

Study reveals how humanity could unite to address global challenges

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New research led by the University of Oxford has found that perceptions of globally shared life experiences and globally shared biology can strengthen psychological bonding with humanity at large, which can motivate prosocial action on a global scale and help to tackle global problems. The findings have been published today in [*Royal Society Open Science*](#).

Many of the most daunting challenges facing humankind today—from the climate crisis and poverty to food insecurity and terrorism—can only be overcome through cooperation and collective action on a global scale. But what would it take to unite humanity in this way?

According to the results of a new study, the key could lie in two of the most potent drivers of social bonding known in group psychology—shared ancestry and shared transformative experiences—albeit shared not only on the level of the tribe, the nation, or the religious community, but with humanity at large.

First author Lukas Reinhardt (Leader of the Global Cohesion Lab at the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion [CSSC], University of Oxford) said, "Us-vs-them thinking is on the rise in many places all over the world, exacerbating conflicts and complicating finding solutions for pressing global problems. Our research, however, suggests that it is possible to foster a shared global identity which could facilitate cooperation on the global level. The practical implications of our findings for policymakers, NGOs, politicians, and activists are wide-ranging."

In two studies involving more than a thousand US participants in total, the researchers investigated whether shared biology and shared experiences with people across the world can foster bonding with

humanity at large and motivate prosocial action on a global scale.

To explore whether appeals to our globally shared biology can affect bonding with humanity at large, the study participants watched [a TED Talk delivered by journalist A. J. Jacobs](#) explaining how all humans share a common ancestry, portraying us as one large human family.

Those who watched the video expressed significantly stronger psychological bonds with humanity at large compared with a [control group](#) whose attitudes were measured before rather than after they had watched the video. Furthermore, participants who watched the video felt stronger [social bonds](#) with individuals supporting an opposing political party, compared with the control group.

To investigate whether globally shared experiences can strengthen social bonds on a global scale, the study focused on the common experience of motherhood. The researchers recruited a sample of mothers and showed that mothers felt stronger bonds with other women from all over the world if they shared motherhood experiences with them.

In each case, the strength of social bonds was measured using a series of images of two overlapping circles—one representing the participant and the other one a group, e.g. humanity at large or the group of all the world's mothers. The images differed in the degree of overlap between the two circles. Participants had to choose the image that best represented their relationship with the group, with the images that had the greatest amount of overlap representing the strongest social bonds with the group.

In both studies, the reported psychological bonding on a global scale was strongly reflected in measures of prosocial action. To assess this, the researchers used a measure from [behavioral economics](#), where participants had to indicate how they would split an amount of money

between members of two different groups in hypothetical scenarios. This measure is used as a practical and cost-efficient tool in experiments to shed light on how strongly participants care about different groups and has been shown to predict real-stakes behavior very accurately.

Professor Harvey Whitehouse (Director of the CSSC, University of Oxford), who co-authored the study, said, "At the CSSC we have been studying for years these two pathways to strong forms of group cohesion—based on shared biology and shared experiences—but this is the first time we have shown that we can create powerful bonds uniting all of humanity. If we can do this in a simple experiment, we can develop far more powerful methods of motivating action on global problems in the future."

He added, "Remembering that we are all related and all experience many of the same challenges in life could be the key to addressing a wide range of global problems, from intergroup conflicts to extreme poverty and the climate crisis."

More information: Why Care for Humanity?, *Royal Society Open Science* (2024). DOI: [10.1098/rsos.231632](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.231632).
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