

The Art of Social Pressure

We are social animals. We all have an innate desire to belong to the social group. It is precisely because we value this sense of belonging so highly that the more other people find an idea, trend, or position appealing or correct, the more correct that idea becomes in our own minds. The Law of Social Validation recognizes and builds upon our innate desire to be part of the main group. It also recognizes that we tend to change our perceptions, opinions, and behaviors in ways that are consistent with group norms. Even if we don't admit it, or maybe even realize it, we care about what others think. As such, we use others' behavior as a guide in establishing the standard for the choices and decisions we make.

We seek to find out what others are doing as a way of validating our own actions. This method is how we decide what constitutes "correct" behavior. We see the behavior as more correct when we see others doing it. The more people do it, the more correct it becomes. Professor Kirk Hansen of the Stanford Business School demonstrated this when he boosted downloads for best-selling files on the web by downloading those files over and over himself so the counter was artificially high. He and his team then observed that these boosted downloaded files were downloaded even more frequently. The high number on the counter indicated popularity, and people were most interested in downloading the files that were already ranked the highest. Whether the question is what to do with an empty can of soda at the park, how fast to drive in the city, or how to eat the soup at a restaurant, the validation of others give us our answer and therefore guides our actions.

We feel validation when we see others do what we want to do. We learned early in life that we make fewer mistakes if we follow the social norm. There are two types of norms: explicit and implicit. Explicit norms are openly spoken or written. For example, road signs, employee manuals, or game rules are all examples of explicit norms. Implicit norms are not usually stated openly. For example, you usually don't have to be directed to say hello or to smile when you see someone, but you do it anyway. Or, somehow you know better than to put your feet up on the dinner table when you're a guest in someone's home, even though your host most likely will not request that you refrain from doing so.

If we don't know the norm, we look around and find it. The Law of Social Validation becomes a way to save time and energy in figuring out what is correct. We use others' behavior to guide our own actions, to validate what we should or should not do. We don't always have to look at the positive and the negative in every situation. This automatic trigger saves us from thinking. We compare what we do against the standard of what everyone else is doing. If we find a discrepancy between what we observe and what we do, we tend to make changes in the direction of the social norm.

Social Judo

This Social Validation compels us to change our behaviors, our attitudes, and our actions. Often this happens even if the things we observe don't really match our true feelings, style, and thoughts. We go against our better judgment because we want to be liked,

accepted, and found in agreement with everyone else. When we are part of a crowd, we “no longer feel individually responsible for our emotions or actions. We can allow ourselves to shout, sing, cry, or strike without temperament imposed by personal accountability.”

We seek out social norms to help us know what we should be feeling or doing. For the most part, this is not a conscious process. We subconsciously accept many ways of behaving that are determined by our surroundings and the actions of others, for example: raising our hands to speak in class, tipping in a restaurant, or how we behave at a concert. When we become part of a group, our once divergent emotions and feelings tend to converge.

Usually, as long as the majority of people agree with what we are doing or about to do, we feel social validation. For the most part, we are all conformists. We will do what the crowd does. We might not like to admit that, but it is true. Only 5-10% of the population engages in behavior contrary to the social norm.

We see this law operating in groups, in organizations, in meetings, and in day-to-day public life. In all of these circumstances, there is a certain standard or norm. In churches, the moral code determines the standard behavior acceptable for the group. In organizations, the bylaws and years of tradition establish a standard operating procedure. Because we want to fit into are these groups and maintain our membership with them, we conform our actions to the norm.

When we find ourselves in a foreign situation where we feel awkward or unsure of how to act, we look for those social cues that will dictate our behavior. This could be at a party, during freshman orientation, or even while attending a family gathering. When the social information we are seeking is at all ambiguous, we don't know how to respond so we continue seeking out social clues. Imagine if you were sitting in the movie theater enjoying your show when somebody shouted, “FIRE!” Do you think you would jump up and run for it? Well, if everyone else did, you would, too. If everyone remained seated, you would remain seated also.

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