

Criteria for coalition formation

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Like many other species, Human beings establish stable social bonds that are not necessarily based on kin. This ability is an essential component of sociality, and may be a crucial factor for the evolutionary emergence of the human species (Dunbar 1996). However, the criteria used by individuals to choose their social partners is poorly understood. In particular, no general law has been proposed to delineate what would count as a valid preference criterion in a strict Darwinian framework.

Social groupings based on mutual partner choice are sometimes said to be political. A typical example is the formation of political coalitions among chimps to take or keep control over the group (de Waal 1982). Another example is offered by babblers, those little birds living in the desert, which form coalitions to defend sheltering bushes against other babbler coalitions (Zahavi & Zahavi 1997). The human species could be characterised by the complexity of political bonds: friendship networks, alliances, supporters, partisans, leaders, factions, all emerge in a political context in which individuals are prone to choose each other. These social phenomena have often been described as resulting from psychological factors such as esteem, feeling of security, dominance. They have also been considered as cultural constructs emerging from a general willingness to cooperate, in which case the partner choice chiefly relies on reliability (Axelrod 1984).

We want to explore an alternative account of coalition formation, which is that individuals choose their partners according to their potential usefulness for the fate of the coalition. This approach departs from studies based on cooperation in several aspects.

- social bonds do not depend on some utilitarian trade of goods or services.
- the criteria for partner choice are expected to be in part biologically determined, and not based on pure rational choice.
- potential partners are expected to display qualities corresponding to those criteria, even if the display is costly (Dessalles 1999; Gintis, Smith & Bowles 2001).
- criteria for social bonding are required to be positively correlated with the success of the coalition.

The latter requirement is the main result we arrived at, both theoretically and through computer simulation (Dessalles 1999). In a political settings, isolated individuals have little chance of success, and they must choose their partners with discernment to resist coalitions formed by others.

In the present paper, we will explore the coexistence of several criteria. It may be in the interest of individuals to choose partners who have qualities different from their own. The result may be seen as a marketplace on which individuals advertise various competences and gauge each other's corresponding qualities. The marketplace metaphor is somewhat misleading, though, as no exchange of goods or services is necessary. The goods are the individuals themselves that may join to form or maintain coalitions.

References

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