

Conformity Bias: Sports Edition

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*.

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?

Transcript of Narration

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Parents seldom accept the excuse from their child, “But everyone else is doing it!”. But research shows that those same parents — and everyone else — take their cues for proper behavior from the actions of others in most social contexts. This peer pressure is what ethicists call the conformity bias.

Research shows that we are more likely to judge an action as moral (or immoral) if those around us judge it to be so, than if we’re deciding on our own. And we are more likely to do a moral (or immoral) act if those around us are doing it, too.

So, for example, we are more likely to speed if drivers around us are speeding and to cheat on exams if we think that other students are cheating, too. Studies show that the more common we think immoral behavior is, the more likely we are to also engage in it.

In reviewing the research on the use of performance-enhancing drugs in sports, behavioral scientist Max Bazerman notes “‘Everybody’s doing it,’ is a remarkably common justification for unethical behavior in sports.” Cyclist Tyler Hamilton — who doped while competing in the Tour de France — said: “We didn’t think of it as cheating. It felt fair to break the rules, because we knew others were too.”

Resisting the pressure to conform can be challenging, especially if we are new to a team or an organization. We want to establish that we belong; no one wants to be relegated to the sidelines or kicked out of the club. But being on the team comes with pressure to follow the unspoken code, where Rule #1 is – no matter what – have your teammates’ backs. This can be tricky territory. While most of us value loyalty as an important virtue, it should never override our moral sense.

Sometimes, we suffer from a collective illusion where we follow what we mistakenly believe is our group’s majority view. For example, most American student-athletes want to do well academically. But they mistakenly believe that most other athletes don’t care about academics. So, to conform to what they mistakenly think is the majority view, many student-athletes act as if school doesn’t matter. This damages their academic careers, and also reinforces this collective illusion.

So it’s up to each of us to stand up for our values, and not just “go along to get along.” It won’t necessarily be easy or always feel good. 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.”

Given the nature of the conformity bias, if we can find the courage to do what is right, chances are our friends will often follow our lead.

Bibliography

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Additional Resources

The latest teaching resource from Ethics Unwrapped is an article, written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice, that describes the basics of behavioral ethics, introduces the videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples, and includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. It was published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), and can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using "Ethics Unwrapped" Videos and Educational Materials\)](#)."

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.