

Testing theories of cooperation between groups in rural Georgia

October 25 2017, by Bob Yirka



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Max Schaub with Bocconi University in Italy has conducted a study to test theories of cooperation among individuals in groups. In his paper published in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, he describes the study,

the data he collected, and his interpretation of the results.

As Schaub notes, historians and [social scientists](#) alike have worked under certain assumptions regarding [social behavior](#) such as the idea that people in a group will band together for common protection when threatened by an outside force. But, he also notes, very little research has been done to see if such seemingly logical assumptions are actually true. For that reason, he designed and carried out a study that involved people living in small communities in the country of Georgia in the Caucasus. People there live in small rural communities and are a mix of ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis—two groups with a historically shaky relationship.

To test social theories, Schaub asked people from both groups to participate in games designed to bring out feelings of trust in a way that could be measured. In one such [game](#), called "the public goods game," two players contribute to a common pool of resources (Georgian money). During some runs of the game, players were from the same group; in others, they were not. Trust could be measured by how much a player was willing to place in the pot. Another, called the "threat game," involved asking players who had won money in the first game to use it to play a game in which they were paired with someone from their own group in some rounds and with a player from the other group in others—in some cases, they were told which group their partner was from, and in other cases they were not. In any case, a designated player was allowed to take some money from his or her partner to use in playing some versions of the game or the partner was allowed to invest it for protection of their group.

After running the game with multiple players in multiple villages with varying degrees of hostility between groups, Schaub found that true to form, players did tend to band together when threatened by an outsider. But, he notes, he also found an unexpected degree of cooperation

between individuals of opposite groups—a possible move, he suggests, by those who live in the villages to keep the peace.

More information: Max Schaub. Threat and parochialism in intergroup relations: lab-in-the-field evidence from rural Georgia, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2017.1560](https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2017.1560)

Abstract

Competition between groups is widely considered to foster cooperation within groups. Evidence from laboratory experiments hints at the existence of a proximate mechanism by which humans increase their level of cooperation with their ingroup when faced with an external threat. Further work suggests that ingroup cooperation should go along with aggressive behaviour towards the outgroup, although these theories are at odds with others that see high investments in outgroup relations as important means of stabilizing intergroup relations. Surprisingly, few of these arguments have been tested in the field, and existing studies are also limited by the lack of a direct measure of threat perception and aggressive behaviour. This study presents lab-in-the-field results from a rural context where exposure to an ethnic outgroup varies between villages. This context makes it possible to capture levels of threat perception, aggressive behaviour and cooperation without inducing intergroup competition artificially in the laboratory. All concepts are measured behaviourally. In- and outgroup cooperation was measured with a standard public goods game, and a novel experimental protocol was developed that measures perceived threat and aggressive behaviour: the threat game. The results show that levels of perceived threat, ingroup cooperation and aggressive behaviour are higher in regions more strongly exposed to ethnic outsiders. However, exposed regions also show high levels of outgroup cooperation and a concomitant lack of elevated ingroup bias. This pattern is explained by theorizing that communities

show parochial altruism when faced with an ethnic outgroup, but balance aggressive behaviour with cooperative offers to diffuse tensions and to keep open channels of mutually beneficial exchange.

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