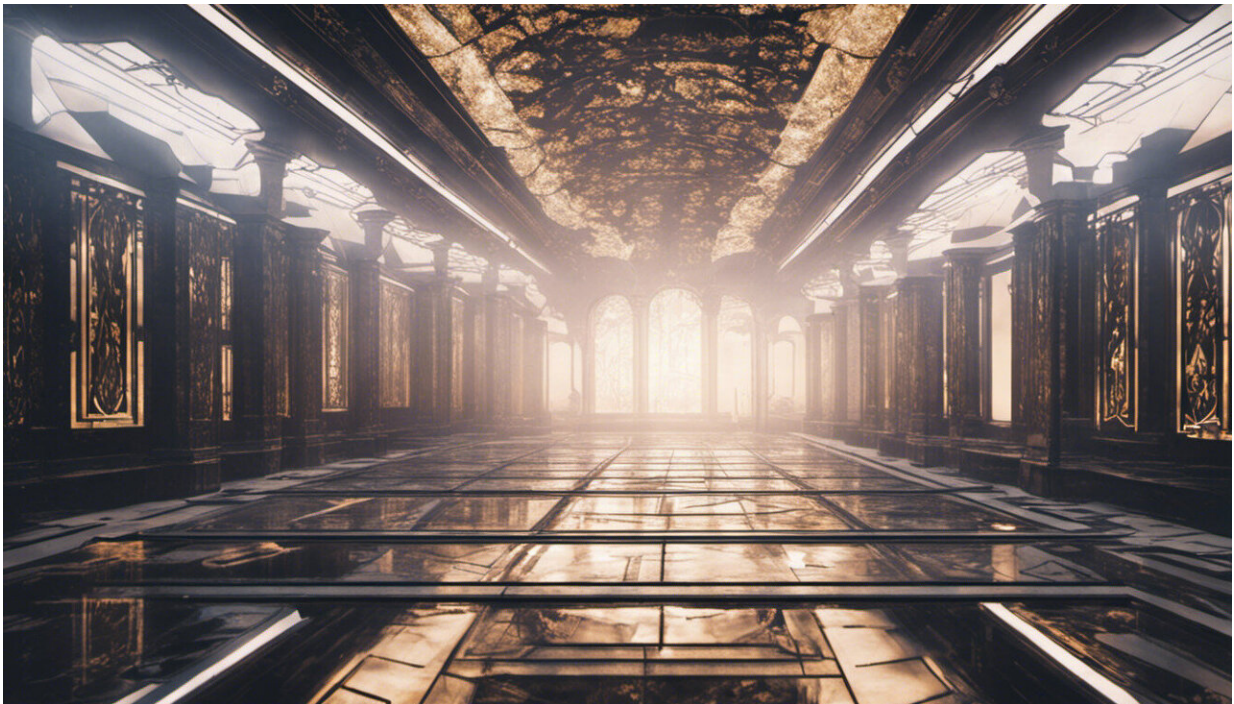


Going along means getting along—and that's not always good, study finds

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Phys.org)—Caving in to social pressure—such as saying that you love a movie because friends do—makes for good vibes about being part of a group and can produce more of the same conduct, according to a Baylor University sociological study. The finding has implications for people ranging from philanthropists to gangs, researchers said.

"The punch line is very simple: Conformity leads to positive feelings, attachments, solidarity—and these are what motivate people to continue their behavior," said Kyle Irwin, Ph.D., an assistant professor of sociology at Baylor and lead author. The research, funded by the National Science Foundation, explores conformity and contributions for the "greater good." It is published in the sociology journal *Social Forces*.

The researchers' experiments showed similar results in groups in which it was the norm to make sacrifices for others, as well as in groups where the norm was "to slack off," Irwin said. "In both cases, participants reported nearly identical levels of attachment to the group, and then continued to follow the norm in subsequent interactions."

Irwin and co-author Brent Simpson, Ph.D., a sociology professor at the University of South Carolina, say the results may be significant for positive collective efforts, such as building public parks, funding public television and radio, or voting.

But the same process holds for [negative behaviors](#) as well. In those instances where group norms prescribe acting selfishly, positive sentiments promote continuing these unwanted actions, Irwin said.

"Examples of this might include [gangs](#) or other [criminal groups](#) where it may be normative to achieve very little according to society's standards, and to continue to do so because there is positive regard among [group members](#). In other words, they may be happy in their mutual non-cooperativeness," he said.

The researchers conducted two "public good" experiments in which participants chose how many of their own resources to give to the group and how much to keep for themselves. Contributed points were doubled and divided equally among everyone, regardless of how much people donated. This means that individuals could "free-ride" and still cash in

on others' generosity. In both studies, participants were informed that contribution decisions would be made one at a time, and that they would fill the last position in the sequence.

The researchers used this design to manipulate norms and the average contribution of other group members (who were, in reality, simulated and whose behavior was pre-programmed). In one case, the contributions of the "others" was very consistent; in another, very inconsistent. Group members in one instance averaged donations of about 65 percent of their resources; in the other, they were relatively stingy, averaging about 25 percent of their resources. Groups in which people contributed generously represented "high-achieving" groups, while those whose members donated very little were akin to "slacker" groups.

After participants decided how much to contribute, they were asked a series of questions about the group, enabling the researchers to measure feelings of attachment among members. Finally, participants made a second decision about how much to give to the group, but this time they were told that no one would see their contribution decision; it was anonymous. Irwin and Simpson used this decision to determine how individuals would behave as a result of their feelings about the group and its members. Findings suggested that people continued to conform to norms even when their decisions were anonymous. Their behavior did not change.

The studies were designed so that individuals believed they were interacting with total strangers. This leads Irwin to believe that "it's a pretty powerful process. They don't know each other, but [conformity](#) to norms still generates [positive feelings](#) about the group. If we're getting these results in this artificial context, think how much stronger it might be with people who know each other and have some sort of interaction history."

Provided by Baylor University

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