Introduction

Increasing the sense of social connection between individuals in a group has been shown to enhance prosocial behaviours towards strangers. This has been taken to suggest that strong group bonds may foster a general prosocial orientation in individuals.

Yet, evidence from crowd psychology suggests that strong group identification may also increase proneness to social influence, or may impair self-monitoring, facilitating behavioural disinhibition.

Since prosocial behaviours are usually in line with highly internalized group norms, a stricter test of the role of genuine prosocial orientation versus social influence in shaping social behaviour would be to assess whether strongly bonded individuals also more easily engage in behaviours that align with the current group norm, but are clearly destructive rather than prosocial.

Research questions

1. Do individuals conform to behaviour of their social group even if this behaviour is clearly destructive towards a third party and does not produce any personal or group gain?
2. Does the social connection between individuals in the group, manipulated by interpersonal similarity, increase this tendency?

Methods

Group bonding task

Participants viewed statement pairs about personal preferences and desires and selected the ones that applied to them most
On their screen, they were shown the statements ostensibly selected by their group members
We varied the similarity between the group members to be similar or dissimilar to manipulate sense of social connectedness

Key press task

Novel task based on the Point Subtraction Aggression Paradigm (PSAP)
In gain trials participants could make fast key pressed to gain a monetary reward for their group; in subtraction trials they could make key presses to destroy points from an unknown future group of participants

We manipulated group members’ behaviour in subtraction trials (shown in the group block) to be either destructive or non-destructive

Design

2x2 between-subjects design with factors Similarity (similar versus dissimilar) and Group Behaviour (destructive versus non-destructive)

Results

Sense of connectedness

Perceived self-group overlap

![Graph showing sense of connectedness and perceived self-group overlap for different similarity and destructive conditions]

- Behavioural ratings after the group bonding task confirmed that participants in similar groups experienced stronger self-other overlap between themselves and their group members ($F = 11.216; p < 0.001$).

Subtraction clicks

Change in subtraction clicks with respect to individual baseline

- A main effect of Group Behaviour on difference scores (group vs baseline) confirmed that participants conformed to their group members’ destructive behaviour in the group block ($F = 10.980; p < 0.001$).

- This effect was also found for the second individual block ($F = 7.158; p < 0.01$), indicating that participants not just publicly complied with the group norm, but to some extent internalized it.

- We did not find a significant Similarity x Group Behaviour interaction, indicating that group bonding did not modulate the extent of conformity behaviour, although post-hoc comparisons showed that significant destructive conformity only occurred in participants from similar groups.

Conclusions

- These data provide evidence from a novel task that individuals tend to copy their group members if these engage in senseless destructive behaviour towards strangers. This underlines the powerful tendency of individuals to conform to their peers, even if the behaviour is harmful to others and does not produce any material gain.

- Although this effect was only present in groups with high interpersonal similarity, we could not show a significant differential effect of group similarity on conformity.

- Our novel task seems promising as a tool for measuring destructive forms of social influence and behavioural contagion in a laboratory setting.