifies beliefs already held. Believing and spreading the rumor gives them something tangible to fight against and makes them feel like better, more righteous people by comparison to those who do nothing and particularly in relation to those who "work for" Satan. The mood is panicky, the imagery is stark, and the suggested action is relatively simple and painless. What could be more satisfying than defeating Satan's minions by simply repeating some information and throwing out one's shampoo?

Constraint

Once uncertainty and urgency are present and a mood has begun to form, members of the rumor public begin to feel a sense of *constraint*. They feel as if they should go along with the norms of the crowd. In this case, it might seem un-Christian to scoff at the rumor. If one's loved ones all seem to believe that the rumor is true, it could be construed as somehow sinful to question it. Those with doubts might feel constrained to keep those thoughts to themselves. When a preacher, minister, or priest is rallying about the evils of satanic corporations, few people would stand up and suggest that it's all just a silly rumor. When newsletters, telephone messages, letters, and (more recently) e-mails arrive from friends, relatives, or religious leaders urging an

immediate boycott; few people ignore the message. The rumor passed most quickly through tight-knit religious groups (Koenig 1985), where people were less likely to contradict each other. More importantly, to argue against a boycott could potentially be construed as arguing *for* the Devil and the Church of Satan, and *against* God and the Church. Many versions of the rumor contained phrases like "all decent Christians must . . ." and "to battle evil we have to . . ." (Koenig 1985). This places a great deal of constraint on anyone who is a part of such a tight-knit community, discouraging them from doing anything to stop the spread of the false rumor. Given a choice between appearing to accept a questionable rumor or alienating and angering friends and relatives, many members of the rumor public chose to keep all doubts to themselves.

Selective Individual Suggestibility

As the rumor public develops a common definition of the situation, members become more and more polarized. They become increasingly likely to accept any information, belief, or behavioral cue that fits the established beliefs of the crowd. One can see this pattern of development in the growth of the rumor. In 1980, the only specific allegations focused on the Procter & Gamble logo. It was suggested by three sources (Martin, Peters, and Worley) that the logo was satanic or contained satanic elements. Less than a year later, this belief had grown into a detailed story about the head of Procter & Gamble announcing allegiance with the Devil. Not too long after that, calls for boycotts went out along with descriptions of an incident that never actually took place (Koenig 1985). Each level of the rumor set the stage for the more detailed versions that followed.

It may be tempting to assume that "selective individual suggestibility" means "gullible." Indeed, when a rumor seems preposterous, we tend to think that only a fool could believe such a thing. However, the basic premise of the Emergent Norm perspective is that people who are *not* particularly gullible or mindless will take part in collective behavior under the right circumstances. In this case, the suggestibility does not have to do with a generally gullible personality. Most of the people who believed this rumor do not believe everything that they hear. Other people who laughed at this rumor probably believed some other tale that was circulating at the same time: perhaps "the engine that runs on water" (which "they" won't produce because then "they" won't be able to sell oil anymore), the "hippie babysitter" legend discussed earlier, or the "McDonald's wormburgers" rumor discussed in Chapter 7. It is not general gullibility that matters; it is the individual's susceptibility to rumors pertaining to certain specific topics that matters. Some people are more likely to believe in satanic cult conspiracies than others. Some are more likely to believe that major corporations knowingly produce poisonous products, or that people in big cities will steal kidneys from strangers. The people who spread the Procter & Gamble rumor during the

first few waves were more likely to believe such tales than the general population because of their religious and cultural beliefs. Those beliefs created a selective suggestibility among them.

Permissiveness

The last component that contributes to collective behavior in the Emergent Norm Perspective is *permissiveness*. Crowd members feel a sense of freedom in relationship to certain urges or tendencies that they normally keep hidden for fear of social rejection. In the case of the Procter & Gamble rumor, normally constrained people were able to talk openly about the idea that big business people were succeeding because of their cooperation with the Devil. They could openly discuss the decline and fall of American society, because now they had proof. Not only was a major corporation giving money to the Church of Satan, but most people did not seem to care and (in a later version of the theory) the Satanists did not believe that real Christians were numerous enough or powerful enough to worry about.

All of these beliefs combined to produce a situation where distributing a flyer accusing people of collusion with the forces of evil seemed perfectly acceptable behavior for hundreds of people across the United States. In normal daily life, people do not publicly accuse businessmen of working for the Devil. Product distributors do not say untrue things about a competing company, and religious leaders do not commit liable or slander. Concerned Christians do not sabotage the operation of law-abiding corporations. However, the Satan rumor permitted people to do all of these things with a clear conscience. Not only did feel guilt-free about their behavior, they actually felt righteous and holy for their efforts on behalf of the Lord (Koenig 1985). Imagine the freedom of being able to spread malicious tales *and* feel morally superior to those who scoff at the rumor.

Conclusion

The Emergent Norm Perspective seems to explain the growth and durability of the rumor about Procter & Gamble and the Church of Satan. To really test the theory one would have to find and interview a number of people who had heard the rumor. This should include those who believed the rumor and those who did not, as well as those who passed the rumor on and those who did not. This would allow a researcher to determine if those who spread and/or believed the rumor did in fact experience more uncertainty, urgency, and so forth. The literature does not contain such specific data. Most of the research done on this particular rumor focuses on the reasons for individual suggestibility, and the communication of mood and imagery. Still, this application should illustrate how the Emergent Norm Perspective is used and give the reader some indication of its usefulness.

There is nothing peculiar or unique about the rumor about Procter & Gamble and the Church of Satan, except the active participation by Amway distributors. It is a fairly typical example of a common category of collective behavior in the United States. Such rumors do not circulate constantly, but they do occur frequently and are likely to circulate again in the near future. The Emergent Norm perspective gives a specific pattern to look for: A large number of people feel uncertain or uneasy about something. They believe that time is running out or that something is happening at a rapid pace. As long as they can develop a belief that seems to alleviate or explain the situation and communicate it to others who feel the same way, the rumor can grow and spread.

If they feel constrained by their associates from questioning the rumor, doubts will be kept quiet. If there is a rumor public with sufficient suggestibility, the rumor is likely to spread and grow. This creates a level of permissiveness within the crowd that allows people to say and do things they would never say or do under normal circumstances. The rumor takes on a life of its own only if it captures the attention and imagination of enough people. Those who find the rumor interesting are likely to repeat it, and those who find it plausible are likely to believe it. The result can be harmless, but it can also result in millions of dollars being wasted by a company to fight a story that has no basis in fact. Worst of all, the nature of the rumor may make denials worthless: If people believe that you are in league with the Devil, they have no reason to believe anything that you say and no reason to worry about any harm that they may do to you.

Discussion

The Internet has contributed more to the spread of rumors in the last ten years than anyone could have ever imagined. People constantly e-mail each other "warnings," "updates," and other urgent messages that are totally untrue. They are so common that the dire warnings are referred to as "scare-mail." What is important is that few people bother to check the story to find out if it is true or false. They might receive an e-mail stating that a dying little boy in a hospital in Philadelphia wants to receive bottle caps. Rather than contact the hospital and verify the story, they forward the message to hundreds of other people. Their bank newsletter contains an "urgent warning" that gang members are shooting people who flash their headlights at night. Rather than call the police and ask if there have been any motorist shootings lately, they repeat the story at social gatherings and mutter about "kids today" or "the gang problem."

The reasons why most people don't take the extra time to check out a story before passing it is simple: They believe it is true. If the story sounds true and the source seems credible, most people see no reason to check any further. If a person believes that gangs are increasing in size and violence,

then the story about flashing headlights seems possible, plausible, and likely to them. If someone believes that Satan and his organized followers are destroying American society, then it seems quite likely that they are also killing small children by the thousands and/or running major corporations. A person who believes that the world is much more violent and dangerous than it used to be is likely to fall for any rumor that confirms that belief. If the rumor also comes from a source that is credible and trusted in the eyes of the person receiving the information, they may never stop to question the story or doubt its truth.

As Koenig (1985) points out, people may accept a rumor or hearsay specifically because it supports a point they wish to make. We all decide whether or not to believe everything that we hear. In the absence of hard evidence, we have to use our own judgement. That means that we must weigh the new message in light of what we already know and believe. If a rumor fits what we already think we know ("gangs are an increasing problem," "society is falling apart," etc.) then it seems more credible to us. If it also confirms some opinion or fact that is important to us, then we are likely to not only accept the rumor as fact, but to repeat it to others.

Rumors are the most basic form of collective behavior. Sometimes they do not require any action other than repeating the story to others. Chapter 11 will apply the Emergent Norm Perspective to a much more action-oriented type of collective behavior: fads.