

Title: Following the crowd can lead people who learn only from their own experience to agree with a mistaken majority

Abstract: People sometimes agree with the beliefs of the majority even when the majority is wrong. This has been attributed to social learning or motivated cognition: people would believe that the majority is likely to be correct because it is more numerous or they would adjust their beliefs to conform to the prevailing norm. In this paper, we propose a novel explanation for the evaluative advantage of popular alternatives. Our explanation does not rely on social learning nor motivated cognition. It emphasizes instead the role of the information sample people use to form their beliefs about the alternatives. We start by noting that people often 'follow the crowd': people are often more likely to sample popular alternatives than unpopular alternatives. The main contribution of this paper is to show that this sampling asymmetry in favor of popular alternatives is sufficient to explain why popular alternatives tend to be evaluated more positively than unpopular alternatives. Our theory provides a novel, sampling-based, explanation of how public conformity in behavior can lead to private acceptance. As such, it casts a new perspective on phenomena such as majority influence, minority influence, coordination problems, group decision-making, attitude polarization through identity signaling and the persistence of undesirable macro-outcomes.