Why People Cooperate

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Contents

Illustrations

Figures

Tables

Overview

What connects people to groups, organizations, and societies? Why do people under some conditions throw their lot in with others and act on behalf of collectivities rather than pursuing their personal self-interest, while in other situations it is difficult or even impossible to motivate such cooperative efforts and people intently pursue their personal self-interest? In other words, what are the reasons that people have for cooperating with others when they are in a group, organization, community, or society? Answering this question is central to all of the social sciences.

A natural tendency, widely found in social psychology as well as in sociology, political science, economics, management, law, and public policy, is to view people as primarily relating to groups instrumentally—that is, cooperating to the degree that others are seen as potential sources of material rewards and/or material costs. Rewards and costs can potentially be thought of in many ways, but are frequently framed in terms of the type of rewards and costs associated with monetary gains or losses. Closely associated to this framing of rewards and costs are the physical pleasures associated with obtaining material rewards or the pain of experiencing material losses. One reason for joining with others in groups is to be better able to obtain rewards and avoid costs and to the extent that people are motivated in this way their relationship is linked to the degree to which they view their potential resource exchanges with others as personally beneficial.

This book argues that the core motivation shaping people's relationships with others is not of this material type. While not denying the importance of material rewards and costs, it is argued that for most people, most of the time, the connections dominating their relationship with others are related to social links. And, in particular, it is suggested that the extent to which people are motivated to act on behalf of others, cooperating with groups, organizations, and societies, rather than pursuing self-interested objectives, is defined by the nature and strength of people's social connections to others.

What are the social links that connect people to others? They are long-term connections to groups that are based upon attitudes, emotional connections, shared identities, common values, trust in the character and motivations of others, and a joint commitment to using fair procedures to exercise authority and make decisions. All of these connections share a linkage based upon social ties and are distinct from concerns about personal material gains and losses. Of course, material gains and losses are also important. However, it will be argued

that the core factors shaping cooperation, especially voluntary cooperation, are social. Because of the centrality of social motivations to cooperation it will be further argued that the viability of groups, organizations, and societies is linked to the ability of groups to create and sustain supportive social motivations among their members.

While I argue that social links underlie people's behavior across all types of social settings, the strength of that motivation is often most obvious in situations in which people cooperate when that cooperation makes little sense in terms of the personal rewards and costs they are facing. When the risks of cooperation are high and the likelihood of gains seems remote, it is hard to understand people's willingness to act on behalf of collectivities.

Consider a common problematic situation, risking injury or death to fight for one's country. Although coercion in the form of conscription is common in such situations, and in conflict situations there are risks associated with shirking from battle, as well as with fighting, it is striking how often people are motivated by their social connections to their group to take risks for their group. As an example, in his well-known book about the American revolution David McCullough describes George Washington's efforts to hold the American army together in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds of defeat by the British. Washington did so by appealing to identity and values, arguing that if the soldiers would stay they would "render that service to the cause of liberty, and to your country, which you can probably never do under other circumstance" (McCullough 2005, 286). Similarly, in *Henry V*, William Shakespeare imagines the king, prior to the Battle of Agincourt, appealing to common identity, saying "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers—for whoever sheds his blood with me today shall be my brother" (act 4, scene 3).

Efforts to inspire voluntary commitment of the type outlined are important because the "only obedience worth soliciting and maintaining [from soldiers] is one born of love not fear. It is not money, legislation, or conscription . . . but the people's attachment to their government from the sense of the deep stake they have in such a glorious institution." This type of obedience is "freely given and inspired by love of country" (Samet 2004, 7). Consequently, it is valuable to the group, which does not have to—and in these dire moments cannot—create incentives or credible punishments sufficient to motivate desired behavior. As McCullough makes clear, the revolutionary soldiers who were inspired by Washington's plea well understood that they faced great risks and hardships that many anticipated (correctly) they would not survive. A rational actor would not have stayed. This emphasis on socially motivated commitment and on the willing exercise of voluntary initiative in fighting ("taking risks") for one's country that exists in democratic culture is generally credited with the superior military effectiveness of democratic armies (Reiter and Stam 2002).

Of course, we do not need to focus upon such extreme settings to see the virtue of social motivations. Even the mundane tasks associated with fast food restaurants are difficult to motivate with money. Rather, managers look for "people who can be instructed in the general goal . . . and let loose to achieve it" (Newman 1999, 176) rather than someone who is only motivated to do required tasks—that is, the work for which he is paid. The broad recognition of the value of such socially motivated cooperation is found in scholarly discussions of cooperation in groups, communities, organizations, and societies (Tyler 2000, 2009).

The idea that appeals to common identities and shared values underlie people's willingness to act on behalf of groups is not new. Classic writing in sociology, for example, recognizes the importance of such connections. The Baron Montesquieu (Shackleton 1961), one of the founders of modern sociology, discussed the human passions that underlie effective societies and, in the case of democracies, focused upon "virtue"—the willingness to put aside self-interest to act in ways that help one's society. He contrasted that virtue to fear, which he characterized as the passion underlying the success of despotic states. This focus upon values as a core linkage between people and their communities is also prominent within both Max Weber's writing upon legitimacy—the perception of obligation to obey legal authorities (Swedbert 2006; Tyler 2006a, 2006b; Weber 1968)—and Émile Durkheim's focus upon legal authorities as enforcers of shared moral values (Cotterrell 1999; Jackson and Sunshine 2007; Nisbet 1974). The writings of these sociologists, while different in many ways, share a focus upon the argument that the success of governmental authorities in democratic states is linked to their ability to call upon the people's values as a basis for their actions.

Within psychology a similar focus upon internalized values is central to the work of Sigmund Freud, who was concerned with the importance of the internalization of values—that is, a transformation after which societal norms were not viewed as "external, coercively imposed pressures to which they must submit" (Hoffman 1977, 85) but instead became part of a person's own value system and were followed even in the absence of external authority. Freud focused primarily upon moral values rather than social ties, but his work shares with sociologists the focus on the development of social motivations.

Social scientists have also recognized the centrality of internal values to regulation and governance (Tyler 2006a). As Herbert Kelman puts it, "It is essential to the effective functioning of the nation-state that the basic tenets of its ideology be widely accepted within the population.... This means that the average citizen is prepared to meet the expectations of the citizen role and to comply with the demands that the state makes upon him, even when this requires considerable personal sacrifice" (1969, 278). Political scientists refer to this set of values as a "reservoir of support" for government and society (Dahl 1956; Easton 1965, 1975), and writers in political science have also noted the importance of creating

and maintaining legitimacy as a foundation for the authoritativeness of the state (Lipset 1959). Just as the law needs people to obey it, the state needs people to be willing to act on its behalf by paying taxes, fighting wars, and so on. All of these classic writings view shared social links as a key element shaping the ability of society and government to motivate cooperative actions on the part of the members of groups.

Within psychology the idea of social motivations was extensively elaborated in the work of Kurt Lewin (Gold 1999) and was central to the Research Center for Group Dynamics that came about after that research. In Lewin's classic studies the focus of concern was the behavior of groups of boys. Various types of behavior were considered, including the performance of group tasks (making theatrical masks) and aggression toward others in the group. In the studies, leaders sought to encourage/discourage these behaviors using a variety of styles of motivation, including authoritarian and democratic leadership.

Because his work was inspired by the events in Germany during World War II, Lewin was concerned with understanding when groups are hostile toward people or subgroups within them. Hence he focused his attention upon issues of aggression and scapegoating. In addition, and most relevant to this discussion, Lewin studied the performance of group tasks—in this case whether the boys being studied were engaged in their task of making theatrical masks. The focus on group performance carried forward as an important aspect of the agenda of the Research Center for Group Dynamics inspired by the work of Lewin and his students and it is this aspect of his early work that is reflected in the concept of cooperation as it is presented in this volume.

A key experimental distinction introduced in the Lewinian research approach was between behavior while the leader is present and behavior when the leader is absent. It was found that when the leader of an autocratic group left the room, the behavior of the boys changed (work dropped from occupying 52 percent to occupying 16 percent of the children's time). When the leader was democratic, this change did not occur (i.e., work only dropped from 50 percent to 46 percent of the children's time). So, when work was motivated by democratic means, children worked irrespective of whether there was an authority present to provide them with rewards and/or sanction shirking.

Lewin argues that democratic leadership, which is participatory, engages the internal motivations of the boys, so their behavior is no longer linked to the presence of the external forces represented by the leader. Instead, behavior flows from internal motivations—from what the boys want to do or feel that they ought to do. Further, and central to Lewin's concerns, the boys are not suppressing negative feelings in the presence of the democratic leader, so there is no motivation for them to be aggressive toward other boys when the leader leaves.

The first aspect of this Lewinian approach is the effort in field theory to identify two sources of motivation. The first is external, and reflects the contingencies in the environment. Lewin recognized that the environment shapes behavior by altering the costs and benefits associated with various types of behavior. The second type of behavior is internal, and is shaped by the traits, values, and attitudes of the person. These are the motivational forces developing from sources within the person and reflecting their own desires. In the terminology used in this volume, the motivations are social.

When external contingencies were strong, individual differences in behavior did not emerge in Lewin's groups. Conversely, in the absence of strong external pressures, behavior reflected people's attitudes and values. Hence, Lewin argued that there is a balance between these two types of motivation within any given situation.

As is the case in the Lewinian approach, the argument taken herein is that the engagement of internal, or social, motivations is especially key when the type of cooperation of concern is behavior that will occur outside of the surveillance of authorities. Such behavior is "voluntary" in the sense that it is not a reflection of the contingencies of the external environment. The leader is not present and cannot either reward or punish behavior. Hence, the behavior that occurs is a more direct reflection of the internal attitudes and values of the boys.

This analysis is broadly framed using the Lewinian field theory model in several ways. First, as is true with the work of Lewin, this analysis of people's actions views behavior as a reflection of two factors: external (instrumental) and internal (social) motivations. Second, and again as articulated by Lewin, the key issue is the mix of these motivations. Finally, this analysis distinguishes between those behaviors that are and those that are not voluntary—that is, behaviors that do and do not occur in settings in which behavior is being observed and those who engage in it are aware that the incentives and sanctions they receive will be shaped by their actions.

While the idea of social motivation has a rich history, in recent decades the focus of attention has shifted strongly toward instrumental motivations. Within the social sciences as well as in law, management, and public policy, discussions of organizations and organizational design have emphasized the use of incentives and sanctions as mechanisms for shaping behavior. Coincident with this focus a large and sophisticated literature on decision making has explored the many heuristics and biases that influence people's efforts to define and pursue their material goals. The argument presented herein will be for an expansion of the factors considered when efforts are made to understand the factors shaping behavior in social settings.

Further, it will be suggested that the additional social factors that emerge as important in such an examination point to a different approach to many social issues and societal problems. The reason to read this book and to adopt the perspective it advocates is that it provides a different approach to a number of societal issues than has dominated discourse in recent decades. That new approach is to focus on creating and maintaining social links between people and groups, and to base efforts to encourage cooperation on those links rather than seeking to motivate cooperation instrumentally through providing rewards or threatening punishments.

An instrumental approach involves the concentration of resources into the hands of authorities, who can then credibly reward and punish desired and undesired behavior. In contrast, an approach based upon social motivations focuses upon creating and sustaining social links between people and groups. This is a long-term strategy that begins with socialization into groups and continues with the exercise of authority in ways that support and enhance social ties.

In any given situation, instead of seeking to shape behavior by promises of reward or threats of punishment group authorities appeal to social motivations, including attitudes, identities, and values. In making these appeals the goal is to encourage people within groups to cooperate because of their own internal desires and feelings of appropriateness. When people do so, the group does not need to motivate them with promises of reward or monitor their behavior for deference to group needs. People want to do what benefits the group and do so willingly based upon their social links to the group.

In this volume I will argue that too little attention is currently paid to social motivations, which I suggest are more effective in motivating cooperation. I will present evidence to support this argument from studies in management, regulation, and governance. While it is generally true that social motivations are important, there has been a general shift in the type of behavior that we want from the members of groups that has heightened the value of a focus on social motivations. This shift is from compliance to cooperation. It is illustrated by the case of regulation. In the legal arena the traditional concern has been with motivating compliance with the law. When I wrote *Why People Obey the Law* (1990) the legal literature focused on one primary goal for the members of society: compliance with the law. This includes compliance in the context of the particular decisions made by legal authorities, such as judges and police officers, and compliance with the law in everyday life. In both cases, a key societal objective is to be able to bring people's behavior in line with the law (Tyler 2006b). A good citizen was viewed as someone who obeyed the law.

Today the view of what is desired from citizens is more complex. First, the problems of compliance have been more widely recognized. To gain compliance

society must deploy resources toward surveillance to catch rule-breakers, and toward prisons to punish them. It is preferable to gain voluntary deference. Such deference is shaped by social motivations.

And these goals for citizens extend broadly. In the arena of crime it is viewed as desirable to have public cooperation in the production of social order. The police need the help of communities to identify criminals and report crimes and to help police communities. Neither of these forms of cooperation is effectively motivated by the risk of sanctions. For example, if a crime is occurring and citizens do not report it there is little realistic risk that they will ever be identified or sanctioned for this lack of cooperation. Similarly, failure to attend a neighborhood meeting about crime and community problems will typically go unnoticed. In other words, while compliance with rules is potentially motivated by the fear of detection through ongoing surveillance by legal authorities, such surveillance is not directed at—and is unlikely to be effective in—detecting the failure to voluntarily come forward when there are opportunities to help the police.

Because cooperation is important, a change is needed in the type of motivation that is the focus of regulatory efforts. It is important to have the type of motivation that leads to voluntary deference and cooperation, and that motivation is social. Social motivations lead not only to compliance but to voluntary deference to rules and to more general willing cooperation.

Changing our behavioral focus from compliance to voluntary acceptance and cooperation leads to a change in the type of motivation that we need to create among community residents. The old focus has been upon creating and maintaining a credible risk of being punished for rule-breaking behavior and/or demonstrating competence by controlling crime. The new focus needs to be upon the internal motivational forces that lead people to undertake voluntary actions without calculating the risks of punishment for wrongdoing or the potential personal gains for cooperation. People need to have an alternative basis for their actions. I will argue that social motivations are this alternative basis.

While this example has focused upon regulation and people's connections to the law and legal authorities, this volume considers three areas: work organizations and worker behavior (management), the law and law-related actions (regulation), and communities and activities related to political behavior (governance). Although these are not all the possible group settings, these areas are three key arenas in which people's willingness to cooperate is central to the effectiveness of relevant institutions. My overall argument, supported by data from studies in these three areas, is that in each social motivations are central to cooperation—especially to voluntary cooperation.

SECTION ONE

Introduction