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The Illusion of Diffusion

In the summer of 1958, our parents bought hula hoops, one for my younger brother and one for me. We weren't the first kids in our neighborhood to have them (I vaguely remember Dad having waited until the price dropped—hula hoops originally cost about \$3, a lot of money in those days for some plastic tubing, a wooden plug, and two staples), but most of the kids I knew got one that summer.

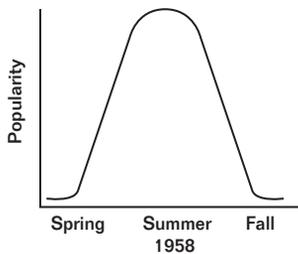
I don't think we played all that much with our hula hoops. What I remember most were the photos that the newspapers and magazines ran that summer, pictures of other people having fun with the new toy. The first ones showed a young boy or girl spinning a hula hoop; but as the weeks passed, the photos displayed ever odder folks—a toddler with a hula hoop, a grandmother, a nun, someone spinning several hula hoops at the same time, groups of hula hoopers, and on and on. It seemed as though everyone had hula hoops.

And that was almost true. Sales were estimated at 25 million—one for every seven Americans, a hula hoop for every kid age 5 to 11 in 1958.¹ Then, almost as quickly as they appeared on the scene, hula hoops fell out of popularity. I remember ours, leaning forgotten against the garage wall, coated with dust.

FADS

Nearly half a century later, the hula hoop still is recalled as the prototypical fad—wildly popular, but short-lived. A graph* of its career might look something like this:

**The Hula Hoop's Popularity—
A Typical Fad**



This graph shows that there was initially little interest in hula hoops; then their popularity rose quickly until it peaked, before rapidly dropping off again.

We could draw essentially the same graph for any fad, because these contours define the fad: a fad is a short-lived enthusiasm.² What makes something a fad is its rapid loss of popularity. This is an important point. People sometimes assume that fads share some quality, that they are by nature strange or silly or trivial. But

* The graphs in this chapter should be understood as approximations, much like the supply and demand curves drawn by economists. No one kept precise records of how the numbers of people who owned and used hula hoops—or wristwatches—shifted over time, so it is impossible to precisely reconstruct these changes. However, when sociologists are able to measure the popularity of novelties, their data generally display patterns similar to those shown in this chapter's graphs.

lots of things that seem strange at first catch on—tattoos and piercings are contemporary examples. A substantial and growing proportion of young, college-educated adults sport body decorations that would have seemed bizarre twenty years ago. What makes something a fad is not that it is peculiar but that it achieves short-lived popularity, only to fade away.

By and large, serious people don't feel they need to pay much attention to fads. We tend to dismiss fads as trivial, silly, inconsequential. When asked to name a fad, people tend to pick examples of young people playing—fad toys (hula hoops, Cabbage Patch Kids), dance fads (the twist, the Macarena), college students acting up (streaking, trying to set the record for the most people crammed into a phone booth), and the like.³ We assume that fads aren't important because they seem so silly.

Yet we're also familiar with fads that aren't so frivolous, that people adopt with more serious intent. The most obvious examples are diet fads (new ways to eat and lose weight) and exercise fads (new ways to enhance health and fitness).⁴ Often, they are promoted by people who seem to be experts—doctors, trainers, and the like. These promoters promise that this diet or exercise program will make a real difference, that we can shed those pounds, become fitter, and dramatically improve our lives. Of course, their solutions almost always turn out to be fads; our enthusiasm for these new sugar-busting, abs-crunching regimens tends to be short-lived. Many diet books and exercise machines wind up gathering dust—just like my old hula hoop.

Even serious professionals get caught up in what turn out to be short-term enthusiasms—that is, fads. Physicians go through periods when they favor particular diagnoses (disease fads) or therapies (treatment fads); managers adopt and then reject meth-

COULD THIS BE JUST A FAD?

***Recent Article Titles in Professional Journals
Reveal Doubts***

From journals aimed at educators

“Career Academies: Cutting-Edge Reform or Passing Fad?”
(2003)

“Online Learning: Fad or Fate?” (2001)

From medical journals

“Evidence-Based Medicine: A New Science or an
Epidemiologic Fad?” (1999)

“Narrative-Based Medicine: A Passing Fad or a Giant Leap
for General Practice?” (2003)

From management journals

“Is Empowerment Just a Fad?” (1997)

“Complexity and Management: Fad or Radical Challenge to
Systems Thinking?” (2002)

Sources: Mittelsteadt and Reeves (2003), Rourke (2001); Bauchner (1999),
Launer (2003); Malone (1997), Holbrook (2002).

ods for improving business practices (management fads); educators devise and then drop teaching techniques (educational fads); and so on. Within particular institutions, commentators acknowledge that fads occur; they even write articles with titles that ask whether some hot new development will prove to be just a fad (see box above).

What these commentators don't seem to notice is that the fads in their particular institution resemble the short-lived enthusiasms that occur elsewhere. In our society, most serious institutions—medicine, science, business, education, criminal justice, and so on—experience what we can call *institutional fads*.⁵ These

institutional fads, especially in business, education, and medicine, are this book's subject.

Institutional fads are not trivial; they have real consequences for our lives. Most of the time, our experiments with new diets or exercise programs have little lasting effect. But when we rely on the current child-rearing guru's advice for raising our kids, our families are affected by whatever passes for today's wisdom. When our children attend the local school, what they learn is shaped by that school's current policies regarding teaching practices and discipline. We depend on our doctors to use diagnoses and treatments that can help us, rather than following some worthless trend. Our work lives—even the continued existence of our jobs—can depend on which management scheme our employers adopt. Whenever our lives intersect with social institutions, we can be affected by whatever ideas—including short-lived fads—are circulating within those institutions.

FADS AND INNOVATIONS

Fads can fool us. The sociologist Emory Bogardus made what was probably the first serious study of fads. Each year between 1915 and 1924, he asked about a hundred people to name five current fads.⁶ Not surprisingly, he found that most fads did not last long enough to make more than one list; only a few received mention in three successive years. One of these was "men's wrist watches."

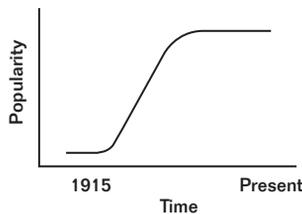
Huh? How could Bogardus's respondents have called wristwatches a fad? Looking back, this seems like a foolish mistake. But when they first appeared, wristwatches were considered silly novelties; after all, the pocket watch and chain, suspended from the waistcoat, were as fundamental an element of proper male attire as

the necktie. Bogardus's respondents called the wristwatch a fad because they didn't expect it to find lasting favor. And experts agreed. In 1915, the *New York Times* covered the debate over wristwatches at the National Retail Jewelers' Association convention, and quoted a delegate: "There's some excuse for a woman wearing her watch on her wrist . . . but a man . . . has plenty of pockets"; another declared, "The wrist watch will never be a common time-piece." A wristwatch manufacturer explained: "Some of those fellows [are] afraid the sales of wrist watches will hurt the sale of more expensive watches. That's all wrong. A man who has a wrist watch will also have a regular watch."⁷

Only now, knowing as we do that the wristwatch has become—along with the wedding ring—one of the most popular forms of male jewelry, can we imagine what must have happened.⁸ Men must have discovered its advantages—that, in addition to being cheaper than the pocket watch, it was lighter, could be worn without a vest, and could be viewed without occupying a hand to remove it from its pocket and open its case. Knowing what we now know, we aren't surprised that wristwatches endured; in fact, we can only marvel that some people once considered the wristwatch a fad.

We can imagine a graph that traces the growing popularity of the wristwatch:

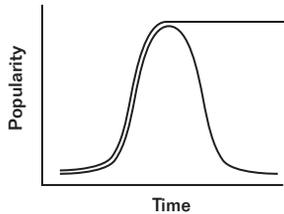
**The Wristwatch Spreads—
Typical Diffusion**



This is actually a familiar graph among social scientists: it is usually called the S-curve because of its shape.⁹ Innovations—new products (like wristwatches) but also new ideas, new customs, all sorts of novelties—tend to spread slowly at first; then their popularity rapidly increases, before leveling off. This process is called *diffusion*. The S-curve is well-known because it fits the diffusion histories of so many successful innovations—if you trace the spread of telephones, or televisions, or VCRs, or whatever, the resulting graph usually forms an S-curve.

If we superimpose our two graphs—the one for fads, and the S-curve for diffusion—we see something interesting:

Comparing the Dynamics of Fads and Diffusion



The process depicted on the left side of each graph is basically the same—in both cases, a few people adopt the novelty at first, followed by a rapid increase as lots of folks get involved, then a gradual tapering to a peak. Up to that point, there is essentially no difference between how fads (like hula hoops) and things that will prove to be lasting innovations (like wristwatches) spread. It is, of course, what happens next that makes the difference—fads soon lose popularity, while successful innovations remain popular.

Our wristwatch example reminds us of an important fact: initially, during the period shown on the left-hand side of our graphs, people can't be sure whether a novelty will endure or fade. Oh, sometimes they have a pretty good idea: it is hard to imagine that many people expected hula hoops to remain wildly popular, or thought that the telephone wouldn't last. But people's predictions are often wrong—and two sorts of mistakes are possible. The first error is what happened when Bogardus's respondents dismissed the wristwatch, or when 1950s adults insisted that rock and roll would soon disappear: that is, people predict that a novelty will be a fad, but it actually turns out to remain popular. The second mistake occurs when something is heralded as the newest important development, but it turns out to be a bust. There are lots of examples—remember CB radios? 8-track tapes? Betamax video recorders? In such cases, people experience what we'll call the *illusion of diffusion*—they expect an innovation to endure, only to be surprised when it loses popularity.

Most fads have enthusiasts who get caught up in this illusion. Think of the folks who thought Beanie Babies would be good long-term investments.¹⁰ It is possible that Americans will permanently alter their eating habits in the ways envisioned by promoters of low-carb diets, but it seems at least as likely that low-carb will go the way of its various low-cal, low-sugar, and low-fat predecessors. While an innovation is spreading, we can't be sure what will happen next. This uncertainty about the future, about whether a novelty will prove to be a fad or a lasting innovation, is a central theme in this book. As we will see, the promoters of institutional fads often get caught up in the illusion of diffusion; they prefer to imagine that they're involved with important innovations rather than trivial fads.

HOW FADS DIFFER FROM FASHIONS

Just as we need to distinguish fads from the diffusion of successful innovations, we must make a distinction between fads and fashions. This is a confusing topic. The experts disagree: some argue that fad and fashion are two names for one phenomenon; others insist they are different, but can't agree on what the difference is. Most often, they dismiss fads as "trifling or insignificant," or "more trivial" than fashion.¹¹ Certainly some familiar fads (such as hula hoops and streaking) may seem trivial, but others—such as the institutional fads that are this book's focus—involve serious matters. But why call them fads instead of fashions? We need to understand how the two differ.

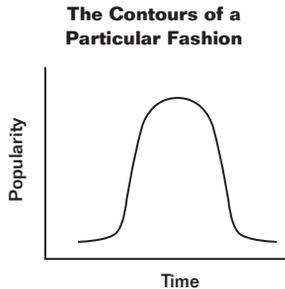
It may help to begin with the example that many people equate with the very word *fashion*: the world of high-status designers creating new dresses for wealthy women. Initially, this world involved haute couture firms located in Paris and a few other major cities that employed such famed designers as Christian Dior and Coco Chanel, who created new outfits; these were displayed at seasonal—traditionally fall and spring—shows; the shows were covered—that is, both publicized and criticized—by the fashion press; some well-received designs actually became available as clothing that could be purchased from high-status vendors; and the styles that originated in this high-prestige venue gradually trickled down, adapted by a succession of increasingly less-prestigious manufacturers, to be sold by less-exclusive stores at ever cheaper prices, to women of ever lower status. The system has evolved; today, a designer may establish a reputation within the high-fashion world, then begin working with much less prestigious vendors (for example, Isaac Mizrahi

designing lines for Target).¹² Still, many fashions display a familiar underlying process: designs with high-status origins spread to less-exclusive venues.

This trickle-down process was at the core of one of the first—and still one of the most influential—analyses of fashion, presented by the great German sociologist Georg Simmel in 1904.¹³ Simmel's basic model envisioned society as a hierarchy or ladder, on which those at the top try to differentiate themselves from the people on the rung below them by adopting new symbols of their higher status (such as a new clothing fashion). But soon, those on the second rung begin to imitate their betters by themselves adopting those same symbols, thereby distinguishing themselves from the folks down on the third rung. This process is repeated as each successive rung of subordinates adopts the fashion of their superiors, only to have it copied by those below them in the hierarchy. And once subordinates adopt a fashion, it no longer serves to distinguish those above from those below, and the former must seek new symbols to set themselves apart from their inferiors. The result is a continual cycle in which those at the top of the status ladder adopt new fashions, only to be imitated by those on successively lower rungs.

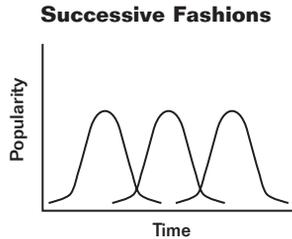
Critics argue that Simmel's model does not fit contemporary fashions because modern society is too complex to be reduced to a single status ladder, and because our fashions often seem to begin among teenagers or others of modest status.¹⁴ But ignore those criticisms for a moment, and imagine some particular fashion in clothing that obeys the trickle-down pattern—let's pick a year when the top designers declare that skirts will go up or go

down or whatever. If we graph the trickle-down adoption of this fashion, we discover a familiar pattern. At the beginning, the new style is adopted by a few elite women, and then it spreads as it is adopted at increasing speed by larger numbers of women of ever lower status. By the time the new style has extended a few rungs down the ladder, those at the top are beginning to drop it; by the time the style achieves its greatest popularity among those of lower status, it is also losing favor in the middle ranks and will soon be dropped, so that we wind up with something much like our familiar fad graph. In other words, particular fashions display essentially the same dynamics as fads:



However, this cannot be the end of the matter. People do not drop a tired clothing style in favor of nakedness. Rather, during the next fashion season, they adopt some new style—even shorter skirts, or longer ones, or whatever the designers are now promoting. Thus, over time, we get a succession of styles, each rising in popularity and then falling as its successor rises: it is this repetitive sequence that distinguishes fashion from fads. Fads are *episodic*—one-shot enthusiasms. When hula hoops lose popular-

ity, it is not necessarily true that something will come along to replace them.



In contrast, fashion is *systematic*; it institutionalizes change, puts it on a schedule. As the critic Joseph Epstein says, “Fashion implies transience, but transience regularized.”¹⁵ The traditional high-fashion world illustrates this perfectly: its designers worked on a seasonal timetable to prepare new creations for the upcoming shows that would attract the fashion press and buyers. This world—in spite of all the hype about the designers’ genius and originality and spontaneity—consisted of established businesses producing goods within a fixed routine. No one in the haute couture world imagined that the upcoming show’s fashions would remain fashionable forever—the new designs were intended to be popular only for a season, before losing favor to the next scheduled inspiration.

Nor is high-fashion clothing unique. There are lots of what sociologists call “culture industries” that produce goods intended to achieve brief popularity, before being supplanted by something new.¹⁶ Think about book publishers, or the people who produce movies or music. Nobody expects this week’s num-

ber one best seller, top box-office draw, or chart-topping song to stay on top forever—or even for all that long. These are all fashion industries that depend on people’s continually shifting tastes.

While fashion is systematic, it is not predictable. That is, while we know that six months from now, some new movie will outgross the competition, we cannot be sure which film it will be.¹⁷ This unpredictability is a characteristic of fashion: people hope that their dress designs, their books, or whatever they’ve created will become popular; they do everything they can to make this happen; but they cannot predict the outcome with complete confidence. Most books, songs, and dress designs will flop; a few will be hits, but nobody knows which ones will make it big. Inevitably, there are surprises. Consider the fates of two big-budget Hollywood ocean epics. Movie industry observers confidently predicted that *Waterworld* (a Kevin Costner adventure movie) would outstrip the competition during the summer of 1995, while the buzz about 1997’s *Titanic* was grim (naysayers warned that people wouldn’t go to see a movie they knew would have an unhappy ending). But it was *Waterworld* that tanked, while *Titanic* sailed to box-office records. Or take the unexpected success of 2004’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*; no one in the industry anticipated that the low-cost, polemical documentary would gross well over \$100 million. People who work in fashion industries know that something will be fashionable—they just can’t be sure what will hit and what will miss.¹⁸

Obviously, the line between fad and fashion cannot be drawn with precision. When we say that fads are episodic while fashions are systematic, we are describing a continuum, not an either-or

dichotomy. Purely episodic fads are at one end of this continuum; they are one of a kind, each unlike any other fad. But we also can spot clusters of similar fads, such as college students acting up (panty raids, goldfish eating, telephone booth stuffing, streaking, rioting on Halloween or other festive occasions, etc.), toy fads (hula hoops, Rubik's cubes, Cabbage Patch Kids, etc.), or fad diets (low-sugar, low-fat, low-carb, etc.). Such *fad clusters* involve the same sorts of people (such as college kids), adopting roughly the same sorts of objects or activities (doing outrageous stuff), for essentially the same reasons (to have fun and attract attention). The similarities among the fads within these clusters are obvious; fads of these sorts aren't completely unrelated to one another.¹⁹ Yet the similarities among a cluster of fads fall short of the elaborately organized systems we find in fashion industries. For example, as the winter holidays approach, the press often tries to pick this year's hot toy; they anticipate the appearance of a toy fad, even though most years don't have one.²⁰ In contrast, recall the highly structured world of high-fashion clothing—the same firms, with biannually scheduled shows, for the same audiences. The clusters of toy fads or campus fads aren't nearly so well organized. Some fads are purely episodic, others less so, but fads remain more episodic than fashions.

Both fads and fashions are forms of fleeting or short-lived enthusiasms. That is, they achieve considerable popularity, but only briefly. In describing them as enthusiasms, I mean to suggest that people find them interesting and appealing. But I do not mean to imply that the people who adopt fads are irrational or out of control. As we will see, people often have quite rational reasons for participating in fads.

INSTITUTIONAL FADS

So far, we have contrasted fads with the diffusion of enduring innovations, and with the highly structured industries that produce fashions. All three phenomena—fads, diffusion, and fashion—involve the spread of new things, of novelties, and in each case there is uncertainty about the future. When some novelty is beginning to spread—when it's at the beginning of what will become either the typical fad/fashion graph or the standard diffusion S-curve—people can't be sure what's going to happen next: Will this novelty attract people's attention? If so, how long will interest in the novelty continue to grow; when will it taper off? And once interest peaks, will it remain high—a case of successful diffusion—or will it drop off, proving that the novelty was just a fad or fashion? No one can be sure of the answers to these questions in advance. Even within the most structured fashion industry, there is uncertainty about which items will rise to popularity, how popular they will become, and how long they will remain in vogue.

While such uncertainties may grip individuals who have a stake in promoting a particular fad or fashion, we might be excused for thinking it hardly matters. So long as we think of fads in terms of hula hoops, streaking, and other playful enthusiasms of the young, or of fashion in terms of which dress or movie proves most popular, we can dismiss fads and fashions as relatively unimportant. Since these inconsequential examples are what first come to mind when we think about fads and fashions, it is no wonder that we don't take either seriously.

However, institutional fads are another matter. They are en-

dorsed by serious people—such as physicians, educators, and business leaders—who insist that the novelties they are promoting are important and will endure. Even if those predictions prove false, institutional fads can have serious consequences. Anyone who follows the news can spot examples of institutional fads. Consider three cases from the 1980s:

- Although a German physician first described multiple-personality disorder (MPD) in 1791, it remained an exceedingly rare diagnosis. In the half century before 1972, less than a dozen cases were reported in the United States; but during the 1980s, psychiatrists diagnosed thousands of cases. And whereas early cases almost always involved patients with only two personalities, the 1980s patients diagnosed with MPD often displayed dozens of “alters.” Diagnoses have since fallen off. The 1980s epidemic of MPD was a *medical fad*.²¹
- During the 1970s and 1980s, business analysts worried that the Japanese economy was growing at a faster pace than that of the United States. Some suggested that Americans needed to appreciate and adopt Japanese business practices. In particular, hundreds of U.S. corporations announced that they would establish quality circles—groups that would allow workers and managers to discuss methods of improving quality. However, within a few years, quality circles had fallen out of favor; they had proven to be another *management fad*.²²
- In 1989, there was great excitement when two University of Utah researchers declared that they had produced a cold fusion reaction in their laboratory. The implications seemed stupendous: once harnessed, cold fusion might provide a cheap, nonpolluting way to generate limitless energy. The

scientists' announcement inspired considerable scientific activity around the world, while media commentators speculated about the tremendous impact this new energy source would have on society. But the researchers' results could not be replicated, and cold fusion is recalled as a short-lived *scientific fad*.²³

The point is not that the 1980s was some sort of bizarre, fad-infested decade. I chose these examples because we now have a little distance from them. Today, when we look back on the excitement about the epidemic of multiple-personality disorder, quality circles' promise to transform American industry, or the wonders of cold fusion, these enthusiasms seem not just misplaced but strange and even silly. But we are less willing to label currently popular ideas as fads, even though an impartial observer might suspect that today's fascination with, say, Six Sigma management techniques, program assessment in higher education, or standardized testing to achieve educational accountability may seem a little odd ten or twenty years from now.

Psychiatrists, managers, and scientists are serious people, but in these three cases serious people bought into what, in retrospect, seem to have been strange ideas. Yet however peculiar institutional fads may seem in retrospect, their repercussions are no laughing matter. During the height of the enthusiasm for the multiple-personality disorder diagnosis, a patient who approached a physician and complained of fairly minor depression could wind up diagnosed with MPD, hospitalized for months, and heavily drugged. Corporations spent many millions trying to implement quality circles. In comparison, Utah's state legislature, which quickly allocated \$5 million to maintain the state's

lead in cold fusion research, got off cheaply. Institutional fads can gobble up time and money.

The illusion of diffusion plays a key role in institutional fads. Serious people almost always reject the notion that their new enthusiasm is just a passing fad or fashion. Rather, they shun both F-words. The hallmark of the institutional fad is the conviction that far from being a fad, this innovation represents progress—it is an improvement that will prove worthwhile and endure. Remember: the front half of the classic fad curve looks just like the beginning of the S-curve of diffusion. When an innovation is spreading, no one can be sure whether it will become an enduring instance of diffusion or will fade as a forgotten fad. But the faithful, those who believe in the novelty's promise, insist that this will be a lasting change. Doubters are dismissed as unimaginative cynics or recalcitrant stick-in-the-muds who are blind to the future's possibilities. While the innovation is spreading, it is easy to believe, to dismiss the skeptics.

Institutional fads seem strange or peculiar only in hindsight, after they have been discredited or at least have fallen out of favor. While they are spreading, institutional fads do not seem silly or crazy. Rather, they are promoted as sane, rational improvements. Their proponents often are respected figures in their professions, and their claims receive serious, deferential attention in the media. It is only later, after the enthusiasm has died down, that people point to the idea's flaws and recognize that this was, after all, just another fad.

Some observers, particularly in the business world, dislike the word *fad*. They prefer to speak of *management fashion*, a term that seems more dignified, classier (remember the glossy, high-status Parisian fashion world), less frivolous. But in our terms, insti-

tutional fads are fads, not fashions, because they are basically episodic and not systematic. The newest management approach is presented not as this season's management style but as a solid, rational, lasting solution. To be sure, there is a cluster for management fads, just as there is for college fads, but they are best understood as episodic rather than as the products of an ongoing fashion system.

Unlike hula hoops, institutional fads have serious consequences. These fads aren't free. Just as "fashion victims" waste their money on unattractive clothing styles, there are *fad victims* who suffer the costs of institutional fads. We've already noted that institutional fads consume resources: when an organization invests its people's time and money in adopting some new management scheme, alternative uses for those resources fall by the wayside. These are the prices that organizations pay for fads. Moreover, when the people who work in institutions watch fads get introduced with great fanfare, only to see them soon fall out of favor, alienation and cynicism can result. Soon, innovations are being dismissed as "the flavor of the month." Consider one of those pieces of humorous bureaucratic folklore that people post in their offices, reproduced in the box on page 20. "The Six Stages of a Project" has circulated, in slightly different forms, for decades; the author of the original version is unknown. It is, of course, a joke—but a joke with a serious message. It presents a cyclical—and cynical—view of organizational innovation, one that sees enthusiasm as not just temporary but illusionary.²⁴ People who post it in their offices proclaim themselves as jaded, as having seen it all before, and therefore as reluctant to buy into the next next thing. Thus, in a curious way, experience with institutional fads, which proclaim the possibility of change, may make

**OFFICE FOLKLORE ON
INSTITUTIONAL FADS***The Six Stages of a Project*

1. Wild Enthusiasm
 2. Disillusionment
 3. Total Confusion
 4. Search for the Guilty
 5. Persecution of the Innocent
 6. Praise and Honor for the Nonparticipants
-

people disillusioned—more suspicious of and resistant to calls for change. These are the prices paid by the people who work in institutions affected by fads: everyone—from the organization’s top leaders to its lowest-ranking employee—risks becoming a fad victim.

But institutional fads are not restricted to the workplace. They intrude on our personal lives. Individuals find themselves trying to keep up with shifts in expert opinion. How should infants and children be raised? What are the health effects of different foods or beverages? What is the best way to lose weight? What should we do to find and maintain loving relationships? How should we invest for the future? Experts offer plenty of answers for these questions, but they often contradict one another, and opinions seem to shift over time—even from week to week. Trying to keep up with this fluctuating advice is a price we all pay for institutional fads—we all find ourselves, at least occasionally, becoming fad victims.

In short, contemporary institutions often seem to be characterized by a churning process in which some novelty, only yes-

terday heralded with great fanfare as the enduring solution to our problems, has fallen out of favor today, and is on its way to being forgotten by tomorrow. How can we explain this constant turnover?²⁵ What are its causes, and what are its consequences?

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book seeks to answer these questions. Chapter 2 begins by considering how our culture—the basic assumptions we make about how the world works—provides a foundation upon which institutional fads can be assembled. Our beliefs in change, progress, and rationality make us willing to listen to proposals to make things better. We believe that change is often for the good, and therefore we welcome all sorts of novelties, including those that turn out to be institutional fads.

The next three chapters trace three stages in the trajectory or life cycle of institutional fads—emerging, surging, and purging. Chapter 3 examines *emerging*—institutional fads' origins, how they are created and launched. Often, a particular guru is credited with starting a fad; but for every successful promoter, there are many wannabe gurus whose ideas never take hold. Why do some ideas attract attention, while others fail to catch on? The answers lie in the ways contemporary institutions are organized, and in the social networks and media that foster the spread of novelties.

Chapter 4 addresses the next stage—*surging*—when people adopt a novel idea and cause it to spread. The motives of these individuals vary: some are true believers, convinced by and committed to the new scheme; others may be far less enthusiastic, even skeptical, yet still find themselves joining the cause. Here,

we will focus on social psychology, on the enthusiasm that characterizes fads, the various reasons people buy into novelties, and the things they expect to gain from getting on the bandwagon.

Chapter 5 explores the key, final stage in the process—*purg-ing*—when the fad peaks and declines. This is when the illusion of diffusion stands revealed, when the novelty's bright prospects dim. What causes a fad to lose adherents? While the answer might seem obvious—the novelty didn't work as promised—that turns out to be too simple a response to a rather complicated question. Fads fade not so much because they fail as because they age, lose the glamour associated with novelties, and become boring.

In chapter 6, our focus will expand to the larger topic of fad dynamics. People sometimes claim that social change resembles a swinging pendulum, oscillating between one extreme and another. Are there conditions when this pattern emerges within institutions? Are there other conditions when different patterns appear? In particular, when do institutions have difficulty shedding novel programs that don't work all that well?

Finally, chapter 7 tries to assess the impact of institutional fads. Defenders argue that these fads play a valuable, even necessary role in social progress, while their critics depict them as without value. This chapter also offers some suggestions for fad-proofing, for finding a middle ground between rejecting all innovation and being vulnerable to every passing enthusiasm.