

***EXPERIMENTS IN  
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY:***

***SELECTED JOURNALS FROM MY ADVENTURES  
WITH PROFESSOR P. J. EMPIRICUS***

***BY***

***ALAN AUGUST***

***FINAL PAPER  
FOR DR. YILI XU***

One balmy day in December, while on safari in the Okavango Delta, I began to shiver and shake. Professor Pthaddeus James Empiricus, the internationally-distinguished social psychologist who had generously taken time off from his knotty experiment on the nature of neckties to join me on safari, looked at me and crumpled his lips.

"How can you be shivering?" he said. "It's a warm, pleasant day in the African summer. You haven't caught the *Bilharzia*, have you?"

"Certainly not," I replied. "I haven't been anywhere near the water. I'm afraid my quaking is not from any foreign disease; I have a final paper to write in social psychology, you see, and it's making me twitch."

"Twitch?" said the Professor, snickering. "There's no need to twitch. All you have to do is think, make some notes, and then write!"

"But Professor!" I protested. "I'm not methodical and calculating and logical, like you."

"Methodical, calculating, and logical? You make me sound like a murderous mathematician!"

"What I mean is, I'm an English major. I study social psychology for the ideas, for the insights it brings to human nature, for the 3 credit hours I get for successful completion."

"I see," said Pthaddeus, twirling a finger through his curly hair. Then his eyes opened wide and a keen grin brightened his face. "I have it!" he said. "We'll take you on a different kind of safari. A safari into the world of human interaction. I'll spare no expense—the world will be our laboratory! You'll keep journals of what you learn, and by the end of the trip, you'll have enough social psychological wisdom for a thousand finals! This would be acceptable to your professor, wouldn't it?"

"I think so," said I, "as long as the journals contain some substantial content, demonstrating some of the principles we've covered in class, applying them, and thinking critically about them."

"Done, done, and done!" the Professor said, writing the goals of the paper into a fat little notebook. "We'll cover it all. Now pack your bags, because the trip begins tomorrow!"

I was flabbergasted by the Professor's proposal and thoroughly flattered by the invitation. After making sure my newt-sitter could feed "Gingrich" for an extra month, I took leave of my safari group and set sail with the Professor at once.

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Day 1—*Somewhere on the Atlantic—A dubious discussion on the nature of social psychology*

A waiting-woman stood in the doorway of the Professor's cabin. "Will there be anything else, Professor?"

"No, Elsa, that is all."

The Professor sipped his tea, and we continued our chat by the fireplace.

"Now," said the Professor, "there are many social psychologists all over the world using tens of millions of dollars in research grants to conduct thousands of experiments on human social behavior—why?"

"That's a broad question," I said. "It could be that, since the 18<sup>th</sup>-century enlightenment, people have felt that everything can be explained by science. So naturally, people began attempting to explain social behavior scientifically. Maybe social scientists have felt they could be to the world of human behavior what Newton and Einstein are to the field of physics. Or maybe curious people noticed patterns and structures in their interactions with others and simply wanted to test and expand their theories in a more methodical, formal way. It could be that, by collaborating with colleagues and producing redundant, puffed-up reports for their paymasters, social psychologists feel they are making legitimate contributions to society. Then again, it could be that, by studying human behavior, we might make the world a safer place and might save ourselves from killing each other off in a great war. It could be all of these; it could be none of these; I don't know—why does anybody do anything?"

As I was speaking, the Professor had grown increasingly amused, and as soon as I had finished, he burst out, "Precisely! That is precisely the problem with the entire 'science' of social psychology. The 'why' of human behavior is an extraordinarily nebulous equation, a foggy triple-function of individual cognition, biological instincts, and social interaction; as your own professor has no doubt pointed out to you, behavior varies widely across culture and time—and, like anything, there may not be a single comprehensive theory for human behavior—it may depend on how you look at it. Of course, subjectivity is absolutely objectionable to science, so we shan't speak much more on that—otherwise, where would we be?"

"Interestingly enough," the Professor continued, "there are several significant (though flawed) theories that have emerged. And, in responding to

my question about why social psychologists study human social behavior, you somehow managed to integrate all five of them into your answer!”

“I did?”

“Allow me to explicate: *Role theory* states that a person conforms to role-specific norms prescribed by a group. Your idea that people naturally began to study human behavior scientifically during the enlightenment suggests that people were instinctively subscribing to the prescribed norms of the day, thus acting out a role. *Reinforcement theory*, a second important perspective, argues that people behave to maximize rewards and minimize punishment. If social psychologists desire to become the Newton or Einstein of their field, like you said, they are motivated by the reward of elite intellectual status and gaining an immortal chair at history’s table of Most Respectable Men. Now, your suggestion about curious people observing their surroundings and desiring to elaborate upon their theories could well be used to support *cognitive theory*, which insists people are not mere objects that act only by reacting to events, but that people have internal cognitive structures which allow them to analyze their surroundings and make reasoned, principled decisions and conclusions. Your unique response that social psychologists might be motivated by the meaning they derive from collaborating and producing—ahem—reports (by the way, there are many studies that are neither redundant nor puffed-up, including a few that I’ve worked on myself) reminds me of the *symbolic interaction theory*, which says that human social behavior evolves out of human interaction. Finally, the notion that our subject has some grander purpose for the human race, like saving our species from self-annihilation, has a taste of the *evolutionary theory* in it, that perspective being that, as biological organisms, all our behavior is ultimately to ensure the replication of DNA. So, you see? Even as social psychologists study human social behavior, their behavior is subject to the object they study. Perhaps that’s one of the difficulties of the field, and of physics, for that matter, and of all science. Ever tried to smell your own nose?”

After this talk I felt more dizzy than a wildly abused yo-yo. The Professor is raising more questions than he’s answering, and I am having serious doubts about whether or not this whole project is a good idea. But I am already aboard the Professor’s ship, adrift somewhere in the middle of the wavy ocean. The project is afoot, and I have no time to lose; Professor P. J. Empiricus, I pray you, teach me something I can use!

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Day 4—*Parrots, a leak, and a giant wave—A lesson in socialization*

“*Squawk! One move, and I’ll blow you all to smithereens!—Squawk!*”

The Professor was a big fan of action films, and he had been teaching his parrot his favorite Arnold Schwarzenegger lines. I must admit the parrot had a keen ear for Schwarzenegger's deadpan Austrian dialect.

"Good, Arnold." The Professor fed the parrot a bit of oatmeal cookie, then nibbled some himself. "Isn't it marvelous," the Professor said, "what extraordinary feats we animals can accomplish with a little socialization!"

I took some offense to this remark. "Socialization is for the birds," I said. "I'm no parrot, spitting back everything that's taught me. I can think for myself."

"Well just remember this," said the Professor, "—that, if it wasn't for society, if you had been born on an island and left there to fend for yourself, you would die, first of all. But even if you lived, you would grow up to be worse off than a monkey, because at least they have socialization that teaches them how to cope with their environment. We are only as advanced as our methods of socialization. It is the transmission of our civilized behavior that keeps us afloat in the present and propels us toward a more respectable future!"

Apparently I had hit upon one of the Professor's tender nerves, of which he had many.

"Okay," I admitted, "*social learning*—that is, learned attitudes and behavior from external sources—is important."

"Then consider the *developmental* perspective," said the Professor. "Humans (or most of us, anyway) have highly advanced innate capacities that determine our behavior. Research shows that we are naturally equipped with many cognitive structures, like language syntax and number lines. When we're babies, we achieve bladder control; when we're toddlers, we achieve the psychological maturity to interact meaningfully with others; when we're teens, sex hormones kick in. Life is a highly instinctive affair, fueled by the periodic release of internal chemicals."

"But that's nurture and nature explaining behavior— isn't there any room for individual conscious thought, or free will? Are we all just parrots?"

"Not parrots," answered the professor, "if you consider the *interpretive* perspective, which says socialization occurs through interaction. It is not purely imitative, but a *reproductive process*, where we are constantly reinterpreting meaning and expressing it in different ways. Like progressing from the ornate Bach to the merry Mozart to thunderous Beethoven to rainy Debussy, and so on from there. Is there free will? Are there absolute values like the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that our intellect can discern and choose to conform to? Does life, after all, have meaning?"

Just as the Professor was beginning to delve into his answer, Elsa ran in with bad news: the ship had sprung a leak, and we needed to come ashore for

repair. The Professor appeared undaunted by this, confident that we were in the vicinity of the remote jungle-island of Mujumbawa. One of his colleagues had recently gone there to study the native population, and he thought we might meet up with him.

“This will be a perfect opportunity to observe social psychology in a natural setting,” the Professor said.

On the way to the island, Elsa, the Professor’s hired captain and waiting-woman, took charge. She ordered the Professor to the helm and told me to bucket out the incoming water while she made preparations for the repair.

Besides feeling concern over our sinking ship, I felt jarred by the sudden shift in the ship’s hierarchy. I was used to perceiving the Professor as the leader of our expedition and having Elsa wait on me; now we were both waiting on Elsa, but the immediacy of our predicament put us all in the same boat. I later learned that this feeling was an example of *role discontinuity*, a phenomenon that often arises when an individual’s identity in a new role contradicts a previous role.

As we approached the island, a large wave nearly tipped us over, but soon the Professor regained control. “You see, boy?” he said, delighting in his mastery of the wave, “Here’s a fine instance of *role acquisition*. I’ve never been a captain in my life, but I’m learning as I go. Socialization is adaptation, and it continues as long as we live!”

I was happy that the Professor had adapted as quickly as he did—otherwise, I would not be here to tell the tale.

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Day 4 (cont.’d)—*Encounter with Dr. Calamaran; Mujumbawa chieftain; rescued from above—the heart of Kohlberg’s model*

Mujumbawa at twilight was thick with tall, leafy trees, plants, and humidity. The shore was infested with clouds of gnats and other bugs. Birds and insects chirped nonstop—the whole island was humming with life.

Elsa stayed with the boat to make the repairs while the Professor and I went off in search of his colleague, Dr. Calamaran, and the native Mujumbawans.

Pressing into the darkening forest, I was increasingly afraid of all that I could not see. At last we came upon a clearing, where two little Mujumbawan children were play-hunting by throwing small spears at a heavy gourd. The Professor pointed this out as an example of *anticipatory socialization*, because the children in their natural play were gaining experience for their future role as hunters.

Once the gourd rolled near us, and the Professor kicked it back to them. They smiled at him, then went back to their game.

“Odd,” said the Professor, “That gourd felt heavy, as if there were a weight inside.”

I looked at the gourd more closely and was horrified to recognize it as—a human head! The Professor knew it immediately as the head of Dr. Calamaran. We started to back out and run, but suddenly spears were at all angles of our necks. A sharp, deep voice barked foreign commands at the Mujumbawan soldiers. The spears were lowered, and we were escorted under tight guard to their home base.

“That’s a good sign,” the Professor whispered as we walked.

“What?”

“Didn’t you notice? The Mujumbawans have an authority structure which they obey to maintain social order. That means they’re operating at least at Stage 4 of Kohlberg’s *model of moral development*.”

I was amazed that the Professor could have social psychology on his mind at a time like this.

We followed our captors into the heart of the island, where we found the tribal chieftain waiting for us inside a *Starbucks Coffee*.

I wouldn’t have imagined *Starbucks* had a franchise in the heart of this remote African island, but I can certainly vouch for their double-mocha latte.

The chief was a blinking, age-shrunk man with a sage white beard, a pointy, knit cap, and a gnarled staff as high as he was. He told us we had nothing to worry about because the Mujumbawans respected the rights of others—

“Stage 5,” the Professor whispered to me.

—and that they followed universal ethical principles as dictated by their god, Jobumba.

“Stage 6!” the Professor said and winked his eye, as if to signal we were home free.

“And Jobumba tells us,” said the chieftain, “that she has chosen you, as the 5,000<sup>th</sup> visitors to our island, to be diced into pieces and offered up as a stew in her honor!”

Now the Professor and I were very nervous. The Mujumbawans operated on the highest level of Kohlberg’s moral scale, but what good was the scale when their morals were about to destroy us?

We were forced at spear point face down onto wide rock slabs that were to serve as chopping blocks. The chieftain said a few words of praise to Jobumba, and the machete was about to come down and slice us to bits, when suddenly, a voice from above called out, “*One move and I’ll blow you all to*

*smithereens!*—it was Arnold, the parrot! All the villagers, not seeing the parrot but thinking some hero had come to rescue us, scattered fearfully into the woods, and we were free men.

“You see?” said the Professor, dusting himself off. “You never know when a little parrot-socialization will come in handy. It seems our noble savages didn’t have the high principles that we thought. They appeared to be at a Stage 6, but when their principles were threatened with punishment, they backed down. Because their beliefs weren’t *internalized*, they were still subject to the fear of punishment, and their Kohlberg value slides from the top, 6, all the way to the bottom, 1. The lesson is, the Kohlberg value is difficult to measure; we can never be sure what others’ motives are, much less our own. Then, too, those motives may change in an instant. On any given day, most of us probably enact every level of Kohlberg’s model—the horror!—how naïve I was to think the model was so graduated and constant, as it’s usually portrayed!”

All this the Professor said as we stood in the empty village, where at any minute our hostile hosts could return. A kind of pensive madness had overtaken him and he wouldn’t budge from the spot. Once I had succeeded in reminding him of the urgency of the situation, however, we made furtive haste back to our ship, where we found Elsa ready to sail. We hoisted anchor and made a safe getaway, and I’ll die happy if I never see the jungle-island of Mujumbawa again!

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Day 12—*Marrakech; market confusion; the lost Americans—A lesson in social perception*

Flutes and drums, people and heat—these were my first impressions of the markets of Marrakech. We docked in Casablanca yesterday and cameled down to this most famous of open-market cities. The Professor said it would be good for me to observe people in dense crowds; besides, he was shopping for some fine hand-woven carpets.

We found ourselves in the *Jemma l-Fna*, a populous market where one could buy an amazing and colorful variety of goods and services for the right price. There was an infinite deal of haggling going on, and soon I became dizzied by the noisy mass of confusion.

While the Professor was shopping, I got caught up in the various dazzling entertainments about the square. The snake-charmers charmed me; the singers entranced me with the power of their crazed, percussive music; then I saw a large crowd gathering around a curious young man, and I went over to investigate.

The man, to prove his iron will, was cutting his arm with a sword until a large gash opened up, flowing profusely with blood. Then a mystic came, put his hand over the wound and, with a few words, healed it. Was it magic? Everything I had observed led me to believe so. But everything I knew about science (my *schema* regarding the physical laws governing reality) led me to conclude this miraculous healing had been a trick, albeit a good one.

As the sun went down over the marketplace, the Professor still had not found a carpet to his liking, so I settled around a campfire and listened to a local storyteller spin a tale much like Shakespeare's *Othello*, where the lover is pushed into a jealous rage because he is convinced that his spouse is unfaithful. In the end, the lover kills his wife and then, realizing that he had been tricked and his wife had been faithful all along, he kills himself. Oh, the pitfalls of social perception! Misunderstanding, you tragic menace of man!

By the end of the story the Professor had joined me, and, after a brief apology for shopping so long, he suggested we find a hotel, for Marrakech was a dangerous city and it wasn't smart to stay out late.

On our way to the hotel, we were stopped by a wholesome, young American couple. They were touring the world on their honeymoon, they said, but they were lost—did we know the way to *La Mamounia*?

"La Mamounia?" said the Professor. "Every self-respecting traveler knows the way to La Mamounia. It is the finest hotel in Marrakech!" And he proceeded to give them directions in the precise manner that only a scientist can.

As the Professor was triangulating a route for the lost couple, the man, who had a set of curiously pointed ears, asked if the Professor would hold on while he got his pen so he could write down the instructions. The Professor agreed, and the man fumbled around in his pocket until he pulled out—a knife!—and pointed it straight at us. The woman had one, too.

They robbed us of all we had (including the Professor's new carpet), and made fast away. We chased them into the *suuqs*, or labyrinthine back-alleys of the marketplace, but it was no use. Soon we were lost with neither money, food, nor shelter for the night.

I was panicking; those robbers had jarred my schema of the wholesome American couple and I was lost, we were lost, but the Professor told me not to worry. "A scholar is never lost," he said. "Because he can think. The thinking man finds his way."

Now this was a poor *group schema*, I thought, to believe that all thinking men find their way. I could have given a hundred examples on the spot where thinking men couldn't find their way, yea, had even gotten lost because of their tangled thoughts. But I didn't want to upset the Professor, so I kept my observation to myself.

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Day 12 (cont'd.)—*Murder in Marrakech; interlude; dinner to die for*—*Kelley's Model and more*

Soon we came to an alley where no people were, and this was rather unusual for Marrakech, which seemed to have an average population density of five per square-foot. It was as if a plague had swept through the entire lane, leaving it empty and dead. At the end of the street there hung a sign outside a building that read, "Hotel Baracara," and we decided to inquire about a room.

A flimsy fan was blowing over our heads as we entered what seemed an empty lobby. I was about to ring the service bell when a rifle appeared over the front desk. Slowly, the rifle lifted, and a wearied, unkempt man raised up behind it.

"What do you want?" he said.

We said, "A room."

He said, "Why?"

"Nonsense!" said the Professor. "This is a hotel, isn't it?"

The man nodded.

"Then why do you ask why we want a room?"

The man answered: Inspector Bra, the world-renowned English detective, had been eerily murdered in the hotel last week, and the murder had been so bizarre that no one had wanted to come near the hotel since, because everyone believed the hotel was possessed by malicious demons.

"Nonsense!" said the Professor. "There are no demons in science, unless you count Dr. No, and even he wasn't supernatural. Come, tell us about this mysterious murder."

The man behind the desk, who I later discovered was Aziz, the hotel manager, said that the murder happened like this: Inspector Bra had checked in the hotel to much paparazzi and fanfare, with a robust woman on each side and his assistant, young Walter Youngblood, clearing his path. Everything was going well, and hotel business was booming from the publicity. But that night during dinner, as the Inspector was slurping his *Oualidia* oysters, Walter Youngblood suddenly snapped and squeezed Bra to death.

"And since no one can explain Youngblood's bloody outburst," Aziz said, "everyone assumes the hotel is occupied by ghosts, and it's been vacant ever since."

“Where is Youngblood now?” asked the Professor.

“The Police Commissioner, Fahd Al Faregh, arrested Youngblood on the spot. Though he insists he did not mean to do any harm, he is to be executed at dawn.”

“Aziz,” said the Professor, “Walter Youngblood is an innocent man. Let my friend and I spend the night here, and I will find the demon responsible for this murder and banish him from your hotel forever!”

Aziz sneezed. “I do not know how Youngblood could possibly be innocent,” he said. “And I don’t know how you could possibly hope to find a demon. But you say you are a scientist?”

The Professor flashed his APA card.

“Then I have faith in you. Do your work, but remember—something caused Youngblood to go mad and murder his mentor—watch your assistant.”

I shivered at the thought—I could never commit such an atrocity, but how could Youngblood? Were there demons in this place? Tonight, we would find out.

All the Professor said in response to Aziz’s final words of warning were, “I will.”

~ *Interlude* ~

“Now wait a minute,” I said to the Professor as we entered our room. “I was all for this trip in the beginning, but I really don’t see what this episode has to do with social psychology. I mean, aren’t we digressing just a bit too far? Shouldn’t we be getting back to the boat and scuttling off to other exotic places that might have more direct application to what I’ve covered in class? And isn’t Marrakech dangerous enough without our becoming embroiled in a bloody murder mystery?”

The Professor pretended not to hear me for a few minutes. He didn’t like my defiance, and he seemed preoccupied. After a bit, he turned to me: “What is the most important chapter in your textbook?”

“According to my professor, it’s chapter five: Social Perception and Cognition.”

“Why do you think your professor said chapter five was the most important?”

“Maybe because perceptions underlie reality. And if we can understand how we construct our perceptions of social reality, perhaps we can break out from under some of the ice of subjectivity and see ourselves more for what we are.”

“Yes,” said the Professor, “the study of perception strikes at the core of our science and of science in general. It’s so important that most people don’t want to talk about it at all. The more we study it, the more we become aware of our own limitations—our cognitive biases—that prevent us from seeing the truth of a situation, if there is such a thing. We see better knowing what blinds us.

“Now see,” said the Professor, “what better way to study social perception than to solve a murder mystery? It reminds us that things aren’t what they seem and helps us cut through our biases to attain a more accurate picture of events. Plus, it’s bags of fun! Come, boy,” the Professor said, tipping forward his top hat, “The game’s afoot!”

~ *The Mystery Continues* ~

Later that evening, the Professor and I came down to the hotel dining room. We sat at a low banquet table on soft cylindrical cushions and were amazed by the magnificent and bounteous array of dishes that lay before us. Three bejeweled Persian women waited on us, offering smiles and wine, and tickling our necks with long feathers, which the Professor particularly loathed.

We had finished our salads, and we were just biting into our *b’stella* pastry, when Aziz rushed in with a man and two hooded figures behind him.

“So sorry to disrupt the esteemed guests’ dinner, but Police Commissioner Fahd has arrived with a couple that matches the description of the pair that stole your goods. He needs you to verify their identity.”

“A quick peek-a-boo, gentlemen,” said Fahd, “and if you say these two are who I think they are, then the lovebirds become jailbirds.” He was a suave, dapper Arab. “And now—I unhood the hoodlums.”

The Professor and I instantly recognized them as the devils who robbed us. They still had our wallets and passports, which Fahd returned to us, but the rest of our goods they had fenced.

“I salute you, Fahd,” said the Professor. “You’re a credit to your profession. Most criminals are never caught.”

“Yes,” Fahd said, “I am uniquely gifted and commonly underestimated. But in this case, my job was easy. Just look at this man—” and Fahd flicked the young American’s pointed ears. “—the crook has crooked ears. It’s a trait I’ve found often in evil people.”

“The Professor is working on the murder case,” Aziz told Fahd. “He thinks Youngblood is innocent.”

“Oh?” said Fahd. “I don’t know how you could believe a man innocent when many witnesses watched him commit the crime. I saw Youngblood do the dastardly deed myself. Don’t you have faith in the Moroccan Police, Professor?”

"I have faith in the facts," said the Professor. "And I think there's more to them than appears."

"In any case, Youngblood is to be executed in the morning. We cannot tolerate murder by dragging out the process with extra investigations and multiple appeals, as the American courts do. It doesn't serve justice. On the other hand, I do believe there's something to the theory that something possessed Youngblood to commit the crime. If you don't mind, Aziz, I'd like to stay for dinner tonight, in case any of your hotel spirits show up. Do you still have any of that '86 Bordeaux?"

The three Persians set a place for Al Faregh, and we continued our dinner. The main course was brought out: simmering lamb chops marinated in saffron and honey and crusted with almonds and sesame seeds. The Professor and Fahd chatted about the importance of social perception in their respective fields; the Professor, having studied the topic from a theoretical point of view, was intensely interested in how Fahd considered perception during an investigation.

"Well," Fahd said, "If social perception is the most important chapter in the social psychologist's book, so it is in the detective's. In the crime business, we are constantly challenged with puzzles that contradict our standard ways of thinking. Criminals are out to outsmart us. So in order to lock them up, we have to escape our established cognitive patterns, schemas, and stereotypes to see through to the heart of the situation. Everyone and everything is suspect; nothing and no one must escape interrogation, including and especially our own ideas about the case. Even then, they still outsmart you. I flew all the way to Peru recently, just to discover that the crook I was pursuing had gone to China."

As Fahd said this, I saw the Professor press a fist against his teeth, in one of his intense fits of concentration. Then, when Fahd was done, he raised his head, saying, "Fahd, your criminal theory is clearly brilliant. And it has led me to this conclusion—call for backup, because there will be an attempted murder tonight!"

Fahd smiled at this. "Professor, please take no offense when I say that I highly doubt that a greenhorn gumshoe like yourself could detect a murder ahead of me. But even if you could, I am an experienced officer, fully capable of handling any danger that might arise."

The Professor stared at Fahd. "The situation requires backup," he said.

Fahd stared at the Professor. "Well, I don't know why you're being so secretive about this, but if you insist, I'll call. Excuse me, gentlemen."

I was embarrassed by the Professor's conspicuously rude behavior toward Commissioner Fahd, and I apologized profusely to him on the Professor's behalf. The Professor glared at me as I did this, but I didn't flinch, because I felt perfectly justified in defending Fahd and perfectly furious at the audacious Professor.

Soon the backup arrived: three muscular officers primed for crime, each one greatly disappointed when they found nothing happening.

“Sorry, boys,” Fahd said to the backup, “I guess this is what happens when I let a social psychologist do a detective’s job. But their trip doesn’t have to be a total loss. How about some gazelle’s horns for my friends?”

“Of course,” said Aziz. He clapped his hands, and soon the three Persians returned with a basket of horn-shaped pastries stuffed with almond paste and showered with sugar.

I bit into the sweet pastry and savored the taste; its hot, buttery crust and rich, mild flavor made it quite possibly the best dessert I’d ever eaten. But suddenly, a mad passion fell over me, and I had the strongest urge to attack the Professor. I got up from my seat, put my hands around his neck, and began strangling him viciously.

The three backup officers immediately dragged me off the Professor and cuffed my hands behind my back.

“So you were right, Professor,” Commissioner Fahd said. “It seems there is a demon haunting this hotel. Nonetheless, we can’t prosecute demons; we can only execute the bodies they possess. Take him away, boys.”

“Hold it,” said the Professor. “Fahd is right—there is a demon in this hotel, but it’s not paranormal. It is Commissioner Fahd himself! He is the perpetrator of these diabolical crimes. Arrest him!”

“What, are you Commissioner now?” Fahd said. “Take the killer away!”

By now I had snapped out of my trance and felt terrible about what I’d done to the Professor, but, because I’d temporarily lost control, I protested my innocence as the officers dragged me away.

“Wait!” the Professor said. “I am the one who predicted the attempted murder and arranged for your presence here; Aziz hired me to solve the mysterious crime in his hotel, and now I have. The least you can do is hear me out.”

The officers stopped and, gripping my handcuffs, forced me onto my knees, signaling that they would listen. I prayed that, after all this, the Professor would actually have something meaningful to say that would exonerate me.

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Aziz, Commissioner Fahd, the two hooded crooks, the three Persians, the backup officers, and I all gathered around the banquet table, and the Professor began his exposition:

“Upon arriving at Hotel Baracara and hearing Aziz’s tale of the murder, I immediately declared that Walter Youngblood was innocent. I said this because

Walter Youngblood was a student of mine back when I taught at the University of Colorado at Denver, and he was unsurpassed in virtues, scholarly and otherwise. He had a good heart and a wonderful sense of humor, and, though he occasionally wrote protracted, unscientific narratives for his final papers, I couldn't help but think him my best student, deserving of the highest marks possible. I knew that the only thing Youngblood would murder was a nasty spider, and even then he might feel guilty.

"Now, after Youngblood graduated I kept in touch with him; I used to meet him in England for tea with Inspector Bra, and Bra told me that Walter was the best assistant he had ever had, because of his pleasant, mellow disposition.

"So when I heard Aziz describe the murder, I combined his account with my foreknowledge of Youngblood's character and instinctively reasoned with *Kelley's Attribution Model*. Consensus—had others exhibited anger toward Inspector Bra that day? Aziz said Bra's entrance was celebrated, and that the hotel was thriving on his arrival—that's a *low consensus*, suggesting that Bra didn't incite his own murder. Distinctiveness—did Walter show aggressive behavior toward anyone else? No; until the murder, he was dutifully assisting the Inspector—the event had a *high distinctiveness*, making Walter's guilt more uncertain. Consistency—did Walter usually become angry? No: the event had a *low consistency*, which made me suspect there was something about the situation that compelled Walter to commit the murder. It was up to me to discover that something.

"Now, because all present at the dinner watched Walter commit the murder, all immediately accepted his guilt. This is none other than a strain of the *Focus of Attention Bias*, where the uninitiated carelessly attribute obvious causative phenomena as most significant, neglecting to consider less obvious influences that might have greater causal significance. What, I asked myself, could have possibly driven a perfectly righteous man to commit this horrid wrong? I returned to Kelley's model. If the wickedness wasn't in Walter, and it wasn't incited by the Inspector, then something *from the outside* must have brought it on.

"Walter must have been drugged. Many drugs are fatal to the taker; but only one is fatal to the person nearest the taker. There is a root (the *mortis* root) that grows on the banks of the Ucayali river in Peru that, if ingested in the smallest amount, fills the taker with a temporary, but very violent, passion, turning even the most loving saint into a momentary Satan. The description of the effects of the root fit Youngblood's murder so precisely that I reasoned he must have been slipped some *mortis* root. But who could have done it?

"My first impression of Commissioner Fahd was a positive one. He had caught the criminals who had robbed us, and done it very quickly. But when I

congratulated him on his achievement, he said he was ‘uniquely gifted’ and ‘commonly underestimated.’ This is the *False Uniqueness Bias*, where people overrate their own uniqueness, and I began to see Fahd as someone who thought himself above the common order, like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*.

“My suspicions of Fahd grew when he said our American crook’s pointed ears were a trait he associated with evil people. Somehow, Fahd has constructed an *implicit personality theory* correlating pointed ears with evil. I guarantee he would hate the Vulcan race from *Star Trek*. Of course Fahd’s attitude toward pointy-eared people is a *stereotype*—an over-generalization about a particular group. I have known plenty of good people with pointed ears in my life, including—Inspector Bra. I began to wonder: did Fahd cause the murder?

“Two further occurrences assured me that he did. First, Fahd dropped by only to verify the identities of the thieves. Once we confirmed the thieves’ identities, however, Fahd violated the *script*, or expected event sequence, for an officer on duty. Hearing that I was investigating the murder, Fahd immediately asked if he could stay for dinner, keeping the criminals waiting by his side. Clearly, he had some vested personal interest in the case. Then, when discussing criminal theory, he mentioned his recent trip to Peru, the only place in the world where one can acquire the mortis root. It was then that I knew Fahd had drugged Youngblood and that he was planning to do the same to my mentor tonight. Fahd wanted me dead, because he wanted his killing safely buried under lies, but I risked the attempt on my life to bring Fahd to justice.”

The room was silent. Fahd’s officers were gaping at him in disbelief. Then Fahd said, “I suppose I’ll save you all the suspense of waiting and the expense of investigating by saying that the Professor is right. I killed Inspector Bra because he had what I should have had. I went to Police Academy with Bra and graduated at the top of my class, while he was number two. But somehow he became an international celebrity in London, and I got stuck serving a life sentence in this rat-hole city. Yes, the Professor is right in every respect but one. I do not have a false uniqueness bias. I *am* an extraordinary person; it’s just that, today, I’ve been beaten by a more extraordinary one.”

The officers decommissioned Commissioner Fahd and set me free. Youngblood, too, was cleared on all accounts, and he was so grateful that he insisted on driving the Professor and I back to the ship in his luxury Hummer.

On the way, I apologized profusely to the Professor and asked him if he could ever forgive me for attacking him.

“Don’t worry, boy,” he said. “your attack was *situational unstable*—brought on by the situation, and unlikely to happen again. You had no control, so you get no blame from me.”

I thanked the Professor for his friendship, and for saving my life—if it weren't for his extraordinary feats of reason, I would have been meat-scrap for the Moroccan vultures.

"Saving lives is expected of the social psychologist," he said. "Like I said, the thinking man finds his way."

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Day 22—*Recapitulation of busy voyagings; the inevitable calendar*

What an adventure! The Professor promised a spectacular ride, and he has far surpassed all of my expectations. After sailing into the Mediterranean and examining human attitudes by studying the French passion for cheese, we ventured back through the Pillars of Hercules and up into the Norwegian Sea. We landed on the Svalbard Islands, where we witnessed a magnificent *Aurora Borealis* and the Professor put on an equally sparkling display of social psychological virtuosity when, with his knowledge of symbolic communication and persuasion, he convinced a few tipsy natives that he was the Norse god Odin, come from Asgard to visit the mortals.

"Where shall we go next?" the Professor said, rubbing his hands together. "I have ideas for an experiment in Istanbul; then we can consider conformity in Calcutta, and the notion of the self in Tokyo. If you think you've known excitement on this trip, hang on—for the excitement has just begun!"

"Professor," I said, "I hate to say this, but my final is due in class on Tuesday. I'd like to continue on this trip... it's really an unprecedented life opportunity, probably in the history of man, but I must turn in my paper."

"Oh. I see. Certainly, formal academics must come first. We'll start back immediately for your indigenous land, and, if the sea is calm and the winds are fair, we should have you back in plenty of time to deliver your paper."

I thanked the Professor. I could see he was somewhat disheartened that our journey was coming to an end, and so was I. We had had many adventures together and had become true friends. Though before I had doubted his reputation and seen him as somewhat of a quirky crackpot, I now held him in the highest regard and would miss him greatly when I returned home.

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Day 24—*The journey home; shark hunting; a sentimental distress call—Altruism & aggression*

The sea was calm and the winds were fair. Our was ship galloping through the waves at a rapid pace. The Professor was on deck reading a brilliant analysis of the Kitty Genovese case and invited me up for a discussion of why

people help or refuse help in emergency situations, but I was too busy gathering and editing my journal to turn in for my final project.

All of a sudden, I heard a loud shriek outside, and I raced up to see what was happening. The Professor and Elsa had already gathered on the port side of the ship and were peering into the water.

There, I saw a baby dolphin being torn apart by a great white shark. It cried out as the shark bit into it.

"I cannot endure this," the Professor said. He grabbed the emergency harpoon gun, took aim, and blasted the harpoon straight into the belly of the shark. The shark fell back and the dolphin got away with only an injured fin.

"Normally I don't condone hunting," said the Professor, "But my savagery to the shark can be explained by my compassion for the dolphin. I felt for that poor porpoise. The shark was tearing *me* apart. Call me egotistic, but I had to stop the terror, for my peace of mind and for the dolphin's piece of fin."

According to the *Empathy-Altruism Model*, I told the Professor he appeared to have acted both to assuage his own distress (an egoistic motive) and because he felt true empathy for the dolphin (an altruistic motive). Though the motive was ambivalent, Elsa and I agreed that the Professor had done the right thing.

Seconds later, we heard a sentimental voice coming in over the radio: "Papa, can you hear me? Papa, can you help me?"

"Turn off that infernal radio!" the Professor said. "I've heard that song a thousand times and I was sick of it from the first."

"But Professor," said Elsa, "This voice isn't coming from a music station. It's coming over the emergency frequency."

"What?" said the Professor. "What, what? It can't be."

"What can't be?" I asked.

The Professor brooded over the radio, listening intently. "Yes, my worst fears are true! Barbara Streisand is in danger!"

"I thought you didn't like her music."

"I don't—but she and I have... a history together. I don't know what could be the matter, but we must go and find out."

"But Professor! I have a final to turn in. You promised we'd get back."

"Curse your final! Do you think I'm so simplistic and egotistic as to consider the costs of our helping? No, I'm far beyond *cost/reward motivation*. But, incidentally, maybe she'll give us a free concert if we rescue her successfully. She's always better in person."

After further listening to the distress call, we learned that Ms. Streisand was being held on *Lovey Island*, which the Professor explained was her secret vacation resort island, not far from Haiti. If Lovey was Streisand's secret island, I asked the Professor, how did he know about it? He offered no response, but

calculated the shortest distance to the Caribbean and set us going that way posthaste.

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Day 25—*The annual convention; my encounter with Moses; un-civil war; Arnold saves the day—Further lessons in altruism & aggression*

I was furious at the Professor for not dropping me off somewhere along the US coast, so I could get back to Denver to hand my paper in on time. But he insisted rescuing a lady in distress was far more important than any meager paper, and that I couldn't see this self-evident fact because I had no relationship to Ms. Streisand, I had little in common with her, and I couldn't perceive a super-wealthy pop-star as deserving of my help.

"*Acquaintanceship, similarity, and deservingness* are all factors that foster helping," said the Professor, "and, unfortunately, none of these factors match your perceived relationship to Barbara. Besides, your egoistic desire of handing in your precious paper is blinding all sense of reasonable, normative humanity in you! You've degenerated into a predatory beast! Thank goodness I'm not the one in need of help."

These words made me think, and, though I didn't speak to the Professor during the rest of our journey to Lovey, I did feel somewhat guilty for not being more willing to help the retired legendary singer in need.

The ship came to port at what seemed a peaceful island. As soon as we docked and got off the boat, two men in plaid shirts and jeans greeted us.

"Morning," said one.

We said hello.

"How many weapons?" said the other.

"Excuse me?" the Professor said.

"You boys are here for the convention, right?"

"Of course," said the Professor, winking at me. "May I see the guest list? I want to see if my friend has checked in yet."

One of the men handed over a clipboard to the Professor. I could see the logo on the letterhead of the top page—it was the NRA! Had the National Rifle Association raided Streisand's private island to host their annual convention? It seemed extraordinarily unlikely, but what other explanation was there?

The Professor introduced us as "Cal Rollins and Jack Granger"—two names on the guest list—and told the men in plaid that we had plenty of guns, bombs, and heavy artillery back on our ship, but that, being tired after a long sea

voyage, we thought it best to leave all our weaponry on board for now. The men looked disappointed, but let us pass.

We came through a wall of tropical trees and onto a wide, finely-mowed green lawn, where we could see a lavish Spanish villa in the distance.

On the lawn, nearly 1,000 NRA members were sitting on collapsible chairs, chanting “Wayne LaPierre, Wayne LaPierre...” in a horrific monotone, and bidding outlandish prices for Civil War guns.

“Civil war indeed!” the Professor snorted. “The whole business of war is senseless instinct and makes me ashamed to be human.”

He pulled out a pair of binoculars and scanned the property. Then he handed them to me.

“Just as I thought,” he said. “Look—Streisand is being held in the bell tower at the top of the hacienda. But she’s guarded. You’ll have to distract the guard, while I untie Barbara.”

I protested, saying that I knew nothing about distracting guards, and that I would surely be killed the instant I was spotted.

“Just think of it as field work,” said the Professor. “You can’t get any closer to observing aggression and altruism than participating in it!”

We had no trouble getting into the house. Lush green plants covered the vestibule. Water fell down a red stone wall and into a pond full of lily-pads and coy fish. An NRA maid offered us champagne in gun-shaped glasses, but we declined.

When the coast was clear, the Professor led the way through several richly-furnished rooms and into an intimate space with a small stage, a piano, and a microphone.

“Barbara’s nightclub,” said the Professor. “For private performances.” But the room appeared to be a dead end.

“What are we doing here?” I said. “We’re wasting time!”

The Professor told me to be patient. Then he calmly sat down at the piano and played the first few bars of “Cry Me a River,” and a spiral staircase spun slowly down from the ceiling. A secret passage!

We climbed the staircase and arrived at the bell tower. The room was arranged like a ring, and Barbara was locked inside the center of the ring. Luckily, the guard happened to be on the opposite side of the ring when the Professor and I arrived. He motioned me around to the right to distract the guard, while he went around the left to rescue Ms. Streisand.

Slowly I crept along the wall, until I could see the guard’s back. But how was I to distract him? There was a half-drunk beer bottle on the ground. If I could grab it and knock him out cold, there would be no trouble. Without a further thought, I took up the bottle and crashed it hard over the guard’s head.

But he didn't fall unconscious. He turned round, and it was—Charlton Heston—enraged!

"Please, Mr. Heston," I said. "I didn't mean to attack you." I remembered that if a victim didn't attribute the attack on him as *intentional*, then he would be less likely to reciprocate. "I didn't know anyone else was up here, and I was just getting out a little frustration by throwing a bottle around."

"How did you get up here?" Heston said.

"I walked. But now let me ask *you* a question: how did you become such a legendary film star?"

"Well, son, I was acting from the time I was a tiny man. You might say it was destiny for me to become the greatest film hero ever. But my story begins back in 1924, on a small farm in—"

And then we heard a lock smash open. At once, Heston knew I was there to free Streisand.

"Infidel!" he screamed and came at me with all his might. He was surprisingly strong for an 80-year-old man and had me in a snake-like death-grip from which I could not escape.

The Professor, on the other hand, was moseying down the stairs with Barbara. "I've got her," he said. "Trouble's over."

Apparently, he didn't hear me choking to death and squeaking out for help with my last gasps of breath.

"Come on, boy!" he said. "What are you waiting for? Let's go!"

Just before I slid out of consciousness, I saw a loose stone brick on the tower window. I managed to squiggle a hand free and clobber Heston over the head. He let me go.

"Oh, Professor?" I said, catching my breath. "What did you say were the four major motivations for aggression?"

"First and foremost, there's the *biological instinct*—we cannot help ourselves from aggression, because it helps us survive."

I slapped Heston across the right cheek.

"Then, there's the *frustration-aggression hypothesis*, which suggests every aggressive act is a response to a previous frustration."

I slapped Heston across the left cheek.

"Third, there's the theory of *aversive emotional arousal*, which says phenomena like insults or physical attacks cause emotional pain, and the individual compensates for that injurious pain by fighting back.

I shoved Heston into the bell tower and locked him in.

"And then, there's the *social learning and aggression* theory, which says aggression is learned through socialization, like watching violent Charlton

Heston movies or playing violent video games. But why ask me this now? Let's get out of here. By the way, what happened to the guard?"

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Outside the hacienda, things had fallen into chaos. Apparently NRA President Kayne Robinson had not been able to bid high enough on the antique gun that he'd wanted, so he had fired upon the auctioneer, setting off an all-out civil war between NRA members.

Bullets were flying and bodies were falling all over the field; it was a terrible sight, but Barbara said this was the only way back to the pier, so we had to crawl our way through it.

About halfway through the field, we came across a boy who had sprained his ankle and couldn't get up.

"Help me," he cried. "Get me out of here, or I'll be shot!"

The Professor moved to help the boy, but Barbara held him back.

"No," she said, "Even if he's young, he's still a Republican. He can't be trusted!"

"Are you out of your mind?" the Professor said. "How can you be so cold after we just rescued you? Now, there's a *five-step decision-making process* before intervention in emergencies. If we can go through those five steps affirmatively, then I suggest we give the lad some aid. Step one: Notice that something is happening. Step two: Interpret the situation as an emergency. Step three—"

"Okay, okay!" Barbara said. "Just help the boy and let's go, or we'll be caught or, worse, shot!"

The Professor examined the boy's ankle and found that the ankle was fine, it was just all the bullets and screaming that had frightened him into paralysis. After a brief pep talk, the Professor convinced the boy to follow our group, for his own safety, and we were off again.

Surprisingly, we made it back to the boat without incident. But once we got on the boat, another surprise was waiting for us. The two men in plaid had boarded the boat and said they had found no weapons whatsoever, which was, in the NRA's book, heresy. Then they introduced themselves—they were Cal Rollins and Jack Granger, the two names we had used to fool them.

They marched us back onto the field and called a halt to the fighting. We were traitors on the island, they said, and we had to be treated to some old-fashioned NRA hospitality—death by firing squad!

...

*“Aggressive cues,”* said the Professor as we were bound hand and foot to wooden stakes on the field. “If their weren’t so many damned guns around, maybe these people might be a little more inhibited about killing us.

“You know the right to a fair trial is in the constitution, too,” said the Professor, as his mouth was gagged.

There we were—the four of us—me, the small boy, Barbara Streisand, and the Professor, tied to stakes in the middle of a great green field on a sweltering day in April, encircled by 1,000 NRA members, on the hijacked island of Lovey, about to be shot to bits by the largest firing squad ever assembled.

I was making my peace with all things sacred and profane as Kayne Robinson gave the orders with military severity, “Ready... Aim...”

But suddenly, out of the sky came a thunderous voice, *“One move and I’ll blow you all to smithereens!”*

I turned to the Professor. Could it be Arnold the Parrot, again? But then I looked up and saw a black helicopter. It dove down like a hawk and landed on the field. Who else jumped out of the hatch but Arnold Schwarzenegger himself, armed with a heavy machine gun!

“Vat are you doing, you cretins, dat’s my boy, Arnie Jr., you’ve got tied up der!” He approached the little boy and cut him loose with a bowie knife. Then, after the boy explained how the Professor had courageously saved him from the savagery of the warring NRA members, Schwarzenegger cut us loose, too, and convinced the NRA to set us free and give Streisand her island back.

...

That night, Schwarzenegger, Arnie Jr., the Professor, and I were treated to a free concert by Barbara Streisand, and she invited us back whenever we had the inclination to come.

“Whatever happened to Charlton Heston?” Barbara asked me.

“I left him up in the bell tower. Should I get him down?”

“No, let’s let him stay up there for a while,” she said. “A little solitude in high places never did Moses any harm.”

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And now, the conclusion...

The concert at Barbara’s was Monday (yesterday) night. Early this morning, I bid good-bye to the Professor, who assured me that he would visit me soon, and then Ms. Streisand put me on a private jet to Denver. The plane ride was long enough that I could finish compiling my final paper, but hardly long

enough to begin to process the incredible experience I've had over the past month. I can only hope my words capture one-thousandth of the surreal amazement and joy I've had on these adventures with Professor P.J. Empiricus.