

“An illuminating analysis of why groups believe things their members don’t—and how we can fight groupthink.”

— ADAM GRANT, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Think Again*

CONFORMITY, COMPLICITY

and the SCIENCE *of* WHY

WE MAKE BAD DECISIONS

COLLECTIVE ILLUSIONS

TODD ROSE

AUTHOR OF *THE END OF AVERAGE* AND *DARK HORSE*



فروشگاه کتاب الکترونیک بایتابام

<https://e-baketabam.ir>

COLLECTIVE ILLUSIONS

CONFORMITY, COMPLICITY,
and the SCIENCE *of* WHY
WE MAKE BAD DECISIONS

TODD ROSE

 hachette
BOOKS

NEW YORK

Copyright © 2022 by Todd Rose

Jacket design by Terri Sirma

Jacket photograph © Skylines, Pixel-Shot / Shutterstock

Jacket copyright © 2022 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Hachette Books

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

HachetteBooks.com

[Facebook.com/HachetteBooks](https://www.facebook.com/HachetteBooks)

[Instagram.com/HachetteBooks](https://www.instagram.com/HachetteBooks)

First Edition: February 2022

Published by Hachette Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Hachette Books name and logo is a trademark of the Hachette Book Group.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021947540

ISBNs: 9780306925689 (hardcover), 9780306925702 (ebook)

E3-20211210-JV-NF-ORI

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Introduction: The Secret of Elm Hollow](#)

[PART I](#)

[The Conformity Traps](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[Naked Emperors](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[Lying to Belong](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[The Sound of Silence](#)

[PART II](#)

[Our Social Dilemma](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[Little Chameleons](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[Chasing Ghosts](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[The Reign of Error](#)

[PART III](#)

Reclaiming Our Power
CHAPTER 7
The Virtue of Congruence
CHAPTER 8
Trusting Strangers
CHAPTER 9
Living in Truth
Acknowledgments
Discover More
Notes

To Parisa Rouhani—the most congruent person I know

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



The real question is whether the brighter future is really always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?

—VÁCLAV HAVEL

INTRODUCTION

The Secret of Elm Hollow

We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.

—SENECA

THE CHARMING FAKE lighthouse attached to the post office in Eaton, New York, is a remnant of once-upon-a-time days when the building was the Tower Gas Station. Painted with an eye-catching red-and-white helix that recalls a barber's pole, the two-story tower peers out over a small town of a few thousand people, set deep in the green belly button of New York State. Almost a century ago, it stood silent witness to one of the most important public opinion studies that you've never heard of.

In 1928, a doctoral student from Syracuse University named Richard Schanck came to live in this village. One of the very first researchers in the brand-new field of social psychology, Schanck sought to conduct a study of how people, as individuals, form their opinions. He chose Eaton (in his 128-page PhD dissertation, he called it "Elm Hollow") because it was a small, tight-knit religious community, remote from the complexities of city life, where everyone knew everyone. As in all tiny towns, neighbors in Elm Hollow scrutinized each other zealously. The gossips kept careful tabs on everyone. If a child walking home from school picked an apple from a neighbor's tree or a man stumbled on a root while hurrying home late at night, someone was bound to notice.

The people of Elm Hollow understood that Schanck was there to study their social behavior, but it didn't take long for them to treat the big-city academic and his wife as their own. In the course of their three years in the village, the Schancks came to befriend Elm Hollow's residents, embedding themselves into the community. Since the couple attended church every Sunday, they were invited to baptisms, weddings, and funerals, as well as into people's homes for intimate dinners.

Schanck wrote down his observations of the townspeople’s behavior in a notebook he carried around with him. He queried them about proper public comportment—particularly their views on the various social prohibitions issued from the pulpit. “Should baptism be done by immersion or sprinkling?” he inquired. “Is it acceptable to go to the theater on Sundays?” “Is it okay to play games with face cards?” (a prohibition originating from a Puritan hatred of British royalty and its dirty penchant for gambling). Publicly, the response was nearly unanimous: the vast majority of those he surveyed agreed that even playing games with face cards, such as bridge, was off limits.

But after his first year in Elm Hollow, Schanck realized that Elm Hollowites weren’t quite the same people they pretended to be at church and elsewhere. For example, despite what they professed in public, Schanck reported that he’d personally drank, smoked, and played face card games with most adults in Elm Hollow... in the privacy of their own homes. This hypocrisy puzzled Schanck: Why in the world would most people in a community say they disapprove of things that they clearly had no problem doing?

In his private discussions with them, Schanck pressed his new friends to level with him. Attempting to understand the cause of this disconnect, he asked them a question whose answer would forever change how we think about public opinion—one that would lead directly to this book.

“What,” he asked, “do you think *most people* in this community would say about smoking, drinking, and bridge playing?”

“Most people,” came the reply, “would say that those are very sinful activities.”¹

For instance, a whopping 77 percent of Elm Hollowites told Schanck that while they themselves had no problem playing with face cards, they believed most people in their community were in favor of the strict prohibition against doing so.² But they had no idea that they were actually members of a silent majority. Nearly three-quarters of them indulged in the exact same “vices,” but they all kept it secret. Even Mr. Fagson, a young, outspoken Baptist minister who pushed a strong fundamentalist position in public, was in fact a staunch, bridge-playing liberal in private.

Similar schisms emerged when Schanck asked the villagers about a range of other religious and secular issues, including whether or not they should build a new high school with the neighboring community (a particularly heated debate that led to fisticuffs). Puzzling over these weird gaps between public and private opinion, Schanck concluded that the people adopted just enough of the majority

stance to be seen as acceptable members of the town. But why would they adhere to norms that they individually and collectively disliked? And how could the people of this small town be so utterly wrong about each other?

That's when he learned about the cultural grip of a dowager widow named Mrs. Salt. Because her father had previously presided as the minister of young Mr. Fagson's church, Mrs. Salt claimed to embody that institution's history and ethics. Since she was also its largest donor, Mr. Fagson depended on her for a paycheck.

Mrs. Salt managed to hold the townspeople in her iron grip for a full generation. Through the sheer strength of her personality, she dictated what one did and did not say in public. "Inasmuch as Mrs. Salt is a vigorous woman and in the habit of giving her views on a subject considerable public expression," Schanck wrote, "people frequently [hear] this oracle of the church expound her opinions [and] accept her views as typical of the group without critical enumeration of just how many believe as she."³

When the old woman passed away, however, things started to change. One night shortly afterward, the seemingly fundamentalist minister and his wife participated in a bridge party where they publicly played with face cards. This phenomenon kicked off a wave of gossip that spread through Elm Hollow like wildfire. If the minister played bridge, who else did? As they talked, people confessed to one another that they too were okay with playing with face cards, which led them to wonder out loud what else they had been wrong about. And with that, the spell was broken.

Richard Schanck concluded that the residents of Elm Hollow had willingly surrendered to Mrs. Salt because they believed (incorrectly) that she spoke for the majority. Schanck showed how, even in a tiny town, people don't necessarily know each other as well as they think they do. He demonstrated how easily a small, highly vocal minority—in this case, one single person—can misrepresent and mislead the rest of the group. And so he gave us the first true, research-driven peek at the subject of this book.

DR. SCHANCK WAS one of the first scholars to explore what I call "collective illusions."^{i,4} Simply put, collective illusions are social lies. They occur in situations where a majority of individuals in a group privately reject a particular opinion, but they go along with it because they (incorrectly) assume that most

other people accept it. When individuals conform to what they think the group wants, they can end up doing what nobody wants. That is the collective illusion's dark magic.

The most famous illustration of a collective illusion is Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," published in 1837. You know the story: two con men convince a vain emperor that they are weaving fine clothes for him. They claim that the clothes are exceptionally beautiful but visible only to intelligent people. Of course no one wants to be seen as stupid, so everyone goes along with the con, even though the clothes don't actually exist. As the emperor parades through town, proud and nearly buck naked, the spell breaks when a small boy speaks up, outing the truth.⁵

If collective illusions were limited to the realm of fairy tales or religious expression, they wouldn't seem terribly important, and there would be no need for this book. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In society today, collective illusions are both ubiquitous and increasingly dangerous.

MODERN MISUNDERSTANDING

If I asked how you personally define a successful life, which of these answers would you choose?

- A. A person is successful if they have followed their own interests and talents to become the best they can be at what they care about most.
- B. A person is successful if they are rich, have a high-profile career, or are well-known.

Now, which one do you think *most* people would choose?

If you chose option A for yourself but thought that most people would choose option B, you are living under a collective illusion.

This question came from a 2019 study of more than fifty-two hundred people that my think tank, Populace, conducted on the ways the American public defines success. The result was that 97 percent chose A for themselves, but 92 percent thought that most others would choose B.

This finding was just the beginning. Using methods that get around the effects of social pressure to reveal authentic private trade-off priorities, we learned that a large majority of people felt that the most important attributes for

success in their own lives were qualities such as character, good relationships, and education. But those same people believed that most others prioritized comparative attributes such as wealth, status, and power.

To put a finer point on it, consider the attribute of fame. In this study, out of seventy-six possible options, respondents told us that they believed “being famous” was the single most important priority for other Americans in their definition of success. But on a personal level, fame ranked dead last.

That’s right: in private, most Americans do not care about being famous. However, they think it’s the North Star for pretty much everyone else in America.⁶ The takeaway from this Populace study was clear: the vast majority of us want to pursue lives of meaning and purpose; yet we simultaneously believe that the majority doesn’t share our same values. As a result, we keep twisting ourselves into pretzels, trying to conform to what we falsely believe everyone else expects of us.

Personal success is not the only place where Populace has found collective illusions. In the span of a few short years, my organization has drawn attention to massive collective illusions that affect everything from the lives we want to live, to the kind of country we want to live in, to the trustworthiness of other people and even our views on the purpose of institutions like criminal justice, education, and health care. We have found that collective illusions flourish in just about every important area of social life in America.

Populace is not alone in this research. In recent years, scholars have unearthed collective illusions in just about every corner of the world and in all aspects of society. Collective illusions color everything from our views on war and climate change to our politics. They affect our attitudes regarding everything from gender bias to mental health and what constitutes physical attractiveness. They influence our ethical behavior and even our choice of foods.⁷

In the United States, for example, most people value and want to use the family-friendly benefits their employers provide (e.g., flexible work arrangements, resource referral programs, child care subsidies, and so on). Yet they also believe most other people do not.⁸ As a result, all the people suffering from this illusion are less likely to actually use the benefits, even though they personally would like to.

Unfortunately, stereotypes tend to become supersized by collective illusions. Thus, in China, people perceive other Chinese people as holding more negative views of Japanese people than they actually do, driving them to express a more anti-Japanese public attitude.⁹ In Japan, most men want to take paternity leave,

but they believe most other men in their country do not. As a result, those who want to take paternity leave are significantly less likely to do so.¹⁰ In California, both Democrats and Republicans assume the other side holds more extreme views than they actually do, creating a self-fulfilling misperception of political polarization.¹¹ Most American student athletes have positive views about academic achievement, but their notion that most other student-athletes do not drives them to act like they don't care about grades, damaging their own academic performance and reinforcing a collective illusion.¹²

In just the past twenty years, the rate and impact of collective illusions has accelerated to such an extent that they have become a defining feature of our modern society. And make no mistake: the consequences are profound. Take, for example, the issue of gender representation in politics. Despite the fact that they comprise more than half of our nation's population, women are profoundly underrepresented in American politics. And the easy answer—sexism—only partially explains the problem. Indeed, private opinion research conducted by Populace found that 79 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “A woman is equally capable as a man of being a good president of the United States.”¹³ Moreover, when they get to a general election—whether at the local, state, or national level—women actually win at the same rate as men.¹⁴

But the moment you ask, “Is a woman as *electable* as a man?” everything changes. Because, at the most fundamental level, electability is about what you think other people think, not which candidate you believe is the most capable. For instance, the political scientist Regina Bateson found that most people didn't personally care about a candidate's gender. However, once they learned that a competing candidate with the same qualifications was a white male, they overwhelmingly deemed him the most electable.¹⁵

Given the structure of our winner-take-all politics, voters regularly play “who-can-win” games that highlight our societal biases. So they think, “I'm not sexist, but other people are, so I'm going to vote for the white man because I want my party to win.” This is exactly the problem with collective illusions. You may, in fact, be the least sexist person on the planet, but nevertheless your misreading of other people may lead you to become part of the problem without realizing it.

This problem isn't just hypothetical: we actually saw it play out in the 2020 presidential election. In a poll conducted prior to the Democratic convention, Avalanche Insights asked Democratic voters whom they would choose if the election were held that day. They responded (1) Joe Biden, (2) Bernie Sanders,

and (3) Elizabeth Warren. However, when asked whom they would choose if they could just wave a magic wand and that person would automatically become president, respondents selected Elizabeth Warren as the winner, hands down.¹⁶

Bateson calls this phenomenon “strategic discrimination.” As she explains, the problem here “is not animus toward the candidate. In contrast to direct bias, strategic discrimination is motivated by the belief that a candidate’s identity will cause other people not to donate, volunteer, or vote for him or her.” Thus, “Americans consider white male candidates more electable than equally qualified Black women and white women and, to a lesser extent, Black men.”¹⁷

Unfortunately, the consequences of collective illusions aren’t limited to politics. They strike at the heart of just about everything that matters in our social lives. Name anything that truly matters to you, and I’ll wager that you are flat-out wrong about what the majority of people really think about at least half of them. And that’s being generous.

Given their destructive power, we clearly have to get a handle on collective illusions. But we cannot do that if we do not understand *why* they exist in the first place.

WIRED TO EACH OTHER

Do you wash your hands after using the toilet?

This question was actually the centerpiece of a 1989 study of fifty-nine college women who used the library restroom at their school. In one instance a researcher served as an observer and was visibly present in the restroom while thirty-one students used the toilet; in another experimental condition, twenty-eight other subjects couldn’t see her. The researcher found that while 77 percent of the women washed their hands when they thought they were being observed, just 39 percent did so when they believed they were alone.¹⁸

Silly as this experiment sounds, it tells us a lot about the underlying cause of collective illusions. We humans are so profoundly social that just our awareness of others can shift our behavior. This desire to be aligned with other people—what social scientists call our “conformity bias”—isn’t optional: it’s a hardwired part of our biology.

For example, in 2016, researchers used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to scan the brains of subjects while they looked at 150 images of different foods, ranging from nutritious items like broccoli to junk foods like

candy. Immediately after seeing an image, the subjects were asked to rate it in terms of personal preference on a scale of one (dislike) to eight (like).

Next, after rating a given item, subjects were shown the average score from two hundred prior participants, and if the subjects' personal rating was the same as the group, the word "agree" appeared. Otherwise, a number showed the difference between the group rating and their own. Finally, after finishing all of their own ratings and getting feedback on what the group had chosen, the participants were asked to rate the foods a second time.

As you can probably guess, on their second ratings participants fell into conformity, shifting their own food preferences to be closer to the group average. Interestingly, their behavior wasn't the only thing affected; the part of their brain involved in processing the value of different foods (the ventromedial prefrontal cortex) was also overwritten by the conformity. Once the subjects knew what the group preferred, the fMRI showed that this brain area shifted from tracking the healthiness of different foods to tracking their popularity.

But what the subjects did not know is that the group averages were entirely made up—manipulated by the researchers to make it seem like the participants were going against the group.¹⁹ This is important because it reveals something fundamental about our bias toward conformity: *reality doesn't matter*. More precisely, our brains respond to what we believe about the group, regardless of whether or not that belief is rooted in truth.

Like the relentless tug of Earth's gravity, our yearning to go along with the crowd is an unconscious and largely inescapable part of how we move through the world—even when it's entirely fictional. It's also why we are always at risk of not only misreading others but also conforming to a false notion of what they think or expect. At the most basic level, this bias toward the majority makes us easy prey for collective illusions.

I myself fell for a short-lived one during the Covid-19 pandemic, when I eagerly participated in a toilet paper buying spree. A false rumor, spread via social media, led shoppers like me to empty store shelves of TP, despite the fact that North American manufacturers reported no actual shortage in supply. Once people began running out to buy extra rolls, the race was on.²⁰

Even in the midst of this collective illusion, I thought, I know there's no shortage of TP. But it seems like everyone else thinks there is. So I couldn't help myself. Thousands of others like me acted like there was, indeed, a shortage, and so illusion rapidly snowballed. Before we knew it, the entire country was

scrambling to stockpile the stuff and apparently with good reason: the shelves were empty! And before I knew it the collective illusion had become a reality.

A key principle from sociology neatly captures what happens when we buy into collective illusions. Developed by sociologist William Isaac Thomas and his wife Dorothy in 1928, the Thomas theorem says, “If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”²¹ In other words, if you and I both truly think that people with freckles who hop on one foot are witches or that there will be no toilet paper left to buy during a pandemic, the *consequences* of that conviction are absolutely real, regardless of whether or not the belief itself is grounded in reality.

Because of our conformity bias, we all collude with collective illusions, both small and large, in our daily lives; but we don’t realize that everyone else is playing exactly the same game. Our internal drive to follow others is so powerful that, if we are not careful, we end up tossing our own private judgment out the window. And so we all tumble together into Elm Hollow-ish misunderstandings.

AT THE DAWN of the social media age, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg argued that new technologies would usher in an era of pluralism and free speech. “Those early years shaped my belief that giving everyone a voice empowers the powerless and pushes society to be better over time,” Zuckerberg observed in an October 2019 speech.²² By that logic, because more people have a voice, collective illusions should have gone extinct by now. Of course, this is not what happened. Ever since Prometheus stole fire from the gods, the story of new technology has always been entwined with unintended consequences.

Today, collective illusions have been turbocharged on a global scale—thanks, in part, to the wonders of platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Under the right conditions, anyone with a smartphone can do something that was impossible back in the days of Mrs. Salt. For Elm Hollowites, the tug of old religious traditions and local history were the source of misunderstandings. Today, by contrast, social media facilitates rapid shifts in perceived consensus, allowing fringe actors to manufacture illusions by creating the impression of majorities that don’t exist in reality.

Imagine hundreds of thousands of Mrs. Salts on Twitter, and you can already guess how this story ends. By making us doubt our own judgment and causing us to believe that we’re out of step with the majority, the loud fringe can

effectively drive us into silence, exacerbating collective illusions and making us complicit in them.

On a national scale, these collective illusions have fed a deep, unsettling sense that something is wrong with our society. The past several years, we've felt as if we're all stuck in some weird *Twilight Zone* nightmare where we are constantly, relentlessly gaslit. Up is down, left is right, right is wrong. It feels as if the values of our society have changed almost overnight. We feel disoriented, frustrated, disaffected, and distrustful of each other. We ask ourselves whether we've gone crazy, or the world has, or both. No wonder people in the United States are waging a kind of war on trust, building elaborate castles of suspicion that imperil our personal happiness and national prosperity.

All around the world, democracy is now under strain due in part to social problems that cannot be solved through legislation or technology. In a very real sense, collective illusions do the most damage in free societies, precisely because they depend on shared reality, common values, and the willingness to engage with different viewpoints in order to function, let alone flourish. That is why I see collective illusions as an existential threat.

The bad news is that we are all responsible for what is happening. And yet that is also the good news, because it means we have the power, individually and together, to solve the problem. The best news of all is that, as powerful as collective illusions are, they are also fragile because they are rooted in lies and can be dismantled through individual actions. With the right tools and some wise guidance, we can dismantle them.

I think I know just the guide.

WHEN IN ROME

First-century Rome was dragged down from its pedestal as a proud republic and into a cynical dictatorship under a series of selfish and debauched emperors. Pressed beneath the muscled thumbs of their first autocratic—if not outright crazy—emperors, Roman citizens found that there was no rule of law except that of obedience to the ruler. Saying the wrong thing could, and regularly did, cost people their livelihoods (and in many cases their lives). And so the name of the game became self-censorship—that is, live your private life how you wish, but don't say what you really think in public. I imagine the citizens of first-century Rome may have felt much the same way we do today.

Enter the great Roman statesman, dramatist, and philosopher Seneca (aka

Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger). Born in 4 BC under the autocratic first Roman emperor, Augustus, Seneca witnessed at very close hand the tyranny of Tiberius, the paranoia of Claudius, the perversions of Caligula, and the narcissism of Nero. He recognized all of them as emperors with no clothes. While he dared not criticize them to their faces, he did write plays, essays, and speeches that served as a kind of antidote to the awful behavior that everyone around those rulers enabled, colluded with, or conformed to.

Seneca is one of those people in history with whom I would love to have dinner. I find him endlessly intriguing, in part because he was a bundle of contradictions. He was an educated man who preached the ascetic life despite being one of the richest men in Rome, a sage who was not above palace intrigue, an elitist who condemned his peers for their out-of-control lifestyles, and a utilitarian who studied human passions (and felt them too).

Seneca is most famous for writing about Stoicism, a philosophy many people dismiss as a simple commitment to keeping a stiff upper lip and repressing one's emotions. (We usually call someone "stoic" when they don't get upset by trying circumstances.) But Seneca's brand of Stoicism was much richer, more profound, and far more practical than that.

Like all Stoics, Seneca believed that the solution to our misery lay not in the external world but rather within each one of us. He thought that if you wanted to lead a satisfying life, you should not repress your emotions but instead claim personal responsibility for them (he called the work of doing this "self-shaping"²³). Most importantly, he showed that we have far more personal power and autonomy than we realize.

Seneca also demonstrated how surrendering to fear, resentment, envy, lust, and other emotions at the moment they occur is self-destructive—an insight made more salient by the many impulsive Roman emperors he knew who had wrecked so many lives.²⁴ To this end, he offered his followers a practical program of knowledge and simple, actionable tips to help anyone, in any circumstance, to control their passions. In this way, he reasoned, their passions would not control them.

For example, he said that people who are afraid of losing their money should try giving some of their material goods away to see, on reflection, that they can live perfectly well without them. He also had gentle tips for self-correction. Instead of beating yourself up over your out-of-control emotions, Seneca would suggest lying in bed at the end of the day and thinking over moments when you had let a negative passion like anger or fear overcome you. Then he would ask

you to forgive yourself in the knowledge that, having reflected on the moment that triggered you, you can be more in command of yourself next time it happens.²⁵

Nearly two thousand years later, Seneca is still relevant. In fact, his approach is exactly how I want you to think about conformity and collective illusions. If we swap his word “passion” for “social influence,” you have the same thing. Like our passions, our social nature is a built-in feature of who we are. Surrendering blindly to either one can be dangerous and damaging. But what Seneca did to tame passion, you and I can do to tackle social influence.

While our social nature is part of our biology, our reaction to our social instincts is within our control. When we’re armed with the right knowledge and skills, we don’t have to choose between being a maverick or being a lemming. This book aims to give you the tools you need to truly understand why and how we conform, how conformity leads directly to collective illusions, and how you can learn to control social influence so that it doesn’t control you.

To that end, the book is organized into three parts.

You’re probably familiar with the “first law of holes,” credited to the British chancellor of the exchequer Denis Healy: when you’re in a hole, stop digging. As a society, we’ve dug ourselves into a substantial hole, and the shovel is our systematic misunderstanding of one another. Part I, “The Conformity Traps,” is about how we easily fall into holes of blind conformity—the collective situations where we are most likely to stop thinking for ourselves and surrender to the group’s collective illusions. The three traps I describe here are the places where you’re likely to make bad decisions that run contrary to your own preferences or values and that can harm other people. By learning to recognize these traps and applying a few simple solutions, you can begin to free yourself from the worst effects of social influence.

Nevertheless, collective illusions still exist everywhere. In Part II, “Our Social Dilemma,” I show how the biological limits of our brains bend us toward them in the first place. To truly get a handle on collective illusions, you need to comprehend how they form and how we all become complicit in them. Specifically, the building blocks of our social nature, imitation and comparison, can trick us into following outdated norms and mistaking the loudest people on the fringe—the Mrs. Salts of the world—for the majority. By the end of this section, you’ll be armed with the knowledge you need to battle collective illusions on a broader scale.

Parts I and II contain the information you can use in your personal life. Part

III goes broader and has implications for all of us as a society. “Reclaiming Our Power” shows how you and I can contribute to a world free of collective illusions by taming social influence, once and for all. We can do this by committing to two things: regaining our personal congruence and restoring social trust. By doing this, we can help to create the kind of cultural inoculation needed to ensure that collective illusions get swept into the dustbin of history.

We live in challenging times: there is enormous pressure to go along to get along, to stay silent, or to lie about our private beliefs in order to belong. But blind conformity is never good for anyone—it robs us of happiness and keeps us from fulfilling our potential, individually and collectively. With the help of this book, you can step around the conformity traps that lead to illusions. You can make better decisions. You can build better relationships. You can have a more meaningful life, lived on your own terms—one that promises greater fulfillment and ultimately contributes to a better life for everyone.

Footnote

¹ Historically, scholars have referred to this as “pluralistic ignorance,” but I find that term inadequate and confusing. The problem for an individual under a collective illusion is not that she is ignorant of what the group thinks; rather, she believes she knows, but she is wrong. That is not ignorance; it is an illusion.

Part I

THE CONFORMITY TRAPS

Once conform, once do what other people do because they do it, and a lethargy steals over all the finer nerves and faculties of the soul. She becomes all outer show and inward emptiness.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF

CHAPTER 1

NAKED EMPERORS

Trust yourself. Think for yourself. Act for yourself.
Speak for yourself. Be yourself.

—MARVA COLLINS

WHEN TIM MCCABE showed up at his local hospital with signs of congestive heart failure in 2009, doctors found a dangerous buildup of fluid around his heart and lungs. Five years before, Tim’s wife, Christina, had donated one of her own kidneys so that he could go on living.¹ Now, suddenly, his body was rejecting the new kidney wholesale, and his heart was in trouble. The doctors put him on dialysis to keep him alive while he waited for another kidney.

So Tim waited. And waited.

Tim is a tall guy with close-cropped brown hair, piercing light-blue eyes, and a cleft chin. He has a thick, no-nonsense New York accent. When a telemarketer called in the middle of his dialysis in the mid-2010s, he smirked ever so slightly as he flipped to speakerphone. He had apparently won a “free cruise to the Bahamas!”

Before his illness, Tim loved to be outside, coaching his elder son in baseball, football, and basketball: “I was out there constantly with him, day and night, as soon as I’d get home from work.” But with his younger son, this was harder. “I just don’t have the strength,” Tim told *The Atlantic*. “They shouldn’t have to deal with this, and I feel bad sometimes that they do.” On dialysis, his quality of life was “just shot.” He couldn’t do much and quickly became weak after any physical activity.

Each day, Tim waited by the phone, hoping for that one call to say, “Come