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Collective Habits Contributing to the New Age of Peace: An Evolutionary Perspective

Ashraf ud Dowla

Voluntarily, most people are able to keep holding their breath under water between 30 to 40 seconds only. Some people may hold breath for a few minutes, but the Bajau can stay underwater for as long as 12 to 13 minutes at depths of several hundred feet. These sea nomadic people live in the waters near the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Over the centuries, these people have acquired a unique ability where they dive and move underwater without any oxygen supply, unusually long time for hunting food. What has made Bajau people to attain this exclusive talent? The simple answer, it's the necessity to survive and persistent endeavor that has made their body chemistry a resilient biological machine adapting to what is essential to move on. The acute necessity to survive has adapted their breathing organs capable of what is needed to continue their life journey in water.

Truly, the human body is a biological yet highly resilient adaptive device. Necessity, recurring endeavor, persistent practice and struggle gradually develop a kind of automated reflex in any human body for attaining the aimed skills. Thus, in consequence, we develop essential soft and hard skills of our life through practice and repeated effort what is commonly known as habits. Habits shape as the innate biological and even psychological necessities to meet our daily needs to survive and enhance our progress as human. Indeed, our life means our time on earth but life also means our habits. Our identity, character, capabilities, and skills are mostly determined by our habits.

Amazing Features of the Human Brain

Did you ever felt saliva on your tongue seeing a picture of juicy tamarind? Perhaps yes; many people experienced wet mouth even by listening to the name of these extra sour juicy fruits. It occurs because, our brain do not recognize the difference between real tamarind and the image of it. For the same brain chemistry, we experience terrific emotions of fear and clammy palms when we watch some kind of horror movie although we are well aware of the drama and every aspect of movie making- performances of actors, use of camera, animation etc. We also experience excitement watching some romantic scene due to the amazing architecture of our brain where it makes no difference between image, visualization, and reality. Indeed, there are keen scientific functions operate behind every such feeling in us.

Human Habits are an Evolutionary Function

When we repeatedly encounter some exciting or odd situation, gradually it turns into usual, and after a certain period, we also start doing similar acts by ourselves. We imitate others and mostly we do it beyond our consciousness. Imitating might sound contagious but mimicry is an evolutionary necessity in human life. Indeed, most of our learning occurs by following others. Coping similar acts and displaying similar behavior also possess enormous social glue, help pair bonding, promoting group cohesion, and help building rapport

with strangers. Researchers behind this study pointed out, it helps human bonding stronger even when people are not aware of it. The study suggests that, unconsciously we tend to imitate people around us – a phenomenon termed the chameleon effect.[1] The chameleon effect works to carry forward the legacy of human knowledge, learning, behavior, and attitude. A newcomer university student may dislike the inappropriate activities during the RAG DAY, but the same boy is often found acting similarly with junior students when he holds seniority in the campus. The depiction is also visible in military training; junior cadets often feel highly disgusted by the unkind behavior of senior trainees in the dormitory but those cadets are found acting similar with their juniors after crossing a term.

Whether good or bad, our behavior develops mostly beyond own awareness and acts as an invisible phenomenon of mental habit that shapes over time. Our habits develop by our surrounding environment whether actual or virtual but once it takes the shape, it starts controlling our life. After any habit is already formed, our brain also starts protecting own habits whether good or bad. Often, we humans do act and behave very little by our knowledge but a lot by our mental and physical habits. Mostly we respond not by what we believe but what habits we possess. We move not by awareness,

logics, and rationality but by what mental habits we have developed over time.

The perception of good and ugly, rationality and judgement, melodious or cacophonous is the outcome of our mental habits. Skills like swimming, riding, driving, reading, playing, typing, and marching is our physical habits, however, skills like perception, evaluating capacity, emotionally intelligent, foresightedness, vision, relationship management, leadership skills are keenly related to the mental habits. Our physical habits build our technical ability but our psychological habits construct our domain of self-worth combining senses of values, principles, faith, dignity, and honor. As such our mental habits define our identity, personality, and character.

When we spot someone as Gypsy, we distinguish them by their living habits. When we identify some people as Jews, Christian, or Hindu, we essentially recognize them by their believing habits. Although none possess empirical evidences on the existences of God, most people believe in different God, Idols, and divine guidance as their mental habits got formatted from the childhood out of their living environment. While everybody is absolutely aware that human life is an episode of a limited time consisting a few years and months but most people employ their lifelong efforts for earning more money, more status, and unlimited power as commanded by own mental habits. The sense of patriotism, dignity, honor, belongingness, values, and principles, concept of the good life, success, and failure are the outcome of our mental habits. Indeed, humans are habit driven entity where mental habits are often more vivid and most dominating. The command of mental habits is so profoundly powerful that people even accept supreme sacrifice to uphold their mental habits.

In the evolutionary perspective, humans are architecture as social being. We love to stay in a group. We always want to be emotionally attached to a team, and thus we form tribes, societies, and nations. Building group identity is our instinctive biological necessity to survive, secure, and progress. We cannot live alone and progress isolate. Due to the evolutionary design, we need emotional support and cooperation of others to enhance own human potentials. In contrast, when we fail to live in associations and stay isolate, we suffer from emotional support deficit; often we endure loneliness,

depression, anxiety and many different mental and even physical disorders. Therefore, human needs to preserve the habit to extend emotional support for mutual benefits.

To complete the evolutionary design, humans are naturally built with enormous essential instincts and emotions to form group identities and associations. The truth is observed in every sphere of our daily life. Humans possess enormous emotional features naturally inbuilt. We always experience sense of love, compassion, sympathy, empathy, belongingness, attachments, and many more natural instincts in us. Getting into a hall room, suddenly when you find people already inside the room are enjoying a burst of laughter, you also reflexively experience a smile on your face without having any knowledge of the reason to be happy. It also occurs when some people are mourning, and incidentally, we are passing by the site, we also reflexively experience a sense of sorry in us. Indeed, human emotions are always induced by the surrounding emotions for the purpose of building mutual attachments. Albert Bandura pointed out this phenomenon through Social Learning Theory and explained that our brain activities are highly resilient to the surrounding stimulations.[2] We tend to like what others like, we feel disgust when we observe people around us sense the same, and thus we develop similar mental habits. As the default design, humans are naturally motivated to form groups and they form groups with similar kinds of physical and mental habits.

In daily life, our brain constantly and continuously encounters and evaluate stimulus of the environment and distinguish each of them as friendly, neutral, or foe. Due to the inherent necessities of better survival, progress and enhancement, our brain spontaneously looks for friends and displays friendly signatures to others whom it considers possessing power potentials. At the same time when our brain evaluates something challenging, unfriendly or hostile, spontaneously it activates its defense mechanism. As human beings are naturally designed to survive and progress in a group or a society, it seeks every opportunity to build power associations with others. To secure own identity in the group and establish own selves as the worthy elements of the group, each human brain continuously evaluates and acts what is needed not only to stick with the group but also to prove its importance among them. That's how every

human unconsciously sense necessity to display own credibility and superiority through every opportunity of verbal and non-verbal signature. Over the time, such urge to display own standing, honor, respect, and dignity turns into our usual mental habits. Thus, creating a strong personal identity and building a powerful coalition works as an unconscious mental drive installed in each human brain.

People stay under unity for the innate purpose to secure better survival and superior progress in life. Often people are also found engaged with debate and fighting to establish own superiority. The same evolutionary purpose operates when they differ and build separate group identity. The necessity of better survival and superior progress drive each human to acquire and propagate own credibility in any terms. They seek to prove own worth in the surroundings by building own domain of security and advancement. Fearing the challenges, many also tend to form own separate group identity. When some people fear falling short of competing capability or credibility, unconsciously they choose to defame their perceived competitors similar to the negative marketing technique. Thus, they engage in propagating bad names and attempt to vilify others to materialize own interest, thus they may develop destructive mental habits. In consequence, we observe emergence of different group identity, conflicting beliefs, opinions, and sometimes disharmony in the society.

A Neuroscientific Perspective of Human Habits

Humans are primarily biological machines and most of our body functioning is controlled by a small organ of 1400 grams consisting of billions of neurons and trillions of synapses. Superior functioning ability of those brain cells determines our aliveness and progress as a human. It operates through enormous biological instincts and neurotransmitters and is directed by essential emotional impulses for the evolutionary purpose of survival and progress. The giant network with keen ultra-microscopic connections, enormous precisions of brain functions, speed, complexities, and evolutionary design of this living organ have made it the most complicated and sophisticated creation in the universe.

Our body acts and reacts as our brain evaluate what is necessary for our wellbeing. In doing so, human brain follows a unique set of skills to accomplish this task. Executive functions of the brain's prefrontal cortex work

relentlessly and consume huge body energy to evaluate every situation, generate decisions and direct our physical responses. When we watch, listen, and visualize something persistently or perform the same task repeatedly, certain brain neurons gradually get strongly connected among themselves and establish working networks. Repeated practice, recurrent experience, and insistent stimulus progressively lead our brain neurons to form certain patterns and thus we experience our habits. Either physical or mental, once habits are formed, it works as an auto-run function beyond our consciousness.

Physical response-based habits are often manifested through our behaviors but mental habits often remain unobserved. When certain habits take the shape, executive functions of the brain disengage and allow the new neuronal network to continue functioning without much of the brain effort. At this stage, the prefrontal cortex of the brain gets involved with forthcoming eventualities, impending challenges, and find solutions to form new and newer habits. Thus habit-building activities constantly roll on inside the human skull similar to microchip production – all tiny connections assemble huge numbers of neurons, forming an integrated circuit or networks and getting out of the production chain as a finished biotic microchip – capable of performing specific habitual actions. Once some habits are confirmed, it takes control of our daily activities and performances. Our physical habits control and determine our physical skills and manifested behavior. Thus our social habits take control of our social behavior, social norms, culture and the universal habits define our state of human civilization.



Humans are Naturally Vulnerable to Build Negative Habits

The negative events or bad news have a greater impact and attention level on our brains than positive ones.

Psychologists refer to this as the negativity bias which powerfully affects human behavior, habits building, decision making, and even relationships. The human brain has a natural tendency to weight and stand out on pessimistic experiences or interactions more than optimistic ones. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson writes, humans are evolutionarily wired with a negativity bias since avoiding threats is the critical necessity to survive. He says, “Two of the little almond shaped regions of human brain called amygdale constantly scrutinize for the bad stuff and fixate on the impending threats. It works as the alarm bell of our brain — uses about two-thirds of its neurons to look for bad news: it’s primed to go negative. As such negative events and experiences get quickly stored in memory — in contrast to positive events and experiences.”[3] Nobel Prize-winning researchers Kahneman and Tversky found that when making decisions, people consistently place greater weight on negative aspects of an event than they do on positive ones.[4]

Psychologist John Cacioppo studied electrical activity in the brain and observed that negative images produced a much stronger response in the cerebral cortex than did positive or neutral images.[5] Such negative biasness occurs due to the evolutionary necessities as our brain constantly work to protect us and enhance our survival in the environment. Neuroscientific evidence has shown that there is higher degree of neuronal processing activities takes place in the brain in response to negative stimuli. The measuring technique of event-related brain potentials (ERPs) also show, the brain's response to specific sensory, cognitive, or motor stimuli elicit a larger brain response by the negative impulses than positive ones.[6] We tend to ponder more about unpleasant events, negative information, and use stronger words to describe them. Thus, bad emotions, bad memories, and bad impressions continuously occupy our attention and impact on our habit building. Research has shown, since negative information causes a surge in brain activity therefore negative bias can have a wide variety of effects on how people think, perceive, behave, respond, feel, and build habits. It explains that humans tends to form negative habits naturally.

Habit Defines Individual Human Identity and Constitute Social Architecture

Once Warren Buffett said, “Chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.” Aristotle pointed out that, quality of work is not an act, it is a

habit. The Greek philosopher Plutarch explained that, human character is simply habit long continued. We are what we repetitively do and our excellence is not an act, but a habit – explained by Will Durant, the writer of *The Story of Civilization*. William James described that, all of our life, is but a mass of habits – practical, emotional, and intellectual. Indeed, our life identity and success is defined and determined by the mass of our constructive or destructive habits. Due to the intuitive motivation in response to the necessity of survival, we learn skills and accumulate our life habits. We form our mental habits on what is practiced and preached in our surroundings. We start to believe what others believe; we start to like what others do. We also start to dislike, disagree, and disbelieve something in similar ways.

Perhaps you have identified the difference of food habits, music habits, habits of social behavior in different age and context. Elders often found enjoying some soft or classical music to the most whereas the youngers may feeling bore and stiff listening to the same piece. Parents prefer some kind of food but the kids enjoy something different. Our mental habit plays an important role in selecting such preferences. We often become emotionally attached to some objects, brands, fashions, life styles, or even geographical areas as they constitute our emotional and mental habits. Whether logical or illogical we often respond, act, and behave due to our physical and mental patterns developed over time and contexts.

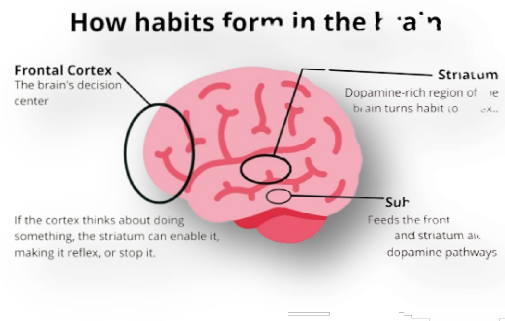
Our life is time bounded; we are habit-bounded entities as well. In adulthood, our daily lives roll on mostly through our habits. The degree and quality of our constructive habits help us to work faster, move faster, and accomplish tasks faster with accuracy. The degree and quality of our physical habits makes us skills and proficient on our works. Conversely, the ways we think, evaluate situations, put comments on certain issues, perceive values, believe something, and sense interests in life are our psychological habits and that makes our identity as individual human character. Although physical habits and mental habits are much intertwined and often difficult to study independently yet physical habits mostly determine our technical ability and mental habits tell us about what we are.

The difference between an amateur and a professional is in their habits. An amateur has amateur habits. A professional has professional habits. We can never free ourselves from habit. But we can replace bad habits with good ones. ~ Steven Pressfield

Time to Build Constructive Habits

Our brain acts beyond consciousness and functions as it gets programmed over time. Infants start learning the fine tune of each pronunciation, intonation, and accent of each word of the language as they observe others speaking. They also learn behavior, display facial expressions, postures, and body language by watching people's actions and reactions to different situations around them. Learning during infancy mostly takes place automatically and unconsciously as an evolutionary necessity to adapt and survive in the living environment. All of these learning takes place as part of habit-building technique. As they watch and observe, they also try to copy and mimic due to the evolutionary motivation to learn new and newer skills. As such, repeated endeavor, persistent practice, and constant effort make toddlers attaining any skills in the form of habits. Indeed, childhood is the best time to build constructive habits and it demands enormous effort to modify when any habit takes the concrete shape.

Although, childhood is the best time to build constructive habits however, habit-building continues in our entire life-long. Due to the media propagation when we repeatedly watch some kind of new fashion on the billboard, Facebook, YouTube, TV, or in any other actual or virtual space, our brain gets wired with new programs and we tend to accept those fashions. In our daily life, hardly we accept or reject any fashion or style by logic but we accept it unconsciously as our brain perceives those new styles as the trend of the time. Our brain always makes an unconscious choice to be the part to the trend although some fashion, style, or norm may not be at all useful the same also occurs in our every life choice, emotional settings, cultures, and even in our belief system. It explains that, our every day and each minute is an opportunity to return from destructive habits and accept the constructive one.



Purpose of the Education System

Children are the best inheritance and the investment of the civilization, as such each parent and every society engage their optimum effort to educating new generation. When we speak about education, we essentially mean the physical and mental training of each child that they should be able to distinguish good from the bad and ugly from the decent. We mean to enhance their working skills, ability to survive, and progress better through learning the rules of the society and enhanced ability on human interactions. Teachers and educators of every society focus their utmost care and effort to build each youth as the responsible citizen, man of principles, complying social standards, norms, and rules. Education system builds each youth with appropriate physical and mental habits that essentially surface them with the sense of dignity and pride in life. The sense of nationalism, patriotism, honor, respectful behavior thus becomes the outcome of constructive mental habits created through formal or informal education system. Indeed, appropriate education is a critical necessity to build and uphold constructive human habits what a society aspire to reach in future.



How to Transform Bad Habits into a Constructive One

Charles Duhigg explained "You can't extinguish a bad habit; you can only change it." He said, habits are hard-wired into our brains, thus we cannot erase it instead, we

can modify. To transform any undesired habits into a constructive one, we have to be determined and focused about changing it. The author of the Power of Habit explained that habit continues with three basic features; the cue, the routine action, and the reward. To transform any old habit into a new, one must keep the old cue, and deliver the old reward, but insert a new routine. As Charles Duhigg said, If you use the same cue, and provide the same reward, you can shift the routine and change the habit. That's how; almost any behavior can be transformed if the cue and reward stay the same. However, to modify a habit, one must possess enough mental strength to change it. An individual must consciously identify the cues and rewards that drive the habits' routines, and find alternatives. The same is applicable for transforming some weird social habits into a productive one. Modifying social practice keeping the old cues and rewards can be suitable to alter some unexpected social habits. A wide use of information technology and its administration is a critical necessity for such transformation.

Collective Habits are the Instinctive Survival Design

Humans are naturally structured with numerous feelings, senses, and essential emotions to build and enhance mutual attachment forming tribes, groups, or societies. In biological architecture, humans possess abundant manifested and also unobserved biotic functions to unite each human through different kinds of socio-emotional impulses. People enjoy talking to each other; they love to hang out with friends and families and experience a sense of punishment when they are kept isolated. We tend to enjoy what others do enjoy, we smile when we observe others smiling, and we experience sadness when we see someone passing through mourning. We, humans, are biologically characterized by love, compassion, kindness, sympathy, empathy, gratitude, serenity, hope, pride, inspiration, and many other feelings that ultimately acts building mutual attachment with others. In our life journey, we experience social attachments, family attachments, subjective attachments, objective attachments, geographical attachments, and many more as our automated life features. These attachments often come from our habits either physical or mental. This is our design and it may be unwise to fight against that natural architecture. For any reason, when we try to lead a life against our biological design of collective living and develop isolated individualistic living habits, the result is a disorder. When we ignore our essential elements of combined habits of mutual wellbeing and try

to lead like a solitary being, we suffer from numerous issues both biologically and psychologically.

75 years longest study on adult life conducted by Harvard finds that people, who are emotionally better connected with their family members, friends, and community, enjoy better fulfillment in life and preserve better physical and mental health. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University reported, "Being connected to others socially is widely considered a fundamental human need—crucial to both well-being and survival." Researchers at the Florida State University College of Medicine also found that loneliness and social isolation is associated with a 40 percent increase in a person's risk of dementia.[7] Therefore, we need constructive habits of reciprocal interest to grow stronger mutual attachment since positive collective habits fulfill our socio-emotional needs to enhance survival and wellbeing. The quality of our living, standard of social peace and stability, norms and cultures are thus determined by the standard of social habits.

Social Habits are Synonymous to Harmony

At the end of a rush day, before hitting the bed, if you take a little respite and ask yourself, what all have you done new today? The way you evaluated something, the way you responded upon some situation, or the way you interacted and behaved with people, was there anything new from your previous days? Perhaps, you will find very little new about it. Indeed, our life rolls on by the repetition of yesterday, the day before yesterday, and beyond. We act, behave, evaluate, and analyze events based on our habits.

When some habits are socially or organizationally accepted, expected and ideally practiced, we often term it as discipline. Our sense of obedience, self-order, norms, and values are the habits of our life. As human being, when we pursue certain collective habits, we develop discipline and harmony, when a society ignore the importance of constructive mental habits, they suffer from disharmony. Discipline is the key necessity of social harmony and harmony leads to peace stability, and prosperity conversely disharmony brings destruction. In a harmonized social structure, the natural outcome is enhanced cooperation and higher productivity, but disharmony brings unhealthy competition, insecurity, power politics, and the society suffer from conflicts and violence. At the meta-level, you will find most of the

social, national, and even global conflicts and crises are linked with the difference in opinions and perceptions – an output of diverse mental habits.

In the Need of Universal Habits

We often feel proud to be the most logical being on earth but such a claim is hardly logical. Practically we humans are highly sensitive creature and emotionally driven by our habits. An individually single human is too weak to survive but collectively humans are the best among all other species to conquer and construct. The concept of collective survival through cooperation and collaboration has made humans superior social beings. So, we need more and more constructive and collective habits for the civilization to enhance cooperation and unity. We also need the most appropriate approach to reshape our destructive mental habits to eradicate our differences and disparity. We need to maximize the power of our spiritual and emotional habits to bring all humans under some universal viewpoints. Nothing to excess, mutual respect, equality, justice, honesty, responsible behavior, hard work, tolerance, and commitment are to be re-established in human habits as a global necessity to re-capture the title “The Best Species on Earth.” These universal habits are again the critical necessity to enhance cooperation among all nations and states for security, peace, and development.

The invention of effective communication ability and easy access to education is one of the best achievements in human history. Constructive learning opportunities is the blessings in progress and prosperity in our life. We are born as primitive biological creatures but learning transforms us sophisticated modern humans. Research, analysis, knowledge, and wisdom have made human civilization connected both vertically with the past and horizontally with the present. In this Information Age, a new and more collaborated world order has silently

emerged to assist the progress of humanity as a single entity. Education system has come up with baskets of logic, rationality, and wisdom to boost our progress as united humans. Knowledge and learning have brought us in front of new possibilities where appropriate and constructive universal habits can foster cooperation; enhance unity, peace, stability, and progress. The precious learning and practice of universal habits can eradicate most of our social and international mental differences and assist to build an even stronger united human identity on earth.

Peace education has opened up our conception that the whole world is the home of all humans and that present civilization has a single entity of humanity as such we need to master the new art of living altogether. We must learn and progress with the highest degree of cooperation among us and wipe out differences and hostility. We need to transform our mental habits so that it helps our combined survival and progress with the highest productivity. We need to shape and reshape our psychological habits to eradicate identity competition, power politics, status, and wealth-hunting contests. We need to establish and enjoy a mental habit of mutual respect, tolerance, sacrifice, and practice of human qualities; a calm and tranquil mindset that helps us all to unite better than yesterday. We need to have the habit to love others and dedicate ourselves to the well-being of humanity irrespective of caste, color, clan, status, or power. We need to eradicate our negative habits and transform them into constructiveness for more collaboration, support, and enhanced security in life. Today, it is a global necessity to promulgate and practice to the most suited universal human habits for more cooperation, superior human values, and greater well-being for humanity.

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