

‘Getting shunned by others could have been deadly’: An evolutionary explanation for ‘cancel culture’

[Cutting](#) people out of one’s social circle (or life) is a common response to being trespassed against. This is why there are so many estranged relationships in the world. Perhaps publicly canceling someone to the point of ostracism can be thought of as a large-scale estrangement.

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An evolutionary approach to any psychological phenomenon seeks to understand that phenomenon in terms of our evolved psychology, often considering how the ancestral human environments in which our minds evolved may shed light on why the phenomenon exists in the first place.

Estrangements are painful and problematic for all kinds of evolutionary reasons. For the lion’s share of evolutionary history, all humans were nomads. Our ancestors lived in small clans capped at approximately 150 (Dunbar, 1992). Family members and other familiar individuals regularly surrounded people. Under such conditions, being estranged from even a small number of others would have consequences for someone’s capacity to survive and reproduce. Getting shunned by others under ancestral conditions could have been deadly.

[**This is an excerpt. Read the full article here**](#)