interacted with one another. Finally, each student completed the racial tolerance scale a second time, allowing researchers to determine how group discussion affected their attitudes.

The data presented in Figure 8.9 show a group polarization effect. Following group discussion, groups composed of students scoring low in prejudice became even more tolerant of racial differences and groups composed of highly prejudiced students became even less tolerant of racial differences.

What produces the group polarization effect? Normative influence plays a role (Goethals & Zanna, 1979; Sanders & Baron, 1977). After learning what the group values, individuals adopt those values in order to gain acceptance and avoid rejection. This leads to a polarization effect, because people who initially were only mildly in favor of a course of action come to more fervently support it. This is especially apt to be true when people believe that the extreme judgments reflect well on themselves, suggesting that people adopt extreme views not only because they want to be liked by others but also because they wish to see themselves in a positive light (R. S. Baron & Roper, 1976). Informational influence also operates. In the course of group discussion, individuals learn new arguments in favor of their position, and these arguments serve to strengthen their original opinions (Burnstein & Vinokur, 1977). The more arguments people hear, the more apt their attitudes are to be polarized (Brauer, Judd, & Gliner, 1995; Vinokur & Burnstein, 1974).

Although normative influence and informational influence normally combine to produce the group polarization effect, each is sufficient to produce the effect on its own (Burnstein & Vinokur, 1973; Goethals & Zanna, 1979; Isenberg, 1986). The two processes do, however, affect different types of decisions. Normative influence produces the group polarization effect when the decision is value laden and subjective, whereas informational influence produces the group polarization effect when the decision is intellectual and factual (Kaplan, 1988).

One more point about the group polarization effect merits comment: The effect refers to the strengthening of the group’s judgment, not the judgments of the individuals themselves (Fraser, Gouge, & Billig, 1971). To illustrate, suppose a group of four students...