

Competition and Cooperation

1. In this lecture we shall apply the principles of evolutionary psychology to the logic of cooperation and competition in the human species. That is we shall explore how evolutionary *biology* can shed insight on *sociology*. In fact E.O. Wilson, who founded the discipline of evolutionary psychology originally referred to it as “sociobiology.”
2. In literate modernity, philosophers argued that human beings are by nature autonomous individuals who seek to optimize their happiness. Civilization was said to transcend this “state of nature” through the recognition that (1) cooperation, though it can come with a short term cost, is often a long term win-win for both parties, and that we all benefit from rules that regulate competition by protecting us from taking advantage of one another. Society, it was argued, was founded on individuals gathering together to draw up and agree upon a common set of rules, a “social contract.”
3. The United States’ constitution was one of the first examples of this theory of human nature put into practice. (1) Everyone had a voice in its formulation through their chosen representatives at the Constitutional Convention and all had the opportunity to consent, again through their chosen representatives in its ratification by each state. Those who did not consent with the upon terms of the contract could argue their case, to seek to change its terms, or if all else failed, they could simply leave. Thus all citizens of the United States were voluntary citizens.
4. This political “state of nature” however does not square with the evolutionary history of our species that we have been tracking this semester. As we have seen, individuality is not a fact of nature, but an achievement, (1) indeed one only feasible with the rise of literacy. We have already seen how (2) oral culture is communal, and that communal life is not optional, but necessary for survival, indeed that even most of our desires are mimetic, imitations of the desires of others. Historically, individuality evolved from communal life, not communal life from individual consent. From an evolutionary perspective, (3) communal belonging and mutual cooperation is humanity’s “state of nature” not autonomous individuality or “savage” dog-eat-dog competition. In fact as humanity and its technologies have co-evolved, there never was a “state of nature” prior to technology

5. Evolutionary psychology explains human behavior not in terms of the optimization of individual happiness but rather in terms of what best optimizes the propagation of a given individual's genes. From this perspective the question before us is (1) when and where is cooperation most likely to occur, when and where can should rather expect competition, or even violence.
 - a. (2) Cooperation is most likely when we share genes with those we help, for then we are still indirectly helping a percentage of our own genes to spread. In fact parents will even risk their lives to protect their children in whom they have invested their genes. Especially mothers, for females can only have so many children. Females especially need to protect their investment. Or better put, those that do, have more offspring survive to reproduce and spread their original mother's genes.
 - b. (3) This is referred to as "kinship" or "hard-core" altruism for it is relatively unconditional, dependent more upon the degree of genetic proximity than upon individual advantage. As many of you wrote in your first reflection papers: family is sacred.
 - c. (4) Thus parents are devoted to their children. (5) What about brothers and sisters? Here again we share half of their genes, so we have an interest in their success; about half as much as in our own, so sibling rivalry can still be a thing.
 - d. (6) What about cousins? We share a quarter of your genes with them, so we are not likely to be *as* altruistic towards them, but they are not nothing. They are still blood.
 - e. (7) What about those who are not related to you at all? When can we expect cooperation with them?
 - i. (8) When we can trust them to reciprocate. Then we are both better off. This is referred to as "reciprocal" or "soft-core" altruism. Rather than a logic of self-sacrifice, soft core altruism is the logic of long term mutual self-interest.
 - ii. (9) In fact cooperation is the very definition of who counts as an ally, or a "friend."

- iii. (10) Cooperation also extends to neighbors, whose reputation for reliable reciprocation can be learned, and rewarded or punished in light of our interactions with them
- 6. Cooperation is so valuable because it is not a zero-sum game. If I help you when it is easy for me but of great value to you, and you reciprocate by helping me when it is easy for you but of great value to me, we both end up better off.
 - a. (1) For example, you are a great cook but are lonely. On the other hand, I hate to cook, but enjoy your company. I might offer to come over and clean the dishes if you cook the meal. We would both end up better off.
 - b. In other words, I scratch your back and you scratch mine. For neither of us can scratch our own.
 - c. But cooperation does entail risk. A risk that the other person won't reciprocate when it is their turn.
 - i. (2) What if, after dinner, I "suddenly remember" I have to finish a big paper and have to leave right away, before I have a chance to wash the dishes. What happens then?
 - 1. Suckered once, shame on you. Suckered again, shame on me.
 - ii. On the other hand, what if you manage to dirty every pot and pan in the kitchen and still expect me to do all the dishes? Am I going to be eager to do this again soon?
- 7. Thus the logic of cooperation:
 - a. (1) We are both better off if we cooperate and help one another. but (2) we need to keep score of favors given and received. On the other hand, (3) we would each do even better if we do not return the other's help and still get away with it.
 - b. The general strategy for cooperation is a (4) "tit for tat" strategy:
 - i. (5) Since cooperation benefits us so much on first encounter, if its someone you know, cooperate. After all you will be better off if they do follow through and reciprocate.
 - ii. Thereafter imitate how they treat you. (6) If they reciprocate, cooperate again. (7) If they betray you then punish them and don't trust them again. (8) one way to reward or punish is to target the other party's reputation.

8. As already mentioned, you can improve the odds of successful cooperation by learning the other's reputation.
 - a. (1) Having a good reputation then is important. More people will cooperate with you if you have a reputation of being a good friend to have.
 - b. (2) On the other hand if you do not know another's reputation, in other words if it is a stranger asking for a favor, and especially if you have no way to punish them if they fail to reciprocate, because you will never see them again, be wary. On the other hand, you can cheat a stranger at no cost to your reputation.
 - i. So do not trust strangers. Stranger danger. But neighbors, treat them as you would want them to treat you back.
 - c. (3) Now having a reputation as someone who returns favors is so valuable that it pays to advertise how cooperative you are, what a good friend you make. It also pays to exaggerate to the extent you can get away with it.
 - d. (4) Consequently one finds more cooperation in small towns, where almost everyone is our neighbor and everyone knows one another's reputation, vs (5) big cities, where almost everyone we encounter is a stranger. (6) Let alone if we live in a "rough neighborhood" where we can expect people to try to exploit us. In this last kind of environment knowing who I can trust is even more important. (7) Gangs evolve as oasis of kinship level altruism in an otherwise exploitative environment. (8) So too ethnic identity can be more important as a marker of who you can trust and who you shouldn't.
9. Now I mentioned that reciprocal altruism depends on keeping track of favors given and received. But its advantageous to "cook the books".
 - a. That is (1) exaggerate the value of favors we give, so the other feels they own you even more, and downplay the value of favors received from others so we don't own them so much. (2) So too excuse failure to reciprocate as unintentional.
 - b. (3) Now we are going to be more persuasive in marketing ourselves if we believe our own pitch. Sincerity is a very persuasive strategy. (4) We have evolved to "rationalize" bad behavior, to deceive ourselves in this regard.

- i. (5) When we do short change someone, you are likely to treat it as an unintended mistake, or (6) minimize the hard done, or (7) even blame the victim, that is scapegoat them.
- ii. If all else fails, feel guilty when caught, to salvage your reputation by demonstrating to others that this is not who you really are.

10. Status differentials also factor in here.

- a. (1) If we can persuade people that we have higher status, they will be more likely to do us a favor. Why? Because they think it will be easier for us to do something that means a lot to them.
- b. (2) Having a high status friend also means more people will want to be our friends too, in the hope that we will be willing to “use our connections” to help them.
- c. (3) Thus, try to be friends with high status people. Don’t be quick to drop them. kiss up. Give them a pass if they cheat you a little. (4) And let it be known that you have such higher status friends. Name drop.
- d. On the other hand, (5) lower status friends need you more than you need them. which means that they will be likely to do you more favors than it costs you to do for them. In fact you can probably get away with exploiting them a little. But if they betray you, punish them severely, or cut them loose, you don’t need them that much.
- e. (6) In general, humans have evolved temptations to kiss up and kick down.

11. How does gender plays into the role of status in cooperation: Let’s start with males:

- a. As we have already seen, (1) high status makes them more competitive in mating. Can get more beautiful and younger mates.
 - i. (2) In fact if they are high status and wealthy enough some females may be willing to share them with another woman, ie to be a mistress on the side. Better to be Bill Gates’ mistress than the sole wife of a minimum wage worker.
 - ii. (3) Which means that high status males may expect beautiful females to *want* to have an affair with them. High status males may be tempted to think they can exchange sex for favors without cost, as has been exposed recently in the “Me, too” phenomenon.

- b. (4) On the other hand, to the extent that high status males get more than their fair share of females, low status males may lose out altogether. (5) Having nothing to lose then, they may be more likely to cheat, ie (6) to steal resources to improve their chances, (7) or even to engage in opportunistic mating—that is, rape. Low status single men will also be more likely (8) to want to disrupt even destroy the social order in which they have no stake. Thus evolutionary psychology would expect such low status single males to be a ripe market for terrorist recruitment.

12. What about females?

- a. (1) As high status males get more than their fair share of the reproductive lives (ie youth) of females, women are a scarcer commodity for the rest. (2) This means that women can be more likely to marry up the social ladder. (3) Which also means that their brothers have a stronger interest in who they marry, (4) as a high status male may be able to do *them* favors they would not otherwise have a chance at. Thus low status brothers will be vigilant that their sister's husband remains faithful and treat their sister right. A low status brother may even want to warn his sister's boyfriend that if the boyfriend betray his sister he will have the brother to deal with.
- b. (5) Thus particularly among lower status males, there will be a strong interest in defending their sister's honor. They may even go so far as to punish a sister who “dishonors” the family by courting or having sex with males of even lower status than themselves.

13. In the next video lecture, we turn to wider networks of cooperation and incentives to protect and promote networks beyond even their effect on the propagation of any given individual's genes. For example, network theory has introduced a more counter-intuitive form of altruism, altruistic punishment, where an individual punishes someone exploiting their network, even at some cost to the competitiveness of their own genes within that network so as to protect the network as a whole upon which their genetic propagation depends.