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Editor's Notebook

William C. Levin
Bridgewater State University

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The Force that Moves Us

We had just pushed back from the gate and the engines of our Boeing 717 were starting to whine. Their pitch was climbing when, suddenly, they whined back down to nothing. The exhaust end of the port engine was right next to me, so I looked out the window. I did this, of course, to see if goose feathers were spewing behind us onto the tarmac. No such luck. No information.

I checked to see if any of the other 100 passengers on the flight were looking for an explanation. No one but me, apparently, cared. Their conversations, reading and general fussing were uninterrupted. Then the grinding, thumping noise began. It was rhythmic, coming every four seconds. It clearly was coming from under the plane, and forwards somewhere. It was a sound I had never heard in past flights, and it was plenty loud. No one could fail to hear it. Thumping seemed to me to be an okay sound in a commercial jet, though I’m not sure how I decided that. But grinding? No. No grinding. Again, no one seemed to have noticed. A cabin attendant walked past our aisle and I almost asked her about it. But what to ask? “Do you hear that?” “Is that noise normal?” “Could I change to a later flight, please?” Then the pilot talked to us. “We’ve had a problem with our primary computer, and we have to reboot it before we can take off. Should only be a few minutes, folks.” I liked that “folks” part. Folksy. But nothing about the engines, and nothing about the thump/grind sounds, which I could still hear. Clearly.

Five minutes later we were taxiing to the end of the runway, the grinding and thumping noises still audible. They were finally drowned out by the screamingly high revolutions of the engines during takeoff. More than 100 people in a 120,000-pound cigar tube climbing to 30,000 feet and not a peep from me or any other passenger, as far as I could tell. To quote a colleague, “How could this happen?” I’ll tell you how; it’s “The Force,” and I’m not talking Bernoulli’s Principle here.

My desire to ask about that scary noise in the airplane was suppressed by what felt like a weight pressing on me. Why didn’t anyone say something? How could I be the only one to ask? I never did, and I suspect that others felt the same. We all kept private any concerns we had because of the social pressure not to ask. “The Force.” In this case, the social force. It is the set of pressures that influence our behavior because we live in association with others. Social forces move us to consider the effects of our behaviors on the lives of other people, most often, we hope, to good effect. They are as real in our everyday lives as are the physical forces, like gravity, that influence events. And, like physical forces, we must be aware of their existence and properties if we are to use them in our own interests. Allow me to illustrate with an example, one which has been making news recently.

This morning The Boston Globe ran a front-page story on bullying in schools. It was reported that a seven-year-old girl had called a classmate names and told her she could no longer sit with the name-caller’s friends at lunch. The other girls all went along. The point of the story was to report that the phenomenon of bullying starts much earlier than previous stories had suggested. These have mostly reported on cyber-bullying among older children, some instances of which have led to suicides by targeted kids. The social forces to “go along” among children are shockingly strong, leading many to commit acts of cruelty which contradict even their deeply held personal values. Social psychologists have long been able to demonstrate in experimental studies the fundamental force of conformity, even to the extent of harming others merely to “go along” with social pressure to do so.

In order to be able to operate normally in our complex world, we must take on faith a great deal about the forces that surround us. We simply do not have time to learn all about them. People don’t need to know how planes get lift to stay in the air before they will agree to fly in them. (If I’ve now made it necessary for you to do so, sorry. Just look up the Bernoulli stuff and you’ll feel better). We have accepted that there are forces of nature, such as gravity, which inventors, engineers and technicians can harness to our uses. However, the social forces operating in our lives are given entire too little attention. Unlike physical forces, the management of which we cede to inventors and engineers, social forces must be managed by normal citizens in everyday interaction. But in order to be able to do this, we must begin to take them as seriously as we do physical forces such as gravity. We must become more sensitive to their existence and expert about their influences on us. Otherwise, we cannot reasonably expect to turn them to the values and goals we hold dearest.

—William Levin is Professor in the Department of Sociology and Editor of Bridgewater Review.