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Why Do People Follow The Crowd?

By ABC News
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*Dr. Gregory Berns, a professor of behavioral science, conducted several experiments for the purpose of answering an age-old question: Why do people follow the crowd? ABC's Primetime recreated two of these experiments using several unsuspecting people. **Skill Focus:** In this lesson, you'll practice identifying an author's central idea and how they support it. This means paying attention to the evidence and reasons they give for their idea. As you read, take note of the details that support the author's central idea.*

- [1] It was a classic episode on the old *Candid Camera* show — people getting on an elevator and turning backward just because everyone else did, and we all laughed. We laughed again during the movie *Mean Girls*, when an act of teenage revenge — cutting nasty Queen Bee Regina's T-shirt during gym class (an act meant to insult her) — became a school fashion trend instead.



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It turns out the joke is on us. These two examples illustrate something that we humans don't like to admit about ourselves: We follow the pack. Like birds in a flock or sheep in a pasture, we follow — sometimes at our own peril.¹

But why are people so conformist?² That is the question that Dr. Gregory Berns, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Atlanta's Emory University, tried to answer in a recent groundbreaking experiment and paper.

Primetime set up its own demonstration recreating Berns' work.

Failing a Test

- [5] We gathered a group of people together for a test of "visual perception." The actual test was simple — to mentally rotate some 3-D shapes and compare them to see whether they were the same or different.

First, the volunteers wrote down their answers to 10 questions privately. But then they had to give the next series of answers out loud for everyone to hear.

1. **Peril** (*noun*) great danger
2. **Conformist** (*adjective*) behaving or thinking like everyone else rather than doing things that are original

But this test came with a twist. One of the participants, Jocelyn, was in on the experiment, with the answers in her hand. Everyone else had been told to follow her lead, except for one participant, Tony. He's the only person in the room not in the know. He was being set up to see whether he would follow the pack.

When the group gave the right answer, Tony agreed. And when everyone gave the wrong answer — Tony still agreed.

Unwittingly,³ Tony had demonstrated Berns' point precisely. The group's influence on Tony profoundly altered the results: He went from 90 percent on his written test to 10 percent when he heard the others' answers.

[10] "You know, five people are seeing it and I'm not. ... I just went along with the answers," Tony said.

Tony wasn't alone. *Primetime* put seven other unsuspecting test subjects on the hot seat. Barbara, for example, got 70 percent on the written test, but her score fell to 30 percent when she listened to others' answers.

"I think I tend to do that, doubt myself when everyone else has their own opinion," Barbara said.

David and Graham, unlike the others, gave the right answers, even when the group didn't.

"I wanted to go with what I felt was the correct answer, and trust myself, and that's what I did," Graham said.

Social Graces

[15] *Primetime* tried out another scenario, this time in a more social, relaxed setting. We invited a group of strangers to Jean George's Asian restaurant in lower Manhattan for a fabulous dinner — and a surprise.

Party planner Colin Cowie and his friend, Donna D'Cruz, were in on the experiment. Their role was to exhibit outlandish behavior most people wouldn't dream of while out at dinner with a group of strangers.

Cowie and D'Cruz licked their fingers, a dinner table no-no. Cowie picked his teeth. The guests initially seemed not to take the bait — until dessert rolled around.

D'Cruz told everyone they should pick up pieces of mango face first, using their mouth. Eventually, people who were total strangers at the beginning of the evening were passing fruit back and forth, mouth to mouth.

Only Harold and Maria, a Canadian couple, passed on the gustatory familiarity. Finally, Harold was the only one who dared to ask, what is the point of the dinner?

[20] Cowie explained the experiment to the group. "I think because we broke the rules, and we made things possible at the table, several of you followed suit with it."

One woman at the table said: "I think the majority of people will look to see what others are doing and follow

3. **Unwittingly** (*adverb*) without realizing; without being aware

their example.”

Conforming Can Have Dangerous Consequences

Both of these tests are examples of our human need to conform. In fact, Berns’ experiment is a variation of one done many years ago by another scientist trying to decipher⁴ an extremely vicious instance of conformity — why so many Germans followed Adolf Hitler down the path to death and destruction. Berns says there are two ways to explain conformist behavior.

“One is that they know what their eyes are telling them, and yet they choose to ignore it, and go along with the group to belong to the group,” he said.

The second explanation is that hearing other opinions — even if they are wrong — can actually change what we see, distorting⁵ our own perceptions.

- [25] Berns wanted to see what was happening in the brain during his experiment. Using an fMRI,⁶ Berns found that, during the moment of decision, his subjects’ brains lit up not in the area where thinking takes place, but in the back of the brain, where vision is interpreted.

Essentially, their brains were scrambling messages — people actually believed what others told them they were seeing, not what they saw with their own eyes.

“What that suggests is that what people tell you — if enough people are telling you — can actually get mixed in with what your own eyes are telling you,” Berns said.

And for those who went against the group, there was another intriguing result: Their brains lit up in a place called the amygdala, which Berns calls “the fear center of the brain.”

“And what we are seeing here, we think, is the fear of standing alone,” Berns said.

- [30] So why do people follow the pack no matter how ridiculous it seems? Perhaps it’s not so much about good and evil, right and wrong, smart or stupid. It might be, as Berns’ experiment suggests, that our brains get confused between what it sees and what others tell us.

Just knowing that might help us guard against it.

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4. **Decipher** (*verb*) to figure out the meaning of something that is unclear or difficult to understand
 5. **Distort** (*verb*) to pull or twist out of shape; to give a misleading or false account or impression of
 6. Functional magnetic resonance imaging or functional MRI (fMRI) is a procedure that measures brain activity.