



The Stone Soup Experiment: Why Cultural Boundaries Persist

Deborah Downing Wilson

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The Stone Soup Experiment is a remarkable story of cultural difference, of in-groups, out-groups, and how quickly and strongly the lines between them are drawn. It is also a story about simulation and reality, and how quickly the lines between them can be dismantled. In a compulsively readable account, Deborah Downing Wilson details a ten-week project in which forty university students were split into two different simulated cultures: the carefree Stoners, and the market-driven Traders. Through their eyes we are granted intimate access to the very foundations of human society: how group identities are formed and what happens when opposing ones come into contact.

The experience of the Stoners and Traders is a profound testament to human sociality. Even in the form of simulation, even as a game, the participants found themselves quickly—and with *real* conviction—bound to the ideologies and practices of their in-group. The Stoners enjoyed their days lounging, chatting, and making crafts, while the Traders—through a complex market of playing cards—competed for the highest bankrolls. When they came into contact, misunderstanding, competition, and even manipulation prevailed, to the point that each group became so convinced of its own superiority that even after the simulation's end the students could not reconcile.

Throughout her riveting narrative, Downing Wilson interweaves fascinating discussions on the importance of play, emotions, and intergroup interaction in the formation and maintenance of group identities, as well as on the dynamic social processes at work when different cultural groups interact. A fascinating account of social experimentation, the book paints a vivid portrait of our deepest social tendencies and the powers they have over how we make friends and enemies alike.

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