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Kickback: Chapter 1  
**A Generational Problem**

**by Robert Urbanowski**

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As you sit here reading this book, *where* and *who* you are is the sum total of your own choices. You chose your profession. You chose your spouse, your friends and, in a sense, your neighbors. Some of your choices were made consciously and others were made unconsciously. Some choices were *proactive* and others were *reactive*. Nonetheless, *you* chose how your life has turned out. Or did you?

Although we live in a society where we have the right to choose our own destinies, the simple truth of the matter is that our decisions are heavily influenced by others. We like to think that we are directing our own paths. Yet our choices might be less our own than we recognize. Instead, many of our choices are made based on what scientists call “social proof,” but what I will refer to as *social guidance*.

In many ways, our generation—the *me* generation—evolved into what we are today because of the power of social guidance. What is social guidance? It is a psychological mechanism by which human beings look to others to guide their own actions—a fancy name for peer pressure. In short, we tend to view a behavior as more correct to the degree that we see others performing it. We assume that, when a lot of people are doing something, it must be the right thing to do. When we see a group of people gathered in a park, we tend to walk over and join them. We like to like things that others like, whether clothes, cars or activities. We know this is true; it’s what makes actions and items popular.

Social guidance often happens on an unconscious emotional level. We don’t consciously say, “All these people are wearing red jeans. I’d better get some too!” Nevertheless, we eventually find ourselves wearing them as well. Often, we simply can’t help ourselves. It’s hardwired into our brains. Using social guidance to validate our decisions is something that human beings have been doing throughout history.

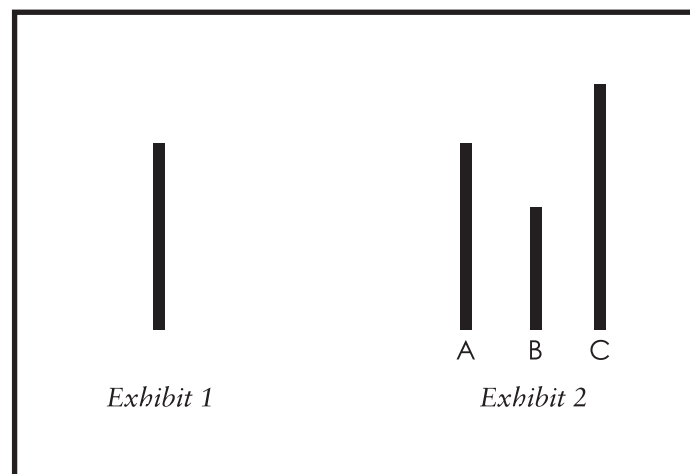
Think about human beings in the Stone Age. They didn’t possess many of the technological tools we take for granted today. If they came across a stream, they couldn’t simply pull out a kit and test the water for parasites. Instead, they used social guidance to help them make decisions. If they saw other people drinking from the stream, they would assume the water was safe to drink. Likewise, if they wanted to know where to find the fish in the stream, they couldn’t just turn on the fish finder in their canoes. Instead, they would paddle along until they found a spot where other fishers were gathered and join them. In this way, and many other ways, they used social guidance for their very survival.

Strikingly, modern people aren’t much different. Despite our advanced technology, we are still heavily influenced by social guidance. If we are trying to decide which movie to see on a Friday night, we’re likely to read a review or choose a movie that someone else has suggested is worth

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watching. Likewise, in deciding which products to purchase, most people choose one of the top two brands in that product category. This is a proven fact. We buy what's most popular, which is a reflection of what others are buying.

Of course, it can make sense to learn from the experiences of others. However, there are times in which the reliance on social guidance leads to nonsensical results. For example, in an experiment called the Asch Line Test, psychologist Solomon Asch demonstrated how other people could affect our decision-making. In his study, Asch told participants that they were going to participate in a line study to test “perceptual judgment.” Asch showed a diagram with bars like those in the figure below to college students in groups of eight to ten. He told them he was studying visual perception and that their task was to decide which bar on the right was the same length as the one on the left. As you can see, the task is simple, and the correct answer is obvious. Bar “A” on the right is clearly the same length as the bar on the left.



Asch staged the test. Only one of the students in each group was a real subject. All the others were confederates who had been instructed to give incorrect answers on certain trials. He asked the students to give their answers aloud and arranged for the real subject to be the next-to-last person in each group to announce her answer so that she would hear most of the incorrect responses before giving her own. Would she go along with the crowd?

To Asch's surprise, 74 percent of participants who were set-up to hear false answers conformed to the majority at least once. When faced with a unanimous wrong answer by the other group members, most people made the decision to agree and give an obviously incorrect response in order to remain comfortable within the group. Asch was disturbed by these results: “The tendency to conformity in our society is so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white, black. This is a matter of concern.”<sup>1</sup>

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Of course, you may be thinking young people are particularly susceptible to peer pressure. Besides, what's the harm in giving a wrong answer in a silly study? Well, I assure you that people of all ages make decisions based on social guidance, even when the stakes are significant.

A fascinating example of social proof has been dubbed the “Werther effect,” so named after the lead character in Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In his research, David Phillips demonstrated that the suicide rate increases dramatically in those areas where a suicide story has been highly publicized. Phillips found that within two months of every front-page suicide story, an average of 58 more people than usual kill themselves. In a gruesome illustration of the principle of social guidance, an uncomfortably large number of people decide suicide is an appropriate action for them because someone else has done it.<sup>2</sup>

In his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Robert Cialdini explains the power of social guidance at work in adults, describing a phenomenon called *pluralistic ignorance*. Pluralistic ignorance occurs when people look to others for clues to appropriate behavior, yet those others have no more insight or knowledge than themselves. It’s the classic example of the blind leading the blind, and the results are often predictably tragic. The results were particularly tragic in 1964 for Catherine Genovese, who was stabbed to death over a period of 35 minutes while 38 neighbors looked on. None of these witnesses telephoned the police until after the woman was dead and silent.

Initially, the media characterized the inaction of her neighbors as cold and uncaring, the result of urban alienation and apathy. However, later research by Latané and Darley revealed that no one had helped precisely because there were so many observers. Each witness looked to the other witnesses to determine what to do. Since no one else was acting, they interpreted the situation as a non-emergency. In other words, they were in a state of pluralistic ignorance.

This hypothesis was supported in subsequent research by Latané and Darley. They determined that people were less likely to receive help as the number of bystanders increased: “...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 the time with five bystanders present.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the more people who stood around and did nothing to help, the greater the likelihood others would do the same thing.

As you can see, pluralistic ignorance can lead otherwise caring and compassionate people to act just the opposite. Even worse, sometimes in our effort to follow the leader, we end up just like the hunted American buffalo. There are two features of buffalo that make them especially susceptible to erroneous social guidance. First, their eyes are set in their heads so that it is easier for them to see to the sides than to the front. Second, when they run together in a stampede, it is with their heads down and low, so they cannot see above the herd. As a result, Native American hunters realized that it was possible to kill tremendous numbers of buffalo by simply starting the herd

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running toward a cliff. The animals, responding to the thundering social guidance around them, did the rest, running toward and over the cliff to their deaths.

Today, marketers use a similar strategy to get consumers running headlong into trouble by purchasing and consuming an excess of products that are not in their best interests. The marketing of tobacco products is a perfect example of using social guidance to drive the herd to its ultimate demise. For years, cigarette manufacturers marketed smoking as “cool” (or should I say, Kool?) Despite ample evidence of the harmful effects of smoking, these companies were able to stampede millions of people into literally killing themselves one puff at a time as they attempted to run with the “in crowd.”

One of the most recent lies promoted through advertising can be seen in credit card commercials. These commercials often promote credit as giving you “freedom.” You can get away from it all or buy whatever you want. However, the truth is that credit card companies sell *debt*. A debt is an *obligation*—the exact opposite of freedom. How do they do this? They pay famous people to stand in front of a camera and tell you that this is “their” credit card. They show you pictures of people having fun on vacation and doing whatever they want, all because they have this certain credit card. The credit card companies are appealing to your natural response to social guidance. If others use that card and get those results, then you could and should too.

I could cite example after example of how marketers use social guidance to affect our behavior. Yet this is not a book about social guidance. This is a book about decisions. So why all the hoopla about social guidance? Because we are being increasingly conditioned to make decisions that are driving us over a cliff. We are being sold a lifestyle that is unhealthy for us—a lifestyle that promises to give us everything we need and want, but is doing the exact opposite.

In a very real sense, we are quickly becoming like John Henry Fabr e’s now famous processionary caterpillars. Fabr e, the great French naturalist, conducted an experiment with a group of processionary caterpillars, so named because these caterpillars blindly follow the one in front of them. Fabr e filled a flowerpot with dirt and then carefully arranged the caterpillars in a circle around the rim, so that the lead caterpillar actually touched the last one, making a complete circle. In the center of the flowerpot, he placed some pine needles, which is food for the processionary caterpillar.

Sure enough, the caterpillars began marching around the circular flowerpot in a procession. Around and around they went for seven days and nights, at which point they dropped dead from exhaustion and starvation. Despite the fact that they were literally inches away from their life source, they failed to see it because they were so busy following the caterpillar in front of them.

Much of our society has become just like these processionary caterpillars. We fail to find nourishment and fulfillment because we are so focused on following the caterpillar in front of us, who,

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in turn, is following the caterpillar in front of him. Sadly, those around us are not acting on the basis of superior information, but are reacting to the social guidance around them. As a result, we all just keep marching round and round, never getting any closer to the things we *really* need in life. This is despite the fact that what we need is easily within our grasp and ready for the taking.

In short, we are being misled. Society presents the idea that having more, pursuing pleasures such as a bigger house, a nicer car, another vacation, a certain achievement and a better appearance are the things that bring fulfillment—to others and to us. But do these things really work? Who could we ask to find out? How about the very people that our society upholds as having it all? Why don't we ask the people who have all of these things whether they bring fulfillment? Let's ask the people with money, fame, beauty, sex appeal and achievement if these things really work.

What does Brad Pitt say about success and personal gain? In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, he said,

*The emphasis now is on success and personal gain. I'm sitting in it, and I'm telling you, that's not it. I'm the guy who's got everything. I know. But I'm telling you, once you've got everything, then you're just left with yourself. I've said it before and I'll say it again: it doesn't help you sleep any better, and you don't wake up any better because of it.*<sup>4</sup>

Think about it. Brad Pitt has more fame and fortune than any ten people could ever dream of having. He is widely recognized as one of the best-looking men in Hollywood and is currently with a woman every bit as attractive as he is. He has everything Madison Avenue tries to sell us. Yet even he is left wondering, "Is this all there is to life?" And Brad Pitt is not alone. Time and again, people who have grabbed the brass ring and achieved everything that is supposed to make them happy, have come away empty-handed.

Take, for instance, Tom Landry, the legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys. In 1960, Landry became the first head coach of the expanded Dallas Cowboys. In his first full season as their head coach, the Cowboys completed a perfect season—a perfectly horrible season, that is. They finished with a record of 0–11–1. The team performed only slightly better over the next four years. It wasn't until Landry's seventh season with the Cowboys that they had their first winning season.

However, Landry's persistence finally paid off after 12 years, when his team won the Super Bowl in 1972. You would think that, after struggling more than a decade to achieve every coach's dream, Landry would have been as fulfilled as any man could be, right? Well, here is what the great coach had to say about his triumph: "The overwhelming emotion—in a few days, among the players on the Dallas Cowboys football team—was how empty that goal was. There must be something more."<sup>5</sup>

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Landry is not the only Super Bowl champion to express this sentiment. John Burrough, retired NFL star, reflected on his 1998 Super Bowl win by saying, “In the middle of all the explosion and hoopla and hype, all I could think was, ‘*Is this it? It this all it is?*’”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Tom Brady, the quarterback of the New England Patriots, said it best. After winning his third Super Bowl at the age of just 28, Brady had the following conversation with *60 Minutes* interviewer Steve Kroft.

**Brady:** Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, “*Hey, man, this is what it is. I reached my goal, my dream, my life.*” Me, I think, “*God, it’s got to be more than this.*” I mean this isn’t, and can’t be, what it’s all cracked up to be.

**Kroft:** What’s the answer?

**Brady:** I wish I knew.... I wish I knew.<sup>7</sup>

Now, you may ask, “What about beauty? Does that work?” After all, it is the subject about which philosophers and poets have waxed eloquently. Men have fought and died over the love of a beautiful woman. Surely, the attainment of beauty is worth the effort. Perhaps. But I think that one of the most beautiful women in Hollywood would disagree. Here is what Halle Berry has to say on the subject of physical beauty:

*Beauty? Let me tell you something, being thought of as “a beautiful woman” has spared me nothing in life, no heartaches, no trouble. Love has been difficult. Beauty is essentially meaningless, and it is always transitory. I can’t believe what people do to themselves [to make themselves look beautiful], the excess, and then they end up distorted. Worse, they still have that hole in their soul that led them to change themselves to begin with.*<sup>8</sup>

It doesn’t matter what people obtain or achieve; “success” never shines as brightly as they are told it will. We see fame, fortune, beauty and accomplishment and think we want them, but the people who have them tell us there is more to life. So why, then, do we so desperately desire that which will not provide fulfillment or lasting happiness? Because we’ve been conditioned by social guidance to want it. After all, everyone else wants it, and is pursuing it, so the evidence tells us that it must be worth pursuing. Like the processionary caterpillar and the American buffalo, we blindly follow what we see others doing without regard for the consequences.

And trust me, there are consequences. In fact, our society is living evidence that things have gone terribly wrong. While every objective indicator of well-being in Western society is increasing, every *subjective* indicator of well-being is decreasing. We have more purchasing power, higher education levels, daily advances in medical science, and even greater access to music and entertainment than ever before. We are a society of “superstars” who have it all. Yet look at what is happening to us.

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Depression is doubling every 20 years, and it strikes at a much younger age. According to a Harvard Medical Center study, the rate of childhood depression is increasing by an astounding 23 percent per year.<sup>9</sup> In fact, preschoolers are now the fastest-growing market for antidepressants.<sup>10</sup> Depression is projected to be the second largest killer after heart disease by 2020.<sup>11</sup> Correspondingly, suicide rates are increasing in the same way. Among young people aged 10 to 14 years, suicides have doubled in the last two decades.<sup>12</sup> Worldwide, suicide now ranks among the top three leading causes of death among those aged 15 to 44 years.<sup>13</sup> In the USA, one suicide occurs every 16 minutes. For every few pages of this book you read, another person will have taken his or her life.

The divorce rate has steadily risen over the last 40 years. In that time, the fastest-growing marital status category was “divorced persons.” The number of divorced adults has quadrupled since 1970.<sup>14</sup> While the United States has traditionally had the world’s highest divorce rate, the rate of divorce in other countries is exploding. The number of annual divorces in Japan more than doubled in the ten years from 1990 to 2000.<sup>15</sup> The divorce rate in China has increased five-fold since 1979!<sup>16</sup> Likewise, divorces in Switzerland were up 40 percent from 1990 to 1998 alone.<sup>17</sup> In Canada, the number of men getting more than one divorce more than tripled from 1973 to 2003.<sup>18</sup>

The prevalence of overweight and obese Americans has increased dramatically for both adults and children. Among adults aged 20 to 74 years, the prevalence of obesity more than doubled, increasing from 15 percent (1976–1980 NHANES survey) to 32.9 percent (2003–2004 NHANES survey). The two surveys also show that the prevalence of overweight young people tripled in virtually all children and teenage categories. It is estimated that today 66.3 percent of Americans age 20 years and older are overweight or obese.<sup>19</sup>

To make matters worse, stress is on the rise. Stress is believed to trigger 70 percent of visits to doctors and 85 percent of serious illnesses. These numbers seem to be verified by a 2004 American Psychological Society survey reporting that two-thirds of Americans say they are likely to seek help for stress.<sup>20</sup> Stress is also deemed a major factor in the two leading causes of death—cancer and heart disease. And stress figures prominently in many other diseases.

Perhaps the greatest irony is occurring in our finances. Although as a society we are wealthier than ever, our personal finances are a bigger mess than ever. Bankruptcy filings in the USA increased almost ten-fold, from about 300,000 in 1980 to more than 2 million in 2005. Bankruptcies rose 30 percent in 2005 alone. Household debt as a percentage of household disposable income is at a record high, following the same trend as personal bankruptcies.<sup>21</sup>

Here we clearly see the paradox wrought by our reliance upon social guidance to make decisions for our lives. We’ve come to the point where the attainment of society’s fantasy is becoming the individual’s nightmare. Our blind pursuit of money, sex, fame and accomplishment is literally driving us over a cliff.

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Interestingly, Cialdini warned of the danger of social guidance in his book, *Influence*. He also suggested there comes a time when we may need to apply the emergency brake to avoid running headlong over the cliff. He says, “We need to check the machine from time to time to be sure it hasn’t worked itself out of sync with the other sources of evidence...” In other words, we need to look around and do a “reality check.”

Unlike the American buffalo, we don’t have to run with our heads down toward impending disaster. We can stop and look up. We can re-examine the way we’ve been approaching life. We can ask the question: “Is our desire to have it all preventing us from having the life we innately crave?” Perhaps it’s time for all of us to stop long enough to examine some factual evidence, rather than listening to what’s being promoted around us.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Solomon E. Asch, "Opinions and Social Pressure," *Scientific American*, November 1955, vol. 193, no. 5, 31-35.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, "Social Proof," *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984).
- <sup>3</sup> Robert B. Cialdini, "Social Proof," *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984), 133.
- <sup>4</sup> PreachingToday.com, Illustrations, "Brad Pitt on The American Dream," excerpt from *Rolling Stone* (10-28-99).
- <sup>5</sup> PreachingToday.com, Illustrations, "Empty Success."
- <sup>6</sup> PreachingToday.com, Illustrations, "Worshipping God Better Than Super Bowl."
- <sup>7</sup> PreachingToday.com, Illustrations, "Quarterback Tom Brady Seeks More," excerpt from Interview with Steve Kroft of *60 Minutes* (11-6-05), [www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com)
- <sup>8</sup> PreachingToday.com, Illustrations, "Halle Barry Says Beauty is Meaningless," excerpt from "Beauty's Beast," [www.NewYorkPost.com](http://www.NewYorkPost.com)
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.creatingoptimism.com/statistics.html>
- <sup>10</sup> Study published in *Psychiatric Services*, April 2004. Reported in our health news archive: Pill-Popping Pre-Schoolers, Even Toddlers Get the Blues.
- <sup>11</sup> World Health Organization report on mental illness released October 4, 2001. Health news stories: Depression Link to Heart Disease; Hostility, Depression May Boost Heart Disease.
- <sup>12</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, <http://www.afsp.org/>
- <sup>13</sup> American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, <http://www.afsp.org/>
- <sup>14</sup> Arlene Saluter, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements," March 1994, U.S. Bureau of the Census, March 1996, series P20-484, vi.
- <sup>15</sup> "The number of divorces annually has almost doubled since 1990, with 264,000 couples formally breaking up in 2000." Reuters, "Japan Cuts Single-Mum Benefits, Blames Divorce Rate," June 7, 9:54 AM, Isabel Reynolds.
- <sup>16</sup> "China tries to stem soaring divorce rate," *The Guardian*, March 2, 2005, by Jonathan Watts in Beijing.
- <sup>17</sup> *Annuaire statistique de la Suisse 1999*, Zurich (1999). Cited in Guillod, Olivier, "Switzerland: A New Divorce Law for the New Millennium" in *The International Survey of Family Law*, 2000 Edition. Jordan Publishing Ltd., 2000, 358.
- <sup>18</sup> United Press International, March 9, 2005, Ottawa. A growing number of Canadian men are going through divorce more than once, the country's statistical agency, Statistics Canada, reported Wednesday. Using census information, the agency found in 1973 the number of men getting more than one divorce was 5.2 percent. In 2003, that more than tripled to 16.2 percent. The increase among divorced women in the same period was only marginally smaller from 5.4 percent in 1973 to 15.7 percent in 2003.
- <sup>19</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/nccd-php/dnpa/obesity/index.htm>  
The two surveys also show that for children aged 2 to 5 years, the prevalence of overweight increased from 5.0 percent to 13.9 percent and for those aged 6 to 11 years prevalence increased from 6.5 percent to 18.8 percent. In teens aged 12 to 19 years prevalence of overweight increased from 5 percent to 17.4 percent.
- <sup>20</sup> American Psychological Society survey, 2004.
- <sup>21</sup> American Bankruptcy Institute, report, U.S. Bankruptcy Filings 1980-2006 (Business, Non-Business, Total).