# Journal club

COOPERATION

## A TALE OF TWO COMPETING THEORIES ON INGROUP FAVOURITISM

When I was an undergraduate student in Japan, I participated in a study in which I received 1000 yen (approximately 10 US dollars back then) and was asked to split it freely with a stranger I had never meet. It was an easy decision: I kept it all for myself. After the experiment, I learned it was about prosociality. Admittedly, I was very selfish. I then began to wonder what could have made me more prosocial in the experiment. Perhaps I would have split it differently if the recipient were my family, friend, or somebody from the same university. This experience interested me in ingroup favouritism in cooperation, the tendency for individuals to be more cooperative with ingroup members than outgroup members.

I quickly learned that ingroup favouritism in cooperation is a robust phenomenon. Nevertheless, at that time there was a theoretical dispute over the psychological mechanisms of ingroup favouritism. Some studies supported the social identity account, which suggests that a mere group categorisation would be sufficient to trigger ingroup favouritism. Other studies supported the bounded generalised reciprocity account, which suggests that the assumption of group-bounded indirect reciprocity underlies ingroup favouritism. According to this latter account, such an assumption leads individuals to expect that ingroup members are more cooperative than outgroup members and this biased expectation leads to the emergence of ingroup favouritism.

Balliet and colleagues in 2014 summarised how the two competing theories could be experimentally pitted against each other. The first point of contention is the difference between cooperation with outgroup members and strangers whose group membership is not revealed. The social identity account predicts that cooperation with outgroup members will be lower than that with strangers, whereas the bounded generalised reciprocity account predicts no difference between them. The second point of contention is whether ingroup favouritism emerges when individuals are anonymous and therefore cannot expect ingroup members to be cooperative with them. The social identity account predicts the presence of ingroup favouritism under anonymity and the bounded generalised reciprocity account predicts its absence.

Instead of contributing another experimental piece to the debate, Balliet and colleagues conducted a large-scale meta-analysis involving over 100 effect sizes reported over the past four decades. The meta-analysis overall yielded supporting evidence for the bounded generalised reciprocity account rather than social identity account: the level of cooperation with outgroup members was not significantly different from that with strangers. In addition, they found that ingroup favouritism did not emerge in experimental conditions in which participants were anonymous. Thus, this large-scale meta-analysis offered a solid conclusion to the long-standing theoretical debate, favouring the bounded generalised reciprocity account over the social identity account.

Besides their theoretical contribution, Balliet and colleagues' meta-analytic effect size of ingroup favouritism became a guiding benchmark for subsequent research and a priori statistical power calculations. Moreover, several moderator analyses offered valuable insights. For instance, the effect size of ingroup favouritism did not substantially differ between studies focusing on artificial and natural groups. This evidence counters the argument based on the social identity account that individuals identify strongly with a natural group than artificial groups and display stronger favouritism. Furthermore, participants from nine countries (eight Western countries and Japan) did not vary in the magnitude of ingroup favouritism. This finding suggests that studies conducted in different provide generalisable findings. It should be noted, however, that the analysis include data only from eight Western countries and Japan. Overall, these results substantiate the robustness of ingroup favouritism in cooperation across different contexts.

Their sound meta-analytic findings encouraged further theoretical sophistication on the bounded generalized reciprocity account. Subsequent empirical work further elucidated, for instance, psychological mechanisms underlying the conditional presence of ingroup favouritism depending on anonymity. Moreover, the meta-analysis shifted scholarly attention to intergroup cooperation that cannot be accounted for by the bounded generalised reciprocity. Consequently, the bounded generalised reciprocity account was further refined by the dynamic indirect reciprocity perspective, which explains conditions under which decision publicity increases cooperation towards both ingroup and outgroup members.

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**Competing interests**
The author declares no competing interests

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE** Balliet, D., Wu, J. & De Dreu, C. K. W. Ingroup favoritism in cooperation: a meta-analysis. *Psychol. Bull.* **140**, 1556–1581 (2014)
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