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Reshaping social structure through performances: Emergent solidarity between actors and observers☆

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ABSTRACT

Based on the interactive model of identity formation (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005) we investigate whether displays of coordinated actions foster feelings of solidarity. Participants were randomly assigned to roles of actors and observers in two experiments (N = 191 and 276). Actors performed in an "airband" in which all played air-guitar (enacting mechanical solidarity) or each member played different air-instruments (enacting organic solidarity). In the control condition actors *imagined* playing (Study 1) or performed individually (Study 2). As predicted, displays of solidarity led to elevated levels of experienced solidarity among actors and observers. As predicted, experiences of organic solidarity were mediated by having a sense of personal value to the group, whereas experiences of mechanical solidarity were not. Interestingly, exploratory evidence suggests that groups who enacted organic solidarity, remained more active throughout a subsequent behavioural task relative to other conditions. This research shows that performing arts are more than just entertainment; performing arts can bring individuals together and shape social structure.

1. Introduction

In social psychological terms, a performance (whether in sports, religion, culture or politics) is successful when it transforms a set of loosely connected individuals into a social entity. This may occur during a Christmas church service, the World Cup football, or the Woodstock festival. At events such as these, loosely connected people make their way to a performance for personal reasons and by personal means. But during the performance, people can come to feel connected with the performers and with each other. In terms of group dynamics this is a remarkable process: despite the fact that the performers (football players, actors, musicians, politicians) are active and the crowd is separated from them and not participating in the core actions, the actions "on stage" are capable of rousing the audience so that a strong sense of solidarity can emerge that transcends boundaries between performers and observers. This process is central to the current research: How do the coordinated actions of a set of performers affect passive observers so that a sense of solidarity emerges that transcends the boundaries between performers and observers?

Our hypothesis is that a process of psychological group formation can explain this phenomenon. That is to say, the same processes that are at play in (interactive) group formation (i.e., interactive model of identity formation; Postmes, Haslam, and Swaab, 2005), might also be able to explain how passive observers come to experience a sense of solidarity, even though they do not take active part. In this way, performers and spectators can psychologically merge into one overarching entity. In cultural research, dance, music, theatre, and other spectacles are seen as instruments which express shared identity and reinforce a sense of community among those who act and those who observe (Beeman, 1993; Evans-Pritchard, 1928; Seeger, 1994; Spencer, 1985). Thus far, empirical research has studied how participation in such events affects identification among core actors (e.g., Khan et al., 2016; Páez, Rimé, Basabe, Wlodarczyk, & Zumeta, 2015) or among people related to the actors as friends or family (e.g., Konvalinka et al., 2011; Xygalatas et al., 2013). The current research investigates emergent bonds among total strangers. The central purpose is to shed light on psychological group formation between passive observers and active performers.

We study group formation by focusing on the emergence of solidarity. Solidarity is an umbrella term for the experience of groupiness and has three components; identification, entitativity, and belonging (see also Koudenburg, Postmes, and Gordijn, 2017, 2013).

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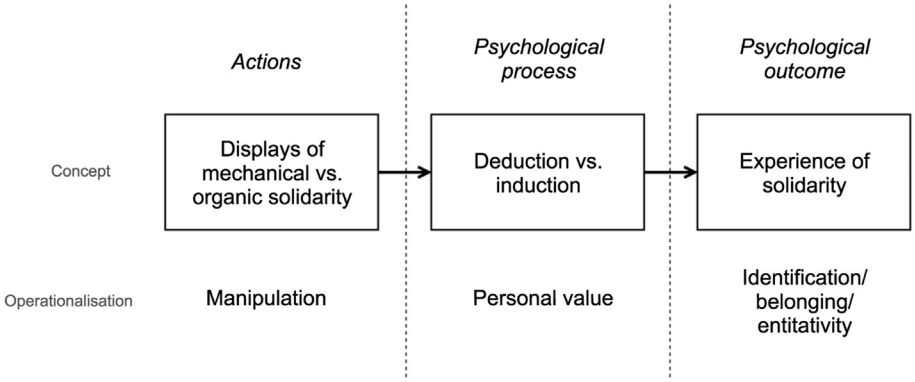

Fig. 1. Overview of concepts, hypothesized process, and operationalisations.

Identification refers to the incorporation of the group into the self-concept, entitativity refers to the unity of the group as a whole, and belonging refers to the relationship between the group and the self. Together, we think these variables can capture the psychological group formation between an active group of people and passive observers.

1.1. Two pathways to solidarity

In the group formation literature, the interactive model of identity formation suggests there are two pathways to forming groups (Postmes, Haslam, et al., 2005). In most groups elements of both pathways co-exist. Nevertheless, within specific situations one pathway may be dominant: Groups can deduce a shared identity from the similarities between individuals, such as pursuing the same goals or values, looking similar or performing the same actions. This similarity can form the basis for identification with a group (deductive social identity formation; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005). Similarity can be due to shared features such as nationality, profession or politics, but also due to coordination in behaviour that is executed in a mechanical and similar way (Koudenburg, Postmes, Gordijn, & Van Mourik Broekman, 2015). In groups performing such mechanical behaviour willingly and consciously, group members are essentially conforming to behavioural norms which makes individual deviation undesired. That is to say, in such groups individual differences are pushed to the background as they interfere with the similarity of its members (cf. Durkheim, 1984).

However, many of the groups we belong to do not arise from an overarching commonality, but instead are formed *organically* around individuals who complement one another's actions. Because of this, individuals can collaborate towards a common outcome and this can form the backbone of an emergent sense of identification too (inductive social identity; Postmes, Spears, et al., 2005). Think for example about a small community in which there is a mailman, a butcher, a farmer, etc. In such communities, the differences between the members of the group, the coordination of their (inter)actions, and the fact that individuals feel personally valuable to the group, contribute to an emergent sense of unity and solidarity (Jans, Postmes, & Van der Zee, 2011, 2012; Koudenburg et al., 2015). In sum, although there are inductive and deductive pathways to developing a shared identity and although the role of individual group members is very different in each, both pathways ultimately can lead to a strong sense of identification (and more broadly, solidarity) with the group as a whole. The main difference between the two pathways, is that in groups in which the bottom-up, inductive process dominates, the sense of personal value is positively related to the degree of identification and unity that group members experience (Jans et al., 2011; Koudenburg et al., 2015), whereas in groups that operate more top-down and where deductive processes dominate, it is the group as an entity that is central to the process of group formation.

1.2. Enacting organic and mechanical solidarity

In the current work, we use the terms mechanical and organic solidarity in two different ways. On the one hand, when we talk about *mechanical and organic displays of solidarity* we refer to the group behaviour that gives rise to deductive and inductive group formation. So, while deduction and induction refer to the cognitive processes by which the psychological representation of the group is formed (see Postmes, Spears, et al., 2005), displays of mechanical and organic solidarity refer to the actual group dynamics: the social interactions among group members and, in the present research, their movement (see also Koudenburg et al., 2015). When we look at the physical processes, we see that the psychological experience of solidarity (identification, belonging, entitativity) can be enacted via behavioural coordination in groups. When people are asked to behave similarly, e.g., to move in synchrony, the group displays mechanical solidarity that may give rise to an emergent sense of groupiness through a deductive process (i.e., we are all behaving the same, we are as one). Conversely, when participants are asked to behave in a complementary way (e.g., they take turns performing a particular movement) they are displaying organic solidarity that may give rise to an emergent sense of groupiness which is induced from group members' personal contributions to the group (i.e, everyone is making a valuable contribution and thus we are united, Koudenburg et al., 2015).

On the other hand, when we mention the *experience of mechanical and organic solidarity* we refer to the psychological outcomes of the respectively deductive and inductive group formation process: the sense of group identification, entitativity and belonging that represent three facets of experienced solidarity in small interactive groups (see also Koudenburg, Postmes, et al., 2017, 2013). On the experiential side, the key difference between mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity is that in the former individuality is in the background, whereas in the latter personal value of individual group members' contributions is central (see Fig. 1 for the conceptual overview).

There is a large body of literature indirectly supporting the first process: Acting in synchrony together with others leads to social bonding, (generalized) pro-sociality, and cooperation (Fischer, Callander, Reddish, & Bulbulia, 2013a; Good & Russo, 2016; McNeill, 1995; Reddish, Tong, Jong, Lanman, & Whitehouse, 2016a; Valdesolo & Desteno, 2011; Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009, and music can reinforce these effects, see Stupacher, Maes, Witte, & Wood, 2017). Strict forms of synchrony, when movements are exactly matched in time and expression can strengthen togetherness among actors. Examples are marching soldiers, dance forms such as line-dancing, or choral singing. In the army this has a clear function; you lose your sense of individuality and feel part of stronger and harmonious unit (McNeill, 1995). Collective rituals also involve synchronized movement and express a sense of community and commitment. Synchrony affects perception of unity among actors, while observers report that groups moving in synchrony appear to be more united (Ip, Chiu, & Wan, 2006; Lakens, 2010; Lakens