Social Proof

Determine correct behavior by seeing what others are doing.

Balthazar Gracian
Observation made over 350 years ago:
"Not all turn the goods over or look deep. Most run where the crowd is because the others run."

Milgram et al. (1969)

1 Confederate looking up
45% looked up

15 confederates looking up
85% looked up
Social Proof: 
Craig & Prkachin (1978)

1. Administered shock to participant
2. Asked participant how painful shock was
3. Took physiological measures of pain

Participants felt less shock on both pain indices if they were in the presence of another participant who was apparently experiencing little or no pain.

Other Forms of Social Proof

Canned Laughter

Person-on-the-street testimonies

Why Does Social Proof Promote Conformity?

Why does it work?

- People make fewer errors when they “follow the crowd”
- Following the crowd is easier - takes less mental effort
Factors that Influence Effectiveness of Social Proof

Uncertain about correct behavior

Social Proof works better under conditions of uncertainty

Certain about correct behavior

Factors that Influence Effectiveness of Social Proof

Dissimilar

Similar

Social Proof works better when others are similar to the self

Copycat Suicides
Schmidtke & Hafter (1988)

Examined # of suicides following broadcast of FICTIONAL TV show

- TV show lasted 6 weeks
- Depicted 19 yr. old male who committed suicide by leaping in front of a train

Following the series, railway suicides increased substantially

This increase was greatest for males who were same age as TV character

Copycat suicides called the Werther Effect
Fluctuations in U.S. suicides before, during, and after 26 publicized suicide stories (Phillips, 1974).

Number of suicides in comparison to what would have normally been expected.

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