

# United we stand: When cooperation butts heads with competition

**Phrases such as “survival of the fittest” and “every man for himself” may seem to accentuate the presence of political and social competition in American culture; however, there obviously are similar instances of inter- and intra-group conflict across almost all known organisms. So what makes competition so prevalent for life and why does it sometimes seem to be preferred over cooperation?**

Psychologists Nir Halevy, Gary Bornstein and Lilach Sagiv from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem have taken a step closer to answering those questions with a recent study exploring individual preferences for inter-group conflict or intra-group cohesiveness in humans.

Participants were divided into two groups and presented with a set of 10 tokens, each worth two money units (MU), and a scenario: each individual can contribute any number of tokens into two pools, the within-group pool (pool W) or the between-group pool (pool B). Contributing a token to pool W increases everyone’s stash, including the contributor, by one MU without affecting the other group, whereas contributing to pool B adds one MU to everyone’s collection in the in-group and subtracts one MU from the out-group’s supplies.

Therefore, the participants have a clear choice to either contribute to the in-group without harming anyone, or actively choosing to damage the out-group.

Previous studies on the topic indicated that individuals would often choose to compete with any opposing group; however, the game used to measure those studies failed to give participants the option of leaving the other group alone. Specifically, the only choices were to keep all of the tokens or to give tokens to the in-group while subtracting tokens from the out-group. By adding the new option of keeping all money within the in-group, the psychologists allowed participants to strengthen their own group without damaging the other.

In the authors’ words: “Contributing to pool W clearly indicates a cooperative motivation to benefit the in-group without hurting the out-group. Contributing to pool B, in contrast, indicates an aggressive motivation to hurt the out-group, or a competitive motivation to increase the in-group’s advantage over the out-group.”

The results, which appear in the April issue of *Psychological Science* surprisingly reveal that the individuals preferred contributing to pool W, choosing cooperation over competition, when given the option to do so. Furthermore, those individuals who were allowed to consult with one another before the game showed an increase in their preference to cooperate.

It appears, therefore, that participants much preferred avoiding conflict when given the option to strengthen their own group instead. But this still leaves behind yet another question of group dynamics: why, if humans prefer cooperation when given that option, are there so many instances of competition shown in everyday life?

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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