

# The social psychology of the saalem witch trials

[Science](#)



There are several other terms that could replace mobpsychology such as group think, group control, social psychology. Social psychology is termed as a branch of human psychology dealing with the behavior of groups and the influence of social factors on the individual. (Donahue) " An individual is subjected to a more powerful control when two or more persons manipulate variables having a common effect upon behavior". (Skinner 323) The psychology behind this simply states that two people are more influential than one and four people more Influential than two, etc.

In the case of the Salem witch trials, this is extremely evident. Having started with just two young girls from the same household and to grow into a state wide panic at such a fast rate supports this idea. In 1692, Salem was a Puritan village outside of Boston. The puritan teachings and beliefs were deeply revered and a way of life for the followers. The preacher of the church was Reverend Samuel Paris. His sermons were fiery, emphasizing on spiritual warfare between the saved and the damned. Norton 18) Before the trials began, Paris preached a series of sermons about the first verse of Psalm 110: " Sit thou at my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool. " (Norton 118) His reticular style of teaching emphasized on the vast differences between " us" and " them"; " us" being the saved and " them" being the damned, thus instilling fear in the congregation and giving him control of his followers. To put it in a better perspective, David Hackett Fisher wrote concerning Puritan religion " Anyone outside of or contrary to that church was an agent of the devil...

It was the responsibility of the church to help such a person by introducing him to confess the indwelling of an evil spirit and free himself. If he did not

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confess, it were better he be killed, lest he be a vehicle through which the devil contaminate others. (Elephant 134) With this being the Puritan mindset, it would be common to fear the repercussions of not conforming to the rules and standards of the religion. Some religious leaders use the fear that sin will keep you from Heaven and that only the leader could save you from damnation. Skinner 3 The Puritans were on a crusade against evil and those who practiced witchcraft. (Schnapps, Ties 133-148) Samuel Paris was not the only religious figure who was preaching these messages at the time. Cotton Mather was a very well known and prestigious minister at Boston's Old North Church. He firmly believed in the practice of witchcraft. His father, Increase Mather, was extremely influential as well at the time. Both had published works about evil in the very real presence of witchcraft. These, as well as other writings were available to the public and influenced public thinking.

Cotton Mather's first book length publication was *Memorable Providence's, Relating to Witchcraft*. This publication was based on his experience with the Goodwin family. Their children became "possessed" and Mather was personally involved in the children's deliverance. (Hill 20) Eighteen months after the Goodwin trial in Boston, Samuel Paris' young daughter and niece began exhibiting the same strange behavior. Having read Cotton Mather's book, he feared the worst for the children. Once examined by Dr. Grids, and finding no plausible reason for their illness, the doctor concluded that it must be witchcraft. Starkey 45) The Paris' owned a slave couple named Tuba and John Indian. Tuba's growing concern for the girls inspired her to bake a witch cake. This cake contained the young girls' urine and was to be fed to a dog.

If the dog were to behave strangely, the presence of witchcraft would be confirmed. (Hill 23) Samuel Paris was horrified of these actions. After hearing what Tuba did, the girls announced that it was in fact Tuba who had bewitched them. Along with these accusations, the girls also stated two other women in the community were responsible: Sarah Osborne and Sarah Good. Norton 44) The three women were of lower nobility which made the accusations much more plausible. These women were typical suspects of witchcraft. In both Europe and America, witches were mostly female, in their forties or older, had no social power, and did not conform to the social norm. (Elephant 136) " It was easy to make that assumption because they seemed more obnoxious, that kind of seasoning is dangerous. " (Borer 137) Many references to the accused are merely called Hags thus placing the women beneath those accusing her. In no time at all, the number of accusations and accusers increased rapidly.

Young women were receiving attention and had access to public power. The girls could shriek and scream and not be punished, but instead be looked upon as victim. (Elephant 137) The amount of fear greatly increased throughout the village. To be against the group would put you in danger, thus the group grows out of fear. (Skinner 323) The girls not only grew in number but in age as well. Each girl would vary in their emotional patterns and would feed off of each others reactions. (Starkey 45) Those who were imprisoned were accusing others and chaos rapidly ensued.

The community response became more agitated as the trials continued. Those who confessed were neither tried nor sentenced. (Elephant 138) The number of confessions only supported the girls' accusations allowing them

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more credibility. Those who claimed to be innocent were hung following their trial or for one man tortured. At this point, the presence of a strong governing body could have brought a more peaceful solution and calmed the growing fear of the people. Instead, the Judges a owe ten tentacles In ten courtroom anon ten solution spun quickly out AT control.

This is an example of how mob psychology affected the outcome of these trials. The peoples' fears were compounded by the girls' emotional outbursts, the religious view points being expressed at this time and growing distrust of people seen as different from themselves. There was no governing body, civil or religious, that was willing or able to control public response. On the contrary, the establishment of Court of Ore and Determiner, in May of 1692, brought a new level of seriousness. Norton 194) Grand and petty Juries were formed, witnesses were called in and the charades escalated.

On December 23, the court appointed new Juries of men who felt the proceedings were too violent and they would use " another method" while conducting future trials. (Norton 291) Once these men took control of the trials, order was slowly becoming restored into play andthe stormbegan to calm. Many who were still imprisoned were only there because they could not pay the fees to be released. Tuba was one of the last remaining to be freed since Samuel Paris refused to pay her cost of imprisonment. Norton 292) When the trials finally came to an end, twenty people had died.

This tragic and unfortunate event could have had a much more positive outcome had the control of the group been enforced at an earlier time. It is clearly evident that the force of the mob caused the Salem witch trials to

become so overwhelming. Increase Matter played a major influential part toward the end of the trials by opposing the manner in which Salem officials handled the allegations. (Norton 291). Luckily for the town of Salem, new laws were put into action as to how to conduct a witch trial properly. Works Cited Borer, Paul S, and Stephen Einsteinium.