

Are You in Sync?

What do marching bands, religious chanting, reciting the pledge of allegiance, singing in unison, and rock concert mosh pits have in common? A recent study from Stanford suggests such synchronizing activities facilitate bonding and mutual support among the participants.

The researchers actually conducted three studies. First, a guide led groups of three people on tours of campus. Some of the groups were asked to walk in step with each other as they went along. Later all the groups participated in a number guessing game which involved second guessing the numbers picked by the other members of the group so that the group's payoff (in cash) would be high. Group members were also asked questions about their connectedness to their group and how much they trusted other members in their group. Those groups who had walked in step on their tours were better at clustering their numbers and earning higher pay-offs on the number guessing game than groups who had not walked in step. They also reported greater feelings of connectedness and trust with their group than did the other groups.

The second study involved groups of three listening to the Canadian National Anthem (none of the subjects were Canadian) on headphones and holding plastic cups. Those who were instructed to sing along with the chorus while moving their plastic cups back and forth in time to the music later scored higher on the number guessing game and reported higher levels of trust and connectedness than those who merely listened to the music and held their cups. *They also scored higher than groups who sang and moved their cups out of sync with the rest of their group.*

The last study repeated the music and cups exercise and then asked groups to play a game in which they could earn money and contribute it to a common fund for the group or keep the cash for themselves. The groups that sang and moved their cups in unison later contributed more to the group fund and kept less cash for themselves than did the non-sync groups.

So what do these simple experiments with college students tell us about the human condition? First, they add to a growing body of research revealing how much human beings are tuned in to the actions of others around them. Second, they offer insight into why people engage in synchronous activity, whether it be dancing and singing or marching. By the way, the synchronized groups did not report feeling any happier than the other groups after the experiments. Singing together or moving in step is not simply a feel-good exercise. Soldiers marching into battle are not doing so out of sheer joy; nor are Christians when they say the Lord's Prayer in unison. Such synchronous activity is more likely creating a bond among the participants that facilitates cooperation and even sacrifice. When acting in unison we are thinking collectively and not individually. This sense of unity may explain why some groups of people reunite from time to time even

after long separations. It may also help explain why those of us in step with our peers are wary of people who seem “out of step” or who “march to the beat of a different drummer.” But that is conjecture for further research.

Wiltermuth S. S. & Heath C. 2009. Synchrony and cooperation. *Psychological Science*, Vol. 20, Pp. 1- 5.