



Social motives in intergroup conflict: Group identity and perceived target of threat[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We experimentally test the social motives behind individual participation in intergroup conflict by manipulating the perceived target of threat—groups or individuals—and the symmetry of conflict. We find that behavior in conflict depends on whether one is harmed by actions perpetrated by the out-group, but not on one's own influence on the outcome of the out-group. The perceived target of threat dramatically alters decisions to participate in conflict. When people perceive *their group* to be under threat, they are mobilized to do what is good for the group and contribute to the conflict. On the other hand, if people perceive to be *personally* under threat, they are driven to do what is good for themselves and withhold their contribution. The first phenomenon is attributed to group identity, possibly combined with a concern for social welfare. The second phenomenon is attributed to a novel victim effect. Another social motive—reciprocity—is ruled out by the data.

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1. Introduction

Social identity informs and shapes individual and social behavior (Akerlof and Kranton, 2011). Recent developments in economics promote the notion that identity is arguably more important than the monetary incentives that take center stage in standard theory. Besley and Ghatak (2003, 2005) argued that organizations can more effectively enhance worker motivation and effort by matching the organization *mission* to the workers' preferences. Akerlof and Kranton (2005, 2008, 2011) take a more general view and regard the mission as one of many ways to foster an *insider* identity in the worker. An insider adopts the organizational affiliation as part of her social identity, and the organization's objective as her own. In this view, rather than relying on optimal pecuniary contracts, “the success of an organization depends on employees who share its goals” (Akerlof and Kranton, 2011, p. 58).

Social, or group, identity facilitates cooperation within groups. Kramer and Brewer (1984) found that priming a joint community identity rather than a subordinate divisive social identity increased cooperation in a common resource pool dilemma. Similarly, inducing *common fate* by determining part of the experimental payoff by a random mechanism at the

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group or at a subordinate level increases cooperation in social dilemmas (Kramer and Brewer, 1984; Brewer and Kramer, 1986; Wit and Wilke, 1992). Eckel and Grossman (2005) artificially enhanced group identity incrementally, from using arbitrary labels to participation in a collaborative task and group competition, to find that strong manipulations increase contributions to a group public good. Similarly, Charness et al. (2007) created artificial groups to show that the saliency of the group affects individual behavior, increasing within-group and reducing between-group cooperation. In Chowdhury et al. (this issue), participants invested more in a between-group Tullock contest when informed that the experimental groups are based on existing ethnic groups.

These studies—while clearly placing group identity at the heart of economic behavior—provide only a limited understanding of how group identity emerges. Akerlof and Kranton (2005, 2011) assert that firms should be willing to invest in creating ‘insider’ identities for their employees, and review and discuss suggestive evidence on how the military, firms, and political parties can influence social categories.¹ These include training, tight interactions within the group, and explicitly stated organizational norms. In this paper, we draw on the vast knowledge accrued in psychology, sociology, and political science on the role of *intergroup conflict* in breeding group identity and thus cooperation (Campbell, 1965; Stein, 1976; Sherif et al., 1961; Coser, 1956). For example, pro-social behaviors directed at the group increase during times of war (Schmieberg, 1942; Janis, 1951; Penner et al., 2005; Glynn et al., 2003; Steinberg and Rooney, 2005; Gneezy and Fessler, 2012).² Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) places intergroup conflict as the first and obvious determinant of social identity. Conflict with other groups creates a clear distinction between the groups, which is required to establish a collective identity. Moreover, conflict induces a common fate within the group, as the actions of the competing group affect the in-group as a whole.

We use a controlled experiment to study the necessary conditions for intergroup conflict to trigger group identity-mediated cooperation. The experimental data lead us to draw two main conclusions. First, it is the *threat* that another group (the outgroup) poses to one's group, as opposed to having the opportunity to harm the other group, that fosters cooperation within the group. Second, for group identity and cooperation to emerge in conflict, it is crucial that the group, rather than individual group members, is perceived to be under threat. When the objectively same threat is perceived as imposed separately on the individual group members, they are *less* likely to cooperate.

Our workhorse is the *Intergroup Prisoner's Dilemma* (IPD; Bornstein, 1992; Bornstein and Ben-Yossef, 1994), which embeds a standard Prisoner's Dilemma (PD) game in intergroup conflict. In our experimental PD game, each of three players in the group receives an initial endowment of 140 ECU (Experimental Currency Units) and decides whether to contribute to a group account or not. Contribution carries a cost of 50 ECU and increases the payoff of each of the three group members (including the contributor) by 30 ECU (the contributor's net loss is thus 20 ECU). The IPD game maintains this payoff structure within the group. The gain of the in-group members, however, is *at the expense* of members of a matched group. Put differently, in the PD payoffs are based only on the sum of contributions in the group, while in the IPD payoffs increase with the sum of contributions in the group, and decrease with the sum of contributions in the matched group.

In a pioneer study, Bornstein and Ben-Yossef (1994) found that cooperation levels in the IPD were roughly double those in the PD. Why does intergroup conflict facilitate intragroup cooperation, despite the severe negative effect that cooperation has on the outgroup? From the point of view of an individual player, embedding the social dilemma within the group conflict adds two aspects to the game. First, her group is placed under threat of being harmed by contributions in the outgroup. Second, her own contributions harm the members of the out-group. While these two aspects are confounded in the IPD, only the first implies common fate. We disentangle these two aspects by introducing a new game, the *Asymmetric Intergroup Prisoner's Dilemma* (AIPD). In the AIPD, contributions made by members of one group—which we label the *Attacker* group—increase the payoffs of the group's members and decrease the payoffs of members of the other group, as in the IPD. In contrast, contributions made by members of the other group—which we label the *Victim* group—only affect payoffs within that group, as in the PD. In other words, the payoff function of Attacker group members is determined as in the PD (i.e., they *are not* affected by the out-group); and the payoffs of members of the Victim group are determined as in the IPD (i.e., they *are* affected by the out-group).

If common fate is the crucial aspect that triggers group identity and consequently cooperation, we should observe more cooperation, relative to a PD game, in the Victim group, but not in the Attacker group, as only members of the former share a common fate due to the actions of the other group. If intergroup conflict enhances group identity, at least to some extent, through creating a clear group boundary with respect to another group, we should also observe an effect in the Attacker group.³

Group identity, however, is not the only social motive involved in group conflict. Reciprocity, for example, has been shown to drive behavior across many social interactions (Fehr and Gächter, 2000).⁴ The high level of contributions in the IPD can accordingly be explained as the manifestation of negative reciprocity between individuals belonging to opposing

¹ See also Ellemers et al. (2004) for an analysis of the interplay between identity and work motivation.

² On the evolution of intragroup cooperation with intergroup conflict, see Choi and Bowles (2007), Bowles (2008), Hugh-Jones and Zultan (2013), Bowles et al. (2003), and Guzmán et al. (2007).

³ De Dreu et al. (2015) similarly used an asymmetric predator-prey game to disentangle motives. In their game, the prey/victim—but not the predator/attacker—is exposed to a fear motive, similar to the way in which the victims in our game, but not attackers, share a common fate.

⁴ In the one-shot simultaneous games that we study, players are not able to reciprocate observed actions by others. We nonetheless use the term *reciprocity* to describe reciprocal preferences that sustain cooperation in equilibrium when actions are taken to reciprocate *expected* actions by others. A

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