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Abstract

The Impact of Group Size and Returns on Descriptive Norms: An Experimental Study on Public Good Games

Individuals' expectations of others' behavior within groups, known as descriptive norms, can profoundly shape human decisions in social and economic contexts reliant on cooperation. This study, employing incentivized online experiments, investigates how two crucial elements of cooperative environments affect descriptive norms relative to the reference group, namely group size and returns of one's contribution, to resemble real-world scenarios of smaller or larger communities that allow for one's higher or lower capacity to affect outcomes. In the context of public good games, by comparing conditions involving small groups with high returns, large groups with low returns, and large groups with high returns, we aim to discern whether and how much group size and returns from the public good impact the formation of expectations on others' cooperative behavior. Furthermore, we assess the accuracy of participants' beliefs about others' contributions to check whether individuals underestimate or overestimate others' cooperative behavior depending on the exogenously imposed experimental conditions. Lastly, by disentangling the impact between group size and marginal per capita return on descriptive norms, this study can provide implications for enhancing cooperation across diverse social contexts, for instance, from small local communities to large online interactions on social networks.