The Power of Others

Peer Pressure, Groupthink, and How the People Around Us Shape Everything We Do

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For Jessica
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Note

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We may think we’re running the show, but most of the time it’s the other way round. The situation we are in, and particularly the people around us, hold sway over our thoughts and behaviours far more than we like to imagine.

In almost every area of our lives, we are steered by others. They influence what we wear, the music we like, the food we eat (and how much of it), our voting habits, how we invest our money. They affect our mental state, the ebb and flow of our moods and emotions. They even colour our moral outlook, whether we act good or bad.

The scientific study of these group dynamics, which work beneath our conscious radar, is transforming our understanding of human nature. We are not the autonomous ringmasters we believe we are; we are social through and through. This insight is disquieting because it challenges the way we see ourselves, and how we judge others. It suggests, for example, that character and personality are not a reliable guide to future conduct. It also forces us to confront some awkward questions about the human condition. Is criminality a state of mind? Does evil beget evil? Are heroes born heroic?
Acknowledging such complexities can be difficult. Recall the outcry in July 2013 when *Rolling Stone* depicted on its cover a photograph of Boston bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev looking doe-eyed and tousle-haired and a little too boyish and innocent for many tastes. The implication was that alleged murderers should not be shown to look like rock stars, or like their mothers’ sons.

Of course they can be all these things. The uncomfortable truth is that people are never the knowable rogues they appear to be. By and large it is their sociability, their compulsive groupishness, that makes it so.

There is no doubting the human fondness for groups. We categorize people on the flimsiest of pretexts: the length of their hair, their turn of phrase. Little wonder that much of human behaviour is understandable only at the level of the collective. In 1954, the Turkish-American psychologist Muzafer Sherif demonstrated this scientifically for the first time in his ‘Robbers Cave’ experiment, pitching two groups of adolescent boys in competition with each other at a summer camp in Oklahoma to study the effect on their behaviour. Within days, they had developed an inter-group rivalry that resembled tribal warfare. Yet the boys were almost identical in background and age: Sherif had conjured up discrimination and intolerance simply by drawing a line in the sand.

In the decades since, social psychologists have demonstrated many times how effortlessly we construct a narrative of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and how quickly prejudice can follow. They have shown, for example, that people will instinctively divide themselves according to the colour of their eyes, the colour of their shirt, their preference for a particular artist, whether they over- or under-estimate
the number of dots in a pattern, whether a coin lands heads up or tails.

Even when based on such arbitrary criteria, group identities run deep. Mark Levine, now at the University of Exeter, found that Manchester United fans, who had been asked to ponder the virtues of their club, were three times as likely to help an injured stranger in a Manchester United shirt as one in a Liverpool or plain shirt. When he repeated the experiment, this time asking them to think about being a football supporter in general, they were happy to lend a hand whatever shirt the stranger was wearing – so long as it was a football shirt. Group identities are transformative, but they are transitory too. They are also instinctively adopted. ‘This impulse … to sunder all the peoples of the world into belligerent collectivities has existed as long as humanity itself’, notes historian David Cannadine in *The Undivided Past*.¹

Groupishness makes evolutionary sense. In our ancestral environ-
ment, natural selection would have favoured individuals who co-
operated with each other and were quick to distinguish friend from foe. Group living provided benefits, such as the division of labour and protection from predators and enemies, that made survival and reproduction more likely. These tribal proclivities are knitted into our physiology, moderated by hormones and neurotransmitters such as testosterone, which promotes competitive behaviour, and oxytocin, which boosts people’s love for their in-group (but not for all humanity as is sometimes suggested). This helps explain both our innate hunger for social connection and the excoriating effects of loneliness. The presence of others can lead us astray, but their absence can propel us to a far worse place.
Many people find it daunting, sometimes overwhelming, to reflect that they are influenced by those around them in such dramatic and fundamental ways. They worry that they are not in control of their lives, that it is not their hand on the tiller, that they will lose their mind in a mob or that group forces will corrupt them as they have corrupted the victims of so many cults. Much of this fear is based on myth (mobs are neither mindless nor mad). But not all of it. Unquestionably, our group leanings can drag us to the moral depths.

They can make us less tolerant towards those who differ from us, and even split societies apart. They have on countless occasions caused people to favour aggression over negotiation. They can trigger the collapse of banks. They can persuade ordinary people to commit extraordinary acts of brutality. They can turn disaffected loners into mass killers. They can lead us to extreme views and distort our thinking on all kinds of issues. They can make us conform too much to what other people think of us, a serious problem when what other people think of us is negative (this is probably the best explanation for why, in some cultures, girls do worse at maths and science than boys, and why African-American students often under-perform when they think they are being tested on intellectual ability).²

Yet they can raise us to heights we are unlikely to reach by ourselves. Most acts of resistance to totalitarian regimes during the twentieth century were communal. Most heroes are not born extraordinary but step up in response to the desperate need of their compatriots, and it’s almost impossible to predict who they will be. Armies can make up in camaraderie and solidarity what they lack in numbers. Solidarity is also behind much sporting achievement and has made possible extraordinary feats of adventure and survival in extreme environments. Crowds, contrary to how they are usually portrayed, tend to be highly co-operative and altruistic, to the
extent that social psychologist John Drury has dubbed them ‘the fourth emergency service’.

Social bonds keenly felt can even help those in isolation: many kidnap victims and solo explorers have kept sane by taking refuge in a world of abstractions far beyond their immediate confines. Furthermore, our social needs can be co-opted to positive ends. The UK government’s ‘nudge’ strategy for recovering unpaid income tax, which involves sending feet-draggers a letter telling them most people pay on time, has improved compliance by some twenty percent. What other people do matters to us at every conceivable level.

The Power of Others is an attempt to illustrate the full extent of all this through stories of behaviour from the outlandish to the everyday. We’ll encounter war heroes, polar explorers, London rioters, Arab Spring protestors, American revolutionaries, mountaineers, round-the-world yachtsmen, New York City firefighters, astronauts, suicide terrorists, heroic rescuers of Jews in wartime Europe, lone wolf killers, professional cyclists, kidnap victims and ‘supermax’ prisoners. We’ll hear from the social psychologists whose laboratory and field studies are redefining our ideas about what makes us tick. We’ll travel from the refuge camps of Gaza to the streets of Cairo, from Guantanamo Bay to the woody valleys of Vermont.

Above all, we’ll learn how to manage our social impulses and vulnerabilities and use them to our own ends: when to follow the herd or go our own way, how to survive a crowd emergency, how self-awareness can help us stand up to prejudice, the secrets to successful brainstorming, how to counter loneliness and alienation, how to avoid the perils of groupthink.

We’ll discover that getting your employees to chat and mingle is a more effective way of increasing productivity than having them
compete against each other; that it is far easier to dissent when someone else is doing it with you (heroism is a group activity too); that the sensationalism that sells newspapers also distorts our view of the world and each other. We’ll see why all-star teams almost always perform beneath expectations; why there has hardly ever been a suicide bomber who has acted alone; why peer pressure can make intelligent people give ridiculous answers to straightforward questions.

The aim is to shine a light on these endlessly fascinating vagaries of group behaviour, and to demonstrate how they affect us in just about everything we do. Social psychology can teach us a great deal about ourselves; without it, we can never hope truly to understand each other.
Most people in Britain of a certain age remember where they were on the morning of 31 August 1997 when they heard the news that Princess Diana had died in a car crash in Paris. It was our JFK moment. Unexpected and shocking as it was, what followed was in some ways even more bizarre. Huge numbers of Britons grieved as if they had known her personally. Tens of thousands queued through the night at St James’s Palace in London to sign a book of condolence. Around a million lined the route of her funeral cortège to Westminster Abbey. Outside the gates of her home in Kensington Gardens the floral tributes lay so deep that those at the bottom began to decompose.

At the time I was living near Kensington, and I remember the day she was killed, which was a Sunday, walking through the gardens and watching all the downcast people standing at the gates looking at the flowers and laying their own bouquets, and starting to feel a little sad myself where before there had been only a kind of astonishment, and thinking, what is going on here? I saw strangers embrace in commiseration. On the television, some newsreaders looked close to tears. The writer Carmen Callil likened it to the Nuremberg Rallies:¹ in this cult of mourning, there was only one way to feel.
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Looking back, it seems clear what was going on. Psychologists know it as emotional contagion: an unthinking synchronization of mood and feeling that can propagate across whole groups. In this case, as in many, there is little doubt it was provoked by relentless media coverage that set the tone for the nation through sentimental commentary and extravagant coverage of what in the beginning was sporadic public grief. It was a case of the ‘dominant opinion monopolizing the public scene’, as cultural studies expert James Thomas put it. Yet emotional contagion is an inevitable consequence of human social behaviour. Like chameleons that change colour with their surroundings, we imitate automatically. Before we explore how that works, consider another example of how quickly emotions – in this case fear – can spread through a community, and how dramatic the effects can be.

On Wednesday, 10 December 1930, a New York City merchant walked into the branch of the privately held Bank of United States on Freeman Street in the Bronx and asked a teller to dispose of the stock he held in the bank. When the manager tried to discourage him, insisting it was a sound investment, the merchant left and spread the story among his business colleagues that the bank was in trouble. Within a few hours, hundreds of people had turned up at the branch seeking to withdraw their money. By the time it closed its doors at 8 p.m., the crowd had swelled to twenty thousand. Three thousand customers had taken out some $2 million, including a man who queued for two hours to remove his measly two bucks.

The Bank of United States never re-opened. The rumours had resulted in runs at other branches, and the bank’s directors feared that large mobs would gather the next day and bleed the business dry. Early on Thursday, they closed down the entire operation and handed over the remaining assets to Joseph Broderick, New
At the time, the Bank of United States was the largest commercial bank in terms of dollars on deposit to fail in the country’s history. Its collapse was a considerable blow to the public’s confidence in the economy, coming as it did just thirteen months after the Wall Street crash known as Black Tuesday. The economist Milton Friedman and others have argued that it accelerated a crisis in banking that helped transform what had been an ordinary, cyclical recession into the Great Depression. Another three hundred banks closed their doors before the end of the year.

The run on the Bank of United States was fuelled by the contagious fear that the institution could not pay out. Like all bank runs, it represented a collective loss of faith in how the banking system worked and in the value of credit – a term derived from the Latin credere, to believe. Such fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy regardless of whether the rumour that triggered it is true: no bank carries all its deposits in cash. Collective fear is hard to ignore and the pattern has been repeated many times since the Great Depression. A recent example was September 2007, when thousands of worried customers queued to withdraw their savings from the ailing British bank Northern Rock after reading reports in newspapers and blogs that others were doing the same, even though the Bank of England had already agreed to support it.

It is easy to scoff at such herdishness, yet it is not as mindless as it appears. When you see large numbers of people losing faith
in the system, it makes sense to get your investment out fast. Even if such behaviour is not well founded, an institution that has lost its reputation is highly likely to fail. The flipside is that we are just as liable to follow the herd when it is running after something we want – or think we want. In January 2012, Apple was forced to delay the launch of its newest iPhone in China ‘for safety reasons’ after a riot broke out among hundreds of desperate customers outside its flagship store in Beijing. Fear of missing out can be just as motivating as fear of financial ruin.

It feels like we are in the driving seat in our daily lives, making decisions autonomously, experiencing emotions that we ourselves generate, choosing what we believe in (and what we don’t). Mostly this is an illusion. Four decades of research into how people decide
EMOTIONAL CHAMELEONS

to do what they do has shown that we are highly susceptible to the winds of social influence—indeed, it is impossible to escape them, short of living in hermitic isolation (and even that may not immunize us, as we’ll see in a later chapter).

To understand why, let’s start with the epitome of social ritual, a good meal. ‘In food, as in death, we feel the essential brotherhood of man’, runs a Vietnamese proverb, a notion that recently has acquired scientific credibility thanks to the work of a group of Dutch behavioural researchers led by Roel Hermans. Hermans and his team built an experimental restaurant in their lab at Radboud University in Nijmegen to test the extent to which people feed off each other—in behavioural terms—while sharing food. (This is the kind of experimental protocol that makes psychology such a popular subject among university students.) They set up a small table, dressed it with plates, cutlery, glasses and napkins, and placed two chairs facing each other. They hid a CCTV camera in a nearby lamp to allow them to observe the diners from an adjacent room. They then served evening meals to seventy pairs of young women—presumably undergraduates grateful for a free meal—and recorded the amount each diner consumed, the number of times she placed food in her mouth and the precise time at which she did so.

Three thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eight mouthfuls later, they found not only that how much each woman ate depended on how much her companion ate, but that each couple’s eating was highly co-ordinated. In other words, the women were more likely to put fork to mouth simultaneously than separately, particularly at the beginning of the meal. The researchers realized they were observing a classic case of social mimicry, a ubiquitous phenomenon where one individual unwittingly imitates the mannerisms of another. Known as the chameleon effect, it appears to
improve communication and rapport. Hermans thinks it might explain many common social dining quirks, such as why we tend to eat more in the presence of others, and why drinking partners often sip their drinks simultaneously, especially when each is focused on what the other is saying. This can work even when the interaction is virtual: the next time you watch a film with a glass in hand, observe how often you raise it in sync with the actors on the screen.

This type of behavioural orchestration carries on well below our level of conscious awareness, which makes it particularly tricky for those of us trying to moderate what we put in our mouths. Like bank runs and public grief, overindulgence is contagious. ‘People have less control over their eating than they like to imagine’, says Hermans. When I ask him what we can do to counter this, he declares: ‘Decrease mindless eating!’ Easier said than done. To be fully mindful about our eating – to savour every flavour to the exclusion of all else – we’d have to dine alone. Hermans thinks it’s more a question of learning to be aware of the external factors that influence our habits, though he stops short of encouraging people to override their mimicking instinct. ‘I’m not sure whether I would advise therapists to even go there, since it is such a big part of our social lives.’

Studies of eating behaviour raise as many intriguing questions as they answer. The women who took part in Hermans’s experiment had an average age of twenty-one, were of ‘normal’ weight, did not know each other, and were three times as likely to mimic each other during the first ten minutes of the meal as during the final ten. Would the effect have been the same if they had been older, or male, or if they had been friends before they sat down together? Or if the pairs had been of mixed age, gender or weight? Or if they had been forbidden from talking? We don’t know. The display of mimicry at the start of each encounter may have been an
unconscious attempt by the women to get along with each other. If so, and if this is a general trait, you might expect less imitation at family meals where everyone knows each other well and more at, say, business lunches.

Shortly after talking with Hermans, I went to lunch with a fellow reporter whom I had not seen for a year, expecting our eating behaviour to resemble the flamingo’s spectacularly synchronized mating dance, since it was in both our interests to go the extra mile. Instead, he hoovered up his food, leaving me stranded. I spent the rest of the meal worried that he didn’t like me, even though we don’t know enough yet about the psychology of mimicry to make such tender judgements. It’s possible of course that he was very hungry.

Or he could just be very selfish. Studies show that selfish people are not great synchronizers. Joanne Lumsden, who studies social cognition at the University of Aberdeen, has discovered that people who approach an encounter aiming to secure the best possible outcome for themselves mirror the movements of their partner about half as frequently as those concerned about the mutual benefits to both. The most likely explanation, she says, is that co-ordination requires you to pay attention to the other person, and if you are focused only on yourself you do that less.

Mimicry is the breath of social interaction. We do it without thinking, and without it anything beyond superficial communication would be impossible. All of us inadvertently copy the facial expressions, postures, manner of speech and other tics and quirks of those we are with all the time. And we do it at remarkable speed.