GDN Project no. RRC13+71
Non-Technical Summary

Full Title:

How Unconditional is Conditional Cooperation?

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Abstract:

Previous experimental research suggests that a non-negligible number of subjects do not resort to free-riding in the linear public goods game but rather are willing to contribute as long as other group members do so.

The paper improves upon the classic design by Fischbacher et al. (2001) to enable the subjects to condition their behavior on the minimum, median, average or maximum contribution as well as on the full contribution profile of other group members. By doing that, it (i) examines the robustness of existing findings regarding the incidence and intensity of conditional cooperation in public goods games; and (ii) provides a better picture of preferences that drive such behavior.

The principal findings are as follows:

- conditional cooperation is a stable phenomenon that is not affected by the choice of a conditioning statistic used to classify the subjects as exhibiting such behavior;
- the presence of the self-serving bias actually depends on the choice of the statistic;
- subjects tend to reciprocate the average rather than anything else albeit without actually realizing that.

Finally, the paper provides guidelines on how the total contribution level can be increased by varying the amount and type of information available to the subjects.

Keywords:

Public goods, conditional cooperation, self-serving bias, full information, summary statistic, strategy method, experiment.