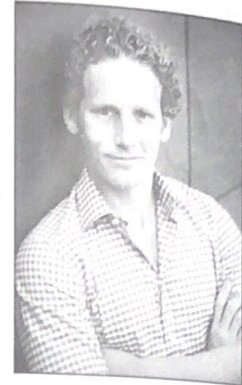


# The Power of Conformity

## ☐☐☐ Jonah Berger

Jonah Berger was born in Washington, D.C., in 1980 and graduated from Stanford University and the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He is a marketing professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, and his research interests include how people's decisions are influenced by their social environment. Aside from publishing in numerous scholarly journals in his field, Berger has written for publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, *Harvard Business Review*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. In 2011 he won Wharton's Iron Professor Competition for faculty research presented to students, and in 2012 he received Early Career Awards from the Association for Consumer Research and the Society for Consumer Psychology. Berger is the author of two popular books: *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (2013) and *Invisible Influence: Hidden Factors That Shape Behavior* (2016).



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In the following excerpt from *Invisible Influence*, Berger observes how people's behavior and use of language are shaped by their social environments. As you read, note how Berger uses illustration to give life to his abstract ideas.

### Reflecting on What You Know

How is your vocabulary influenced by the social environment in which you live? Think of words and phrases—everyday expressions or even slang—you use that may not be used by others in different areas of the country. To what extent is what you say influenced by where you live?

**I**magine a hot day. Really hot. So sweltering that the birds won't even sing. You're parched, so you drop into a local fast-food restaurant to grab a cold drink. You walk up to the counter and the clerk asks what you'd like.

What generic term would you use if you wanted a sweetened carbonated beverage? What would you say to the clerk? If you had to fill in the blank “I’d like a \_\_\_\_\_, please,” how would you do it? 2

People’s answers depend a lot on where they grew up. New Yorkers, Philadelphians, or people from the northeastern United States would ask for a “soda.” But Minnesotans, Midwesterners, people who grew up in the Great Plains region of the country would probably ask for a “pop.” And people from Atlanta, New Orleans, and much of the South would ask for a “Coke.” Even if they wanted a Sprite. 3

(For fun, try ordering a Coke next time you’re in the South. The clerk will ask you what kind, and then you can tell them a Sprite, Dr Pepper, root beer, or even a regular Coke.)\* 4

Where we grow up, and the norms and practices of people around us, shape everything from the language we use to the behaviors we engage in. Kids adopt their parents’ religious beliefs and college students adopt their roommates’ study habits. Whether making simple decisions, like which brand to buy, or more consequential ones, like which career path to pursue, we tend to do as others around us do. 5

The tendency to imitate is so fundamental that even animals do it. 6

Vervets are small, cute monkeys found mostly in South Africa. Similar in size to a small dog, they have light-grey bodies, black faces, and a fringe of white around their stomachs. The monkeys live in groups of ten to seventy individuals, with males striking out on their own and changing groups once they reach sexual maturity. 7

Scientists often study vervets because of their humanlike characteristics. The monkeys display hypertension,<sup>1</sup> anxiety, and even social 8

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\*Or imagine you’re at the office, chatting with some coworkers. You’re about to grab lunch, but the rest of your office mates are on deadline and can’t go with you. Being the polite person you are, you ask the group whether you can get them something. How would you address the group—that is, what word(s) would you use to address a group of two or more people? How would you fill in the blank: Would \_\_\_\_\_ like me to get you anything? The answer seems even easier. But again, it depends on the people around you. People from the West or Northeast tend to say “you guys.” People from the South tend to say “y’all.” People from Kentucky tend to say “you all.” Some people from Philadelphia or Boston might even say “youse,” as in “Youse guys want something from the store?” [Berger’s note]

<sup>1</sup>*hypertension*: high blood pressure.

and abusive alcohol consumption. Like humans, most prefer drinking in the afternoon, rather than morning, but heavy drinkers will drink even in the morning and some will even drink until they pass out.

In one clever study, researchers conditioned wild vervets to avoid certain food. Scientists gave the monkeys two trays of corn, one containing pink corn and the other blue corn. For one group of monkeys, the scientists soaked the pink corn in a bitter, repulsive liquid. For another group of monkeys, the researchers flipped the colors—blue tasted bad and pink normal.

Gradually, the monkeys learned to avoid whichever color tasted bad. The first group of monkeys avoided the pink corn while the other group avoided the blue. Just like soda in the Northeast and pop in the Midwest, local norms had been created.

But the scientists weren't just trying to condition the monkeys, they were interested in social influence. What would happen to new, untrained monkeys who joined each group?

To see what would happen, the researchers took the colored corn away and waited a few months until new baby monkeys were born. Then, they placed trays of pink and blue corn in front of the monkeys. Except this time they removed the bad taste. Now the pink corn and the blue corn both tasted fine.

Which would the baby monkeys choose?

Pink and blue corn were just as tasty, so the baby monkeys should have gone after both. But they didn't. Even though the infants weren't around when one color of corn tasted bitter, they imitated the other members of their group. If their mothers avoided the blue corn, they did the same. Some babies even sat on the avoided color to eat the other, ignoring it as potential food.

Conformity was so strong that monkeys who switched groups also switched colors. Some older male monkeys happened to change groups during the study. Some moved from the Pink Avoiders to the Blue Avoiders, and vice versa. And as a result, these monkeys also changed their food preferences. Switchers adopted the local norms, eating whichever color was customary among their new group.

We might have grown up calling carbonated fizzy beverages "soda," but move to a different region of the country and our language starts to shift. A couple years surrounded by people calling it "Coke" and we might find ourselves doing the same. Monkey see, monkey do.