

Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant

On the evolution of reputation: Prosociality or Partner Choice?

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Abstract

Why do humans share valuable resources with others? Why do they engage in acts that benefit others at personal cost? And why are some of these acts directed towards complete strangers? Giving help poses a problem for evolutionary theory because it is a costly behavior that not always results in apparent selection benefits for the donor. However, not only do humans regularly help family members, friends and strangers, but they become more generous when their reputation is at stake (i.e., when others can become aware of their behavior). Two hypotheses aim to explain generosity via reputation: Indirect Reciprocity (IR) proposes that people help others who are helpful to reward virtue—and as a result, donors become receivers when third parties reward their virtuous behavior—whereas Reputation-based Partner Choice (RPC) proposes that people help other helpers to display generous traits, thereby attracting profitable exchange partners. Although both hypotheses account for the costs helpers acquire when investing in others, they differ in one critical point: the givers motivation. The Indirect Reciprocity hypothesis views helping others as evidence of good moral intentions (prosocial view), whereas the Reputation-based Partner Choice hypothesis views helping as an effort to attract candidates for future profitable exchanges (partner choice view). We aim to investigate which of these two hypotheses best explains anonymous helping and reputation-based generosity by conducting a series of economic experiments. Our research will result in several peer-reviewed journal articles, one or more “think pieces” targeting non-scholarly outlets (e.g. , a *NYT* op-ed), a larger grant proposal to the National Science Foundation, will give participating students the opportunity to conduct state-of-the-art experiments, will contribute to our understanding of the roots of unique human features, such as morality, and will hopefully provide tools that will aid in addressing some of the global issues that are largely dependent on human generosity.

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