



Religion, ethnicity and cooperation: An experimental study



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ABSTRACT

We investigate how cross-cutting ethnic and religious identities as well as the strength of individual religiosity and fundamentalism affect individual cooperation. In a repeated prisoner's dilemma experiment, information about subjects' religious and ethnic identities was either revealed or concealed to examine the individual and joint effects of these influences on subject decisions. While subjects' knowledge of others' religious and ethnic difference has no net effect on their cooperativeness, the awareness of similarity increases it. Subject religiosity and fundamentalism have no independent effect on cooperation, but they enhance ethnic and religious intergroup effects.

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1. Introduction

In recent years religion has been identified as a significant macroeconomic influence on performance differentials and trade links between nations (Barro & McCleary, 2003; Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2003, 2009). A small but growing literature within experimental economics has since examined the effect of religion on individual behaviour to try to account for these findings (for recent overviews, see Hoffmann (2013) and Tan (in press)). A number of studies have examined whether religion enhances cooperation by instilling pro-social values. Orbell, Goldman, Mulford, and Dawes (1992) found that more religious people were no more cooperative in a prisoner's dilemma. Similarly, Sosis and Ruffle (2003) found no differences in cooperation between religious and secular kibbutz members respectively in a common-pool resource dilemma. In the two studies by Anderson, Mellor, and Milyo (2010) (Anderson & Mellor, 2009; Anderson et al., 2010) the religious affiliations and service attendance of subjects did not significantly explain their public good contributions. Ahmed and Salas (2009) found no differences in public good contributions between religious and non-religious subjects in three countries.

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These results suggest that the strength of religious values alone does not influence individual cooperation. However, religion may affect behaviour through religious group identity. Religious difference can cause prejudice (Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999) while common religion may engender ingroup favouritism (Irons, 2001). Tan and Vogel (2008) found mutually greater trust among more highly religious Christian subjects. In the study by Chuah, Fahoum, and Hoffmann (2013), Muslim and Hindu communities in Mumbai trusted their religious ingroup members more. Chuah, Hoffmann, Jones, and Williams (2007) found ingroup favouritism in ultimatum games played between British and Malaysian subjects, however their result may be driven by shared ethnic rather than religious group identities.

Observing the effect of religion on individual behaviour is therefore hampered by the confounding simultaneous influences of religious values as well as overlapping religious and ethnic group membership. In this paper we report an experiment designed to disentangle these variables by testing for their individual and combined effects. In particular we observe cooperation among a multi-cultural subject pool where religion and ethnicity are cross-cutting social categories that are either revealed or concealed in different experimental conditions. In addition, we measure the strength of religious values using multi-dimensional scales (religiosity and fundamentalism) shown to be valid across different religions. These measures enable us to examine whether strength of religious sentiment affects behaviour independently or in concert with religious group identity. Our experiment robustly demonstrates the effects of the interplay between religious values and religious and ethnic affiliations on individual cooperation. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework we employ. Section 3 outlines the design of the experiment and our procedure in conducting it. Section 4 reports the results. Section 5 discusses and concludes.

2. Theory

The voluminous literature on social categorisation suggests alternative hypotheses for the simultaneous effects of religious and ethnic identity as well as religiosity on the cooperativeness of our subjects. Intergroup effects, i.e. the preferential treatment of similar people relative to those who are different are well understood and documented for a single social category. They are however more complex when multiple, potentially *cross-cutting* social categories exist as in realistic settings (e.g. Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glas, 1992). For example, religious affiliation and ethnicity typically overlap only imperfectly such that individuals may share one but differ in the other group identity. For two dichotomous categories this graduates social distance between interacting individuals in terms of double ingroup (*II*) or outgroup identities (*OO*) as well as partial commonality (*IO* or *OI*).

A number of models exist that suggest how these latter, ambiguous cross-cutting conditions affect intergroup behaviour. Hewstone, Islam, and Judd (1993) classify these models based on their predicted effects for the four conditions which they call *contrasts* (see Table 1). All models surveyed agree that condition *II* results in ingroup favouritism (+) while *OO* engenders discrimination (–). However they differ in the predictions for the cross-cutting conditions *IO* and *OI* compared with the two extremes. All possible combinations of positive, negative and neutral (0) effects for the two cross-cutting conditions on cooperation have support from particular contrasts proposed by different models.

Overall neutral effects for both *IO* and *OI* (contrast 1) arise when the individual influences of the two categories are independent and/or additive. For example if a target person belongs to the same religion but a different ethnicity their respective effects cancel out. Positive effects for both *IO* and *OI* are predicted by category conjunction models where shared identity in only one category results overall in an ingroup assessment (contrast 2). In this view another person is considered an ingroup member as long as they share either religion or ethnicity. The same prediction is made by category differentiation models which posit that outgroup discrimination can be eliminated when the differentiating social category concerned is crossed with a shared one. Conversely, negative effects for both (contrast 3) result when dissimilarity in one category suffices to trigger outgroup discrimination irrespective of the other. Here an overall outgroup assessment results from either religious or ethnic difference. When only one of the two categories is used and dominates the other this results in a positive effect for one cross-cutting condition and a negative one for the other (contrast 4). For example Hewstone et al. (1993) find category dominance for religion over nationality in their experiment.

In hierarchical category models the prior assessment of one category affects that of another which is attended to subsequently. This arises for instance if a person is identified as an ingroup member according to the first category (+) and, due to approbation, receives further scrutiny which reveals outgroup identity according to the other category (–) resulting in an

Table 1

A priori contrasts for the four intergroup conditions from two dichotomous social categories. Adapted from Hewstone et al. (1993).

| Condition | <i>II</i> | <i>IO</i> | <i>OI</i> | <i>OO</i> | Cross-cutting categories are |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--|
| Contrast 1 | + | 0 | 0 | – | Independent/additive |
| Contrast 2 | + | + | + | – | Differentiating/conjunctive (similarity) |
| Contrast 3 | + | – | – | – | Conjunctive (dissimilarity) |
| Contrast 4 | + | – | + | – | Dominating |
| Contrast 5 | + | 0 | – | – | Hierarchical (approbation) |
| Contrast 6 | + | 0 | + | – | Hierarchical (derogation) |

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