



Research article

Understanding the influence of power and empathic perspective-taking on collaborative natural resource management



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ABSTRACT

Public engagement in collaborative natural resource management necessitates shared understanding and collaboration. Empathic perspective-taking is a critical facilitator of shared understanding and positive social interactions, such as collaboration. Yet there is currently little understanding about how to reliably generate empathic perspective-taking and collaboration, particularly in situations involving the unequal distribution of environmental resources or power. Here we examine how experiencing the loss or gain of social power influenced empathic perspective-taking and behavior within a computer-mediated scenario. Participants ($n = 180$) were randomly assigned to each condition: high resources, low resources, lose resources, gain resources. Contrary to our expectations, participants in the perspective-taking condition, specifically those who lost resources, also lost perspective taking and exhibited egoistic behavior. This finding suggests that resource control within the collaborative process is a key contextual variable that influences perspective-taking and collaborative behavior. Moreover, the observed relationship between perspective-taking and egoistic behavior within a collaborative resource sharing exercise suggests that when resource control or access is unequal, interventions to promote perspective-taking deserve careful consideration.

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1. Introduction

Natural resource management decisions are inherently difficult because they require input from multiple groups with competing values and divergent interests (Brown and Harris, 2000; Jacobson and Decker, 2006). Collaborative natural resource management by communities, or in partnership with government institutions, has had its share of failures. Egoistic behavior and failed collaborative management can result in a “Tragedy of the Commons” (Hardin, 1968), where common pool resources (e.g., cod in New England, forests in Maine and water in the Southwest and Mexico) are depleted, resulting in the subsequent collapse and closure of fisheries, the loss of forested habitat, and water shortages.

According to Ansell and Gash (2008), the key to overcoming egoistic behavior and promoting collaborative outcomes is to

develop effective participatory processes that build trust, commitment, and shared understanding among participants (Fig. 1). In their review of 137 cases of collaborative governance, Ansell and Gash (2008) described several key starting conditions (i.e., power-resource-knowledge asymmetries, incentives for and constraints on participation, and prehistory of cooperation or conflict) that “set the basic level of trust, conflict, and social capital that become resources or liabilities during collaboration” (p. 550) (Fig. 1). They also identify shared understanding, created during the collaborative process, as a key factor that can transform combative stakeholders into cooperative partners, promote collaborative behavior and resolve public goods management challenges (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Moreover, others have suggested that fragile social connections contribute to collaborative resource failure (Acheson, 2006). Conspicuously absent from this previous work is any mention of perspective-taking within the collaborative process.

Perspective-taking is a critical component of empathy, and a key precursor of shared understanding and positive social interactions, such as collaboration (Berenguer, 2007, 2008; Eisenberg and Miller, 1987; Galinsky et al., 2005). Defined as the ability to see situations through the eyes of others, perspective-taking is often described as

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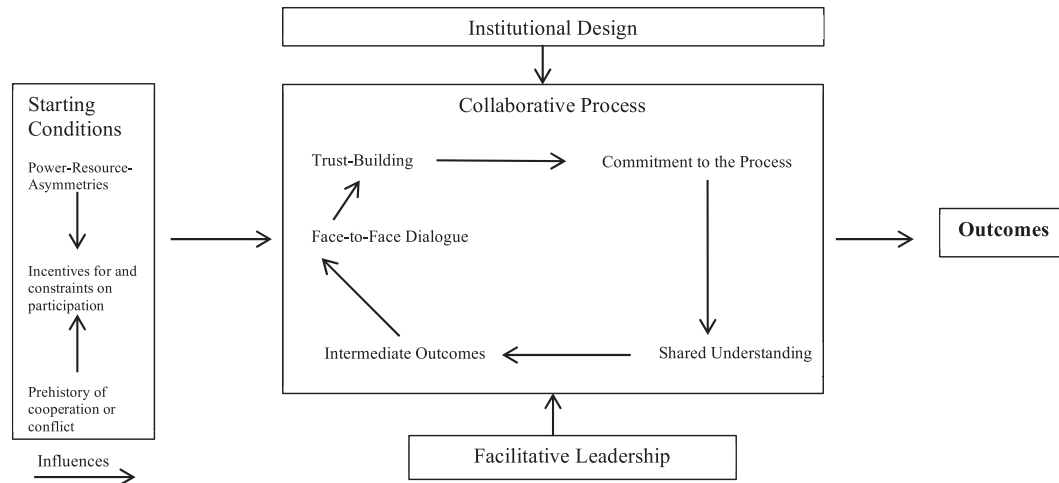


Fig. 1. Simplified version of 'A Model of Collaborative Governance' developed by Ansell and Gash (2008).

a precursor of social coordination, social bonds (Galinsky et al., 2005) and helping behavior (Cialdini et al., 1997). There is a well-established conceptual basis for the relationship between perspective-taking and prosocial behavior (see Eisenberg and Miller, 1987; Berenguer, 2007, 2008; Galinsky et al., 2005). Previous studies have found that asking participants to consider the perspective of others can increase helping behavior (Batson, 1994; Cialdini et al., 1997). Yet our current understanding of how to encourage empathic perspective-taking in the context of natural resource dilemmas is confused at best (Acheson, 2006). Alternative research suggests that perspective-taking, specifically considering others' motivations for self-interested behavior, can encourage selfish behavior (Miller, 1999) and reactive egoism (i.e., where expectations of self-serving behavior by others can contribute to egoistic behavior among participants) (Epley et al., 2006).

If, as previous research suggests, perspective-taking is a precursor of shared understanding and collaborative behavior, and if fragile social connections contribute to resource failure, then it is vitally important to explore the individual factors of the person and contextual variables that may influence whether stakeholders take the perspective of others and develop strong social connections that facilitate collaborative natural resource decisions. Gaps in the current knowledge are a critical barrier delaying collaborative, evidence-based decision-making for resource management, and encouraging the persistence of ineffective interventions. Thus, the objectives of this study are (1) to explore how shifting control of natural resources throughout a collaborative natural resource simulation influences participants' perspective-taking abilities and collaborative behavior and (2) propose a new framework for collaborative decision-making that includes both contextual and individual influences as key factors affecting the collaborative process.

2. Background

2.1. Empathic perspective-taking

Perspective-taking allows us to imagine what a character in a movie is feeling or to imagine what it feels like to walk in someone else's shoes. "To be considerate, even in small ways, one needs empathic perspective-taking" (De Waal, 2009, p. 110). While the full array of empathy can involve multiple components, key among these factors is the skill of perspective-taking, also called empathic perspective-taking (Preston and de Waal, 2002).

Two important components of perspective-taking play a critical

role in promoting collaborative behavior: individual perspective-taking (the cognitive process of imagining the experiences of another) and macro perspective-taking, which includes the social, political, and economic context for the social realities of the lives of other people (Segal et al., 2012). Individual perspective-taking facilitates social bonds with new groups or individuals (Galinsky et al., 2005). Individual perspective-taking is the foundation on which the macro perspective-taking components can be developed (Segal et al., 2012). Macro perspective takers are interested in understanding why people are poor, understanding the political perspectives or opinions of people who are different from them, and helping people of a different race or ethnicity. Both types of perspective-taking are key in decreasing prejudice, facilitating social coordination (Galinsky et al., 2005), and improving intergroup attitudes and relationships (Batson et al., 1997). Without individual perspective-taking, a person is not able to have macro perspective-taking. Both individual and macro perspective-taking skills are individual-level factors that could influence an individual's ability and willingness to collaborate.

2.2. Perspective-taking and prosocial behavior

Within our research, we treat perspective-taking as it has historically been treated in the psychological literature, as a vital and instrumental determinant of successful prosocial behavior (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987). There is strong theoretical and empirical support for the connection between perspective-taking and socially responsible behavior (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 2000; Segal et al., 2012). Broadly, empathy can improve intergroup attitudes and relations (Batson et al., 1997; Stephan and Finlay, 1999), promote social interaction (Gerdes and Segal, 2009), civic engagement (Miaskiewicz and Monarchi, 2008), and social tolerance (Segal et al., 2012). More specifically, perspective-taking can increase social competence, generate a sense of psychological closeness between individuals, and increase mimicking behavior, which enhances social bonds (Galinsky et al., 2005), helping behavior (Cialdini et al., 1997), coordinated interactions, and collaborative behavior (Müller et al., 2012; van Baaren et al., 2009). Collaborative behaviors are included in the broad domain of prosocial behaviors, which include voluntary or intentional actions aimed at enhancing outcomes for others and for oneself (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987). Collaborative management of natural resources is a subtype of prosocial behavior.

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