

Seeing really is believing

February 1 2012

(Medical Xpress) -- Want to know why sports fans get so worked up when they think the referee has wrongly called their team's pass forward, their player offside, or their serve as a fault?

Research from The University of Queensland's School of Psychology and the Queensland Brain Institute found people actually see their team's actions in a different way than they see those of other teams.

The study, which was published in the journal [Human Brain Mapping](#), randomly divided [volunteers](#) into blue and red teams and let them judge the relative speeds of hand actions performed by the team they support, and their [opponents](#), in a competitive situation.

Lead [researcher](#) Dr Pascal Molenberghs said results showed the brain responded differently when people saw actions of their team members compared to the opposing side, but that this was not as simple as a [bias](#) in opinion.

“Our study found that people quickly identified with their group and that they consistently judged their own team's actions as being a fraction of a second faster than those of non-team members, when in reality the actions were identical,” Dr Molenberghs said.

The research team, which also included PhD candidate Veronika Halász, Professor Jason Mattingley, Dr Eric Vanman and Associate Professor Ross Cunnington, then used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to assess each participant's brain activity during the

experiments.

“We explored two possible explanations for the bias: either people actually see their team's actions differently, or people see the actions as the same but make a conscious decision that their own team was faster,” he said.

“We found that the people who showed a bias in favour of their own team had a different brain response when they were watching the actions of team members compared to the actions of non-team members.

“But crucially, we found no difference in brain response during the conscious decision making part of the experiments.

“What this suggests is that we unconsciously perceive the actions of teams we are affiliated with differently than those performed by other teams.

“So contrary to common belief, people seem to be unaware that they are biased towards their own team.

“It's not simply that we decide to favour the actions of our team because we think they are the best. Rather, because we feel an affiliation with the team, our brain processes the actions of own team members more favourably.

“So next time you think an umpire has made an unfair call against your team, bear in mind that your team allegiance could be affecting the way your [brain](#) is processing what you saw.”

Dr Molenberghs said the results had broader implications.

“Our findings could help explain discrimination between all kinds of groups - including those of race, gender and nationality - because our

study suggests that we see the [actions](#) of non-group members differently and what we see is what we believe.”

Dr Molenberghs plans to build on the findings by conducting similar experiments with members of real teams to see how this affects the outcomes.

More information on the study is available [here](#).

Provided by University of Queensland

Citation: Seeing really is believing (2012, February 1) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-believing.html>

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