

1 Prosocial preferences do not explain human cooperation in public-goods games.

Burton-Chellew MN¹, West SA

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11 Jun 2014



Nichola Raihani

F1000 Ecology

University College London, London, UK.

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The article makes an important contribution to the literature on the motives underpinning cooperation in typical economic games. Previous studies have explained cooperative behaviour by arguing that humans have pro-social preferences or a concern for the welfare of others in the game. This study shows that these inferences may be incorrect. The behaviour of subjects who play a public goods game in a 'black-box' scenario, where they are unaware of the presence of other players or that others will benefit from their investments, cannot be statistically distinguished from the behaviour of subjects who know that their contributions to the public good benefit others (as in standard public goods games). Moreover, when subjects are given enhanced information about how their investments and payoffs compare to those of other group members, contributions decrease rather than increase. These findings suggest that cooperative investments are not always motivated by concern for others and instead hint that individuals might often be concerned with maximising their own welfare but do so imperfectly.

Disclosures

None declared

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Abstract:

ABSTRACT

It has become an accepted paradigm that humans have "prosocial preferences" that lead to higher levels of cooperation than those that would maximize their personal financial gain. However, the existence of prosocial preferences has been inferred post hoc from the results of economic games, rather than with direct experimental tests. Here, we test how behavior in a public-goods game is influenced by knowledge of the consequences of actions for other players. We found that (i) individuals cooperate at similar levels, even when they are not... informed that their behavior benefits others; (ii) an increased awareness of how cooperation benefits others leads to a reduction, rather than an increase, in the level of cooperation; and (iii) cooperation can be either lower or higher than expected, depending on experimental design. Overall, these results contradict the suggested role of the prosocial preferences hypothesis and show how the complexity of human behavior can lead to misleading conclusions from controlled laboratory experiments.

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