

# Cross-national gender differences in behavior in a threshold public goods game: Japan versus Canada

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## Abstract

To investigate the effects of gender and national culture on economic behavior, we compare all-male and all-female groups from Japan and Canada in the context of a threshold public goods game with a strong free-riding equilibrium and many socially efficient threshold equilibria. Females and Canadians exhibit higher levels of conformity when compared with males and Japanese, respectively. However, such symmetric group behavior translates into significantly tighter equilibrium convergence only for Canadian females. Canadians, particularly Canadian females, are more successful at providing the public good than Japanese. The results suggest that the prevalence of different notions of self-construal may affect behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Research in social psychology suggests that both gender and culture influence individual behavior in various social settings. According to the “gender-centered” hypothesis (Deaux, 1976; Eagly & Wood, 1991; Gilligan, 1982), gender differences may arise because of the different ways that females and males are socialized by parents, schools, and mass media, among others. Thus, gender differences may also differ across countries, since countries may possess different cultures, and, therefore, different norms, values, and social conventions. Moreover, culture, as proxied by national background, may also influence economic behavior. For instance, Burlando and Hey (1997), using a public goods game, found that British subjects free ride more than Italians. In a public goods game in which subjects had to first decide whether or not to participate, Cason, Saijo, and Yamato (2003) found that Japanese behave more spitefully early on, ultimately achieving more efficiency than Americans, while American behavior more closely matches equilibrium predictions. However, both these studies used mixed male–female groups to examine cultural differences in the laboratory, and gender differences were neither examined nor compared. In regard to gender effects, results in the area of public goods provision are mixed and inconclusive. Brown-Kruse and Hummels (1993) and others (e.g., Sell & Wilson, 1991) found that men contribute more in a voluntary contribution mechanism (VCM) setting, while some researchers (e.g., Nowell & Tinkler, 1994) reported the opposite finding. Furthermore, there is also evidence showing no gender difference in the level of contribution in a public good setting (Cadsby & Maynes, 1998; Sell, Griffith, & Wilson, 1993; Solow & Kirkwood, 2002). All of the gender studies cited here used North American subjects (see Croson & Gneezy, 2005 for an excellent review of this literature). To date, research on cross-national differences in gender-specific behavior is not well developed.

One reason for this lack of development may be that most theories and empirical studies that focus on gender differences in socioeconomic behavior are based largely on Western cultures. Thus, it is important to consider whether gender differences observed in North America are culturally specific, or widely present in different national and cultural contexts. One paper that attempts to explore this issue is Croson and Buchan (1999), who used participants from the United States, China, Japan and Korea. Their experimental evidence from a two-person trust game showed no significant gender effects among trustors. However, female trustees were significantly more generous than males. Country dummy variables showed no significant differences between countries. Interaction effects between gender and country were not reported. Moreover, as the authors pointed out, there were few female participants in Japan and Korea, making it difficult to draw conclusions about potential gender differences in those countries.

The primary purpose of the present research is thus to extend past work on the effects of gender and national culture by examining their impacts both separately and together on individual behavior. In this study, using a threshold public goods game, we compare the behavior of males and females in the context of all-male and all-female groups in Japan and Canada. The paper is organized in the following way. In Section 2, we discuss the threshold public goods game and briefly review some prominent themes from the literature on gender and cultural traits that could potentially influence the behavior of males and females as well as Japanese and Canadians in the context of such a game. In Section 3, we discuss the specifics of our experimental design and procedure. The results are presented in Section 4. Conclusions and implications are offered in Section 5.

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