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“Reciprocity, Attributions, and Principled Defection: On Social Roots of Non-Cooperative Behavior”

Cooperating with others often entails some sacrifice of one’s own interests. Accordingly, many theories highlight self-other tradeoffs as drivers of cooperative behavior, asserting that people act pro-socially when they prioritize how they treat others but not when their self-interest trumps their other-regard. We challenge this perspective, by presenting and testing a game-theoretic, attribution-based model of reciprocity which highlights people’s thinking about others’ motives. To illustrate, consider first-move cooperation in a sequential, one-shot prisoners’ dilemma. This action could be attributed to genuine kindness; the first-mover caring about the second-mover. It could also be attributed to tactical self-interest; the first-mover attempting to elicit the second-mover’s reciprocal cooperation because it is materially profitable. We suggest that people frequently do not reciprocate positive behavior that might be attributable to tactical self-interest rather than genuine kindness. They feel differently about someone taking a calculated chance at maximizing his own payoff compared to someone acting out of authentic caring. We term such failure to reciprocate positive behavior as principled defection, because it is driven by social considerations not self-interest. If principled defection is prevalent, then the fundamental impediment to mutual cooperation in many settings is not self-interest trumping other-regard. It is that players cannot credibly signal kind motives. That is, much non-cooperation may arise among people who are not particularly self-interested and indeed care a lot about others, but have not been convinced there is a place for their caring, because they have not been persuaded that their counterparts genuinely care about them. Accordingly, three experiments indicate that when players can convincingly signal kindness, reciprocity rates are extremely high.

SHORT BIO

Yuval Rottenstreich is a Professor of Management at the Rady School at UCSD. He has previously held positions at NYU Stern, Duke Fuqua, and Chicago Booth. He earned a Ph.D. in Psychology from Stanford University and an A.B. in Economics and Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania.

Rottenstreich has been published in numerous journals including *Psychological Review*, *Psychological Science*, *Management Science*, and the *Journal of Consumer Research*. He is a Department Editor of *Management Science’s: Judgment and Decision Making* and is on the editorial board of both *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* and the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*.

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