

SECTION 4

STRIVING FOR ACCEPTANCE

19. SEEING MODERN SOCIETY WITH FRESH EYES

You decide to learn if the behavior of members of a modern group has changed from that in your earlier groups. You recall that the members in the first group of ancestors usually behaved in ways that increased their personal chances of survival, even when that behavior hurt other members. In the second group of ancestors, the earlier behavior of the members was modified by social pressure in ways that promoted survival of the group. However, you decide to postpone a detailed examination of the behavior of modern individuals until you have an overall look at a modern society with fresh eyes.

Activities of a Modern Group

You know that the United States is made up of many different types of groups doing many different things. Most people are working to provide food, clothing, and shelter for the physical needs of their members, just as they did in your old groups. Defense of your groups was a part-time activity of all members. Now full-time warriors defend the modern society against external enemies. You note that one of your former groups' activities isn't needed anymore, as wild animals are not a problem now. However, much effort is still needed to combat even more dangerous predators - the microbes. You also note that many members work on some important new activities, including public health and education.

You are amazed to see how much of the society's resources are spent in the unending battle against the human predators within the group who prey on weaker members. These are people who cannot control their natural response to stimuli. Although part of this task is still handled by social pressure, there is now an army of police, prosecutors, attorneys, judges, and jail guards to enforce the way the members behave toward each other. Overall, you conclude that some activities have changed hardly at all while others have changed as conditions changed. There wasn't much use for poets and comedians in the bad old days!

Membership in a Modern Group

To get a better understanding of what's going on, you pick a commercial business with about a hundred employees. You realize almost immediately that this modern group has the same objective as the members of the groups of ancestors you lived in. The people here are working together to obtain objectives that they cannot get as well by working alone.

As you watch an individual apply for membership in this modern group, you note that the admission process is more formal, but the requirements for membership are remarkably similar to those in your ancient group. The leaders of this group examine the applicant carefully to be sure he can contribute to its current needs. To be accepted, an individual must have skills the group needs at that time. Moreover, his contributions must outweigh any shortcomings he might have. And even after the individual is accepted, he

will be eliminated if the group no longer requires his skills, if he becomes unable to do his work, if he does it poorly, or if his behavior causes “more trouble than he’s worth.” So the requirements for membership in a cooperative group have changed hardly at all.

The need for social approval hasn’t changed much, either. Although failure to hold membership in a group doesn’t mean death anymore, losing membership in a modern group still generates negative feelings almost as intense as those on being pushed out of an ancient group. Some people have been so enraged at being dismissed that they killed those who expelled them

Hierarchy in a Modern Group

As you examine many different types of modern subgroups, you recognize that they all have hierarchies. You are amused to see that the way members behave and communicate with each other is based on their position in the hierarchy, just as it was in your old groups.

And yet, something important has changed. In your old group, a member tried to move up in the hierarchy to increase his chances of survival. Although expulsion from a modern group seldom results in death, its members are still working frantically to move up in the hierarchy. Why do they do that?

Well, no big mystery. You recognize that some of it is simply continuation of an old behavior pattern even after the conditions that caused that behavior have changed. Some of it is an increased desire to get the benefits at the top of the tree. Things themselves, instead of their contribution to survival, have become the basis for social approval.

Underlying this constant competition for economic and psychological benefits, most modern people still want the same things your former comrades wanted. They want to be accepted as valued members of the group. Even those near the bottom of the totem pole want “respect,” which really means they want acceptance as a qualified member of the group.

Insufficient Contributors

When times were tough, the early groups abandoned everyone who did not make an adequate contribution. This included old people, those who were sick or injured, and those without skills that the group needed. As the groups are now more secure, they can afford to keep some or all of those they would otherwise have abandoned. However, these insufficient contributors do not have all the benefits of full membership. They fall to the bottom of the hierarchy and are given only enough, and sometimes not enough, resources for existence.

The share of benefits given to these auxiliary members is determined by the extent to which the full members identify with those who aren’t contributing fully to the group. Most people realize that some day they too will be too old to contribute, so retirees are

treated fairly well, especially those who made major contributions in the past. Most people who worked for many years receive some portion of their former income to sustain them in their old age.

There is also some understanding for those who are temporarily unemployed. Most are given some public money to tide them over until they can find a new job. Some of those whose contributions are no longer needed because conditions have changed are offered retraining. At the bottom of the heap are those who have never made a full contribution and are unlikely to do so.

As you complete your brief examination of a modern society, you are impressed that the formation of cooperative groups has achieved its primary objectives. Formation of a group has greatly increased the chances of survival of its members. Also, by working together, the members have vastly increased their personal possessions. Nevertheless, there are also some important negatives. Many people suffer physically and emotionally from their struggle to move up in the hierarchy, even though this is no longer needed for their survival. And you find that the possessions and privileges of those near the top of the hierarchy are vastly different from those at the bottom. So this hasn't improved much over your old groups.

You conclude that there has been some progress over the millennia, but it has been modest and varies considerably in different countries.

Although many people are not aware they are doing so, they compete by fair means or foul to increase their status in the group. They usually continue to do things that were desirable in the ancient groups. However, because the conditions have changed, some behavior that increased social acceptance in the ancient groups now loses it in modern groups, as will be shown in the following chapters.

20. SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

You are having dinner with several of your male friends. As you half-listen to their conversation, your mind drifts back to an evening you spent with your ancient comrades. The men are talking as they sit around a fire. Zho is telling for the fifth time how skillfully he killed the antelope. Tah then tells again how bravely he fought against an enemy. When your attention turns back to your modern friends, you hear Joe telling how he landed a big new account. Then Tom tells how he single-handedly fought off a big competitor to save his most important customer. Over thirty thousand years difference in time, but only the details are different.

Now that you think about it, you're amazed how much conversation consists of people telling others about themselves, and almost always in a way that makes them look good. Someone or other tells about his success in the stock market, with the opposite sex, or in growing roses. And when they run out of their own successes, they talk about their children, their parents, their neighbors, and their pets.

This verbal communication is often backed up by a display of nonverbal symbols of their success. They arrange their bowling trophies on a table in the entryway, hang a framed diploma in the family room, display the 4H ribbons they won for their pickles in the kitchen, or have a floodlight focused on the books they wrote. And, of course, visitors can't help noticing their big house, the expensive car in the driveway, an in-ground swimming pool, or sparkling jewelry.

Tastefully done, these attempts to increase social approval make a few points with most audiences. Far more often, however, they lose more than they gain. Most people are not really interested in the routine activities of others; they listen politely only until they get a chance to relate their own activities. And while they might compliment the speaker on a significant achievement, there is also an element of discomfort in it. If you have advanced in the hierarchy, then they have relatively fallen back. This is the reason why "It's easier to bear the success of an enemy than a friend."

Gaining Social Approval

Making contributions the group needs is still the best way to gain social approval. Although not everyone can lead troops, hold public office, make scientific discoveries, or build new industries, many everyday activities also gain social approval. You can always have a bright smile and frequently say that this is the best country in the world. You pay your taxes without complaint, display the flag on holidays, vote even when you don't understand the issues, and support the international policies of your government, right or wrong. When something goes wrong, you say, "Things are never as bad as they seem!" You support your group's objectives, its values, and its leaders. Your controlled optimism, pleasant disposition, and being a "good citizen" quietly contributes to the morale of the group and so gains social approval.

Helping others in trouble contributed to the survival of the ancient groups and so had social approval. Helping others still promotes social approval for those who fight our common enemies of viruses, bacteria, and fungi. Others contribute money or services to charities. Some help an acquaintance get a job or sponsor a friend for membership in an association. Even giving Beth a ride to the doctor or tiding Jim over with a small loan gains some social approval.

Opportunities to be helpful come along only now and then. Nevertheless, you can increase your acceptance almost every day simply by the way you greet other members of your group. If you think this isn't important, consider how you would feel if you were in a foreign country and met another American. If you greet each other like old friends, you will both feel good. But how will you feel if you greet him cordially and he looks at you, turns, and walks away? Greetings are like military passwords; they show that you recognize each other as members of the same group.

Other ways to gain social approval include:

- Engaging in "small talk," which you jokingly refer to as "social foreplay." You use it to feel out the other person until you have a better idea of what you can say without offending him.
- Listening carefully to what others have to say.
- Extending compliments, invitations, birthday cards, and small gifts when appropriate.
- Saying positive things about other members.

Losing Social Approval

Modern society is so large that you usually don't know who is contributing what to its welfare. This gap gives some people the opportunity to magnify the importance of their contributions in some way or other. Techniques that stay within reasonable distance of the facts will be described here. Those that involve deception will be covered in a later chapter.

Embellishment

Even when they intend to be factual, most people dress their contributions up a bit. Their children not only have a 3.8 average, but it's from a tough school. They didn't simply visit the White House like everyone else, but were shown some of its private rooms. The painting they bought is not only beautiful, but it's by one of the best young artists in the country, and besides, they got a real bargain on it.

Some people increase the significance of their achievements with something like, "All the professors at the university said it couldn't be done" or "I've been told that my son's article is one of the most important ever written on this subject."

Embellishment is harmless enough. Most people ignore embellishment so that it doesn't succeed in advancing the status of the transmitter, but it doesn't do any real harm, either.

Exaggeration - "You won't believe the day I had!" She's right; you don't believe it, at least not all of it. Exaggeration is so common that most people don't realize they're doing it. Tim says his employer couldn't get along without him. Jane mentions that her department is the best in the entire company. Sometimes the exaggeration occurs in overstating the difficulties that had to overcome, whether it was childhood poverty or the size of the opposing football team.

As with embellishment, some puffery is considered harmless, so it's accepted with amused indulgence, and discounted back to reality. After all, most people are doing a bit of exaggerating themselves, so it has only a slight negative effect on the transmitter's status.

Exaggeration becomes sticky when it crosses the fine line into boasting. The difference is that exaggeration attempts to magnify the contributions of the transmitter without purposely diminishing the status of others. Boasting, in contrast, magnifies an achievement, real or imaginary, in order to diminish someone through an unfavorable comparison. "Your handicap is twenty? I've only been playing golf about a year and mine is down to 12 already." (Confidentially, he's played for years, and his handicap is 16.) The listener resents any attempt to diminish him, but especially so when it's based on exaggeration instead of fact. So boasting always loses instead of gains the social approval it seeks.

Pseudo-contributions

Some people find it easier to claim contributions than to make them. Walking on a wire high above the ground or skill in twirling a baton are achievements but they make no significant contribution to the group. Academic studies on trivial or obscure subjects have a similar effect.

A common pseudo-contribution is anything "exclusive," such as belonging to an exclusive club, attending an exclusive school, or living in an exclusive neighborhood. Of course the individual might indeed have made valuable contributions to the group to be in that position, but being part of something "exclusive" isn't it. "Exclusive" people do gain social acceptance from others within that subgroup and those who would like to get into it. However, because exclusivity implies superiority over others, they lose approval from everyone else.

Another pseudo-achievement is claiming an association with someone having a higher status in the hierarchy, as by "name-dropping." Although few people ever check the claimed association, this attempt to increase status is too transparent to be effective. Sometimes the attempt is pathetic; "I wasn't in the service myself because of my eyes, but

my brother was wounded." Name-dropping is effective only with other name-droppers; others see it as an attempt to be superior, which loses social approval.

The Kwatiutkl Indians of the northwest coast of Canada have an interesting way to gain status called a "potlatch." This is a meeting of the chieftains around a campfire. One of the participants wants to show that he has so much wealth that he can destroy some of it, so he pours a container of whale oil on the fire. The other chiefs must not back away from the heat or they lose status. Then, as the fire cools, another chief says, "For that little bit of whale oil you call yourself a chief? Look what I can do!" as he throws a canoe on the fire, and so on through the night. Rather like one of our big weddings or Bar Mitzvahs.

Once you are aware of the practice of pseudo-contributions, you see it in innumerable other forms, including:

- Getting a degree from a "diploma mill" and passing it off as equal to that from an accredited college.
- Trotting out obsolete achievements (e.g., the college football player who is still catching that pass for the winning touchdown).
- Being a perfectionist in insignificant activities.
- The Monday-morning quarterback, who always knows what others should have done in every situation.

These behaviors are all counter-productive. Instead of achieving their objective of gaining social acceptance, they lose some. The easiest way to improve your social status is to eliminate all of them from your behavior.

The next chapter will take a look at an even worse way of trying to move up in the social hierarchy, that of pushing other people down.

21. PUSHING OTHERS DOWN

Getting ahead in your group's hierarchy takes ability and hard work. What's more, you might fail. So most people try to find an easier way to get ahead. Instead of trying to move up themselves, they try to push others down, based on the principle that "The worse I can make you look, the better I seem to be." It's a kind of human relativity!

Once you aware that this is going on, you're amazed at how many different ways there are to do it. In fact, it's so common that it seems to be normal behavior. Almost everyone unconsciously learns these techniques by watching others use them. Most people aren't even aware that they're trying to improve their social status by pushing others down or by holding them there.

Who Does What to Whom?

At some time or other, in some way or other, most people try to diminish others. Those near the top of the hierarchy enforce their superiority over others directly and publicly in many ways from the subtle to the heavy-handed. Those with lower status don't dare to attack their superiors directly, so they try to undermine them instead. Those on about the same level use both types of attack, diminishing their peers directly and undermining them indirectly.

Most of this social warfare occurs among peers. A department head might launch a missile at the company president or at its janitor, but these are occasional explosions rather than a sustained attack. Most of his attempts at diminishment are aimed at his closest competitors, his peers, his supervisor, and any subordinates who might be gaining on him.

Minor Diminishments Among Peers

Topping others - You are proudly telling a group of your friends about your recent trip to Russia. They seem to be impressed until one of them interrupts to tell about his trip to China. If you mention that your son just graduated from college, he tells them that his son graduated from MIT in only three years. If he can't top you with some personal achievement, he points out that his auto has more horsepower, uses less gasoline, or has softer seats.

Catching others off base - Some people just love to catch you off base, especially in public. Even a trivial error, such as mispronouncing a word or using incorrect grammar, gives them an opportunity to diminish you. Still better is catching you in a factual error. While you squirm, they can go on for hours harping on your incredible mistake, such as saying that Joe DiMaggio played for the New York Giants. No point in making it worse by arguing with them.

Unfavorable comparisons - This technique for diminishment can be direct or indirect. An example of an indirect attack is comparing you unfavorably with others, as

by praising your competitor's personal qualities, abilities, or achievements. A direct attack tries to force you into a competition you will surely lose. ("How about a game of tennis, chess, gin?") This put-down is even more obvious when you are offered a handicap. ("Tell you what. To make it more interesting, I'll spot you three points, a rook, etc.") When the challenge cannot be refused, it can sometimes be defused by changing the focus. ("Well, okay, I guess I need the exercise, but I haven't played in months")

After watching this technique for a while, you conclude that all attempts to diminish others are intentional, even when the attacker might not be aware he's doing it.

Direct Attacks

The diminishments in this category make clear to everyone that your status is inferior to that of the attacker:

Names - Everyone has a name. By distinguishing you from everyone else, it makes you a special individual. So your status is reduced when someone takes your name away from you by referring to you impersonally, as in calling a waiter "boy" or "garcon." Your secretary feels diminished if she overhears you say, "I'll have my girl call yours to set up a lunch." Referring to someone impersonally makes him or her not quite a person.

Manner of addressing others - Members near the same level in the hierarchy greet each other informally, often using first names or even nicknames. However, as a subordinate member, you greet a superior member formally as Mr. Jones, or "sir." The superior member returns your greeting by addressing you informally as "Tom." However, he goes too far if "Tom" is reduced to the generic "kid" or "boy."

You "talk up" to your superiors while they "talk down" to you. You greet (e.g., salute) your superior first, but otherwise don't speak unless spoken to. On your boss' arrival, you say cordially, "Good morning, Mr. Smith!" Mr. Smith then grumbles a reply, which is considered a fair exchange between superior and subordinate. However, if Mr. Smith happens to say, "Good morning, Tom!" and you grumble a reply, you're in trouble!

Exclusion - There is a guard at the gate of the community where the superior members of your community live. They can enter your neighborhood, but you can't enter theirs. There's no use trying to play on the golf course at their country club though they could, but won't, play at your public course. And your boss can come into your work area at any time but you can't go into his unless you're summoned.

Criticism - One of the functions of a superior is to correct the improper behavior of a subordinate. The subordinate might resent the criticism but nevertheless accepts his boss's right to do so. However, everyone resents criticism that goes beyond the accepted standards. And although you will accept some criticism from a superior, you're insulted by the same criticism from a colleague and furious if it comes from a subordinate. You

accept criticism directed at a specific shortcoming but resent criticism that is generalized to all your actions, as with “Can’t you ever do anything right?”

There are so many variations of this technique that the following forms of diminishment are listed without further discussion:

- Being too busy to listen to you.
- Forcing you to show respect (“Say ‘sir’ when you talk to me.”).
- Imposing expectations (“Don’t make me ashamed of you.”).
- Issuing orders (“Shut up!” “Don’t do that!”).
- Showing signs of boredom, impatience, or annoyance.
- Talking down to you, especially with insults or obscenities.
- Threatening (“I don’t want to have to tell you again...”).

Indirect Attacks

These are diminishments by peers who subtly act as though they are your superiors. Examples include:

- Contradicting you, especially with “yes, but...” to show that he knows more about the subject than you do.
- Disagreeing with your actions or opinions in a way that reflects on your intelligence or judgment (“Whatever made you think that?” or “Were you drinking when you did that?”)
- Giving advice or help you didn’t ask for (“It’s really very simple. All you have to do is...”). More often than not his advice is useless because he doesn’t have all the facts straight.
- Praising judgmentally (“Well, on the whole, I think you did a pretty good job.”)
- Putting words in your mouth (“Of course you want to go, don’t you, dear?”) or modifying what you are saying when the difference is not significant (“It wasn’t a Tuesday, Sweetie. It was a Wednesday.”)
- Questioning your morals or values (“Gee, I never thought you’d do something like that!”)
- Reassuring you when he is not in a position to do so (“You’ll see, it will all turn out all right.”)
- Second-guessing you (How come you didn’t think of doing....”)

- Trivializing your problem, especially by making it cute. (“I wish I had two women interested in me!”)

You know that these are put-downs because no one ever uses them on his boss. These techniques are so common that the practitioner loses only minor social approval for using them. In fact, if the victim reacts too strongly to them, he loses status for causing social dissension. So it’s best to ignore the minor annoyances and to deal calmly with the more serious attacks.

Discrediting you to others - Some people prefer to attack you without fear of a counterattack. They do this by disclosing your shortcomings, secrets, and errors when you are not present. Some examples are:

- Associating you with something that has a negative image (“If he’s not a communist, he sure talks like one!”)
- Belittling your achievements (“He didn’t make the company; the company made him.” Or, “He only gives the money to charity only for the publicity”)
- Blaming you unfairly or without all the facts (“I hear it was all his fault the marriage broke up.”)
- Blocking your advancement, as by blackballing you for membership in a club or for a promotion with “I wonder if he is our type of guy?”
- Telling others about your secrets, weakness, or mistakes.

A skilled practitioner sometimes diminishes you in public under the pretense of innocence. Of course, he wouldn’t have told that joke that shows how dumb, greedy, etc. an ethnic group is if he knew you were one of them. Or he didn’t think you’d mind if he mentioned you had herpes, and anyway, it’s true, isn’t it?

Since you’re not there to defend yourself, your attacker might seem to gain by your diminishment. However, if his attack fails, he loses social approval not only for causing the trouble and also for being incompetent in the way he did it.

In addition, others become concerned that he might attack them next. So those who bad-mouth others almost always lose social approval. There is, however, one exception. If the victim is strongly disliked, perhaps because he attacks weaker people, the other members will be glad to see him “brought down a peg or two.”

Holding Others Down

As you learned during your stay in an early group of our ancestors, a member’s status in its hierarchy is not permanent. Quite the contrary. Those near the bottom are constantly trying to advance, both to increase their safety and to obtain more benefits.

Those near the top want to keep what they have, so they do everything they can to keep the upstarts down.

Anyone who gives up his privileges and treats subordinates as equals undermines all those in superior positions. If a military officer doesn't require his subordinates to salute him and address him as "sir," next thing you know they'll be questioning not only his orders but all authority. So all those near the top of the hierarchy are required to participate in the struggle to maintain their privileged position.

Those who don't maintain their superiority lose the social approval of their peers. When President Franklin Roosevelt, who was born into wealth, sponsored laws that helped the poor, he was called "a traitor to his class." Those who actively assist the bottom-dwellers are called "Jew-lovers" or worse and demoted to the lower status of those they help.

The degree to which superior members can hold inferior members down is limited by social pressure to preserve the group. At one time a master could kill a slave who didn't obey him. However, this cost both him and the group the services of the slave. So the master's freedom to abuse a slave was limited at the point where the slave would rather die than accept that level of abuse.

There are similar limits in a modern society. Subordinate members accept diminishment only to the extent usually considered to be appropriate by the group. Enforcing the level of diminishment approved by the group has the social approval of that person's peers, but going beyond that level loses it.

There are few, if any, winners in this cruel game of diminishment. Anyone who carries the attack too far loses status for causing unnecessary dissension. A victim who cannot defend himself against a peer also loses status. However, you do not lose status when a superior attacks you. Others recognize that this is not a fair fight; they know you can't hit back at your boss. So there is some imprecise line on how much diminishment a subordinate is expected to take. Social approval is lost only through accepting more abuse without fighting back. The boss also has to be aware of that vague line. Up to that level, his behavior is accepted as normal. But going beyond it triggers strong disapproval.

So diminishing others continues the behavior of our ancestors to increase their chances of survival. Their status in the hierarchy might be the difference between life and death. But the vast majority of people today don't have that problem. No one is about to kick them out of the community. They aren't going to benefit much by moving up a few notches in the hierarchy and they aren't going to be seriously hurt if they move down a few. So why are so many people spending so much effort trying to diminish others?

Have you noticed that this is the longest chapter in this book? Any idea why? The next chapter will describe a seldom-recognized technique of diminishing others through wit.

22. DIMINISHING OTHERS THROUGH WIT

As you eat dinner in a restaurant, you overhear the people at the table on your right insult each other directly and crudely, yet they all seem to be hugely enjoying the exchange. In contrast, the people at the table on your left are aiming darts at each other. You'd call them "catty," but they're all men. Why does some "humor" seem warm and friendly while some makes you tense and uncomfortable? The unfunny kind is almost always an attempt to diminish someone under the pretense of humor.

When you encounter a threat, your body tenses in preparation for a struggle. You're going to be hurt in some way. If you escape from the threat, you're flooded with an intense feeling of relief. You're safe! Then you find yourself beginning to laugh hysterically. So laughter comes from the relief of tension when you escape a threat. The more serious the threat, the greater your relief when you escape from it and the more intense your laughter.

True humor puts someone in a mildly threatening situation. (A man is in bed with a woman who is not his wife. There is a knock on the door...) You identify with the person being threatened. The closer the connection, the more intensely you feel the threat. The humorist then rescues you from it in some unexpected way, showing it wasn't a real threat after all.

A good friend says, "I hate going to parties with you!" (Why? What have I done wrong? Am I going to lose an old friend?) Then he gives you a sly smile and says, "All the good-looking women (men) want to dance with you instead of me."

Whew! There really wasn't a threat after all. In fact, he was complimenting you! You slowly let out the breath you have been holding. Then you get this warm feeling for the humorist who rescued you from the threat. You playfully punch your friend's arm. Son of a gun, he really had you going for a minute!

Although wit pretends to be humor, its objective is very different. It's really an underhanded attempt to advance in the hierarchy.

Wit is much more complex than it might seem. It's a three-sided game. There is an attacker (the witty fellow), one or more intended victims, and an audience. As a result, there are three interconnected contests are going on:

- Between the wit and the victim
- Between the wit and the audience
- Between the audience and the victim.

The wit attacks in a way that will reduce the social approval of his intended victim. Any of the techniques to diminish others described earlier can be used. For

example, the wit might tell a presumably funny story about some error you made. (If it's really as funny as he pretends, why aren't you laughing instead of squirming?) Or he might amuse the audience by limping around with a cane to show that you're too old for the young woman you're escorting. Or he might pronounce your name with an exaggerated German accent to show your resemblance to Hitler. When the wit's attack is clever, his status is improved while that of the victim is diminished.

The drama plays out quite differently when the wit is less clever. Wit without skill is reduced to the practical joke, which no one considers to be funny except the misguided practitioner. It uses a meat cleaver instead of a rapier. As the attack becomes obvious, the victim might start to get angry. He can usually be stopped with "What's the matter? Can't you take a joke?" Even so, the wit now has a wounded enemy waiting for an opportunity to get even. Moreover, the audience is uncomfortable that the attack might provoke violence, so the wit loses some social approval for causing unnecessary dissension. Heavy-handed attempts at wit always lose instead of gain social approval.

The wit expects to improve his social status by showing how cleverly he can demolish his victim. So his attacks almost always occur before an audience he wants to impress.

A major factor in this contest for audience approval is the relative status of the wit and the victim. Most audiences support a wit who takes on a dangerous superior, especially one who isn't well liked. Then the attack resembles a bullfight. The matador provokes the more powerful bull into futile responses until it is too confused to fight back. The matador can then strut in front of his paralyzed victim to gain the approval of the crowd for his skill and courage. But one wrong move and the matador will be injured or killed. As a similar fate awaits the wit if he makes a mistake, the tension builds during his performance. When the angry superior is too confused to fight back, the tension eases and the audience snickers at his discomfort.

The audience's reaction is quite different when the wit attacks someone who is restrained from fighting back because of his lower status, as when a boss verbally belittles a subordinate through wit. Tension builds as the subordinate is abused, but the tension is turned against the wit for provoking this unnecessary dissension. While the audience might show a grudging acknowledgment that the attack was skillful, a wit who attacks someone lower on the totem pole in public, however cleverly, always loses social approval.

When the wit begins his attack, you often do not know for sure who his intended victim or victims are. You might be one of them, so you feel some tension. When you realize you are not included, some of your tension is released, so you smile or laugh uncomfortably. In fact, you realize that you might get a little bonus from the incident because your status will be improved a bit if the victim's status is reduced.

The tension builds again as you watch the conflict between the wit and his victim. You wonder what, if anything, the victim will do about his diminishment. Will he attack

the wit in order to regain his status? Then, if the victim does not counter-attack the wit, the tension is broken and you join the others in laughing more heartily at his misery.

To summarize this point, very few attacks improve the social approval of the wit. These usually are clever attacks against a disliked authority figure, as when columnists attack a pompous congressman or students make fun of a teacher. Clumsy attacks or those against a victim who cannot defend himself always lose social approval for trouble making. Besides, a wit is like a man going around with a drawn sword. You never know when he might turn his attack on you.

Jokes can be based on either humor or wit. Any physical or social threat, real or imagined, can be the setting for a joke. The joke starts with some situation that arouses tension, such as sex, elimination, or loss of status. If there's no tension, there is no release and therefore no laughter. However, some care is needed here. Subjects that cause tension are different in different cultures. What's funny in one society or subgroup might not be funny in another.

A humorous joke has no victim, unless it's the jokester himself. It usually shows a likable person in some kind of trouble from which he escapes in some unexpected way. The witty joke, in contrast, ties the victim to some unpopular group, such as an authority figure, a criminal, or an enemy. Then it runs a sword through the victim. So witty jokes are just another way to diminish some person or subgroup in order to advance in the hierarchy.

Nevertheless, most people don't allow themselves to be diminished without fighting back, as will be shown in a later chapter. The audience might recognize itself as the victim in the joke. Or it might not allow the wit to get away with hurting others through his joke. There are numerous examples of public figures who made jokes or flip comments that diminish some subgroup. The violent response shows how intensely the victims and their friends resent the attempt to diminish them, even under the guise of humor.

People who can't distinguish between wit and humor shouldn't use either.