In the introductory article preceding this, written at the outset of the project, I argued for the centrality of cooperation for success in social policy while pointing out the fragility of the process and the nature of the social dilemma at its heart (Lazarus, 2023). I went on to review the factors known from research to promote cooperation, to explain how they mapped on to motivational interests and to discuss how these findings, and evolutionary insights, might be applied in a policy context.

As that introductory article explained, the methodology and goal of this issue is for behavioural researchers and policy workers to co-write articles in which they explore the knowledge base for the science of cooperation in the service of improving the policy response to a societal problem. The resulting collaborations have been a microcosm for what is required if we are to maximise the potential of behavioural science for solving problems of social policy characterised by a social dilemma.

The primary audience for this issue is the social policy community, which can find here opportunities from the research on cooperation to further their policy agendas. A secondary audience is the behavioural science community, which may be encouraged to engage further with the policy world in order to use their findings and expertise for the common good.

The project is now approaching completion, and I can report on its overall structure. In designing the journal issue, I sought articles on one specific topic and on a number of problem areas for which cooperation is critical, each to be chosen from a broader social policy theme. The specific topic, due to its urgency and importance, is climate change negotiation, and the broader themes are: issues within communities; out-group problems between communities; the environment; public health; and strengthening cooperation in future generations. The subjects of the articles selected for these themes are, respectively: UK welfare payments; the care of refugees; travel problems; vaccination hesitancy and organ donation; and early years social development. For each article, I invited commentaries (‘replies’) from
behavioural researchers and from policy workers and advisers – followed by target author responses – in order to continue the conversation and to make the most of this interdisciplinary exchange for practical advantage.

The issue is appearing in two parts. This first part contains the articles on climate change negotiation and welfare payments, together with the commentaries and responses.

In the first article here, Frey and Burgess (2023) argue that improvements in communication, trust and fairness – all central to successful cooperation – are key elements in the following problems they identify in the climate change negotiation process: reconciling conflicting interests over global public goods; the consensus decision-making process; and designing institutions to implement resolutions emerging from the negotiations.

In the second article, Johnson and Nettle (2023) consider a particular political reform to disability welfare payments in the UK, arguing 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. They go on to describe principles that would result in greater fairness in the design of welfare systems.

The remaining articles described earlier will appear in Part 2, together with accompanying commentaries and responses. In addition, in the second part, I shall conclude the issue by providing an analysis of various concepts underpinning and employed explicitly in this collection of collaborations, and, based on this analysis, suggest some conceptual tools and practical techniques for tackling policy problems involving a social dilemma.

For now, I will just urge the recognition of a central place for behavioural science in social policy. Science is sometimes perceived to be just one way of viewing the world, in conflict with others. However, there is no conflict; science is just the name we give to finding out how the world works. And if we are rational, why would we not make every effort to take advantage of evidential and conceptual understanding that can only increase the chance of success in tackling societal problems?

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