

Chapter 96

An Examination of Selfish and Selfless Motives: A Review of the Social Psychological and Behavioral Economics Literature

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ABSTRACT

Current behavioral economics/game theory and social psychology literature have been captivated by the idea of altruism and egoism. In large part, these two disciplines have tried to determine the foundation of selfish and selfless behavior, without much result. The current chapter examines the root issues associated with this inquiry and argues for a shift in attention towards factors associated with cooperation. As such, empirical research from both disciplines is presented to show the advancements in relation to identification of these factors. Additionally, the authors offer a possible solution to the fractured literature in the form Weber, Kopelman, and Messick's (2004) dual process model in an effort to merge findings from both disciplines in an attempt progress this line of research.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of selfish and selfless behavior has captured the interest of philosophers, academics, researchers, and practitioners across a variety of disciplines, including biology, mathematics, sociology, psychology, economics, and political science. As a species, we have pondered the antecedents to, benefits of, and meaning behind selfish and selfless thoughts and behaviors. This duality is exemplified by Ayn Rand "greed is good" vs Louis Blanc "to each according to his needs". Why have so many dedicated so much time to these two motives? Perhaps it is because as humans we have encountered both motives

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in our own lives and have found them appealing and valuable. Additionally, it is common for humans to seek information out about a situation in order to understand and predict behavior and outcomes. As such, we are frequently evaluating our own and other people's intentions. Thus our ability to recall past experiences and form predictions of human behavior allows us to also postulate about the benefits and risks inherent in both strategies.

The original intent of this chapter was to provide a review of the literature in selfish and selfless motives and behavior. However, there is a great deal of information from a variety of disciplines that at times seems to contradict itself. In part, this is due to the use of multiple terms for the same process or variable. Thus, the authors of this chapter will first provide a list of terms and their definitions that will be used throughout. These terms and definitions are important as they may help clarify some of the inconsistent results in the cross-discipline literature.

Following the definitions, this chapter will examine selfish and selfless motives and behavior by reviewing the social psychological and behavioral economics literature. In particular, the chapter will examine factors that influence selfish (i.e., non-cooperative) vs. selfless (i.e., cooperative) behavior in both disciplines. The authors will then discuss how the selfish/selfless literature in both disciplines can be synthesized by a dual process model. Finally, the authors will briefly discuss how the literature in this area may benefit business management, politics, and social issues.

BACKGROUND

In order for selfish or selfless behavior to occur there must be at least two individuals, the target of the behavior and the executor of the behavior. Additionally, selfish or selfless behavior can only occur within the exchange of a resource (e.g., time, money).

Social Dilemmas

According to Van Lange, Balliet, Parks, and Van Vugt (2014) a social dilemma is a situation whereby non-cooperation, or a selfish action, is beneficial for the individual in the short-term; however, non-cooperation by the group will be detrimental for the group members in the long run. The dilemma occurs when an individual is forced to choose between their own well-being now (i.e., selfish behavior) or work with the group in a long-term (i.e., selfless) investment of the resource. Similarly, Dawes and Messick (2000) goes further by suggesting that the dilemma occurs when "reasonable and rational" decisions at the individual level lead to less benefits, thus coaxing the individual to act "unreasonably and irrationally" (p. 111). Social dilemmas have been a pervasive issue addressed in religion, philosophy, natural and social sciences, politics and business.

Mixed Motives

Social dilemmas present a problem because of mixed motives. Mixed motives are dueling or inconsistent motives that have the potential to influence an individual in seemingly unpredictable ways. In the case of social dilemmas, an individual must choose between actions based on pure self-interest or actions with the group in mind. According to Van Lange et al.(2014) mixed motives are based off of three main

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