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Acting for the good of the group: The role of social identity and rational calculation motives

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Individuals must often choose to cooperate with others to maximize a group outcome or act in a way that maximizes personal incentives. When each individual in a group benefits more by defecting than cooperating, the situation is a social dilemma. Traditional theories of choice behavior in social dilemmas have assumed that people's behavior is individualistic, selfish, and rational in the sense of maximizing personal outcomes. More recent theories have emphasized group identification motives and suggest that people often sacrifice personal gains for the good of the larger group. We conducted an experiment that examined both individualistic and collective motives simultaneously. We predicted that participants in a superordinate condition (common group membership emphasized) would be more cooperative than those in an individualistic condition (individuality emphasized) or a subgroup condition (two distinct groups emphasized). We further predicted that this basic effect would be mediated by social identification (stronger in the collective condition) and rational calculation (e.g., less fear of being taken advantage of in the collective condition) motives. Participants were 140 elementary psychology students. The experimental design was a 3 (collective, subgroup, or individualistic condition) x 2 (academic major or political affiliation as basis for group membership) factorial. In each experimental session, six participants were seated in isolated cubicles. Each was allocated \$5 and then had to privately and irrevocably decide to either GIVE or KEEP the endowment. It was made clear that money given would not be returned, but if \$20 or more was collected in total all six would receive a \$10 bonus (whether or not they personally gave). Several measures were administered, including group identification and rational calculation estimates. Cooperation was significantly greater in the collective condition compared to the individualistic or subgroup conditions. As predicted, participants in the collective condition expressed greater group identification, were less fearful of losing their endowment, and were less concerned with maximizing selfish interests. These motivational items, in turn, predicted rates of cooperation. Suggestions for the theoretical integration of social identity and rational calculation approaches are discussed.