



Are you a Sheeple?

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This article discusses the behaviour of “sheeple”—a blended word or portmanteaux that encompasses the words “sheep” and “people”. Sheeples are commonly docile, compliant, easily persuaded, and inclined to follow the crowd. Through a comparison with the herding behaviour of animals, the article observes how large numbers of people may act at the same time and in a similar fashion. It suggests that Homo sapiens are hardwired to imitate others, and, in stressful situations, do not independently seek out the information required to determine the correct course of action; with their fight or flight mechanism in overdrive, these sheeple simply follows the crowd.

This article suggests that sheeple behaviour is triggered by a variety of neurological processes in the brain on detecting danger. In this context, it is pointed out that the catalysts signalling the need for action can take many forms, and that any perceived threatening situation, be it real or imaginary, can cause sheeple behaviour. Consequently, it is suggested that apart from facing physical danger, situations such as social disapproval can provoke the brain's danger circuits.

Moreover, the article suggests that it is not only neurological processes that contribute to sheeple behaviour, but that child development also plays a role. Here, reference is made to Homo sapiens' search for protective figures and other feelings that originate from childhood.

This article also highlights that sheeple behaviour is ubiquitous, found everywhere from the financial sector to outbursts of mob violence, political movements, religious gatherings, sporting events, riots, strikes, and even in the context of consumer preferences such as fashion trends. In each of these instances, the individual adopts an opinion based on what other people say and do without bothering to consider the evidence for themselves.

The article goes on to consider the potentially dark side of sheeple behaviour in situations where individual judgment and opinion-forming processes are suppressed, and sheeples automatically follow a group's movement and behaviour. And as can be seen from the madness of crowds, this behavioural pattern can cause an effect, whereby reactions ripple out, influencing the emotions of other members of the group, including their dynamics and individual cognitions. Essentially, a process of social contagion occurs, meaning a tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of other people, contributing to behavioural convergence.

It is also pointed out that people with an understanding of sheeple dynamics can easily exploit this human behavioural pattern. This is particularly the case in the context of leadership, where Homo sapiens' sheeple-like tendencies offer a great opportunity for demagogue-like leaders to rise to power. It suggests that charismatic leaders will be the obvious outlets in capturing the irrational needs, desires, and fears of groups of people.

The final section of this article touches on the need to be vigilant to this human tendency. It is suggested that it is all too easy to regress into sheeple-like behaviour without even being aware of it. The suggestion is made, however, that fostering independent thought will reduce the risk of the destructive elements of sheeple behaviour, but it will remain a challenge distinguishing between the wisdom and the madness of crowds.

Key words: Sheeple; Herding Behaviour; Evolution; Amygdala; Groupthink; Collective Madness; Social Contagion; Demagogue Leaders; Snake Oil Salesmen; Propaganda; Regression; Developmental; Nature-nurture.

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Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.

— Oscar Wilde

Collective fear stimulates herd instinct and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd.

— Bertrand Russell

Introduction

On reading the title of this article, you may naturally ask yourself ‘what is a “sheeple?”’ For linguists, however, this created expression may not seem so mysterious, as they might quickly sense it is a blended word, combining “sheep” and “people”. To be more precise, it is what is referred to as a *portmanteaux* compound that describes individuals who voluntarily acquiesce to other people’s suggestions without taking much of a critical stand. Instead, they are thought to be docile, compliant, easily persuaded and inclined to follow the crowd. In other words, sheeples are people who behave in a passive, herd-like manner.

The idea of sheeple-like behaviour isn’t new. In the late 1800s, the French social psychologist Gustav Le Bon referred to the herding behaviour of human beings as a way of explaining various crowd phenomena. He said, “The crowd is always dominated by considerations of which it is unconscious... The sentiments and ideas of all persons in the

gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes...”¹

According to Le Bon, the processes of anonymity, contagion, and suggestibility, rob the individual of their own opinions, values, and beliefs. No longer being people in their own right, they begin to behave like sheeples.

As he was not an evolutionary psychologist, Le Bon didn't expand his theories to associate his ideas with the herding behaviour that takes place in the animal kingdom; however, this is exactly the domain where such behaviour appears most prominently. In fact, the term “herding behaviour” comes from the way animals in herds, flock of birds, or schools of fish, act, particularly when faced with a dangerous situation such as escaping predators. In such instances of panic mode, animals, fish, or birds, often move together as a unit. It becomes their way to avoid injury or death. In other words, they turn into sheeples. Although this kind of herd behaviour appears to be the result of some form of central coordination, paradoxically it seems to be an emergent property of local interaction. In short, it looks as if an invisible hand is making it happen.

To help us better understand this strange herding phenomenon, the evolutionary biologist William Hamilton introduced the “selfish herd” theory. He suggested that a herd's spontaneous emergence was the result of the activities of the individuals in the herd trying to ensure that predators would eat other members of their species instead of being eaten themselves.² To be more precise, individual group members try to reduce the danger to

¹ https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Lebon/LeBon_1895/LeBon_1895_02.html

² William D. Hamilton (1971). "Geometry for the Selfish Herd". *Journal of Theoretical Biology*. **31**(2): 295–311.

themselves by moving as close as possible to the center of the fleeing group in order to avoid the far higher risk of predation on the periphery. Thus, stampedes shouldn't be viewed as planned events, despite affecting a whole herd. On the contrary, they should be seen as an emergent phenomenon and form of self-preservation, in which all the individuals of the herd are out for themselves.

As may have become clear, this behaviour is neither triggered by a control center, nor enforced by hierarchy. Rather it is the outcome of spontaneous communication processes between the members of the species, contributing to copycat behaviour. Thus, a herd's form and movement are induced by the fact that each individual member of the herd is competing to stay close to its centre, thereby placing other members between themselves and the predators. Unfortunately, the behaviour demonstrating the wisdom in crowds can also lead to the madness in herds; sheep behaviour can have very positive effects—helping animals in the herd to escape a predator— but it can also have disastrous results. For example, many animals becoming injured or trapped. Once again, even though the herd seems to behave like an organized unit moving harmoniously, it is in fact the uncoordinated behaviour of self-serving individuals. The herd is not motivated by the desire to protect the group, but on the contrary, has self-interest at its heart.

The Illusion of Control

Moving from the kind of herd behaviour found in the animal kingdom to human beings, Homo sapiens are also very much herd animals and social creatures. Indeed, this quality has made us so successful as a species. Social cooperation seems to be hardwired in

each of us. Thus, even though we like to imagine that we are in control of our lives and treasure our individuality, human beings are also embedded in complex social structures which organize our actions. Taking a hard look at the way we act suggests we aren't really the independent decision-makers we consider ourselves to be.

Thus, although we like to believe that each choice that we make is based upon our own best judgment, and although we celebrate our ability to control our own lives, certain patterns of behaviour go beyond the individual. Considering our evolutionary trajectory, the species *Homo sapiens* also appears to be hardwired with instinctual behaviour patterns that helps it to survive when dangers present itself. Given the way our brains function, we do not always give careful and rational thought to the situation we may find ourselves in. We may have the illusion of controlling our own lives, but as a group we may act instinctively in concert; it doesn't take much to become a sheeple.

It is most likely that our herd instinct developed as our prehistoric predecessors transformed into human beings over the course of thousands of centuries. Without it, our ancestors could not have banded together to fight off dangerous animals or help each other to collect food. In certain situations, *Homo sapiens* will display similar instinctive and strange herd-like behaviour patterns as can be found among animals. Therefore, comparable to the herding behaviour of animals, we can observe how large numbers of people may be acting at the same time, in a similar fashion. *Homo sapiens* seems to be hardwired to imitate others.

Clearly, there are many benefits to be gained by living and working cooperatively in groups with others of the same species, including safety from predators, access to mates, and assistance in finding food. It can be extremely advantageous to share knowledge. Similarly, to the panic behaviour of herds, however, in humans such behaviour can also have both negative and positive consequences. There will be the ever-present danger of overusing social information. We may end up copying others more than we should. Or to be more specific, in certain situations our evolutionary heritage seems to take over from rational thought. Instead, we start to behave like sheeples, not even realizing that we're doing so.

In particular, when we find ourselves in stressful situations, we may not give ourselves the time to independently seek out the required high-quality information to determine what would be the correct course of action. Hardwired as we are for immediate action when we perceive danger, we aren't taking the necessary reflective stand. Instead, our fight/flight mechanism will get into overdrive. And as a result, we might follow the crowd. We turn into sheeples. After all, taking the cue from others—similarly to what happens in the animal kingdom—could be a life saver.

The Role of the Amygdala

The culprit behind this sheeple-like behaviour seems to be our brain, triggering off a variety of neurological processes when it imagines that we are in a danger zone. Triggers that signal that action is required can take many forms, and many different situations—be they real or imaginary—can cause sheeple behaviour. These are not just

circumstances of physical danger but can also be provoked by social disapproval, for example, the fear of not fitting in. This fear is one of the explanations for “groupthink”, a phenomenon in which the desire for group consensus overrides common sense. People will make irrational or non-optimal decisions motivated by the desire to fit in. Too often, it looks like nature has condemned us to conformity as opposed to individual judgement.

Experiments in social psychology and cognitive neuroscience offer firm evidence for such behaviour. For example, it appears that mirror neurons (the nerve cells that fire when we act and observe the same action performed by others) play a role in creating such sheep-like behaviour. When in fight-or-flight mode, our brain readily sacrifices rational, evidence-based observation in favour of instinctual reactions.

Responsible for this is the amygdala, a region of the brain primarily governing emotional responses. This complex structure of cells in the middle of the brain is commonly thought to form the core of a neural system that processes fearful and threatening stimuli. In situations of perceived danger, the amygdala will respond automatically, before our frontal lobes have had a chance to provide any logical reasoning for the situation. Thus, this fight-or-flight response will be activated without any conscious initiative from the person who is facing the threat.

Of course, this can be a helpful response when we are in immediate physical danger and need to react very quickly for reasons of safety and security.³ In these circumstances,

³ As a caveat, in making these observations, what should be kept in mind is that our knowledge about these brain patterns is still evolving. Research on the neuroscience of human social behaviour seems to be a

sheeple behaviour can be a life saver, however there are also situations when sheeple behaviour—when we subordinate personal accountability to the fears and passions of the group—may come back to haunt us later.

Social Contagion

Although we may be consciously aware of the dangers of sheeple behaviour, we have all been in situations where resisting a crowd has felt very difficult. All too easily, simply being told that most people think about an issue in a certain way can lead us to change our mind and submit to group pressure. What is alarming about this behaviour, is that it often occurs unconsciously, and we aren't even aware that we're behaving like sheeples. All too often, we internalize the opinions, feelings, and moods of others, whilst thinking these ideas to be our own. It is this particular characteristic that makes us easily susceptible to manipulation by people who have a specific agenda. In this respect, similarly to the herding behaviour found within the animal kingdom, human beings can just as easily be directed by a minority.

In fact, according to studies, it appears that it only takes 5% of what scientists call “informed individuals” to influence the direction of a crowd, mobilizing the other 95% to follow without even realizing it.⁴ Again, it demonstrates how the need to blend in provokes our brain's danger circuits, making it difficult to resist group pressure. Due to our brain's

relatively neglected topic despite the importance of sheeple-like behavior within an individual and social context. Much more research will be needed to fully understand these behavior patterns.

⁴ University of Leeds. "Sheep In Human Clothing: Scientists Reveal Our Flock Mentality." *ScienceDaily*, 16 February 2008. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/02/080214114517.htm>

tendency to engage in this kind of mirroring behaviour—short-circuiting rational thought processes—it doesn't take much for us to pursue social acceptance, seek assimilation, and fear the rejection of our views. This unconscious, apparently hardwired procedural routine, provides a signalling channel to transmit messages to all members of a group to get into action. Unfortunately, however, when the human animal pays disproportionate attention to what others say—basing their decisions on the opinions of others instead of their own rational thoughts—sheeple behaviour will come to the fore.

The dark side of sheeple behaviour is that individual judgment and opinion-forming processes shut down. Each member of the group automatically follows its movement and behaviour. Furthermore, this behavioural pattern commonly has a ripple effect, whereby reactions diffuse out, influencing the emotions of other members of the group, including their dynamics and individual cognitions. Essentially, a process of social contagion is taking place, meaning a tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of other people, contributing to behavioural convergence. When this occurs, the desire to fit in overrides individual judgement, even as, in order to stay sane, our brains maintain the illusion that whatever we're doing is based on our independent judgement. It is believed that everyone else would arrive at the same conclusions and do whatever we're doing. Basically, we like to imagine that other people would see things our way if they would only consider everything rationally like we do. In reality, however, we are on automatic pilot. We are behaving like sheeples.

The Ubiquity of Sheeples

Once noticed, sheeple-like behaviour can be observed all around us. Whether it's the fear of being the odd one out, being different or uncertain, these neurologically driven processes compel us to behave in a herd-like fashion, originating from the choice to run or fight our prehistoric ancestors once had to make under perceived threatening situations. As made reference to earlier, these instincts haven't changed. Even in contemporary society, we frequently contend with situations that we perceive to be threatening.

A good illustration of sheeple behaviour can be found in the financial speculation at the stock market. Like other social contagion processes, it is a phenomenon very much driven by emotions—greed in the bubbles and fear in the crashes. And even as we speak, a similar sheeple-like phenomenon is taking place with respect to bitcoins. Its volatility speaks for itself. Paradoxically enough however, these risky bubbles aren't caused by reckless individual risk-taking. On the contrary, this sheeple-like behaviour is the result of individuals choosing what feels to them like the least risky strategy of all—following the herd.

Sheeple behaviour can also be seen in outbursts of mob violence, political movements, religious gatherings, sporting events, riots, strikes, and even in the context of consumer preferences such as fashion trends. In each of these instances, the individual adopts an opinion based on what other people say and do without bothering to consider the

evidence for themselves. Again, given our evolutionary heritage, it demonstrates that we are all susceptible to behaving as sheeple.

Snake Oil Salesmen

As we have ascertained, people with an understanding of sheeple dynamics can easily profit from it. This is particularly the case in the context of leadership. Homo sapiens' sheeple-like tendencies provide a great opportunity for demagogue-like leaders to rise to power. This "Führerprinzip" (or 'leader principle') was at its most extreme in Nazi Germany. The infamous Nazi propaganda film made by Leni Riefenstahl *Triumph of the Will* illustrates dramatically how Adolf Hitler used these human dynamics so successfully, in convincing people to follow his directions, despite all his evil intentions. This cinematographer's masterpiece is a pure propaganda film through and through. It portrays Hitler as a savior instilling unity, rather than a man driven by a hatred of people he deemed less worthy. In a way, the film combines the strength of documentary reportage and propaganda in a single, powerful visual force. Using tracking shots to showcase huge crowds, the visuals in the film show extended shots of people marching in support of Hitler, all seemingly under his spell, each member of the crowd hailing and enthusiastically applauding him.

Clearly, Hitler's moves were all designed to elicit some kind of Pavlovian response from the viewers. In fact, the film is a song of praise to Nazism, expressed through the geometry of mass rituals—complete with the symbols of power from ancient civilizations—above which hovers the God-like figure of Hitler. This film demonstrates that

the Führer was a master of propaganda; as he wrote chillingly in his book *Mein Kampf*, “It is possible by means of shrewd and unrelenting propaganda to make people believe that heaven is hell—and hell heaven.”

Sadly enough, Hitler’s propaganda efforts were extremely convincing. Many followed his lead unquestionably. One of Hitler’s main disciples, Rudolf Hess, would say, “Hitler is Germany and Germany is Hitler. Whatever he does is necessary. Whatever he does is successful. Clearly the Führer has divine blessing.” These comments were parroted by Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, who stated with conviction that “We are witnessing the greatest miracle in history. A genius is building the world. We heard his voice when Germany slept. His hand has made us a nation again. His hand has led us back to the fatherland. Our whole life we give to the Führer.”⁵ Clearly, what these two key players in Nazi Germany were saying was that the Führer held absolute responsibility over everything and demanded the absolute obedience of all.

Unfortunately, we continue to witness similar behaviour as leaders have repeatedly taken advantage of the sheeple phenomenon. New awareness of this helps us to understand why people had such blind faith in leaders like Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, Pol Pot, and others. It also explains why they would blindly adhere to their ideologies, however bizarre they might be.

⁵ <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/nazi-germany/the-fuehrer-principle/>

Despite the disastrous consequences of these individuals' leadership activities, the sheeple pattern remains very much alive on the contemporary world stage. We need only to think of such leaders as Bolsonaro, Trump, Orbán, Erdogan, Al Sisi, Mohammed Bin Salman, Modi, Khamenei, or Xi Jinping to see how they take advantage of it. Even today we can only watch as Vladimir Putin manipulates his people, overloading the Russian population with disturbing propaganda material to rationalize his disastrous war. And as is for all to see, many people seem to believe his strange distortions of reality, taking for the truth the most bizarre conspiracy theories.

This sheeple programming in our brains explains why otherwise sane and sensible people override common sense proving that human beings are not as intelligent and independent as they would like to think they are. Given the nature of our evolutionary heritage, it is natural for human beings to want to feel part of a community of people with shared cultural and socioeconomic norms. It should come as no surprise therefore that in times of uncertainty, we will always look to strong leaders to guide our behaviour and provide examples to follow.

Are We Born as Sheeples?

Of course, nurture also plays an important role in sheeple behaviour. Not only are various neurological processes at work but there are also developmental processes that seem to play a role. Early childrearing practices are another key line of enquiry in understanding why Homo sapiens behaves the way they do when looking for a leader to provide protection. In fact, leaders will be the obvious outlets to capture the irrational needs,

desires, and fears of groups of people. After all, it is quite convenient to have other people direct the functions of our brain.

In his various contributions to developmental psychology, Sigmund Freud made this process quite clear. He suggested that leaders are the unconscious heirs to the mantle of the primal father. Consequently, they are the obvious outlets for our fantasies when in knotty situations: they inherit their absolute power and unquestioned authority from their caregivers. In fact, taking these psychological dynamics into consideration, the leader attracts followers very easily, as a group who will put aside rational criticism and independent judgment in matters concerning the leader's will. Instead, what happens is, they hunger for the approval of the leader, they will carry out his or her absolute commands with little regard for any personal, moral judgments.⁶ Thus what happens is that the leader's word is written law. They begin to believe that all governmental policies, decisions, and offices ought to work toward the realization of this end.

What's worrisome is that, due to the impact of social media, sheeple behaviour seems to be on the rise. Often, social media selectively amplifies the most sensational content, triggering its viewers' fight-or-flight response. And demagogue-like leaders will take advantage of this human behavioral pattern. We can see that an increasing number of

⁶ Sigmund Freud (1921). Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVIII, London: International Psycho-Analytical Press; Sigmund Freud (1913-1914), Totem and Taboo and other works, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIII, London: International Psycho-Analytical Press.

these leaders, talented in using the internet's algorithms, can exploit peoples' sheeple inclinations to achieve their own ends. In that respect, they know how to work on people's anxieties, evoking the fight-flight response. All too often, this hardwired behaviour patterns helped them in their rise to power. In this context, their use of fake news has also become a major tool to move people in one direction or the other. Here, the creation of fear and the invention of enemies mobilises the sheeples into supporting the kind of behaviour that people would normally find repulsive and threatening. And by the time the panic of the sheeples has subsided, it will be too late—the reins of power may be firmly in the hands of a newly-minted despot.

Sheeple Resistance

As has been said before, copying what other individuals do can be useful in certain situations. Given the fact that there is a sheeple inside all of us, we need to be aware and on guard to this human characteristic. It is important to remind ourselves how easy it is to regress into the sheeple-like behaviour without even realizing it; we fall easily back into these herd-like patterns. Thus, despite the fact that herd behaviour can have occasional advantages, there are many reasons why we should try to avoid such patterns. Otherwise, in blindly following the leader, we may discover that we have become psychologically imprisoned by these people. In other words, when we are following a leader, the process of forming personal situational awareness may be overlooked, and our individuality taken away. We should realize, be it consciously or unconsciously, that demagogue-like leaders may be playing on our inner sheeple inducing us towards herd-like behaviour.

To prevent this from happening, we must remind ourselves that our reflective capacity is what has made for human progress. Even though we are a social species, we should also value our individuality. We should not blindly follow the crowd. To prevent regressing into sheeple-like behaviour, it is important to ask questions, consider our options and educate ourselves in order to make well-informed decisions, even if that means we risk looking “stupid.” It is important to remind ourselves that just because everyone else seems to be making a quick decision doesn’t mean that they know best. It will always be the easier option to follow the herd rather than make independent judgements. Thus, when making a decision, we should examine the kind of biases we may have and question their source.

Realizing the need to justify our choices makes it less likely that we will blindly mimic other people. It will prevent us from living in a form of echo chamber and accepting ideas without further scrutiny. Thus, our challenge will always be to evaluate our personal beliefs when they contradict what others are doing. We should welcome different opinions, but at the same time try to understand why they are so different.

While we are going through these mental activities, we need to keep in mind that being a sheeple is often the natural way of doing things. Whatever position we take, there will always be much (conscious and unconscious) pressure to belong to a group. Hardwired as we are to blend in, it will always be difficult to oppose what appears to be the opinion of the majority. We will always have to struggle with the belief, irrational as it may be, that large numbers of people cannot be wrong.

It will be our challenge, however, to oppose this idea. We should never assume that something is right simply because the majority of people agree on it. We should not accept that the larger the group of people involved in a decision, the more likely it is to be correct. As history has clearly demonstrated, this can be a serious mistake. Therefore, it is important to remind ourselves not to allow anyone else to tell us what we should think, feel, or do. Instead, we should ask ourselves whether the choices that we make are really *our* choices, or whether we have fallen into a sheeple pattern. We should remain aware that our natural desire to be part of the “in crowd” could damage our ability to make the right decisions. Once we become aware of our inclination towards sheeple behaviour, we can make a conscious effort to try and evaluate our own opinions, and following the crowd will less likely be our default pattern. However, to dare to do things differently will always be a challenge.

In addition, we need to be aware of the degree to which stress affects our decision-making capacities. It is anxiety-provoking situations when sheeple behaviour will become more prominent. Therefore, we need to also remind ourselves that reflective decision-making will be even more important when we feel pressured to act quickly. As sheeple behaviour in humans is most frequently observed at times of danger and panic, we need to learn to effectively respond to such stressful environments, when all too easily we could be swayed by the crowd. Therefore, it is wise to delay taking action until we have assessed the situation and are fully aware of what’s happening.

Whenever, we feel the pull of sheeple behaviour, we should remind ourselves that it is our capacity for both independent and dependent thought that has made Homo sapiens so successful and allowed our species to progress. It has helped us to learn new things, discover, develop, and advance ideas. Of course, this doesn't mean that we should ignore our evolutionary heritage, after all, a society of people all working off completely different scripts, with no common themes would be dysfunctional. Clearly, we are socially wired, meaning that we are looking for common ground when we get together as a group. Our brains will always rely on a certain degree of groupthink. At the same time, we should not forget that stimulating independent thought is the only means of reducing the risk of collective madness. It remains our lifelong challenge to distinguish between the wisdom and the madness of crowds, to be selective about sheeple behaviour.