

OGDEN AND THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPAL
The Law of Inertia and the Cultural Lag
By Eustacia Cutler © 2021

Does the law of inertia cause the culture to lag or do our educated heads invest so much time and thought and money on one particular point of view that we can't bear to let go of our investment?

THE CUTTLEFISH

Recently I watched a PBS program on the cuttlefish: a minute swimmer with little to offer in the way of intellectual or cultural investment. Researchers studying the cuttlefish were amazed that it could make surprising and astute behavior changes in order to get at the food they were offering it. They concluded that animal intelligence was the ability to adjust to a new reality.

That may be valid for a hungry cuttlefish with no intellectual investment to defend, but it stirs up a reciprocal question. Can educated researchers adjust to a new reality while demonstrating their invested intellectual technique?

Particularly if that new reality is a small boy with Aspergers?

OGDEN

The teacher sat Ogden down at a little table like the tables in his school-- only this time it wasn't with other children and it wasn't a school room. Then she sat herself opposite him with a notepad in one hand and a sharp pencil in the other; she held the pencil poised in the air like a dart.

Ogden's mother had told him to be good, and the teacher had told him it was going to be a game. But now he wasn't sure. If it was a game how come the room was full of silent grown-ups staring at him? He kept his body turned sideways. Bad enough to look straight on, but worse when they stare like that.

The teacher smiled. She didn't look too different from his mother, but she sure wasn't his mother. She asked him to show her how he brushed his teeth. His mother would never ask him to do anything that dumb. She'd just say it's bedtime, Ogden, time to brush your teeth. The teacher pretended to

put an imaginary something on one side of the table, telling him it was his toothbrush. Over here she put her make-believe toothpaste.
“Show me what you do with them.”

Teachers sometimes ask you to do silly things, but you have to do them even when you know they’re silly. That’s how schoolworks. So, he picked up her not-there toothbrush, squeezed out some of her not-there tooth paste and pretended to scrub up and down on his teeth. The teacher brought her notepad and pencil together and made a sharp little check mark.

The staring grownups nodded and clicked their clickers. Who were they and what were those clickers? He’d been a good sport and done her toothbrush game and those people with their clickers were making him feel how he felt when the big boys snickered and told him he walked like a duck. He decided it was his turn to play.

“I want to talk about gorillas. Gorillas are my favorite--” she cut him off.
“Do you have friends at school?”

This was definitely not a game. In real games you take turns. The teacher was all smiley like the big boys in the school yard. Better go along with her.

“Yes.”

“Can you name them?”

“There’s Ryan and Natasha and Alex. The part I like about gorillas—“
“Are they really your friends or just your classmates?”

“Yes, they’re my friends, we go to school together.” Why don’t the clicker people stop her? It was his turn and she’s interrupting

She leaned over and smiled: “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yes. Her name is Morgan.” What did that have to do with gorillas? Sometimes grown-ups aren’t interested in gorillas, but he was interested in them and it was definitely his turn.

The teacher made a mark with her sharp pencil. “Do you know what marriage is?” There she goes again. He’d answered her questions—and—he’d given her his turn. Better try a joke.

“Knock, knock”

“Who’s there?” Whew! She’s finally listening.

“Gorilla.”

“Gorilla who?”

“Gorilla cheese sandwich— get it?” No she didn’t! She just made another check mark and the clicker people clicked.

“Do you have a girl friend?”

“Yes, I told you, her name is Morgan.” He had a lot of knock-knocks, he’d get in another one fast before she could interrupt.

“Knock, knock.” He’d make her share.

“Is she a girl friend or just a friend?”

“She’s a friend! Gorilla gonna squish your head!”

With that Ogden spread his arms out on the table and laid his head on them:

“I think I’ll play dead now.”

No one laughed, no one stirred. Were the visiting clicker people aware that they’d just been dismissed by a 5-year-old Asperger boy who likes gorillas and knows how to play games?

Though the visitors saw themselves as experienced autism therapists, had Ogden managed to turn them into green beginners? It was a ravishing October day, and they’d been fed a fancy lunch on a balcony overlooking the city. That alone was enough to cloud any out-of-towner’s judgment

And the doctor hosts? Were they so concentrated on measuring Ogden’s attention deficit that they couldn’t see the scene from Ogden’s point of view—that a game is an exchange?

From the doctors’ point of view, it wasn’t a game, it was an exam. If they had explained that to Ogden, he might have reacted differently. 5-year-olds know about tests, they’re part of the school day. Since they didn’t, Ogden saw the doctors as unable to play games. That--in Ogden’s eyes— made *them* the “obsessives with attention disorder.”

To add to it, a room full of strangers was staring at him and clicking computer devices. Ogden knows computers, knows something he’s doing is

being recorded. For him or against him? Since he had no way to know, it must have felt awfully like bullying. As politely as he could, he backed out the only way he could figure—and still keep it a “game.”

“I think I’ll play dead now.”

The host doctors weren’t listening; they’d fallen into appraising their demo technique and were busy deciding that a live interview was the wrong way to teach visiting therapists. Chatting among themselves, they concluded that visiting professionals need a mix of entertainment and fact. The next time they would pre-record the section with the boy, show the visitors the DVD and invite an entertaining ticket-selling star to talk about it.

None of the host doctors noticed how closely their thinking followed Ogden’s, who at five years old (too young to care about ticket sales) knew enough to introduce an entertaining “knock-knock” to get their attention.

Nor had they noticed that Ogden had left the table.

On that golden October afternoon, were the host doctors unaware that something more than their demonstration was at stake?

I don’t remember that Ogden was introduced socially, given a chance to stand up, say his name and shake hands with the doctor—thereby making the project a shared demonstration. To assume that he couldn’t understand a joint partnership was to rank him with the cuttlefish.

Or is it that none of us can see but one reality at a time? And therefore, tend to think of it as the only reality?

**“.. the whole possibility of saying or thinking anything about the world, even the most apparently objective, abstract aspects of it studied by the natural sciences, depends upon human observation, and is subject to the limitations which the human mind imposes, this uncertainty in our thinking is also fundamental to the nature of the world.”*
Michael Frayn: postscript to his play COPENHAGEN (1998)

An uncertainty that every sleight-of-hand artist knows by heart.