

## Culture, Individual Choice, and the Psychology of Social Transformation

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Throughout the developed world, but particularly in the United States, a cultural crisis is occurring as the result of a combination of Christian religious fundamentalism, White supremacy, and the weaponization of misinformation.

Culture is produced by a consensus of intentioned consciousnesses. It is the result of thousands, upon millions, upon billions of tiny mundane choices made each day by individuals. When you fly from Seattle to Vancouver and look down, there is no visible line traced in the soil that separates the United States from Canada. Yet no Canadians fifty feet from that arbitrary line think of themselves as being American, nor do any Americans fifty feet from the line on the U.S. side see themselves as Canadian. Why is that?

The answer is that we are embedded in our culture. We participate in its creation through the choices we make about what foods to eat and how to prepare them, what sports we watch, what churches we attend, and a thousand other quotidian decisions that make us Canadians or Americans. And the same would be true between Spain and Portugal, or Italy and France. Each generation is instructed in that culture and passes it on to the next generation in this way. Things slowly evolve through the consensus of committed minorities.

Things change because of the accumulation of tiny variances by individuals. We see the changes but not the process. When I was a boy and you went to another family's house on the coffee table there would be an ash tray, a clutch of cigarettes, and one of those Ronson table lighters your mother would tell you not to play with. You never see that anymore. Why is that? No law was passed banning it. The President did not go on television and tell people to stop smoking. The cigarette companies certainly did nothing to cause this change. But it did change. Why? Because enough individuals heard and listened to enough medical data that they made the individual choice to stop, and the culture reflected that in television shows and movies.

Similarly, how did "colored people", the word of choice for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, now known only as the NAACP, become Negroes, a word used by Dr. Martin Luther King, and, today, Blacks? How did Gay become LGBT and then LGBTQ?. No president went on national television to make a pronouncement, no law was passed; the transition was widely and openly discussed. It happened because of individual choices that reached some threshold whereupon culture changed.

What do we know about that threshold? A study done by the Social Cognitive Networks Academic Research Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute provides data-based guidance. "We show how the prevailing majority opinion in a population can be rapidly reversed by a small fraction  $p$  of randomly distributed committed agents who consistently proselytize the opposing opinion and are immune to influence. Specifically, we show that when the committed fraction grows beyond a critical value  $p(c) \approx 10\%$ , there is a dramatic decrease in the time  $T(c)$  taken for the entire population to adopt the committed opinion" [1].

So, when approximately 10 percent of any cohort, be it church congregation, school committee, or political party, changes in consciousness, the whole cohort must accommodate to that change regardless of how or where that opinion starts and spreads in the

society. And when the number is higher, yet still a minority, the shaping of the culture becomes more pronounced. A powerful example of this truth can be seen in the Covid-19 anti-vaxxer movement.

The Covid pandemic and America’s response to it shows how through the weaponization of misinformation, culture cohorts can be created and passionately defended even when it creates a death cult. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) more than one million people have died as a result of contracting Covid and the actual number is probably higher [2]. It is far and away the most deaths in any country [3].

How is it possible that the richest nation on earth spends \$10,586 per person, per year, on healthcare yet ranks 30<sup>th</sup> in the World in the quality of its healthcare? [4]. For comparison Norway spends \$6,187 and ranks 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Netherlands spends \$5,288 and ranks 8<sup>th</sup> and has the worst Covid death rate of all the nations of the world? [5]. Why? Poor healthcare structure is certainly a factor. But that is only a piece of it. The big reason is that the Republicans, led by then President Donald Trump and Rupert Murdoch and their minions politicized and actively misled millions of men and women with anti-vaxxer disinformation that changed the psychology of perception about Covid.

Through this disinformation, for political reasons, they created an American death cult that has caused these horrible numbers. And two years into the pandemic researchers at the Brown School of Public Health, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Microsoft AI for Health “analyzed data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and *The New York Times* and came up with not only 319,000 needless deaths but also a state-by-state breakdown of where they could have been prevented. Between January 2021 and April 2022, about every second person who died from COVID-19 since vaccines became available might have lived if they had received the shots, the researchers found. Nationwide about half of the 641,000 people who have died since vaccines became available could have lived if every single eligible adult had gotten jabbed” [6].

One of the most obvious lessons to emerge from the Covid Pandemic, as President Biden observed, is that as time has gone on it has become clear the Covid pandemic is, to quote the President, “a pandemic of the unvaccinated” [7]. The question, of course, is why did about a third of the adults in America choose not to get vaccinated? It was a very odd decision given that to go to public school in the United States a whole series of vaccines are required and given without any fuss. States vary slightly but what is required in Washington State is pretty typical (See Figure 1).

	Hepatitis B	DTaP (Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis)	Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type B)	Polio	PCV (Pneumococcal Conjugate)	MMR (Measles, mumps rubella)	Varicella (Chickenpox)
By 3 Months	2 doses	1 dose	1 dose	1 dose	1 dose	Not routinely given before 12 months of age	Not routinely given before 12 months of age
By 5 Months	2 doses	2 doses	2 doses	2 doses	2 doses		
By 7 Months	2 doses	3 doses	3 doses	2 doses	3 doses		
By 16 Months	2 doses	3 doses	4 doses	2 doses	4 doses	1 dose	1 dose
By 19 Months	3 doses	4 doses	4 doses	3 doses	4 doses	1 dose	1 dose
By 7 years or Kindergarten entry	3 doses	5 doses	Not routinely given to children age 5 years and older	4 doses	Not routinely given to children age 5 years and older	2 doses	2 doses

School aged children (K-12) in before and after-school programs must meet the immunization requirements for their grade in school.  
Find information on other vaccines that are recommended, but not required, for child care/preschool attendance at: [www.immunize.org/cdr/schedules](http://www.immunize.org/cdr/schedules)  
Review the Individual Vaccine Requirements Summary for more detailed information, located on our web page: <https://www.doh.wa.gov/occc>  
To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127.  
Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 (Washington Relay) or email [civil.rights@doh.wa.gov](mailto:civil.rights@doh.wa.gov).  
DOH 348-053 Nov 2020

Figure 1: Source: Washington State Department of Health [8].

I present the Covid pandemic as an illustration of how individual choices, when a consensus reaches or passes the 10% consensus threshold established by the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute research creates cultural transformation, in this case the culture of the United States. That leads to a second question, one that should be of particular interest to the psychiatric and psychology communities. Disinformation/misinformation is not new. It is a psychological tool of power dating back millenia.

Dr. Martin Worthington, a Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin and author of *Ea's Duplicity and the Gilgamesh Flood Story*, on the basis of his study of 3,000 year old clay tablets describes Noah's flood from a very different perspective centering on using misinformation. According to Worthington, the god Ea uses "fake news" or doublespeak to trick the Babylonian Noah, Uta-napishti, into building the Ark. The statement that Ea makes ("ina šēr(-)kukkī / ina lilāti ušaznanakkunūši šamūt kibāti") is usually translated as a promise that God "will rain down upon you a shower of wheat." All of which sounds unusual, but for ancient people who worried about harvests and grain supply, pretty great. In his new book on the subject, Worthington argues that the verses can also be translated as "he will rain down upon you rain as thick as (grains of) wheat". A similar statement, but crucially different. What seems to be happening here is that Ea is using the linguistic ambiguities in order to manipulate humanity into building the Ark. It's a somewhat deceptive play on words [9].

The reason for this, Worthington argues, is that in ancient Mesopotamian mythology the gods need human beings in order to get fed. When humans sacrifice animals and burn their bodies, the scent of the burning animals rises to the heavens and the gods feed on it like flies. Ea has Uta-napishti build the Ark in order to preserve human life and his own food supply. It is for this reason that Ea has Uta-napishti take animals on the Ark, so they can be sacrificed to him later on.

Here I am going to quote myself in an earlier paper: "So, if fake news is not new and is and has been prevalent all over the world, what is different today? The answer, I think, is the internet in all its various forms and the weaponization of lies in a manner and to a degree never seen before in human history. Almost without real consideration of its impact we have undergone a fundamental and existential transformation of our culture through the digitization of information. Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Align, and all the rest of the digital information spigots operate with very little oversight as to the accuracy of material found on their sites, and in many cases, with the deliberate intent to create a political result through misinformation. I want to take two aspects of this trend to give a sense of the effect it can have.

"The role of misinformation, and its power, have been very clear in the Covid crisis, and it has been going on long enough to draw some fact based conclusions about this culture shaping trend. A trend that is literally a matter of life or death. National Public Radio (npr), working with the Kaiser Family Foundation, pulled the relevant data together: the number of deaths per 100,000 across the U.S. by calculating the deaths per 100,000 in roughly 300 counties. They reported, "Since May 2021, people living in counties that voted heavily for Donald Trump during the last presidential election have been nearly three times as likely to die from COVID-19 as those who live in areas that went for now-President Biden" [10] (See Figure 2).

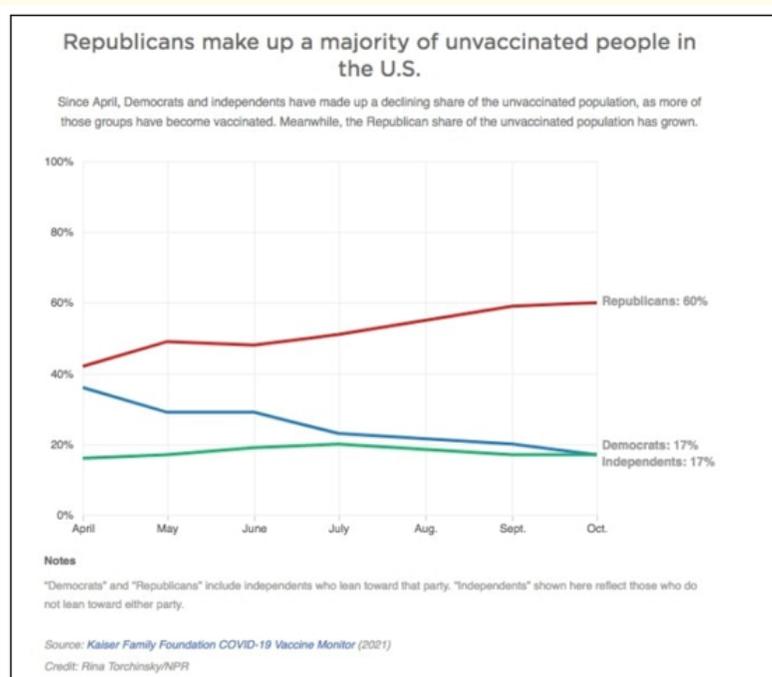


Figure 2

Using misinformation to create a cohort sufficiently large to alter the entire culture in modern times clearly was understood by Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin. But they did not have social media and the internet as was available to former President Trump. There will be more of this. One can already see it in the struggle over the American gun obsession. I would suggest that the mental health community put in the effort to develop an approach to dealing with this new reality.

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