INTRODUCTION

Cooperation and Social Policy: Integrating Evidence into Practice – introduction to the issue

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How can research evidence on cooperation best be exploited to the advantage of social policy? In this issue we bring together behavioural researchers with expertise in cooperation and social policy practitioners to work together on a series of issues in social policy for which the major challenge is for the players involved to cooperate for the common good. In this introductory paper I first explain the nature of cooperation, its potential for the collective good and the obstacles to achieving that potential. After a brief review of behavioural research applications to social policy, I summarise evidence for the many factors that promote cooperation in experimental and real world settings and that might be employed in the policy arena. These factors represent the influence of a small number of motivational influences including reciprocity, fairness, reputation, group identification and social norms. Analysis of the research findings reveals ways in which the real world difficulties in promoting action for the common good might be overcome. Evolutionary behavioural analysis adds additional insights useful for policy development. Beyond the value of the individual contributions the issue as a whole has the potential to uncover new understanding of the relationships between policy problems and their solutions.

Key words cooperation • interdependence • reciprocity • reputation • social policy

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[T]he major conclusion in the literature [is] that direct and sustained relationships between researchers and policymakers are the optimal method for promoting the use of research in policy-making.

French (2019: 163), from his wide-ranging review of the evidence-based policy literature
Making the most of cooperation research for social policy

For millennia we have persecuted outsiders. For centuries communities have degraded the environment. For decades, the temperature at the surface of the earth has been rising dangerously due to human activity. As citizens, organisations and nations the countless decisions we make affecting the welfare of ourselves and others may fail to advance the public good. What is it about human behaviour that results in these existential hardships and is there a common logic by which we might do better in eluding them?

While each of these problems has its particular causes, a common thread that unites them is that the action of each participant has consequences for all, and the pursuit of personal gain is often at odds with the public good. The logic underlying these problems is that of the social dilemma and success in solving them means finding ways to replace self-interest with cooperation. Sometimes, of course, a way is found. The Coupled Model Intercomparison Project brings dozens of teams of climate change modellers together to work on standardised tasks (The Economist, 2020a) and the major vaccine-producing pharmaceutical companies are cooperating now in the search for a vaccine against SARS–COV-2 (The Economist, 2020b).

For the past few decades psychologists, anthropologists, economists and evolutionary biologists have been working to understand the nature of human cooperation, through empirical and theoretical studies. And, as I shall describe in a later section, a great deal of experimental work, and work in real world settings, has revealed the influences on social decisions that can make the difference between the failures and successes described above.

In this issue we investigate what the scientific study of human cooperation can offer to social policy by presenting the fruits of close collaboration between behavioural scientists and policy workers. By bringing practitioners from these two disciplines together to co-author papers on a range of policy issues we aim to identify empirical findings and concepts from the research that can be applied to solving societal problems, having carefully considered the differences between the laboratory and the real world as settings for behavioural decision making.

Cooperation has enormous potential for improving human welfare at all scales from the personal to the global by pooling the components of success for a joint enterprise: physical power, resources, skills, knowledge, experience, social support and social influence. And not just by offering more of the same but by the division of labour, combining complementary aptitudes and resources. However, many societal dilemmas arise when citizens act alone to make personal decisions immediately affecting only their own welfare but in the longer term playing a small part in the welfare of a wider community. Responsible energy use, for example, or vaccination decisions. At the global political level – such as in the response to climate change – decisions are reached by negotiation but the same logic applies. Here the consequences of action are generally clearer than they are for the individual citizen but the stakes are much higher.

In all these contexts cooperation is a fragile commodity, vulnerable to exploitation from those who take without contributing, setting personal advantage over the public good. This means that social policy must recognise the importance of the psychological processes underlying the dilemmas inherent in individual decision making in many areas of public and political life (Van Lange et al, 2014). These processes follow from our interdependence, the fact that the consequences of our actions
for other individuals sit within the wider set of the decisions of those others. The nature of this interdependence has been the subject of analysis by social psychologists (Kelley et al, 2003; Balliet and Van Lange, 2013a; Van Lange et al, 2014) and also by evolutionary biologists seeking to understand the origins of our cooperative nature (Roberts, 2005; Aktilis et al, 2018; Barclay, 2020).

As an example of this interdependence, consider the individual who dumps their waste on someone else’s land, or the nation whose pollution causes damage far beyond its borders. In both cases the actor gains an immediate net benefit by choosing to pollute. The single polluting act may cause little harm and consequently fail to generate empathetic or ethical engagement in the decision. Reflection, however, reveals that the same choice confronts others with unwanted waste, and this is where the problem lies. Although the polluting act is beneficial for the individual actor whatever others do, if all parties show restraint they would all be better off than if they had all polluted. This is the essence of a social dilemma (Van Lange et al, 2014: Chapter 1) and its inevitable conflict between individual and public good is the raison d’être for this journal issue. When the ‘selfish’ path is followed the result is what Hardin (1968) dubbed ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, and I place ‘selfish’ in inverted commas here since an enlightened self-interest by all concerned would lead to restraint and a better outcome for all.

This is a good point at which to formalise things and provide a definition of cooperation, by which I mean here an action that benefits another individual or social group with either a benefit or cost to the actor. I adopt this definition, which follows practice in the evolutionary sciences (West et al, 2007), for two reasons. First, because it is made in terms of consequences and not motives and, second, because those consequences are not entirely in the hands of the actor. As I have said, cooperation is vulnerable to exploitation from those who take without contributing so that – depending on the actions of others – the same act may result, sooner or later, in either a benefit or a cost for the actor.

When there is a personal gain to the cooperative actor it may be immediate, as when individuals work together, to build an irrigation ditch for example, or when they come to a binding agreement in negotiation. Alternatively, an actor’s benefit may rely on the recipient contributing to the common good at some time in the future. The actor suffers a net cost from their cooperative action when others fail to contribute sufficiently to the joint venture. Following West et al (2007), I will call ‘mutual benefit’ those cases when both (all) parties do eventually benefit from the interaction. The all-important difference between the actor benefitting, or not, from their action hangs crucially on trust (Uslaner, 2002; Kohn, 2008; Balliet and Van Lange, 2013a) – a belief that others will contribute – and that trust being justified. As in the Tragedy of the Commons, a cooperative overture only bears fruit, and mutual benefit only follows, if others cooperate too.

The problem described in my opening sentence – discrimination against outsiders – may not seem to fit the logic of a social dilemma. This is correct but, as I shall describe later, cooperation research reveals that mere contact and communication have the potential to remove the bias against outsiders and encourage more cooperative relationships between groups with different identities. Contact encourages cooperation and cooperation further breaks down social barriers: a virtuous circle.

So, how do people respond to dilemmas in which personal gain and benefit to others is in conflict? Decades of research, largely in lab experiments, have shown
that individuals faced with such decisions are neither completely selfish nor wholly self-denying. Naturally, there are cultural differences, interpretable in terms of social and economic factors (Henrich et al., 2004; Herrmann et al., 2008; Balliet and Van Lange, 2013b), but it is clear that the notion that we act as rational maximisers of short-term personal gain is strongly refuted by the data. And since this important aspect of our social life seems to be universal it is illuminated by an evolutionary analysis (see Lazarus, 2017, section 3, for an introduction). It can be explained by our long early history of life in small hunter-gatherer groups (Kelly, 2013), a life in which cooperation was mutually beneficial and in which our interactions were largely with others known to us, whose behaviour towards us we would remember and who would tell others how we behaved towards them; interdependence is the basis of our cooperative natures, and a reciprocity with others and regard for our own reputations help to explain how that nature is expressed in our social lives, as I will show.

With this universal limited regard for the welfare of others as a basis, researchers have discovered evidence for a wide variety of factors – reflecting a much smaller number of motivational influences – that are successful in promoting cooperation, and I review this work later. These results provide a resource for policymakers grappling with social dilemmas and this journal issue urges that we make the most of this evidence, and of related ideas, for promoting an enlightened self-interest for the public good. Evolutionary analysis provides one source for such related concepts of practical value to policy making and I examine this viewpoint later.

Following this introductory paper, the issue starts with an analysis of a particular political reform to disability welfare payments in the UK. Johnson and Nettle argue that an evolutionary understanding of human responses to deservingness and need deepens our appreciation of the reasons for the success or failure of such policies and go on to describe principles resulting in greater fairness in the design of welfare systems.

Further papers will follow and, to build on the dialogue, will be accompanied by replies from behavioural scientists, policy practitioners and others, as well as an editorially reviewed blog. When all papers and replies have been completed and published I will attempt to draw general lessons from the project in a final paper.

In the next section I put the aims of the issue in the broader context of the recent interest by behavioural scientists to address practical human problems of concern to social policy.

**Application of behavioural research to social policy: a brief review of recent work**

Research in psychology and behavioural economics by Kahneman, Tversky, Thaler and others, and its application to the social policies of ‘nudging’, is well known (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009; Kahneman, 2011; Thaler, 2015) and has been taken up in the UK by the Behavioural Insights Team (Dolan et al, 2010; Hallsworth et al, 2018; Halpern, 2019).

Although disciplinary boundaries are inevitably somewhat fuzzy, less well known are the contributions to policy issues from within the disciplines of social psychology and evolutionary behavioural science, which include approaches from psychology, anthropology, biology and economics. Early books from within evolutionary behavioural science edited by Somit and Peterson (2003) and Crawford and Salmon (2004) seem to have had little impact on policy (Sear et al, 2007) but in the last
decade applied behavioural studies informed by evolutionary thinking have become more pragmatic, addressing social issues directly with empirical studies and these deserve to be better known by the policy community. Here is a flavour of recent work, chronologically ordered, in which contributions by social scientists have been followed more recently by the work of behavioural scientists working within an evolutionary framework.

- In the edited volume *Cooperation in Modern Society: Promoting the Welfare of Communities, States and Organizations* (Van Vugt et al, 2000) social scientists discuss the factors facilitating success in cooperative organisation in the absence of coercive authority, with contributions on transportation, common pool resources, volunteerism, workplace justice, tax and welfare.
- Sage launches the journal *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* in 2000.
- Social psychologists and political scientists contribute separate papers to a special issue of the journal *American Behavioral Scientist* titled *Cooperation in Society: Fostering Community Action and Civic Participation* on topics including natural resource management, volunteerism, political action, support for government welfare programmes and leadership (Van Vugt and Snyder, 2002).
- *Applied Evolutionary Psychology* edited by Roberts (2011) has sections on business, family, society, health, marketing, communication and technology, including chapters on charitable behaviour and altruism.
- The edited volume *Applied Evolutionary Anthropology: Darwinian Approaches to Contemporary World Issues* (Gibson and Lawson, 2014a) includes papers on microfinance, population change, health and cooperation. The editors recommend ‘improving communication and collaboration with appropriate decision-makers, including national policymakers, research think tanks and non-governmental charities’ (Gibson and Lawson, 2014b: 9).
- In their book *Social Dilemmas: The Psychology of Human Cooperation* Van Lange et al (2014), social psychologists, have a chapter on ‘Environment, Politics, Security and Health’.
- In *Tyneside Neighbourhoods: Deprivation, Social Life and Social Behaviour in One British City*, and within an evolutionary behavioural framework, Nettle (2015) examines the influence of deprivation on mutual aid, trust and other aspects of social life.
- Wilson (2019), in *This View of Life: Completing the Darwinian Revolution*, advocates an evolutionary approach to social issues, with a prominent place for cooperative solutions.
- In *Human Evolution Beyond Biology and Culture: Evolutionary Social, Environmental and Policy Sciences* van den Bergh (2018) takes a more conceptual approach, discussing policy design as informed by evolutionary thinking and policy making as an evolutionary process, and comparing the approaches to policy of neoclassical economics, public choice theory and evolutionary theory.
- Prosocial World ‘is a non-profit organization that seeks to evolve a more prosocial world. Inspired by scientists, … basing our methods on the most recent developments in evolutionary, complex systems, and contextual behavioral science to enhance cooperation … for the well-being of others’ (Prosocial World, 2020).
- *The Cooperation Databank* at the Amsterdam Cooperation Lab, due to go online in late 2020, is ‘coding the entire history of lab and field research on human
cooperation using social dilemmas … Our goal is to establish an open access database where researchers can go, perform a targeted search of the literature, and efficiently conduct their own meta-analyses on cooperation’ (Amsterdam Cooperation Lab, 2020).

I say more about what evolutionary behavioural analysis has to offer to social policy in the ‘Darwin’s window’ section.

Promoting cooperation: what the research tells us

In this section I briefly review the variables found to increase cooperation in experimental studies from which, unless stated otherwise, causal influence can be deduced. The evidence comes from a variety of experimental ‘games’ which vary in terms of the range of motives generated but in all of which the participant has to decide between personal gain and benefit to one or more others. A common paradigm is the public goods game (Camerer, 2003) in which cooperation is measured by contributions from a personal endowment to a public purse. The experimental work is supplemented by important descriptive work in real world group settings. My list of variables may not be exhaustive but it captures the major motives involved, as I shall explain. Policy workers – preferably in consultation with behavioural scientists – can browse this list for influences that may be of practical value in their work.

These numerous variables largely represent the action of just a few motivational influences and I first sketch this bigger picture for a deeper understanding of this rather daunting literature. In each case I indicate the relevant list codes that follow in the four categories of influential variables A, B, C and D [A1, etc.], starting in each case with the variable most directly evidencing the motivational category.

- **Financial and other incentives**: the (usually) monetary consequences (real or imagined) of participants’ decisions. [A1–5]
- **Reciprocity**: roughly matching the decisions of other participants: ‘conditional cooperation’. This might be understood as representing a sense of fairness, rewarding generosity and punishing meanness. [D3, A4a,b, B1–3, 5, 12] Dasgupta (2009) argues that for a cooperative outcome it is important that all parties believe that all others will cooperate.
- **Fairness**: concern that resources are equally distributed. [D6, C2, C6]
- **Need**: concern for fairness is moderated by regard for need. [D7]
- **Reputation**: concern that others see one as generous, fair, trustworthy and/or trusting [D4, A4c, D5], a concern which pays off. [B1]
- **Group processes**: the most important is group identification [D2, B7] which enhances cooperation. This produces an in-group bias [B11, A4e] to the detriment of out-group individuals. Other group processes influence the relative cooperativeness of individual group members, group representatives and groups acting as an entity. [B9–10]
- **Social norms**: because of their conceptual nature it is more difficult to assign causal influence to norms than to many other influences. However, norms
of benevolence and others based on the nature of a social interaction, such as reciprocity and fairness, are likely to be at work, to various extents, both in the lab and in real world dilemmas (Biel and Thøgersen, 2007).

In addition to these motivational influences, certain kinds of information are important in influencing cooperative decision making: information about the nature of the dilemma [C1, D1] and – through communication between participants – information that facilitates agreement on a cooperative strategy [B7]. Van Vugt (2009) identifies a similar set of motivational and informational influences to those presented here and discusses their implications for environmental protection.

Entries in the list that follows are stated in terms of an influence that increases cooperation in absolute terms (for example, ‘Reward cooperation’, implicitly compared with ‘Cooperation not rewarded’) or in comparison with a different condition (for example, ‘Reward is costly rather than free’). Where an entry contains a purely theoretical proposal the reference is preceded by the word ‘theory’. Supporting references are an introduction to a large literature; some contain further references for the same finding and others are meta-analyses. Related entries are cross-referenced to highlight shared motivational influences.

A. Benefits and costs, rewards and punishments

Benefits and costs refer to the consequences of cooperating as opposed to free-riding (also called ‘defecting’). Rewards and punishments refer to the actions of other players in response to a participant’s choices.

1. The benefit from cooperation is greater (Zelmer, 2003) or more likely to be achieved (Milinski et al, 2008).
2. Benefits and costs are more predictable (Biel, 2000; theory: Sandler, 1998).
3. Benefits come sooner rather than later (Harris and Madden, 2002; evidence is correlational).
4. Reward and punishment (Balliet et al, 2011; Balliet and Van Lange, 2013b).
   a. Reward cooperation and punish free-riding. [See D3: this is a form of conditional cooperation.]
   b. The reward or punishment is paid for by the participant rather than being free. [D3: this resembles conditional cooperation in that the payment by the rewarder or punisher is rewarded by greater cooperation.]
   c. Punishment is by long-term partners rather than strangers. [D4: concern for one’s reputation.]
   d. Punishment is more effective when participants are paid for the dilemma outcome. [A4b]
   e. Non-monetary punishments: disapproval; exclusion from the group (Chaudhuri, 2011). [D2: group identification.]
5. Reward cooperation and punish free-riding when each is rare (so the cost is low); thus move from the former to the latter as cooperation becomes more common (carrot, then stick) (theory: Boyd et al, 2003; Hilbe and Sigmund, 2010).
B. Negotiation structure

1. The opportunity to choose playing partners (‘partner choice’), using information on their prior generosity, compared to being matched randomly (Page et al., 2005; Chaudhuri, 2011). Of importance to the analysis of motivational influences, more generous partners are more popular and benefit by being chosen (Sylwester and Roberts, 2010). [D3, where this results in generosity matching; D4: reputational regard pays off.]

2. Partners are consistent over game sessions rather than changing (Zelmer, 2003). [D3; partnership enables conditional cooperation.]

3. Participants are matched for their level of cooperativeness, and particularly when they know this (Chaudhuri, 2011). [B1, D3: matching facilitates conditional cooperation.]

4. Participants are inexperienced (Zelmer, 2003).

5. Endowments are homogeneous (the same for all players), rather than heterogeneous (Zelmer, 2003; Cherry et al., 2005). This may work by producing similar donations to the public good (a predictable proportion of the endowment) by all players, which has the same outcome as conditional cooperation. [D3]

6. There is weak evidence for greater cooperation in smaller groups (Hamburger et al., 1975; Pavitt, 2018; Ge et al., 2019 find support; Marwell and Ames, 1979 partial support; Sally, 1995 weak support; Zelmer, 2003 no support). This is in spite of theory predicting the effect (Olson, [1965] 1971: Chapters I and II; Hamburger et al., 1975; Richerson and Boyd, 2005: 199). Support may be weak since the group sizes compared are too similar.

7. Cooperation is enhanced by contact between players (compared to anonymity), by communication and by joint activity (Dawes et al., 1977; Sally, 1995; Kurzban, 2001; Zelmer, 2003; Bochet et al., 2006; Mulford et al., 2008; Balliet, 2010; Woolley and Fishbach, 2019). Contact, communication and joint activity may promote cooperation by establishing empathy (Sally, 1995) or group identity [D2].

8. The experimenter does not ask participants how they believe others in the game will behave (Zelmer, 2003).

9. Individuals are more cooperative than groups (Wildschut et al., 2003).

10. Group members (and individuals) are more cooperative than group representatives (Reinders Folmer et al., 2012).

11. Greater cooperation to in-group than out-group members (Balliet et al., 2014). [D2: group identification.]


C. Enduring social group arrangements

These ‘design principles’ are predictive of long-term stability in real world (not experimental) common pool resource groups such as coastal fisheries; see, for example, the Nobel Prize-winning work of economist Elinor Ostrom (1990). These principles have also been applied to the problem of antibiotic prescribing (Tarrant et al., 2019), generalised (Wilson et al., 2013; Wilson, 2019) and extended (Frey, 2020).

1. Rights of appropriation and the relevant resources are clearly defined. [D1]

2. Rights to take benefits are related fairly to available resources. [D6]
3. Collective decision making.
4. Monitoring agreed-on appropriation behaviours.
5. Graduated sanctions for those violating the rules. [A4 on punishment.]
6. Fair conflict resolution mechanisms. [D6]
7. Right of the group to organise independent of external authorities.
8. Where groups are nested hierarchically the first seven design principles apply at all levels.

D. Perceptions

1. The nature of the dilemma is clear to participants, in particular that a public good is at stake and that they can do something about it (Eek, 1998). Also that it is framed in a way that makes cooperation more attractive (Zelmer, 2003; Yamagishi et al, 2007; Van Lange et al, 2014: 65). [C1]
2. Identification with the group to which the dilemma relates (Simon et al, 1998; Chaudhuri, 2011). [B11: in-group bias.]
3. Cooperation is greater if there is a belief, or direct or indirect evidence, that others have cooperated or will cooperate (‘conditional cooperation’) (Fischbacher et al, 2001; Milinski et al, 2002; Barclay, 2004; Chaudhuri, 2011; Balliet and Van Lange, 2013a; Sznyer et al, 2019; Gächter, 2006, who discusses policy applications; Keizer et al, 2008; 2013: real world experiments).
4. Regard for one’s cooperative reputation (Milinski et al, 2002; Barclay, 2004; Jacquet et al, 2011).
7. Need in others (Sznyer et al, 2019).
8. Cooperation declines over repeated trials of the same game (Zelmer, 2003).
9. Feedback of the effect of one’s actions on available resources provides opportunity for restraint if necessary; without it resources may be overestimated (theory: Biel, 2000).

Back to the real world

How successfully can these findings, largely from the lab, be applied to real world social problems? While many societal dilemmas share the same logical structure as those used in lab studies (which are sometimes explicitly designed to mimic a real world problem: for example, Milinski et al, 2008), they can present a number of challenges to the encouragement of prosocial attitudes in terms of the motives and informational variables just outlined.

First, it may not be clear to all citizens that, for example, paying their taxes and protecting the environment are public goods. When this is clear the lack of contact and communication with the anonymous majority of their potential beneficiaries, and their very large number, may provide little opportunity for the building of group identification, trust, conditional cooperation and the activation of a sense of fairness (Biel, 2000: 35). However, it is important to appreciate that even when these facilitating factors for cooperation are absent in the lab – when participants first start
playing with strangers they cannot see, hear or communicate with – cooperation still occurs about 45 per cent of the time (Pruitt, 1967; Wichman, 1970).

These lab groups are very small, however; what about behaviour for the public good in larger settings? Two facts offer encouragement here. First, small local communities of some hundreds or more, with a group identity, do show mutual cooperation and particularly in times of adversity (Fritz and Williams, 1957). Witness, for example, the food delivery services that communities have offered to those who are self-isolating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, even in real world settings where people share no obvious common identity with the strangers around them the evidence shows that individuals are more likely to act for the common good if it seems that they are being observed (the audience effect on reputational concern: D5 and D4 above) or if environmental cues suggest that others are public spirited (Keizer et al, 2008; 2013: D3 above). These prosocial effects have been achieved by direct manipulation of the environment and illustrate the application of behavioural science to our problem.

Ostrom’s design principles (C1–8 above) are group level phenomena which, if successfully generalised from their common pool resource group origins (see references in C above), will predict stability in long-term social enterprises of various kinds. These group level phenomena – including fairness, collective decision making and agreements – clearly rely on a great many cooperative interactions at the individual level and, as such, should benefit from judicious application of cooperation-promoting factors in categories A, B and D of the above list.

Having discussed the opportunities and difficulties in applying the evidence to societal problems, it is worth reiterating the major motives likely to enhance prosociality: incentive (financial or otherwise); reciprocity; a sense of fairness; reputational concern; and group identity (without creating an out-group). A sense of fairness should be enhanced by indicating where inequalities exist and reciprocity by stressing the contributions of others. Conditional cooperation should also respond to knowledge of cases where contributions to the public good are high; unfortunately, of course, it is when contributions are low that help is most needed.

Finally, we should not forget that decisions made in response to societal dilemmas may hinge on the value assigned to the public good; a public of which the individual is a small part but which is overwhelmingly made up of others. Even if one cares little for others one may appreciate that if no one contributed then one would suffer oneself, and for that reason decide to contribute. More importantly, greater feelings of benevolence toward others will inevitably shift the values in the social dilemma towards decisions for the common good, and if these feelings are common knowledge there is the best chance of a cooperative outcome (Dasgupta, 2009).

**Darwin’s window: evolutionary insights for social policy**

Evolutionary analysis addresses questions about the origins and adaptive functions of behaviour and I addressed such questions for cooperation briefly early in this article. The current consensus resulting from this analysis explains the origin of reciprocity, fairness, reputation and social norms (Lazarus, 2017: section 3), as well as group identity, and its dark side, out-group discrimination (Richerson and Boyd, 2005: Chapter 6), as major causal factors for cooperation. This congruence between evolutionary predictions and the empirical evidence discussed in the previous section,
and their likely universal application to human populations – with cultural variation: see the first section – strengthens confidence in the belief that these motivating factors deserve a central place in policy making.

Evolutionary thinking has more to say too of practical value to policy makers and I end with a few examples.

Dasgupta (2009) emphasises the role of evolved emotions in cooperative decision making (stress in the original):

Nature and nurture play a still little-understood combined role in developing in us a general disposition to reciprocate … Our capacity to have such feelings as shame, affection, anger, elation, obligation, benevolence and jealousy would appear to have emerged under selection pressure. No doubt culture helps to shape preferences, expectations and thus, behaviour, which are known to differ widely across societies. But cultural coordinates enable us to identify the locus of points upon which shame, affection, anger, elation, obligation, benevolence and jealousy are put to work; they do not displace the centrality of those capacities in the human make-up (Dasgupta (2009: 3303).

This reminds us of the central role of the emotions in controlling behaviour and of the robust channels through which policy implementations can have their effects.

Johnson and Levin (2009) consider a range of psychological (as well as organisational and political) biases that may hinder our ability to deal effectively with environmental problems: positive illusions, cognitive dissonance, the fundamental attribution error, prospect theory and in-group/out-group bias. They write:

we are all subject to systematic biases in judgement and decision making. While such biases may have been adaptive heuristics that promoted survival and reproduction in the Pleistocene environment of our evolutionary past, in today’s world of technological sophistication, industrial power and mass societies, psychological biases can lead to disasters on an unprecedented scale … all of these psychological biases lead people to downplay the probability and danger of environmental change, and their role in it, while increasing their perceived incentives to maintain the status quo, and to blame problems on others … Psychological approaches not only shed new light on old puzzles in politics, economics and sociology, but also suggest novel – and sometimes counter-intuitive – policy recommendations. (Johnson and Levin, 2009: 1593–4)

Borgerhoff Mulder (2019: 323) writes that group level traits are:

likely to be particularly important in humans, for whom traditions, norms and institutions are transmitted across generations through cultural evolution. Because adaptations occur mainly at the level at which selection is most potent, policy interventions should be designed at that level. For humans, this indicates a need to reform the structure of communities, neighbourhoods and workplaces, rather than working on individuals.
My own view here is that the evidence for the influence of many variables on individual cooperative decision making reviewed earlier is too strong to be ignored when it comes to policy making and that interindividual interactions may still be important in achieving higher level change (perhaps in conjunction with work directly at the higher level), as I argued for Ostrom’s design principles in the previous section. The extent to which higher level interactions are important for policy will be partly a matter of scale and, as Borgerhoff Mulder (2019: 323) also writes: ‘[e]vidence that multilevel selection operates as the invisible hand causing local actions to benefit the common good is still mixed’. The choice of level at which to work is a matter for debate: a national problem may best be tackled at the level of communities, where local knowledge can be exploited, and group identification and trust are likely to be stronger.

Coda

I take it as a given that policy making must be based on sound evidence. How is this to be achieved when the training, language and methods of policy makers and researchers are often so different? The quote that opened this paper suggests a consensus for a closer dialogue between the two and this has been my aim in this journal issue. The hope is that advances can be made when research findings are brought to bear on real world problems in direct discussion, and in the sustained joint effort of analysis required of a written report.

In addition, when the journal issue is complete, the reports compared and the replies studied, we shall learn whether new lessons emerge. Can relationships be discerned between what were previously considered independent problems? If so, do apparently different social problems share structural properties amenable to similar solutions? What different or broader solutions emerge compared to those suggested by the research discussed here? We shall see, and I will be alert for such novelties in writing a final paper for the issue.

Whatever emerges, the journal and I are committed to disseminating the results widely in order to maximise the usefulness of this work for social policy.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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