

In Groups We Shrink

Carol Tavris

After studying sociology and comparative literature at Brandeis, Carol Tavris (b. 1944) earned her PhD in social psychology at the University of Michigan. Tavris has worked as a freelance writer, taught in UCLA's psychology department, written for *Vogue*, *Harper's*, and *G.Q.*, and served as an editor for *Psychology Today*. She has published extensively in the field of psychology, with emphasis on emotions, anger, sexuality, and gender issues. She has taught at the New School for Social Research in New York City since 1983. Her works include *The Mismeasure of Woman* (1992), *Psychobabble & Biobunk: Using Psychology to Think Critically About Issues in the News: Opinions, Essays and Book Reviews* (2001), *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (2007). The essay printed here appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1991.

1 The ghost of Kitty Genovese would sympathize with Rodney King. Genovese, you may remember, is the symbol of bystander apathy in America. Screaming for help, she was stabbed repeatedly and killed in front of her New York apartment, and not one of the 38 neighbors who heard her, including those who came to their windows to watch, even called for help.

2 One of the things we find appalling in the videotape of King's assault is the image of at least 11 police officers watching four of their colleagues administer the savage beating and doing nothing to intervene. Whatever is the matter with them, we wonder.

3 Something happens to individuals when they collect in a group. They think and act differently than they would on their own. Most people, if they observe some disaster or danger on their own—a woman being stabbed, a pedestrian slammed by a hit-and-run driver—will at least call for help; many will even risk their own safety to intervene. But if they are in a group observing the same danger, they hold back. The reason is not necessarily that they are lazy, cowardly or have 50 other personality deficiencies; it has more to do with the nature of groups than the nature of individuals.

4 In one experiment in behavioral psychology, students were seated in a room, either alone or in groups of three, as a staged emergency occurred: Smoke began pouring through the vents. Students who were on their own usually hesitated a minute, got up, checked the vents and then went out to

report what certainly seemed like fire. But the students who were sitting in groups of three did not move. They sat there for six minutes, with smoke so thick they could barely see, rubbing their eyes and coughing.

5 In another experiment, psychologists staged a situation in which people overheard a loud crash, a scream and a woman in pain, moaning that her ankle was broken. Seventy percent of those who were alone when the "accident" occurred went to her aid, compared with only 40 percent of those who heard her in the presence of another person.

6 For victims, obviously, there is no safety in numbers. Why? One reason is that if other people aren't doing anything, the individual assumes that nothing needs to be done. In the smoke-filled room study, the students in groups said they thought that the smoke was caused by "steam pipes," "truth gas" or "leaks in the air conditioning"; not one said what the students on their own did: "I thought it was fire." In the lady-in-distress study, some of those who failed to offer help said, "I didn't want to embarrass her."

7 Often, observers think nothing needs to be done because someone else has already taken care of it, and the more observers there are, the less likely any one person is to call for help. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, 30 people watched for an hour and a half as a building burned to the ground before they realized that no one had called the fire department. Psychologists call this process "diffusion of responsibility" or "social loafing": The more people in a group, the lazier each individual in it becomes.

8 But there was no mistaking what those officers were doing to Rodney King. There was no way for those observers to discount the severity of the beating King was getting. What kept them silent?

9 One explanation, of course, is that they approved. They may have identified with the abusers, vicariously participating in a beating they rationalized as justified. The widespread racism in the Los Angeles Police Department and the unprovoked abuse of black people is now undeniable. A friend who runs a trucking company told me recently that one of her drivers, a 50-year-old black man, is routinely pulled over by Los Angeles cops for the flimsiest of reasons "and made to lie down on the street like a dog." None of her white drivers has been treated this way.

10 Or the observers may have hated what was happening and been caught in the oldest of human dilemmas: Do the moral thing and be disliked, humiliated, embarrassed and rejected. Our nation, for all its celebration of the Lone Ranger and the independent pioneer, does not really value the individual—at least not when the person is behaving individually and standing up to the group. (We like dissenters, but only when they are dissenting in Russia or China.) Again and again, countless studies have shown that people will go along rather than risk the embarrassment of being disobedient, rude or disloyal.

And so the banality of evil is once again confirmed. Most people do not behave badly because they are inherently bad. They behave badly because they aren't paying attention, or they leave it to Harry, or they don't want to rock the boat, or they don't want to embarrass themselves or others if they're wrong.

Every time the news reports another story of a group that has behaved mindlessly, violently and stupidly, including the inevitable members who are just "going along," many people shake their heads in shock and anger at the failings of "human nature." But the findings of behavioral research can direct us instead to appreciate the conditions under which individuals in groups will behave morally or not. Once we know the conditions, we can begin to prescribe antidotes. By understanding the impulse to diffuse responsibility, perhaps as individuals we will be more likely to act. By understanding the social pressures that reward groupthink, loyalty and obedience, we can foster those that reward whistle-blowing and moral courage. And, as a society, we can reinforce the belief that they also sin who only stand and watch.

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. What is Tavris's thesis? How does she support her position?
2. How does the psychologist's term for the behavior Tavris describes explain what actually happens?
3. How does Tavris imagine this condition will right itself?

WRITING FROM THE TEXT

1. Write about an incident that you observed or were a part of that confirms Carol Tavris's point.
2. Write about an incident that you observed or were a part of that shows an exception to Tavris's point.

CONNECTING WITH OTHER TEXTS

1. Read "Discrimination at Large" (p. 175) and argue that people's ridicule of fat people is often part of a group dynamic. Use Tavris's reasoning to show how people in groups sanction such ridicule. As part of your essay, consider how the group can work as a whole to ex-

King Curtis's Echo

Max Thayer

After being drafted into the Army in 1966 and serving for three years, Max Thayer (b. 1946) decided to move to Los Angeles to break into the movies. With no acting training or Hollywood connections, he began studying plays and books on acting, and he performed with experimental and street theater groups. When he joined the Screen Actors Guild in 1972, he changed his name from Michael to Max, after a character in Harold Robbins's novel *The Carpetbaggers*. Thayer has performed on stage in New York and Los Angeles and has appeared in numerous action movies shot in Hollywood and around the world. Neither a stuntman or martial-artist, Thayer credits his love of sports and his childhood experiences with ice hockey, baseball, football, basketball, boxing, and swimming for helping him in his film work. In addition to numerous B-movies, Thayer has had small background roles in *Pearl Harbor*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *Collateral Damage*, *American Gun*, *S.W.A.T.*, and *Terminator 3*. The following essay first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* in 2005.

1 I don't know what made me do it, but I'm glad, in a strange way, that
I did.

2 When I heard my neighbor call out "You can't park there," I knew what
was going on. Someone had pulled into our single-lane driveway, which
serves four apartments that sit atop a pawn shop and a Russian deli on Santa
Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood. When I heard a muffled response and
my neighbor's more urgent "No! Someone is coming. We need to keep that
space clear," I jumped up to look out my window.

3 Despite the no parking signs, deli customers routinely park in the mouth
of the driveway, blocking exit or entrance, though most of the time a simple
request to move is met with sheepish compliance. But today a man in his

30s, fit and full of himself, nonchalantly waved off the appeal and sauntered around the corner just as I leaned out the window and got off a "Hey!"

4 Maybe if I'd just kept my mouth shut I wouldn't have taken it personally. After all, just two minutes before, I had been sprawled out in my bedroom, windows wide open, enjoying a balmy Sunday morning leafing through the newspaper while monitoring the two football games in progress on TV. Absolute bliss.

5 My first bad move was slipping into a pair of flip-flops and trundling down to the landing to right this slight to my dignity. I wasn't going to yell, just walk up to him in the deli and murmur something along the lines of: "You were asked politely to move; would you please?"

6 When I turned the corner at the end of the driveway, Mr. Park Where I Want was striding away from the deli and toward me. Smugly self-assured and dressed in one of those velour warm-up suits, he was bouncing along as if he'd just won the lottery.

7 He smirked when we passed each other. I turned and retraced my steps as he approached his car. I pointed to the signs posted near the entrance. "In the future, no parking, OK?"

8 Our eyes met as he smirked again. "Caaalm down."

9 Calm down? "I'm calm, just don't park here."

10 At this point I should have kept on walking back to the funny papers and football.

11 "Caaalm down," he said again in a pat-on-the-head tone.

12 You know how annoying that is?

13 I gave him my best withering look. "It's real simple, no parking, *nyetski*, right?"

14 He grinned as he slid into his car. He offered up an unoriginal obscenity, followed by "low-life."

15 I felt my anger surge into a raging boil.

16 I proffered my middle finger, cocked and ready to see what Mr. Big Shot in His Big Mercedes wanted to do about it.

17 More grinning as he slowly backed out of the driveway, returning the salute.

18 That's when I lost it, spewing every unprintable phrase that welled up in my febrile brain. I questioned his courage, his sexual proclivities, his family, his—you know the drill.

19 And that's when he braked in the middle of the street, grin gone and in its place an icy stare.

20 At that movement, a car barreling around the corner blared its horn and we lost eye contact. He maneuvered out of the way and drove off.

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. How do Thayer's title and opening line capture reader interest? What other elements in his next two narrative paragraphs keep readers intrigued?
2. How does Thayer's description of himself before the confrontation contrast with his behavior when he "lost it"? How does this tirade affect "Mr. Park Where I Want"?
3. What aspect of Thayer's character surprises him and causes him to question, "Where had this venom come from? I had been ready to go to fist city with a stranger, for what?" (171).
4. What is relevant about Thayer's flashback to an earlier incident involving "monster sax player" King Curtis? What is significant about Thayer searching for the elusive sax player—and his "echo"?
5. Why is Thayer *thankful* for this encounter with the Russian deli customer, and what has he learned from it?

Blue Spruce

Stephen Perry

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While teaching creative writing—at Long Beach City College; University of California, Irvine; and the UCLA Extension Writers' Program—Stephen Perry (b. 1950) has published more than sixty-five poems in anthologies and in journals such as the *New Yorker*, *Yale Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Antioch Review*, and *Salmagundi*. Perry has also served as poetry consultant to the Disney Corporation—the only such consultant in the company's history. He is currently seeking a publisher for his collection of poems, *Homecoming*. Perry shares a "co-dependent" Web site with his author wife, Susan Perry, and invites readers to visit and interact with them at www.bunnyape.com.

Referring to "Blue Spruce," Perry reveals, "When I read this poem at poetry readings, I usually tell people that everything in the poem is true, except for the title. There were no blue spruces (that I know of) in the little town in Missouri where I set the poem. I just like the double pun on 'blue' and 'spruce.'" The poem was published in the *New Yorker* in 1991.

My grandfather worked in a barbershop
smelling of lotions he'd slap on your face,
hair and talc. The black razor strop

5 hung like the penis of an ox. He'd draw
the sharp blade in quick strokes over
the smooth-rough hide, and then carefully

over your face. The tiny hairs would gather
on the blade, a congregation singing
under blue spruce in winter,

10 a bandstand in the center of town
bright with instruments, alto sax, tenor
sax, tuba or sousaphone—the bright

oompah-pahs shaving the town somehow,
a bright cloth shaking the air
15 into flakes of silvering hair

floating down past the houses, the horses
pulling carriages past the town fountain,
which had frozen into a coiffure

20 of curly glass. My grandfather had an affair
with the girl who did their nails
bright pink, bright red, never blue,

perhaps as the horses clip-clopped on ice
outside his shop, his kisses
smelling of lather and new skin—

25 when she grew too big and round
with his child, with his oompah love,
with his bandstand love, with his brassy love,

and the town dropped its grace notes
of gossip and whispered hiss,
30 he bundled her out of town

with the savings which should have gone
to my mom. But how could you hate him?
My mother did, my father did,

and my grandmother, who bore his neglect.
35 When she was covered in sheets
at her last death,

he flirted with the nurses, bright
as winter birds in spruces
above a bandstand—

40 I'll always remember him in snow, a deep lather
of laughter, the picture
where he took me from my mother

and raised me high, a baby, into the bell
of his sousaphone, as if I were a note
45 he'd play into light—

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. List all the images that Perry uses to characterize the grandfather. Describe the resulting “portrait.”
2. Discuss the narrator’s perception of his grandfather and contrast it with the