

How Society Works: A Few Critical Elements Summarized

Why do people do what they do? What really explains our behavior? Are those talkshow hosts and columnists really making sense? The media, not to mention daily conversations, are filled with overly simple explanations of social behavior. Prominent examples include the "follow the money" explanation of why politicians and corporate executives do what they do. Another class of explanations explains everything in terms of reproductive urges. Everything is really about sex. Sex, reproductive urges, and money do explain some of human behavior. Most any economist, psychologist, or sociologist will say that sex and money are not complete and comprehensive explanations of human behavior.

Mass Media Influence - Television, newspapers, radio, magazines, and the World Wide Web condition our perceptions of ourselves and of what's good/bad/problematic in the world. Television and magazines are especially powerful influences on our images of beauty, success, and fitness. This aspect of the media has been so heavily, and accurately, covered by others that there is little point addressing the subject here.

Peer Pressure - People encourage us to do things, or at least plant ideas in our heads

Psychological Drives and Impulses - Emotions, errors in perception or reasoning, and drives for such things as group affiliation, safety, reproduction, and affection exert strong influences on our behavior.

Free will is clearly constrained by individual psychological makeup and culture.

Biology and Genetics - Biology and genetics are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are not interchangeable concepts. Genetics refers to inherited traits and the biological material that transmits those characteristics. Biology encompasses many, many processes that occur in the human body. Biological processes and genetic traits are obviously linked to many physical and mental characteristics. Our physical and mental characteristics certainly influence our lives in many ways. No geneticist would ever defend the general position that anyone with trait X will do Y.

Socialization - This is the process of learning about language, good behavior, bad behavior, "proper" goals and aspirations, and other cultural information that we need to get along in society. Socialization does not proceed in the same way for people of a particular race, religion, ethnic background, or social class. All of these things influence what we learn.

Much socialization, arguably the most important part, occurs before age 18. For a person to make a major change in how they were socialized ("brought up" in popular language) is difficult. The desire for change or the ability to succeed could well be influenced by the same socialization that's now causing a problem.

Family, peer groups, schools, churches, and the mass media are all agents of socialization. We learn about God and morality from church and family and friends. We learn the knowledge and skills deemed important for the individual, with much of the learning taking place in school. The content of the messages we encounter is largely beyond our control as children. Even as adults we can only exercise limited control of our own socialization. Rising

Standards and Expectations - I'm thinking of the rising standards that people feel they must live up to. People think that they need to do much more than their parents did. Parents need an intercom system for the baby, a minivan, a yard for the kids, and a college savings plan. This thinking is healthy for those who sell intercom systems, minivans, and suburban real estate. Parents and the natural environment suffer over things that are not necessary for proper child development, or good for the environment.

The standards for being a success seem to keep going up and up: "He's 40 but can't afford to live in DuPont Circle (or substitute any expensive neighborhood) and drive an Acura. What a loser!" The standards for being a good provider go up with the proliferation of new, pricey products and services that can supposedly turn parents into good parents.

It should now be clear that social behavior is more than just a matter of biology or genetics or money. There is much more involved than people simply deciding to do this or stop doing that. Social forces that are hard for us to understand combine with psychology, genetics, and biology to influence us. By extension, our schools, churches, families, and governments are all influenced by various social and psychological forces.