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Introduction

How will humans decide to address today's "Grand Challenges" of resource depletion, climate change, ethnic and religious conflict, and natural and man-made disasters? Grand Challenge problem-solving will demand an unprecedented degree of cooperative effort and effective policies based on well-grounded theories of human nature and of cooperation. Yet, as I searched through the relevant literatures I was disappointed to find inconsistent ideas and research methods, even disagreements about the kinds of questions we need to be asking about humans and about cooperation.

The key barrier to cooperation research is the lack of coordinated efforts between a camp of collective action theorists and a camp of evolutionary psychologists. Differences are evident between the two camps even in something as basic as the questions: What is the nature of cooperation, and what is the goal of cooperation research? Collective action theorists understand cooperation to be a particularly difficult challenge for humans owing, in large part, to the tension that may arise between individual and group interests. Much of their research and theory-building has aimed at learning how humans confront cooperation problems through the construction of institutions (rules and associated forms of social organization and culture) that can foster cooperative behavior.

Unlike the collective action theorists, to evolutionary psychologists cooperation is not a serious problem because, when required, it arises spontaneously as an expression of a prosocial psychology. Thus evolutionary psychologists ignore

institution-building, and, while some may consider the importance of culture, ultimately they understand cooperation to result from instincts that have a deep evolutionary history in our species. As a result, they pay little attention to the “proximate” time frame of collective action theory, which addresses how humans solve cooperator problems in particular social and cultural settings. To evolutionary psychologists, the key research question pertains to the “ultimate” sources of cooperation, namely, how did humans evolve into a “groupish” species over hundreds of thousands of years of bioevolutionary history?

In this and later chapters of this book I tilt strongly toward collective action theory, but always from a critical perspective toward both collective action and evolutionary psychology. I find collective action theory superior to evolutionary psychology for a number of reasons, chiefly because its theoretical proposals can be evaluated in the light of data gathered from real human experience, a way of thinking and working that is in line with the expectations of scientific epistemology. I find this empirical dimension admirable. At the same time, I fault the collective action literature for its tendency to emphasize Western historical experience. I also fault its lack of ability to link cooperation to the psychological foundations of human thought and social action—the human nature question. Evolutionary psychologists do bring psychological factors into the conversation about cooperation. Yet, I find their highly formal methodologies, which depend heavily on experimental game research and computer simulations, unable to match the complexity of real human psychology or of social experience that we find outside the sterile confines of the lab or the computer screen.

THE LIMITATIONS OF PREVAILING COOPERATION THEORIES AND A CALL FOR REVISION

Some researchers have attempted to overcome the divide between empirical and formal (by which I mean experimental game and computer modeling) approaches to cooperation research by presenting both side by side. However, this strategy has not been successful, in my view, even in the writing of some of the bright lights of cooperation studies such as Russell Hardin, Dennis Chong, and Elinor Ostrom (who won the Nobel prize in economics for her work on the collective management of resources). The difficulty I see is an uneasy tension between an empirical dimension, consisting of narrative accounts drawn from particular ethnographic or historical examples, and a formal dimension, the latter based on mathematical modeling and experimental games. The problem is that narrative and formal modes of presentation are highly dissimilar forms of knowledge that are not well integrated.

Oddly, it is often the case that while the narrative accounts document successful instances of cooperation, formal analyses often point to how cooperation is unlikely. For example, computer simulations show that cooperation is not likely to evolve biologically, a perhaps counterintuitive finding that has engaged the imagination of the evolutionary psychology community and prompted much new research that I describe in chapter 2. Similarly, experimental games show that based on the rational decisions of individuals (a characteristic feature of most experimental game research), highly cooperative outcomes are uncommon. For example, in “public goods games” players selfishly strategize to “free-ride” to gain individual benefit from pooled resources. And, in these games, if cooperation does appear, it usually is not sustained and may even decline within games and across multiple repeated games, again, owing to the free-rider problem. And yet, humans have sometimes built cooperative social formations in the real world, away from the game-playing laboratory, some of which have been sustained over long periods. This says to me that the emphasis placed on experimental games as a path to understanding cooperation may be misplaced.

As I mentioned, in the cooperation literature we often encounter formal analyses interspersed with narrative accounts based on ethnographic or historical sources. Typically I find the latter compelling and useful, while, at the same time, I realize that the description of selected isolated examples fails to realize the important goal of placing cooperation study on a firm foundation of scientific understanding. In spite of this shortcoming, what I find worth noting in these narratives is the way that institutions form a bridge between the individual, who is tempted to behave as an egotistical free-rider, and the collectivity, which thrives on each person’s group-oriented choices; cooperation is more likely to thrive when well-crafted institutions are able to shape individual choice toward cooperative action.

Interestingly, the same process of institution-building may be observed even in some specially designed experimental game scenarios. For example, in one experiment conducted by Elinor Ostrom, James Walker, and Roy Gardner, free-riding declined and cooperation increased when players were able to identify free-riding players and were able to decide on rules for imposing punishments and rewards, illustrating a rudimentary form of institution-building in an experimental context (Ostrom et al. 1992; see also Ostrom and Walker 2000). But such examples are far from edifying when we consider that the cooperating groups in games like this typically consist of a small number of middle-class US college students, often even sharing the same academic major. In the real world, persons attempting to forge cooperation often do so in contexts of vastly larger social scale and in situations of social and cultural heterogeneity in which communication is challenging and contention and opposition present obstacles to institution building and to cooperation.

THE REVISIONIST GOALS OF THIS BOOK

It is in these contexts—large scale and social and cultural heterogeneity—that I situate the theory-building project of this book. In doing so I not only separate my work from the experimental games and computer simulations, but I also depart from the common practice of those cooperation theorists who focus their research efforts on small-group contexts in which, typically, cooperators share social standing and cultural background and in which monitoring, sanctioning, and rewarding, enacted in face-to-face contexts, are the principal strategies to minimize cooperator problems. Cooperation and institution-building in small groups have an important place in cooperation research viewed broadly, yet, I suggest, what is most needed is for cooperation study to shine its light on groups whose large scale renders direct monitoring of behavior problematic and in which not everyone will agree what form cooperation should take or whether it is a good idea at all.

Another goal of mine is to avoid the divide that separates formal analysis and descriptive narrative accounts, to instead unite these two highly separate forms of knowledge. I do this first by suggesting that we unmoor cooperation research from its ties to evolutionary psychology, experimental games, and bioevolutionary simulations. I propose this reorientation not to distance cooperation study from psychology or other biological factors, or quantification. Instead, I will propose ways to build cooperation research on a rich empirical foundation while also aligning it with a branch of psychological research very different from evolutionary psychology, one that studies human cognitive capacity, especially what is called “Theory of Mind.” The study of cognition is important because, as I argue throughout this book, properties of human psychology intersect in important ways with cooperative social action and with institution-building for cooperation.

My revisionist perspective is also a turn away from particularistic descriptive accounts of successful cooperative groups to deploy, instead, the method of systematic cross-cultural comparative research. This method, developed by anthropologists and psychologists, draws from a vast body of ethnographic, archaeological, and historical sources from multiple world areas, cultures, and time periods. By taking a comparative direction, I am able to illustrate the diverse social and cultural patterns within which cooperative social outcomes have been realized. At the same time, the cross-cultural approach provides me, and my coauthor, Lane Fargher, with a method suited to the evaluation of causal theories that identify those factors that inhibit or enhance the possibilities for cooperation.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

In chapter 2 I bring together ethnographic and other anthropological data to show how ideas proposed by evolutionary psychologists concerning cooperation can

be critiqued. I argue that their understanding of humans is a poor fit with what is known, from descriptive accounts, about how humans behave and about the kinds of social groups they build. I follow up on the critique by asking, and, I hope, answering, the question: Why has evolutionary psychology gained so much credibility as a source of cooperation theory?

In chapter 3, I present two building blocks for a cooperation theory: the notion of collective action and associated ideas about the rational human. I also point to how collective action theory is applied by way of institutional analysis. The goal of chapter 4 is to address the seemingly puzzling fact that the discipline of anthropology, my home discipline, has had little role to play in developing or evaluating theories of human cooperation. However, I also point to some recent developments, what I call a “new anthropological imagination,” that will provide a path forward to better incorporate the discipline’s vast store of knowledge and insights into the conversation about cooperation.

The goal of chapter 5 is to provide an additional building block for cooperation theory. Here I suggest that we turn away from evolutionary psychology to instead benefit from recent discoveries by psychologists and primatologists, especially ideas surrounding Theory of Mind cognitive capacity. This will be an essential path to cooperation study that allows for an integration of biological evolutionary questions and the institution-building that is central to collective action.

In the following chapters, to realize my goal to situate cooperation study beyond small-scale and socially homogeneous contexts, I address institution-building that enables broad participation in commercial transactions (chapter 6), how collective action can become a central goal of state-building (chapters 7 and 8) (with Lane Fargher), how collective action is staged across the territorial expanse of a polity and in populous urban centers when established social ecologies and physical infrastructures inhibit the implementation of collective strategies (chapters 9 and 10) (also with Lane Fargher).

In chapter 11 I address the issue of how collective action entails the construction of cultural designs that reimagine the mind and the self in society, inspires aesthetic transitions in forms of representation, and involves innovation in forms of performance and ritual to enhance consensus in the face of social cleavage. In the chapter’s last section I point out that in instances where high levels of cooperation have been established, we see a pattern of reconsideration of the role of religion in civil life.

In chapter 12 I bring together themes developed in previous chapters to place cooperation in a material framework of environment, production, exchange, consumption, and demography. My analysis shows how these factors mutually interact to establish what I identify as a “coactive causal process” that, once set into play, is a spur to demographic, technological, social, and cultural change. In this chapter

I also address the question of causality—what are the initial conditions in which cooperation, and the coactive process, are likely or not likely to be established? The final chapter summarizes the central themes of the book’s project and identifies possible policy implications of an expanded collective action theory.

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