



The Law of Social Proof

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Part 1: Everybody's doing it!

I was browsing through a newspaper yesterday happily convinced of the rationality of human kind when I came across an item concerning a so-called mystery illness in a school in England. It seems a total of 53 pupils and adults were taken to hospital after suddenly developing sickness and headaches at Collenswood School in Stevenage.

Strangely though, doctors could find nothing wrong. Consultant clinical psychologist Khwaja Abbas said: "When one person feels ill it is not uncommon for others around them to have the same symptoms. It is not hypochondria; the symptoms can be quite real. Mass hysteria is a likely explanation for what happened at the school."

Mass hysteria indeed, but what exactly does that mean? How do you catch a 'thought disease'?

Social proof

It is a well-accepted fact now that we are all 'social beings' with a –basic need to be connected to others. What is not so well known is that we are such social creatures that we are highly susceptible to being influenced by 'the herd'. We are all vulnerable to what Robert B Cialdini has termed 'social proof' in his seminal book *Influence*.

Social influence, loss of independence and mass hysteria

Musing over the concept of social proof I remembered the tulip 'craze' which originated in Holland.

The story begins in 1559. Conrad Guestner brought the first tulip bulbs from Constantinople to Holland and Germany, and people fell in love with them. Soon tulip bulbs became a status symbol for the wealthy – because they were beautiful and hard to get.

Early buyers loved tulips. And as the tulip craze spread and their popularity boomed, tulips started to be bought and sold as stock commodities. Buying tulips was a good investment. Everyone was doing it!

Eventually (but quicker than you might imagine as social proof behaviour can spread like wildfire) the most expensive bulbs sold for up to \$76,000! Can you imagine spending \$76,000 for a single tulip bulb? Maybe not. However if every one around you accepted this as normal behaviour...

Part 2: Incredible Instances of Social Proof in Action

Headed for a fall

Of course eventually the bottom fell out of the market and people had to sell sell sell. Europe was left wondering what fuss about tulips had been about! Tulip prices soon plunged to less than the present equivalent of a dollar each. Those who had bought a tulip for \$76,000, found six weeks later that it was now worth less than one dollar.

You may already be drawing similarities between this and the dot com boom and bust. Again, despite normally-savvy investors' better judgement, billions of dollars were sunk into companies that with hindsight, had no solid business model. But of course, everyone was doing it – and no-one likes to miss out on an opportunity!

It's OK - everyone's doing it!

The more people engage in a particular behaviour the more acceptable this behaviour becomes. And the social proof rule applies whatever the behaviour. Consider these: Nazi Germany, smoking, medieval witch hunts, the wearing of horrendously flared trousers in the 1970's (guilty!) or the almost standard practice of having body piercing as a 'fashion accessory.' All these phenomena are explicable when we understand the power of social proof. If it is the behaviour of the many that it becomes acceptable to the individual. And usually the individual will feel that they have acted because of a logical chain of reasoning.

In one experiment five primed students were told to describe a circular shape as 'being like a square'. A sixth (un-primed) student, on hearing the others describe the clearly circular object as being like a square, was 81% more likely to also say the round object was square. If the other five students said it was circle like then the sixth student would describe it as being circular. What does this tell us about the psychology of jury service?

And how about the research cited by Cialdini's book? After a highly publicised death of a famous person the suicide rate increases dramatically in areas where that death has been highly publicised! People already vulnerable it seems decide what to do on the basis of what a celebrity had done! (pg 146 Influence - the psychology of persuasion Robert B. Cialdini).

We frequently assume that the teenage years are a time of rebellion. However it is usually only parents who are rebelled against. Teenagers are often the biggest social conformers when it comes to the behaviour of their own peers; they dress, walk and talk in similar ways to their friends. A truly individualistic, rebellious teenager would not be so dictated to by social proof!

Part 3: What to do if you are mugged

Consider the well known phenomena of 'bystander apathy'. People have been robbed, raped and even murdered in crowded areas whilst good people looked on but failed to help. Early on a March morning in New York in 1964, thirty eight New York citizens were aware that Catherine Genovese was being stabbed to death. Not one of them phoned the police or attempted to help in any way during the thirty five minutes that the murderous assault lasted.

Why? Because, unless you are a strong natural leader, you tend look to others for behavioural cues. If no-one else is doing anything, the thinking goes, it must mean something is already being done, or there is a good reason for not getting involved.

If (heaven forbid!) you are ever attacked in a crowded place don't just shout for help. Rather focus your attention on one individual, look them in the eye and say: "You with the blue shirt, help me!" You are much more likely to elicit a response because you are appealing to an individual, not a crowd making it much harder to defer responsibility.

The psychology of selling

Of course advertisers use the social proof rule as a matter of course these days, claiming their product is the 'fastest growing', 'largest selling', or that 'a million Americans can't be wrong' and that this 'international best seller has sold eleven million copies!'

Part 4: On being an individual

So with this sort of pressure, how can we be ourselves, steer our own ships and be individuals?

Before we dismiss social proof out of hand we need to be fair. Much popular behaviour is valuable and the fact that many people do it may be a good sign that we should follow suit. Regular dental check ups, exercising, taking financial advice and so on, are activities engaged in by millions and with good reason.

It's only when we blindly follow the masses that our individual integrity is threatened – especially when that quiet voice says briefly "is this really right?" before being drowned out by the roar of the crowd. But if we go against the herd at any opportunity then our behaviour is no less mechanical than the social-proof induced actions of a Nazi or fashion victim.

We need to be influenced by those around us for society to function but we also need to understand that more people doing something doesn't necessarily make it right.

Recall the story of the Emperor's new clothes. Although the king was naked, none of his thousands of subjects would admit (even to themselves) that he wasn't wearing fine new clothes (the cunning tailor had said that only a fool wouldn't be able to see the fineries).

It took the direct perception and clear straight forwardness of a child in the crowd to point out the Emperor was in fact... naked.

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