

Leader of the Packed:
The Benefits and Costs of Perspective Taking in Group Endeavors

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Abstract: Group members often reason egocentrically, both when allocating responsibility and when assessing the fairness of group outcomes. Two experiments – one involving co-authors and another negotiators – demonstrate that these egocentric judgments are reduced when participants “unpack” their group members. However, these experiments also demonstrate that unpacking can have deleterious effects on behavior. Unpacking other group members’ thoughts may invoke cynical theories about how selfishly or egoistically other group members will behave, leading to more selfish or egoistic behavior by participants in return. This suggests that one common perspective taking approach to conflict resolution can have unfortunate consequences on actual behavior.

Why do we claim too much credit?

- People claim more responsibility for group outcomes than is logically possible (Ross & Sicoly, 1979)
- One’s own contributions are often more available than others’ (Ross & Sicoly, 1979)
- “Packing” others collectively into “the rest of the group” (Savitsky, Van Boven, Epley, & Wight, 2003)

How to reduce egocentrism?

- “Unpacking” collaborators by thinking about each individually (Savitsky et al., 2003)
- Perspective taking – considering the situation from the other’s point of view
- Increasing availability of others’ contributions relative to one’s own should reduce egocentric responsibility allocations

Costs of perspective taking?

- Naïve cynicism – We expect others to be more motivationally biased than they actually are (Kruger & Gilovich, 1999)
- Misperceptions of self-interest – We assume others are concerned with self-interest (Miller, 1999)

Hypothesis:

Perspective taking will...

- *Decrease* egocentric judgments about fair allocations of responsibility or resources
- *Increase* selfish behavior and dissatisfaction with the group members

Study 1: Authors

Authors of journal articles estimate their contribution to the paper and desire for future collaboration

- Packed condition: Report their own contribution only
- Unpacked condition: Report own contribution and contributions of co-authors

Results

- Unpacking reduced egocentric allocations of responsibility, with the unpacked groups (123%) claiming less credit than the packed groups (140%), $t(195) = 2.04, p < .05$.
- The correlation between claimed responsibility and desire to initiate a new project with the group was $-.09$ for the packed groups, and $-.40$ for the unpacked groups, $z = 2.29, p < .03$
- This suggests that unpacking reduced desire to work with the group again in the future among those who felt they contributed more to the project

Study 2: Negotiators

Simulation of a social dilemma based on actual crisis of ocean overharvesting in which representatives of fishing associations meet to discuss strategies for harvest reduction

- Packed condition: Report what is fair for own association to harvest
- Unpacked condition: Asked to think about situation from perspective of other associations, then report what is fair for all groups to harvest

Results

- Discussion helped to reduce egocentric allocations of responsibility for the packed condition only $F(1, 38) = 21.26, p < .001$
- Despite claiming they deserved less of the harvest, the unpacked groups actually took a greater percentage of the possible harvest (60%) than the packed groups (47%), $t(38) = 5.57, p < .001$
- These higher harvesting levels amounted to a smaller percentage of available profits for the unpacked groups (62%) compared to the packed groups (84%), $t(38) = 5.41, p < .001$

Conclusions

- Perspective taking (unpacking) reduces self-serving judgments of responsibility allocations
- Desire to work with group in future depends on amount of overclaiming and unpacking
- Perspective taking may, in some cases, decrease egocentric biases but increase self-interested behavior

References

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