

Under the influence of others

TARNYA DAVIS

RESearch from the University of Illinois has found that some of the same brain systems that play a role in our learning from trial-and-error are engaged also when people conform to social norms.

These findings are important because changing our behaviour to align with peers can contribute not only to community-building and social harmony, but to societal breakdown.

As humans we have a desire to conform, and other people's behaviours have significant impacts on our brains.

The researchers investigated how our brain works in social situations by asking participants to play an "ultimatum game" where one player proposes how to split \$10

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with another. The researchers observed how people reacted when their partners accepted or rejected their offers and how their behaviour changed.

The study mirrors interactions within a community and demonstrates how cooperative relationships work.

Participants' behaviour was shaped by the behaviour of their negotiation partners; peo-

ple became more generous after receiving generous offers and vice-versa.

Our behaviour is affected by observing our peers - we replicate others.

These findings can help us make sense of the sometimes confusing choices other people make that might seem out of character.

It also helps us appreciate how others' behaviour might influence our choices.

As much as we might like to think of ourselves as independent and unique, we are also social beings, and we have a drive to conform and fit in.

How we see the world is profoundly affected by the people we associate with.

The goals and values of these people will even guide our sense of right and wrong.

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