

## Conformity Bias

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as conformity bias. Conformity bias refers to our tendency to take cues for proper behavior in most contexts from the actions of others rather than exercise our own independent judgment. Conformity bias may occur when we face peer pressure or are trying to fit into particular professional or social environments.

To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Obedience to Authority* and *Role Morality*. To learn a method to voice oneself when facing conformity bias, watch the GVV video series, especially *GVV Pillar 6: Voice*.

The case study on this page, “Reserve Police Battalion 101,” takes a look at the dangers of conformity bias in the context of the Holocaust, in which many ordinary German men willingly aided Nazi officers in murdering millions of Jews. For a related case study that explores the dangers of obedience to authority facing a Nazi officer, see “Stangl & the Holocaust.”

Behavioral ethics draws upon behavioral psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things. Many behavioral ethics concepts are explored in detail in [Concepts Unwrapped](#), as well as in the video case study [In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story](#). Anyone who watches all (or even a good part) of these videos will have a solid introduction to behavioral ethics.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: conformity bias, obedience to authority and role morality.

### Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of a time when you did something just because everyone else was doing it—even when it didn’t feel quite right to you? Do you regret it now?
2. It was recently observed that “cheating is contagious.” Does that sound true to you? Why or why not? If it is true, why might this be the case?
3. Loyalty is generally considered a good quality. When a group to which you owe loyalty seems to be making a decision that seems unethical to you, how should you go about trying to balance your loyalty to the group against your own ethical integrity? Have you had an experience like that? If so, how did you resolve it?
4. Can you explain how “groupthink” works? Can you think of a time when you have been subject to groupthink?



5. In the *Harry Potter* books, Albus Dumbledore told Harry: “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.” Do you have advice for people regarding how they can muster such bravery? Any personal experience to share?
6. How can an organization that wants its employees to make decisions in accordance with their own moral compass encourage them to do so?

### Additional Resources

Asch, Solomon E. 2004. “Opinions and Social Pressure.” In *Readings about The Social Animal* (9th Edition), edited by Joshua Aronson and Elliot Aronson, 17-26. New York: Worth Publishers.

Browning, Lynnley. 2005. “How an Accounting Firm Went From Resistance to Resignation.” *New York Times*, August 28.

Esser, James K. and Joanne S. Lindoerfer. 1989. “Groupthink and the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident: Toward a Quantitative Case Analysis.” *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 2 (3): 167-177.

Janis, Irving L. 1982. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (2nd Edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Rowling, J.K. 1997. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. New York: Scholastic.

For resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.”](#)

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Teaching Behavioral Ethics.”](#)

An article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?”](#)

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. “Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases.” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

**Transcript of Narration**

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“Parents seldom accept as an excuse their child’s plea of “Hey everyone else is doing it.” However, psychological studies demonstrate that those same parents, and everyone else, tend to take their cues for proper behavior in most social contexts from the actions of others. This pressure is called the conformity bias.

Psychologist Solomon Asch found that when he asked subjects to tell which of three lines is the same length as a fourth line, no one had difficulty unless they were placed in group with Asch’s confederates who gave obviously wrong answers. Under those conditions, almost all the subjects found it very painful to give the obviously correct answer in contradiction to the strangers’ wrong answers. In fact, most participants gave an obviously incorrect answer at least once during the study.

This bias to conform is much greater, of course, when the others in the group are co-employees and/or friends, or when the correct answer is not right there in black and white – as it was in the Asch Study – but is instead a subjective—like an ethical questions.

An employee at the accounting firm KPMG challenged the ethics of tax shelters that the firm was selling. He received a simple e-mail that said: “You’re either on the team or off the team.”

Well everyone wants to be on the team. We all realize that loyalty is generally an important virtue. But it causes a pressure to conform and this pressure to conform, it can be argued, helped cause Ford employees to sell the Pinto despite awareness of its gas tank dangers, and helped A. H. Robins employees to continue to sell the Dalkon Shield contraceptive IUD despite knowing its ghastly medical consequences.

The impairment of individual decision making known as “groupthink” – where people deciding in groups often make more extreme decisions than any individual member initially supports – can exacerbate the conformity bias. It can be reasonably argued that loyalty and groupthink helped Morton Thiokol employees to remain silent about known O-ring dangers that caused the Challenger space shuttle disaster.

Psychological and organizational pressures can cause even people with good intentions to lie or otherwise act unethically. Good character isn’t always sufficient. As Albus Dumbledore told Harry Potter, “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.”