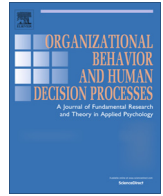




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Groups outperform individuals in tacit coordination by using consensual and disjunctive salience



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ABSTRACT

Tacit coordination between individuals has received considerable research attention (Mehta, Starmer, & Sugden, 1994; Abele & Stasser, 2008). However, groups often must coordinate tacitly with other groups, and such intergroup coordination has been rarely studied. In three experiments, we found that interacting groups are more successful at coordinating tacitly than are individuals. This advantage is driven by two types of coordination salience that are uniquely derived from groups deliberating and making collective responses. Consensual salience occurs when groups select a response because a majority of members support it. Majorities efficiently identify popular response tendencies (i.e., focal points) and thereby increase the chances of matching other groups' responses. Disjunctive salience occurs when at least one member of a group suggests a focal point. We propose that focal points are often demonstratively evident when mentioned, and if proposed by any group member, are likely to be adopted as the group response.

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1. Introduction

Social actors frequently encounter situations that demand coordination of actions with others. Friends attempting to meet in a crowded concert venue have to correctly anticipate where each is likely to go. Greeting rituals with family and friends present a multitude of possible actions – handshake, hug, or kiss – and failure to coordinate is embarrassing at a minimum. Potentially more disastrous are failures of drivers to coordinate effectively on the roadways, which can lead to accidents. These situations are relatively easy to navigate if parties communicate about possible courses of action. Since all parties involved first and foremost want to coordinate, disagreements are unlikely to arise and are easily overcome if discussed. However, communication is often awkward and impractical, and sometimes it is impossible. Cell phones can be forgotten at home, lack reception, or run out of battery power. An anticipated opportunity to chat with one's partner can be unexpectedly missed. An assumption that two people are “on the same page” can be made in error. Under such conditions, coordination can still be achieved tacitly, through mutually held understandings and expectations. Problems of tacit coordination typically cannot be unilaterally solved by reason or logic and even well-intentioned

and well-acquainted actors, such as romantic partners, are not universally successful in their attempts at coordinating tacitly (Chartier & Abele, 2015). Of the dozens of potential meeting places in a park, how can two friends hope to select the same one? Indeed, from an economic perspective, the behavioral options are often indistinguishable in payoffs, and hence the many possible solutions are equally attractive to the parties involved. The friends want to meet and whether they meet by the concession stand or the fountain matters little. In game theoretic terms, a problem can be said to have many pure strategy Nash-equilibria, or patterns of responses that once arrived at, leave no party with an incentive to unilaterally change their decision (Nash, 1950).

Thomas Schelling (1960) proposed that options in coordination problems are often distinguishable by label even if they do not differ in attractiveness, and that these labels differ in terms of salience to interacting partners as potential solutions to the coordination problem. His informal investigations supported this notion by demonstrating that individuals do not respond randomly when trying to coordinate, but opt for salient options termed focal points. For example, he asked a convenience sample where and at what time of day they would meet a stranger who was also trying to meet them in New York City. A majority picked Grand Central Station and virtually all chose noon. Therefore, grand Central Station at noon is a focal point, or effective solution, to this particular coordination problem. Mehta, Starmer, and Sugden (1994) investigated the concept of focal points more systematically and

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demonstrated that coordination was far more likely when interacting parties had the explicit goal of matching, as opposed to simply responding with their idiosyncratic preferences. Therefore, success indeed depends on the appeal of focal points rather than mere coincidence or shared preferences. There is more to focal points than mere preferential majority independent of the coordination problem. People consider them to be reasonable responses to coordination problems.

These early investigations of tacit coordination focused on coordination between individuals; intragroup coordination. But social situations often require coordination between groups; intergroup coordination. Where exactly should we meet the Jones's for our picnic in the park? What hours should our store be open during the holidays to dovetail with other local businesses? The current work develops the theoretical underpinnings of differential performance in intergroup and intragroup tacit coordination, measures the tacit coordination performance of interacting groups relative to interacting individuals, and tracks the processes underlying intergroup tacit coordination decisions.

Groups outperform individuals at many problem solving tasks (Hill, 1982; Laughlin & Ellis, 1986). There are, of course, counter-examples where groups actually perform quite poorly. Examples include cases of hidden profiles, in which groups focus on information all members know to the detriment of unique and critical information that only one member knows (e.g. Stasser & Titus, 1985) and the consideration of base rates in probabilistic reasoning, where groups seem to magnify biases and errors in judgment (Hinsz, Tindale, & Nagao, 2008). Kerr and Tindale (2004) suggest that this inconsistent performance can be partially explained by the fact that groups focus on cognitions that members share in common to the relative exclusion of cognitions that are not shared by members. "Social sharedness" can either help or hinder a group's decision making process depending on the specifics of the problem faced (Tindale, Smith, Dykema-Engblade, & Kluwe, 2012). We contend that tacit coordination is a domain in which groups will benefit from their reliance on socially shared cognitions. In scenarios demanding tacit coordination, relying on socially shared cognitions should be beneficial because successful coordination often requires the actors to match the actions of others; a purely consensual process with no objectively "correct" answer. There is some initial evidence to suggest that this may be the case. Feri, Irlenbush, and Sutter (2010) showed that groups, compared to individuals, converged more quickly on pay-off dominant solutions in coordination games where options differ in terms of actor outcomes. Their findings are consistent with the cumulative evidence that teams are more responsive to economic incentives than are individuals (see, e.g., Bornstein, Kugler, & Ziegelmeyer, 2004). However, as mentioned before, in many coordination situations, the response options do not differ in attractiveness and choosing any common response is the primary concern. Thus, we focused on tasks that more directly model social situations such as the "meeting" problem, in which options are distinguishable by labels but not by payoffs. We hypothesize that interacting groups will outperform interacting individuals in tacit coordination based on two predicted group-level mechanisms for detecting focal points: consensual salience and disjunctive salience. Consensual salience is born of a pattern of majority influence in small groups. Disjunctive salience rests on the idea that focal points have demonstrative appeal, and will be influential once considered.

1.1. Consensual salience

In a matching coordination task, the successful response is that which others predominantly select. Groups should be better able

than individuals to identify such population level consensus by sampling the response tendencies of their members and checking for a dominant or modal response. We hypothesize that if an option is initially preferred by a majority of group members, it will be selected as the group's decision. In terms of social decision schemes, this process would yield a "majority-wins" scheme (Davis, 1973; Laughlin, 1999; Stasser, 1999). Such a pattern would echo classic findings on majority influence and attitude polarization in small groups (Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Myers & Lamm, 1976). Operationally, a focal point is the most popular response in a target population and majority processes should amplify the popularity of the most popular response. To demonstrate, suppose 80% of individuals in a particular population prefer meeting at Grand Central Station, while 20% prefer meeting at Times Square. There is a 90% chance that a group of three randomly drawn from this population will have a majority who prefer Grand Central Station, substantially increasing the odds that two groups, as opposed to two individuals, will successfully meet in New York City if a majority wins decision scheme is followed. There are however ample counter-examples in which "majority-wins" social decision schemes are not followed, such as in cases where problems have demonstrably correct solutions (Laughlin, 1980, 1999). Thus, the two open questions regarding the consensual salience hypothesis are will groups typically follow a majority-wins decision scheme in this domain, and if so, will this be to the benefit of the group?

1.2. Disjunctive salience

Groups may also benefit from a distinct, yet not mutually exclusive process, which we term *disjunctive salience*. If one member of a group suggests a focal point, then others may experience a "Eureka"-like feeling due to its intuitive appeal. For example, Mehta et al. (1994) asked individuals to name a flower. When simply picking a flower, 35% responded *rose*. This was the most popular response. When attempting to match another randomly chosen individual, 67% responded *rose*, suggesting that many who would not have chosen *rose* if simply picking were able to correctly recognize that it would be a popular matching option. The concept of disjunctive salience implies that, if any group member mentions the focal point (*rose* in the foregoing example), the group will likely select it. A member may initially prefer *lily*, but think to themselves something along the lines of "now that you mention it, *rose* is a really great and obvious pick!" In this sense, identifying a focal point is a disjunctive task because the most effective group member determines the group success (Steiner, 1972). Just as when a group of friends is searching for the last puzzle piece that seems to have been lost in the house, the group succeeds if any single member succeeds. In terms of social decision schemes, the proposed process is captured by a "truth-wins" scheme (Davis, 1973; Laughlin, 1999; Stasser, 1999). Assume that 80% of the population prefers *rose* as the best coordinating response. There is a 99% chance that at least one member of a group of three will prefer *rose*. If *rose*-proponents mention this preference, and others are convinced that it is the best option, group performance will benefit.

Both of these processes should lead to more convergence in group responses compared to individual responses. In Experiment 1 we compared the tacit coordination performance of groups and individuals. In Experiment 2 we compared group responses to the responses of the individuals that comprised the groups in order to more directly test consensual and disjunctive salience as group processes involved in tacit coordination decisions. In Experiment 3 we assess the impact of coordinating *with* a group, independent of coordinating *as* a group.

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