

C1-C2 English Worksheet

The Bad Apple Effect: Why Rule-Breaking Spreads Through Groups

26 October 2026

Article

Societies often take for granted that rules will be respected, even when obeying them carries a personal cost. Yet violations can spread through groups in ways that are neither simple imitation nor inevitable contagion. Researchers at the University of Amsterdam set out to investigate how minor and major breaches affect observers' decisions. In an online experiment involving 750 American adults, participants selected the brightest point of an animated 'shooting star'. They could maximise payment by choosing a different square, effectively flouting an arbitrary rule. Afterwards, they could revise their decisions after viewing another participant's response.

Some volunteers gave in to temptation after witnessing blatant breaches. Rather than merely matching the example, a small minority went beyond the level of misconduct they had observed. By contrast, watching someone comply had little influence on subsequent choices. Individuals were especially likely to fall into line with rule-breakers who shared their political affiliation, the study's measure of social closeness. Nevertheless, roughly a quarter continued to hold firm, obeying the instruction despite a financial disadvantage. Such differences suggest that influence depends partly on who sets the example; it is not an automatic process.

The team also drew on computer simulations to investigate how occasional escalation could snowball into widespread non-compliance. A few people who intensify violations may undermine a group's standards. However, an independent psychologist warned against reading too much into an artificial task with no penalties, lasting relationships or real victims. It would be premature to conclude that workplace dishonesty or public disorder necessarily operates in the same way. Nor does the research boil down to an argument that all rule-breaking is destructive: challenging unjust conventions can be essential. Instead, it poses an unsettling question about why some groups tolerate misconduct, and how conspicuous examples change accepted behaviour.

True/False

Decide if each statement is True (T) or False (F).

No.	Statement	T / F
1	The study examined whether the severity of observed misconduct influenced later choices.	
2	Participants earned the highest reward by following the stated instruction exactly.	
3	Observing obedient participants produced the strongest shift towards dishonesty.	
4	A minority made more serious violations than the people whose behaviour they viewed.	
5	A shared group identity strengthened the influence of people who broke rules.	
6	Computer modelling established that actual public disorder spreads by the same mechanism.	
7	Approximately one in four participants consistently followed the rule despite the opportunity to earn more money.	
8	The researchers argued that challenging an unjust rule is always destructive.	

Sources: The Guardian, 20 October 2026; Proceedings of the Royal Society B, 21 October 2026.

Phrase Match

Match the phrases (1-10) to the correct definitions (A-J).

Phrases (1-10)	Definitions (A-J)
1. take for granted	A. start conforming to others
2. set out to	B. grow rapidly into a much bigger problem
3. gave in to	C. used a source of information or support
4. went beyond	D. yielded to pressure or temptation
5. fall into line	E. be reduced to one essential point or idea
6. hold firm	F. assume something without questioning it
7. drew on	G. giving something more meaning than it deserves
8. snowball into	H. exceeded a limit or example
9. reading too much into	I. maintain a principle despite pressure
10. boil down to	J. start with a particular goal in mind

Synonym Match

Match the words (1-10) to the correct synonyms (A-J).

Words (1-10)	Synonyms (A-J)
1. breaches	A. later
2. inevitable	B. disregarding
3. flouting	C. weaken
4. blatant	D. intensification
5. subsequent	E. unavoidable
6. roughly	F. disturbing
7. escalation	G. hasty
8. premature	H. flagrant
9. undermine	I. violations
10. unsettling	J. approximately

Use the New Language

Choose 5 words or phrases from the worksheet and write your own sentences.

No.	Your sentence
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Discussion Questions

Student A	Student B
1. When have you seen a minor rule violation gradually become normal?	1. Does overlooking minor misconduct invite serious violations, or is that a slippery-slope assumption?
2. Have you ever felt pressure to fall into line with a group?	2. Are leaders more accountable for a group's misconduct than its individual members?
3. Which harmless conventions do you question, and which rules should never be broken?	3. Can groups maintain standards without surveillance or threats of punishment?
4. Have you encountered a manager who ignored rules they expected others to obey?	4. At what point does loyalty to a group become complicity?
5. Have you ever challenged a policy that seemed unjust or unreasonable?	5. How could small breaches snowball into systemic dishonesty within an organisation?
6. Do you judge a close friend's misconduct differently from a stranger's?	6. Should rules be enforced consistently even when they are clearly counterproductive?
7. How does trust change when a colleague openly flouts a shared standard?	7. How much can an anonymous online experiment reveal about real-world corruption?
8. Who has had the strongest influence on your sense of acceptable behaviour?	8. Is principled dissent essential to healthy organisations, even when it involves rule-breaking?

Answer Key

True/False	1=T, 2=F, 3=F, 4=T, 5=T, 6=F, 7=T, 8=F
Phrase Match	1=F, 2=J, 3=D, 4=H, 5=A, 6=I, 7=C, 8=B, 9=G, 10=E
Synonym Match	1=I, 2=E, 3=B, 4=H, 5=A, 6=J, 7=D, 8=G, 9=C, 10=F

Example Sentences With the Phrases

No.	Example sentence
1	Many employers take for granted that new staff understand unwritten rules.
2	The researchers set out to understand why some teams tolerate misconduct.
3	She gave in to pressure and approved a report she knew was misleading.
4	His behaviour went beyond a small mistake and became deliberate dishonesty.
5	Workers may fall into line when respected colleagues ignore safety rules.
6	The committee chose to hold firm despite growing pressure from sponsors.
7	The investigators drew on interviews and records to reconstruct events.
8	A minor conflict can snowball into a serious dispute if no one intervenes.
9	We risk reading too much into one unusual decision made under stress.
10	The disagreement may boil down to competing ideas of fairness.