

10.1 Social Groups: Both Our Destruction and Our Salvation?

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Human beings form social groups at the drop of a hat and on the thinnest of pretexts, with consequences both good and bad. On the one hand, being part of a group provides a sense of belonging and security (Allport, 1979; Correll & Park, 2005) and promotes cooperation and altruism within the group (Bernhard, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2006). On the other hand, group membership can also result in prejudice and stereotyping of outgroup members (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), and sometimes even outright hostility and conflict (Struch & Schwartz, 1989). In their chapter, Victoria Lee and Lasana Harris (L&H) argue that the human tendency toward “groupishness” (Haidt, 2012) has another negative consequence: It may act as a limit on the very possibility of free will. Cheekily, L&H illustrate their proposal by asking whether academics have free will in choosing their position on the issue of free will. Academics, being people too, are strongly motivated by social rewards and seek contact with and approval from their ingroup. For an academic interested in free will, the ingroup consists of other academics who have the same position on the issue of free will.

Being part of such a group, L&H argue, will likely affect how the academic thinks about free will. For example, group polarization may cause the academic to adopt an opinion that is more extreme than his or her initial position (Isenberg, 1986; Myers & Lamm, 1976). Similarly, ingroup positivity biases may result in favorable evaluations of ingroup members (Brewer, 1979) that are not justified by the quality of their arguments. Interactions with outgroup members—those who have a different opinion about free will—may also be affected, becoming less open and collaborative. L&H suggest that the net effect of these types of intergroup processes is to impose a constraint on the academics’ freedom to arrive at their own conclusions about free will. In other words, the powerful human drive for belonging comes with a set of biases that may function to limit free will.

The great majority of academics aspire to be impartial seekers of truth. As such, the message that our social nature as human beings may limit our ability to achieve this goal will come as a disappointment to many. Adding to the bad news, we believe there is another threat to free will inherent in the very nature of human decision making. In particular, the need to arrive at a single conclusion in the face of ambiguous and conflicting evidence may lead us to discount information that disagrees with our ultimate decision, and also to feel unduly confident in our choices (Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Thagard, 1989).

To understand why this might be so, we must first consider the nature of complex decision making. An intuitive view is that like members of a jury, we first assemble the relevant facts or evidence and then integrate the evidence to arrive at a conclusion. However, this simple metaphor belies the complexity of what it is that juries and decision makers are doing. Specifically, the so-called “evidence” that is available is often more like an inference. Consider someone who is deciding whether or not to accept a job offer at a new company (Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Simon, Krawczyk, & Holyoak, 2004). In making this decision, the job candidate may consider whether the company is likely to continue growing, whether promises of rapid promotion are truthful, and whether their prospective colleagues are likely to be agreeable. These facts can only be inferred, and the inferences are uncertain (Holyoak & Simon, 1999). Moreover, different inferences can conflict with one another: For example, the job candidate might believe that the company will continue its upward trajectory, but that the coworkers are likely to be a pack of ruthless jackals. At the end of the day, however, this person must make a binary decision to take the job or leave it. How can people make a coherent decision in the face of such ambiguous and conflicting information?

One proposal is that decisions arise from a dynamic process of constraint satisfaction that ultimately results in *coherence* between the decision and how the inferences are evaluated (Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Thagard, 1989). Although we normally think of inferences as affecting decisions in a forward direction, coherence models suggest that emerging decisions can also work backward to alter the strength of inferences (Simon, Pham, Le, & Holyoak, 2001). In other words, the connection between inferences and decisions is bidirectional. The effect of this bidirectional connection is that as decision making proceeds, inferences that are consistent with the emerging decision are strengthened, and inferences that are inconsistent with the decision are weakened (Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Simon et al., 2001). Returning to the example of the job candidate, this model implies that as

the candidate begins to lean more toward one decision (e.g., take the job), this individual will come to believe more strongly that the company has good prospects for future growth, and less strongly that coworkers will be nasty. In this way, inferences come to cohere more strongly with the ultimate decision (Simon et al., 2004). Notably, inferences will also cohere more strongly with one another, becoming internally consistent even though they may be logically unrelated. In principle, for example, there is no reason why the personalities of one's coworkers should be related to the future of the company, and yet coherence pressures will tend to make them correlated with one another. This phenomenon is known as spreading coherence (Holyoak & Simon, 1999). Finally, coherence processes will also tend to result in very confident decisions, in spite of the initial ambiguity of the situation (Holyoak & Simon, 1999).

This model of decision making has a number of consequences for free will and intellectual progress, none of them good. Academic decision making, such as adopting a position on the issue of free will, is clearly rife with complexity, uncertainty, and conflicting evidence. As such, it falls squarely within the domain of decision problems covered by coherence theories. The implication is that as an academic arrives at a decision about free will, that academic will tend to believe less in the evidence that is inconsistent with his or her position, and more in the evidence that is consistent with his or her position. Another academic, arriving at the opposite conclusion, will make the opposite pattern of evaluations. Moreover, each side will be certain that they are right since coherence tends to result in high-confidence decisions (Holyoak & Simon, 1999). Taken together, coherence effects make it difficult to argue for free will in complex decision making: If one's own opinions and evaluations are altered by the decision-making process, without one's knowledge or consent, then one's will is hardly free.

As if this wasn't already bad enough, coherence processes in decision making are likely to interact negatively with the intergroup biases that L&H outline in their chapter. This is because any starting bias in how the evidence is evaluated will be accentuated through spreading coherence (Holyoak & Simon, 1999; Simon et al., 2004). For example, imagine that an academic was predisposed to favor an argument made by an ingroup member with whom the academic had had an enjoyable conversation at a conference. This argument would tend to strengthen the position that it supports, which in turn would strengthen all other arguments associated with this position and inhibit arguments that support the opposing position. In this way, a little bit of ingroup favoritism or a little bit of outgroup

bias can initiate a positive feedback cycle that makes it more difficult to consider the opposing position.

Another domain where coherence effects may operate is moral decision making, which often involves conflicting imperatives and uncertain contingencies. The debate about capital punishment, for example, involves a conflict between concern for retributive justice and concern for the value of human life, as well as inferences about whether capital punishment is an effective deterrent or not, the cost of lifetime imprisonment versus execution, and so forth. Thus, it is likely that as an individual develops an opinion about capital punishment, his or her evaluation of the competing arguments for and against it will shift into a coherent pattern. Consistent with this possibility, people who were primed with purely deontological arguments for or against capital punishment shifted their opinions about relevant consequentialist arguments in a way that was consistent with the prime that they received (Liu & Ditto, 2013). Logically, the two types of arguments should be unrelated: For example, one's opinion about whether justice for murder is best achieved through capital punishment should have nothing to do with whether one thinks it is an effective deterrent. The fact that these two tend to move together suggests that coherence effects may operate in moral decision making, as in other domains. Moreover, coherence can be expected to have the same negative consequences in the moral domain as elsewhere.

At this point, an idealistic academic or a person striving to be an ethical human being may be feeling some despair. If we are merely slaves to our groupish tendencies and our inbuilt decision-making machinery, then what of free will, moral responsibility, and intellectual growth? But take heart, fellow travelers: Ironically, the very social processes that constrain the free will of individuals may also serve to aid the broader mission of intellectual and ethical progress. In particular, provided that there are at least two groups with opposing opinions, then competition between groups for the best evidence, the most convincing arguments, and ultimately the correct answer may spur progress on both sides. In short, intergroup competition may function something like an arms race.

Perhaps the best-known example of this effect is the space race, in which the former Soviet Union and the United States competed to have the most advanced space technologies. Competition between these bitter enemies led to tremendous progress in both pure and applied sciences and also led to an American push for better science education. Such arms races may occur whenever people form groups that compete to achieve the same goal. In the academic arena, groups of people with differing opinions are com-

peting to uncover the truth; in the moral arena, groups are competing for their moral stance to become the normative view. When one side acquires new evidence or finds a flaw in the opposing side's logic, the other side must shore up their arguments or find better ones. Competition between groups may also serve as a check on coherence effects: With the other side drawing attention to the holes in one's position, it becomes more difficult to ignore competing evidence or maintain a blithe certitude in one's conclusions. Thus, our own groupish tendencies may be both our destruction and our salvation.

Of course, there are important differences between intellectual and military arms races. In a military arms race, it is difficult to ignore when one side is ahead: If the other guys have a satellite in space and you don't, then evidently you're doing something wrong and you need to change your approach. However, when the competition is between ideas, the outcomes are less clear-cut. The danger here is that if both sides think they're winning, they may simply ignore the other side, thereby circumventing the possibility of a productive arms race. As a result, it is not simply enough to sit back and let intergroup competition work its magic. Rather, each of us has a personal responsibility to actively listen to people who have a different view, both as academics and as citizens of the world. In this way, individual responsibility and intergroup processes may work synergistically, allowing social and intellectual progress to be made, scientific revolutions to occur, and people to change their minds from time to time.

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