

Nobody's watching? Subtle cues affect generosity in an anonymous economic game

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Abstract

Models indicate that opportunities for reputation formation can play an important role in sustaining cooperation and prosocial behavior. Results from experimental economic games support this conclusion, as manipulating reputational opportunities affects prosocial behavior. Noting that some prosocial behavior remains even in anonymous noniterated games, some investigators argue that humans possess a propensity for prosociality independent of reputation management. However, decision-making processes often employ both explicit propositional knowledge and intuitive or affective judgments elicited by tacit cues. Manipulating game parameters alters explicit information employed in overt strategizing but leaves intact cues that may affect intuitive judgments relevant to reputation formation. To explore how subtle cues of observability impact prosocial behavior, we conducted five dictator games, manipulating both auditory cues of the presence of others (via the use of sound-deadening earmuffs) and visual cues (via the presentation of stylized eyespots). Although earmuffs appeared to reduce generosity, this effect was not significant. However, as predicted, eyespots substantially increased generosity, despite no differences in actual anonymity; when using a computer displaying eyespots, almost twice as many participants gave money to their partners compared with the

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controls. Investigations of prosocial behavior must consider both overt information about game parameters and subtle cues influencing intuitive judgments.

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1. Introduction

Humans are remarkable for the extent of their cooperation with, and altruism toward, unrelated individuals. Such prosocial behaviors have been the focus of many recent investigations. Formal models reveal that cooperation and other forms of prosocial behavior can be sustained when agents have the ability to acquire information about actors' past actions, as this allows prosocial actors to behave in ways that reduce the opportunities for, and enhance the costs of, free-riding behavior that degrades cooperation (Leimar & Hammerstein, 2001; Nowak & Sigmund, 1998; Panchanathan & Boyd, 2003, 2004). This conclusion has been borne out by empirical results obtained using experimental economic games, methods that allow for the exploration of decision making in controlled social interactions involving opportunities for cooperation, punishment, trust, and generosity (Fehr & Gächter, 2002; Frank, Gilovich, & Regan, 1993; Milinski, Semmann, & Krambeck, 2002b; Yamagishi, 1986). Changes in the rules and parameters of these games often have substantial impact on the levels of prosocial behavior. For instance, cooperation and other forms of prosocial behavior can be sustained when players are given information about one another's choices in past rounds, assuming that there are opportunities to respond to that information in the game context (Barclay, 2004; Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Milinski, Semmann, & Krambeck, 2002a, 2002b). Strikingly, however, some prosocial behavior occurs even in games that preclude opportunities for players to establish reputations of any sort—some individuals continue to behave in a cooperative and/or altruistic fashion even in anonymous games that consist of just a single round of interaction (Gintis, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2003; see Henrich & Fehr, 2003, for a review).

Impressed by the level of cooperation that remains in the absence of opportunities for reputation formation, a number of investigators have argued that, in both experimental settings and the real world, reputational considerations can explain only some of the prosocial behavior observed in humans, because (a) players in economic games strategically alter their behavior as a function of the opportunities for reputation formation afforded by a given experimental game context, indicating that they understand how such opportunities vary, and yet (b) some level of prosociality frequently remains even when all opportunities for reputation formation have been eliminated (Gintis et al., 2003; Henrich & Fehr, 2003). These scholars thus argue that, while many individuals are motivated to behave in a prosocial manner by a concern with the social consequences of their actions, at least some individuals, some of the time, are also motivated to behave in this fashion, independent of the potential benefits or costs of such behavior. This pattern, often termed *strong reciprocity*, is thought to

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