

REPORT 07 Jun 17

HOW DO WE SHAPE EACH OTHER'S BEHAVIOURS?

Survival of the fittest in the modern world means being able to get your way in an expanding web of social networks. Canvas8 spoke with evolutionary psychologist Dr. Diana Fleischman to understand how we constantly and subconsciously train others to do what we want.

Location **Global**

Highlights & Data

- Shaping the behaviours of other people involves significant cognitive effort in remembering everyone's preferences and aversions
- This knowledge is used to emotionally condition a person through reinforcement or punishment
- People with a shared future (e.g. family members, partners) 'train' each other to become better at cooperating and satisfying each other's desires
- 'Training' is often subtle and subconscious, interwoven into daily actions and conversations with others
- Women tend to be better at shaping behaviours in this manner because, over evolutionary history, they've been less able to use force to get their way
- Gifting may be an economically inefficient social behaviour, but it's effective at demonstrating how well you understand others and reinforces relationships

Scope

Throughout history, evolutionary advantage meant being best adapted to surviving in a wild and harsh environment. Our early encounters and needs shaped our physical form and taught us to communicate through language. Humans that had some behavioural advantage succeeded in that setting. They survived because they were the 'fittest'.

Fast forward to today and our biggest moments are no longer hunts or harvests, but conversations, meetings and dates. Our environment is a distinctly human one. It is an intricate web of complex social networks. In our cities, we interact with potentially hundreds of people each day. In our digital worlds, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp now process over 60 billion messages a day. [1]

Surviving in the modern world means being best adapted to interacting with, working alongside, and getting what you want out of other people. Being optimally adapted means having finely attuned skills to shape the behaviour of others. As this year's insights partner for **Nudgestock** – the UK's largest festival of behavioural science – Canvas8 took the opportunity to talk with Dr. Diana

Fleischman, guest speaker at Nudgestock, senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Portsmouth, and member of the Centre for Comparative and Evolutionary Psychology, to understand how we shape each other's behaviours through our everyday interactions.

Emotional conditioning

“Think about how much time you spend thinking about the things your friends would like, planning a date that they would find pleasing, or dating people and thinking about what their favourite things are and picking out gifts for them,” says Fleischman. “There is a huge amount of cognitive effort that goes into remembering other people’s preferences and aversions.” [2] In today’s unprecedentedly social environment, Fleischman argues that we’re quite unaware of how much effort we put into remembering these very personal details. But this attention pays off during emotional interactions, in which we reinforce our relationships when we do things others like – such as giving the right gift or making a special meal.

“We have things that we all tend to like – food, warmth, sex, things like that,” explains Fleischman. “There are also idiosyncratic preferences that individuals have that are very unique to them, [like] the colour blue or certain types of cars, food or interactions.” It’s a lifetime of strategic behaviour we engage in to help achieve what we want when dealing with others. “It happens a lot with people who want something from someone else. So you will probably remember your boss’ favourite foods or the things that drive them crazy more than you will remember other people’s [preferences and aversions]. And that is not just so that you don’t annoy them, but also so that you can potentially reinforce them.” [2]

“*There is a huge amount of cognitive effort that goes into remembering other people’s preferences and aversions*

In fact, it happens most often between people with a shared future, who train each other to become better at cooperating and satisfying each other’s desires. “The mating relationships are interesting because in a sense there is a lot of shared fate,” says Fleischman. “One of the most important adaptive problems that we have is finding a mate and getting out of them what we want, whether they’re a man or a woman. This is an area where there is very strong pressure to shape one another.” [2]

A person’s role as a parent sees them mould desirable behaviours when raising a child, but it’s also true that your children train you. “You come out as an infant being able to nearly smile early on and then crying, which is very subversive very early on. Both are used as a way of shaping your parents. Yet people think this magically goes away when you become an adult or that there is something immoral about it,” says Fleischman. “But this behaviour is pervasively unconscious.” [2]



We're constantly conditioning others, but often subconsciously

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The subconscious behaviour shaper

We're largely unaware of how we're manipulating each other because we don't want it leaked – not to others who will take offence, and not even to ourselves, as this may harm the self-perception of being cooperative and kind. “This is good in some ways. If you show somebody that you are trying to manipulate them, they will think you are a sociopath,” explains Fleischman. “But it is bad in other ways, as we will engage in reinforcement and punishment when we don't really need to.” [2]

“Take this example; let's say you are driving down the road with your partner and you see a billboard for a fancy car or a strip club – something that reminds you of something that they did that upset you once upon a time,” says Fleischman. “You might go really quiet or get angry internally, and anger and sadness are emotions that facilitate punishment. The current thinking is that anger and sadness will cause you to remember what a person did. But I think it's these emotions that cause you to engage in tactics to upset or to punish that person.” [2]

“*The actual training is so subtle that it's not offensive, malicious, or even something we do consciously. It's simply interwoven into the fabric of our social interactions*

On the flip side, gratitude is a fundamentally reinforcing emotion. “It is the emotion that motivates us to reinforce other people, especially when someone goes above and beyond what you might expect,” says Fleischman. “Your degree of reinforcement to them is going to be even greater as you want to reinforce that behaviour to facilitate it happening in the future.” [2] In an explicit form, it's why we might leave a tip for good service at a restaurant, but there are many more subtle ways we reinforce behaviours in our close relationships, such as giving that special look, the touch of a hand, or a thoughtful gift.

“On the one hand, people don’t want to be trained, but on the other hand, people like to know that you have a shared investment in them or that you care about them enough that you want to train them,” she explains. [2] Everybody has things that annoy them and things that please them. This is why we are so good at remembering other people’s preferences and aversions – so we can develop a bespoke training schedule for each individual.

In personal lives, people don’t like to feel that they are being used as a means to an end. Yet Fleischman puts it kindly, saying: “People are trying to entice you with things that you find pleasurable. But the actual training is so subtle that it’s not offensive, malicious, or even something we do consciously. It’s simply interwoven into the fabric of our social interactions.” [2]



The perfect gift is reinforcing as it shows how well you know someone

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A woman’s gift

Research shows that women are objectively more thoughtful and better at selecting gifts for others, regardless of the gender of the receiver and the type of relationship between the two. [3] “There are a few reasons for this – some of them are ugly, some of them are nice,” explains Fleischman.

“One reason that women are really good at subtly shaping other people is because women have, over evolutionary history, not been able to use physical force to get their way. Men have always had this very straightforward plan: ‘If you don’t do what I want, I will beat you up or I will threaten you in some way’. Women haven’t had any access to that. Women in long-term enduring friendships [and] relationships have had to use more subtle means to facilitate their strategies.” [2]

“Another reason is that women [typically] care for preverbal infants and children,” she adds. “It is very important if you want a child to do what you want – you can’t really explain to them why you want what you want. You have to be able to figure out what are their favourite things, what are their least favourite things, and shape them with that kind of method.” [2]

Advertisers know that keeping women front-of-mind is effective. In fact, an analysis of Super Bowl ads from 2015 and 2016 found that they performed 35% better among women than men, even

though most were gender neutral. Additionally, ads created with women in mind were found to be more engaging not just for women, but for men as well. [4]

“*Women in long-term enduring friendships [and] relationships have had to use more subtle means to facilitate their strategies*

While the number of females in the workforce has risen constantly over the past decades, the vast majority of ‘at-home’ parents in the US (84% in 2012) are still mothers. [5][6] As women are evidently doing most of the training at home, having a female partner who’s good at training children is very adaptive for men, as she’s likely to do the same for friends and relatives. “The best clue that you have that she is good at that is actually how well she trains you,” says Fleischman. “While men bristle at being trained, they know that if a woman is really good at remembering his preferences and aversions, then she also has that social memory for other people and that is going to be a great thing for him.” [2]

There is a certain tension for some men in long-term relationships. “I know some very high status guys who were incredibly under the thumbs of their wives,” says Fleischman, “and there is a certain intrinsic pleasure to that because you know someone is really good at that if they can take you as a high status man and train you to do whatever she wants.” [2]



Women are often better at remembering people’s pet peeves and pleasures

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Insights and opportunities

There are two kinds of behavioural conditioning. Operant conditioning occurs when something is punished or reinforced directly after it happens – think of the way we’ll train our dogs. Classical conditioning occurs when two stimuli become associated with each other. “If you have good food in a certain environment enough times, then the environment itself will become pleasing,” says Fleischman. “If you have sex with someone enough times, their mere presence or their voice will become reinforcing.” [2]

She explains that there are two things that are going on when we buy products. One is that we are thinking about how we can reinforce others with those products, but another is that we're thinking about how we can become more reinforcing to the people that we want to attract. "Many make-up commercials are conveying a message of 'look how aesthetically pleasing you can be to other people,'" says Fleischman. "If you tickle their pleasure centres, then they will find you inherently reinforcing." [2] The same goes for many products we use for aesthetic purposes, like clothing; we are trying to be directly reinforcing to people in the operant sense.

Perfume can be used in the same way, but it has a particularly strong effect in the classical sense. It's that feeling of being reminded of a lover's warm embrace, just by smelling a piece of their clothing. Their presence becomes associated with that smell, and one can be used to invoke a feeling of the other. Jean Paul Gaultier captured precisely this feeling in its [Le Male TV campaign](#). We also do this with experiences. By taking someone to a nice restaurant, we are inadvertently causing them to associate us with the delicious food, wine and overall pleasurable experience.

“All of us have this fingerprint, a totally unique mosaic of things that we find pleasing

Products and brands can be also used as behaviour shaping tools. This is especially evident through gifting, a behaviour that while economically inefficient, is socially effective. [7] "When you give a gift, you have spent money on something that brings them a small amount of pleasure to the recipient but was expensive to you," says Fleischman. "But what you are also saying is 'I am willing to sacrifice something for you.'" Economists would argue that if people only get \$100 of pleasure out of a \$300 Christmas gift, there is a huge net loss in terms of the value. "I think that is actually intentional," adds Fleischman, "and that it is the inefficiency itself that may hold that social value." [2]

Why is it that perfectly selected gift such a strong tool for reinforcement? It shows that someone has a good social memory for your preferences. It shows how much mental real estate you have in their mind. It's a gesture with great signalling value – that they can take all of your preferences that are diluted and nebulous – and put them into one focused gift.

"Obviously people prefer, if you are going to train them, that you train them with reinforcements rather than with punishment," says Fleischman. "People are flattered if you know all of the things that bring them pleasure, because our tastes and desires are changing and malleable, yet determined by our past. We have all these things throughout our lives, places and people, art and music, that we associate with certain pleasurable events. All of us have this fingerprint, a totally unique mosaic of things that we find pleasing." [2] Seeing others respond to our interests is always charming and comforting, because it's a good measure of how well they know us.

Diana Fleischman is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at The University of Portsmouth, and part of the Centre for Comparative and Evolutionary Psychology. Her research has turned to how we use focuses on the social and physiological influences on our behaviour, particularly how the menstrual cycle influences psychology, and the psychology of response to cues of disease, especially disgust.

Alex Caminer is Senior Behavioural Strategist at Canvas8, where he designs research strategies

and leads behaviour change projects. With another foot in the academic world, he investigates the nuances of decision making, understanding the hidden forces that guide our behaviour to rethink the way we structure our lives and design our societies.

Sources

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