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The pull of the group: Conscious conflict and the involuntary tendency towards conformity

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ABSTRACT

Is the reason that majorities exert an undue influence on the actions of individuals revealed through changes in subjective experience? Using an adaptation of the response interference paradigm (Morsella, Wilson, et al., 2009) in which participants are trained to introspect on their own experience of conscious conflict, two studies reported here show that the mere act of recalling counter-majority stances or opinions is associated with stronger subjective effects than recalling stances or opinions that coincide with majorities. Thus, an intention to conform to a majority (even when the majority is known to be wrong, as shown in the second study) seems to interfere with people's recall of their own stance or opinion. These results provide novel evidence for recent yet under-supported suggestions that majorities can influence individuals even when it is improper or illogical because human social cognition is primarily and involuntarily cooperative at the implicit level.

1. Introduction

The idea that people will conform to majorities even when such behavior is illogical or unwise has captivated scientists and lay people for decades (Miller, 2011), dating back to the classic experiments of Sherif (1935) and Asch (1951) which initially demonstrated that group influence over individuals was surprisingly strong. Why exactly do majorities exert such undue influence on an individual's behavior? Decades after the phenomenon was first identified, recent lines of research appear to converge on the existence of a "social sense," meaning that people are unintentionally guided by the internal states and beliefs of others (Kovacs, Teglas, & Endress, 2010). In support of this, recent developmental research shows that human infants have the unique ability to cooperate with others soon after birth (Warneken, Chen, & Tomasello, 2006). Further, neuroscience studies show that the brain responds with an "error signal" when a person disagrees with a majority opinion (Klucharev, Hytonen, Rijpkema, Smidts, & Fernandez, 2009). Additionally, work from linguistics suggests that human communication is possible because humans are especially adept at implicitly detecting and conforming to others' intentions and desires, even though doing so requires complex calculations (Levinson, 1983, 2006). Rand, Greene, and Nowak (2012) further supports this by showing that, in economic games, cooperative responses are faster and more intuitive than competitive responses.

These lines of research suggest that the influence of majorities is especially difficult for people to resist because conformity intentions form automatically, even in situations when conformity is improper or illogical. That is, perhaps we cannot help but be implicitly inclined to form intentions to conform to majorities, even when lacking a proper reason for doing so, and as a result as our inclination to conform interferes with our ability to do anything else. Though this idea falls out of recent theory about social influence, an empirical demonstration specifically of these counter-productive conformity intentions has yet to appear in the literature, and is therefore the focus of the current investigation.

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Fortunately recent work on how involuntary processes interact with more controlled processes suggests a way to provide this demonstration, namely by having participants introspect on their experience of *conscious conflict* in a conformity situation. According to Morsella (2005), the primary function of consciousness is to resolve incompatible skeletomotor muscle plans. As such, when skeleotomotor muscle plans conflict, there is an associated change in subjective experience – a conscious conflict. When participants in a Stroop task are asked to name the color of a word in which text is incongruent with its color (e.g., the word "blue" written in red ink), there is a conflict between the intention to name the color and the intention to read the word. As a result, participants experience a conscious conflict (which, importantly, they report having little control over; see also Morsella, Berger, & Krieger, 2011) because the automatic inclination to say "red" interferes with the intention to say "blue" (Morsella, Gray, Krieger, & Bargh, 2009). Moreover, merely anticipating incompatible intentions (such as when participants are told that they will be asked to perform one of two opposing actions, such as either moving their finger left or right) when motionless causes the experience of conscious conflict, relative to sustaining compatible intentions (such as when participants are told that they will be asked to perform one of two non-opposing actions, such as either moving their finger left or up) (Morsella, Wilson, et al., 2009). Thus, because consciousness is necessary to resolve conflicts between competing action plans, even simple actions (such as naming colors in a Stroop task, or preparing to move one's finger left or right) can cause conscious conflict due to the presence of incompatible intentions.

Correspondingly, though not conceptualized as such previously, we suggest that the undue influence of majorities over individuals points to a hypothesis about how nonconformity is subjectively experienced. Specifically, if group influence does indeed spur an intention to conform in much the same way that a Stroop task spurs an intention to read words, then even minor acts of nonconformity should cause an experience of conscious conflict. Thus, the hypothesis here, tested in two studies, is that the mere act of recalling one's own belief or stance on an issue (when asked) should be enough to cause a conscious conflict when one disagrees with a majority, since the intention to recall one's own stance should interfere with the intention to conform to the majority.

We adapted our task from procedures used in Morsella, Wilson, et al.'s (2009) study of conscious conflict. This task is designed to train participants to introspect on urges to make errors, specifically by training participants on the feeling of the urge to make an error during a Stroop task, a feeling they are afterward told is called "activity". Participants then answered a series of trivia and opinion questions, after which they were shown how a majority of previous participants answered those same questions. Then, they are asked to recall their own answers again, this time rating how much "activity" giving *their own answer* causes them. We hypothesized that, due to presence of an intention towards conformity to the majority, participants would experience more "activity" when recalling answers in which they disagreed with the majority than for answers in which they agreed with the majority. That is, though asked to do nothing but give us their original answers again, participants are still pulled towards the majority response. A follow-up study also reported here demonstrates that people experience this conscious conflict even when they know that they are right and the majority is wrong.

Importantly, showing that conscious conflict occurs under such minimal conditions speaks to the idea that majority influence tends to seep into people's decisions even absent any logical reason, thus making majority influence especially difficult to resist. Thus, though these studies do not explicitly measure illogical or unwise conformity, in focusing squarely on the experience of conscious conflict in conformity situations these studies are the first to show that there are measurable traces of group influence even when people are asked to recall their own stances. This experienced conscious conflict in turn supports the idea that the undue influence of majorities might be due an automatic and uncontrolled tendency towards conformity. Likewise, this work is unique in its use of theories of the function of consciousness, typically used to explain low-level phenomena like the Stroop task, to account for properties of high-level social behavior.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Forty-three participants (27 female, average age = 39) completed an online study.

2.2. Procedure

The first experimental task trained participants to introspect on their urges to make errors during a Stroop task (Morsella, Gray, et al., 2009; Morsella, Wilson, et al., 2009). During each trial in this training, a word is displayed and participants are asked to "sub-vocalize" – that is, name in their head, the name of the color in which the word is displayed. There were a total of 32 trials, 16 of which were incongruent (e.g., "blue" printed in red), 8 congruent (e.g., "red" printed in red), and 8 control stimuli (e.g., "phone" printed in red), presented in random order. Participants were instructed to press the space bar once they had successfully sub-vocalized the color name. Following this, participants were asked to rate, on an 8 point scale, "On the previous trial, how strong was the urge to make a mistake" (1 = *almost no urge*, 8 = *extremely strong urge*).

After this, following Morsella, Wilson, et al. (2009), participants were told "What you were measuring inside your mind when estimating your urge to make a mistake is a psychological state called 'activity.' When your urge to make a mistake on this task was high, activity was high; when your urge to make a mistake on this task was low, activity was low." Participants were further told that they would be asked to measure "activity" later.