Why Do People Follow The Crowd?
By ABC News
From Abc News.Go.Com ● 2006

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. As you read, take notes on what evidence the authors use to support their claims.

[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.

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

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, 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.

“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

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?

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.”

3. Unwittingly (adverb): without realizing; without being aware
One woman at the table said: "I think the majority of people will look to see what others are doing and follow 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 decipher 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, distorting our own perceptions.

Berns wanted to see what was happening in the brain during his experiment. Using an fMRI, 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.

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.

"Why Do People Follow The Crowd?" from ABCNews.Go.com, © 2006, ABC News. Reprinted with permission, all rights reserved.

---

4. **Decipher (verb):** to work out what something says or means, even though it is very difficult to read or 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.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. In your own words, explain what the researchers’ fMRI results (discussed in paragraphs 25-29) indicate about human nature. Cite evidence from the text in your response.

2. PART A: In Paragraph 19, what is meant by the phrase “gustatory familiarity”?
   A. Offensiveness
   B. Eating in a way that is overly or inappropriately friendly
   C. Casual behavior often demonstrated among friends
   D. Strange behavior indicating that someone is unaware of social norms

3. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer for Part A?
   A. “...outlandish behavior most people wouldn’t dream of” (Paragraph 16)
   B. “...licked their fingers, a dinner table no-no.” (Paragraph 17)
   C. “Eventually, people who were total strangers ... were passing fruit back and forth, mouth to mouth.” (Paragraph 18)
   D. “...the majority of people will look to see what others are doing and follow their example.” (Paragraph 21)

4. How do the Primetime experiments relate to the Germans who followed Adolf Hitler?
   A. The experiments illustrate the human need to conform, even when the majority takes their actions to moral and philosophical extremes
   B. The experiments illustrate that even under extreme pressure, some people still choose to go against the grain
   C. The experiments illustrate that the Germans who followed Adolf Hitler can't be held responsible for following the crowd
   D. The experiments illustrate that the Germans were wrong to follow Adolf Hitler
5. Which sentence from the text best emphasizes the key concept of the biological nature of conformity?

A. “Berns wanted to see what was happening in the brain during his experiment.” (Paragraph 25)
B. “the fear of standing alone...” (Paragraph 20)
C. “…our brains get confused between what it sees and what others tell us.” (Paragraph 30)
D. “Just knowing that might help us guard against it.” (Paragraph 31)
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. The author suggests that we don't like to admit to ourselves that we will readily follow the crowd. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer.

2. The author suggests that the desire to belong is a very powerful—if not the most powerful—human emotion. Do you agree or disagree with this assertion? Explain your answer.

3. Why do people follow the crowd? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art, literature, or history in your answer.