

Be in control of your memes  
by Lloyd Robertson

I needed one more true and false question for the final. I decided it would be: "The majority of people who suffer from Acquired Immune Deficiency come from Africa (T/F)". Even tho we had not specifically covered this question in class, the answer was found in the textbook and, besides, I was teaching bright NORTEP students.

Every student circled "F". If they had only flipped a coin half of them would have had it right! Something must have been biasing them to give the wrong answer.

An exciting new concept with huge applications to psychology is the "meme". During the 1960s biologist Richard Dawkins noticed that just as life evolves, so does culture. He searched for the mechanism of cultural evolution and came up with "the smallest unit of culture that is self-replicating", which he labelled "meme". The concept of an arch is a meme. "Free will", "liberty", and "media" are examples of other memes. Dawkins found that some memes attracted each other. For example, the meme "god" is almost always found alongside the meme "faith". The two reinforce each other in the mind of the individual. Some memes repel each other. For example, it takes psychic energy to keep the meme "faith" alongside the meme "reason" in one belief system. In a sense our minds are a battleground where different memes form alliances to compete with other groups of memes for dominance.

What does this have to do with my health class? As a class, as well as a society, we have spent considerable resources emphasizing that AIDS is an epidemic. Attention has been given to the concept of "safe sex" which has been modified to "safer sex". Everyone is "at risk" unless you abstain entirely. The anti-AIDS memplex (group of mutually attracting memes) effectively repels the idea that the majority of AIDS cases are in Africa. It gets to the level of feeling, the right answer doesn't feel right.

Recent polling of adults in the USA revealed that only 37% were able to correctly answer "Was there a time when humans and dinosaurs both lived?"; 25% were able to correctly answer "Do antibiotics kill viruses?"; and, 43% were able to say which was smaller, electrons or atoms. In each case, had they known nothing, 50% of U.S. Americans would have selected the right answer. There must be memplexes in U.S. culture biased against the right answers to these questions.

International tests of high school students show that Japanese, Western Europeans and Canadians at or near the top for science literacy while USA students lag far behind. There appears to be an anti-science bias in the United States which is reflected in their educational system. This allows memes planted by their entertainment industry which, for example, often pictures humans and dinosaurs in the same plot, to predominate.

Polling consistently reveals that most Canadians believe that the murder rate is increasing. In fact the murder rate has been dropping in Canada for the past 20 years. But whole memplexes introduced by feminist groups who want to "take back the streets", right wing lobby groups who want "a capital punishment for a capital crime", religious groups who see society as "violent and

evil" and news media who report on murders in the United States (where the murder rate is 10 to 12 times our own) create the illusion that our murder rate is increasing.

Memologist Aaron Lynch says that we can become infected by "mind viruses" which then dominates our thinking. It may be that the recent Taber murder is a copycat of the Colorado murders. Cluster suicide may be another example.

Phobias are an example where memes can trigger or exasperate a tendency that is already present. Many people are afraid to leave their houses. Others wash frantically and repeatedly. Still others don't trust their doctors. Some even believe that there is a medical conspiracy to misdiagnose them.

Good mental health involves critical thinking. It involves having the knowledge and the temperament to put facts in perspective. We need to be able to accept facts and not overgeneralize from them. We need to be able to question sources and be tentative in our conclusions. We need to recognize our own biases. We need to be in control of our own memes or they will be in control us.