Agency and structure

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

van Breemen, J.A.

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Download date: 29 Apr 2020
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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
The research reported in this thesis was partially funded by a Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research grant (NWO ASPASIA-VIDI grant no. 015.007.048) awarded to Klarita Gërxthani, which is gratefully acknowledged.

Design & Layout by Grefo Prepress, Eindhoven
Printed by Drukhetnu.nl, Enschede

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PROMOTIECOMMISSIE:

Promotores: Prof. dr. B.G.M. Volker
*Universiteit van Amsterdam*

Prof. dr. K. Gërxhani
*European University Institute*

Overige leden: Prof. dr. M. Kremer
*Universiteit van Amsterdam*

Prof. dr. J.H. Sonnemans
*Universiteit van Amsterdam*

Prof. dr. G.A. van Kleef
*Universiteit van Amsterdam*

Prof. dr. ir. V.W. Buskens
*Universiteit Utrecht*

Dr. S. Vogt
*University of Oxford*

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
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