

Assignment Week 4 – Offer 4 different examples of, and explain how, social groups maintain order

Yuval Noah Harari points out that humans can mobilise and coordinate massive groups effectively due to our ability to conceive and believe in 'common myths' (Harari, 2011, p. 27-36). The maximum number of individuals there can be in a group for it to be possibly governed purely by gossip and inter-personal relations is 150 (Harari, 2011, p. 29). But common myths – such as religion, or the concept of a nation and by extension the laws of a nation – allow people who would otherwise share little to nothing in common can peacefully co-exist and work towards a common goal (Harari, 2011, p. 27-36). Presumably indigenous groups would be no different and this is what we can seek to find from the Anthropological literature that I have examined. But from the Anthropological literature I have found there is also many different constructed social orders that have developed among social groups which all cause conformity to themselves to some degree – for them to function in the first place.

One aspect of society that appears to be regulated is that of human aggression. For instance, the Semai have a culture which totally encourages peaceability. They have an ethos of when confronted with aggression to either bend or flee (Sponsel, 2017, p. 31) – which comes from a worldview which perceives violence to be abnormal (Dentan, 2003, p. 170) and stupid, senseless and utterly terrifying for it (Sponsel, 2017, p. 31). They do not enforce their children to do anything – they merely expect them to learn from the examples of the grown-ups (Sponsel, 2017, p. 32). Furthermore, when the children are doing something the adults do not want them to, the adults will simply condition the children to not do things out of fear – they teach the children to be afraid and cautious (Dentan, 2003, p. 170). Some observers commented that ultimately this attitude and worldview to violence helps them tame and transcend the tensions and anger that they repress and hold up inside of them – they “...love and nurture their demonic spirit guides, of whom Thunder Lord is the greatest. (The) Semai imagine that, as they surrender to the demonic powers, those powers surrender to them (Dentan, 2008, p. 236). This is what helps stabilise their society and maintain their control over aggression.

Some societies do however maintain social control via several means of aggression. The Yanomami often use aggression to maintain control over their women (Chagnon, 1983, p. 112-113), where men would not only strike them with their hands and firewood, but even chop them with the sharp end of a machete or axe, or even shoot them with barbed arrows. Several men consider the occasional beating – regardless of performance – reasonably “just to keep her on her toes” (Chagnon, 1983, p. 113). Violence among the Yanomami could well be as a result of their cosmology which doesn't recognise women as proper human beings unlike the men (Chagnon, 1983, p. 95) – they were viewed as merely fruit that the men themselves picked. Or it could be from the fact that women are often at risk from being kidnapped during raids (Chagnon, 1983, p. 175). Yet they have no say whatsoever in the political marriages arranged between different tribes (Chagnon, 1983, p. 111).

From an economic perspective as well, different groups use different economic structures to maintain order. There are two main types on display here – on one side we have Immediate-Return societies and Delayed-Return Societies (many societies however may be somewhere between the two) (Woodburn, 1982, p. 432). Several societies manage to create social order through maintaining an egalitarian society – a social order where no one can attain any real authority and status over anyone else (Woodburn, 1982, p. 431). The !Kung for instance have a nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyle and this means that they have flexible choice of movement, allowing them to accomplish a rational distribution of people in relation to resources available at any particular time and to

segregate themselves easily from those that they have in conflict with themselves as well, without economic penalties (Woodburn, 1982, p. 435). The !Kung also have a strong cultural expectation of sharing to result in equity (or equality of outcome) – men are expected to be self-deprecating about their success and any one who boasts will likewise be met with scorn (Woodburn, 1982, p. 440). Furthermore, they have sanctions on the accumulation of personal possessions (Woodburn, 1982, p. 442). Ultimately the benefits that egalitarian societies have (from mutually reinforcing values and norms to ensure nobody has any more authority over anyone else) means many positive things. Their social groupings are flexible and constantly changing in composition, no one becomes dependent upon anyone and relationships involving two people would not become tied up in binding commitments and dependencies of the sort that are so familiar in delayed-return systems (Woodburn, 1982, p. 434). I would imagine people would be freer to express their own emotions and desires at any given time, even if they are not a totally antinomian society without any social prohibitions and rules.

Other societies however might have a more hierarchical system as their cultural construct. The Nuer represent status through the ownership of cattle (Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p. 14), which is what is mainly used as a form of currency within their culture (Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p.14-19). Cattle as a currency is how exogamous marriages are agreed to – families need cows to swap for wives (Evans-Pritchard, 1951, p. 58-59). Sharon E. Hutchinson reports how much the Nuer were absorbed in the care, exchange and sacrifice of their cattle (1996, p. 56) and how they were to them different to money – they found it bizarre that some `sterile` could be used as a value system unlike cattle (Hutchinson, 1996, p. 56). While cattle are used to determine who married who, the Nuer society also does share other features of acephalous societies – there is no chief head, but they are made up of differing segments, with primary segments being made up of a group of secondary segments and secondary segments being made of tertiary segments (Evans-Pritchard, 1940, p. 139). However, ensuring that cattle are involved in the arrangement of marriages is one way to ensure that families are stable enough to raise children in.

In conclusion I feel that much of the impetus for social obligation which results in a necessary degree of order comes from a culture deciding on certain boundaries and norms which to our eyes may appear peculiar and utterly arbitrary. And that just goes to show that humans seem to tend to fall into some degree of rules and norms even when they are not completely true. The observations of the varieties of the social constraints and `common myths` found among societies means that humans are not only hugely adaptable – but it would seem from a scientific perspective that moral arbitration and judgement from homo sapiens appears to have some limits and this has big implications for future discussions about morality and future cultural negotiation.

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