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The poverty game and the pension game: The role of reciprocity

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Abstract

We examine the force of the reciprocity norm in gift giving experiments in which mutual gift giving is efficient but gifts are individually costly. Our main result is that we find almost no evidence for reciprocity. Gifts supplied are unrelated to gifts received. This applies equally to the Poverty Game (player 1 gives to player 2, player 2 gives to player 1) and the Pension Game (player 2 gives to player 1, player 3 gives to player 2, player 4 gives to player 3, etc.). Nevertheless, we do find substantial levels of gift giving. Furthermore, these levels are higher in the Pension Game than in the Poverty Game. © 1998 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Experimental inquiry has produced a substantial body of evidence indicating that strategic decision-making is often at odds with the presumptions of strict gamesmanship. For instance, several experimental studies have shown a substantial degree of cooperation among players in social dilemmas. Both among economists and psychologists, these results have sparked a serious interest, both theoretically and experimentally, in the strength and consequences of ethical values and social norms. In spite of this acknowledged importance, social norms have rarely been the direct focus of research (see, e.g., Kerr, 1995). In this paper we examine more closely the norm of reciprocity. An important and well-recognized feature of reciprocity is that it sometimes allows a more efficient outcome to be achieved in situations with partially conflicting interests. Therefore, reciprocity has been called a “natural law” (Sugden, 1986) and one of the “cements of society” (Elster, 1989). If there is trust that a cooperative choice will be reciprocated, there is room for mutually beneficial cooperation.

A problem which sets itself at the outset is that reciprocity means different things to different authors (Kerr, 1995). Furthermore, some use other labels – like fairness, or interpersonal orientation – for concepts which are very close to what most scholars now call reciprocity. Most authors seem to agree that reciprocity refers to a conditional obligation, not an unconditional one, such as, for instance, under (pure or impure) altruism. Reciprocity refers to a *quid pro quo*; good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished. In addition, most authors take it that reciprocity considerations apply in response to *observed* behavior of others. As Gouldner (Gouldner, 1960, p. 171) puts it: “we owe others certain things because of what they have previously done for us”. Some authors, however, take a somewhat broader perspective and allow reciprocity considerations to be applied in situations where the behavior of others is (yet) unknown (e.g., Rabin, 1993). In these cases people reciprocate the *anticipated* behavior of others.

In the present paper we will concentrate on the first version of reciprocity which relates to responses to observed choices of others. Reciprocity is then only possible if two conditions are met. First, there must be sequentiality in the move structure: one player acts, a second player reacts. Second, the reacting player must be informed about the action of the first player. Budescu et al. (1995) refer to these two conditions as “priority in time” and “priority in information”, respectively. If the player moving second does not know how the first player acted, she can act but not *react*. In our design, we exploit this

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