

Social Influence and Drift in Collective Behavior

Human decision models often begin with individual, cost-benefit analyses as the basic behavior, with any social influence as a secondary add-on. This appears to underestimate social influence among humans, whose brains have actually evolved to handle social relations. In fact, a better starting point in many cases may be to assume that people base their choices (consciously or not) primarily on the decisions of those around them. As captured by experiments and simple evolutionary drift models, undirected social influence introduces an irrationality and unpredictability to collective behavior, with wide implications for studies of popular culture and economics.