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A New Paper on Cooperation

Posted on [November 12, 2010](#) by [Robert Kurzban](#)

The corrected proof version of a [paper](#) in *Evolution and Human Behavior* that I think is likely to cause something of a stir was posted yesterday in the ‘articles in press’ section of the journal’s web site. (There is a [version](#) on the web, but I don’t know if it is the same as the corrected proof. My remarks below are for the posted version.)

The paper is titled, “Sixteen common misconceptions about the evolution of cooperation in humans” and was written by Stuart West and two of his colleagues at Oxford. I very strongly recommend it to anyone interested in these sorts of issues. It pretty much goes without saying that a paper that talks about 16 ways that people are wrong is fairly likely to rub some the wrong way; the fact that the paper is about an area that generates a lot of, er, let’s call it “animated” debate - cooperation in humans - adds fuel to the fire. The paper is likely to provoke a great deal of discussion.

One key sentence in the paper is this one: “Cooperation is defined as a behaviour which provides a benefit to another individual (recipient), and which is selected for because of its beneficial effect on the recipient” Note that second part of this sentence, which denies that it is only the *effect* of the behavior’s that matters; this part says that, as a matter of definition, the *reason* that the behavior was selected matters. This second part is important, as it defines cooperation in an adaptationist framework. Some will, I believe, find this irritating, but my own view is that this is quite sensible. They use the following example to illustrate their point: “when an elephant produces dung, this is beneficial to the elephant (emptying waste), and also beneficial to a dung beetle that comes along and uses that dung; but it is not useful to call this cooperation.” The exclusion of such cases is an important advantage of adaptationist definitions. (Tooby and Cosmides [made this argument](#) in their paper about friendship; Peter DeScioli and I [made this argument](#) in the context of punishment.) If one were to use only the *effect* of behavior - the dung beetle is better off - then elephant pooping would not be excluded from the definition. (I’ve mentioned this issue [before](#).)

What are the misconceptions? West et al. talk about cases in which people have tried to redefine various terms, and spend a fair bit of time on the distinction between proximate and ultimate causation. They also talk about kin selection, so-called ‘green beard’ genes, and multi-level selection. A good fraction of the paper is given over to comments on “strong reciprocity,” using it as an example of the confusion of ultimate and proximate explanations. That is, they note that strong reciprocity is a proximate claim - a set of “predispositions” - but then is advanced as an ultimate explanation for cooperation. Indeed, they spend a fair bit of time talking about strong reciprocity, even giving it its own misconception, number 14: “Human cooperation in economic games requires the novel evolutionary force of strong reciprocity.”

I think that that this paper will generate a lot of discussion and, again, I strongly recommend it for people keeping tabs on these debates.

2 Responses to *A New Paper on Cooperation*



Nick says:

November 15, 2010 at 6:40 am

Hey Rob. Not related, but I read this today and thought you might be interested:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/this-is-your-brain-on-metaphors>

Great blog, by the way.

[Reply](#)



H. J. Smith says:

December 1, 2010 at 5:33 pm

Thanks for bringing this discussion to my attention. I read the referenced “article in press” and your article on punishment. Since I work in the field of criminal justice, I found your article on punishment particularly interesting.

Please keep us posted on the inevitable dialogue that this paper will produce.

[Reply](#)

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