

Behavioral sociology outside the lab: studying cooperation and cohesion with panel-based interactive experiments

Aim

To disentangle the opportunities and threads of cooperation and social cohesion dynamics to deal with societal challenges using the novel methodology of behavioral experiments embedded in panel surveys

Theoretical background

Our society has been hit with a number of crises in recent years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate crisis. Arguably, our ability to address such crises is crippled by our inability to understand the complex behavioural processes that underly the social aspects of these crises. Progress in providing actionable insights has been slow because the underlying social processes are inherently *complex*, with many deeply intertwined mechanisms. Particularly challenging is the role that *social cohesion* plays as both a cause and a consequence in these processes. For instance, current levels of political polarization, a symptom of lack of cohesion, pose significant barriers to achieving collective action. At the same time, both the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate change debate underscore how these critical issues and the policies addressing them can also themselves become *sources* of intense polarization, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between cooperative behavior and social cohesion: Effective collective action to tackle societal challenges depends on a foundation of strong social cohesion, while efforts at collective action, in turn, influence the degree of social cohesion. Consequently, this creates a dynamic and complex system of social processes with numerous interdependent factors, making outcomes difficult to anticipate and raising the potential for policy interventions to yield unintended consequences.

Research design

Behavioral social experiments form a powerful and well-established way to disentangle such intertwined mechanisms in complex social situations by enabling a combination of causally varying social context while zooming in on micro-mechanisms (Falk & Heckman, 2009). However, traditional lab experiments also have serious limitations. This project seeks to address the methodological limitations that both scholars and policymakers encounter in evaluating the behavioral components of these complex dynamics. By leveraging novel infrastructure to conduct large-scale behavioral experiments (e.g., Centola, 2010) embedded in panel surveys, we combine the strengths of experimental research and panel surveys, overcoming the limitations of traditional lab experiments.

Literature

Falk, A., & Heckman, J. J. (2009). Lab Experiments Are a Major Source of Knowledge in the Social Sciences. *Science*, 326(5952), 535–538.

Centola, D. (2010). The spread of behavior in an online social network experiment. *Science*, 329(5996), 1194-1197.

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