

Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

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Richard Bach, in his book *Illusions*, states a handy aphorism: **Perspective – use it or lose it.** This periodical – distributed by Rob Greenaway & Associates – shares amongst recreation and tourism management professionals, and others, several tools and concepts which will help exercise your perspective.

This issue considers how we are the way we are. We're suckers for an apparent good deal and we punish those who trespass against us, even when it's apparently more hassle than it's worth. In the end, we end up with a functioning community. It's amazing, really.

Gullible, gullible, gullible

With finance companies failing like wilted cabbages grown on poorly-fertilised real estate, it's worth reviewing just how gullible we really are. In a nutshell, we really are.

Remember Richard Long touting Hanover Finance, and Colin Meads describing Provincial Finance as, "solid as"? That should have been the first warning, since the marketeers (to coin a word) were relying on a method that has been proven to mislead.

In 1973, several medical researchers tested the hypothesis that:

Given a sufficiently impressive lecture paradigm, an experienced group of educators participating in a new learning situation can feel satisfied that they have learned, despite irrelevant, conflicting, and meaningless content conveyed by the lecturer.¹

That is, if the educational set-up looks impressive, and the lecturer is charismatic and convincing, we will be inclined to perceive that we have been offered a quality product, even if they deliver a pile of twaddle.

To test the hypothesis, the researchers presented a professional actor to groups of highly trained educators, making sure that the actor looked distinguished and sounded authoritative. They provided him with a fancy CV and title – Dr. Myron L. Fox – and an ambiguous speciality – the application of mathematics to human behaviour – and an intimidating topic – *Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education*.

One of the researchers coached the actor to, "present his topic and conduct his question and answer period with an excessive use of double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements. All this was to be interspersed with parenthetical humour and meaningless references to unrelated topics."

Dr Fox's lecture to 11 mental health educators was videotaped and then replayed to two other audiences: 11 psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric social workers, and 33 educators and administrators enrolled in a graduate level university educational philosophy course – 21 of whom held master's degrees while eight had bachelor's degrees.

No one spotted the hoax. Indeed, the general response, as noted in the three satisfaction surveys completed, was clearly positive. While nothing could have been learnt from the lecture, the audiences predominantly perceived that they had been well-educated about this

new topic. In fact, even after having been informed that the exercise was a sham, several participants were still keen to learn more about the bogus topic, asking for fictitious references. Style wins over substance.

There are many excellent examples of our lack of critical analysis. Lyprinol anyone? Or how about Carlos – an ancient soul, channelled through the body of Jose Luis Alvarez in 1988. A few weeks of theatrical promotion of this New Age faith healer by the makers of the Australian documentary show, *Sixty Minutes*, was enough to almost fill the Drama Theatre in the Sydney Opera House with adherents, who were "moved and delighted" by their experience.

Even after revealing the con, several elderly attendees were incensed: "Never mind what they say," they told Alvarez, "we still believe in you."²

Let's get academic again. Psychologist Bertram Forer writes:

Virtually every psychological trait can be observed in some degree in everyone.... It is not in the presence or absence of a trait that individuals differ. The uniqueness of the individual ... lies in the relative importance of the various personality forces in determining behaviour and in the relative magnitude of these traits in comparison with other persons.³

You might think we're talking about degrees of gullibility here. We are, but in a more subtle manner. Forer completed a type of psych test on his students, from which a tailored 'personality vignette' was generated. This vignette offered such findings as:

- You have a great need for other people to like and admire you.
- You have a tendency to be critical of yourself.
- You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage.
- While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them.

Of course, the trick was that every student got the same vignette. After reviewing their personal profile, the students were, "asked to raise their hands if they felt the test had done a good job. Virtually all hands went up and the students noticed this. Then the first sketch item was read and students were asked to indicate by hands whether they had found anything similar on their sketches. As all hands rose, the class burst into laughter."



¹ Naftulin, D.H., Ware, J.E., Donnelly, F. 1973. The Doctor Fox Lecture: A Paradigm of Educational Seduction. *Journal Of Medical Education*, Vol. 48, July 1973, pp. 630-635.

² Sagan, C. 1996. *The Demon-haunted World*. Ballantine Books

³ Forer, B. 1949. The Fallacy of Personal Validation: A Classroom Demonstration of Gullibility. *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 1949, (44), pp. 118-121.

Forer had earlier quantified his students' support for the method and found that all of them accepted it as a good or perfect instrument for personality measurement.

In 1997 I was in a fish and chip shop waiting for my two fish and one scoop. As you do, I was reading a *New Idea* or something similar and came across a series of reviews of Princess Diana's future. The numerologist said Dodi and Diana would split and Diana would marry a wonderful English gentleman and settle down to a long life of good deeds. The astrologist predicted their relationship would develop into a stable friendship and Diana would find other loves. The handwriting analyst (graphologist) thought she would devote herself to her two sons and become celibate. Oddly, none wrote: I predict Diana will die in about a month's time in a high speed car accident in a Paris tunnel, and millions will mourn her passing.

Why we continue to waste even the most shoddy paper on this tosh is beyond me. Methinks little gullibilities breed big gullibilities. Add greed and you have a recession. ❖

Altruistic punishment

Altruistic punishment is when, say, a soccer team bans its best player due to an indiscretion on his or her part: *This will hurt us as well as you – but hopefully you more-so.*⁴

In gaming theory, we learn that when members of a community interact repeatedly they are more likely to cooperate for the greater and shared good. If there is no repeat interaction, selfishness reigns. This forms part of the Tragedy of the Commons thesis, where individual gain is made at the expense of the collective good.⁵ The question here is, how do you deal with the rat-bags who free-ride on the magnanimity of others (how do you avert those who cause the common tragedy)? Punishment is a solution to the problem, but who bears the cost of dealing out the retribution? The question is, why would you bother punishing someone where their action adversely affects everyone but the costs of retribution are solely yours? If you've ever tried to recover a bad debt from a recidivist dodger you might appreciate the game I'm describing.

Economists Fehr and Gächter reviewed this query, noting that punishment appears to form a cornerstone of a functioning society, and that we often cooperate with others when we have no kinship or long-term relationship. We all benefit from cooperation, but the costs of punishment frequently accrue to an individual.⁶

Their test involved 240 students playing an investment game, where cooperation provided the greatest net gains to the group, and selfishness (defection from the group) offered the greatest direct gains to the individual. In half the games, players were able to buy punishment for individuals who played selfishly. In the other games,



no punishment was possible. In all games, members were shuffled so there was no chance of gaining any form of reciprocity from other team members.

Unsurprisingly, when punishment was not allowed, the level of cooperation was relatively low, and group income suffered. With punishment possible, cooperation dominated. Those who tended to be more cooperative were also the biggest punishers.

Free-riders could lose cash at a ratio of three to one. It would cost me \$1 to make you lose \$3. However, those who bought punishment knew that they would not be playing with the free-rider again. There was no direct financial benefit from paying to make someone else suffer. So why bother?

Fehr and Gächter concluded that, first, punishment makes the world go round. And second, there must be some benefit from meting out punishment when there is no direct advantage. They suggest that free-riding causes strong negative emotions in those who perceive a loss. Buying punishment assuages those emotions. We pay to make ourselves feel better. Which makes me wonder, why call it *altruistic* punishment? We punish the free-rider more the further they deviate from community expectations, because, frankly, we get a bit pissed-off. Those who benefit most from community cooperation – who have the most invested in their community – are the most aggrieved and get the most satisfaction from forcing a cost on the transgressor.

My contribution to the common good includes sharing verbal advice with boaties who break the five knot rules, although the costs (in EUs⁷) also accrue to our kids. They dislike cruising with Mr Shouty. ❖

Change is good

Robert Winston (*Child of Our Times, moustache*) reports that people who have led mentally diverse lives are less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease. Unfamiliar challenges, however trivial, are best for maintaining brain performance.⁸

So, if you are feeling smug because you do your daily Sudoku; sorry, but that's not enough. If today is Sudoku then tomorrow should be trying to balance a coffee cup on your nose. Winston suggests making a cup of tea with your eyes shut. He doesn't explain how a crotch-full of boiling water encourages neuron development.

I recommend moving your computer mouse to the other side of your keyboard. Or, if you must have two cars, make one European and one not, one diesel and one petrol. Then you can 'increase the density of your receptor sites' by indicating with your wipers, and by finding out where to dispose of petrol-tainted diesel responsibly (try Ben's Oil – not that I would know, of course). ❖

For Your Interest

Resource management work continues to be the mainstay of my occupation – specifically recreation and tourism assessments of effect for wind farms, hydro schemes, marine farms, road stoppings, tourism proposals, marinas, residential and visitor accommodation and so on. Most of the projects I work on are quite large-scale, so it's fascinating comparing the media-take with the reality.

The Environment Court is an interesting place in which to spend time. The role of the expert witness is to advise and assist the Court, and it's a challenge to balance the Court's expectations about the depth of data required to make a decision with the cost and feasibility of providing that data, and its reliability and relevance. The bar is constantly being raised, and it's good to see that recreation planners are more frequently joining consenting teams early on in the process, rather than having to play catch-up later.

I really enjoyed assisting the Nelson City Council with a process of consultation and management planning for Rutherford and Trafalgar Parks, and had a great time watching Megan Wraight's team identify relevant open space development opportunities. I must remember to chase more work of this type.

⁴ Highfield, R. 2002. *The Science of Harry Potter*. Penguin (don't bother)

⁵ See my 2001 and 2006 newsletters at www.greenaway.co.nz.

⁶ Fehr, E. Gächter, S. 2002. Altruistic Punishment in Humans. *Nature*. Vol 414. 10 Jan 2002.

⁷ Embarrassment Units

⁸ Winston, R. 2003. *The Human Mind*. Bantam Books