Social Proof: Why We Look to Others For What We Should Think and Do

"Where all think alike, no one thinks very much."

— Walter Lippmann

"The five most dangerous words in business are: 'Everybody else is doing it.'"

— Warren Buffett

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The Basics

Consider a university freshman, attempting to navigate the adult world for the first time. They are convinced that all the other students around them somehow know more about adulthood. Perhaps they imagine that everyone else was handed a manual they somehow missed. Everyone else seems to know where to go, how to make new friends, what to do. Except, of course, the majority of their peers feel equally unsure and are doing the exact same. We never quite leave behind that tendency to look at others for clues.

When we feel uncertain, we all tend to look to others for answers as to how we should behave, what we should think and what we should do. This psychological concept is known as **social proof**. It occurs as a result of our natural desire to behave in the correct manner and fit in with others. It can be easy to assume that everyone else has a better grasp of what to do in a given situation. Social proof is especially prevalent in ambiguous or unfamiliar conditions, or in big groups. It affects us both in public and in private.

In The Power of Positive Deviance (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1422110664/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=farnamstreet-

20&camp=1789&creative=9325&linkCode=as2&creativeASIN=1422110664&linkId=dd316fc8db9653042f517e134497706c), Richard Pascale explains social proof:

> *A well-known principle of chemistry establishes that active ingredients can be mixed together with little effect until a third ingredient- often an innocuous catalyst- triggers a chemical synthesis. Analogously, the social system is the catalyst between all the stuff we know versus what actually alters our behavior and mental maps. Social proof? Simple idea, really: it boils down to 'seeing is believing.'… We use social proof to decide how to dispose of an empty popcorn box in a movie theater, how fast to drive on a highway, or whether to tackle that fried chicken or corn on the cob with our hands at a dinner party. At the more consequential end of the spectrum, we rely on social proof to inform moral choices- whether to assist an inebriated football enthusiast who falls on the sidewalk or step forward as a whistleblower.*

Social proof can be problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, groups of people can reach conclusions which are suboptimal or even outright wrong. This is also known as groupthink or herd behavior. Secondly, social proof can be manipulated to guide us towards choices we would not otherwise make. In extreme cases, it can lead to groups of people becoming violent or antisocial. We will look at one of the worst examples further on in this post.

No one likes to be confused about what to do in a situation where other people are around to witness any blunders. The more uncertain we feel, the more susceptible we are to social proof.

A further key factor is the similarity we see between ourselves and the people around us.

When people relate to those around them (due to gender, class, race, shared interests, and other commonalities) they mimic each other's behavior with greater care. This is known as implicit egotism and linked to the mirror neurons in our brains.

In Private Truths, Public Lies (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0674707575/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=farnamstreet-20&camp=1789&creative=9325&linkCode=as2&creativeASIN=0674707575&linkId=17d0d1549b2afa985da080bc88dd32fe), Timur Kuran writes of the influence on social proof on groups:

> *A phrase like 'the American way' when uttered on behalf of a particular agenda, signals that most Americans, or at least most respectable Americans agree on what is appropriate. Of course, the claim embodied in such a phrase may harbor much exaggeration. Other methods of exaggeration include dwelling on biased polls [e.g. a political poll only completed by white males] and overstating the size of a demonstration. All such methods constitute direct appeals to social proof. ..the softness or hardness of a belief must not be confused with its power, which is its potential influence over behaviour. A belief based solely on social proof -one that is extremely soft- may generate wild passions, as when a student participates fervently in a revolutionary movement whose program she has never read. By the same token, a belief formed through extensive personal experience- one that is very hard may elicit little action. An educator convinced that schools are in decline will not necessarily act on this information fearing objections.*

No matter how individual we think we are, we all have an inherent desire to conform. Psychologists call this the bandwagon effect- ideas, beliefs, trends, and concepts are spread between people. The more people adopt them, the more people are influenced to do so.

In The Negotiator's Fieldbook (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1590315456/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=farnamstreet-20&camp=1789&creative=9325&linkCode=as2&creativeASIN=1590315456&linkId=94d7a1864c77afc88e3af16a0bc09485), an example of how social proof is used by lawyers is provided:

> *A lawyer… might exhibit certain behaviors at the bargaining table (e.g. she can attempt to frame the negotiation as a search for jointly desirable outcomes) and thereby model the behaviour for her counterpart. This, in turn, could induce her counterpart to conduct herself in a similar manner. Likewise, a lawyer might use evidence from similar cases…showing how often- even perhaps for what amounts- litigants in similar cases have settled. By demonstrating that similarly situated others have settled, the lawyer may be able to persuade her counterpart that settlement is appropriate for her as well.*

Robert Cialdini and the Science of Persuasion

According to Robert Cialdini, social proof is one of the six key principles of persuasion (https://www.farnamstreetblog.com/2014/04/influence-psychology-persuasion/). When combined with reciprocity, consistency, authority, liking, and scarcity, it can be used to influence people's actions.

In one study, researchers from New York City university planted a man on a busy sidewalk. Amongst crowds of people, he stopped and looked upwards for a minute. The experiment by social psychologists Milgram, Bickman, and Berkowitz was designed to test the power of social proof. When just one man gazed at the sky, just 4% of passersby also looked up. When the experiment was repeated with five men looking upwards, 18% of passersby followed suit, and for 15 the figure was 40%. This experiment is cited by Cialdini as an illustration of how social proof persuades people to behave in certain ways. Another study cited by Cialdini concerned charitable donations, finding that showing people a list of their neighbors who had donated to a charity led to a substantial increase in funds raised. The more names on the list, the more people donated. Cialdini also explains how the use of social proof can backfire. Campaigns to reduce drug and alcohol consumption which cite high rates of abuse can have the opposite effect. People subconsciously seek to comply with the many others who are engaging in this behavior.

Cialdini writes:

> *The principle of social proof says so: The greater the number of people who find any idea correct, the more the idea will be correct…We will use the actions of others to decide on proper behavior for ourselves, especially when we view those others as similar to ourselves…When we are uncertain, we are willing to place an enormous amount of trust in the collective knowledge of the crowd…First, we seem to assume that if a lot of people are doing the same thing, they must know something we don't…Social proof is most powerful for those who feel unfamiliar or unsure in a specific situation and who, consequently, must look outside themselves for evidence of how best to behave there… Since 95 percent of the people are imitators and only 5 percent initiators, people are persuaded more by the actions of others than by any proof we can offer.*

Examples of social proof

"Lack of skepticism is often the result of our social beliefs. No one would believe such absurd nonsense as a moon made of cheese or a flying teapot when it is proposed in such an unfamiliar way. However, when we encounter equally absurd belief systems in socially or historically-familiar contexts, they seem to have a measure of proof and be established or valid. In other words, a lot of people believing some total bullshit creates a form of social proof."
— Sia Mohajer

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An unfortunate fact of life is that some people desperately seek opportunities, while others are bombarded with them. One person struggles to find a job, sending their CV everywhere. Another person has an impressive role already and yet is constantly offered

others. One book proposal is fought over by publishers. Another is relegated straight to the bin. One person never manages to find anyone willing to go on a date, while another receives non-stop propositions despite being in a relationship. Why does this happen? The answer is social proof.

When someone is regarded as successful, talented, or attractive that view spreads. When social proof is absent, others are more dismissive and attentive to flaws. Two people could be equally qualified, but the one with a high-ranking job already seems like a fail-safe choice for a key role. Two writers could be equally talented, but the one whose previous book was a bestseller will have much less trouble getting their next published. And so on.

The Arizona Petrified Forest

A classic example of social proof occurred in the Arizona Petrified Forest. The theft of unusual petrified wood by visitors was becoming a serious issue, depleting the ancient woodland. Staff put up a sign stating: 'Many past visitors have removed the petrified wood from the park, destroying the natural state of the Petrified Forest.' This was intended to deter theft, but it had the opposite effect. The depletion of the petrified wood tripled. Experts who looked at the case determined that the signs had served as social proof, making people feel the act was justified.

Claquers

Another example of social proof is a claque. A claque is a group of professional applauders, positioned in theaters or opera houses. Claqueurs (members of a claque) have been used since Emperor Nero, whose performances were applauded by five thousand soldiers. In the 16th century, claqueurs became a common part of theater and opera performances. Their job was to applaud a performance, encouraging others to do the same. Social proof meant that once a few people began to applaud, the rest did the same. Audience members saw that others appeared to enjoy the piece and went away with a more positive view of it. Whilst clacquers are now rare, their existence shows how social proof can distort reality.

The Jonestown Massacre

The 1978 Jonestown Massacre is one of the most shocking, terrifying examples of the dark side of social proof. Under the leadership of religious fanatic Jim Jones, 918 people died in a commune in Georgetown. Although the event was technically a mass suicide, the degree

of duress and force under which the deaths happened and the fact that 1 in 3 were minors mean that massacre is more accurate. Nearly a thousand members of the cult drank poison, including infants. Within a matter of minutes, all were dead.

In the aftermath of this tragedy (the worst loss of American lives on a single occasion until 9/11), the world struggled to make sense of how it could have happened. One important element which emerged upon study was that of social proof. Isolated from the rest of the world, the commune had no outside influences and no one to emulate save each other. At the head of the cult was the self-appointed messiah Jim Jones who manipulated and controlled his followers. Force was used to squash any dissent, meaning people had no option but to comply. Cult members were encouraged to inform Jones of anyone who felt rebellious, and families were broken up to give him total control. If someone did object, they had no allies to side with and reinforce their change of heart. The few people who survived were mostly couples who managed to stay together and had the social proof provided by each other necessary to retain their opinions. Deborah Blakey, a survivor later said:

> *Any disagreement with [Jones'] dictates came to be regarded as "treason." ….Although I felt terrible about what was happening, I was afraid to say anything because I knew that anyone with a differing opinion gained the wrath of Jones and other members.*

Jones' final, harrowing speech which manipulated his followers into committing suicide can be heard here. It provides a clear example of how people succumbed to social proof. Throughout the tape, a number of people are heard dissenting, only to be forced back into submission by their peers.

How marketers use social proof

"Social proof is a flame to the human mind moth,
and it leaves a fire trail of destruction across the path of enough."
— Will Jelbert (The Happiness Animal)

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Marketers love using social proof to encourage people to spend more money. If you ever feel the strange urge to buy something you don't need, this could be down to social proof.

Marketers achieve this in a number of ways:

- Using influencers and famous people. A phenomenon known by psychologists as the 'halo and horns effect' means we see a product/service as more desirable if it is associated with someone we like. On a subconscious level, we imagine their good qualities rubbing off on the item advertised. Likewise, if we wish to be like someone, we may think anything they endorse will make us more like them.
- Implying popularity. Night clubs and bars often make patrons wait outside, even when the venues are not full. This creates an aura of desirability
- Reviews/ratings. 70% of people look at these before making a purchase, to see what others think about a product or service. Even though these can be biased, anecdotal or even fake, we judge people 'like us' as more trustworthy than the companies. For example, if someone is planning on buying a certain vacuum cleaner, just one negative review can sway them away from it- never mind that said reviewer may have used it incorrectly.
  Social proof is part of the Farnham Street latticework of mental models. To read more on the topic look to Cialdini's Persuasion, Gladwell's Tipping Point, or Kuran's Private Truths, Public Lies.

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