5.1
What Is Group Psychology?
Adaptations for Mapping Shared Intentional Stances

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Collections of people can do things that collections of most other things cannot. They can join together and coordinate their actions against the interests of others, come to each other’s aid, work together to extract benefits that would otherwise be inaccessible, and create benefits that would otherwise not exist. This makes collections of people incredibly powerful and incredibly unique. Furthermore, unique dynamics emerge when more than two people interact over time which are not readily reducible to the dyadic level (Harcourt, 1988). For example, the status between people can change even if they do not directly interact. If you and I are allies, and X hurts me, then your relationship with respect to X changes even though you and X did not interact at all.

In order for you and I (and X) to anticipate and reason about these changes, sophisticated and selective inferences are necessary. To the extent that unique dynamics and properties characterize multiperson coordination and cooperation, the mind must contain psychological structures built around and for such dynamics. These can be referred to as coalitional psychology.

The function of coalitional psychology is to (1) infer the actual and potential alliance relationships between people, (2) generate expectations of how those individuals are likely to act and react, and (3) initiate and engage in these alliance relationships. Accomplishing these tasks in an ecologically valid context requires cue-based structures for detecting coalitional affiliation as well as coalitional inference, expectation, and motivational systems. These systems embody the deep structure or “social grammar” of multi-person cooperation dynamics (such as the indirect consequences described in the example above) and operate by tracking and modifying the intentional stances of others. In this framework, intentional stances can be thought of as how much a particular agent values another agent and are factored into expectations of who will come to whose aid, who will take whose side in a conflict, who will help whom, and so on.

The central premise of this chapter is that many “group” phenomena—race, lexically marked ethnic kinds, minimal groups—can be understood as the output of this coalitional psychology. Recent findings in multiple labs are converging on this idea, and the remainder of this chapter will survey these findings. These results suggest that thinking about the basic functions of psychological structures—such as the functions of coalitional psychology—offers new ways to look at old problems and clear directions for future research.

FUNCTION 1: INFER THE ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL ALLIANCE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLE

Visual Markers
For decades, one of the most robust findings in adult social psychology had been the primacy of race as a dimension of person perception—that people immediately notice, encode, and store in memory the race of the people that they encounter. Years of research on implicit racial categorization suggested that race is a pre-primed, context-insensitive, and experimentally immutable social category. But, in fact, a growing number of studies now demonstrate that race is neither a primary dimension of person perception, nor is it immutable, but is instead a readily modifiable consequence of cognitive structures designed to keep track of social alliances (an experimental validation of the idea that racial features are otherwise arbitrary dimensions that gain their
meaning through social dynamics; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, 2012).

Tracking alliances requires psychological structures which monitor for actual events of coordination, cooperation, and competition, and keep track of who is doing what to whom. It also requires tracking anything that might predict these kinds of relationships ahead of time. This may include many different things (including shared knowledge, differential proximity, and so on), but would also include any otherwise arbitrary feature of the world that tends to co-occur with coalitional behaviors. Coalitional psychology would pick up on these features and treat them as probabilistic cues for coalitional expectations (e.g., shared intentional stances).

In the case of race, in a world in which certain physical features are correlated with affiliation patterns, coalitional psychology will pick up on those physical features and use them to generate expectations about how people are likely to get along. However, coalitional alliances are also dynamic (I may be on X’s team today but on your team tomorrow). This means that coalitional psychology must not only attend to newly diagnostic cues but also abandon the use of previously diagnostic cues. If categorization by race is in fact a consequence of this coalition tracking, then this predicts that a context in which race is no longer coalitionally predictive should reduce categorization by race.

This is precisely what has been found, both in antagonistic contexts in which race is not predictive of who has an antagonistic stance toward whom (Kurzban, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2001) and also in cooperative contexts in which race is not predictive of who cooperates with whom (Pietraszewski, 2009; Pietraszewski, Cosmides, & Tooby, under review). This exact experimental manipulation has little to no impact on participants’ categorization by sex, meaning that these results cannot be driven by limited attentional resources. That information about who is on whose side reduces categorization by race suggests that race is a consequence of coalitional psychology, and that sex is not. That race—a previously diagnostic coalitional cue—is so quickly abandoned for more diagnostic cues suggests that coalitional psychology is constantly searching for socially predictive cues.

Recent developmental evidence provides converging support of this account (e.g., Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Rhodes, this volume). The Bigler studies are particularly powerful because they demonstrate what happens to arbitrary visual similarities when they become associated with coalitional cues in a real-world situation. In an experimental condition, teachers gave elementary school students two different shirt colors to wear in class for 4 weeks. Teachers used the shirt colors as much as possible in social interactions: in seating arrangements and class decorations, in addressing students, when granting permission, and so on. In a control condition, teachers interacted with the students without regard to shirt color. Perceptions of in- and out-group variability, peer preferences, and actual helping behavior all demonstrated the engagement of coalitional psychology in the experimental condition, but not in the control: Children framed the context in terms of an in-group and out-group, saw less variability within each group, and were biased toward their own group. Moreover, in a second experimental condition shirt color was assigned based on a permanent biological trait: hair color. There were no differences between the two experimental conditions; that one dimension of similarity was initially random whereas one was based on a biological trait did not matter. What causes a particular shared dimension to engage coalitional psychology is how it is used socially, not whether it is permanent or biological.

There is also an elegant demonstration of this last point in adults. Using the same implicit measures of social categorization used to study race, Sack (2005) presented all participants with the same set of visual stimuli—some people who had very obvious wine-stain birthmarks on their faces and some who did not. The explanation of the marks was manipulated between subjects. Some were told that these were biological genetic mutations, whereas others were told that they were volitionally acquired when joining a group. In the biological condition there was no implicit categorization by mark, but in the social group condition there was strong categorization.

Taken as a whole, these studies in both children and adults suggest (1) that certain preexisting visually marked categories like race behave as if they are instances of coalitional representations; (2) novel visual dimensions will be treated as markers of coalition membership, but only if they correlate with alliance patterns; and (3) visual salience and biological permanence are not sufficient to engage coalitional psychology.

**Lexical Markers**

Linguistic communication sets up an opportunity to communicate and learn about coalitional events or structures in the absence of direct experience. Therefore, when someone refers to a collection
of people with a label, one possible inference is that this label refers to a coalitional unit. This means that a lexical label applied to a person or collection of people should be considered a candidate for marking a coalitional group, or more precisely, should probabilistically engage coalitional inferences and expectations. Recently, Baron and colleagues (Baron, Dunham, Banaji, & Carey, in press) have demonstrated that applying a lexical label in this way engages coalitional inferences in preschoolers and adults.

Of course, coalitions are not the only type of human "kinds," and therefore not every lexical marker applied to a collection of individuals will refer to a coalitional unit. Language or residency groups, for instance, seem to have their own set of associations and expectations (Hirschfeld and Gelman, 1997) and accents in particular have been hypothesized and shown to be distinct from coalitional psychology (Pietraszewski & Schwartz, 2006; Pietraszewski & Schwartz, under review). While these other "kinds" are not treated as coalitions, this does not preclude the possibility that these "kinds" could evoke certain default coalitional expectations under the right circumstances.

Shared Opinions as Coordination Signals
Coordination is a prerequisite for cooperation. If two people are allied with one another, or have overlapping interests, they are likely to assess a situation in a similar way. This relationship between shared assessment and cooperation out in the world can lead to cognitive structures that treat these assessments as intrinsic cues of intentional stance and therefore coalitional affiliation. In fact, recent evidence (Pietraszewski, Curry, Bang-Peterson, Cosmides, & Tooby, under review) suggests that shared political opinions are sufficient to engage coalitional psychology in adults.

FUNCTION 2: GENERATE EXPECTATIONS OF HOW INDIVIDUALS ARE LIKELY TO ACT AND REACT
Maintaining an up-to-date representation of the social world and predicting the outcome of future interactions requires the deployment of inferences and expectations once coalitional cues have been detected. These modify intentional stance representations according to the social grammar of coalitional dynamics. What these inferences are, how they are deployed in response to coalitional cues, and how they form coherent and selective expectations is still largely unexplored. However, a few preliminary investigations have been done.

Pietraszewski and German (2013) examined the inferences responsible for anticipating how people will react to events in which they are not involved. These should be highly sensitive to coalitional relationship status and should selectively modify intentional stances, but not other states. Preschoolers and adults were shown a conflict between two characters and were then asked to indicate who would be angry in response to the conflict, including uninvolved characters. All participants expected this intentional stance to extend to the uninvolved allies of the characters, but not to their acquaintances. In a control condition involving spinning on playground equipment, participants were asked to indicate who would be dizzy. Participants did not extend this (nonintentional) internal state to any of the uninvolved characters; neither to the allies nor to the acquaintances. This suggests that these inferences selectively extend intentional stances and therefore cannot be as simple as "if A and B are allies, A and B will always feel the same thing." Baron and colleagues (in press) have demonstrated a similar finding. In response to a lexically marked collection of agents, children will extend an expectation of mean behavior to other agents who also share that label, but they will not extend other behaviors such as eating versus not eating. While preliminary, these studies demonstrate that coalitional cues selectively modify intentional stance expectations in ways consistent with coalitional dynamics.

FUNCTION 3: INITIATE AND ENGAGE IN ALLIANCE RELATIONSHIPS
Decades of research demonstrate that intergroup biases form over arbitrary similarities and differences (the minimal group paradigm and its variants). In fact, randomly drawing numbers from a jar is sufficient to induce these effects (Locksley, Ortiz, & Hepburn, 1980). Given that arbitrary differences are not sufficient to engage coalition tracking, why are people using arbitrary differences as a reason for being biased?

This is an instance where being clear about function is critical. Human beings make their living by cooperating, not by watching others cooperate. Initiating and engaging in cooperative relationships require fundamentally different motivational and behavioral repertoires than does keeping track of them. In the real world, mutually represented shared properties are a substrate
over which actual cooperative relationships can be formed. Coalitional psychology should therefore frame arbitrary similarities as an opportunity to establish a cooperative relationship. This will require signaling interest in a cooperative relationship and probing for the receptivity to this in others. This can be accomplished through motivational and valuation structures which direct the differential allocation of resources along that shared dimension and by inducing and signaling positive regard for those who are similar along that dimension.

Historically, group psychology grew out a framework which supposed that groups are formed around the rational assessment of conflicts of interest. Minimal group results were so devoid of apparent logic in this respect that they entirely changed the study of group psychology. Theoretical accounts arose which posited that shared identities are intrinsically valued in and of themselves in order to explain these effects (social identity theory: Tajfel & Turner, 1986; self-categorization theory: Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). More recent studies from Yamagishi and others (e.g., Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999) demonstrate that minimal group biases are instead yoked to the expectation of future reciprocation. Things that might disrupt this possibility—such as expecting your allocation to come from someone other than a minimal in-group member—cause minimal group effects to go away.

There is ongoing debate about whether the intrinsic value of social identities versus expected payoffs are truly driving these effects. But this debate is unnecessary—both can be true. That minimal group effects represent the output of a psychology whose function is to initiate and engage in cooperative alliances provides a coherent account of why otherwise arbitrary similarities are assigned a positive valuation and why any resource allocation in such a context is yoked to an expectation of future returns.

Finally, this view—that the mind is designed to expend effort and upfront cost to look for and signal coordination—suggests a broader approach to the psychology underlying minimal groups. Initiating coalitional alliances along particular dimensions in the real world requires sifting the social world for dimensions along which you and your social interests will do well. This "constructive" first-person aspect of coalitional psychology is probably one of the most important and yet least studied aspects of social cognition.

CONCLUSION

Many important phenomena in social and developmental psychology can be understood as manifestations of a common set of cognitive structures: a coalitional psychology. The functions of this coalition psychology is to (1) infer the actual and potential alliance relationships between people, (2) generate expectations of how those individuals are likely to act and react, and (3) initiate and engage in these alliance relationships. How these basic functions are carried out is still largely unknown. However, recent breakthroughs in studies of children and adults are offering the first glimpses of a structure and logic that promises to be a sophisticated and complicated—but also succinct and complete—model of human group psychology.

REFERENCES


