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Case Report

“Trumping” conformity: Urges towards conformity to ingroups and nonconformity to morally opposed outgroups

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A response interference paradigm measures intentions to conform to majorities.
- People feel urges to conform to ingroup and neutral outgroups, even when asked to simply recall a previously stated preference.
- However, people report urges to resist the opinions of groups they morally oppose (e.g., Trump supporters, among those morally opposed to Trump).
- Results may help explain why morally polarized groups have so much trouble communicating.

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ABSTRACT

While previous research suggests that people are primarily biased towards conformity, the current studies test the premise that conformist tendencies are bounded by group membership and moral opposition. Participants were trained in a Stroop-like response interference paradigm to introspect on urges to state majority preferences when being asked to recall their own previously-stated preferences. Consistent with previous research, across three studies utilizing target groups across the ideological spectrum, respondents report more interference (greater urge to make an error) when recalling product preferences for which they disagreed, rather than agreed, with an ingroup majority. However, this conformist tendency is attenuated when the target group is an ideological outgroup and reversed towards nonconformity when respondents further have strong moral opposition to the outgroup. This perhaps sheds light on why political groups can be so strikingly polarized and seemingly unwilling to communicate.

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In the past decade, multiple fields have converged on the idea that a fundamental feature of human cognition is a tendency towards harmony with others. This work includes demonstrations that cooperative responses occur temporally before competitive responses (Bear & Rand, 2016; Rand, Greene, & Nowak, 2012), that human infants start showing cooperative instincts soon after birth (Warneken, Chen, & Tomasello, 2006; see also Kovacs, Teglas, & Endress, 2010), that the brain sends an “error signal” when disagreeing with a majority (Klucharev, Hytönen, Rijpkema, Smidts, & Fernández, 2009), that group norms are powerful, yet under-detected influences on behavior (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008), and that people form intentions to conform to majorities even when the majority is known to be incorrect (Stein, 2013).

However, this idea seems to belie the modern political landscape. Even before the 2016 Presidential election, Liberals and Conservatives were more ideologically divided than any other time in recent history (Abramowitz, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014). From early in his candidacy, Donald Trump was so abhorred by some that several articles were dedicated to explaining why anyone would support him at all (Friedersdorf, 2015; Tannenbaum, 2015). During the election, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were the two most unpopular Presidential candidates in recent history (Enten, 2016). A study from June 2016 found that most people view the opposing political party as a very unfavorable source of negative emotion, composed of people with which they have little common ground (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Accordingly, the notion of a staunch liberal being compelled to conform to the preferences of a Trump supporter, or a conservative to a Clinton supporter, seems problematic. Along these lines, recent research shows that people on both sides of the political divide are intolerant and prejudiced towards those they see as having different ideological values (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014; Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013). Thus, the idea that people have a cooperative “social sense” (Kovacs et al., 2010) might have important boundary conditions.

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Theorizing on morality might illuminate those boundaries. Haidt (2007, 2012) argues that morals divide people into "tribal communities" with distinct moral intuitions that both "bind" communities together and "blind" people to the viewpoints of groups they morally oppose. Such theorizing suggests that the purpose of morality is to maximize the chances that one's moral group "wins", rather than to help its members seek the truth. For example, people see authorities in a positive moral light only when they agree with those authorities ideologically (Frimer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, 2014). Haidt (2012) further argues that merely entertaining the opinions of a group one morally opposes can be seen as taboo. Since Liberals and Conservatives have distinct moral intuitions (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), partisans who view their political opponents as a having a diametrically opposed set of morals might be biased towards distancing themselves from, rather than accepting, each other's points of view, even on trivial issues.

Thus, the central hypothesis of the current research is that the typical tendency towards conformity to groups is reversed to nonconformity when the group is a strongly morally opposed outgroup. Notably, experiments in the above-cited work on conformity and cooperation have tended to use other respondents (presumably an ingroup) as a reference group, so reactions to outgroups are under-explored.

1. Harnessing the principles of consciousness to explore social behavior

Much of the above-cited work on conformity suggested that people might be compelled towards conformity to majorities, even when conformity offers no apparent benefit. Synthesizing this idea with Morsella's (2005) theory that the primary function of consciousness is to resolve conflicts between two incompatible action plans, Stein (2013) tested the hypothesis that conformity tendencies are associated with experienced conscious conflicts. That is, consciousness should be invoked if people do in fact have inappropriate or unhelpful urges to conform, because the action plan to conform (theoretically caused by a general conformity tendency) conflicts with the action plan to not conform.

Stein (2013) correspondingly reasoned that when people are asked to simply repeat their own previously stated preferences, provided they know their opinion is different from a majority of others, people might feel "urges" to conform that conflict with the intention to repeat their response. "Conflict" in this sense refers to the same feeling that people experience in a Stroop task. For example, where people are asked to name the color of a word printed in a color incongruent with the word (e.g., "red" printed in blue ink), people experience a conscious conflict because the "urge" to say "red" interferes with the goal to say "blue" (Morsella, Gray, Krieger, & Bargh, 2009a; Morsella, Berger, & Krieger, 2011).

In a paradigm adapted from Morsella et al. (2009b), participants in Stein's (2013) task were first trained to identify the feelings of conscious conflict (urges to make an error) in the Stroop task. Then, participants answered a set of two-choice questions. After each they were informed about how a majority of others answered the question. Respondents were next simply asked to recall their own answers again, while also reporting urges to make an error, analogous to the urges they experienced during the Stroop task. Consistent with the idea that people are biased towards conformity, participants reported heightened urges to make an error when their own response disagreed with the response of the majority, suggesting that an urge to conform interfered with the intention to state their own response.

The current studies extend this paradigm by adding in a between-subjects manipulation of group identity. The hypothesized pattern of results is that the normal tendency to feel heightened interference (urge to err due to competing intentions) when recalling a counter-majority response would be replicated when the majority is an ingroup. However, this tendency should be reversed for a morally opposed outgroup, such that heightened urges to make an error are felt when recalling a majority-*consistent* response. Studies 1a and 1b demonstrate this effect using Donald Trump supporters and Hillary Clinton supporters as target outgroups, while Study 2 demonstrates the effect across a wide range of ideological groups.

2. Study 1a

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

In January 2016, 285 American mTurk users (126 female, average age = 32.54) completed an online survey. The identity of the target majority group (Americans vs. Canadians vs. Trump supporters) was varied randomly between subjects. In this study, "Americans" represents an ingroup, while the "Canadians" group was included as a comparison condition representing an outgroup with which respondents would not feel heightened ideological conflict.

When using a similar paradigm, Stein (2013) Study 1 reported an effect size of Hedges $g_{av} = 0.47$ (mean difference = 0.8, $SD = 1.65$). A power analysis indicated that a within-subjects sample of 36 would be needed to detect an effect of this size at the $p < 0.05$ level. Since the Trump opposition group was the group of greatest theoretical interest, this study was run until the number of respondents who morally opposed Trump was at least 40. Similar stopping rules were used in the other studies reported here. All measures, manipulations, and exclusions are reported.

2.2. Procedure

2.2.1. Attention check

The experiment began with two attention check questions which screened out 6 participants. Participants were asked to state the current year, and to choose the opposite of "hot" from a multiple choice list.

2.2.2. Training task

Following Stein (2013) and Morsella et al. (2009b) participants were first trained to introspect on urges to make errors during a Stroop task. During each trial in this task, participants see a word printed in one of several colors and are asked to "sub-vocalize" (name in their head) the name of the color. The task consists of 32 randomly ordered trials, 16 of which were incongruent (e.g. "red", printed in blue ink), 8 or which were congruent (e.g., "red" printed in red ink), and 8 of which are neutral (e.g., "house" printed in red ink). Participants were asked to hit the space bar after successfully sub-vocalizing each color name. After each trial, respondents were asked "On the previous trial, how strong was the urge to make a mistake?" (1 = *Almost No Urge*, 8 = *Extremely Strong Urge*). The purpose of this task was to train respondents on the feeling of conscious conflict (e.g., the feeling of conflict between the urge to sub-vocalize the printed word and the intention of sub-vocalizing the color) so this feeling can be reported on later.

To that end, after the twenty-fourth trial, respondents were told:

"To tell you a bit more about this task: **What you were measuring inside your mind when estimating your urge to make a mistake is a psychological state called 'motion'**. When your urge to make a mistake on this task was *high*, motion was *high*; when your urge to make a mistake on this task was *low*, motion was *low*. Note that "motion" is not necessarily a negative feeling, nor a feeling of negative agitation, it's simply the urge to give an erroneous response to each question."

Note that Stein (2013) and Morsella et al. (2009b) called the psychological state "activity" rather than "motion". However, since some respondents in the current study would later report on urges to make errors in the context of seeing preferences of Trump supporters, a group they potentially feel great negativity towards, "motion" was thought to be a more neutral word since "activity" might bring "activism" to mind. After these instructions, respondents completed the rest of the training session, though for each trial they were asked to report

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