Behavioural and neuronal insights into multisensory combination of unpracticed cues.

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Abstract

Effective decision-making requires integrating multiple information sources, weighted by their reliability and context. While classic studies show near-optimal cue combination with well-learned signals and extensive feedback, everyday choices often rely on unfamiliar or cross-modal cues without such training. We examined cue combination under these conditions using an online perceptual estimation task in large and diverse participant cohorts. Participants combined unpracticed cues, including visual motion direction, spatial visual information, and auditory location, with minimal feedback and occasional cue conflict. Integration strategies varied with age and self-reported ADHD or Autism. Visual cues were combined near-optimally, whereas audio-visual combinations exhibited winner-take-all behaviour, typically but not always favouring the more reliable cue. To test the generality of these findings, we used electrical microstimulation in non-human primates, targeting unimodal or cross-modal association areas. Stimulation of visual cortex was integrated with sensory motion cues, while stimulation of prefrontal cortex promoted winner-take-all choices. These findings suggest universal circuit-level distinctions between within- and across-modality integration, with deviations potentially diagnostic for neuropsychiatric conditions.

Keywords: multisensory integration, cue combination, neurodiversity, psychophysics

To navigate a complex and noisy world, humans must combine diverse sources of information. Whether evaluating job offers or estimating the direction of an approaching car, we dynamically integrate cues based on their reliability and contextual relevance. In perceptual decision-making, this process is referred to as cue combination, which is the integration of multiple sensory or feature-based signals into a single perceptual estimate. Cue combination has been a central focus of research on sensory integration and probabilistic inference [1, 2, 3].

Classic studies show that when cues are combined under ideal conditions, typically involving highly familiar signals, extensive training, or frequent feedback, observers often weight them in proportion to their reliability. This strategy produces judgments that approach statistically optimal estimates [4, 5, 2, 6]. However, most natural decisions occur without such extensive calibration. Novel or unfamiliar cues, particularly those from different modalities, are not always combined optimally, especially when feedback or learning is limited [7, 8, 9]. In novel or uncertain situations, observers must rely on internal heuristics about which information sources can be trusted. Despite its ecological relevance, cue combination of unpracticed cues under minimal feedback conditions, especially comparing multisensory and within-modality cues, remains underexplored.

Because cue combination requires flexible information integration and can be measured precisely, it provides a powerful framework for identifying principles that underlie flexible decision-making across species, sensory domains, brain areas, and between neurotypical and atypical individuals [10, 11]. Addressing these questions requires a multidisciplinary approach that spans behavioural, cognitive, clinical, and systems neuroscience.

Here, we combine large-scale behavioural testing in diverse human cohorts with causal manipulations in non-human primates to examine how cue combination strategies emerge across modalities and individuals. Human participants performed an online perceptual estimation task involving combinations of visual and auditory cues, with minimal feedback. This design allowed us to assess integration in a way that approximates naturalistic decision-making. We compared performance across groups defined by age and self-reported neurodevelopmental diagnoses (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, and Autism), revealing consistent differences in cue-weighting strategies [12, 10, 11]. To probe the circuit basis of these differences, we paired visual motion stimuli with an aritificial cue (electrical stimulation in either visual or prefrontal cortex) in non-human primates [13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21]. While stimulation of visual cortex was integrated with motion cues in a graded fashion, stimulation of prefrontal cortex resulted in winner-take-all (WTA) behaviour.

Our findings reveal circuit-level mechanisms underlying differences in cue combination within and across modalities and across groups, suggesting that the structure and function of cortical circuits involved in cue integration play a key role in shaping both behavioural strategies and individual differences in perceptual inference. More broadly, this work illustrates the value of combining large-scale human behavioural data with targeted neural interventions in animal models.

Results

A continuous localization task to estimate multisensory perception in a diverse set of participants

We recruited a diverse set of human participants via an online platform (Prolific; Fig. 1A). Our participants consisted of 167 English-speaking participants (77 female, 80 male, 7 non-binary/gender queer, 3 transgender women) from around the world. Participants self-reported membership in one of four groups: 43 neurotypical younger adults (age range 18–35; mean age = 25), 43 neurotypical older adults (age range = 60–100; mean age = 64), 44 younger adults with ADHD (age range = 18–30; mean age = 25), and 37 younger adults with ASD (age range = 18–30; mean age = 26). All participants reported normal vision and hearing, and we verified headphone use during the task.

We designed a continuous estimation task to measure participants' perceptual and cue combination abilities. Participants reported, with a mouse click on the rim of a circle, the angle indicated by one or more visual or auditory cues (Fig. 1B). The visual cues were a random dot motion cue (M), in which a proportion of dots in the circle move coherently in one direction [22, 23] and a spatial cue (S), in which the dot locations were picked from a two-dimensional Gaussian whose center was at one angle around the circle. The auditory cue (A) was a simple tone whose pan and pitch indicated the angle. Each block of trials involved one or more cues, the order of the blocks was randomized across participants, and the difficulty of the trials was identical for all participants. Participants received no feedback during the experiment except for a short tutorial preceding the single-cue conditions. The stimuli could indicate any angle around the circle, and when more than one cue was present, all cues indicated the same angle.

This continuous estimation design provides two advantages. First, it offers sufficient statistical power to estimate participants' single-cue performance and relate it to their multi-cue performance using a feasible number of trials. Participants typically clicked near the correct location, with modest error and little bias (Fig. 2A, B). Performance was generally better on multi-cue than on single-cue trials, as reflected in narrower response distributions (compare the width of the histograms in Fig. 2A for an example group). We quantified performance in each condition as the standard deviation of responses aligned to the correct location (e.g. standard deviation of the distributions in Fig. 2A), denoted σ.

Second, the task allows direct comparison of cue combination performance across different models. If participants used a winner-take-all (WTA) strategy, selecting the cue they used most precisely in single-cue trials, their standard deviation in multi-cue trials would be:

WTA:

$$\sigma_{combined} = \sigma_{Cue*} \tag{1}$$

Alternatively, if participants combined cues according to a Bayesian optimal (OPT) strategy, weighting each cue by its reliability, the standard deviation in multi-cue trials would be:

OPT:

$$\sigma_{combined} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{\frac{1}{\sigma^2_{Cue_1}} + \frac{1}{\sigma^2_{Cue_2}}}} \tag{2}$$

Performance on single-cue trials varied by cue and group

Participants' ability to use individual cues differed both across cues and participant groups (Fig. 3A). Although there was substantial variability across individuals, consistent patterns emerged when comparing visual motion, spatial, and auditory cues among younger and older neurotypical adults and younger adults with self-reported ADHD or ASD. There was substantial interaction between cue and group (two-way mixed ANOVA; $F(15, 815) = 3.22$, $p<0.001$), indicating that each group showed distinct sensitivities to different cues. In contrast, there was no overall effect of group [$F(3, 163) = 1.62$, $p = 0.18$], suggesting that these differences reflected selective strengths rather than general performance deficits.

Across all participants, performance differed significantly by cue ($F(5, 815)= 67.10$, $p<0.001$), but the specific pattern of strengths varied by group. Older adults performed more accurately on auditory than on motion trials [($t(42) = 2.99$, $p<0.01$)], while younger adults with ASD performed better on motion than auditory trials [$t(36) = 2.21$, ($p=0.03$)]). There were no significant differences between participants with ADHD and age-matched neurotypical adults (Fig. 3A).

Together, these results show that sensitivity to single cues depends on both the cue and participant group. Importantly, these baseline differences underscore the need to interpret cue combination behaviour relative to each individual's performance on single-cue trials. This consideration guided our subsequent analyses.

Optimal integration for within-modality cues, but not for cross-modality cues

Participants combined information from multiple cues more effectively than from any single cue, as reflected by smaller response variability on multi-cue trials 3A, B), consistent with previous reports [4, 5, 13, 7, 24]. To determine how participants combined information from multiple cues, we compared their performance to the predictions of two models: a winner-take-all (WTA) model, in which decisions are based solely on the most reliable cue, and a Bayesian Optimal (OPT) model, in which cues are weighted according to their reliability.

A clear pattern emerged. When combining two visual cues (motion and spatial), participants' performance closely matched the optimal prediction. Their variability was significantly lower than predicted by the winner-take-all model, but not significantly different from the prediction of the optimal model. Fig. 4A, right). In contrast, when combining visual and auditory cues, performance was statistically indistinguishable from the WTA prediction (Fig. 4A, left and middle).

This distinction between within- and across-modality cue combination is broadly consistent with neurophysiological and psychophysical observations. Visual cues are often combined within the visual system itself [25], and this combination occurs even

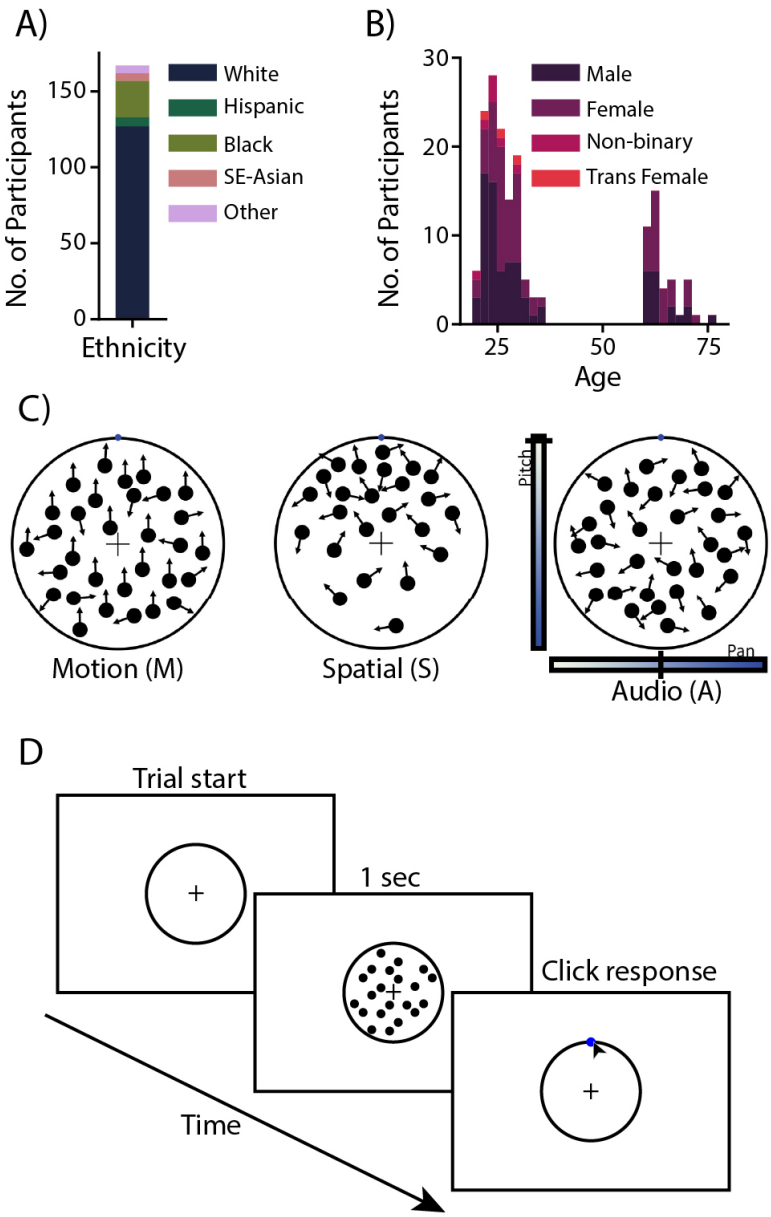

Fig. 1 Human participants and task. A) Self-reported ethnicity of all 167 human participants. B) Self-reported gender and age of participants. Younger adults (restricted to ages 18-35) self-identified as having been diagnosed with ADHD, ASD, or neither. Older adults (restricted to ages 60+) self reported as not having been diagnosed with either ADHD or ASD. C) Experimental conditions. Each trial included one or two directional cues: the direction of motion of random dots (M), the spatial density of those dots (S), or an auditory cue whose pitch and pan indicated a direction (A). D) Schematic of an example trial. The trial began when a participant clicked on the central cross. Then the stimulus was displayed for 1 second, and the participant indicated a directional judgment by clicking the appropriate point on a target ring (blue point in this example was not shown).

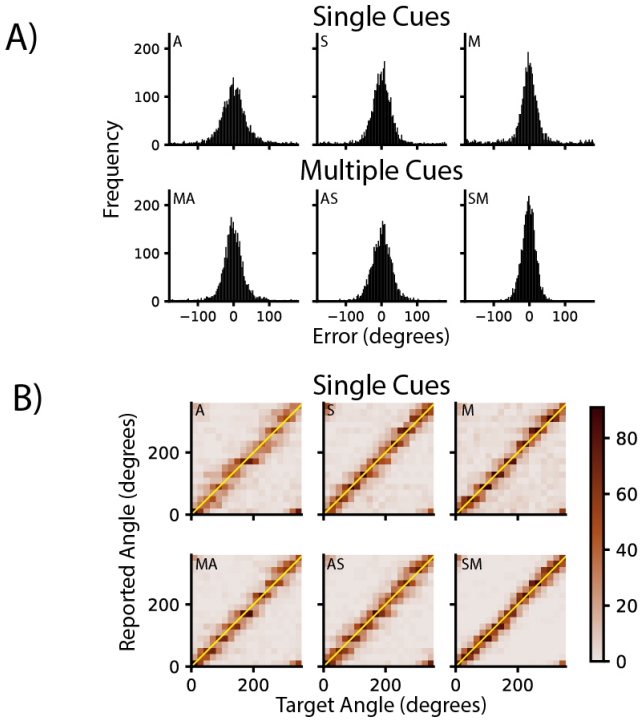

Fig. 2 Choice patterns demonstrate that this example group of participants understood the cue combination and continuous nature of this task. A) Histograms, from the younger adult, non-ADHD, non-ASD group, of chosen direction relative to the actual direction for single-cue conditions (top row; M=otion, A=auditory; S=spatial) and trials containing two cues (bottom row; MA=motion-auditory, AS=auditory-spatial, and SM=spatial-motion). In general, multi-cue trials yield tighter distributions of choices, which follows the expectation that cue combination improves accuracy. B) Heatmaps of chosen versus actual direction for the same group and stimulus conditions as (A). Most choies are near the diagonal of these plots, indicating the lack of a prominent bias. The choices are distributed along the full range of choice directions, suggesting that the participant understood the continuous nature of the task. These results are typical of our data set.

in anesthetized animals [26]. Multisensory cue combination, however, likely involves computations in association areas that may require additional processing or effort [27, 28]. These studies show that within-modality cue combination is less demanding in multi-cue learning than multisensory cues, perhaps suggesting differences in how effectively or effortfully those cues are combined.

Across participant groups, cue combination strategies were broadly similar. Averaged across all multi-cue conditions, all four groups showed performance intermediate between the WTA and optimal predictions (Fig. 4B). There was a trend for younger adults with ADHD to combine cues more optimally than their neurotypical peers (Fig. 4B).

Together, these results reveal that near-optimal integration is characteristic of within-modality cues, whereas cross-modality combinations follow a more selective,

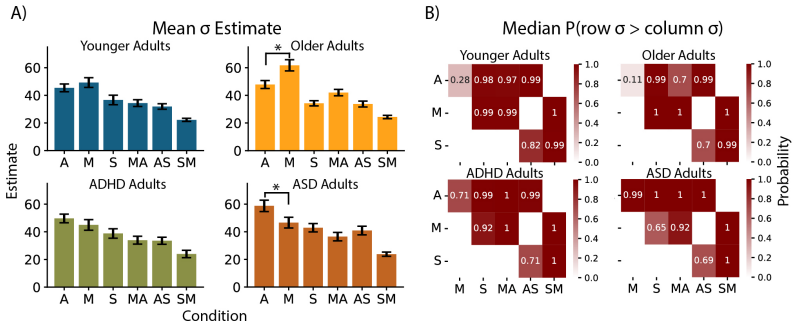

Fig. 3 Participants performed better when they were able to combine information from multiple cues. A) Standard deviation of estimates for each condition (x-axes; A auditory, M motion, S spatial, and combinations of letters indicate multi-cue conditions) and for each group of participants (blue, neurotypical young adults; yellow, neurotypical older adults; brown, young adults with ASD; green, young adults with ADHD). Error bars represent standard error of the mean (SEM). B) Statistical comparisons of performance across each pair of conditions. Dark colors indicate that performance was better for the condition on the azimuth. (Numbers indicate the probability that the condition on the azimuth had better performance.)

winner-take-all pattern. This difference suggests that distinct computations and/or biological substrates support cue combination within and across modalities.

Cue conflict experiments confirm modality-specific cue weighting

The cue combination experiment generated clear predictions about how participants in different groups would weight information from different sensory cues. We tested these predictions in a cue conflict experiment in which the directions indicated by the two cues on multi-cue trials were offset by 15° in opposite directions from the objective angle (Fig.5A). If participants weight cues according to their relative reliability, their average choice (μ) should be shifted toward the cue with the narrower distribution of errors, which for most participants was the spatial (S) cue. In this context, μ, represents the point of subjective equality (PSE) between the actual and chosen angle (Fig. 5B).

Although there was considerable individual variability, participants' PSEs were generally shifted toward the location of the cue on which they performed better on single-cue trials (Fig. 6). We quantified this by comparing the actual PSE (grey triangles in Fig. 6; colored triangles show group means) with the prediction of the Bayesian optimal model (black markers in Fig. 6).

One consistent exception was observed in older adults, who relied more heavily on the auditory cue than on either visual cue (compare the yellow circle to the black marker in (Fig. 6)), even when it was suboptimal to do so. This pattern persisted even among older adults who performed better with motion or spatial cues on single-cue trials (compare the triangles to the black circle in Fig. 6)).

The cue conflict experiments therefore provide convergent evidence for the conclusions from the cue combination experiments. When two cues are placed in conflict, the Bayesian optimal strategy is to respond according to the reliability-weighted average

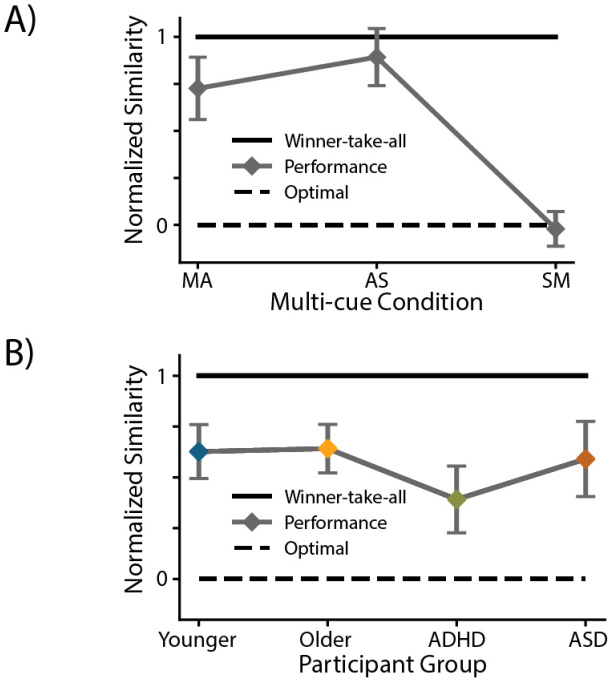

Fig. 4 Cue combination was near optimal for two visual cues but far suboptimal for visual-auditory combinations. A) Across all participants, split by condition, we quantified the similarity between performance on each multi-cue condition and the prediction of the winner-take all (solid line) and Bayesian optimal (dashed line) strategies as the normalized difference between optimal cue combination performance and observed performance in the better of the two single cues and the relevant two cue condition. Error bars represent SEM, and data are averaged across all participants in all groups. Performance on the cross-modal conditions (MA and AS) supports a winner-take-all model: the difference between the winner-take-all prediction and combined condition performance was not significantly different for the MA [($t(166) = 0.82$, $p>0.05$)] and AS [$t(166) = 1.48$, $p>0.05$)] cross-modal conditions. In contrast, performance on those conditions was significantly different from the prediction of the optimal model for the MA [($t(166) = 6.61$, $p<0.001$)] and AS [$t(166) = 10.86$, $p<0.001$)] conditions. Performance on the within modality condition supports a Bayesian optimal model: performance on SM trials was significantly different from the prediction of the winner-take-all model [$t(166) = 1.48$, $p<0.001$)] but was not significantly different from the prediction of the Bayesian optimal model [$t(166) = 0.26$, $p=0.80$)]. (SM) supports Bayesian optimal performance. B) The normalized similarity between the performance of each group of participants and the predictions of the two models, averaged over conditions, was not significantly different across groups ($p>0.05$).

of the two cues, producing a unimodal distribution centered between their directions and with reduced variability relative to single-cue trials. In contrast, a winner-take-all strategy produces unimodal distributions with peaks near the directions indicated by the most reliable cue.

In our task, participants used distinct combination rules for visual–visual and visual–auditory cue pairs. On spatial–motion trials, participants typically produced narrow, unimodal choice distributions centered between the two cues (Fig. 5B). On visual-auditory trials, participants produced broader, often asymmetric distributions

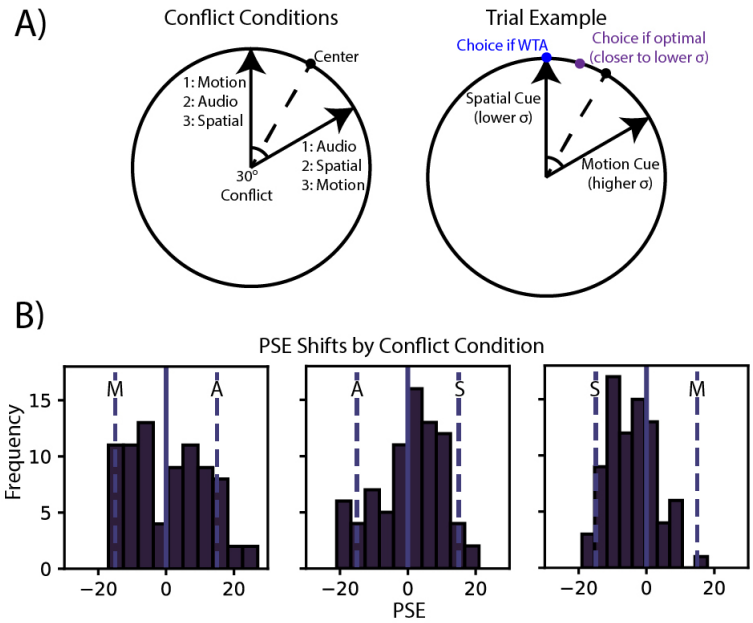

Fig. 5 Task and performance of an example group (younger adults) in our cue conflict experiment. A) Conditions in the cue conflict experiment. Each multi-cue condition included an offset of 30° between the two cues (e.g. in the motion-auditory condition, the motion direction was always 30° counter-clockwise of the direction indicated by the auditory cue). On an example spatial-motion trial (right), the winner-take all model predicts that participants should select the direction of the single cue on which the participant performed best (e.g. spatial in this example; blue dot), while the optimal model predicts an intermediate choice biased toward the direction of the better single cue (purple dot). B) Histograms of the mean PSEs from all participants in the cue conflict experiment. PSEs that are offset from 0 mean that the two cues were weighted unequally. Note the PSEs are biased towards the spatial (more reliable) directions and the least spread in PSEs in the spatial-motion condition.

with means shifted toward the cue on which they were more accurate (Fig. 5B, 6). Together with the cue combination results, these findings support the hypothesis that cues are combined approximately optimally within the visual system, but according to a winner-take-all strategy in the association areas that mediate multisensory integration.

Deviations from the assumption that cue conflict behaviour is related to performance on single-cue conditions

Both the Bayesian optimal and winner-take-all models assume that choices on cue conflict trials are related to participants' performance on single-cue trials. The Bayesian model predicts that choices will be modestly biased toward the more reliable cue, whereas the winner-take-all model predicts a stronger bias toward that cue. Each participant's adherence to these predictions is illustrated in Fig. 6.

For example, participants who were more accurate at estimating auditory than motion stimuli on single-cue trials are represented by upward-pointing arrows on the

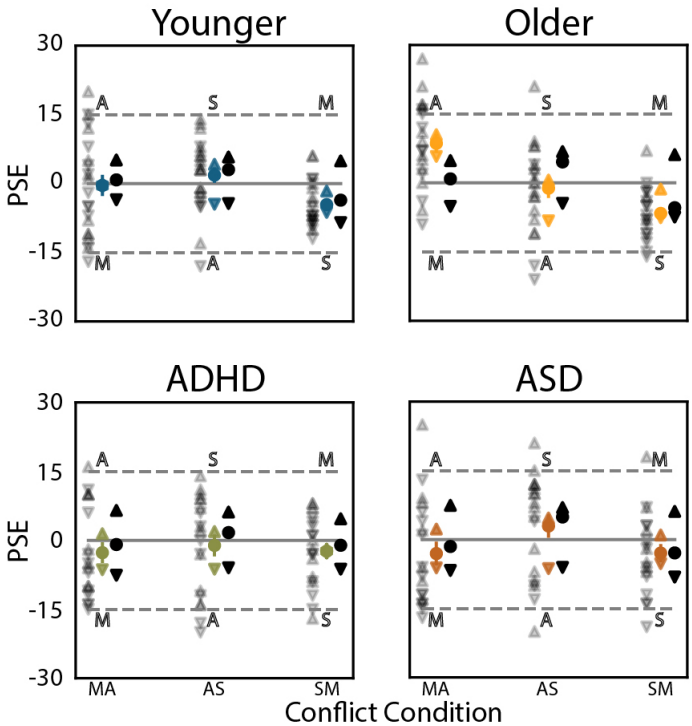

Fig. 6 Points of subjective equality (PSEs) for each group of participants, for each conflict condition. The scattered gray triangles show data for each participant. The up-pointing (down-pointing) triangles represent participants for whom, of the pair of cues involved in the conflict, the cue on the upper (lower) dashed line was better. The solid, colored markers show the means for participants. The solid black markers show the mean predictions according to the optimal model.

left side of each plot. Both the optimal model (black upward triangles) and the winner-take-all model predict that these participants' PSEs should lie above zero, indicating a bias toward the auditory cue. Conversely, participants who performed better on motion than auditory trials are expected to have PSEs below zero, reflecting a bias toward the motion cue.

Most participants' PSEs followed these predictions, but notable deviations emerged. Older adults tended to underweight the motion cue even when their motion performance was superior. Specifically, yellow downward arrows tended to lie above zero for motion–auditory (MA) trials, and upward arrows tended to lie below zero for spatial–motion (SM) trials, contrary to model predictions (black triangles). Substantial variability was also evident across individuals in all four groups.

These findings suggest that future models of cue combination could benefit from incorporating a flexible or partially decoupled relationship between single-cue performance and behavior on multi-cue trials. The divergence between accuracy and weighting in older adults may indicate that multisensory integration involves additional neural processes, such as confidence weighting or effort-related modulation, that are distinct from those governing single-cue performance.

Testing predictions using causal neuronal manipulations

The behavioral findings suggested a circuit-level distinction between the mechanisms that integrate cues within a sensory modality and those that combine cues across modalities. Specifically, our results predicted that visual cortex (where visual cues are thought to be combined) should combine information using a near-optimal weighted average. In contrast, whereas association areas involved in multisensory integration should use a winner-take-all strategy. To test this prediction directly, we turned to a model system in which we could control both the source of information and the site of integration.

We therefore trained two rhesus monkeys (Macaca mulatta, both male, 8 and 10 kg) to perform an eye movement version of the motion estimation task performed by our human participants (Fig. 7A; different aspects of these data have been published previously [29]. While fixating a central point, the monkeys viewed a random dot motion stimulus that could move in any direction and at any coherence level. They reported their perceived motion direction by making an eye movement to a corresponding location on a circular target ring. The amount of fruit juice reward on each trial depended on the accuracy of their estimate (see Methods). The monkeys' choices closely tracked the actual motion direction (Fig. 6B).

While the monkeys performed this task, we recorded from groups of neurons in the middle temporal area (MT), a region critical for motion perception [30, 31, 23], and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC), an association area involved in multisensory integration, decision-making, reward processing, and eye movement planning [32, 33, 34]. As in previous work, [20, 23], we then perturbed activity in these areas using low-current electrical microstimulation (20–40 muA) applied to a single electrode during stimulus presentation on randomly interleaved trials. This approach allowed us to test how information introduced at different cortical levels was combined with visual motion signals during perceptual decisions.

Consistent with the prediction from human psychophysics, visual motion and electrical stimulation of MT were combined in a near-optimal way. As in previous studies [23], microstimulation in MT biased choices toward the preferred direction of the neurons near the stimulated site, producing intermediate estimates between the visual and electrical cues. To test whether this reflected Bayesian optimal weighting, we varied the coherence of the visual motion stimulus, thereby changing its reliability. The Bayesian optimal model predicts that stimulation should have a stronger influence on choices when the visual cue is less reliable. Our MT microstimulation data matched this prediction: the bias toward the stimulated direction was greater when motion coherence was low than when it was high (compare rows in Fig. 8).

In contrast, stimulation of dlPFC produced a pattern consistent with the winner-take-all model that characterized cross-modal cue combination in humans. The model predicts that stimulation of dlPFC should produce bimodal choice distributions, with one mode aligned with the visual motion direction and the other aligned with the preferred direction of the stimulated neurons. Moreover, the proportion of trials in each mode should depend on the relative reliability of each cue. Consistent with this prediction, dlPFC microstimulation produced bimodal choice distributions centered on the visual and electrical cues, and the proportion of stimulation-driven choices

increased when the visual stimulus was less reliable (low coherence) compared with when it was more reliable (high coherence; Fig. 8).

Together, these results provide causal evidence for the circuit-level prediction that visual cortex integrates information according to near-optimal weighting, while association cortex resolves competing inputs through a winner-take-all mechanism.

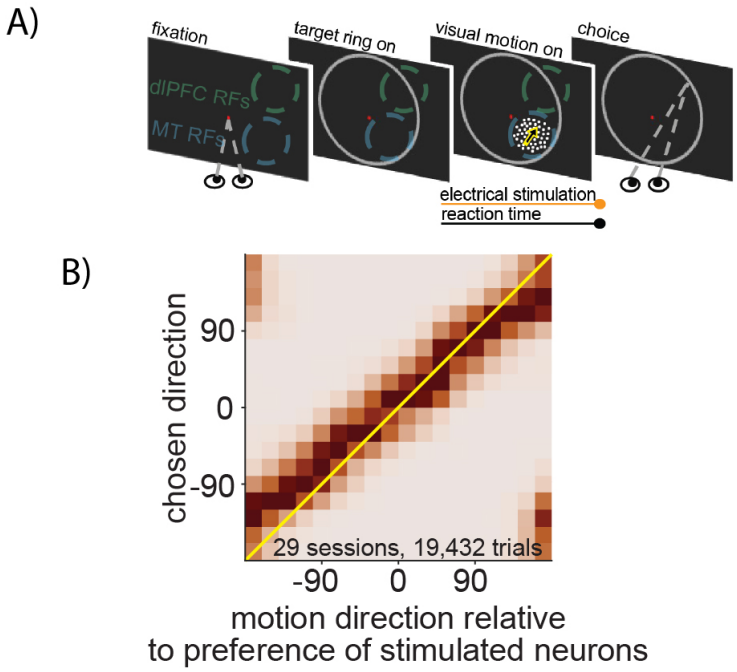

Fig. 7 Causal experiment to compare cue combination within the visual system and in association areas. A) Continuous estimation task for our monkey microstimulation experiment. Monkeys fixated a central spot and viewed a random dot motion stimulus that, like in our human experiments, could move in any direction. Whenever they were ready, the monkeys indicated their choice by looking at a point on the target ring that corresponded to a direction judgment. The dots disappeared at the moment the monkeys initiated the eye movement. The monkeys were rewarded according to the accuracy of their motion direction estimate, which was sometimes scaled according to a rule that is irrelevant for the current study (see Methods). During the experiments, we recorded populations of neurons in MT and dlPFC using multielectrode probes. We placed the dots within the joint spatial receptive fields of the recorded MT neurons and positioned the target ring so that a portion of it overlapped the response fields of the recorded dlPFC neurons. On a randomly selected subset of trials, we electrically microstimulated one electrode at a time in MT or dlPFC during the period that the dots were displayed. B) Composite of behavioural data across 29 sessions from 2 monkeys during non-microstimulation trials. In general, the monkeys achieved high accuracy and their choices varied smoothly with the motion direction.

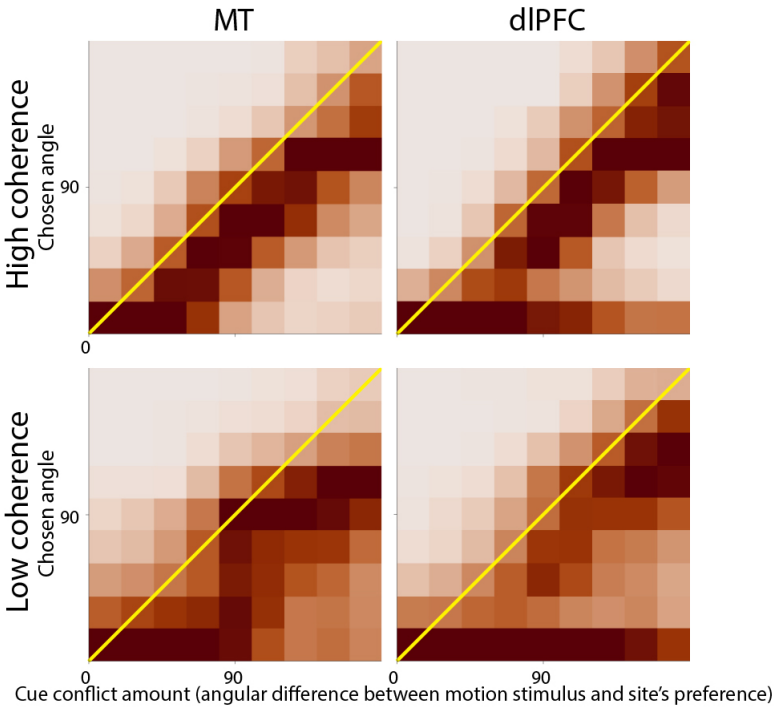

Fig. 8 Causal evidence that cue combination within the visual system (e.g. area MT) is approximately Bayesian optimal while in association areas (e.g. dlPFC) obeys a winner-take-all rule. The heat maps depict choices from trials where we stimulated area MT(left) or dlPFC(right), when the visual stimulus had high (top) or low (bottom) coherence. MT microstimulation biased choices toward the preferred direction of the stimulated neurons while dlPFC stimulation produced bimodal choices that were directed either to the preference of the stimulated neurons or to the mean choice during non-stimulation trials (horizontal bands). Decreasing the coherence increased the bias on MT microstimulation trials and increased the proportion of choices toward the preference of the stimulated neurons, but did not change the unimodal or bimodal nature of the distributions.

Discussion

We combined behavioural, physiological, and causal approaches across species, sensory modalities, ages, and diagnoses to investigate the neuronal computations that underlie decisions based on multiple sources of information. Together, these results show that the mechanisms supporting cue combination depend on whether information is integrated within a single sensory system or across modalities, and that these mechanisms vary across individuals, particularly with age and neurodevelopmental diagnosis. This work demonstrates how large-scale online psychophysics can be used to generate and test specific hypotheses about neuronal computation, which can then be evaluated using causal manipulations in animal models.

Complementary benefits of laboratory neurophysiological studies and online psychophysics experiments

Our approach integrated neurophysiological recordings and perturbations in monkeys with online psychophysical testing in humans, two methodologies that offer complementary strengths. Neurophysiological experiments provide exceptional control over behaviour and the ability to record and manipulate neuronal activity. These experiments have revealed that single neurons can combine multiple sources of information in a way that reflects the reliability of each cue, suggesting a plausible substrate for cue combination [13]. However, these studies are necessarily limited in the number of subjects and therefore cannot easily address questions about age, diagnosis, or individual variability.

Online psychophysics provides the opposite advantage. By recruiting large, diverse cohorts of human participants, it is possible to examine variability across individuals and groups at an unprecedented scale. Although online testing has less experimental control than laboratory studies—for example, participants self-report demographic information and eye position cannot be tracked—the behaviour we observed was lawful and internally consistent. Group-level differences were clear, and the correspondence between the cue combination and cue conflict experiments confirmed that high-quality data can be collected online.

In our study, the human results generated a neural hypothesis that we were able to test directly in monkeys. The convergence between these two approaches illustrates how controlled animal neurophysiology and large-scale human psychophysics can be used together to identify general computational principles of perception.

Age-related differences in multisensory cue combination

We found consistent differences between how older and younger adults used and combined cues to guide decisions. Unlike younger adults, older adults performed better on auditory than motion trials (Fig. 3A) and tended to over-rely on auditory cues during combined motion–auditory trials. Even older adults who performed better on motion than auditory cues alone gave disproportionate weight to auditory information in the cue conflict experiment (Fig. 6), a pattern not observed in younger adults.

Several age-related changes in perception and cognition may contribute to this suboptimal cue combination. Older adults often experience declines in the reliability of sensory inputs, such as reduced visual acuity and auditory sensitivity, leading to noisier perceptual representations [35]. Both younger and older adults can benefit from multisensory integration in simple detection or visuo-haptic tasks [36, 37, 38], although in some contexts, older adults show diminished multisensory benefits ([39, 40]. Increased susceptibility to multisensory illusions, such as the McGurk effect, also suggests that older adults may have greater difficulty estimating the reliability of conflicting cues [41]. In contrast, younger adults with ASD are sometimes less susceptible to multisensory illusions [42, 11, 43], potentially reflecting reduced integration of conflicting information [44].

Age-related declines in attentional control may also affect cue weighting by making it more difficult to flexibly allocate attention across modalities[35]. These results

highlight that changes in multisensory integration across the lifespan may reflect both sensory degradation and alterations in cognitive control processes.

Role of expertise in multi-sensory cue combination

Studies of multisensory integration have produced heterogeneous results. Some report near-optimal integration, others find suboptimal or winner-take-all strategies, and many show that performance depends on participants' experience and task conditions [4, 5, 13, 7, 24]. One consistent observation is that when cues from different modalities are well-practiced, integration tends to approach optimality. For example, participants can combine auditory and visual cues to localize sound sources nearly optimally [5], an ability that is especially refined in predators that must rapidly identify prey [45]. Similarly, our well-trained monkeys integrated visual motion and reward information efficiently (Fig. 7, see [29]). In contrast, when cues do not typically co-occur or are novel to the participant, as in our visual–auditory paradigm, combination tends to be suboptimal.

These observations suggest that multisensory integration requires effort, training, and cognitive engagement that are distinct from the processes underlying the combination of cues within a single sensory modality. Within the visual system, neurons readily combine multiple visual features, often through mechanisms such as divisive normalization [46, 47], even in anesthetized animals [26, 48, 49]. In contrast, multisensory integration depends on higher-order association areas such as the prefrontal cortex [50, 51, 28], which show minimal activity under anesthesia and are strongly modulated by motivation, learning, and attention [52]

Our neuronal perturbation experiments support this distinction. When monkeys combined visual motion with microstimulation in MT, a visual cortical area, they integrated the two signals nearly optimally. The same animals combined visual motion with microstimulation in dlPFC according to a winner-take-all strategy. Because these stimulations were unpredictable and could not be practiced, this contrast suggests that cue integration within and outside sensory systems relies on fundamentally different computations. A key question for future work is whether people and other animals can learn to combine multisensory cues more optimally with experience.

Implications for neurodiversity in multisensory integration.

Individuals with ASD and ADHD can show differences in performance, academic achievement, and reaction time compared to neurotypical individuals [53, 54]. Our experimental design, which incorporated multiple cues, modalities, and participant groups, allowed for more nuanced interpretation. Individuals with ASD performed well overall but showed selective difficulty with auditory cues. This pattern is consistent with previous reports of reduced perceptual fusion in audiovisual illusions such as the beep / flash paradigm [11], suggesting weaker multisensory integration in ASD. Other studies, however, have found intact integration for visual–vestibular cues [55] or for visual navigation tasks, albeit with greater variability [56]. Our results align with this latter view, showing that integration in ASD can be preserved but cue-specific.

Participants with ADHD performed at least as well as neurotypical younger adults and, although the differences were not statistically significant, appeared closer to optimal across all conditions (Figure 4B), particularly for multisensory cues. This pattern raises the possibility that certain features of ADHD, such as heightened responsiveness to salient or novel information, may enhance integration in some contexts.

Studying situations in which individuals with ASD or ADHD perform as well as, or better than, neurotypical participants can identify mechanisms of resilience and inform new approaches to intervention or accommodation. More broadly, these findings suggest a universal distinction between circuit-level mechanisms for integrating within- and across-modality cues, and that specific deviations from these mechanisms may represent diagnostic behavioral features of neuropsychiatric conditions.

Methods

Cue combination and conflict tasks for human participants

We built our online human psychophysics experiments using Gorilla experiment building tools [57] and customized scripts. We recruited adult human participants through Prolific (prolific.co), who performed our cue combination task (Fig. 1). All procedures involving human participants were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Chicago (and granted a Category 4 exemption).

167 English-speaking participants (77 female, 80 male, 7 non-binary/gender queer, 3 transgender women) from around the world participated in one of two experiments. We did not observe substantially different results in male and female participants. Participants self-reported as belonging to one of the following groups: 43 younger adults (mean age: 25), 43 older adults (mean age: 64), 44 ADHD adults (mean age: 25), 37 ASD adults (mean age: 26). All participants reported normal vision and hearing and completed the task wearing headphones.

Before beginning the experiment, participants had to succeed a headphone test. During a given trial in the test, white noise would be played in multiple intervals. On one interval, a quiet tone would be played simultaneously. Participants would report which interval contained the masked sound. Sufficient performance on this test would be difficult without the use of headphones rather than sound speakers.

On a each trial, clicked a mouse on the rim of a circle to report the direction indicated by one or more visual or auditory cues. The visual cues were a motion direction cue, in which a proportion of dots within the circle move coherently in one direction, and a spatial cue, in which the dot density was higher in one part of the circle. The audio cue was a simple tone where the pitch and pan of the sound indicated a location on the circle.

The auditory and visual stimuli were generated using Python 3 and relevant packages (numpy, matplotlib, pydub, ffmpeg, etc.). Each stimulus was presented as a short one-second video clip at 60 frames per second and a resolution of 800 by 800 pixels. On a given trial, a circle appeared on screen, the inside of which was populated with smaller, moving dots. On the first frame of the video, each dot was generated with a random 'age' up to the maximum 'life' of 30 frames. Upon reaching the maximum lifespan, a dot would be removed and replotted in a new location according to the

parameters of the condition. In the Motion (M) condition, the dots were uniformly distributed within the circle. On a given frame, each dot would move one step in the direction of either the target angle or a uniformly random angle around the circle. The proportion of dots moving at the target angle on any given frame is the coherence, which was set to a value of 0.4. Thus, in order to perform the task, participants could only rely on motion information. In the Spatial (S) condition, the coherence of the dots was set to 0 and on any given frame, each dot would move in a random direction. Instead, dots within the circle were plotted according to a two-dimensional gaussian centered on the target angle on the rim of the circle. As such, the dots subtly clustered near the target angle and to perform the task, participants would need to make use of the spatial organization cue. In the Audio (A) condition, a given auditory stimulus was a simple tone (sine wave) played for 1 second. The tones mapped onto locations around the circle with the horizontal component of the angle mapping onto auditory pan ranging from -1 (left only) to 1 (right only) and the vertical component mapping onto frequencies ranging from 400Hz to 800Hz, well within the hearing range for younger and older adults. This was a general, low-tech mimicry of auditory location direction that avoided considerations such as head and pinna shape while leveraging existing expectations such that it was both intuitive and informative without training. On screen, the dots within the circle had a coherence of 0 and were uniformly distributed within the circle. Thus, in order to perform the task, participants had to rely on the audio cue alone.

Combined conditions were pairwise combinations of the three individual cues. The spatial and motion (SM) combined condition was parameterized the same way as in the motion only condition except, rather than dots plotted according to a uniform distribution, they were plotted according to the spatial organization of the spatial condition. The audio and spatial (AS) combined condition and the audio and motion (AM) combined condition were the same as the respective spatial-alone and motion-alone condition with the appropriate audio playing alongside the video.

These were uploaded as videos to the Gorilla.sc experiment platform to build the experiment. Single-cue conditions and multi-cue conditions were counterbalanced separately, with single-cue conditions preceding multi-cue conditions in the experiment. This was necessary to minimize task confusion for participants. Preceding each single-cue condition were tutorial videos and 8 practice trials to ensure participants understood the task. Tutorial videos were created in Adobe After Effects, animating a mouse over the stimuli to demonstrate how the participant should give their response on a given trial. The 8 practice trials that followed occurred at cardinal directions around the circle with feedback and no other feedback was given during the course of the experiment.

In the perceptual estimation experiment, the presented cues were always consistent with one another. That is, the audio, motion, and spatial cues all indicated the same location on the rim of the circle.

Each experimental condition utilized one or more of the motion (M), spatial (S), or audio (A) cues.

The cue conflict task was the same as above, except the multi cue conditions were symmetrically offset in opposite directions by 15° each from the target location.

Behavioural task for rhesus monkeys

The subjects for the monkey experiments were two adult rhesus monkeys, S and O (Macaca mulatta, both male, 8 and 10 kg, respectively). Different analyses of a subset of these data have been published previously [29]. Before behavioural training, the monkeys were implanted with a custom titanium head holding device. All surgical and behavioural procedures conformed to the guidelines established by the National Institutes of Health and were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees of the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon.

During behavioural training and experiments, the monkeys sat in a primate chair that provided head restraint. We presented visual stimuli on a high-quality LCD monitor (VPixx Technologies Inc., QC Canada; 120Hz refresh rate) positioned 57cm from the monkey's eyes. We monitored eye movements and eye position using an infrared optical eye tracker (Eyelink 1000, SR Research, ON, Canada). Behavioural control and stimulus presentation were managed by computers using a Unix based operating system (running MATLAB, The MathWorks, Inc., Natick, MA, and PsychToolbox [58]).

The monkeys were trained to perform a variant on the continuous direction estimation task performed by our human participants, but there was only a motion cue. A trial began when the monkey fixated a central spot on a black background (inside an invisible 1° diameter window). Then a circular target ring was displayed and remained visible for the remainder of the trial. After a randomly selected delay (range 200-400 ms), a dynamic random dot kinematogram was displayed in a stationary circular aperture inside the target ring. During these multi-coherence experiments, trials using two motion coherences were randomly interleaved (low coherence range: 15% - 20%; high coherence range: 35% - 50%).

Monkeys were trained to make a saccadic eye movement to a location on the target ring to signify their choice. The monkeys could initiate the eye movement between 150 and 1500 ms after visual stimulus onset. The reward was based on the accuracy of the motion estimate. For reasons unrelated to the current study and described in [29], the reward associated with some choices was scaled by an amount indicated by the location of pink- or purple- colored portions of the target ring. The data presented in Fig. 8 are only from the randomly interleaved half of trials in which high reward expectation was associated with the preferred direction of the stimulated neurons.

Electrophysiological methods

Before electrophysiological recordings and microstimulation experiments, two recording cylinders (Crist instruments Co., Inc., Hagerstown, MD) were placed over the principal sulcus and visual cortex to provide access to dlPFC and MT, respectively. We recorded from groups of neurons in MT and/or dlPFC using 24 or 32 channel linear probes (V- and S- probes; Plexon Inc, Dallas, TX) positioned using grids (Crist Instruments Company Inc., Hagerstown, MD) and advanced using a hydraulic microdrive (Kopf instruments, Tujunga, CA). Spiking activity, local field potentials, eye position, and task events were recorded at 30,000 samples/second (using Trellis software and

Ripple recording hardware; Ripple, Salt Lake City, UT). All data were analyzed using custom scripts (MATLAB; The MathWorks, Inc., Natick, MA or Python).

Details of our recording methods have been reported previously [29]. Briefly, MT units were identified based on stereotactic coordinates, gray-white matter transitions, and functional properties. In most experiments, the receptive fields of the recorded MT units were less than 12 degrees eccentric so we could place the motion stimulus within their receptive fields without overlapping the target ring. We measured the spatial receptive fields and motion direction tuning to verify electrode positioning, guide motion stimulus positioning, and identify the tuning preferences of sites recorded on the contacts we used for electrical stimulation.

We recorded dlPFC units along the banks and gyri of the principal sulcus (determined by stereotactic location and visual inspection during surgery). We included recordings from locations in which we observed spatial selectivity during any period of a delayed saccade task. We typically recorded units whose response fields were more than 10 degrees eccentric so we could position a portion of the target ring within them and avoid overlap with the visual motion stimulus.

For electrical microstimulation, we selected two contacts on a probe to be stimulated on random subsets of trials (at most one contact was stimulated on each trial, and we also interleaved no stimulation trials). Microstimulation experiments were only ever performed in one brain area per session. The MT units on candidate stimulation contacts were required to have a suitable visual receptive field location and strong direction tuning. The dlPFC units on candidate stimulation contacts were required to have suitably positioned visual or premotor response fields.

Electrical microstimulation began with the onset of the visual motion stimulus and remained on until the monkey moved its eyes out of the fixation window to initiate the eye movement to indicate its motion direction judgment. Microstimulation was biphasic and delivered at 200 Hz with an amplitude that ranged across sessions between 20 and 40 mA (8-10).

Data Analysis

The location of each click (humans) or eye movement (monkeys) to indicate a decision was stored in x, y coordinates. Subsequent analyses are based on the angle between the clicked location and the target (correct) location.

Bayesian Parameter Estimation

Many analyses are based on estimates of the mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ) of choices. We estimate these from discrete data by calculating the likelihood of each possible μ, σ pairing using Equation 3 where θ_i is the calculated angle for a given trial.

$$P(D|\mu,\sigma) = \prod_{i=1} \frac{1}{\sigma\sqrt{2\pi}} exp\left(-\frac{(\theta_i-\mu)^2}{2\sigma^2}\right) \tag{3}$$

Using the likelihoods with a uniform prior, we calculated joint posterior distributions over μ, σ using Bayes' formula (Equation 4). Marginalizing over μ, we get a probability density over σ. The mode of this PDF is our σ estimate.

$$P(\mu, \sigma|D) = \frac{P(D|\mu, \sigma)}{\sum_{\mu,\sigma} P(D|\mu, \sigma)} \tag{4}$$

Joint posterior probabilities are calculated the same way for the conflict experiment. The σ estimates were calculated by marginalizing the joint posterior over μ and it was marginalized over σ to get the the μ estimates which is also the point of subjective equality (PSE).

Bayesian Comparison of σ Distributions

We use the σ probability density functions to compare the single and multi-cue conditions to one another, calculating the probability that one PDF is greater than another. These results were summarized in Figure 3B. We let ρ_{row} stand for the σ PDF pertaining to a given condition and ρ_{col} stand for the σ PDF of another condition. Equation 5, where $x_i(x_j)$ refers to the ith(jth) bin of the PDF, describes the calculation.

$$P(\rho_{row} > \rho_{col}|D) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \rho(x_i)_{col} \sum_{j=i+1}^{n} \rho(x_j)_{row} \tag{5}$$

Cue Combination Predictions

For a given participant, we took 10,000 samples from their single-cue σ PDFs. For each combined condition, the relevant single-cue samples were combined according to the different model equations (1, 2). This resulted in PDFs over σ for each model. The modes of these PDFs were taken as the predictions of each model. These data were summarized in Figure 4 where median performance was plotted normalized between the predictions of the winner-take-all and optimal models.

Frequentist Statistics

The two-way mixed ANOVA and subsequent post-hoc tests were performed using the most likely σ values (maximum a posteriori estimates) obtained from the earlier parameter estimation. We used publicly available Python packages including *pandas*, *scipy*, *pingouin*, and *statsmodels*.

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Declarations

The authors declare no competing financial interests. Data and code will be provided upon reasonable request.

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