

Social commentary is a difficult thing to manage, especially in a short amount of time. There are few people who have the ability to comment on current events in a limited time frame. Rod Serling, director, screenwriter, and creator of classic shows such as *The Twilight Zone* and *The Night Gallery* was one of those people. He was able to write scripts that not only entertained, but also had hidden commentary for those who were willing to hear it. In fact, he indicated that the message of the show was meant to be an unconscious one.

*The Twilight Zone* was a television show that ran from 1959 to 1964 on CBS. Many writers and directors were involved in the show, and the episodes are variable in topic and quality, as a result. As Rod Serling was interested in social commentary, many of the episodes include ideas that we address in teaching social psychology. What follows is a very brief, basic guide to using 3 episodes from *The Twilight Zone* to help illustrate some social psychological concepts.

*The Night Gallery* was another of Serling's shows that aired beginning December of 1970. The format of this show was very different, focusing less on social commentary and more on entertainment. Several episodes, however, have the same relevance to social psychology as *The Twilight Zone*. One episode in particular is discussed here.

Episode summaries are given, so please be aware that there are spoilers if you haven't seen these episodes.

### “The Eye of the Beholder”

“The Eye of the Beholder” (Serling & Heyes, 1960) aired November 11, 1960. Written by Rod Serling and directed by Douglas Heyes, this episode is an interesting insight into social norms, the attractiveness bias, self-esteem, and conformity. Janet Tyler is a young woman who spends most of the episode with her head swathed in bandages because she has undergone a treatment for her facial “disability.” Basically, her appearance does not conform to the culture’s ideals of beauty. Interestingly, until the end of the episode, the viewer does not see the faces of any characters. When her bandages are removed, we see a beautiful young blonde woman. The camera then shows us the (by our standards) deformed faces of the other characters. The doctors have not been able to cure her “disability” and she has undergone the maximum number of treatments, her case is considered hopeless. Meanwhile, “The Leader” is making a speech on television about the importance of conformity and the dangers of individuality. Janet Tyler is met by an extremely attractive young man who is there to take her to a village where people who look like them live, separate from the rest of society. AZ

The attractiveness bias has a long history in social psychology. From the earliest publications of the theory (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) regarding perceptions of the positive characteristics associated with beauty, many studies have shown that those who are perceived as beautiful are assumed to possess positive personal characteristics, such as kindness, intelligence, and personal success (see Langolois, et al., 2000).

Physical attractiveness has long been seen as an important aspect of other and self perception. Its influence on self-esteem has been well documented. Crocker and colleagues’ (e.g. Crocker, Luhtanen, & Sommers, 2004; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) theory surrounding Contingencies of Self-Worth indicates that self-esteem is, in part, based on domains people perceive as important to their personal worthiness. In essence, failure in these domains indicates that one is worthless, whereas success indicates that one has worth. If physical attractiveness is an important domain to an individual or culture (as it is in this episode), being perceived as “ugly” would deal a severe blow to one’s self-esteem.

Another reason for the perceived importance of physical attractiveness is social rejection. People experience a great deal of anxiety surrounding the social rejection of those who are not considered attractive (Park, 2007). In the episode, the doctor often refers to Janet Tyler living with “her own kind” if the treatment is not effective. This is clear evidence of social rejection. This is also evident in how the nurses react to Janet Tyler’s appearance. Early in the episode, one nurse indicated that, if she looked like the patient, “I would bury myself in a grave someplace.” This underlines the rejection, as well as the effect on self-esteem this would have.

This episode directly discusses the maxim “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” – to us, the “normal” characters are ugly. Serling is providing a clear reminder that beauty is often culturally determined.

## “Mute”

Written by Richard Matheson and directed by Stuart Rosenberg, “Mute” aired January 31, 1963 during season 4. Social norms, acculturation, and nonverbal communication of prejudice are only some of the possible topics that can be discussed in this episode. The episode opens with a group of people making a pact to create a community in which people only communicate through telepathy. Ten years later, one of the families involved in the pact is caught in a house fire with only the young daughter (Ilse) surviving. She is taken in by Sheriff Wheeler and his wife who discover that she does not speak. They assume that the parents neglected the girl and denied her an education. What they do not realize is that the girl can only communicate through telepathy. Over the course of 3 months, Ilse is enrolled in school with a cruel teacher who spends a great deal of time trying to get Ilse to talk. When she introduces Ilse to the class, Miss Frank (the teacher) makes the following comment: “We are going to work with her until she’s exactly like everybody else.” Miss Frank discovers that the girl communicates through telepathy because she had some experience with it as a child. When others from the telepathic community finally come to check on Ilse, they find that she is no longer able to communicate via telepathy, and she begins talking. As a result, she stays with the Wheelers.

Conformity is a major component of this story. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) identified two major sources of information about appropriate behavior: informational and normative. Informational conformity occurs when people rely on others to determine what is correct, and normative occurs when people are attempting to be accepted. Kelley (1952) described these as the desire to be right and the desire to be liked, respectively. There is clearly some normative influence occurring here, as speaking is the only form of acceptable communication. Normative conformity may have an influence, as well. Ilse understands that she won’t be accepted in this new community if she does not speak like the others in the community.

Acculturation is another area that this episode touches on. Ilse’s family lived in the same town as the other characters, but their house was outside of town and the family did not interact with the community. As a result, Ilse was from a very different culture. When her parents were killed in the fire, Ilse was forced into a new culture with which she had no previous experience. Her adaptation (see, e.g., Sam & Berry, 2010, for a discussion of terms) to the new culture was not easy. Berry (1997) discussed the different psychological effects acculturation can have, depending on the circumstances of the cultural change. If the acculturation is smooth, then negative psychological effects are minimal. Ilse’s case could be used to discuss the more negative possible outcomes. “Acculturation stress” occurs when an individual has difficulty coping with changes, and experiences stress that can lead to physical or mental well-being issues. It is also possible to make the case that Ilse’s ability to cope with the changes was much more difficult, which can lead to more severe outcomes, such as severe depression or anxiety (e.g. Jayasuriya, Sang, & Fielding, 1992).

The literature surrounding the spread of prejudice through non-verbal signals is also relevant to this episode. Evidence has shown that nonverbal displays of bias are observed by bystanders, and the bias “spreads,” leading the observers to exhibit similarly biased behaviors (e.g., Castelli, et al., 2012; Willard, Isaac, & Carney, 2015). Miss Frank (the teacher) does not hesitate to show her negative attitude regarding Ilse’s inability to speak. To be sure, it is clear that Miss Frank is not tolerant toward anyone who is different, as can be seen by her statement to the other students “We are going to work with her until she’s exactly like everybody else.” Feldman & Donahoe (1978) found evidence that students are able to detect nonverbal indicators of negative attitudes from teachers, and that the students adopt those behaviors toward the students. This effect has also been found in children as young as preschool (Skinner, Meltzoff, & Olson, 2017).

### “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street”

Originally airing March 4, 1960, “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street” was written by Rod Serling and directed by Ron Winston. This episode is incredibly helpful in explaining emotional contagion and how mob mentality occurs. In this episode, a suburban neighborhood is going about its business when a loud noise passes overhead. Most of the residents come out to find out what’s happening and decide that it must have been a comet. Then, anything that uses power stops working, including lights, lawnmowers, and cars. Electricity being affected is one thing, but cars should not be affected by electrical issues. One neighbor, Pete Van Horn, goes to Floral Street to see if they are experiencing the same issues. During the discussion of what is happening, a young boy indicates that the power outage is caused by aliens who have placed a spy among them. Then, one of the neighbors’ cars starts unexpectedly. The neighbors begin to get suspicious of each other and begin to discuss odd behaviors they have seen each other engage in. Over the next few hours, suspicions increase and friendships break down. Eventually, the fear spreads to the point that violence breaks out, including the murder of Van Horn when he comes back. At this point, the mob mentality has completely taken root and the neighbors are in a full panic. As the camera pans away to show the whole street in chaos, 2 aliens are shown discussing how people will destroy each other with the planting of just a little suspicion, and that they will do this in every street in the world to take over.

Emotional contagion has been defined as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person, and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992, pp. 153-154). Often, emotional contagion is adaptive because it can lead to empathy (e.g., Stel & Vonk, 2010). Facial expression of emotion can also serve as a primitive form of communication, for example, between parents and infants (Campos & Sternberg, 1981; Malatesta & Haviland, 1982). In the presence of danger, someone feeling afraid could communicate to others that they need to attend to the environment. Clearly, this aids in survival.

Emotional contagion is not always beneficial, however. Based on our social nature, we are prone to experience the negative emotions of others, even when it serves no adaptive purpose. For example, living with someone who is mildly depressed increases the likelihood of suffering some of those symptoms (Howes, Hokanson, and Loewenstein, 1985). Certain characteristics influence the ease with which emotions are transferred via mimicry, including in-group status (Bourgeois & Hess, 2008) and pre-existing positive relationships, such as friendships (McIntosh, 2006; Tickle-Degnen, 2006). All of these are present in this suburban neighborhood – this is clear from the several mentions made of how long the families have known each other. The families are all of similar ages and racial backgrounds, and this is a tight-knit in-group – they are all neighbors.

Non-verbal cues are often important in emotional contagion. In part, the mob violence in the episode occurs through mimicry of non-verbal behavior, including facial expression of emotion, such as when people look scared (Dimberg, 1982; Lundquist & Dimberg, 1995; McIntosh, 2006). The camera often pans over the neighbors several times showing their facial expressions. Physical posture can make someone look as though they are ready to fight or flee, or if they are sad (Bernieri, Davis, Rosenthal, & Knee, 1994).

### “Class of ‘99”

Written by Rod Serling and directed by Jeannot Szwarcz, this was part of Rod Serling’s second show, *The Night Gallery*. The episode aired September 22, 1971. This segment opens with an auditorium filling with young adults. It is revealed that this is the oral final exam for the University’s graduating class. Questions are asked by the professor to individual students. The questions begin with physics, in which one student, Mr. Johnson, challenges the professor about his answer. The professor begins a threat, but the student is clearly afraid and stops the challenge. The questions then move on to social sciences. The professor indicates that this is the most important part of the curriculum because social interaction is critical to one’s ability to function and contribute to society. The questions come in the form of 3 hypothetical situations that the students are asked to act upon. The first situation deals with 2 rivals for a professional position for which a black male and a white male are competitors. Racial differences are the basis of the disagreement, and the professor encourages the use of stereotypes and physical violence from both parties. The second hypothetical situation involves 2 girls who have a negative affective reaction to each other. In this case, the stereotypes associated with social class are the focus, and mild aggression is shown by both women. The final situation is about survival and again race is the center of attention. Violence is again encouraged, but this time a weapon is involved. One student indicates that the rival should be killed, but is unable to do it. A third student steps in and concludes the situation by shooting the “traitor” (the student who could not kill the first student). The twist comes when we find out that the student who was shot was a robot. The next scene shows the graduation, in which a student discusses how the machines were created by men to be like men, and that the prejudices and violence are part of being human.

The general idea running throughout this episode is in-group and out-group. Regardless of how the situation was framed (whether it be a rival, an enemy, or one individual who caused a negative affective response), the individual chosen was always from a different group. Ingroup bias (Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992) is especially apparent in the last situation in which Elkins, a white student, was to choose an “enemy” and chose an Asian student, Chang. This is also a good example of Self-Identity Theory (SIT; Hogg & Williams, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 2001) at work in that the in-group the students were identifying with influenced how they perceived the other students.

Stereotypes are also an important aspect of this episode. When the students are asked to describe each other, stereotypes were always used (e.g. the black and white students are described as “inferior” and “bigoted,” respectively). Enemies were identified as someone who looks different from oneself. The situations outlined in the episode are clear examples of the Outgroup Homogeneity Effect and ingroup bias (Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). An obvious bridge to prejudice is also made here, as the characters show obvious negative attitudes toward those who are different from them in some way.

The link between prejudice, authoritarianism, and aggression is also clearly defined here. The culture in this episode is clearly authoritarian, as is seen in the early interaction when the student challenges the professor about his answer. There is clear threat of punishment and the student is afraid. The authoritarian personality was first proposed by Adorno and colleagues (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and has been found to be associated with prejudice and aggression (e.g. Al-Tarrah & Lester, 2003; Altemeyer, 1988; Raden, 1980).

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