Agency and structure

The role of individual social values and material interests in changing contribution rules to, and benefits from, a collective good

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Societies heavily depend upon high levels of cooperation towards a collective. Both formal rules, i.e., explicit regulations formally enforced by a third party, and informal rules, i.e., social norms, structure those cooperative interactions of individuals within groups by guiding individual and collective action. Unfortunately, rules can allow for a breakdown of cooperation, leaving the collective worse off. Or they prescribe an unequal division of the benefits of cooperation, leaving some members of the collective with less benefits from cooperation. This dissertation investigated whether individuals attempt to change those rules, with a focus on change attempts which would ensure cooperation and an equal allocation of benefits within teams of individuals.

While earlier research typically focused on individual attempts to change the informal rules, this dissertation examined individual attempts to change the formal rules. We incorporated the influence of the informal rules on team interactions in our analyses of formal rule change attempts. We also included the heterogeneity of the individuals making up the teams in which cooperative interactions take place with respect to their social values and their interest in providing the team collective.

Our analyses thus focused on the micro level of individual interactions and institutional change. We took a bottom-up perspective by applying an experimental method. This enabled us to investigate the causal mechanisms in a laboratory-controlled setting, and to consider a formal rule both as the dependent variable to be explained and as the structure which constrains or allows for change.
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Jacqueline van Breemen
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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................... viii

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1
1.1. Studying individual attempts to change the rules ................. 1
1.2. Formal rules structuring contributions to, and benefits from, the team collective ............................. 3
1.3. Securing cooperation and an equal allocation of benefits .......... 4
1.4. Individual motivations: self-interest and social values .......... 5
1.5. The interaction between formal rules and contribution norms .... 8
1.6. Bringing it all together: rules, norms, and individual motives 9
1.7. From a rule change attempt to an actual rule change ............ 10
1.8. Empirical approach .................................................. 11
1.9. Overview of the remaining chapters ................................ 17

CHAPTER 2
SECURING COOPERATION: INDIVIDUAL ATTEMPTS TO CHANGE THE CONTRIBUTION RULES 21
Abstract ................................................................. 21
2.1. Introduction ....................................................... 22
2.2. Social values and social norms in relation to contribution rules 24
2.2.1. A conflict between individual social values and the rules ........ 24
2.2.2. A rule change attempt is preceded by a norm change attempt 26
2.2.3. Communication facilitates an actual rule change .............. 28
2.3. Method ........................................................... 29
2.4. Results ........................................................... 37
2.5. Concluding discussion .............................................. 43

CHAPTER 3
UNEQUAL BENEFITS AND COOPERATIVE ENVIRONMENTS: DO PROSOCIALS MIND THE GAP? 47
Abstract ................................................................. 47
3.1. Introduction ....................................................... 48
3.2. Unequal benefits and rule change attempts ......................... 50
3.2.1. Individual heterogeneity of interests in providing the team collective ................................. 50
3.2.2. The moderating effect of individual social values .......... 51
3.3. Method ........................................................... 53
3.4. Results ........................................................... 59
3.5. Concluding discussion .............................................. 63