

A LINE ON LIFE

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Social Traps *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

The odds are that you have been caught in many social traps during your lifetime. What are social traps? How can they be avoided?

A **social trap** is any situation that rewards immediate actions that will have undesired effects in the long run. Personal examples of social traps are quite common. Many people are enticed into drinking too much at parties, because their pleasure is immediate and their discomfort – a hangover – comes later. (My social trap is similar. I tend to enjoy eating goodies, but I pay for it later with the problems associated with obesity.) Many people go into debt to own many desirable goods, but later they suffer when the staggering credit card bill arrives. For immediate pleasure of sexual intimacy, many teenagers later pay the price of pregnancy, forced marriage, early divorce, curtailed education, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and so on.

Psychologists have also been interested in *collective* social traps. In such traps, no one individual acts against the group interest. However, if many people act alike, collective harm is done. For example, in a congested city, each person who leaves work right at 5:00 PM expects to gain by getting home earlier. Yet if everyone leaves at 5:00, the resulting traffic jam will insure that everyone gets home late and emotionally frazzled. Rather than waiting a half-hour before leaving to solve this problem, almost everyone tries to make a "*fast getaway*" to serve their own immediate interests. In larger industries, this problem could be reduced by staggered shifts – having portions of their employees start and finish work a half-hour before or after the regular time.

Another example is the "*Share-A-Ride*" program to reduce traffic congestion. Each person decides that it is more convenient to drive his/her own car (to run errands and so on). Again, individual behavior effects the welfare of others and one's self. Because everyone wants to drive for "*convenience*," driving becomes inconvenient for all. The mass of cars in most cities causes irritating traffic snarls and lack of parking spaces. Each driver has been drawn into a social trap.

A particular collective social trap has been named **The Tragedy of the Commons**. This tragedy occurs when *people share a limited resource*. One example involves crab fishermen in Alaska. At first, crabs were plentiful and fishermen were few. Each fisherman made large, profitable catches. To raise profits, each added boats to his fleet. For a while, this did increase individual profits. However, this led to over-fishing – as fishing fleets grew, the catch per boat decreased. With fewer crabs, the reproduction rate of crabs slowed, and crab fishermen went bankrupt. Individually, their actions made sense; but collectively, they suffered greatly in the long run.

In case you don't think this applies to you, more familiar examples of this dilemma relate to conserving gasoline, water or electricity. Whenever our personal comfort or convenience is involved, it is highly tempting to "*let the other person worry about it.*" Yet – in the long run – everybody loses. Have you noticed that – when the supply of gas goes up and prices come down a little – more large cars tend to be purchased? When gas gets cheaper, are you more likely to buy a "*gas-guzzler*"?

Many major social problems may be thought of as social traps. *Environmental pollution* is a good example. There are immediate benefits to polluting – but disastrous long-term costs. If you pollute a river or dump trash on a hillside, it has little noticeable immediate effect. However, if many others do the same as you, the problem quickly mounts to affect everyone.

As another example, consider farmers who apply pesticides to a crop to save it from pest damage. They benefit immediately. However, when many farmers use pesticides, the water system – now polluted with pesticides – may be permanently damaged.

At the international level, countries continue to maintain nuclear stockpiles to feel "*secure*." Yet doing so increases the chance of a final nuclear holocaust. On each side, there are people wondering, "*How did we get into this mess?*"

Even if we are aware of social traps, it may be very hard to dismantle them. One possible way is to rearrange the rewards and the costs. For example, many companies are tempted to pollute, because it saves them money and increases profits. To reverse the situation, a progressive tax could be levied, so it would cost more – not less – for a company to pollute. At an individual level, some power companies are experimenting with a metering system that charges lower rates for using power at "*off-peak*" periods.

There is psychological evidence that – in real social traps – people are more likely to restrain themselves if they believe others will too. Otherwise, they are likely to think, "*Why should I be a sucker? Nobody else is going to conserve...*" (fuel, electricity, water, crabs or whatever)."

Other problems may be harder to solve. How can littering be more effectively discouraged or prevented? How can we make carpooling or public transportation the first choice for more people? All of these and more are social traps that need springing. It is important that we do not fall into the trap of ignoring these problems.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1986, pages 611-612.