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# INFLUENCE

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*Science and Practice*

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

Walter Lippmann

I don't know anyone who likes canned laughter. In fact, when I surveyed the people who came into my office one day—several students, two telephone repairmen, a number of university professors, and the janitor—the reaction was invariably critical. Television, with its incessant system of laugh tracks and technically augmented mirth, received the most heat. The people I questioned hated canned laughter. They called it stupid, phony, and obvious. Although my sample was small, I would bet that it closely reflects the negative feelings of most of the American public toward laugh tracks.

Why, then, is canned laughter so popular with television executives? They have won their exalted positions and splendid salaries by knowing how to give the public what it wants. Yet they religiously employ the laugh tracks that their audiences find distasteful, and they do so over the objections of many of their

most talented artists. It is not uncommon for acclaimed directors, writers, or actors to demand the elimination of canned responses from the television projects they undertake. These demands are only sometimes successful, and when they are, it is not without a battle.

What can it be about canned laughter that is so attractive to television executives? Why are these shrewd and tested people championing a practice that their potential watchers find disagreeable and their most creative talents find personally insulting? The answer is both simple and intriguing: They know what the research says. Experiments have found that the use of canned merriment causes an audience to laugh longer and more often when humorous material is presented and to rate the material as funnier (Fuller & Sheehy-Skeffington, 1974; Smyth & Fuller, 1972). In addition, some evidence indicates that canned laughter is most effective for poor jokes (Nosanchuk & Lightstone, 1974).

In light of these data, the actions of television executives make perfect sense. The introduction of laugh tracks into their comic programming increases the humorous and appreciative responses of an audience, even—and especially—when the material is of poor quality. Is it any surprise, then, that television, glutted as it is with artless situation-comedies, is saturated with canned laughter? Those executives know precisely what they are doing.

With the mystery of the widespread use of laugh tracks solved, we are left with a more perplexing question: Why does canned laughter work on us the way it does? It is no longer the television executives who appear peculiar; they are acting logically and in their own interests. Instead, it is the behavior of the audience that seems strange. Why should we laugh more at comedy material afloat in a sea of mechanically fabricated merriment? And why should we think that comic flotsam funnier? The executives aren't really fooling us. Anyone can recognize dubbed laughter. It is so blatant, so clearly counterfeit, that there can be no confusing it with the real thing. We know full well that the hilarity we hear is irrelevant to the humorous quality of the joke it follows, is created not spontaneously by a genuine audience but artificially by a technician at a control board. Yet, transparent forgery that it is, it works on us!

## THE PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL PROOF

To discover why canned laughter is so effective, we first need to understand the nature of yet another potent weapon of influence: the principle of social proof. This principle states that we determine what is correct by finding out what other people think is correct. The principle applies especially to the way we decide what constitutes correct behavior. *We view a behavior as correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it.* Whether the question is what to do with an empty popcorn box in a movie theater, how fast to drive on a certain stretch of highway, or how to eat the chicken at a dinner party, the actions of those around us will be important guides in defining the answer.

The tendency to see an action as appropriate when others are doing it works quite well normally. As a rule, we will make fewer mistakes by acting in accord with social evidence than by acting contrary to it. Usually, when a lot of people are doing something, it is the right thing to do. This feature of the principle of social proof is simultaneously its major strength and its major weakness. Like the other weapons of influence, it provides a convenient shortcut for determining the way to behave but, at the same time, makes one who uses the shortcut vulnerable to the attacks of profiteers who lie in wait along its path.

In the case of canned laughter, the problem comes when we begin responding to social proof in such a mindless and reflexive fashion that we can be fooled by partial or fake evidence. Our folly is not that we use others' laughter to help decide what is humorous; that is in keeping with the well-founded principle of social proof. The folly is that we do so in response to patently fraudulent laughter. Somehow, one disembodied feature of humor—a sound—works like the essence of humor. The example from Chapter 1 of the turkey and the polecat is instructive. Remember the example of the turkey and polecat? Because the peculiar cheep-cheep of turkey chicks is normally associated with newborn turkeys, their mothers will display or withhold maternal care solely on the basis of that sound. Remember how, consequently, it was possible to fool a mother turkey with a stuffed polecat as long as the replica played the recorded cheep-cheep of a baby turkey. The simulated chick sound was enough to start the mother turkey's maternal tape whirring.

The lesson of the turkey and the polecat illustrates uncomfortably well the relationship between the average viewer and the laugh-track-playing television executive. We have become so accustomed to taking the humorous reactions of others as evidence of what deserves laughter that we too can be made to respond to the sound, and not the substance, of the real thing. Much as a cheep-cheep noise removed from the reality of a chick can stimulate a female turkey to mother, so can a recorded ha-ha removed from the reality of a genuine audience stimulate us to laugh. The television executives are exploiting our preference for shortcuts, our tendency to react automatically on the basis of partial evidence. They know that their tapes will cue our tapes. *Click, whirr.*

### People Power


Television executives are hardly alone in their use of social evidence for profit. Our tendency to assume that an action is more correct if others are doing it is exploited in a variety of settings. Bartenders often salt their tip jars with a few dollar bills at the beginning of an evening to simulate tips left by prior customers and thereby to give the impression that tipping with folding money is proper barroom behavior. Church ushers sometimes salt collection baskets for the same reason and with the same positive effect on proceeds. Evangelical preachers are known to seed their audience with ringers, who are rehearsed to come forward at a specified time to give witness and donations. For example,

a research team at Arizona State University infiltrated the Billy Graham organization and reported on such advance preparations prior to one of his Crusade visits: "By the time Graham arrives in town and makes his altar call, an army of six thousand wait with instructions on when to come forth at varying intervals to create the impression of a spontaneous mass outpouring" (Altheide & Johnson, 1977).

Advertisers love to inform us when a product is the "fastest-growing" or "largest-selling" because they don't have to convince us directly that the product is good; they need only say that many others think so, which seems proof enough. The producers of charity telethons devote inordinate amounts of time to the incessant listing of viewers who have already pledged contributions. The message being communicated to the holdouts is clear: "Look at all the people who have decided to give. It *must* be the correct thing to do." At the height of the disco craze, certain discotheque owners manufactured a brand of visible social proof for their clubs' quality by creating long waiting lines outside when there was plenty of room inside. Salespeople are taught to spice their pitches with numerous accounts of individuals who have purchased the product. Sales and motivation consultant Cavett Robert captures the principle nicely in his advice to sales trainees: "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."


Researchers, too, have employed procedures based on the principle of social proof—sometimes with astounding results.<sup>1</sup> One psychologist in particular, Albert Bandura, has led the way in developing such procedures to eliminate undesirable behavior. Bandura and his colleagues have shown how people suffering from phobias can be rid of these extreme fears in an amazingly simple fashion. For instance, in an early study (Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1967), nursery-school-age children, chosen because they were terrified of dogs, merely watched a little boy playing happily with a dog for 20 minutes a day. This exhibition produced such marked changes in the reactions of the fearful children that, after only four days, 67 percent of them were willing to climb into a playpen with a dog and remain confined there petting and scratching the dog while everyone else left the room. Moreover, when the researchers tested the children's fear levels again, one month later, they found that the improvement had not diminished during that time; in fact, the children were more willing than ever to interact with dogs. An important practical discovery was made in a second study of children who were exceptionally afraid of dogs (Bandura & Menlove, 1968): To reduce these children's fears, it was not necessary to provide live demonstrations of another child playing with a dog; film clips had the

<sup>1</sup>A program of investigation conducted by Kenneth Craig and his associates demonstrates how the experience of pain can be affected by the principle of social proof. In one study (Craig & Prkachin, 1978), subjects who received a series of electric shocks felt less pain (as indicated by self-reports, psychophysical measures of sensory sensitivity, and such physiological responses as heart rate and skin conductivity) when they were in the presence of another subject who was tolerating the shocks as if they were not painful.



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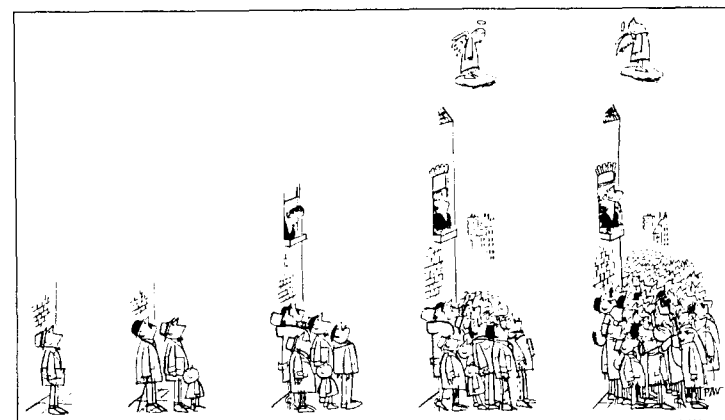
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Figure 4.1

same impact. The most effective type of clips were those depicting a variety of other children interacting with their dogs. Apparently the principle of social proof works best when the proof is provided by the actions of many other people.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Any reader who doubts that the seeming appropriateness of an action is importantly influenced by the number of others performing it might try a small experiment. Stand on a busy sidewalk, pick an empty spot in the sky or on a tall building, and stare at it for a full minute. Very little will happen around you during that time—most people will walk past without glancing up, and virtually no one will stop to stare with you. Now, on the next day, go to the same place and bring along four friends



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#### LOOKING FOR HIGHER (AND HIGHER) MEANING

Figure 4.2 The draw of the crowd is devilishly strong.

The powerful influence of filmed examples in changing the behavior of children can be used as therapy for various other problems. Some striking evidence is available in the research of psychologist Robert O'Connor (1972) on socially withdrawn preschool children. We have all seen children of this sort: terribly shy, standing alone at the fringes of the games and groupings of their peers. O'Connor worried that this early behavior was the beginning of what could become a long-term pattern of isolation, which in turn could create persistent difficulties in social comfort and adjustment throughout adulthood. In an attempt to reverse the pattern, O'Connor made a film containing 11 different scenes in a nursery-school setting. Each scene began by showing a different solitary child watching some social activity and then actively participating, to everyone's enjoyment. O'Connor selected a group of the most severely withdrawn children from four preschools and showed them this film. The impact was impressive. After watching the film, the isolates immediately began to interact with their peers at a level equal to that of the normal children in the schools. Even more astonishing was what O'Connor found when he returned to the schools six weeks later to observe. While the withdrawn children who had not seen O'Connor's film remained as isolated as ever, those who *had* viewed it were now leading their schools in amount of social activity. It seems that

to look upward too. Within 60 seconds, a crowd of passersby will have stopped to crane their necks skyward with the group. For those pedestrians who do not join you, the pressure to look up at least briefly will be nearly irresistible; if the results of your experiment are like those of one performed by three social psychologists in New York, you and your friends will cause 80 percent of all passersby to lift their gaze to your empty spot (Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969).

this 23-minute movie, viewed just once, was enough to reverse a potential pattern of lifelong maladaptive behavior. Such is the potency of the principle of social proof.<sup>3</sup>

### After the Deluge

When it comes to illustrating the strength of social proof, there is one illustration that is far and away my favorite. Several features account for its appeal: It offers a superb example of the much underused method of participant observation, in which a scientist studies a process by becoming immersed in its natural occurrence; it provides information of interest to such diverse groups as historians, psychologists, and theologians; and, most important, it shows how social evidence can be used on us—not by others, but by ourselves—to assure us that what we prefer to be true will seem to be true.

The story is an old one, requiring an examination of ancient data, for the past is dotted with millennial religious movements. Various sects and cults have prophesied that on a particular date there would arrive a period of redemption and great happiness for those who believed in the group's teachings. In each instance it has been predicted that the beginning of a time of salvation would be marked by an important and undeniable event, usually the cataclysmic end of the world. Of course, these predictions have invariably proved false, to the acute dismay of the members of such groups.

However, immediately following the obvious failure of the prophecy, history records an enigmatic pattern. Rather than disbanding in disillusion, the cultists often become strengthened in their convictions. Risking the ridicule of the populace, they take to the streets, publicly asserting their dogma and seeking converts with a fervor that is intensified, not diminished, by the clear disconfirmation of a central belief. So it was with the Montanists of second-century Turkey, with the Anabaptists of sixteenth-century Holland, with the Sabbataists of seventeenth-century Izmir, and with the Millerites of nineteenth-century America. And, thought a trio of interested social scientists, so it might be with a doomsday cult based in modern-day Chicago. The scientists—Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter—who were then colleagues at the University of Minnesota, heard about the Chicago group and felt it worthy of close study. Their decision to investigate by joining the group,

<sup>3</sup>Other research besides O'Connor's suggests that there are two sides to the filmed-social-proof coin, however. The dramatic effort of filmed depictions on what children find appropriate has been a source of great distress for those concerned with frequent depictions of violence and aggression on television (Eron & Huesmann, 1985). Although the consequences of televised violence on the aggressive actions of children are far from simple (Freedman, 1984), the data from a well-controlled experiment by psychologists Robert Liebert and Robert Baron (1972) have an ominous look. Some children were shown excerpts from a television program in which people intentionally harmed each other. Afterward, these children acted in a significantly more harmful way toward other children than did those who had watched a nonviolent television program (a horse race). The finding that children act more aggressively toward one another after seeing aggression on television held true for the two age groups tested (5- to 6- and 8- to 9-year-olds) and for both girls and boys.

incognito, as new believers and by placing additional paid observers among its ranks resulted in a remarkably rich firsthand account of the goings-on before and after the day of predicted catastrophe (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956).

The cult of believers was small, never numbering more than 30 members. Its leaders were a middle-aged man and woman, whom for purposes of publication, the researchers renamed Dr. Thomas Armstrong and Mrs. Marian Keech. Dr. Armstrong, a physician on the staff of a college student-health service, had a long-held interest in mysticism, the occult, and flying saucers; as such, he served as a respected authority on these subjects for the group. Mrs. Keech, though, was the center of attention and activity. Earlier in the year she had begun to receive messages from spiritual beings, whom she called the Guardians, located on other planets. It was these messages, flowing through Marian Keech's hand via the device of "automatic writing," that formed the bulk of the cult's religious belief system. The teachings of the Guardians were loosely linked to traditional Christian thought.

The transmission from the Guardians, always the subjects of much discussion and interpretation among the group, gained new significance when they began to foretell of a great impending disaster—a flood that would begin in the Western Hemisphere and eventually engulf the world. Although the cultists were understandably alarmed at first, further messages assured them that they and all those who believed in the Lessons sent through Mrs. Keech would survive. Before the calamity, spacemen were to arrive and carry off the believers in flying saucers to a place of safety, presumably on another planet. Very little detail was provided about the rescue except that the believers were to make themselves ready for pickup by rehearsing certain passwords to be exchanged ("I left my hat at home." "What is your question?" "I am my own porter.") and by removing all metal from their clothes—because the wearing or carrying of metal made saucer travel "extremely dangerous."

As Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter observed the preparations during the weeks prior to the flood date, they noted with special interest two significant aspects of the members' behavior. First, the level of commitment to the cult's belief system was very high. In anticipation of their departure from doomed Earth, irrevocable steps were taken by the group members. Most had incurred the opposition of family and friends to their beliefs but had persisted, nonetheless, in their convictions, often when it meant losing the affections of these others. In fact, several of the members were threatened by neighbors or family with legal actions designed to have them declared insane. Dr. Armstrong's sister filed a motion to have his two younger children removed from his custody. Many believers quit their jobs or neglected their studies to devote full time to the movement. Some even gave or threw away their personal belongings, expecting them shortly to be of no use. These were people whose certainty that they had the truth allowed them to withstand enormous social, economic, and legal pressures and whose commitment to their dogma grew as they resisted each pressure. The second significant aspect of the believers' preflood actions was a curious form of inaction. For individuals so clearly convinced of the

validity of their creed, they did surprisingly little to spread the word. Although they initially publicized the news of the coming disaster, they made no attempt to seek converts, to proselyte actively. They were willing to sound the alarm and to counsel those who voluntarily responded to it, but that was all.

The group's distaste for recruitment efforts was evident in various ways besides the lack of personal persuasion attempts. Secrecy was maintained in many matters—extra copies of the Lessons were burned, passwords and secret signs were instituted, the contents of certain private tape recordings were not to be discussed with outsiders (so secret were the tapes that even longtime believers were prohibited from taking notes of them). Publicity was avoided. As the day of disaster approached, increasing numbers of newspaper, television, and radio reporters converged on the group's headquarters in the Keech house. For the most part, these people were turned away or ignored. The most frequent answer to their questions was, "No comment." Although discouraged for a time, the media representatives returned with a vengeance when Dr. Armstrong's religious activities caused him to be fired from his post on the college health service staff; one especially persistent newsman had to be threatened with a lawsuit. A similar siege was repelled on the eve of the flood when a swarm of reporters pushed and pestered the believers for information. Afterward, the researchers summarized the group's preflood stance on public exposure and recruitment in respectful tones: "Exposed to a tremendous burst of publicity, they had made every attempt to dodge fame; given dozens of opportunities to proselyte, they had remained evasive and secretive and behaved with an almost superior indifference" (Festinger et al., 1956).

Eventually, when all the reporters and would-be converts had been cleared from the house, the believers began making their final preparations for the arrival of the spaceship scheduled for midnight that night. The scene as viewed by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter must have seemed like absurdist theater. Otherwise ordinary people—housewives, college students, a high-school boy, a publisher, a physician, a hardware-store clerk and his mother—were participating earnestly in tragic comedy. They took direction from a pair of members who were periodically in touch with the Guardians; Marian Keech's written messages were being supplemented that evening by "the Bertha," a former beautician through whose tongue the "Creator" gave instruction. They rehearsed their lines diligently, calling out in chorus the responses to be made before entering the rescue saucer: "I am my own porter." "I am my own pointer." They discussed seriously whether the message from a caller identifying himself as Captain Video—a TV space character of the time—was properly interpreted as a prank or a coded communication from their rescuers.

In keeping with the admonition to carry nothing metallic aboard the saucer, the believers wore clothing from which all metal pieces had been torn out. The metal eyelets in their shoes had been ripped away. The women wore brassieres whose metal stays had been removed. The men had yanked the zippers out of their pants, which were supported by lengths of rope in place of belts.

The group's fanaticism concerning the removal of all metal was vividly experienced by one of the researchers who remarked, 25 minutes before mid-

night, that he had forgotten to extract the zipper from his trousers. As the observers tell it, "this knowledge produced a near panic reaction. He was rushed into the bedroom where Dr. Armstrong, his hands trembling and his eyes darting to the clock every few seconds, slashed out the zipper with a razor blade and wrenched its clasps free with wirecutters." The hurried operation finished, the researcher was returned to the living room—a slightly less metallic but, one supposes, much paler man.

As the time appointed for their departure grew very close, the believers settled into a lull of soundless anticipation. Luckily, the trained scientists gave a detailed account of the events that transpired during this momentous period.

The last ten minutes were tense ones for the group in the living room. They had nothing to do but sit and wait, their coats in their laps. In the tense silence two clocks ticked loudly, one about ten minutes faster than the other. When the faster of the two pointed to twelve-five, one of the observers remarked aloud on the fact. A chorus of people replied that midnight had not yet come. Bob Eastman affirmed that the slower clock was correct; he had set it himself only that afternoon. It showed only four minutes before midnight.

These four minutes passed in complete silence except for a single utterance. When the [slower] clock on the mantel showed only one minute remaining before the guide to the saucer was due, Marian exclaimed in a strained, high-pitched voice: "And not a plan has gone astray!" The clock chimed twelve, each stroke painfully clear in the expectant hush. The believers sat motionless.

One might have expected some visible reaction. Midnight had passed and nothing had happened. The cataclysm itself was less than seven hours away. But there was little to see in the reactions of the people in the room. There was no talking, no sound. People sat stock-still, their faces seemingly frozen and expressionless. Mark Post was the only person who even moved. He lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes but did not sleep. Later, when spoken to, he answered monosyllabically but otherwise lay immobile. The others showed nothing on the surface, although it became clear later that they had been hit hard.

Gradually, painfully, an atmosphere of despair and confusion settled over the group. They reexamined the prediction and the accompanying messages. Dr. Armstrong and Mrs. Keech reiterated their faith. The believers mulled over their predicament and discarded explanation after explanation as unsatisfactory. At one point, toward 4 A.M., Mrs. Keech broke down and cried bitterly. She knew, she sobbed, that there were some who were beginning to doubt but that the group must beam light to those who needed it most and that the group must hold together. The rest of the believers were losing their composure, too. They were all visibly shaken and many were close to tears. It was now almost 4:30 A.M. and still no way of handling the disconfirmation had been found. By now, too, most of the group were talking openly about the failure of the escort to come at midnight. The group seemed near dissolution. (Festinger et al., 1956)

In the midst of gathering doubt, as cracks crawled through the believers' confidence, the researchers witnessed a pair of remarkable incidents, one after another. The first occurred at about 4:45 A.M. when Marian Keech's hand suddenly began transcribing through "automatic writing" the text of a holy message from above. When read aloud, the communication proved to be an elegant explanation for the events of that night. "The little group, sitting alone all night

long, had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction." Although neat and efficient, this explanation was not wholly satisfying by itself; for example, after hearing it, one member simply rose, put on his hat and coat, and left, never to return. Something additional was needed to restore the believers to their previous levels of faith.

It was at this point that the second notable incident occurred to supply that need. Once again, the words of those who were present offer a vivid description:

The atmosphere in the group changed abruptly and so did their behavior. Within minutes after she had read the message explaining the disconfirmation, Mrs. Keech received another message instructing her to publicize the explanation. She reached for the telephone and began dialing the number of a newspaper. While she was waiting to be connected, someone asked: "Marian, is this the first time you have called the newspaper yourself?" Her reply was immediate: "Oh yes, this is the first time I have ever called them. I have never had anything to tell them before, but now I feel it is urgent." The whole group could have echoed her feelings, for they all felt a sense of urgency. As soon as Marian had finished her call, the other members took turns telephoning newspapers, wire service, radio stations, and national magazines to spread the explanation of the failure of the flood. In their desire to spread the word quickly and resoundingly, the believers now opened for public attention matters that had been thus far utterly secret. Where only hours earlier they had shunned newspaper reporters and felt that the attention they were getting in the press was painful, they now became avid seekers for publicity. (Festinger et al., 1956)

Not only had the long-standing policies concerning secrecy and publicity done an about-face, so too had the group's attitude toward potential converts. Whereas likely recruits who previously visited the house had been mostly ignored, turned away, or treated with casual attention, the day following the disconfirmation saw a different story. All callers were admitted, all questions were answered, attempts were made to proselyte all such visitors. The members' unprecedented willingness to accommodate new recruits was perhaps best demonstrated when nine high-school students arrived on the following night to speak with Mrs. Keech.

They found her at the telephone deep in a discussion of flying saucers with a caller whom, it later turned out, she believed to be a spaceman. Eager to continue talking to him and at the same time anxious to keep her new guests, Marian simply included them in the conversation and, for more than an hour, chatted alternately with her guests in the living room and the "spaceman" on the other end of the telephone. So intent was she on proselyting that she seemed unable to let any opportunity go by. (Festinger et al., 1956)

To what can we attribute the believers' radical turnabout? Within a few hours, they had moved from clannish and taciturn hoarders of the Word to expansive and eager disseminators of it. What could have possessed them to choose such an ill-timed instant—when the failure of the flood was likely to cause nonbelievers to view the group and its dogma as laughable?

The crucial event occurred sometime during "the night of the flood" when it became increasingly clear that the prophecy would not be fulfilled. Oddly, it was not their prior certainty that drove the members to propagate the faith, it was an encroaching sense of uncertainty. It was the dawning realization that if the spaceship and flood predictions were wrong, so might be the entire belief system on which they rested. For those huddled in the Keech living room, that growing possibility must have seemed hideous.

The group members had gone too far, given up too much for their beliefs to see them destroyed; the shame, the economic cost, the mockery would be too great to bear. The overarching need of the cultists to cling to those beliefs seeps poignantly from their own words. From a young woman with a 3-year-old child:

I have to believe the flood is coming on the twenty-first because I've spent all my money. I quit my job, I quit computer school. . . . I have to believe.

From Dr. Armstrong to one of the researchers four hours after the failure of the saucer men to arrive:

I've had to go a long way. I've given up just about everything. I've cut every tie. I've burned every bridge. I've turned my back on the world. I can't afford to doubt. I have to believe. And there isn't any other truth.

Imagine the corner in which Dr. Armstrong and his followers found themselves as morning approached. So massive was the commitment to their beliefs that no other truth was tolerable. Yet that set of beliefs had just taken a merciless pounding from physical reality: No saucer had landed, no spacemen had knocked, no flood had come, nothing had happened as prophesied. Since the only acceptable form of truth had been undercut by physical proof, there was but one way out of the corner for the group. It had to establish another type of proof for the validity of its beliefs: social proof.

This, then, explains their sudden shift from secretive conspirators to zealous missionaries. It also explains the curious timing of the shift—precisely when a direct disconfirmation of their beliefs had rendered them least convincing to outsiders. It was necessary to risk the scorn and derision of the nonbelievers because publicity and recruitment efforts provided the only remaining hope. If they could spread the Word, if they could inform the uninformed, if they could persuade the skeptics, and if, by so doing, they could win new converts, their threatened but treasured beliefs would become *true*. The principle of social proof says so: *The greater the number of people who find any idea correct, the more a given individual will perceive the idea to be correct.* The group's assignment was clear; since the physical evidence could not be changed, the social evidence had to be. Convince and ye shall be convinced.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps because of the quality of ragged desperation with which they approached their task, the believers were wholly unsuccessful at enlarging their number. Not a single convert was gained. At that point, in the face of the dual failures of physical and social proof, the cult quickly disintegrated. Less than three weeks after the date of the predicted flood, group members were scattered and

## CAUSE OF DEATH: UNCERTAIN(TY)

All the weapons of influence discussed in this book work better under some conditions than under others. If we are to defend ourselves adequately against any such weapon, it is vital that we know its optimal operating conditions in order to recognize when we are most vulnerable to its influence. We have already had a hint of one time when the principle of social proof worked best—with the Chicago believers. It was a sense of shaken confidence that triggered their craving for converts. In general, *when we are unsure of ourselves, when the situation is unclear or ambiguous, when uncertainty reigns, we are most likely to look to and accept the actions of others as correct* (Tesser, Campbell, & Mickler, 1983).

In the process of examining the reactions of other people to resolve our uncertainty, however, we are likely to overlook a subtle, but important fact: Those people are probably examining the social evidence, too. Especially in an ambiguous situation, the tendency for everyone to be looking to see what everyone else is doing can lead to a fascinating phenomenon called *pluralistic ignorance*. A thorough understanding of the pluralistic ignorance phenomenon helps explain a regular occurrence in our country that has been termed both a riddle and a national disgrace: the failure of entire groups of bystanders to aid victims in agonizing need of help.

The classic example of such bystander inaction and the one that has produced the most debate in journalistic, political, and scientific circles began as an ordinary homicide case in New York City's borough of Queens. A woman in her late twenties, Catherine Genovese, was killed in a late-night attack on her street as she returned from work. Murder is never an act to be passed off lightly, but in a city the size and tenor of New York, the Genovese incident warranted no more space than a fraction of a column in the *New York Times*. Catherine Genovese's story would have died with her on that day in March 1964 if it hadn't been for a mistake.

The metropolitan editor of the *Times*, A. M. Rosenthal, happened to be having lunch with the city police commissioner a week later. Rosenthal asked the commissioner about a different Queens-based homicide and the commissioner, thinking he was being questioned about the Genovese case, revealed something staggering that had been uncovered by the police investigation. It

maintained only sporadic communication with one another. In one final—and ironic—disconfirmation of prediction, it was the movement that perished in the flood.

Ruin has not always been the fate of doomsday groups whose predictions proved unsound, however. When such groups have been able to build social proof for their beliefs through effective recruitment efforts, they have grown and prospered. For example, when the Dutch Anabaptists saw their prophesied year of destruction, 1533, pass uneventfully, they became rabid seekers after converts, pouring unprecedented amounts of energy into the cause. One extraordinarily eloquent missionary, Jakob van Kampen, is reported to have baptized 100 persons in a single day. So powerful was the snowballing social evidence in support of the Anabaptist position that it rapidly overwhelmed the disconfirming physical evidence and turned two-thirds of the population of Holland's great cities into adherents.

was something that left everyone who heard it, the commissioner included, aghast and grasping for explanations. Catherine Genovese had not experienced a quick, muffled death. It had been a long, loud, tortured, *public* event. Her assailant had chased and attacked her in the street three times over a period of 35 minutes before his knife finally silenced her cries for help. Incredibly, 38 of her neighbors watched from the safety of their apartment windows without so much as lifting a finger to call the police.

Rosenthal, a former Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, knew a story when he heard one. On the day of his lunch with the commissioner, he assigned a reporter to investigate the "bystander angle" of the Genovese incident. Within a week, the *Times* published a long, front-page article that was to create a swirl of controversy and speculation. The initial paragraphs of that report provided the tone and focus of the story:

For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens.

Twice the sound of their voices and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out, and stabbed her again. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead.

That was two weeks ago today. But Assistant Chief Inspector Frederick M. Lussen, in charge of the borough's detectives and a veteran of 25 years of homicide investigations, is still shocked.

He can give a matter-of-fact recitation of many murders. But the Kew Gardens slaying baffles him—not because it is a murder, but because "good people" failed to call the police. (Ganzberg, 1964)

As with Assistant Chief Inspector Lussen, shock and bafflement were the standard reactions of almost everyone who learned the story's details. The shock struck first, leaving the police, the newspeople, and the reading public stunned. The bafflement followed quickly. How could 38 "good people" fail to act under those circumstances? No one could understand it. Even the murder witnesses themselves were bewildered. "I don't know," they answered one after another. "I just don't know." A few offered weak reasons for their inaction. For example, two or three people explained that they were "afraid" or "did not want to get involved." These reasons, however, do not stand up to close scrutiny: A simple anonymous call to the police could have saved Catherine Genovese without threatening the witnesses' future safety or free time. No, it wasn't the observers' fear or reluctance to complicate their lives that explained their lack of action; something else was going on there that even they could not fathom.

Confusion, though, does not make for good news copy. So the press as well as the other media—several papers, TV stations, and magazines that were pursuing follow-up stories—emphasized the only explanation available at the time: The witnesses, no different from the rest of us, hadn't cared enough to get involved. Americans were becoming a nation of selfish, insensitive people. The rigors of modern life, especially city life, were hardening them. They were



becoming "The Cold Society," unfeeling and indifferent to the plight of their fellow citizens.

In support of this interpretation, news stories began appearing regularly in which various kinds of public apathy were detailed. Also supporting such an interpretation were the remarks of a range of armchair social commentators, who, as a breed, seem never to admit to bafflement when speaking to the press. They, too, saw the Genovese case as having large-scale social significance. All used the word *apathy*, which, it is interesting to note, had been in the headline of the *Time's* front-page story, although they accounted for the apathy differently. One attributed it to the effects of TV violence, another to repressed aggressiveness, but most implicated the "depersonalization" of urban life with its "megapolitan societies" and its "alienation of the individual from the group." Even Rosenthal, the newsman who first broke the story and who ultimately made it the subject of a book, subscribed to the city-caused apathy theory.

Nobody can say why the 38 did not lift the phone while Miss Genovese was being attacked, since they cannot say themselves. It can be assumed, however, that their apathy was indeed one of the big-city variety. It is almost a matter of psychological survival, if one is surrounded and pressed by millions of people, to prevent them from constantly impinging on you, and the only way to do this is to ignore them as often as possible. Indifference to one's neighbor and his troubles is a conditioned reflex in life in New York as it is in other big cities. (A. M. Rosenthal, 1964)

As the Genovese story grew—aside from Rosenthal's book, it became the focus of numerous newspaper and magazine pieces, several television news documentaries, and an off-Broadway play—it attracted the professional attention of a pair of New York-based psychology professors, Bibb Latané and John Darley. They examined the reports of the Genovese incident and, on the basis of their knowledge of social psychology, hit on what had seemed like the most unlikely explanation of all—the fact that 38 witnesses were present. Previous accounts of the story had invariably emphasized that no action was taken, *even though* 38 individuals had looked on. Latané and Darley suggested that no one had helped precisely *because* there were so many observers.

The psychologists speculated that, for at least two reasons, a bystander to an emergency will be unlikely to help when there are a number of other bystanders present. The first reason is fairly straightforward. *With several potential helpers around, the personal responsibility of each individual is reduced.* "Perhaps someone else will give or call for aid, perhaps someone else already has." So with everyone thinking that someone else will help or has helped, no one does. The second reason is the more psychologically intriguing one; it is founded on the principle of social proof and involves the pluralistic ignorance effect. Very often an emergency is not obviously an emergency. Is the man lying in the alley a heart-attack victim or a drunk sleeping one off? Is the commotion next door an assault requiring the police or an especially loud marital spat where intervention would be inappropriate and unwelcome? What is going on? In times of such uncertainty, the natural tendency is to look around at

the actions of others for clues. We can learn, from the way the other witnesses are reacting, whether the event is or is not an emergency.

What is easy to forget, though, is that everybody else observing the event is likely to be looking for social evidence, too. Because we all prefer to appear poised and unflustered among others, we are likely to search for that evidence placidly, with brief, camouflaged glances at those around us. Therefore everyone is likely to see everyone else looking unruffled and failing to act. As a result, and by the principle of social proof, the event will be roundly interpreted as a nonemergency. This, according to Latané and Darley (1968b) is the state of pluralistic ignorance "in which each person decided that since nobody is concerned, nothing is wrong. Meanwhile, the danger may be mounting to the point where a single individual, uninfluenced by the seeming calm of others, *would react.*"<sup>5</sup>

### A Scientific Approach

The fascinating upshot of Latané and Darley's reasoning is that, for an emergency victim, the idea of "safety in numbers" may often be completely wrong. It might be that someone in need of emergency aid would have a better chance of survival if a single bystander, rather than a crowd, were present. To test this unusual thesis, Darley, Latané, their students, and colleagues performed a systematic and impressive program of research that produced a clear set of findings (for a review, see Latané & Nida, 1981). Their basic procedure was to stage emergency events that were observed by a single individual or by a group of people. They then recorded the number of times the emergency victim received help under those circumstances. In their first experiment (Darley & Latané, 1968), a New York college student who appeared to be having an epileptic seizure received help 85 percent of the time when there was a single bystander present but only 31 percent of time with five bystanders present. With almost all the single bystanders helping, it becomes difficult to argue that ours is "The Cold Society" where no one cares for suffering others. Obviously it was something about the presence of other bystanders that reduced helping to shameful levels.

<sup>5</sup>The potentially tragic consequences of the pluralistic ignorance phenomenon are starkly illustrated in a UPI news release from Chicago:

*A university coed was beaten and strangled in daylight hours near one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city, police said Saturday.*

*The nude body of Lee Alexis Wilson, 23, was found Friday in dense shrubbery alongside the wall of the Art Institute by a 12-year-old boy playing in the bushes.*

*Police theorized she may have been sitting or standing by a fountain in the Art Institute's south plaza when she was attacked. The assailant apparently then dragged her into the bushes. She apparently was sexually assaulted, police said.*

*Police said thousands of persons must have passed the site and one man told them he heard a scream about 2 P.M. but did not investigate because no one else seemed to be paying attention.*



VICTIM?

Figure 4.3 At times like this one, when the need for emergency aid is unclear, even genuine victims are unlikely to be helped in a crowd. Think how, if you were the second passerby in this picture, you might be influenced by the first passerby to believe that no aid was called for.

Other studies have examined the importance of social proof in causing widespread witness "apathy." They have done so by planting within a group of witnesses to a possible emergency people who are rehearsed to act as if no emergency were occurring. For instance, in another New York-based experiment (Latané & Darley, 1968a), 75 percent of lone individuals who observed smoke seeping from under a door reported the leak; however, when similar leaks were observed by three-person groups, the smoke was reported only 38 percent of the time. The smallest number of bystanders took action, though, when the three-person groups included two individuals who had been coached to ignore the smoke; under those conditions, the leaks were reported only 10 percent of time. In a similar study conducted in Toronto (A. S. Ross, 1971), single bystanders provided emergency aid 90 percent of the time, whereas such

aid occurred in only 16 percent of the cases when a bystander was in the presence of two passive bystanders.

After more than a decade of such research, social scientists now have a good idea of when bystanders will offer emergency aid. First, and contrary to the view that we have become a society of callous, uncaring people, once witnesses are convinced that an emergency situation exists, aid is very likely. Under these conditions, the number of bystanders who either intervene themselves or summon help is quite comforting. For example, in four separate experiments done in Florida (R. D. Clark & Word, 1972, 1974), accident scenes involving a maintenance man were staged. When it was clear that the man was hurt and required assistance, he was helped 100 percent of the time in two of the experiments. In the other two experiments, where helping involved contact with potentially dangerous electric wires, the victim still received bystander aid in 90 percent of the instances. In addition, these extremely high levels of assistance occurred whether the witnesses observed the event singly or in groups.

The situation becomes very different when, as in many cases, bystanders cannot be sure that the event they are witnessing is an emergency. Then a victim is much more likely to be helped by a lone bystander than by a group, especially if the people in the group are strangers to one another (Latané & Rodin, 1969). It seems that the pluralistic ignorance effect is strongest among strangers: Because we like to look graceful and sophisticated in public and because we are unfamiliar with the reactions of those we do not know, we are unlikely to give off or correctly read expressions of concern when in a group of strangers. Therefore, a possible emergency is viewed as a nonemergency and a victim suffers.

A close look at this set of research findings reveals an enlightening pattern. All the conditions that decrease an emergency victim's chances for bystander aid exist normally and innocently in the city, in contrast to rural areas:

1. Cities are more clamorous, distracting, rapidly changing places where it is difficult to be certain of the nature of the events one encounters.
2. Urban environments are more populous; consequently, people are more likely to be with others when witnessing a potential emergency situation.
3. City dwellers know a much smaller percentage of fellow residents than do people who live in small towns; therefore, city dwellers are more likely to find themselves in a group of strangers when observing an emergency.

These three natural characteristics of urban environments—their confusion, their populousness, and their low levels of acquaintanceship—fit in very well with the factors shown by research to decrease bystander aid. Without ever having to resort to such sinister concepts as "urban depersonalization" and "megalopolitan alienation," then, we can explain why so many instances of bystander inaction occur in our cities.

## Devictimizing Yourself

Explaining the dangers of modern urban life in less ominous terms does not dispel them. Furthermore, as the world's populations move increasingly to the cities—half of all humanity will be city dwellers within a decade (Newland, 1980)—there will be a growing need to reduce those dangers. Fortunately, our newfound understanding of the bystander “apathy” process offers real hope. Armed with this scientific knowledge, an emergency victim can increase enormously the chances of receiving aid from others. The key is the realization that groups of bystanders fail to help because the bystanders are unsure rather than unkind. They don't help because they are unsure an emergency actually exists and whether they are responsible for taking action. When they are sure of their responsibilities for intervening in a clear emergency, people are exceedingly responsive!

Once it is understood that the enemy is the simple state of uncertainty, it becomes possible for emergency victims to reduce this uncertainty, thereby protecting themselves. Imagine, for example, you are spending a summer afternoon at a music concert in a park. As the concert ends and people begin leaving, you notice a slight numbness in one arm but dismiss it as nothing to be alarmed about. Yet, while moving with the crowd to the distant parking areas, you feel the numbness spreading down to your hand and up one side of your face. Feeling disoriented, you decide to sit against a tree for a moment to rest. Soon you realize that something is drastically wrong. Sitting down has not helped; in fact, the control and coordination of your muscles has worsened, and you are starting to have difficulty moving your mouth and tongue to speak. You try to get up but can't. A terrifying thought rushes to mind: “Oh, God, I'm having a stroke!” Groups of people are passing by and most are paying no attention. The few who notice the odd way you are slumped against the tree or the strange look on your face check the social evidence around them and, seeing that no one else is reacting with concern, walk on convinced that nothing is wrong.

Were you to find yourself in such a predicament, what could you do to overcome the odds against receiving help? Because your physical abilities would be deteriorating, time would be crucial. If, before you could summon aid, you lost your speech or mobility or consciousness, your chances for assistance and for recovery would plunge drastically. It would be essential to try to request help quickly. What would be the most effective form of that request? Moans, groans, or outcries probably would not do. They might bring you some attention, but they would not provide enough information to assure passersby that a true emergency existed.

If mere outcries are unlikely to produce help from the passing crowd, perhaps you should be more specific. Indeed, you need to do more than try to gain attention; you should call out clearly your need for assistance. You must not allow bystanders to define your situation as a nonemergency. Use the word “Help” to show your need for emergency aid, and don't worry about being wrong. Embarrassment is a villain to be crushed. If you think you are having a

stroke, you cannot afford to be worried about the possibility of overestimating your problem. The difference is that between a moment of embarrassment and possible death or lifelong paralysis.

Even a resounding call for help is not your most effective tactic. Although it may reduce bystanders' doubts that a real emergency exists, it will not remove several other important uncertainties within each onlooker's mind: What kind of aid is required? Should I be the one to provide the aid, or should someone more qualified do it? Has someone else already gone to get professional help, or is it my responsibility? While the bystanders stand gawking at you and grappling with these questions, time vital to your survival could be slipping away.

Clearly, then, as a victim you must do more than alert bystanders to your need for emergency assistance; you must also remove their uncertainties about how that assistance should be provided and who should provide it. What would be the most efficient and reliable way to do so?

## Many Are Called But Only One Should Be Chosen

Based on the research findings we have seen, my advice would be to isolate one individual from the crowd: Stare, speak, and point directly at that person and no one else: “You, sir, in the blue jacket, I need help. Call an ambulance.” With that one utterance you would dispel all the uncertainties that might prevent or delay help. With that one statement you will have put the man in the blue jacket in the role of “rescuer.” He should now understand that emergency aid is needed; he should understand that he, not someone else, is responsible for providing the aid; and, finally, he should understand exactly how to provide it. All the scientific evidence indicates that the result should be quick, effective assistance.

In general, then, your best strategy when in need of emergency help is to reduce the uncertainties of those around you concerning your condition and their responsibilities. Be as precise as possible about your need for aid. Do not allow bystanders to come to their own conclusions because, especially in a crowd, the principle of social proof and the consequent pluralistic ignorance effect might well cause them to view your situation as a nonemergency. Of all the techniques in this book designed to produce compliance with a request, this one is the most important to remember. After all, the failure of your request for emergency aid could mean your life.

Not long ago, I received some firsthand evidence proving this point. I was involved in a rather serious automobile collision. Both I and the other driver were plainly hurt: He was slumped, unconscious, over his steering wheel while I managed to stagger, bloody, from behind mine. The accident had occurred in the center of an intersection in full view of several individuals stopped in their cars at the traffic light. As I knelt in the road beside my car door, trying to clear my head, the light changed. The waiting cars began to roll slowly through the intersection; their drivers gawked but did not stop.

I remember thinking, "Oh no, it's happening just like the research says. They're all passing by!" I consider it fortunate that, as a social psychologist, I knew enough about the bystander studies to have that particular thought. By thinking of my predicament in terms of the research findings, I knew exactly what to do. Pulling myself up so I could be seen clearly, I pointed at the driver of one car: "Call the police." To a second and a third driver, pointing directly each time: "Pull over, we need help." The responses of these people were instantaneous. They summoned a police car and ambulance immediately, they used their handkerchiefs to blot the blood from my face, they put a jacket under my head, they volunteered to serve as witnesses to the accident; and one person even offered to ride with me to the hospital.

Not only was this help rapid and solicitous, it was infectious. After drivers entering the intersection from the other direction saw cars stopping for me, they stopped and began tending to the other victim. The principle of social proof was working for us now. The trick had been to get the ball rolling in the direction of aid. Once that was accomplished, I was able to relax and let the bystanders' genuine concern and social proof's natural momentum do the rest.

## MONKEY ME, MONKEY DO

A bit earlier I stated that the principle of social proof, like all other weapons of influence, works better under some conditions than under others. We have already explored one of those conditions: uncertainty. Without question, when people are uncertain, they are more likely to use others' actions to decide how they themselves should act. In addition, there is another important working condition: similarity. The principle of social proof operates most powerfully when we are observing the behavior of people just like us (Festinger, 1954). It is the conduct of such people that gives us the greatest insight into what constitutes correct behavior for ourselves. Therefore, we are more inclined to follow the lead of a similar individual than a dissimilar one.

That is why I believe we are seeing an increasing number of average-person-on-the-street testimonials on TV these days. Advertisers now know that one successful way to sell a product to ordinary viewers (who compose the largest potential market) is to demonstrate that other "ordinary" people like and use it. Whether the product is a brand of soft drink or a pain reliever or a laundry detergent, we hear volleys of praise from John or Mary Everyperson.

More compelling evidence for the importance of similarity in determining whether we will imitate another's behavior comes from scientific research. An especially apt illustration can be found in a study done by psychologists at Columbia University (Hornstein, Fisch, & Holmes, 1968). The researchers placed wallets on the ground in various locations around midtown Manhattan to observe what would happen when they were found. Each wallet contained \$2.00 in cash, a \$26.30 check, and various information providing the name and address of the wallet's "owner." In addition to these items, the wallet also contained a letter making it evident that the wallet had been lost not once, but

twice. The letter was written to the wallet's owner from a man who had found it earlier and whose intention was to return it. The finder indicated in his letter that he was happy to help and that the chance to be of service in this way had made him feel good.

It was evident to anyone who found one of these wallets that this well-intentioned individual had then lost the wallet himself on the way to the mailbox—the wallet was wrapped in an envelope addressed to the owner. The researchers wanted to know how many people finding such a wallet would follow the lead of the first finder and mail it, intact, to the original owner. Before they dropped the wallets, however, the researchers varied one feature of the letter it contained. Some of the letters were written in standard English by someone who seemed to be an average American, while the other letters were written in broken English by the first finder, who identified himself as a recently arrived foreigner. In other words, the person who had initially found the wallet and had tried to return it was depicted by the letter as being either similar or dissimilar to most Americans.

The interesting question was whether the people who found the wallet and letter would be more influenced to mail the wallet if the first person who had tried to do so were similar to them. The answer was plain: Only 33 percent of the wallets were returned when the first finder was seen to be dissimilar, but 70 percent were returned when he was thought to be a similar other. These results suggest an important qualification of the principle of social proof. We will use the actions of others to decide on proper behavior for ourselves, *especially when we view those others to be similar to ourselves*.

This tendency applies not only to adults but to children as well. Health researchers have found, for example, that a school-based antismoking program had lasting effects only when it used same-age peer leaders as teachers (Murray et al., 1984). Another study found that children who saw a film depicting a child's positive visit to the dentist lowered their own dental anxieties principally when they were the same age as the child in the film (Melamed et al., 1978). I wish I had known about this second study when, a few years before it was published, I was trying to reduce a different kind of anxiety in my son, Chris.

I live in Arizona where backyard swimming pools abound. Regrettably, each year, several young children drown after falling into an unattended pool. I was determined, therefore, to teach Chris how to swim at an early age. The problem was not that he was afraid of the water; he loved it, but he would not get into the pool without wearing his inflatable inner tube, no matter how I tried to coax, talk, or shame him out of it. After getting nowhere for two months, I hired a graduate student of mine to help. Despite his background as a lifeguard and swimming instructor, he failed as I had. He couldn't persuade Chris to attempt even a stroke outside of his plastic ring.

About this time, Chris was attending a day camp that provided a number of activities to its group, including the use of a large pool, which he scrupulously avoided. One day, shortly after the graduate student incident, I went to get Chris from camp and, with my mouth agape, watched him run down the diving board and jump into the deepest part of the pool. Panicked, I began

pulling off my shoes to jump in to his rescue when I saw him bob to the surface and paddle safely to the side of the pool—where I dashed, shoes in hand, to meet him.

"Chris, you can swim!" I said excitedly. "You can swim!"

"Yes," he responded casually, "I learned how today."

"This is terrific! This is just terrific," I burred, gesturing expansively to convey my enthusiasm. "But, how come you didn't need your plastic ring today?"

Looking somewhat embarrassed because his father seemed to be raving while inexplicably soaking his socks in a small puddle and waving his shoes around, Chris explained:

"Well, I'm 3 years old, and Tommy is 3 years old. And Tommy can swim without a ring, so that means I can, too."

I could have kicked myself. Of course it would be *to little Tommy*, not to a 6'2" graduate student, that Chris would look for the most relevant information about what he could or should do. Had I been more thoughtful about solving Chris' swimming problem, I could have employed Tommy's good example earlier and, perhaps, saved myself a couple of frustrating months. I could have simply noted at the day camp that Tommy was a swimmer and then arranged with his parents for the boys to spend a weekend afternoon swimming in our pool. My guess is that Chris' plastic ring would have been abandoned by the end of the day.

## Monkey Die

Any factor that can spur 70 percent of New Yorkers to return a wallet, with all its contents included, must be considered impressive. Yet the outcome of the lost-wallet study offers just a hint of the immense impact that the conduct of similar others has on human behavior. More powerful examples exist in addition to this one. To my mind, the most telling illustration of this impact starts with a seemingly nonsensical statistic: After a suicide has made front-page news, airplanes—private planes, corporate jets, airliners—begin falling out of the sky at an alarming rate.

For example, it has been shown (Phillips, 1979) that immediately following certain kinds of highly publicized suicide stories, the number of people who die in commercial-airline crashes increases by 1,000 percent! Even more alarming: The increase is not limited to airplane deaths. The number of automobile fatalities shoots up as well (Phillips, 1980). What could possibly be responsible?

One explanation suggests itself immediately: The same social conditions that cause some people to commit suicide cause others to die accidentally. For instance, certain individuals, the suicide-prone, may react to stressful societal events (economic downturns, rising crime rates, international tensions) by ending it all. Others will react differently to these same events; they might become angry, impatient, nervous, or distracted. To the degree that such people operate or maintain the cars and planes of our society, the vehicles will be less



FREE-THINKING YOUTH

Figure 4.4 We frequently think of teenagers as rebellious and independent-minded. It is important to recognize, however, that typically that is true only with respect to their parents. Among similar others, they conform massively to what social proof tells them is proper.

safe, and consequently, we will see a sharp increase in the number of automobile and air fatalities.

According to this "social conditions" interpretation, then, some of the same societal factors that cause intentional deaths also cause accidental ones, and that is why we find so strong a connection between suicide stories and fatal crashes. Another fascinating statistic indicates that this is not the correct explanation: Fatal crashes increase dramatically only in those regions where the suicide has been highly publicized. Other places, existing under similar social conditions, whose newspapers have *not* publicized the story, have shown no comparable jump in such fatalities. Furthermore, within those areas where newspaper space has been allotted, the wider the publicity given the suicide, the greater

has been the rise in subsequent crashes. Thus, it is not some set of common societal events that stimulates suicides on the one hand and fatal accidents on the other. Instead, it is the publicized suicide story itself that produces the car and plane wrecks.

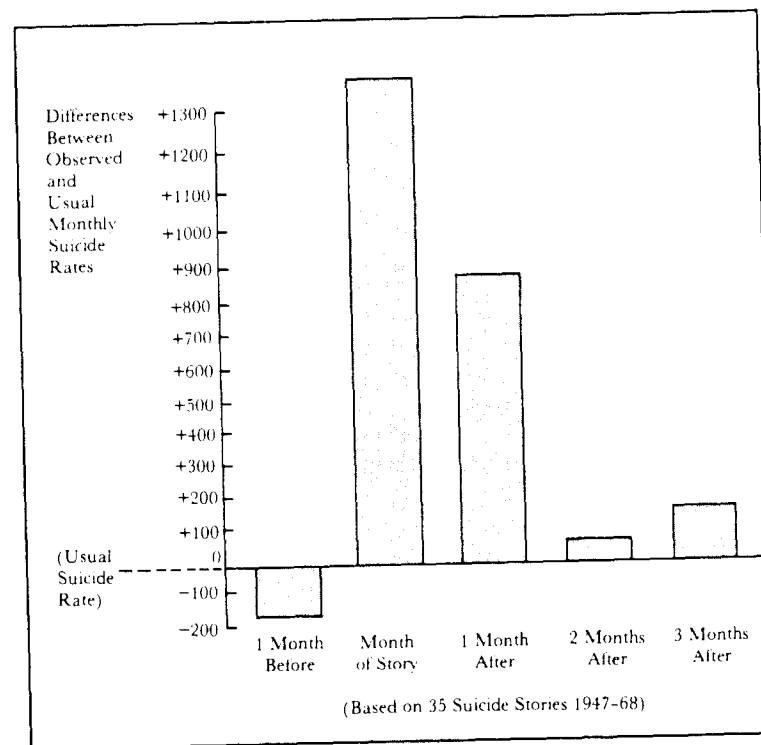
To explain the strong association between suicide-story publicity and subsequent crashes, a "bereavement" account has been suggested. Because, it has been argued, front-page suicides often involve well-known and respected public figures, perhaps their highly publicized deaths throw many people into states of shocked sadness. Stunned and preoccupied, these individuals become careless around cars and planes. The consequence is the sharp increase in deadly accidents involving such vehicles that we see after front-page suicide stories. Although the bereavement theory can account for the connection between the degree of publicity given a story and subsequent crash fatalities—the more people who learn of the suicide, the larger will be the number of bereaved and careless individuals—it *cannot* explain another startling fact: Newspaper stories reporting suicide victims who died alone produce an increase in the frequency of single-fatality wrecks only, whereas stories reporting suicide-plus-murder incidents produce an increase in multiple-fatality wrecks only. Simple bereavement could not cause such a pattern.

The influence of suicide stories on car and plane crashes, then, is fantastically specific. Stories of pure suicides, in which only one person dies, generate wrecks in which only one person dies; stories of suicide-murder combination, in which there are multiple deaths, generate wrecks in which there are multiple deaths. If neither "social conditions" nor "bereavement" can make sense of this bewildering array of facts, what can? There is a sociologist at the University of California in San Diego who thinks he has found the answer. His name is David Phillips, and he points a convincing finger at something called the "Werther effect."

The story of the Werther effect is both chilling and intriguing. More than two centuries ago, the great man of German literature, Johann von Goethe, published a novel entitled *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*). The book, in which the hero, named Werther, commits suicide, had a remarkable impact. Not only did it provide Goethe with immediate fame, but it also sparked a wave of emulative suicides across Europe. So powerful was this effect that authorities in several countries banned the novel.

Phillips' own work has traced the Werther effect to modern times (Phillips, 1974). His research has demonstrated that, immediately following a front-page suicide story, the suicide rate increases dramatically in those geographical areas where the story has been highly publicized. It is Phillips' argument that certain troubled people who read of another's self-inflicted death kill themselves in imitation. In a morbid illustration of the principle of social proof, these people decide how they should act on the basis of how some other troubled person has acted.

Phillips derived his evidence for the modern-day Werther effect from examining the suicide statistics in the United States between 1947 and 1968. He found that, within two months after every front-page suicide story, an average



FLUCTUATION IN NUMBER OF SUICIDES BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER MONTH OF SUICIDE STORY

Figure 4.5 This evidence raises an important ethical issue. The suicides that follow these stories are *excess* deaths. After the initial spurt, the suicide rates do not drop below traditional levels but only return to those levels. Statistics like these might well give pause to newspaper editors inclined to sensationalize suicide accounts, as those accounts are likely to lead to the deaths of scores of people. More recent data indicate that in addition to newspaper editors, television broadcasters have cause for concern about the effects of the suicide stories they present. Whether they appear as news reports, information features, or fictional movies, these stories create an immediate cluster of self-inflicted deaths, with impressionable, imitation-prone teenagers being the most frequent victims (Bollen & Phillips, 1982; Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Phillips & Carsensen, 1986, 1988; Schmidtke & Hafner, 1988).

of 58 more people than usual killed themselves. In a sense, each suicide story killed 58 people who otherwise would have gone on living. Phillips also found that this tendency for suicides to beget suicides occurred principally in those parts of the country where the first suicide was highly publicized. He observed that the wider the publicity given the first suicide, the greater the number of later suicides (see Figure 4.5).

If the facts surrounding the Werther effect seem to you suspiciously like those surrounding the influence of suicide stories on air and traffic fatalities, the similarities have not been lost on Phillips, either. In fact, he contends that all the excess deaths following a front-page suicide incident can be explained as the same thing: copycat suicides. Upon learning of another's suicide, an uncomfortably large number of people decide that suicide is an appropriate action for themselves as well. Some of these individuals then proceed to commit the act in a straightforward, no-bones-about-it fashion, causing the suicide rate to jump.

Others, however, are less direct. For any of several reasons—to protect their reputations, to spare their families the shame and hurt, to allow their dependents to collect on insurance policies—they do not want to appear to have killed themselves. They would rather seem to have died accidentally. So, purposively but furtively, they cause the wreck of a car or a plane they are operating or are simply riding in. This can be accomplished in a variety of all-too-familiar-sounding ways. A commercial airline pilot can dip the nose of the aircraft at a crucial point of takeoff or can inexplicably land on an already occupied runway against the instructions from the control tower; the driver of a car can suddenly swerve into a tree or into oncoming traffic; a passenger in an automobile or corporate jet can incapacitate the operator, causing the deadly crash; the pilot of a private plane can, despite all radio warnings, plow into another aircraft. Thus the alarming climb in crash fatalities that we find following front-page suicides is, according to Phillips, most likely due to the Werther effect secretly applied.

I consider this insight brilliant. First, it explains all of the data beautifully. If these wrecks really are hidden instances of imitative suicide, it makes sense that we should see an increase in the wrecks after suicide stories appear. It makes sense that the greatest rise in wrecks should occur after the suicide stories that have been most widely publicized and have, consequently, reached the most people. It also makes sense that the number of crashes should jump appreciably only in those geographical areas where the suicide stories were publicized. It even makes sense that single-victim suicides should lead only to single-victim crashes, whereas multiple-victim suicide incidents should lead only to multiple-victim crashes. Imitation is the key.

In addition, there is a second valuable feature of Phillips' insight. Not only does it allow us to explain the existing facts, it also allows us to predict new facts that had never been uncovered before. For example, if the abnormally frequent crashes following publicized suicides are genuinely the result of imitative rather than accidental actions, they should be more deadly as a result. That is, people trying to kill themselves will likely to arrange (with a foot on the accelerator instead of the brake, with the nose of the plane down instead of up) for the impact to be as lethal as possible. The consequence should be quick and sure death. When Phillips examined the records to check on this prediction, he found that the average number of people killed in a fatal crash of a commercial airliner is more than three times greater if the crash happened one week after a front-page suicide story than if it happened one week before. A similar phenomenon can be found in traffic statistics where there is evidence for the

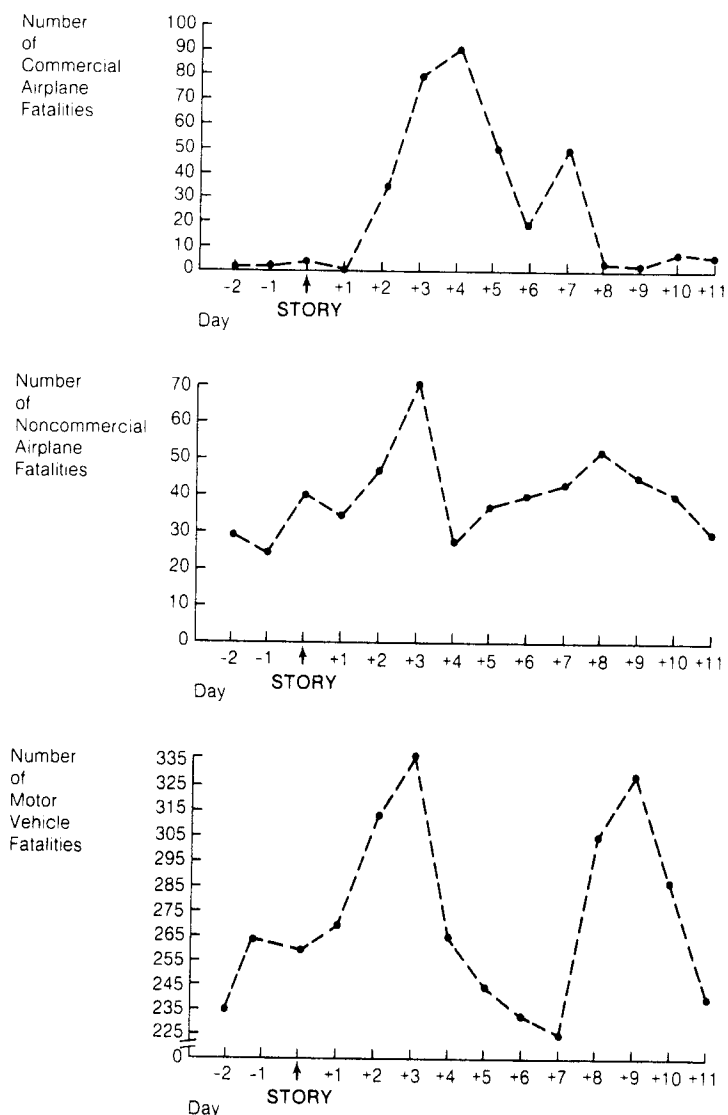
deadly efficiency of post-suicide-story auto crashes. Victims of fatal car wrecks that follow front-page suicide stories die four times more quickly than normal (Phillips, 1980).

Still another fascinating prediction flows from Phillips' idea. If the increase in wrecks following suicide stories truly represents a set of copycat deaths, then the imitators should be most likely to copy the suicides of people who are similar to them. The principle of social proof states that we use information about the way others have behaved to help us determine proper conduct for ourselves. As the dropped-wallet experiment showed, we are most influenced in this fashion by the actions of people who are like us.

Therefore, Phillips reasoned, if the principle of social proof is behind the phenomenon, there should be some clear similarity between the victim of the highly publicized suicide and those who cause subsequent wrecks. Realizing that the clearest test of this possibility would come from the records of automobile crashes involving a single car and a lone driver, Phillips compared the age of the suicide-story victim with the ages of the lone drivers killed in single-car crashes immediately after the story appeared in print. Once again the predictions were strikingly accurate: When the newspaper detailed the suicide of a young person, it was young drivers who then piled their cars into trees, poles, and embankments with fatal results; but when the news story concerned an older person's suicide, older drivers died in such crashes (Phillips, 1980).

This last statistic is the clincher for me. I am left wholly convinced and, simultaneously, wholly amazed by it. Evidently, the principle of social proof is so wide-ranging and powerful that its domain extends to the fundamental decision for life or death. Phillips' findings illustrate a distressing tendency for suicide publicity to motivate certain people who are similar to the victim to kill themselves—because they now find the idea of suicide more legitimate. Truly frightening are the data indicating that many innocent people die in the bargain. A glance at the graphs documenting the undeniable increase of traffic and air fatalities following publicized suicides, especially those involving murder, is enough to cause concern for one's own safety. I have been sufficiently affected by these statistics to begin to take note of front-page suicide stories and to change my behavior in the period after their appearances. I try to be especially cautious behind the wheel of my car. I am reluctant to take extended trips requiring a lot of air travel. If I must fly during such a period, I purchase substantially more flight insurance than I normally would. Phillips has done us a service by demonstrating that the odds for survival when we travel change measurably for a time following the publication of certain kinds of front-page suicide stories. It would seem only prudent to play those odds (see Figure 4.6).

As if the frightening features of Phillips' suicide data weren't enough, his additional research (Phillips, 1983) brings more cause for alarm: Homicides in this country have a stimulated, copycat character after highly publicized acts of violence. Heavyweight championship prize fights that receive coverage on network evening news appear to produce measurable increases in the United States homicide rate. This analysis of heavyweight championship fights (between 1973 and 1978) is perhaps most compelling in its demonstration of



**DAILY FLUCTUATION IN NUMBER OF ACCIDENT FATALITIES BEFORE, ON, AND AFTER SUICIDE STORY DATE**

Figure 4.6 As is apparent from these graphs, the greatest danger exists three to four days following the news story's publication. After a brief dropoff, there comes another peak approximately one week later. By the eleventh day, there is no hint of an effect. This pattern across various types of data indicates something noteworthy about secret suicides. Those who try to disguise their imitative self-destruction as accidents wait a few days before committing the act—perhaps to build their courage, to plan the incident, or to put their affairs in order. Whatever the reason for the regularity of this pattern, we know that travelers' safety is most severely jeopardized three to four days after a suicide-murder story and then again, but to a lesser degree, a few days later. We would be well advised, then, to take special care in our travels at these times.

the remarkably specific nature of the imitative aggression that is generated. When such a match was lost by a black fighter, the homicide rate during the following 10 days rose significantly for young black male victims but not young white males. On the other hand, when a white fighter lost a match, it was young white men, but not young black men, who were killed more frequently in the next 10 days. When these results are combined with the parallel findings in Phillips' suicide data, it is clear that widely publicized aggression has the nasty tendency to spread to similar victims, no matter whether the aggression is inflicted on the self or on another.

## Monkey Island

Work like Phillips' helps us appreciate the awesome influence of the behavior of similar others. Once the enormity of that force is recognized, it becomes possible to understand perhaps the most spectacular act of compliance of our time—the mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana. Certain crucial features of the event deserve review.

The People's Temple was a cultlike organization that was based in San Francisco and drew its recruits from the poor of that city. In 1977, the Reverend Jim Jones—who was the group's undisputed political, social, and spiritual leader—moved the bulk of the membership with him to a jungle settlement in Guyana, South America. There, the People's Temple existed in relative obscurity until November 18, 1978, when Congressmen Leo R. Ryan of California (who had gone to Guyana to investigate the cult), three members of Ryan's fact-finding party, and a cult defector were murdered as they tried to leave Jonestown by plane. Convinced that he would be arrested and implicated in the killings and that the demise of the People's Temple would result, Jones sought to control the end of the Temple in his own way. He gathered the entire community around him and issued a call for each person's death to be done in a unified act of self-destruction.

The first response was that of a young woman who calmly approached the now famous vat of strawberry-flavored poison, administered one dose to her baby, one to herself, and then sat down in a field, where she and her child died in convulsions within four minutes. Others followed steadily in turn. Although a handful of Jonestowners escaped and a few others are reported to have resisted, the survivors claim that the great majority of the 910 people who died did so in an orderly, willful fashion.

News of the event shocked us. The broadcast media and the papers provided a barrage of reports, updates, and analyses. For days, our conversations were full of the topic, "How many have they found dead now?" "A guy who escaped said they were drinking the poison like they were hypnotized or something." "What were they doing down in South America, anyway?" "It's so hard to believe. What caused it?"

Yes, "What caused it?"—the critical question. How are we to account for this most astounding of compliant acts? Various explanations have been offered.





Figure 4.7 Bodies lay in orderly rows at Jonestown, displaying the most spectacular act of compliance of our time.

Some have focused on the charisma of Jim Jones, a man whose style allowed him to be loved like a savior, trusted like a father, and treated like an emperor. Other explanations have pointed to the kind of people who were attracted to the People's Temple. They were mostly poor and uneducated individuals who were willing to give up their freedoms of thought and action for the safety of a place where all decisions would be made for them. Still other explanations have emphasized the quasi-religious nature of the People's Temple, in which unquestioned faith in the cult's leader was assigned highest priority.

No doubt each of these features of Jonestown has merit in explaining what happened there, but I do not find them sufficient. After all, the world abounds with cults populated by dependent people who are led by a charismatic figure. What's more, there has never been a shortage of this combination of circumstances in the past. Yet virtually nowhere do we find evidence of an event even approximating the Jonestown incident among such groups. There must be something else that was critical.

One especially revealing question gives us a clue: "If the community had remained in San Francisco, would Reverend Jones' suicide command have

been obeyed?" A highly speculative question to be sure, but the expert most familiar with the People's Temple has no doubt about the answer. Louis Jolyon West, chairman of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA and director of its neuropsychiatric unit, is an authority on cults who had observed the People's Temple for eight years prior to the Jonestown deaths. When interviewed in the immediate aftermath, he made what strikes me as an inordinately instructive statement: "This wouldn't have happened in California. But they lived in total alienation from the rest of the world in a jungle situation in a hostile country."

Although lost in the welter of commentary following the tragedy, West's observation, together with what we know about the principle of social proof, seems to me quite important to a satisfactory understanding of the compliant suicides. To my mind, the single act in the history of the People's Temple that most contributed to the members' mindless compliance that day occurred a year earlier with the relocation of the Temple to a jungled country of unfamiliar customs and people. If we are to believe the stories of Jim Jones' malevolent genius, he realized fully the massive psychological impact such a move would have on his followers. All at once, they found themselves in a place they knew nothing about. South America, and the rain forests of Guyana, especially, were unlike anything they had experienced in San Francisco. The country—both physical and social—into which they were dropped must have seemed dreadfully uncertain.

Ah, uncertainty—the right-hand man of the principle of social proof. We have already seen that when people are uncertain, they look to the actions of others to guide their own actions. In the alien, Guyanese environment, then, Temple members were very ready to follow the lead of others. As we have also seen, it is others of a special kind whose behavior will be most unquestioningly followed: similar others. Therein lies the awful beauty of Reverend Jones' relocation strategy. In a country like Guyana, there were no similar others for a Jonestown resident but the people of Jonestown itself.

What was right for a member of the community was determined to a disproportionate degree by what other community members—influenced heavily by Jones—did and believed. When viewed in this light, the terrible orderliness, the lack of panic, the sense of calm with which these people moved to the vat of poison and to their deaths seems more comprehensible. They hadn't been hypnotized by Jones; they had been convinced—partly by him but, more importantly, by the principle of social proof—that suicide was the correct conduct. The uncertainty they surely felt upon first hearing the death command must have caused them to look around them for a definition of the appropriate response.

It is worth particular note that they found two impressive pieces of social evidence, each pointing in the same direction. The first was the initial set of their compatriots, who quickly and willingly took the poison drafts. There will always be a few such fanatically obedient individuals in any strong leader-dominated group. Whether, in this instance, they had been specially instructed beforehand to serve as examples or whether they were just naturally

the most compliant with Jones' wishes is difficult to know. No matter; the psychological effect of the actions of those individuals must have been potent. If the suicides of similar others in news stories can influence total strangers to kill themselves, imagine how enormously more compelling such an act would be when performed without hesitation by one's neighbors in a place like Jonestown. The second source of social evidence came from the reactions of the crowd itself. Given the conditions, I suspect that what occurred was a large-scale instance of the pluralistic ignorance phenomenon. Each Jonestowner looked to the actions of surrounding individuals to assess the situation and—finding calmness because everyone else, too, was surreptitiously assessing rather than reacting—"learned" that patient turntaking was the correct behavior. Such misinterpreted, but nonetheless convincing, social evidence would be expected to result precisely in the ghastly composure of the assemblage that waited in the tropics of Guyana for businesslike death.

From my own perspective, most attempts to analyze the Jonestown incident have focused too much on the personal qualities of Jim Jones. Although he was without question a man of rare dynamism, the power he wielded strikes me as coming less from his remarkable personal style than from his understanding of fundamental psychological principles. His real genius as a leader was his realization of the limitations of individual leadership. No leader can hope to persuade, regularly and single-handedly, all the members of the group. A forceful leader can reasonably expect, however, to persuade some sizable proportion of group members. Then the raw information that a substantial number of group members has been convinced can, by itself, convince the rest. Thus the most influential leaders are those who know how to arrange group conditions to allow the principle of social proof to work in their favor.

It is in this that Jones appears to have been inspired. His masterstroke was the decision to move the People's Temple community from urban San Francisco to the remoteness of equatorial South America, where the conditions of uncertainty and exclusive similarity would make the principle of social proof operate for him as perhaps nowhere else. There a settlement of a thousand people, much too large to be held in persistent sway by the force of one man's personality, could be changed from a following into a *herd*. As slaughterhouse operators have long known, the mentality of a herd makes it easy to manage. Simply get some members moving in the desired direction and the others—responding not so much to the lead animal as to those immediately surrounding them—will peacefully and mechanically go along. The powers of the amazing Reverend Jones, then, are probably best understood not in terms of his dramatic personal style but in his profound knowledge of the art of social jujitsu.

## DEFENSE

We began this chapter with an account of the relatively harmless practice of laugh tracking and moved on to stories of murder and suicide—all explained by the principle of social proof. How can we expect to defend ourselves against a

weapon of influence that pervades such a vast range of behavior? The difficulty is compounded by the realization that, most of the time, we don't want to guard against the information that social proof provides (Hill, 1982; Laughlin, 1980; Warnik & Sanders, 1980). The evidence it offers about the way we should act is usually valid and valuable. With it we can cruise confidently through countless decisions without having to investigate the detailed pros and cons of each. In this sense, the principle of social proof equips us with a wonderful kind of automatic pilot device not unlike that aboard most aircraft.

Yet there are occasional, but real, problems with automatic pilots. Those problems appear whenever the flight information locked into the control mechanism is wrong. In these instances, we will be taken off course. Depending on the size of the error, the consequences can be severe; but, because the automatic pilot afforded by the principle of social proof is more often an ally than an enemy, we can't be expected to want simply to disconnect it. Thus, we are faced with a classic problem: how to make use of a piece of equipment that simultaneously benefits and imperils our welfare.

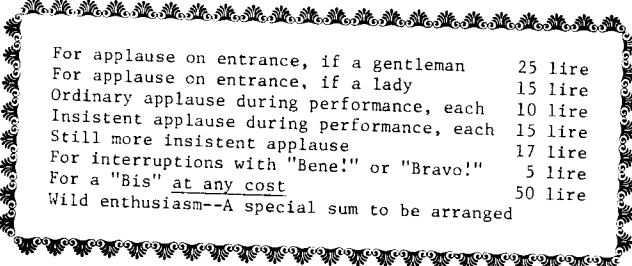
Fortunately, there is a way out of the dilemma. Because the disadvantages of automatic pilots arise principally when incorrect data have been put into the control system, our best defense against these disadvantages is to recognize when the data are in error. If we can become sensitive to situations where the social proof automatic pilot is working with inaccurate information, we can disengage the mechanism and grasp the controls when we need to.

## Sabotage

There are two types of situations in which incorrect data cause the principle of social proof to give us poor counsel. The first occurs when the social evidence has been purposely falsified. Invariably these situations are manufactured by exploiters intent on creating the *impression*—reality be damned—that a multitude is performing the way the exploiters want us to perform. The canned laughter of TV comedy shows is one variety of faked data of this sort, but there is a great deal more, and much of the fakery is strikingly obvious.

For instance, canned responses are not unique to the electronic media or even to the electronic age. In fact, the heavy-handed exploitation of the principle of social proof can be traced through the history of grand opera, one of our most venerable art forms. This is the phenomenon called *claquing*, said to have begun in 1820 by a pair of Paris opera-house habitués named Sauton and Porcher. The men were more than opera-goers, though. They were businessmen whose product was applause.

Organizing under the title *L'Assurance des Succès Dramatiques*, they leased themselves and their employees to singers and opera managers who wished to be assured of an appreciative audience response. So effective were Sauton and Porcher in stimulating genuine audience reaction with their rigged reactions that, before long, *clagues* (usually consisting of a leader—*chef de claque*—and several individual *claqueurs*) had become an established and



For applause on entrance, if a gentleman	25 lire
For applause on entrance, if a lady	15 lire
Ordinary applause during performance, each	10 lire
Insistent applause during performance, each	15 lire
Still more insistent applause	17 lire
For interruptions with "Bene!" or "Bravo!"	5 lire
For a "Bis" at any cost	50 lire
Wild enthusiasm--A special sum to be arranged	

#### ADVERTISED RATES OF THE ITALIAN CLAQUE

Figure 4.8 From "ordinary applause" to "wild enthusiasm," *claqueurs* offered their services in an audaciously public fashion—in this case, in a newspaper read by many of the audience members they fully expected to influence. *Claque, whirr.*

persistent tradition throughout the world of opera. As music historian Robert Sabin (1964) notes, "By 1830 the claque was a full-bloom institution, collecting by day, applauding by night, all in the honest open. . . . But it is altogether probable that neither Sauton, nor his ally Porcher, had a notion of the extent to which their scheme of paid applause would be adopted and applied wherever opera is sung."

As claquing grew and developed, its practitioners offered an array of styles and strengths. In the same way that laugh-track producers hire individuals who excel in titters, chuckles, or belly laughs, the clagues spawned their own specialists—the *pleureuse*, chosen for her ability to weep on cue; the *bisseur*, who called "bis" (repeat) and "encore" in ecstatic tones; and, in direct kinship with today's laugh-track performer, the *rieur*, selected for the infectious quality of his laugh.

For our purposes, though, the most instructive parallel to modern forms of canned response is the conspicuous character of the fakery. No special need was seen to disguise or vary the claque, who often sat in the same seats, performance after performance, year after year, led by a *chef de claque* two decades into his position. Even the monetary transactions were not hidden from the public. Indeed, one hundred years after the birth of claquing, a reader of the London *Musical Times* could scan the advertised rates of the Italian *claqueurs* (see Figure 4.8). Whether in the world of *Rigoletto* or "Gilligan's Island," then, audiences have been successfully manipulated by those who use social evidence, even when that evidence has been openly falsified.

What Sauton and Porcher realized about the mechanical way that we abide by the principle of social proof is understood as well by a variety of today's profiteers. They see no need to hide the manufactured nature of the social evidence they provide—witness the amateurish quality of the average TV laugh track. They seem almost smug in the recognition of our predicament: Either we must allow them to fool us or we must abandon the precious automatic pilots that

make us so vulnerable to their tricks. In their certainty that they have us trapped, however, such exploiters have made a crucial mistake. The laxity with which they construct phony social evidence gives us a way to fight back.

Because automatic pilots can be engaged and disengaged at will, we can cruise along trusting in the course steered by the principle of social proof *until* we recognize that inaccurate data is being used. Then we can take the controls, make the necessary correction for the misinformation, and reset the automatic pilot. The transparency of the rigged social proof we get these days provides us with exactly the cue we need for knowing when to perform this simple maneuver. With no more cost than a bit of vigilance for plainly counterfeit social evidence, then, we can protect ourselves nicely.

Let's take an example. A bit earlier, we noted the proliferation of average person-on-the-street ads, in which a number of ordinary people speak glowingly of a product, often without knowing that their words are being recorded. As would be expected according to the principle of social proof, these testimonials from "average people like you and me" make for quite effective advertising campaigns. They have always included a relatively subtle kind of distortion: We hear only from those who like the product; as a result, we get an understandably biased picture of the amount of social support for it. More recently, though, a cruder and more unethical sort of falsification has been introduced. Commercial producers often don't bother to get genuine testimonials. They merely hire actors to play the roles of average people testifying in an unrehearsed fashion to an interviewer. It is amazing how bald-faced these "unrehearsed interview" commercials can be. The situations are obviously staged, the participants are clearly actors, and the dialogue is unmistakably prewritten.

I know that whenever I encounter an influence attempt of this sort, it sets off in me a kind of alarm with a clear directive: *Attention! Attention! Bad social proof in this situation. Temporarily disconnect automatic pilot.* It's so easy to do. We need only make a conscious decision to be alert to counterfeit social evidence. We can relax until the exploiters' evident fakery is spotted, at which time we can pounce.

And we should pounce with a vengeance. I am speaking of more than simply ignoring the misinformation, although this defensive tactic is certainly called for. I am speaking of aggressive counterattack. Whenever possible we ought to sting those responsible for the rigging of social evidence. We should purchase no products featured in phony "unrehearsed interview" commercials. Moreover, each manufacturer of the items should receive a letter explaining our response and recommending that they discontinue use of the advertising agency that produced so deceptive a presentation of their product.

Of course, we don't always want to trust the actions of others to direct our conduct—especially in a situation important enough to warrant our personal investigation of the pros and cons, or one in which we are experts—but we do want to be able to count on others' behavior as a source of valid information in a wide range of settings. If we find in such settings that we cannot trust the information to be valid because someone has tampered with the evidence, we ought to be ready to strike back. In such instances, I personally feel driven by

## Stay tuned, folks: Consumers from Mars are on next

By Dave Barry

Recently I was watching TV, and a commercial came on, and the announcer, in a tone of voice usually reserved for major developments in the Persian Gulf, said, "Now consumers can ask Angela Lansbury their questions about Bufferin!"

As a normal human, the natural reaction to this announcement is: "Huh?" Meaning: "What does Angela Lansbury have to do with Bufferin?" But this commercial featured several consumers who had apparently been stopped at random on the street, and every one of them had a question for Angela Lansbury about Bufferin. Basically, what they asked was, "Miss

Lansbury, is Bufferin a good product that I should purchase, or what?"

These consumers seemed very earnest. It was as if they had been going around for months wringing their hands and saying, "I have a question about Bufferin! If only I could ask Angela Lansbury!"

What we are seeing here is yet another example of a worsening problem that has been swept under the rug for too long in this nation: The invasion of Consumers From Mars. They look like humans, but they don't act like humans, and they are taking over.

### JUST YOUR AVERAGE MARTIAN ON THE STREET

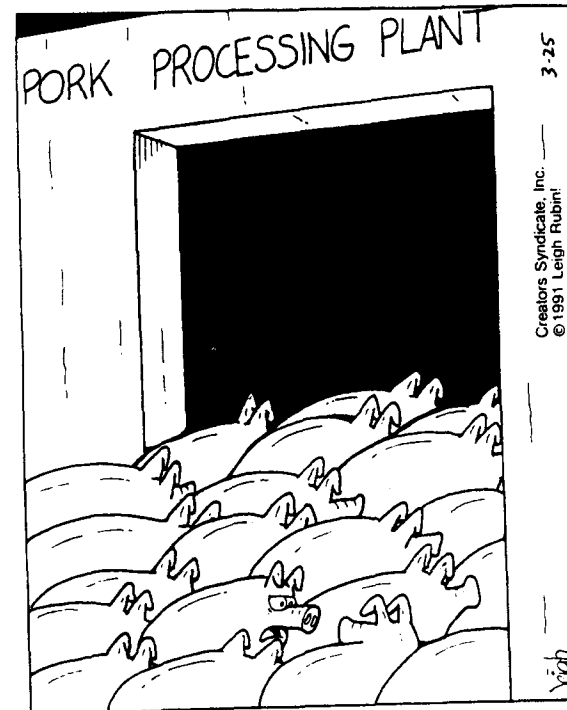
Figure 4.9 Apparently I'm not alone in noticing the number of blatantly phony "unrehearsed" testimonial ads these days. Humorist Dave Barry has registered their prevalence too and has labeled their inhabitants *Consumers from Mars*, which is a term I like and have even begun using myself. It helps remind me that, as regards my buying habits, I should be sure to ignore the tastes of these individuals who, after all, come from another planet than me.

more than an aversion to being duped. I bristle at the thought of being pushed into an unacceptable corner by those who would use one of my hedges against the decisional overload of modern life against me. And I get a genuine sense of righteousness by lashing out when they try. If you are like me, so should you.

### Looking Up

In addition to the times when social evidence is deliberately faked, there is another time when the principle of social proof will regularly steer us wrong. In such an instance, an innocent, natural error will produce snowballing social proof that pushes us to an incorrect decision. The pluralistic ignorance phenomenon, in which everyone at an emergency sees no cause for alarm, is one example of this process.

The best illustration I know, however, comes from a story of one of my students, who was a highway patrolman. After a class session in which the subject of discussion was the principle of social proof, he stayed to talk with me. He said that he now understood the cause of a type of traffic accident that had always puzzled him before. The accident typically occurred on the city freeway during rush hour, when cars in all lanes were moving steadily but slowly. Events leading to the accident would start when a pair of cars, one behind the



"Well, so much for the safety-in-numbers theory."

"SHAKIN' BACON"

Figure 4.10 The notion that there is safety in numbers can prove very wrong once a herd mentality sets in.

other, would simultaneously begin signaling an intention to get out of the lane they were in and into the next. Within seconds, a long line of drivers to the rear of the first two would follow suit, thinking that something—a stalled car or a construction barrier—was blocking the lane ahead. It would be in this rush to cram into the available spaces of the next lane that a collision frequently occurred.

The odd thing about it all, according to the patrolman, was that very often there had been no obstruction to be avoided in the first place and by the time of the accident, this should have been obvious to anyone who looked. He said he had more than once witnessed such accidents when there was a visibly clear road in front of the ill-fated lane switchers.

The patrolman's account provides certain insights into the way we respond to social proof. First, we seem to assume that if a lot of people are doing the same thing, they must know something we don't. Especially when we are uncertain, we are willing to place an enormous amount of trust in the collective

knowledge of the crowd. Second, quite frequently the crowd is mistaken because its members are not acting on the basis of any superior information but are reacting, themselves, to the principle of social proof.

There is a lesson here: An automatic pilot device, like social proof, should never be trusted fully; even when no saboteur has fed false information into the mechanism, it can sometimes go haywire by itself. We need to check the machine from time to time to be sure that it hasn't worked itself out of sync with the other sources of evidence in the situation—the objective facts, our prior experiences, our own judgments. Fortunately, this precaution requires neither much effort nor much time. A quick glance around is all that is needed. And this little precaution is well worth it. The consequences of single-minded reliance on social evidence can be frightening.

Certainly, a flier whose plane is locked into automatic pilot would be wise to glance occasionally at the instrument panel and out the window. In the same way, we need to look up and around periodically whenever we are locked into the evidence of the crowd. Without this simple safeguard against misguided social proof, our prospects might well run parallel to those of the freeway lane switchers: crash.

### READER'S REPORT

*From a Former Racetrack Employee*

I became aware of one method of faking social evidence to one's advantage while working at a racetrack. In order to lower the odds and make more money, some bettors are able to sway the public to bet on bad horses.

Odds at a racetrack are based on where the money is being bet. The more money on a horse, the better the odds. Many people who play the horses have surprisingly little knowledge of racing or betting strategy. Thus, especially when they don't know much about the horses in a particular race, a lot of times they'll simply bet the favorite. Because tote boards display up-to-the-minute odds, the public can always tell who the current favorite is. The system that a high roller can use to alter the odds is actually quite simple. The guy has in mind a horse he feels has a good chance of winning. Next he chooses a horse that has long odds (say, 15 to 1) and doesn't have a realistic chance to win. The minute the mutual windows open, the guy puts down \$100 on the inferior horse, creating an instant favorite whose odds on the board drop to about 2 to 1.

Now the elements of social proof begin to work. People who are uncertain of how to bet the race look to the tote board to see which horse the early bettors have decided is a favorite, and they follow. A snowballing effect now occurs as other people continue to bet the favorite. At this point, the high roller can go back to the window and bet heavily on his true favorite, which will have better odds now because the "new favorite" has been pushed down the board. If the guy wins, the initial \$100 investment will have been worth it many times over.

*(continued)*

I've seen this happen myself. I remember one time a person put down \$100 on a pre-race 10 to 1 shot, making it the early favorite. The rumors started circulating around the track—the early bettors knew something. Next thing you know, everyone (myself included) was betting on this horse. It ended up running last and had a bad leg. Many people lost a lot of money. Somebody came out ahead, though. We'll never know who. But he is the one with all the money. He understood the theory of social proof.

*Author's note:* Once again we can see that social proof is most telling for those who feel unfamiliar or unsure in a specific situation and who, consequently, must look outside of themselves for evidence of how best to behave there.

### SUMMARY

- The principle of social proof states that one important means that people use to decide what to believe or how to act in a situation is to look at what other people are believing or doing there. Powerful imitative effects have been found among both children and adults and in such diverse activities as purchase decisions, charity donations, and phobia remission. The principle of social proof can be used to stimulate a person's compliance with a request by informing the person that many other individuals (the more, the better) are or have been complying with it.
- Social proof is most influential under two conditions. The first is uncertainty. When people are unsure, when the situation is ambiguous, they are more likely to attend to the actions of others and to accept those actions as correct. In ambiguous situations, for instance, the decisions of bystanders to help are much more influenced by the actions of other bystanders than when the situation is a clear-cut emergency. The second condition under which social proof is most influential is similarity: People are more inclined to follow the lead of similar others. Evidence for the powerful effect of the actions of similar others on human behavior can be readily seen in the suicide statistics compiled by sociologist David Phillips. Those statistics indicate that after highly publicized suicide stories other troubled individuals, who are similar to the suicide-story victim, decide to kill themselves. An analysis of the mass suicide incident at Jonestown, Guyana, suggests that the group's leader, Reverend Jim Jones, used both of the factors of uncertainty and similarity to induce a herdlike suicide response from the majority of the Jonestown population.
- Recommendations to reduce our susceptibility to faulty social proof include a sensitivity to clearly counterfeit evidence of what similar others are doing and a recognition that the actions of similar others should not form the sole basis for our decisions.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

## Content Mastery

1. Describe the principle of social proof and how it can explain the effect of canned laughter on an audience's reaction to comedy material.
2. In the Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter study of the end-of-the-world cult, group members pushed to win new converts only after their doomsday predictions proved false. Why?
3. Which two factors maximize the influence of social proof on an individual? What was it about the Jonestown, Guyana, situation that allowed these two factors to operate forcefully?
4. What is pluralistic ignorance? How does it influence bystander intervention in emergencies?
5. Which naturally occurring conditions of city life reduce the chance of bystander intervention in an emergency?
6. What is the Werther effect? How does it explain the puzzling relationship between highly publicized suicide stories and startling increases in the number of airplane and automobile fatalities following publication of the stories?

## Critical Thinking

1. If you had to deliver a lecture to heart patients concerning the best way to secure help should they experience heart trouble in a public place, which steps would you tell them to take?
2. In early 1986, someone injected cyanide into Tylenol capsules on store shelves, creating widespread publicity and a national furor after a New York woman died from ingesting one of the capsules. The weeks that followed saw a rash of product tampering incidents. Three other popular over-the-counter medications were found laced with poison; pieces of glass were inserted in packages of cereal and ice cream; even bathroom tissue was not immune—in one office building, the toilet paper in the public restrooms was sprayed with Mace. Although the Tylenol incident itself could not have been foreseen, explain why, after reading this chapter, you might have predicted the aftermath.
3. Suppose you were a TV producer given the delicate job of creating a series of public service programs designed to reduce teenage suicide. Knowing that research suggests that previous programming may have inadvertently increased teen suicides via the principle of social proof, what would you do to use the same principle to make it likely that your shows would reduce the problem among those who watched? Who would you interview on-camera? Would any of them be troubled teenagers? Which questions would you ask them?

4. Describe a situation in your past in which you had been tricked into compliance by someone who counterfeited the principle of social proof. How would you handle a similar situation today?