



Unbounded indirect reciprocity: Is reputation-based cooperation bounded by group membership?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Reputational concern is not restricted to interacting with ingroup members, but can also promote cooperation with outgroup members
- Social identification did not affect cooperation with ingroup members
- Reputational concern is a psychological mechanism operating also with outgroup members

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ABSTRACT

Bounded generalized reciprocity (BGR) predicts that people cooperate to maintain a positive reputation with ingroup, but not outgroup, members—and this explains ingroup favoritism in cooperation. We propose that the benefits of maintaining a positive reputation are not limited by group boundaries and so people may cooperate to maintain a good reputation among outgroup members when they will meet and interact with members of that group again. According to this unbounded indirect reciprocity perspective, reputation can promote cooperation with both ingroup and outgroup members. Alternatively, social identity theory (SIT) favors social identity versus reputation as an explanation for cooperation among ingroup members. We test these hypotheses across five studies ($N_s = 619, 607, 613, 360, \text{ and } 615$) that manipulate reputation, social identification, and partner's group membership in a cooperative decision making task. Across our studies, people were more cooperative with both ingroup and outgroup members when their reputation was at stake (Studies 1–5), and reputational concern mediated the effect of cues of gossip on cooperation in interactions with ingroup and outgroup members (Studies 1–4). Social identification did not affect cooperation with ingroup members. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the indirect benefits of cooperation that can transcend group boundaries.

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People often enact costly behaviors that benefit others (i.e., cooperate), even when these behaviors don't obviously benefit themselves. Nonetheless, some possible benefits of cooperation can be far removed from the actual behavior. For example, an evolutionary perspective suggests that humans can condition cooperation on cues that costly cooperation may result in either direct or indirect benefits (Cosmides & Tooby, 2005). Indeed, people tend to cooperate with others they will interact with again, and so situations that contain potential direct benefits (Delton, Krasnow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2011). Importantly, people can

also cooperate in situations that lead to indirect benefits—when current cooperation is observed and gossiped about to future interaction partners (Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016). Such indirect benefits can be immense and highly rewarding, since gossip and reputation can spread far and wide and reach the ears of many potential future interaction partners.

Bounded generalized reciprocity (BGR) hypothesizes that the indirect benefits from cooperative behavior (and so a positive reputation) come from ingroup, but not outgroup, members (Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999). From this perspective, people cooperate more with ingroup members, because cooperation enhances their reputational standing in the group, and a good reputation will later translate into benefits received from ingroup members. According to BGR, the indirect benefits of reputation are group-bounded, so people behave to enhance their reputation only when interacting with ingroup members. We suggest that the indirect benefits of a good reputation can extend beyond

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group boundaries and so people respond to cues that their behavior carries reputational consequences with ingroup and outgroup members. Here, we advance an *unbounded* indirect reciprocity perspective and extend previous research on reputation-based cooperation by (a) testing whether the cooperation-enhancing effects of reputation are group bounded, and (b) comparing reputation-based accounts of ingroup favoritism in cooperation with a social identity approach.

1. Bounded or unbounded generalized reciprocity?

Bounded generalized reciprocity (BGR) proposes that humans have evolved a tendency to cooperate with ingroup members, because cooperation results in indirect benefits and reduces the potential cost of being excluded from the group.¹ When interacting with ingroup members, people may be more likely to meet, interact with, and receive indirect benefits from other ingroup, compared to outgroup, members (Yamagishi et al., 1999). Thus, BGR states that (a) people have expectations of indirect reciprocity from ingroup members, (b) people cooperate with ingroup members to maintain a positive reputation in their group, and (c) group membership cues activate a heuristic to cooperate with ingroup members (Yamagishi et al., 1999). According to BGR, reputational concern is a core psychological mechanism of ingroup favoritism in cooperation (Mifune, Hashimoto, & Yamagishi, 2010).

One implication of BGR is that reputational concern only matters during interactions with ingroup members rather than outgroup members. To test this hypothesis, Yamagishi and Mifune (2008) manipulated common and unilateral knowledge of group membership (i.e., whether an ingroup or outgroup interaction partner knows one's group membership) in cooperative interactions. Behavior can only influence reputation when group membership is common knowledge. Indeed, people were more cooperative with ingroup than with outgroup members in the common (versus unilateral) knowledge condition—a finding replicated across several studies (Guala, Mittone, & Ploner, 2013; Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008). These findings suggest that ingroup favoritism is a strategy to enhance reputation within a group.

BGR assumes that reputation is *bounded* in groups. Yet, previous common knowledge studies do not confirm that reputation is bounded in groups or that people only care about their reputation among ingroup members. First, these studies often involve one-shot interactions with no future interdependence (Everett, Faber, & Crockett, 2015). Second, these studies did not test reputational concern as a psychological mechanism explaining why people cooperate more with ingroup than with outgroup members. Third, the common versus unilateral knowledge manipulation also made salient social identity concerns (cf. Mifune et al., 2010). We propose that the psychology underlying concern for reputation and the acquisition of indirect benefits may not be limited by group boundaries (Milinski, Semmann, Bakker, & Krambeck, 2001; Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2015; Wu et al., 2016).

According to an unbounded indirect reciprocity perspective, people may condition their behavior on multiple cues that identify when behavior can lead to indirect benefits (Panchanathan & Boyd, 2004). Cues of indirect benefits include whether future interaction partners know about one's previous behavior via observation or gossip, which would subsequently affect reputation (Wu et al., 2015, 2016). So, people may even cooperate with outgroup members to promote a positive reputation, if intergroup interactions involve cues of indirect benefits. Indeed, people cooperate to enhance their reputation when interacting with others who could gossip to their future partners (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar,

& Keltner, 2012; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007). Moreover, cues of indirect benefits tend to enhance a concern about the collective beliefs that others have about oneself, and this reputational concern enhances cooperation (Wu et al., 2015, 2016). Importantly, previous research did not investigate whether cues of indirect benefits (e.g., gossip) are *independent* of knowledge about partner group membership, and so did not inform if people only cooperate to maintain a good reputation with ingroup members.

To summarize, we have outlined two competing perspectives on reputation-based cooperation. BGR hypothesizes that reputation-based cooperation is group bounded—cues of indirect benefits only promote cooperation with ingroup members (*Hypothesis 1a*). Moreover, BGR predicts that people will only care about their reputation when interacting with ingroup members, and so reputational concern mediates the relation between cues of indirect benefits and cooperation when interacting with ingroup, but not outgroup, members (*Hypothesis 1b*). Alternatively, an unbounded indirect reciprocity perspective predicts that cues of indirect benefits (e.g., gossip and public monitoring) will promote cooperation independent of partner group membership (*Hypothesis 2a*). Additionally, this approach predicts that people care about their reputation when interacting with both ingroup and outgroup members, and that reputational concern will mediate the relation between cues of indirect benefits and cooperation (*Hypothesis 2b*).

2. Social identity versus reputational approaches to ingroup favoritism

The perspectives mentioned above are in stark contrast with social identity theory—a dominant theoretical perspective that emphasizes the role of social identification and self-esteem as explanations for ingroup favoritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). Seminal experiments used minimal group paradigms to divide individuals into groups according to a trivial category, and then asked them to allocate valuable resources to anonymous ingroup and/or outgroup members (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). These experiments showed that the mere categorization into different groups was sufficient to promote ingroup favoritism (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Turner et al., 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Notably, individuals' choices in these situations were not driven by self-interest, previous interactions, or shared values, but by social identity—ingroup favoritism serves to increase a positive self-esteem (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). A crucial process for ingroup favoritism is *social identification*—how important a group is in defining the self (Leonardelli & Brewer, 2001). Previous studies support the hypothesis that higher social identification can promote ingroup favoritism in cooperation (*Hypothesis 3*; Brewer & Kramer, 1986; De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999).

Nonetheless, several criticisms have been raised about SIT as an explanation of ingroup favoritism. First, the minimal group paradigms (MGP; Tajfel et al., 1971) also presented some degree of interdependence with ingroup, but not with outgroup, members (Yamagishi & Mifune, 2016). In fact, although participants in the MGP had to allocate money to ingroup and outgroup members, behaviors that favored ingroup members could actually enhance one's chance to be reciprocated in future interactions. Indeed, studies demonstrate that ingroup favoritism disappears when ingroup members cannot reciprocate (e.g., Rabbie, Schot, & Visser, 1989). Second, studies using common knowledge manipulations demonstrated that individuals cooperate with ingroup members only when their reputation is at stake (Balliet, Wu, & De Dreu, 2014; Yamagishi et al., 1999). Despite these critiques, SIT still remains one of the most influential theories to explain ingroup favoritism. The few studies that compare SIT and BGR focus on social identification and expected reciprocation, but not on reputational concern (Stroebe, Lodewijckx, & Spears, 2005; Velez, 2015). Here we compare how social identification and reputation promote ingroup favoritism.

¹ Here, we retain the original term “generalized reciprocity”, which proposes that people expect to receive benefits from other in-group members, especially if they have a positive reputation (Yamagishi et al., 1999). Thus, generalized reciprocity in the context of BGR is the same as reputation-based “indirect reciprocity”.

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