Refusing the Good: The Self-Interest Norm Breeds Altruist Rejection

Abstract

This study investigates whether individuals reject altruistic members from the group because they violate social norms. One hundred students played a game where they made decisions about how many points to contribute to and harvest from a commons pool. Past research demonstrates that in these games players desire to eject altruistic players from the group (Parks & Stone, 2010). We suggest that self-interested action was normative under these conditions, and the desire to eject altruistic players stems from norm violation. By giving participants the opportunity to construe altruistic actions as self-interested, we were able to reduce participant rejection of altruistic players. This demonstrates that violation of the self-interest norm is the operative mechanism in rejection of altruistic players.

Goody-two-shoes, boy scout, goody-goody, bleeding heart—these are words used derisively to refer to individuals who come off as excessively caring and moral. Why do people feel the need to deride those who are doing no wrong? This study explores the possibility that it is not caring or moral qualities per se that evoke a derisive reaction, but norm violation in a culture that expects self-interested motivations.

In a study examining participant reactions to different group member usage patterns in a commons pool game, Parks and Stone (2010) reached the conclusion that participants desire to see benevolent individuals (those who contribute much and use little) removed from the group. In fact, benevolent individuals were rated to be just as undesirable as selfish individuals. This finding is counterintuitive because it is not in an individual’s best interests to reject group
members who will contribute greatly to the group’s resources while detracting little from them. In an examination of the explanations given for expelling benevolent individuals, Parks and Stone (2010) identified norm deviance as a common justification.

Past research has demonstrated that group members who deviate from the norm are consistently evaluated negatively (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000). Given that the benevolent individuals in the Parks and Stone (2010) study were perceived as norm deviants, negative evaluations resulting from this perception could explain the desire to expel these members from the group. Miller (1999) suggests that self-interested behavior, rather than being the default of human behavior, is often carried out for normative reasons. Individuals consistently act in their self-interest because they feel that others expect them to act in their self-interest. Behaving altruistically in the commons pool game may have been in direct violation of this norm.

If violation of the norm of self-interest lies at the root of altruist rejection, it follows that negative evaluations of benevolent individuals will cease if participants are given the opportunity to construe their altruistic actions as self-interested.

Current Study

The present study uses similar methodology to Parks and Stone (2010) with the key difference that prior to taking part in the commons pool game, participants learned that the most altruistic player will receive a bonus at the end of the experiment. The bonus is not large enough to draw participants to follow an altruistic strategy, but the existence of a bonus opens up the possibility of viewing altruistic behavior as self-interested. Though the behavior of the benevolent individual will not have changed, it can now be viewed as conforming to the norm of
self-interest. Participants in the self-interest condition should then express a stronger desire to keep the benevolent individual in their group than participants in the control condition. As a result of the manipulation, I expect to see a reversal of pattern of the means with the benevolent players being rated as more desirable than the fair players.

Methods

Participants

One hundred participants ($M_{age}=19; 60\%$ female) were recruited from an introductory psychology course at a Canadian university. Participants received a research credit towards completion of their course in exchange for taking part in the study.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either the self-interest condition or the control condition. Supervising experimenters were blind to the assigned condition of participants.

Participants were told that they were a member of a five-person group that would interact through computer terminals. In reality, the participant was playing alone and the other four supposed players were sets of programmed choice sequences intended to create the illusion of playing against real people. Three of the four other “players” pursued a fair strategy, which entailed them claiming an amount from the commons pool proportional to their contribution. The fourth “player” pursued an altruistic strategy, which entailed making large contributions to the commons pool while claiming very little.

After receiving their instructions, participants played a commons pool game consisting of ten rounds. Every round, each player was given 10 points and instructed to contribute a portion
**Table 1.** Mean contributions and harvests for programmed opponent strategies during each round continued over ten rounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contribution</th>
<th>Leave in Pool</th>
<th>Take from Pool</th>
<th>Base Endgame Points</th>
<th>Endgame Bonus</th>
<th>Total Endgame Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Endgame bonus column assumes that the players obtain the endgame bonus and the altruist computer player obtains the altruist bonus.

of their choosing (up to a maximum of 10) to the pool. That portion would be doubled and added to the pool. Next, players decided how many points they wanted to harvest from the pool. Points remaining in the pool at the end of the round were carried over into the next round. If there were more than 300 points left in the pool at the end of ten rounds, each player received a bonus of 150 points.

Prior to beginning the game, participants in the self-interest condition received the instruction: “At the end of round ten, the player who best matches the description, *made large contributions while harvesting very little*, will receive a bonus of 100 points.” The control condition received no such instruction. Participants worked through several examples and completed a test to ensure that they understood the dynamics of the game. In place of a redundant example in the control condition, the self-interest condition included an example demonstrating that though pursuing the altruistic bonus is roughly equivalent point-wise to adhering to a fair strategy, if multiple players attempted to pursue this strategy the resultant competition would bring about net losses for the both of them.

Upon completion of the game, participants were asked to rate their desire to remain in a group with each other member on a Likert scale (1 = *not at all desirable*, 9 = *very desirable*) and
give a written explanation of the strategy that they used in the game. Total player points were then converted to a sum of money (25 points = $1) and awarded to the player.

**Results**

The results support our hypothesis that giving participants an opportunity to make self-interested attributions about the motives of other players would decrease negative evaluations of those players, leading to a decreased desire to expel them from the group (Figure 1). In line with our expectations, desire to retain an altruistic player was significantly higher in the self-interest condition, $t(98) = 2.83, p < .05$. As predicted, in the self-interest condition altruistic players were rated as even more desirable than the fair players, $t(98) = 1.72, p < .05$. The pattern of the means in the control condition matches the results reported in previous research (Parks & Stone, 2010) with desire to retain altruistic members falling significantly lower than desire to retain fair members, $t(98) = 2.21, p < .05$.

![Figure 1. Mean desire to retain a group member using a given strategy compared across conditions.](image-url)
Written strategy explanations indicate that no participant chose to pursue the altruistic strategy. Participants ended the game with $M = 300$ points (equivalent to $12) , SD = 25.$

**Discussion**

Parks and Stone (2010) observed a desire to expel benevolent members from the group and implicated perceived norm deviance as a mechanism underlying this phenomena. Exploring the specifics of this mechanism, the present study demonstrates that the norm of self-interest is the specific norm being transcended. By giving players the opportunity to construe an altruistic strategy as self-interested, the anti-normative shunning effect was completely reversed. In fact, after removing the perceived norm deviation participants preferred having benevolent players in their group even over fair players. This suggests that humans by default prefer to have benevolent members in their groups, but norms act as a barrier to the expression of this preference.

Another explanation provided by Parks and Stone (2010) is that benevolent players are rejected for reasons of social comparison. The presence of a benevolent player evokes negative self-evaluations from players pursuing more self-interested strategies. In other words, standing next to a saint makes you look bad by comparison and it is for this reason that benevolent players are rejected. The results of this study are consistent with the social comparison explanation as well. Once the benevolent player’s actions can be construed as self-interested, they need not be viewed as any better than a fair player’s actions. Benevolent strategies do not pose a self-evaluative threat if they can be viewed as some way self-interested.

Another important criticism to be addressed is that the norm of self-interest, rather than being chronically activated, may have been activated by features of the commons pool game played.
Gaining points was presented as the objective of the game and real life incentives were given for gaining points. This design implies self-interest as the normative motivation which may have led to the adoption of this norm and driven subsequent evaluations made by participants. If this is the case, the findings of this study as well as the Parks and Stone (2010) study may be artefacts of the methodology rather than universally applicable truths. Furthermore, Miller (1999) suggests that the norm of self-interest is specific to Western cultures. Replicating this study in collectivist cultures could do much to determine the extent to which self-interested behavior is a culture-bound phenomena. If the norm of self-interest is a product of individualist culture, study replications in China or India may not observe the same desire to expel benevolent actors.

References

