EDITORIAL

Cooperation and Social Policy: Integrating Evidence into Practice – introduction to Part 2

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For those coming to this special issue here for the first time, not having seen Part 1, I will first provide a brief introduction to its aims. As my introductory article (Lazarus, 2023a) explains, the methodology and goal of this issue is for behavioural researchers and social 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 are 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.

In my introductory article, I argued for the centrality of cooperation for success in social policy, while pointing out the fragility of the process. I went on to review the factors known from research to promote cooperation, to explain how they mapped to motivational interests and to discuss how these findings, and evolutionary insights, might be applied in a policy context.

My rationale for the contents of the issue is explained further in my introduction to Part 1 (Lazarus, 2023b) and resulted in two articles in that part – on climate change negotiations and UK welfare payments – and the four papers here, in Part 2, on sustainable travel, on vaccination hesitancy and organ donation, on the care of refugees, and on the encouragement of cooperation in early-years child development. Each article is accompanied by commentaries (‘replies’) from behavioural researchers and policy workers, together with a response, in order to make the most of this interdisciplinary exchange for practical advantage.

In the first article here, Donegan et al (2023) introduce their analysis of sustainable travel problems by framing them in game theory terms, game theory being the foundational tool for analysing social dilemmas. They show how a simple game theory description can be elaborated to incorporate psychological realities that clarify players’ motives, thus aiding policy moves towards potential solutions. They go on to analyse a number of travel problems and use them to draw a useful distinction
in terms of the relative importance of citizen (bottom–up) and policy (top-down) contributions to their solution.

Larson and Toledo (2023) describe and compare the public health challenges in encouraging citizens to cooperate with vaccine and organ donation programmes for the public good. As with sustainable travel issues, an analysis has to start by considering the costs and benefits of social decisions, here concerning health, as well as the likely motives involved, before developing a public health programme to encourage take-up. An important distinction here, and one that divides countries, is between opt-in or opt-out systems, which have very different implications for the role of cooperation. Misinformation and mistrust are identified as particular problems for public health programmes.

El-Higzi and Moyer (2023) use the case study of a successful grass-roots effort to help a family of asylum seekers in Australia as a focus for their analysis, with the first author having hands-on experience of such efforts. They apply the evolutionary social–psychological literature on cooperation to the problem of promoting collective action for refugees through two goals: norm change, by convincing prospective hosts that refugee support is a community good; and altruism, by supporting cooperation within the host community.

With ‘Building a cooperative child’ as their title, Broesch and Robbins (2023) identify four psychosocial phenomena that support cooperation in early development around the world: taking the perspective of others; expanding the self-concept to include others; secure attachment; and internalising societal norms. They aim to guide parents, educators and policymakers through the process of encouraging cooperation in development.

These four articles are all accompanied by commentaries – and a response – that introduce new ideas and evidence, developing the value of the target articles for social policy.

In a final research article (Lazarus, 2023c), drawing on the experience of editing this special issue, and employing the contributions to the issue as exemplars throughout my text, I propose a method for developing the early stages of social policy interventions requiring cooperation, based on the application of behavioural game theory and the analysis of the motivations of those involved. I go on to discuss: the contrasting properties of selfish and altruistic motives for cooperating; the long-term prospects for altruistically motivated cooperation; and ethical aspects of tackling societal dilemmas through bottom-up and top-down agents for change. Finally, I consider the current state of the relationship between behavioural science and social policy.

My hope is that the social policy community and behavioural scientists will be encouraged by the work of this issue to engage with each other for the common good.

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Conflict of interest
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References


