



## Nothing Wrong with Shaming the Shameless

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## ABC's Show about Ethics Lacks Them

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<sup>1</sup> Research into human behavior consistently shows we are influenced social norms—by what the people around us expect. Indeed, we're more influenced by the expectations of peers than we are by rules or arguments.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Don McCabe, a Rutgers University professor who studies academic cheating, has found that one of the best predictors of how much cheating a college campus will have is whether students imagine their peers would condemn cheating. If students think their peers would find it unacceptable, they generally don't cheat. If they think their peers are okay with it, then they are, too.

<sup>3</sup> Peer pressure, in other words, can be a force for good—or for ill.

<sup>4</sup> Which brings us to the recent fad of hidden-camera television. For decades, the only show in this genre was *Candid Camera*. But lately, our culture of YouTube and reality TV has become more voyeuristic than at any other point in memory, resulting in a new breed of hidden camera programs.

<sup>5</sup> And some of those hidden camera wielders have social or political agendas. The poster child for social-justice hidden-camera work is ABC's *What Would You Do?*, a series in which unsuspecting citizens often find themselves faced with horrible behavior and have to decide what to do about it. Once they've made their call, host John Quinones springs out to interview them about their reactions. On the show, we see unsuspecting citizens rise to the occasion, briefly becoming heroes in scenarios in which they are the only real element. We also see people expose themselves as racist, homophobic, or sexist as they agree with a person whose lines are completely scripted.

<sup>6</sup> I've heard complaints about the program, and some of those complaints are valid. The scenarios can feel fake or forced. An episode in which a security guard barges into an Arizona store to check the immigration status of anyone who looks "Mexican" is particularly cringe-worthy. The actors and host can sometimes push bystanders a bit hard to weigh in on what they are seeing: "What do you think?" a woman in a Mississippi restaurant asks bystanders after she has just taunted an openly affectionate gay couple, apparently not considering that young women traveling alone in a region not well-known for tolerating homosexuality might not relish the idea of taking a public stand. Perhaps worst of all, the host and producers often seem to expect more people to be mean than actually turn out to be. One of the great pleasures of the program is watching fellow human beings

<sup>1</sup> The two men at the next table are kissing. Other customers at the Mexican restaurant in Mississippi try to ignore it. Clearly, they're not used to seeing open displays of gay affection. Still, aside from some giggling teen-aged girls, most seem to prefer to wrinkle a nose and keep eating.

<sup>2</sup> It isn't until Traci, a customer eating alone at another table, verbally rebukes the couple for grossing her out that any of them vocalize their own feelings, and even then, it usually takes a direct question from the kissing couple.

<sup>3</sup> "Are we bothering you?" one of the gay men asks a nearby, elderly man.

<sup>4</sup> "We're alright. It just affects people in different ways," the man replies.

<sup>5</sup> Apparently, this isn't an extreme enough reaction for the producers of the hidden-camera show that is being filmed in the restaurant—titled *What Would You Do?*—which employs both the gay couple and Traci as actors. In response to the older customer's shrug, one of the actors remarks that he and his partner hope to get married some day. A woman sitting with the older customer, not an actor, at this point admits she doesn't really understand gay marriage.

<sup>6</sup> At this, the television crew and host swoop in, cornering her and pushing for details. She fumbles out some impromptu answers. At some point in the process, she signs a waiver permitting the TV show to use its footage of her—even though she hasn't seen it, won't have any control over how it is edited, and will likely be stuck with the result for the rest of her life due to YouTube.

<sup>7</sup> Welcome to bigot-baiting, the latest in a long-line of reprehensible gladitorial sports that humanity has dreamt up. Actors stage fake confrontations—often painfully loud, stagey, and badly scripted—over pressing social issues. Hidden cameras catch how bystanders respond, not just to the events themselves, but to direct questioning by the actors participating. Although the actions of some bystanders can be quite noble, those reactions don't seem to be what the show's producers are looking for. They seem determined to draw out ugliness for inspection.

<sup>8</sup> Even if you're opposed to homophobia, racism, and sexism (and I hope we all are) there's an element to this pastime that ought to make you nervous. It's all done in the name of ethics—to expose and combat the sorts of wrong-headedness that make society tough to live in for some of its constituents. Yet even as it fights against an

<p>rise to the occasion, yet one gets the impression at times the producers wanted to capture more monstrosity on film—and less humanity—than they caught. When an American soldier stands up for an Islamic citizen, you want to cheer.</p> <p>7 However, I disagree with those who accuse the show of being unfair or unethical toward those bystanders who act like jerks on camera. I have read several such critiques and always come away shaking my head.</p> <p>8 If we want to reverse racism, homophobia, sexism, and similar ills, one of the best tools in our toolbox is shame. We've tried arguments, with poor results. Some of these people cannot be reasoned with. We've tried laws, with meager results. Some of these people find the law to be a creative challenge—an obstacle to be spryly danced around. They already act like jerks in public. They know people have smartphones capable of filming them. They know there are cameras running in the corners of many shops and restaurants.</p> <p>9 Besides, once the ruse is revealed, the producers have them sign release forms to use the footage—if they don't sign, the footage isn't used. So the people you see on TV have given permission to air what they said and did. Claiming they didn't know they were on camera is, therefore, a red herring. They truthfully don't care about the cameras—until they learn, the hard way, that most people don't share their viewpoints. They don't care until that video is flying around on Upworthy and the mail starts rolling in. And if that's the only point at which they'll start caring, then we have a duty to bring them to that point.</p> <p>10 A show that puts decency in a heroic light and shames jerks is a good thing—something that may beget a culture more of us would like to live in. Even if people just <i>act nicer because they think they might be on camera</i>, that's a good thing.</p> <p>11 I say bring on more hidden cameras.</p>	<p>array of evil –isms, it cheerfully stomps on other ethical principles we all ought to hold dear.</p> <p>9 In our criminal justice system, for instance, we don't allow entrapment. Undercover cops aren't permitted to talk us into committing crimes just so they can yell “gotcha” and slam the cuffs on us. The show revels in such things. Also, we insist that accused criminals be read their rights and that they be entitled to legal counsel before they do something so stupid as to sign a piece of paper or confess to anything, because we have learned that cops will find creative ways to get a signed confession unless such provisions exist (and even, sometimes, when they do). The show's subjects, however, are still blinking from the lights and rapid pace of events when they sign those waivers, in the dizzying heat of the moment and without legal counsel. Yet the consequences in both criminal and television cases are more-or-less eternal: Good luck getting the video calling you a ____-ist off the Internet.</p> <p>10 Let's apply a different framework to the show: human-subjects research. The federal government insists American colleges and universities go through rigorous protocols for any research involving human beings, particularly if deception is involved. The research review boards become even more concerned if subjects' identities are likely to become public. If researchers do not abide by those guidelines, their universities risk government censure and loss of funding. <i>What Would You Do?</i> isn't a university, so it isn't technically bound by those research requirements. But the ethical principles clearly apply. And yet the show, in the episode described above, gives out the full name—first and last—of a woman who responds in an on-camera interview that her religious beliefs hold that homosexuality is a sin. Whether one agrees with her views (I don't) or not, she has the same right to human subjects protection that the rest of us do.</p> <p>11 Finally, consider that often the people on the show are vulnerable: elderly, minors, women. They are also, almost invariably, located in areas where the issue in question is likely to provoke: the gay couple episode is in Mississippi; an illegal immigration themed stunt is held in Arizona. Sticking up for a noble cause can be risky in those areas. So we cannot really be sure the people on the show believe what they are saying. The unsuspecting victims of this ambush television are caught in a dilemma: Is it better to be condemned locally by people you know or by legions of strangers on the Internet?</p> <p>12 A show that asks us to be more principled should set a better example.</p>
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