

## PREFACE: IN KATZ'S DELI

Much of the 1989 Rob Reiner movie *When Harry Met Sally* now seems more than a little sugary. This tale of dating and friendship among Manhattan's middle class trumpets its moral almost as loudly as its plot twists, as Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan) meet and mate and remeet (as friends) and so on, until the inevitable final reunion. That said, the movie contains one of the more memorable scenes of romantic comedy. As they're sitting in a Lower East Side delicatessen, the topic of female orgasms comes up, and Harry tells Sally that no woman has ever faked one with him. How does he know? Sally asks. He just knows, Harry responds. Sally then shows him—and the rest of the deli's clientele—just how wrong he is.

What happens after that is what lies at the heart of our book. At the next table is a woman of what is politely known as “a certain

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age,” who says to the waiter, “I’ll have what she’s having.” Such a simple phrase, and yet “What she’s having” signifies humankind’s amazing ability for social learning. We learn from those around us, from those around those around us, and on outward, both in time and space, to people whom we’ll never meet and people long dead. “What she’s having” is what this book is all about: how social learning shapes human behavior at multiple levels, from individuals to communities to populations. Without grasping the importance of “What she’s having,” no map of human behavior is complete.

We are certainly not the first to publish a book on human behavior. From Gabriele Tarde’s *The Laws of Imitation* in the nineteenth century and Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* of the 1930s, to Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* and Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s *Nudge*, our thirst for science about ourselves is insatiable. We can’t get enough of easily digested information about why we do the things we do. Politicians, policymakers, and business leaders are particularly keen on getting us to behave the way they want us to.

Wherever we seek to shape behavior, it’s become clear just how difficult it is to bring about change. For every widely adopted piece of shiny technology such as the iPod, most marketing campaigns fail to attract even modest attention. Corporations usually fail to change their employees’ behavior, and democratic governments usually fail to change citizens’ behavior. Of the billions of dollars of our (retirement) money spent on mergers and acquisitions, most reduce shareholder value as mutually hostile employees fail to deliver the promised synergies. Many of the challenges we face, from the fallout of the global financial crisis to combating climate change, are as

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much social as they are technological: we need a better map of how collective human behavior works.

Part of our myopia is inherited from the Enlightenment and classical economic theory, epitomized by the “rational-choice” model, often more wishful gospel than empirical truth. The central thrust of the new “behavioral economics” so beloved by politicians is that we are far from being rational agents who think and act according to what we calculate to be in our own best interests. Most of the time we make mistakes and act in surprisingly irrational ways. Our minds are full of biases and errors, and our thinking is lazy and shorthanded—when we can be bothered to think at all.

Behavioral economics has improved the map in important ways. So has evolutionary psychology, a discipline that explores how human brains, biologically adapted to a very different Pleistocene world, cope with the one we live in today. This explains a few things. Half an hour on New York’s gridlocked streets or in a London pub will show just how our “caveman” roots can surface. Likewise, our bodies are bloated from the glut of sweet and fatty foods our ancestors were bound to seek out.

But neither of these two corrective projects, behavioral economics or evolutionary psychology, goes far enough. Both avoid the obvious fact that humans are, first and foremost, social creatures. Yes, we can be lazy thinkers, and yes, we have Pleistocene brains, but a large part of our success during the Pleistocene and since then is attributable to our doing what we do with those around us, to learn from and influence each other so naturally that we hardly notice it. We use the brains of others to think for us and as a place to store knowledge about the world; almost everything we know and do

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involves shared knowledge from past and present people—billions of them by now. To understand human behavior, we need to move from the “me” perspective to the “we” perspective.

Why does any of this matter? Philosophically, it matters because—as Steven Pinker argued in *Blank Slate*—working from false assumptions about people is bad for business and politics and bad for scholarship. Practically, it matters because our social inheritance underlies modern human life in a huge, increasingly interconnected population of people to learn from, and an enormous oversupply of choices in our lives.

Four centuries ago, amateur astronomers changed forever how we saw the cosmos and our place within it. We believe that something similar is happening with the current explosion of research on human social influence and cultural evolution, fueled by the widespread popularity of “social” connective media such as phones, social-networking platforms, and the Internet as a whole. This book attempts to describe a new map of human behavior that pulls together this learning. To build it, we present experimental and real-world examples and adopt different perspectives, depending on the issue. We zoom out from the individual in a box who does a few tricks, to people influencing each other in pairs or in small social groups, to the behavioral complexities characteristic of larger groups. As we move up in scale, we consider ideas, behavior, and social practices. We use the notion of different landscapes for cultural evolution, starting with assumptions about individuals in more predictable, smooth, and static social landscapes and then moving on to populations in more rugged, unpredictable, and dynamic social landscapes. But all the time, our map encompasses the abil-

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ity of our species to learn from its peers: to “have what she’s [or he’s] having.”

This is far more than a descriptive or theoretical exercise. Our ambition is to provide you with a practical and usable map to help you navigate your way through the complex world of human behavior and—if your ambition is to change it—to do so with greater hope of success. Some of what we have to say will be familiar to social scientists, but we’ve tried to present a new and practical synthesis, while expressing our appreciation along the way for the sheer elegance and impact of the subject.

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