Undesirable Human Traits?

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Following authors like Sachs[1] and George Orwell, I have elsewhere[2] drawn attention to just how difficult it is to engage in any meaningful discussion of social policy when nothing is what it seems to be and words usually mean their opposites. More accessibly[3], I have underlined the importance of psychologists mapping and measuring the networks of external social forces which determine human behaviour every bit as strongly as gravity controls the movements of the planets and sailing boats because these so often lead us, despite our personal values, to, every day, do many things we know to be wrong.

However, as I have reflected on these things, I have gradually become aware that it is possible that many, if not most, human beings may possess a range of characteristics which predispose them to behave in ways which are not in the public interest (i.e. not in the interests of the survival of our species and thus not in their own interest or those of their children). I have penned this article to highlight some of these.

Adulation of Authority

One of the most frightening of these is our tendency to believe that whoever is in authority is basically well intentioned, committed to the public interest, and systematically evaluates the logic and effectiveness of proposals to tackle issues of public concern. The process I have in mind may be indicated (by no means entirely figuratively) as follows: Some guy rides up on his horse, kicks out the king of the castle, and installs himself. Amazingly, almost everyone then genuflects and promises to fight to the death for any cause he may espouse.

Hogan and his colleagues[4] have written about the "dark side of charisma" characteristic of many managers. Charming, poised, and "hail fellow well met", they, as archetypical psychopaths[5], are all too often willing to knife anyone who voices an alternative perspective and frequently destroy their organisations - and the lives of all who work in them - for the sake of personal gain. In a keynote speech to the Occupational Psychology Division of the British Psychological Society[6], Hogan made it clear that his analysis applied to "the world's greatest international terrorists" - Kissinger, Bush, Blair, and their likes[7]. In passing, Hogan also noted that most of those who somehow come to be described as "leaders" are more correctly characterised as "dominators".

Here, I want to pick up what might be called the "dark side of adulation": the apparently almost overwhelming predisposition to think well of authorities and accept what they say without question.

Most of the hundred-plus speakers who addressed the "G8 Alternatives"[8] meetings in Edinburgh in the summer of 2005, and most of the hundreds of thousands of people who joined the "make poverty history" marches associated with that event (and others like it), clearly thought that most of our "leaders" were well intentioned people who would not only be motivated by ethical and humanitarian considerations to reduce the millions of people who die each year as a result of the policies they pursue and to take steps to rectify the gross injustices (such as abuses of human rights in China and Palestine and by international companies like Nike and Monsanto) but would also actually be able to implement policies which would do so[9].

Not only do most people seem to be predisposed to think well of authority, they also seem to have an inordinate predisposition to believe that whatever policies are put forward by those authorities are likely to have been designed with the long-term public interest in mind, to be unwilling to examine the evidence for the effectiveness of those proposals, and to be willing to engage without protest, even enthusiasm, in whatever activities those authorities command[10]. And they do not just carry out orders: they set about inventing ever better ways of implementing the policies that are proposed – even the most inhumane ones … ranging from torturing minorities through imposing "the market process" (both between and within nations) to forcing children to attend destructive schools.

Tough Social Policy

But the fact that most people seem to have an inordinate predisposition to think well of authority does not seem to be the only problem. Most seem to be all too ready to acquiesce in, even advocate and support, "tough-minded" solutions to social problems[11]. "Crime" is to be tackled by introducing identity cards, arming the police, and imprisoning a higher proportion of the few who get caught for longer. It is not to be tackled by, for example, such things as examining what lies behind the categorisation of certain behaviours as "crime" (the word being widely applied to activities involving the infringement of laws forbidding trivial behaviour - such as smoking cannabis, gay and pay sex, and watching porno films - while not being applied to such things as the invention and implementation of a campaign to destroy the production of hemp as a competitor to synthetic fibre via the invention the word "marijuana" and the criminalisation of smoking it[12], gross extortion [as in the invention of a system whereby bankers can "lend" entirely fictitious money to the "Third World" at beyond-usurious rates of interest in order to appropriate their land, agricultural products, commodities and capital[13]], and the appropriation and destruction of the commons [the soils, the seas, and the atmosphere[14]]). Among the many ironies associated with this double talk, "law abidingness" is widely assumed to imply and involve an unwillingness to protest against the enaction of such laws!

At this point it may be appropriate to draw attention to some of the ways in which these processes play out in relation to education. There seems (to me!) to be an amazing acceptance (without protest) of the authoritarian notion that the goals of the "educational" system are to be decided by "authorities" (politicians and public servants) and not by parents - this despite the fact that it is widely recognised that parents are their children's most important educators and are, in reality, virtually the only people who nurture their children's most important competences (like self confidence, initiative, and the ability to communicate). Not only are the goals and procedures to be determined by "authorities", the misguided "educational" programmes to which children are to be subject are to be implemented by authorities (teachers) who have been selected for, among other things, their willingness to echo the views of authority, and monitored via "high stakes" testing which is unable to register the most important outcomes of the "educational" process - whether those outcomes be desired and desirable or undesired and undesirable[15].

In a similar way, it seems to be generally accepted that health is to be promoted by centrally decreed programmes such as mandatory immunisation (which kill and maim more than the epidemics from which they were supposed to protect us) and bans on smoking in public places (the effects of passive smoking being trivial in comparison with the effects of such things as alcohol consumption, the consumption of fast "foods", and "passive" pollution caused by cars and aircraft) - and not by such things as taking steps to reduce stress by, for example, redesigning living and working arrangements[16], moving buildings associated with journeys, and establishing appropriate human support networks[17].

I have shown elsewhere[18] that at the heart of the network of social feedback and control (best termed "socio-cybernetic") processes which result in the educational system failing to deliver the *educational* benefits most people want it to achieve lies a cluster of inappropriate beliefs about public management. As already indicated, these include acceptance of the view that authorities have the right to specify "universal" (undifferentiated) targets which all pupils are supposed to achieve and authoritarian control procedures.

Unacceptability of Experiment and Evolution

Numerous commentators from Smith and Mill onward have noted that the issues on which we somehow expect governments to decide, and on which "leaders" seem to have an inordinately strong wish to decide, are far too complex to be decided upon through any kind of bureaucratic process and that, as a result, government decisions are inevitably decisions taken by committees of ignoramuses. Those involved in the politico-bureaucratic process usurp managerial responsibility, preferring system-wide, mandatory, prescriptive action based on "common sense" (which, in practice, usually means ignorance) to evolution through experimentation, evaluation, public debate, and individual and group choice. My question is why there is so little public protest against this process? Why do we have such faith in the goodwill of authorities? Why do so few of us seem to have noticed that, far from being people who are committed to the long

term public interest, not only do these "leaders" tend to be people who are inordinately devoted to their own advancement irrespective of the cost to others, they also seem to be people who have somehow been selected and promoted for the role they play in a none-too-obvious sociological process which is not merely dedicated to the advance of what might loosely be termed "American capitalism" but which is actually, and more seriously, driving our species - and Gaia herself - toward extinction at an ever accelerating rate?

The Quest for Simplistic Moral Codes

These attitudes to authority seem to be associated with a second rather frightening human predisposition: The quest for a framework of authoritative rules to guide behaviour. I have in mind, not just such things as the amazing hold that fundamentalist religious beliefs seem to exert over many people, but also such things as a willingness to impose "democracy", economic systems, and particular sexual practices on others by force, and the seemingly extraordinary attraction of imposing unbelievably simplistic moralistic codes on others - codes which focus on such things as "no smoking" or "no sex with others of the same gender".

It's not just that people are born into e.g. fundamentalist religious groups that gain control over their thoughtways. We seem to have an inordinate predisposition to seek out and join such groups so that we can, for example, absolve ourselves from the responsibility for thinking for ourselves and behaving ethically in situations in which many complex ethical considerations come into play[19] and legitimise our predisposition to do such things as beat up our sons for homosexuality or our daughters for neglecting their families by doing school homework.

Intolerance of Diversity

But this frightening network of attitudes to authority seems to be accompanied by another, somewhat related, trait: an intolerance of diversity.

To return to education for an example, it is not simply that those who now dictate what is to happen in schools have seemingly somehow been selected and promoted for the role they play in advancing what might loosely (and incorrectly) be termed American capitalism but also that these authorities seem to be able, altogether too easily, to orchestrate attacks on diversity. In the end, I have come to wonder whether this intolerance of diversity might not also be somehow deeply rooted in human nature.

This intolerance-of-diversity is of very great interest psychologically. Having collected huge samples of gall wasps, Kinsey[20] noted that they were all different and that the variation between them could not be summarised in terms of a small number of "dimensions". When he turned his attention to human sexual behaviour[21] he noted the same thing. Sexual behaviour was enormously varied. That variation could not be adequately captured using a small number of reductionist "scales" – running, for example, from "Masculine" to "Feminine". Some men wanted to *be* women. Others were

enormously attracted to men. For others it was the personal sensual experience that was of overwhelming importance - yet the things people enjoyed doing (or having done to them) were extraordinarily varied and did not "hang together" in the manner required to substantiate a claim that they formed an internally consistent "scale". What's more, these dispositions were not even integrated within individuals. People who enjoyed bathing in love and esteem might also enjoy anonymous "wild" "animal" experiences. Given this huge variance, very many people found many of the, hitherto more or less secret, pleasures and activities of others abhorrent. But this abhorrence of the behaviour of others - much of it, in different ways, in conflict with the proscriptions of religious (and therefore political) authority - was not the main reason why Kinsey's funding was terminated. This had more to do with the power of current scientific paradigms enforced by another kind of authority, in this case "experts" on (social) scientific methodology. Kinsey set out to document the vast diversity in human sexual behaviour. As we have seen, that variation could not be summarised using a small number of "scales" or "dimensions". Yet that was exactly what those who reviewed his work for his sponsors asserted that he must do if his work was to be considered of scientific merit and therefore fundable.

As it happens, virtually all moves toward the development of an adequate framework for thinking about individual differences - that is to say for discussing human diversity - have been stifled for similar reasons[22].

Distrust in the Goodwill and Integrity of Others

It seems that nothing grabs the minds of the masses - leading them to sign up for everything from the Gestapo to the Red Guards, to participate in religious inquisitions and campaigns of genocide, and to attack on gays, porno watchers, and smokers - like simplistic thinking about "evil" people - especially when those views have been promulgated by some "authority" and amplified through the media. As already mentioned, it is not just that people want to follow orders. Hundreds of thousands of people set about inventing and implementing "better" ways of seeking out, persecuting, and torturing renegades, Jews, infidels, and, it seems, almost any out group that can be dreamt up, not for any financial reward or other commendation, but for the satisfaction of having exorcised the evil to the best of their ability. And they clamour for the forceful imposition on others, not only of religious practices and "moral" codes, but also such things as assent to almost meaningless assertions about societal management systems - such as "royalty", "communism", "democracy", and "the market".

A Product of a Conspiratorial Plot on the Part of Authorities or a Result of Groupthink?

One might be forgiven for cynically thinking that many such campaigns have been orchestrated by those who hold real power in society to divert attention from more important issues – like the ever increasing world management by the international banking community, or the destruction of the planet by intensive agriculture, international transport, and manufacturing. One might likewise be forgiven for thinking

that they might be the outcome of some as yet poorly understood sociocybernetic processes. But my point is that they also seem, potentially, to have deep roots in human nature that we neglect at our peril.

Of course, nothing is entirely clear. It is, for example often not at all clear to me whether it has been the power-oriented quest on the part of authority to regulate and control or people's unwillingness to trust their fellows to act responsibly that has led to the seemingly relentless rise of regulative bureaucracy which progressively usurps managerial and personal responsibility. I well remember the appointment of the first Director of Education in my home town. People asked "What is he to do?". Before that, there had just been head teachers and teachers. But the outcome of the process of which his appointment was but the first step has been the introduction of a huge bureaucracy made up of committees, advisory services, and directives accompanied by a "quality control" and regulatory system which transforms the jobs of head teachers and teachers into administering tests and filling in forms. My question is: "Where did the demand for the appointment come from?". Was it simply part of an international fashion - like the extraordinary campaign against smoking[23] - or did it stem from the conspicuous fact that some head teachers and teachers were much worse than others and the belief that the appointment of a Director would bring them all up to the standards of the best?

Conclusion

Although it is possible to explain a great deal of undesirable human behaviour by reference to such things as social forces which deflect people from well-intentioned social action, it would seem that there is a very real possibility that much of it is strongly determined by some deep seated psychological dispositions. These would seem to merit more serious study than they have received in the past.

Endnotes

1 Sachs, 1982
2 Raven, 1997
3 Raven, 1995, 2000
4 Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990
5 In the sense in which the term is used by Hare, eg 1980.
6 Hogan, 2006
7 For an account of Kissinger's antics see eg: BBC (2006) *The Trials of Henry Kissinger*. BBC Four, 3 April, 1.05-2.25am. May also be an earlier, printed, document. For extensive evidence that such concerns and behaviours are characteristic of political "leaders" rather than an exception see Dean (2006).
8 http://www.webarchive.org.uk/tep/12038.html WOULD BE BETTER TO GIVE A SITE WITH THE PROGAMME IF CAN FIND IT. These meetings were organised with the intention of generating alternative policies for world management to those being advocated by the leaders of the world's richest countries - who were, at the time, meeting in the nearby town of Gleneagles.

9 In reality, as I have shown elsewhere (Raven, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2004, Raven & Navrotsky, 2001), policies based on "common-sense" are typically negated by the social forces mentioned above. As a result, (i) G8 "leaders" would not know where to begin; (ii) anything they did do would almost certainly fail; (iii) most of the suggestions made at the G8A meetings were equally useless. (Worse hardly anyone addressed the central question of how to run our world in such a way that our species and the planet would have any chance of survival – that is to say, what an alternative planetary management system to that represented by the G8 would look like. [See Raven 2006 for more detail]).

10 A by-product of this process seems to be the, often vehemently endorsed, belief that one should concur with whatever policies "democratically elected" leaders put forward … and, perhaps still more disturbingly, whatever policies (usually promoted by pressure groups) have been endorsed by majority vote at mass assemblies in which contributions from participants are reduced to two minute sound bites from preselected speakers - a procedure which precludes all meaningful discussion.

11 It may be thought that I should have referred here to earlier work in this area stemming from work on "The Authoritarian Personality" by such authors as Adorno (1950) and Eysenck (1954) on the one hand and Almond and Verba (1963) and Inkeles (1974) on the other. [More recent work has been summarised by Jost et al (2003) and Dean (2006)]. However, my purpose here is not to explore individual differences in such traits but to highlight the potential importance of some *general* human predispositions which *many* people seem to exhibit and to suggest that these merit more attention than they have received in the past. Thus, in our research into Political Culture in Ireland, we found that no less than 93% of the population strongly agreed with the statement that "What we need here is a good, strong, leader whose decisions cannot be questioned" (Raven et al 1976, Raven 1980)

12 Herer (1994)

13 Raven, 1995

14 Privatisation of water "services", for example, turns out to involve nothing less than the privatisation of the rain.

15 Raven, 1994

16 The greatest single expenditure in the US is on tranquilisers to ameliorate the effects of stress at work.

17 A series of Quality of Life studies (e.g. Marks et al (2006); Lane (1991) have shown, both intra- and inter-nationally that these are much more important determinants of quality of life and health than material possessions and formal health care.

18 Raven, 1994

19 This predisposition has been discussed at some length by Fromm, 2001.

20 Jones, 2005.

21 Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948.

22 This issue merits a paper in its own right. All that can be done here is to hint at some of the issues.
The range of problems can be easily exposed via the following "thought experiment". Most discussions of human diversity - individual differences - in psychology proceed on the assumption that these are to be described and discussed in terms of a limited number of internally-consistent dimensions. But ask yourself where biologists would

have got to if they had attempted to describe all the variation between plants and animals in terms of 1(g), 5 (Big 5), or 16 (16 PF) "dimensions", then sought to reduce the variations in their environments to 10 "dimensions", and then investigate the relationship between plants and their habitats using multiple regression techniques. The implications which follow from these observations can be interestingly illustrated by further reference to Kinsey's work.

Like many other scientists (e.g. Galileo), Kinsey found himself dealing with a topic of the greatest importance to human happiness and well being but in relation to which there were endless pronouncements by religious authorities on behalf of God, endless legalized proscriptions and prescriptions associated with horrendous punishments, an almost total lack of information on the consequences of alternatives, and entrenched hegemonic "scientific" views endorsed by scientists whose prestige depended on maintaining those positions. And when it came to the question of the sources of this variance – its heritability – (expressed in such statements as "gays are born that way") he encountered a complete lack of appreciation of the relationship between genetic characteristics and environment that are so conspicuous to any biologist worth the name. Variation in appropriate aspects of the environment can always transform the expression of a genetic characteristic. But they cannot transform a given specimen into a different kind of being.

It is perhaps easiest to illustrate the way this last observation plays out in psychology by referring to our experiments with the nurturance of "Achievement motivation" and our studies of the way in which multiple high-level competencies are nurtured in some homes and schools (see Raven & Stephenson, 2001 for a summary).

At the heart of our model of competence (Raven & Stephenson, 2001) lies the notion that, out of a vast number of potential motivational predispositions, individuals are born with only a few - and these are relatively stable over a lifetime. The task of transforming one into another is as difficult as the task of changing one species into another. Nevertheless a great deal can be done to nurture or stunt these predispositions, just as one can lead plants to blossom and grow (or otherwise).

What our "n. Ach." development programmes show is there are two components in the dramatic changes that can be brought about. One consists of value-clarification: some people stop trying to be businessmen if they don't like the look of what they learn from the research literature. But the remainder, having got some of their scruples out of the way, can release enormous energy into doing what they like doing and so become better at it. They exercise and develop the components of competence required to translate their predispositions into effect. (The process is illustrated more generally in Raven and Stephenson, 2001.)

It follows that Kinsey was right to assert that the predisposition to engage certain kinds of sexual behaviour is inborn and relatively unchangeable … but that a great deal can nevertheless be done to nurture or stunt that predisposition.

Kinsey's concern to map human diversity as a first step toward finding ways of summarizing and studying it is reflected in Spearman's writings on individual differences. He wrote that:

> "Every normal man, woman, and child is … a genius at something … It remains to discover at what … This must be a most difficult matter, owing to the very fact that it occurs in only a minute proportion of all possible abilities. It certainly

cannot be detected by any of the testing procedures at present in current usage.
But these procedures are capable, I believe, of vast improvement".

Despite this clear statement, neither the transformation in psychometric methods nor the mapping exercise which would follow from these observations have ever been carried out.

When one asks *why* Spearman's comments were ignored and *why* there was so much opposition to Kinsey's work, one encounters a range of explanations at different levels.

But, regardless of the particular components of the explanation on which one chooses to focus, what is most important is that *social forces over-rode both logic and individual priorities and values*. It follows that *human behaviour is not mainly determined by internal, individualistic, characteristics but by external social forces akin to those that control the behaviour of the planets, falling apples, and sailing boats*.

Why have psychologists so rarely set out to map and measure these social forces? One reason is that the preoccupations of psychologists have themselves largely been determined by those who hold power in the profession - by people who determine textbook content and the award research grants - because of their espousal of current conventional wisdom (cf. Kuhn, 1970). But, as has happened so often in the past, religious and political authorities have been terrified of what might happen if peoples' (diverse) talents were unleashed.

Beyond these theoretical and methodological deficiencies and fears lies yet another barrier to the development of appropriate ways of thinking about and studying diversity which can also be illustrated by reference to Kinsey's work. Kinsey was confronted by strident proclamations about the long-term consequences of prescribed and proscribed action which had never been empirically investigated.

The problem is that the collection of appropriate evidence runs into exactly the same difficulties as handling variety and experiment in the first place.

Meaningful study of the consequences of alternatives presupposes the existence of sub-communities living in different ways in the first place. And then systematic documentation of *all* the personal and social, short- and long-term, intended and unintended consequences of each of the options. ("Personal and Social" because what is good for the individual may be bad for society; "short- and long-term" because what is good in the short-term may be bad in the long-term.) And for evolution to occur the resulting information needs to be made public so that people can make meaningful choices between the options instead of upward in a bureaucratic hierarchy to authorities making decisions binding on all.

It may be thought that current moves toward the study of "what works" in connection with "evidence based" health care and education represent moves in this direction. But this is far from being the case.

One again there are many problems at different levels. But the kind of evaluation just mentioned can be captured by the term "comprehensive evaluation": study of *all* the short and long term consequences … Such an approach is at loggerheads with the current image of science and the preoccupations of those entrenched in a single-variable reductionist "science" carried out using measuring instruments of demonstrated construct validity. But what to do when there are no relevant measures

and when long term social consequences can only be inferred rather than documented? Current prescriptions by the great and the good lead directly into the trap of "arbitrary measurement" - the deployment of off-the-shelf measures which are incapable of revealing most of the important outcomes. The results are every bit as unethical as following the prescriptions of priests (Raven, 1997, 2000): In education *most* pupils talents are stunted and remain unrecognized and unavailable to them when seeking employment (Raven, 1977, 1994; Raven & Stephenson, 2001) … and the talents that the educational system most seriously suppresses are the very talents required to change the way we live in such a way that our species will have a chance of survival (see sources cited above). The issue is more complex. It involves asking: "What works in what ways for whom?".

23 This employs advertising portraying claimed effects that would be instantly condemned by the advertising standards authority and curtailed in the trade descriptions act if it came from a non-governmental source. Why do we permit our authorities to require manufacturers to print "smoking kills" on every packet of cigarettes … and, even more, to outlaw smoking in public places (accompanied by grossly misleading advertising) … when we do not insist that every bottle of beer alerts drinkers to the fact that "drinking kills", and proclaim slogans like "cars kill", "eating kills", "air transport murders millions", "hospital induced illnesses kill", "immunisation kills", "sex kills", "fertilisers kill", "pesticides kill", "nuclear waste kills", and "the slave labour employed to produce these clothes and carpets has resulted in the deaths of thousands" … Why have our authorities to singled out this one - in comparison with the others I have mentioned, entirely trivial - act of self destruction for public attention? One could be forgiven for thinking that it performs some diversionary function … directing attention away from the much more important. But the question remains: "Why have we allowed them to do so?".

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