

PEER PRESSURE

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES

"A child's goal is not to become a successful adult, any more than a prisoner's goal is to become a successful guard. A child's goal is to become a successful child".

JUDITH RICH HARRIS

I was once one of those awful women who look at their friends' children and wonder why on earth they don't bring them up better. Then I had my own son. I had thought childrearing was all about setting a good example, providing love, encouragement and support, imposing boundaries, and if push comes to shove, inflicting the necessary controlled punishment. How innocent I was.

While our son is of course the best thing since sliced bread, I now realise that there are three forces involved in most of our interactions - his parents' will, his will and then the will of his friends and school mates.

And Quentin and I are often battling against how he sees himself in relation to this peer group - *no-one else has to do that...I'm the only one who doesn't have a.....everyone else is going.....*

In 1994, Judith Rich Harris was a psychology textbook writer, with no doctorate or academic affiliation, working from her home in suburban New Jersey. Because of a lupus-like illness, she didn't have the strength to leave the house. However, she had plenty of time to think. Her breakthrough idea came when she read a paper on how teenagers rebel against being teenagers and the restrictions put on them by adults. The theory was that they break the rules because they want to be like adults. Harris felt the author had got it backwards – adolescents aren't trying to be like other adults, they are trying to be like other adolescents. Children identify with and learn from each other.

Rich Harris began to write her book, *The Nurture Assumption*.¹ In it she proposed the theory of group socialisation, whereby culture is transmitted by way of the children's peer group.

GROUP SOCIALISATION

The central thesis of Rich Harris' thesis is that, in the formation of an adult, genes and peers matter more than parents. She says that, apart from passing on their genes, parents have little influence over their children, except to choose their child's peer group. It is this peer group that shapes us. This of

¹ Judith Rich Harris (1998/9); *The Nurture Assumption-why children turn out the way they do*

course appears simplistic and her theory certainly ruffled feathers. The idea ran counter to the engrained psychological and psychotherapeutic theories of the age and is still controversial in child development circles.

Nevertheless, Rich Harris has a point which reverberates far beyond the area of child psychology. She insists that if we assume that the group is the natural environment of the child, we see things differently. During childhood, children learn to behave the way people of their age and sex are expected to behave in their social category. They adapt their behaviour to fit in with the others and where necessary they disguise their differentness.

According to Rich Harris, personality has an inborn and an environmental component. The inborn part is with you wherever you go; it influences, to some extent, your behaviour in every context. The environmental component is specific to the context in which you acquired it. It includes not only the way you learned to behave in those contexts, but also the feelings you associate with them. If your parents make you feel worthless, those feelings of worthlessness are associated with the social contexts in which your parents did that to you. The feelings of worthlessness will be associated with outside-the-home contexts only if the people you encountered outside your home also made you feel like that.

This is why when you go home, the old self can re-appear the moment you walk through the door and hear your mother say *"Is that you, dear?"* - the dignified successful women and men are soon back bickering and whining away at the family dinner table.

A child identifies itself with the psychological or reference group, the group to which, at a given moment in time, they want to belong. They learn what is expected from them within the relevant group, and most of all they try to fit in. That is why immigrant children tend to speak the language of their host country with local accents, not the broken accents of their parents.

Modern children are provided with a ready-made group of people "like me" - their classmates. They interact with their families only when they are at home. They see their schoolfriends as being psychologically significant for them, the group to which they relate subjectively, the one for which they *"take their rules, standards and beliefs about appropriate conduct and attitudes."*

Children who are unpopular with their peers tend to have low-self esteem, and Rich Harris thinks the feelings of insecurity can last a lifetime. You have been tried by a jury of your peers and you have been found wanting. You never quite get over that.

As children get older they have more freedom to choose the company they keep - the characteristics they start out with can become exaggerated. A bright child is more apt to join a clique of academic achievers, a not-so-bright child a different kind of clique. The influence of his companions motivates the bright child to do well in school and as a consequence he may become still brighter.

As an interesting example, Rich Harris refers to immigrants who come to the US from another country. They often move to areas populated by others of the same national background - the Chinatowns or Italian, Jewish or Irish neighbourhoods, or in the Midwest Swedish, Norwegian or German districts. The children of immigrants who grow up in such areas are surrounded by peers who come from similar homes - homes in which English might not be spoken, in which chopsticks might be used instead of spoons and forks. In such areas, children blend their cultures - they acquire American ways with a foreign flavour. They speak English with an accent.

But immigrant culture is lost as soon as the family moves to a neighbourhood where they are no longer surrounded by people of the same national background. When the immigrants' child joins a peer group of

ordinary, non-ethnic Americans, the parents' culture is lost very quickly. The last aspects of the old culture to disappear are those that are done at home, such as cooking. Children tend not to learn how to cook in the presence of their peers.

Kids learn to become code-switchers. At home they speak Chinese and eat with chopsticks, with their friends its English and a knife and fork. The code switching child toggles between her two cultures as she passes through the door of her home. Click. Click. But the two cultures are not equal. The children of immigrants bring the culture of their peers home to their parents: they do not, as a rule, bring the culture of their parents to their peers.

Research has shown that the best predictor of whether a teenager will become a smoker is whether her friends smoke, not whether her parents smoke. Smoking is more likely to be a signal of adolescent solidarity - a way to demonstrate your allegiance to a particular peer group within the high school, to show your disdain for other groups (the goodie-goodies, the nerds), and to prove that you don't give a damn about adult concerns and rules.

Rich Harris says that anti-smoking ads are very tricky.² The best bet would be an ad campaign that gets across the idea that the promotion of smoking is a plot against teenagers by adults - by the fat cats of the tobacco industry. Show a covey of sleazy tobacco executives cackling gleefully each time a teenager buys a pack of cigarettes. Show them dreaming up ads designed to sell their products to the gullible teen - ads depicting smoking as cool and smokers as sexy. Show smoking as something they want us to do, not as something we want to do.

Incidentally, Judith Rich Harris advises that the one way of rescuing a kid who is heading for trouble is to get him out of the neighbourhood and away from his delinquent peers.

Group socialisation theory can be expanded to include adults and our need to fit in with the social norms of our peer group, our community and wider society. And this desire to fit in and to keep up with the Jones plays its part in determining people's responses to climate change. *"Are my friends still driving SUVs?" "How cool is it to be seen on a bike?" Are we the kind of people who drive electric cars?"*

SOCIAL NORMS

Social norms are complicated rules that dictate which actions are permissible. Although we may be able to articulate the underlying tenets, they operate automatically and often unconsciously. Some norms may need to be enforced, with sanctions being applied when people cross the line. Others become internalised and individuals abide by them of their own accord. Those who stick to the norms are rewarded by being thought well of, and punished by being thought badly of, whether or not those attitudes are intentionally expressed. And you know this because you bask in the good opinions or smart under the bad opinions - without anyone having to say or do anything.

When we violate social norms, or observe someone else in violation, our brains respond with a range of emotions, designed to register the violation, to make us feel guilty, and to redress the imbalances caused. If we comply with the social norms we receive increased esteem, trust and, most importantly, cooperation.

Some norms are seen as being crucial to society and we must adhere to them. For example, in the West, we all wear clothes and bury or cremate our dead. These were labelled "mores", by the nineteenth century American sociologist William Graham Sumner.

² Judith Rich Harris (1998/9); *The Nurture Assumption*; p. 283

Other social norms should be complied with, which means that there is social pressure on the individual to conform but there is some room for discretion. For instance, we dress our children in clean clothes and organise funerals to mark someone's passing. Sumner called these behaviours "folk-ways". He argued that values in folkways and mores are inherently non-rational, and yet powerful, in influencing thought and behaviour.

And then there are the norms that allow quite a bit of flexibility. In the West, women may wear dresses, skirts or trousers, the length of which is up to them, unless of course they stray too far up the leg. Funeral and wedding ceremonies may now be organised in a variety of settings.

Social norms can be split into two groups:

1 Descriptive norms - which teach us how most people around us behave - we buy the right car and keep up with fashions.

2 Injunctive norms - which alert us to what is sanctioned or frowned upon - it is wrong to ignore traffic lights, or to throw litter on the ground; driving a Hummer is no longer cool (as demonstrated in the last episode of ER, when one of the characters abashedly admitted that her hire car was a Hummer - *"it was the only vehicle they had available"*)

People need social proof, we look to others around us, including strangers for guidance on how to behave, and we look for cues in surroundings. That is why canned laughter is used in sit-coms, to signal that a joke is funny.

If people perceive that there are no social "rules", or that nobody cares, or no-one is "watching", then their behaviour may reflect this lack of social support or boundaries.

In the 1960s, Stanford University's Philip Zimbardo³ and his team left two seemingly abandoned cars on roadsides, one in wealthy Palo Alto, California and the other in the less salubrious Bronx. In the Bronx, within ten minutes, looters started by taking out the battery. Over the next 48 hours, the researchers recorded 23 separate destructive acts by individuals or groups, who either took something from the abandoned vehicle or did something to wreck it. Virtually all the acts occurred in broad daylight. Surprisingly, only one of these episodes involved adolescents. The rest were by adults, many well-dressed and driving by in cars, people who might qualify as at least lower-middle class. These might be the very same citizens who would, under other circumstances, have been mistaken for mature, responsible citizens demanding more law and order in their community.

The car in the "neighbour-watched" Palo Alto remained untouched and when the researchers were removing it after five days, a complaint was made to the police that an abandoned car was being stolen! This field study was the precursor to what later became known in 1982 as the "Broken Windows Theory" of crime devised by political scientist James Q. Wilson and criminologist George Kelling and which has since been used successfully in New York - Their simple solution to crime control was to restore order to urban disorder by making it clear what was not acceptable in the community, starting at ground level - by removing abandoned cars, painting out graffiti and fixing broken windows.

Norms of social responsibility and altruism are of particular interest, as the worst effects of climate change and unstable energy prices are being, and will continue to be, felt by those living in poverty, especially in the developing world.

³ http://www.lucifereffect.com/about_content_anon.htm

According to Marc Hauser,⁴ all societies have at least two norms of altruistic behaviour: we should help people who can't help themselves - social responsibility, and return favours to those who have given in the past - reciprocity.

Social scientists suggest that these norms are learned, instilled by personal and third party observations. Helping others and returning favours brings praise and good feelings, while abstaining and renegeing brings criticism and bad feelings.

An article in New Scientist by Kate Douglas,⁵ confirms this. She says that fear of being punished is not the only thing that keeps our inner egoists in check. Often we are virtuous simply because it feels right.

Our conscience weighs up the pros and cons - we learn the complex social rules of our particular culture and they become linked in our brains with emotions such as pride and honour, shame and guilt, giving them moral significance - vice becomes associated with negative emotions, virtue with positive ones.

The pleasure we get from performing a good deed is probably induced by a cocktail of neurochemicals but one, oxytocin, normally associated with bonding and love, appears to be especially important.

Paul Zak at Claremont Graduate University in California discovered the link between oxytocin and morality almost a decade ago. His experiments show that people with more oxytocin are more generous and caring and that our oxytocin level increases when someone puts trust in us. He describes oxytocin as the "*key to moral behaviour*".

The fact that people adapt to the values of their culture makes morality a moveable feast. And the reverse is also true, the right cultural context brings out the good in us. According to Binghamton University academic David Sloan Wilson, and co-founder of the Evolution Institute,⁶ there's no point in trying to make individuals more prosocial, you need to increase the prosociality of the entire neighbourhood.

And don't underestimate the power of social norms. According to Lori B. Anderson,⁷ weight gain in one person may be influenced by the weight of people in his or her social network, either directly or indirectly - the relative obesity effect, social network effect, or peer effect.

Using data from a 2007 survey of American high school students, she concludes that a society with a strong trend toward obesity will experience increases in the social norm. Individuals then perceive their weight as lower, due to the changing norm. They also change their weight goals causing changes in eating behaviour - which can mean eating more unhealthy foods and a resulting spiral effect. The changing norms exacerbate the trend in obesity by causing individuals to perceive themselves as thinner and giving them less of a desire to lose weight.

HAVE A LOOK AT THESE:

The cost of social norms - Dan Ariely <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlqtbPKjf6Q>

Male restroom etiquette <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzO1mCAVyMw>

⁴ Marc D. Hauser (2006); *Moral Minds*; p.289

⁵ *Homo Virtuous?*; Kate Douglas; *New Scientist*; 10th Nov. 2012; p.42-45

⁶ See <http://evolution-institute.org/>

⁷ *The Trend in Obesity: The Effect of Social Norms on Perceived Weight and Weight Goal* ; 2009
<http://www2.binghamton.edu/economics/graduate/documents/prospectus-by-l-anderson.pdf>

WHO GETS OUT FIRST IF A SHIP IS SINKING?

Interestingly, society is constantly evolving, and new social norms emerge, sometimes without us even realising it - to the point that we believe they were always there!

We all think that it is a time-honoured tradition that if a ship is sinking, all efforts are made to ensure that women and children are taken off first. And most of us assume that this is a sea-faring practice that has gone on for centuries. Not so, says Mikael Elinder, an economist at Uppsala University in Sweden.⁸ Chivalry at sea is just a myth!

Elinder and his team trawled through a list of over 100 major maritime disasters spanning three centuries, looking for survival rates of men and women. They ended up with data on 18 shipwrecks, involving 15,000 passengers, which showed that the survival rate for men was basically double that for women. On the little data they had on children, it was clear that they had even worse survival prospects, just 15%. They could also clearly see that the crew were more likely to survive than passengers, with 61% survival rate as compared to 37% of male passengers. On average, the captain was more likely to survive than the passengers. It really was every man for himself.

Elinder believes that what happened on the heavily studied Titanic, confirmed the myth. Another researcher, Lucy Delap of Cambridge University, argues that the myth was then spread by British elites to prevent women obtaining suffrage - look at the Titanic, there is no reason to give women the vote because men, even when facing death, will put the interests of women first.

It has been claimed that the “women and children first” policy is just a British phenomenon, but Elinder found a lower survival rate for women on British ships than on ships of other nations!

STATUS

Social status is the prestige attached to one's position in society, or to a rank you hold within a certain group, such as the family or workplace.

Achieved social status is earned by one's own achievements, whereas ascribed status can be inherited at birth.

People differ from one another in social status. Those with higher status have greater power, money, and access to interested partners. Due to the fitness-enhancing benefits of having higher-status, the drive for high status, and the emotions, traits, and behaviours that facilitate that drive, run deep in our veins.

According to the evolutionary psychologist, Geoffrey Miller,⁹ all human brains have a deep and abiding interest in two sets of evolutionary goals: attaining higher social and sexual status and striving for better survival and parental prospects. So, we display our desirable traits and our social status to attract a mate, through so called “positional goods” - buying a flash car, wearing the latest fashions, building a fancy house. The more flashy and conspicuous the material good, the more it advertises availability and potency - hence the sports car!

A high position within a social hierarchy in evolutionary terms corresponds to improved access to financial, physical, sexual, social and informational resources, which in turn will help protect our individual long-term interests and those of our children.¹⁰

⁸ *New Scientist*; 4th Aug. 2012; p. 27

⁹ *Geoffrey Miller (2009) Spent-sex, evolution and consumer behaviour*

¹⁰ *S. Retallack, T. Lawrence & M. Lockwood (2007) Positive Energy; p. 121*

One of the most powerful emotions attached to social status is pride. This pride can be either hubristic or authentic.¹¹

Hubristic pride is fuelled by arrogance and deceit and is associated with anti-social behaviours, rocky relationships, low levels of conscientiousness and high levels of disagreeableness, neuroticism, narcissism, and poor mental health outcomes. But people in this category can have social status and influence within their group (as seen in the RTE TV series Love/Hate).

On the other hand, authentic pride is fuelled by the emotional rush of accomplishment, confidence, and success, and is associated with prosocial and achievement-oriented behaviours, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, satisfying interpersonal relationships, and positive mental health. Authentic pride is also associated with genuine self-esteem, and people who have this draw inspiration from others and want to be emulated by them.

The author Alain de Botton¹² describes status as a *“worry, so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives, that we are in danger of failing to conform to the ideals of success laid down by our society and that we may as a result be stripped of dignity and respect; a worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung or are about to fall to a lower one.”*

His thesis states that the hunger for status, like all appetites, can have its uses, spurring us to do justice to our talents, encouraging excellence, restraining us from harmful eccentricities and cementing members of a society around a common value system. But, like all appetites, its excesses can cause status anxiety, which can be deadly and never-ending.

He points out that, despite being blessed with riches and possibilities far outstripping those imaginable by our ancestors, we have shown a remarkable capacity to feel that both who we are, and what we have, is not enough. A sharp decline in actual deprivation may paradoxically, have been accompanied by a continuing and even increased sense of deprivation and a fear of it.

Status now rarely depends on an unchangeable identity handed down through the generations. Instead, it hangs on one’s own performance. And if you fail, you feel like a failure and others can treat you accordingly. The only way to be the best is to have the best.

“Keeping up with the Jones” is a term we throw around at will, but let’s face it, even we environmentalists like to keep up our images - to such an extent that it is quite possible to spot us on the street, especially in small rural areas like Bantry, where we stick out like a sore thumb (hint, we dress down to go into town and everyone else dresses up) - we watch each other, we know if someone breaks ranks and uses a non-ecological washing powder, we check to see that each other’s toilet paper is recycled and, moreover, chlorine-free, we pride ourselves on our dirty, veggie growing, finger nails. It’s just that our status triggers are different, and, we believe, more virtuous as they “don’t cost the earth”.

UK SCHOOL-KIDS TALK ABOUT SOCIAL STATUS

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMMD10o8CN4&feature=related>

¹¹ <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beautiful-minds/201008/two-routes-social-status>

¹² A. De Botton (2004) *Status Anxiety*; p. 5

THE SOBERING STORY OF EASTER ISLAND¹³

Easter Island is one of the most remote, inhabited places on earth. Only 150 square miles in area, it lies in the Pacific Ocean, 2,000 miles off the west coast of South America. When the Europeans first discovered the island in the early 1700's they found a primitive society of about 3,000 people living in squalid reed huts or caves, engaged in almost perpetual warfare and resorting to cannibalism in a desperate attempt to supplement their meagre food supplies. The island was barren and treeless.

What amazed the early visitors was that, amongst all the squalor and barbarism, there was evidence of a once flourishing and advanced society. Scattered across the island were over 600 massive stone statues, some as high as forty feet, and weighing over 50 tons. Many of the statues had been toppled and damaged, while others remained half-constructed in a quarry. Who could have been responsible for such a socially and technologically complex task as carving, transporting and erecting the statues? Easter Island became a "mystery" for many to try and solve.

The general conclusion is that the first settlers arrived in the fifth century. As the population grew, closely related households formed clans, each headed by a chief who was able to direct activities and organise food redistribution and other essentials. The Easter Islanders engaged in elaborate rituals and monument construction. Each settlement had its own burial and worship site, where the clan members erected between one and fifteen of the huge stone statues that survive today. These elaborate statues were carved by peasants in the quarry, and then transported across the island. Lacking any draught animals they had to rely on human power to drag the statues using tree trunks as rollers. Over time the number of clan groups would have increased and the competition between them to build statues intensified.

At the time of the initial settlement, Easter Island had a dense vegetation cover with extensive wooded areas. The trees were cut down to provide clearings for agriculture, fuel for heating and cooking, construction material for household goods, pole and thatch houses and canoes for fishing. And the most demanding requirement of all was to facilitate the movement of these large and heavy ceremonial statues. By 1600, the island was almost completely deforested and statue erection was brought to an abrupt halt, leaving many stranded at the quarry.

From 1500 onwards, the shortage of trees was forcing many people to abandon house building and forcing them to live in caves or flimsy reed huts. They became stranded as they could no longer construct canoes, and even fishing had become more difficult as they could no longer make nets out of the paper mulberry tree. The removal of the forests caused soil erosion which affected crop yields. The society collapsed into conflict, slavery and cannibalism. And one of the main aims of warfare was to destroy the statues of opposing clans.

Yet at the very time when the limitations of the island must have become starkly apparent the competition between the clans for the available timber seems to have intensified as more and more statues were carved and moved across the island in an attempt to secure prestige and status. The fact that so many were left unfinished or stranded near the quarry suggests that no account was taken of how few trees were left on the island.

¹³ C. Ponting (1991) *The Green History of the World*; p. 1-7

SOCIAL DESIRABILITY

In the summer of 2008, I carried out an ad-hoc survey on the streets of four towns in West Cork, asking a random 60 people a number of questions about climate change and energy. By the end of the process, I was fairly sure that quite a few of the respondents had given me the answers they figured I wanted to hear, and that bothered me. Refreshingly, a small few barked back words like “bullshit” and “hoax” - at least I knew where we stood there. I puzzled over whether it was good or bad that people felt they had to give the “right” answer - surely it wasn’t great if they just went home and carried on with the “wrong” actions?

The term “social desirability” is often used to characterize answers to survey questions that conform to current norms, rather than to what people truly feel.

Howard Schuman et al¹⁴ have studied race in the US and they say that racial attitudes may represent little more than the superficial verbalization of socially approved norms. And they ask a similar question to me - if it has become less acceptable to express negative attitudes toward black people, then are white people saying what they actually feel, or are they reporting what they think they should be feeling, especially in the interview situation?

And there is evidence to show that at least some responses to attitude questions do appear to vary depending on the nature of the interview. Attitudes shift in relation to the degree of privacy provided to respondents, with some white attitudes becoming more negative toward blacks when the survey setting is more private. The assumptions that respondents make about an interviewer’s attitudes also appear to influence how they describe their own attitudes.

However, the authors go on to say that the issue is more complex than this line of thinking suggests. They suggest it would be naive to think that the transformation of white racial attitudes over the last half century has occurred simply because a great many Americans have each altered their personal views. But the fact cannot be ignored that in the 1940s, segregation, discrimination, and openly verbalized prejudice toward minorities of all kinds were entirely acceptable throughout much of the United States. Today very few people would express open support for any of these. Norms calling for equal treatment regardless of race are now highly salient in America, not only in much of the legal structure, but in more intangible ways as well.

So, we shouldn’t underestimate the power of social norms. If someone gives a different answer because he or she is in the presence of an interviewer, this probably means they feel that their real attitude is not acceptable to the interviewer. The same social pressure to state views other than your own is also likely to occur in other social situations.

The authors question the degree to which norms are “internalized” and become personal attitudes, so that they operate even when interviewers or other observers are not present. There is good reason to think that this varies greatly across individuals, with some having made the norm an integral part of their personality and thus attempting to live in accord with it all of the time. For others, the norm functions more as an external constraint, shaping their behaviour to the extent that they feel observed by those assumed to uphold the norm. But even the latter people see the norm as meaningful, as, at least it influences the way they act in certain public situations.

Norms do not exist in thin air, and in the absence of legal or other coercion they must receive some support from personal attitudes. Just as many attitudes are shaped by social norms, so individual attitudes support social norms by being called forth when there is a violation of the norm.

So, I can rest assured, saying something you don’t mean can be better than saying what you really mean! Whether consciously, or unconsciously the survey respondents were picking up on an emerging social norm. These people are on the first rung of the ladder, which is good news for those of us who are a few rungs further up.

¹⁴ Excerpt from *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*
<http://www.publicopinionpros.norc.org/inprint/2005/july/schuman.asp>

PEER PRESSURE AND AUTHORITY

Obedience to authority is a fundamental aspect of human nature, a characteristic that we see early in life, as children are exposed to their parents' rules. However, when people respond to hierarchy they can absolve themselves of responsibility for their actions - "*I was ordered to do it*". The unpalatable truth is that the most horrible acts can then be committed by perfectly normal people. In the right circumstances under certain situational pressures, most of us, and perhaps all of us, might be led to commit atrocities.

STANLEY MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENT

In the early 1960s, the social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a classic study of authority, bringing to light how systems outside of our moral faculty can impose significant constraints on what we do.¹⁵ How do we decide between two competing actions when one conflicts with our conscience and intuitions about what is morally right, and the other conflicts with the requests of an authority figure? Ultimately, one action loses and the other wins.

Milgram's studies involved a trained middle-aged actor, the experimenter, and genuine subjects selected from people living in New Haven, Connecticut. Although rigged beforehand, the experimenter appeared to randomly assign each subject to either the role of teacher or student. The genuine subjects always drew the teacher role. Prior to the experiment the experimenter brought the teacher into a room and explained that the main goal was to explore how punishment influences a person's capacity to learn. The learner memorised a list of paired words, such as blue-box, nice-day, and was then brought to another room, strapped into a chair, and attached to electrodes leading to a machine - in the experiment there was no shock, but the actor responded as if there was. Both were then informed that electric shock would be used to assess its effectiveness in learning. The teacher was brought into the next room and introduced to the dial with clockwise increments, starting at "Slight Shock" and ending a few increments after "Danger: Severe Shock", indicated by XXX. If the learner answered correctly the teacher was to move onto the next question. Otherwise, the teacher pressed the button, and for each following incorrect answer, the experimenter instructed the teacher to give an increasingly sharper shock.

Based on a preliminary assessment of what people actually said they would do under the circumstances, Milgram expected subjects to stop delivering shocks at a moderate level of pain, stopping around 9 on a dial that went up to 30. The actual response was extraordinary. With either some or no prodding from the experimenter ("*please continue*" or "*the experiment requires that you continue*"), subjects continued shocking the learner to an average maximum intensity of around 20-25, equivalent to an extreme intensity shock.

Some teachers refused to continue at an early stage, despite urging from the experimenter. But Milgram was amazed to find those who questioned authority were in the minority. 65% of the teachers were willing to progress to the maximum voltage level.

Some participants demonstrated a range of negative emotions about continuing, pleading with the learner to be more careful, laughing nervously and acting strangely. Some thought they had killed him. Nevertheless, participants continued to obey, doing what they were told.

With voice feedback (i.e. screams of pain) from the learner, Milgram only observed a negligible change in the level of shock given. Subjects willingly zapped the learner in the face of such feedback as "*let me out of here...agonised scream...my heart's bothering me. You have no right to hold me here.*"

Bringing the learner into the same room as the subject, in full view and in close proximity, caused only a 20% increase in disobedience. This suggests that when the victim is in full view, the teacher's empathy

¹⁵ Marc D. Hauser (2006); *Moral Minds*; p. 138-141

rises closer to the surface, which is more likely to influence action, especially disobedience in the face of authority. Despite this, even when the subjects could see the learner squirming and hear him screaming, most went up the level 20 ("Intense Shock") on the shock meter. An extraordinary 30% of subjects went up the highest level of shock (30 on the dial; 450 volts and a label of XXX), even though the learner no longer responded verbally and was virtually listless.

Milgram reflected that, despite subjects learning from childhood that it is a fundamental breach of moral conduct to hurt another person against his will, almost half of the subjects abandoned this tenet in following the instructions of an authority who had no special powers to enforce his commands. To disobey would bring no fine or punishment, and it was clear from the remarks and behaviour of many of the participants that in punishing the victims they were often acting against their own values.

Milgram's experiments capture a core element of human nature. Breaking with authority is hard. To break with rules imposed from on high is to inhibit a typical or habitual pattern of action. The experiments also show that obedience to authority is universal, but the degree to which authority rules varies between cultures. Other labs across the globe replicated his exact design, including in Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria, Australia and Jordan. Subjects in all these countries were willing to send high levels of shock to their learners, but there was considerable variation among the countries. 85% of German subjects were willing to send shocks at the highest level, whereas in the US and Australia, the proportions dropped to 65% and 40% respectively.¹⁶ Which goes to show that culture can alter the gain on the rule of authority or the obedience of a culture's members, but the capacity to rule and follow are evolved capacities of the mind, shared with our primate relatives and numerous other species.

One interesting exception to the rule that we obey authority is that we will defy authority if peers signal us to. According to Tina Rosenberg,¹⁷ one of the variations Milgram tried included two other confederates supposedly administering shocks alongside the real subject. When the confederates pretended to have had enough and refused to administer the shocks, only four of the forty participants continued to administer shocks up to the maximum level. Milgram carried out at least nineteen variations on the basic experiment, testing such things as whether people were more likely to defy the authority figure if they were physically closer to the victim, if they were in a less fancy setting, or if they were women. The most defiance was produced by Variation 17 - the revolt of the peer group. The peer group's creation of a social norm of human kindness was the most effective way to encourage defiance to an immoral order.



¹⁶ Hauser; p. 141

¹⁷ Tina Rosenberg (2011); *Join the Club*; p.32