

Indo-Asian News Service

January 16, 2009 Friday 6:02 PM EST

RESEARCHERS EXPLAIN WHY HERD MENTALITY GOVERNS MOST OF US

BYLINE: Muhammad Najeeb Report from Indo-Asian News Service brought to you by HT Syndication.

LENGTH: 269 words

DATELINE: Washington

Washington, Jan. 16 -- (IANS) Social conformity or the tendency to follow the crowd tends to originate in the brain, according to the latest findings.

A new study provides intriguing insight into how the herd mentality can be guided by the perceived behaviour of others.

Many studies have borne out the profound effect of group opinion on individual judgments. We look to the behaviour and judgement of others for information about what will be considered expected and acceptable behaviour.

"We often change our decisions and judgements to conform with normative group behaviour," said study co-author Vasily Klucharev from the FC Donders Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging in The Netherlands. "However, the neural mechanisms of social conformity remain unclear."

Klucharev and colleagues hypothesised that social conformity might be based on reinforcement learning and that a conflict with group opinion could trigger a "prediction error" signal.

A prediction error, first identified in reinforcement learning models, is a difference between expected and obtained outcomes that is thought to signal the need for a behavioural adjustment.

The researchers used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine brain activity in subjects whose initial judgements of facial attractiveness were open to influence by group opinion, said a Donders release.

"The present study explains why we often automatically adjust our opinion in line with the majority opinion," said Klucharev.

The research was published in Thursday's edition of Neuron.