



Obedience and Influence: A Social Psychology Study of Character Developments in Todd Strasser's *The Wave*

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Abstract

I have chosen to analyze Todd Strasser's novel *The Wave* from a social psychology perspective. The aim is to analyze how the characters are psychologically affected by group pressure as well as by the consequences of their own actions. I will use two categories drawn from social psychology, obedience and influence, to help explain the characters' behaviors.

Firstly, I summon up the two categories (explaining what they are, etc.) and then I use them to help describe the characters' behavior and when it occurs in the book. Finally, I show how one of the characters see through this and show how she goes against the group pressure.

To conclude, the goal of the essay is to use social psychology to show how the characters change and act throughout the story and how they are psychologically affected by *The Wave* and also by their choices and actions, to show how the characters are affected by the consequences of group pressure.

The Wave (1981), written by Todd Strasser, is based on the film adaptation of the true event called "The Third Wave" which occurred in a high school history class in Palo Alto, California in 1967. The book is about a high school history teacher, Mr. Ross, who teaches his students about World War II. The students do not understand why the Germans did not make a stand against Hitler if they did not agree with him. The teacher does not know how to explain, so he decides to conduct an experiment on the students without them realizing it that he calls "The Wave", in which he attempts to replicate the fascist tactics prevalent in 1930s Germany. He begins with teaching his students discipline and it continues from there, escalating into something which he did not expect. More and more members join until the school becomes completely taken over by the Wave and those who do not want to join have to hide. When a student makes Mr. Ross realize what he has created, he puts an end to it all before it gets out of hand. Although both the book and the film adaptation are quite similar to what actually occurred at that California high school, my focus is entirely on the book and will not account for the film or the actual event. I am going to analyze the book from a social psychology perspective, meaning that I am going to use social psychology to show how the novel's characters change their personalities and their attitudes. I have chosen to work with two categories from social psychology that are especially useful for an analysis of the characters: "obedience" and "influence". With the help of these two categories the purpose of this essay is to explain why most of the students act without realizing what it is happening to them, while one of the characters does make a stand. The essay will have two parts: I will first give an explanation of the terms "obedience" and "influence" as they are understood in social psychology. I will then use these two concepts in my analysis of the novel, concluding by showing why one of the characters, Laurie, understands that influence and obedience is being used on her and the rest of the school and makes her stand.

So first some social psychology: if people do what they want all the time, it would become catastrophic. From childhood, we obey legitimate, authoritative people (Aronson 272). This is called obedience. Obedience is one form of social influence that involves one person ordering people to do their wishes. The person issuing the commands has a way of imposing obedience on the

submissive (Baron 184). The commanding person is normally someone with high social status within a given chain of command (Hewstone 265). It is a process which involves changing one's behavior in response to a command from an authoritative person (Bordens 289). Obedience can occur at any given point; even when the authoritative person is not present, we still follow the rules and laws. Also, obedience can be used in the wrong way as well. Even if it involves hurting or killing other people, people will sometimes still follow the orders of an authority (Aronson 272). This sort of obedience is called destructive obedience and this obedience is used when the rules that people are meant to obey are used negatively. This can occur when an authoritative figure is obeyed but it goes against the acceptable standards of moral behavior, and thus goes against one's conscience (Bordens 289). There are people who will follow the orders from an authoritative figure without any thought to the consequences of their actions (Holt 527). Such people are the "puppets" and the person of authority is the one pulling the strings. The person of authority tells you what to do, and they are responsible for the end results, because the follower (the puppet) was following their orders (Aronson 278).

Some people can find it difficult to refuse to continue obeying when being under pressure, especially when the person of authority is above them in a hierarchy (Aronson 275). It is no surprise that people who follow an authority's rules do know what they are doing and that they are doing something wrong and still do not stop. It is unfortunately because the person has followed the norms, which then eventually can become conflicting, that the person cannot tell the difference between what is right and what is wrong (Aronson 277). In those sort of situations, when the situation has become confusing and the person under the influence of an authority is unsure what to do, the person looks to other people to help define the situation (Aronson 276). An example of this is Stanley Milgram's famous experiment in obedience. It involved a learner (who was the victim) and other participants. If the participants were ordered to punish a learner who was a friend, they would sympathize with him or her. But if the learner was a complete stranger, the participants tended to obey the experimenter, who was the figure of authority. Milgram thus concluded that there was a huge difference if the learner was either a friend or a stranger (Gold

240; see also Hewstone 266-271, Myers 194-200 and Bordens 292-303).

Sometimes, other people's company can affect our thoughts, feelings, attitudes or behavior because of their words and actions (Aronson 35). This is called social influence. This can occur when a person inflicting the influence uses some form of coercive measure, (-persuasion, threats, promises or giving commands) that causes the one exposed to the influence to behave differently from how they would normally act (DeLamater 197). This can cause the target to change his/her attitudes about a person, situation or issue (DeLamater 197). Because influence has an effect on our expressions of attitudes and behaviors, our attitudes will predict our behavior in certain situations, meaning that there will be a connection between what we think or feel and what we do (Myers 126). The individual behavior of one person is powerfully influenced by the social environment, and we can sometimes underestimate how much social influence can affect our behavior (Aronson 52). Examples of when influence can occur are e.g. when a politician tries to persuade us with rhetorics, to get us to vote for him or her, or when some friends are drinking and they want you to have some as well (Aronson 35). There are moments when social influence is not intentionally exerted on the target, for example, when an individual changes his/her attitudes/beliefs as a result of meeting another person in a way that the first person does not purposely influence or force any conditions on the second person (Gold 167).

There are instances though when social influence is exerted through methods appealing to the target (Baumeister). One such method is compliance, which is a form of social influence involving one or more people's attempts to change other people's behavior. There are several techniques (friendship/liking, commitment/consistency, scarcity, reciprocity, social variation and authority) that the source uses to get the target to comply (Baron 205). Eventually, the target's behavior agrees with the source (DeLamater 197). Another example is conformity, which is a form of social influence which occurs when individuals change their behavior to suit the rules and expectations of others in certain cumstances (Baron 205). Influence can also occur from exposure to the opinions of a majority within a group (Hewstone 249). Conformity can minimize when one or more people share the same committed views as the target's (the

person who is being exposed to the influence), or if one or more people depart from the majority's position in some form. We tend to give in to influence because we want to be liked and also to be right. To be liked in this context means that one would be accepted by those in power (which are the ones the target wants them to like), to be right means that the target's actions or judgments would be legitimate in relation to the source. We also conform to justify our previous behavior (Baron 205). A person, who is the target, normally fears, makes judgments and/or adopts social roles within their group (Baumeister).

However, there are people who resist social influence, despite the fact that the pressure to conform is strong. The reason for this is because the person wants to stay as the unique individual they are. Sometimes, a minority can influence a majority, especially when the people who are resisting are committed to what they believe in (Baron 205). Sometimes social influence can prove to have no or very little effect on the target. Sometimes when a source is issuing orders, the target will rebel against the figure of authority (DeLamater 197).

It is now time to apply these concepts to the novel. Obedience and influence can mistakenly be considered to be quite similar, but there are important differences, even though both usually occur around the same time in relation to specific events in the book. My focus, however, will initially be on obedience. The first sign of obedience in the book is the lesson after Mr. Ross shows the students a video from World War II. When they react strongly against the ill-treatment that the Nazis inflicted on the Jews, and Mr. Ross cannot answer their questions about how could this have been allowed to happen, he decides to show his students what it was like for the German people. During that class, he teaches his class several ways of discipline. This would consist of making the students sit straighter in their chairs, making them walk around the classroom and when commanded by him, to sit back on their chairs and remain in the posture they had just learned. The students do this until he is satisfied. Mr. Ross imposes other rules which the students have to obey, such as standing up and answering a question and also beginning it with "Mr. Ross". Despite the fact that their teacher shouts at them and gives commands, the students feel exhilarated, it was not intimidating. The atmosphere changes in the classroom. The students like the

feeling of being controlled and they want to please their teacher by obeying his every word:

It was a far cry from the normally casual atmosphere of the classroom, but neither Ben [Mr. Ross] nor his students reflected on that fact. They were too caught up in this new game. The speed and the precision of each question and answer were exhilarating. Soon Ben was perspiring as he shouted each question out and another student rose sharply beside his or her desk to shout back a terse reply.

(Strasser 36)

Although this is only a classroom environment, it is still a form of obedience, because Ben (the authority) is inflicting power over his students (who are the submissive). He wants them to obey his rules inside his classroom.

Obedience, as defined by social psychology, occurs in all of these situations. Baron explains that obedience is used by one or more legitimate people of authority, who have power over the submissive (184). Even in the classroom the next day, the students sit in their desks, in the position which Mr. Ross taught them the day before. This means that they are still obeying his rules from the previous day and that still has an effect on them. During that lesson, Mr. Ross creates new rules which the students have to obey, such as using the Wave's motto to salute other Wave members inside and outside the classroom (Strasser 44).

During one of the next lessons, Mr. Ross's power over his students grows larger. He gives his students membership cards (some with the letter X on the back which means that they are monitors, who report to Mr. Ross when a member is not following the rules). Mottos and membership cards are perfect examples of symbols used in fascism. According to Laurence W. Britt "Catchy slogans, pride in the military, and demands for unity were common themes in expressing this nationalism. It was usually coupled with a suspicion of things foreign that often bordered on xenophobia". This is what the Wave expresses by the help of mottos and membership cards, it creates a form of unity which excludes non-members. It also gives the members an opportunity to use these symbols to become the voice of the Wave, meaning that they had to spread the

Wave to all corners of the school. This would mean that they would be the voice of their teacher, that they would hold the power to get new recruitments to follow and obey the Wave's rules and orders. (Strasser 58). Also, one of the more noticeable aspects is that Mr. Ross's students, who were Wave members, begin acting on their own. They give orders to the new members and they made sure that the rules were followed. Another prime example is when Wave members try to recruit new members and the non-members do not want to join, the members would harass them until the point where they did join or they hid from them. By this point, the Wave had almost taken over the school and it meant either you were in the Wave, or you had to hide to avoid it. In these cases, obedience is not used to for a good cause; it is used in a negative way. It reached the point where students had no way of escaping the Wave's presence, which lead to dire consequences for the non-members.

From the perspective of social psychology, Aronson describes this as destructive obedience, which is when obedience is taken one step further by issuing threats etc. on the submissive (272). In this case, it shows the Wave moves on from persuasion and tries another tactic- using threats and other methods to force people to join. The members of the Wave who harass and bully students do not themselves realize that they are using their power in a way which is hurting the non-members. They are following the orders and norms of the authority, which is Mr. Ross, without questioning him. Also, what the Wave members do not realize is that if they could look at themselves in a mirror, they would realize that their new behavior goes against their own conscience, their own beliefs and thoughts (see Bordens 289). The Wave members in their blind obedience do not follow socially accepted standards of behavior. At the start of the book, Mr. Ross's students had been against how the Nazis treat the Jews, but what they do not realize is that they are no different from the Nazis: they also used similar methods to make other people submit to them. Although their way of spreading the Wave's message is by using convincing arguments and negative tactics, the methods that they use are no longer conveyed as positive, rather negative, which also causes the action of exposing the Wave as a negative image.

When the Wave has reached its breaking point, Mr. Ross realizes what he has created and uses his power one last time to stop the Wave. He explains to his

students that both he and the members have gone too far, that they should not follow someone without questioning why. He also explains that if he had not done anything and let the Wave continue; to what lengths would the Wave had gone:

“You thought you were so special!” Ross told them. “Better than everyone outside of this room. You traded your freedom for what you said was equality. But you turned your equality into superiority over non-Wave members. You accepted the group’s will over your own convictions, no matter who you had to hurt to do it. Oh, some of you thought you were just going along for the ride, that you could walk away at any moment. But did you? Did any of you try it?”

(Strasser 134)

What Mr. Ross tries to explain to his students is that they should not just accept a situation or circumstance. As Holt points out, one cannot follow an authority without thinking (5 ). Although it might seem great, they must each step back and look at the whole picture, not just the part of it which seems appealing and then question if they truly think if it is right or wrong. Only then can they as individuals decide what they want to do. Bordens explains that if one agrees to something which goes against one’s moral behavior, it becomes a matter of conscience (289). The Wave members in the novel regret how they have behaved, and realize that they were no different from the Nazis. I would also argue that when Mr. Ross tells his students, he is also questions his own beliefs. He comes to accept that he, like his students, had become blind by the novelty of being an authority figure. Despite the fact that from the beginning Mr. Ross saw it as an experiment, it eventually got out of hand. What he had failed to realize was that he liked where the experiment was going, before he finally realizes that it was going too far.

The examples of the concept of influence occur often in the book. For example, when Mr. Ross gives an order to his members they follow; but then, the same members can then use their power to influence others. The same members are both influenced by their leader and influence others. Aronson describes influence as something which occurs when a person has an effect on another person’s emotions, feelings or behavior because of what they say or what they do

(35), which is what occurs throughout the storyline. The first sign of influence in the book is when Mr. Ross teaches his students different types of discipline. Despite the fact that he is shouting at them and giving commands, the students at first think it is a game, but after a while they realize that they like the exhilarating feeling of being commanded over. Because the whole class became hooked on Mr. Ross's controlling manner, they all influence each other in a similar way. By being involved, they all watch each other to see, for example, how other classmates respond to the command given.

The students' attitude slowly begins to change to suit the command at hand:

"It was a far cry from the normally casual atmosphere of the classroom, but neither Ben nor his students reflected on that fact. They were too caught up in this new game. The speed and the precision of each question and answer were exhilarating. Soon Ben was perspiring as he shouted each question out and another student rose sharply beside his or her desk to shout back a terse reply" (Strasser 36).

Delamater describes the kind of behavior (in this case threatening, but there are other types as well) that Mr. Ross elicits from his students' as a persons' adjustment to a social situation (197). Delamater adds that people who have been exposed to such influence, in this case the students, will change their attitudes about a person or issue or situation, which is what happens in the classroom. Because Mr. Ross would use threats and other methods to gain control over his students, he is able to change their attitude about how they perceive him. Instead of going on instinct and saying no to him, they do the complete opposite and try to please him. From being students who were not particularly bothered about having the teacher's approval, a dramatic change occurs showing the students becoming the "teacher's pets".

Even after class, still feeling the energy which came from the lesson, Mr. Ross's students discuss and reflect over what has happened. They talk about how it felt for them as individuals and how it felt as a whole class:

"That was really different. It was like, when we all acted together; we were more than just a class. We were a unit.

Remember what Mr. Ross said about power? I think he was right.
Didn't you feel it?"

"Aw, you're taking it way too seriously," said Brad behind him.
(Strasser 37)

This behavior might look like a conscious attempt to question authority, but that is not the case. Myers tells us that because influence does have an effect on a persons' way of expressing attitudes and behavior, a persons' behavior in a certain situation is predictable (126). This means that there is a connection between how a person thinks and feels about something and what a person does, which is what is happening in this situation. The students are part of a classroom environment which changed how they would normally behave, and discussing how they feel about the lesson afterwards does not release them from the grip of the teacher's authority.

There are two people in Mr. Ross's class who are especially influenced by that lesson: David and Robert. David, who is a football player, likes that the class becomes united as one, even if it was for a brief moment. He uses the knowledge that he has learnt from class to motivate the football team to play as a team and not as individual players: "I'm talking about unity. I'm talking about discipline. We have to start acting like a team. Like we have a common goal. Your job on this team isn't to steal another guy's position. Your job is to help this team win" (Strasser 46). Aronson explains how a person can become powerfully influenced by the social environment, which can affect his or her behavior (52). David is affected by the social environment of his classroom, both by his teacher and his classmates. David is so loyal and dedicated to the Wave that he goes against his girlfriend because she does not agree with him. It takes hurting her for him to realize that the Wave is not about equality, but has become an excuse to hurt those who are not a part of its inner circle. This is a perfect example of what David perceives the Wave as and that the Wave really has become conflicting for him. David viewed the wave only as he wanted to see it, everything else around it was irrelevant.

Robert, the underdog of the class, is influenced in a different way. David sees him in the men's bathroom. Usually he looks like a scruff, but now he has tidied himself up. With his shirt tucked in and his hair sorted, he stands in front

of the mirror, viewing himself while mimicking the movements that had occurred during class, answering Mr. Ross's questions over and over again. Mr. Ross's influence on his class has made Robert change his lazy ways. This process develops even further throughout the book, for example when he asks to become Mr. Ross's bodyguard:

"Robert, what are you doing?" Mr. Ross asked.

"Mr. Ross, I'm your bodyguard," Robert announced.

"My what?"

Robert hesitated slightly. "I want to be your bodyguard," he said. "I mean, you're the leader, Mr. Ross; I can't let anything happen to you."

"What could happen to me?" Ben asked, startled by the notion.

(Strasser 83)

Robert is trying so hard to prevent Mr. Ross from being hurt, but the real reason behind his behavior is that he is afraid that one day the Wave will end, meaning that everything will go back to how it once was, reducing him to be the underdog of the class again. He does not want to lose this feeling of unity and belonging, of for the first time not feeling alone anymore. He also is trying to show Mr. Ross that he believes in the Wave and by following Mr. Ross's wishes, hopefully can become a prominent person within the group.

Another person who is influenced without realizing it is Mr. Ross himself. In the beginning, he does see it as an experiment, which was the point of the Wave. He notices the changes that occur within his members, some more noticeable than others, but seems blind to his own changes. He discusses the Wave and its progress with his wife throughout the book, and she is the one to notice how he has changed too. She and the headmaster of the school discuss the experiment with him. The principal is unsure about the Wave, and calls Mr. Ross in to his office about the matter:

"I'm completely aware of that," Ben insisted. "You have to understand that this experiment can't go any further than I let it go. The whole basis for the Wave is the idea of a group willing to follow their leader. And as long as I'm involved in this, I assure you it can't go out of hand."

Principal Owens refilled his pipe with fresh tobacco and lit it, for a moment disappearing behind a small cloud of smoke while he considered Ben's words. "Okay," he said. "To be perfectly frank about this, it's so different from anything we've had around here that I'm not sure what to think. I say, let's keep an eye on this thing, Ben. And keep your ears open too. Remember, Ben, this experiment, if that's what you want to call it, involves young, impressionable kids. Sometimes we forget that they are young and haven't developed the, uh, the judgment we hope they'll someday have. Sometimes they can take something too far if they're not watched. Understand?" (Strasser 53)

Although he convinces his wife and boss for the time being, he has no idea of what is coming. When the school's newspaper *The Grapevine* publishes a special edition that exposes the Wave for what it is, printing a story about a Jewish boy that had been beaten up after the rally, and publishing an anonymous student's letter about being harassed into joining the Wave, Mr. Ross still had not realized what the Wave had become, or what he had done to cause these events to happen. Becoming aware how his actions had influenced his students and even himself in negative ways (despite knowing for what purpose he had started the experiment), he now uses his influence to make his students understand that they have to take responsibility for their own actions, that they should not blindly follow a leader without question, and that they should never let group pressure take over their individual responsibility as human beings.

So far the general impression is that the characters in the novel all follow the standard model for obedience and influence, but there is one example, however, of a character who does not obey blindly or cannot stand up to influence: Laurie. She notices after a while that the Wave is not what it is pictured to be, and it bothers her how the Wave members obey every command without question. In the beginning, though, she thinks the Wave is great and the message it conveys is something that is too appealing to resist: what she likes is the feeling of equality, but when she finds a letter from an anonymous student in the publications office about being budged into joining the Wave by a senior, she realizes that the idealistic picture that she had in her head of the Wave had been

a lie. The Wave is not about equality because those students who said no to join the Wave are harassed and bullied to the point that they have to join or hide.

Strasser problematizes this behavior by showing that Laurie goes against the orders conveyed by the Wave, for example by not expressing the Wave's symbol or saying the Wave's motto to other Wave members. She does not try to convince students to join, she tries to tell them to leave the Wave. She does this in several situations, mostly with her boyfriend David who is totally hooked to the Wave.

David is not happy that she is not going to attend the Wave Rally:

“Don't you see,” Laurie said, mistaking his hesitation for a glimmer of doubt. “You're so idealistic, David. You're so intent on creating some kind of utopian Wave society full of equal people and great football teams that you don't see it all. It can't happen, David. There will always be a few people who won't want to join. They have a right not to join.”

David squinted at his girlfriend. “You know,” he said, “you're just against this thing because you're not special anymore. Because you're not the best and most popular student in the class now.”

“That's not true and you know it!” Laurie gasped.

(Strasser 87)

From this quotation we can see straight away that Laurie has understood how the Wave functions, that it is a social utopia for its members, and that the Wave takes away the possibility of choice. David, on the other hand, only sees the positive sides of the Wave and how it has a good effect on people. He also knows that Laurie was popular before the Wave, so he believes that the reason why Laurie is against the Wave is because she has lost her popularity status. David cannot see what Laurie sees, that the Wave is dangerous.

Towards the end of the book, when she has finally convinced David that the Wave is bad, they both try to convince both their teacher and their classmates that the Wave has to end before it gets completely out of hand. It is because of Laurie that Mr. Ross finally sees the danger of what he has created, and finally stops the experiment. This shows that unreflective obedience on the part of the many can at times be stopped or at least diminished by the conscious acts of a single thinking individual.

As with her resistance to unthinking obedience, Laurie is the one character who resists Mr. Ross's influence. Here too, though, she initially agrees with the rest of her class that being part of the Wave means equality for everyone, and that no one is better or worse than the other. This view does not last that long, however, before she begins to wonder which direction the Wave is heading. When she discovers the anonymous student's letter in the publications office, the one later printed in the student's paper, her view of the Wave changes dramatically. Baron writes that when a person resists influence, it is because he or she does not want to change who they are to suit someone else (205), which is precisely what Laurie does not do. Despite the fact that other Wave members do not agree with her and pressure her to give in to the Wave, she still sticks to what she believes in. She uses her influence as a writer for the school's magazine to make people see the Wave for what it is. As mentioned earlier, she and her fellow staff members create a special issue of *The Grapevine*, dedicated to exposing the Wave. Because influence has little effect on Laurie and her fellow staff members, they were in turn able to use their influence in a different way. Baron tells us that influence can be used by a minority to influence a majority (205), which is what the staff of the *Grapevine* does by releasing the newspaper. DeLamater also says that a target which is being exposed to the influence, can or will rebel against the source in response (197), which is what the *Grapevine* staff do by releasing that newspaper which contained bad publicity about the Wave. When the newspaper is published, a lot of people are grateful to her and the staff of *The Grapevine* for making them aware of what the Wave really means, thus exemplifying how influence can be both a positive and negative force depending on the circumstances. So, Laurie can successfully use her influence to convince Mr. Ross to end the Wave before it is too late. Although the whole process had been a terrifying experience, she, but mostly the other members and Mr. Ross, learned a valuable lesson: not to believe blindly in something and to think carefully before acting on other's orders.

To conclude, the two categories from Social Psychology I have chosen relate in particular to *The Wave*, and I have shown how the characters in the novel have been psychologically affected by both influence and obedience. The book itself is mostly about how people are affected by one or more person's

influence and eventually being controlled by an authority figure. These factors can take a toll on a person's life, but the novel at the same time shows that they do not necessarily have to. The categories of obedience and influence are played out alongside each other throughout the novel. My study has shown how the novel's characters have been affected by their own and others' actions. Through the use of social psychology the essay has increased our understanding of the characters' choices and actions. I have both shown how someone can so be easily be effected by group pressure and how simple choices, attitudes and beliefs, can affect people socially, but also how even a single individual can make a difference by not giving in to group pressure and authoritarian methods.

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