



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

The social organization of human cooperation and intergroup conflict under inequality

Snijder, L.L.

Citation

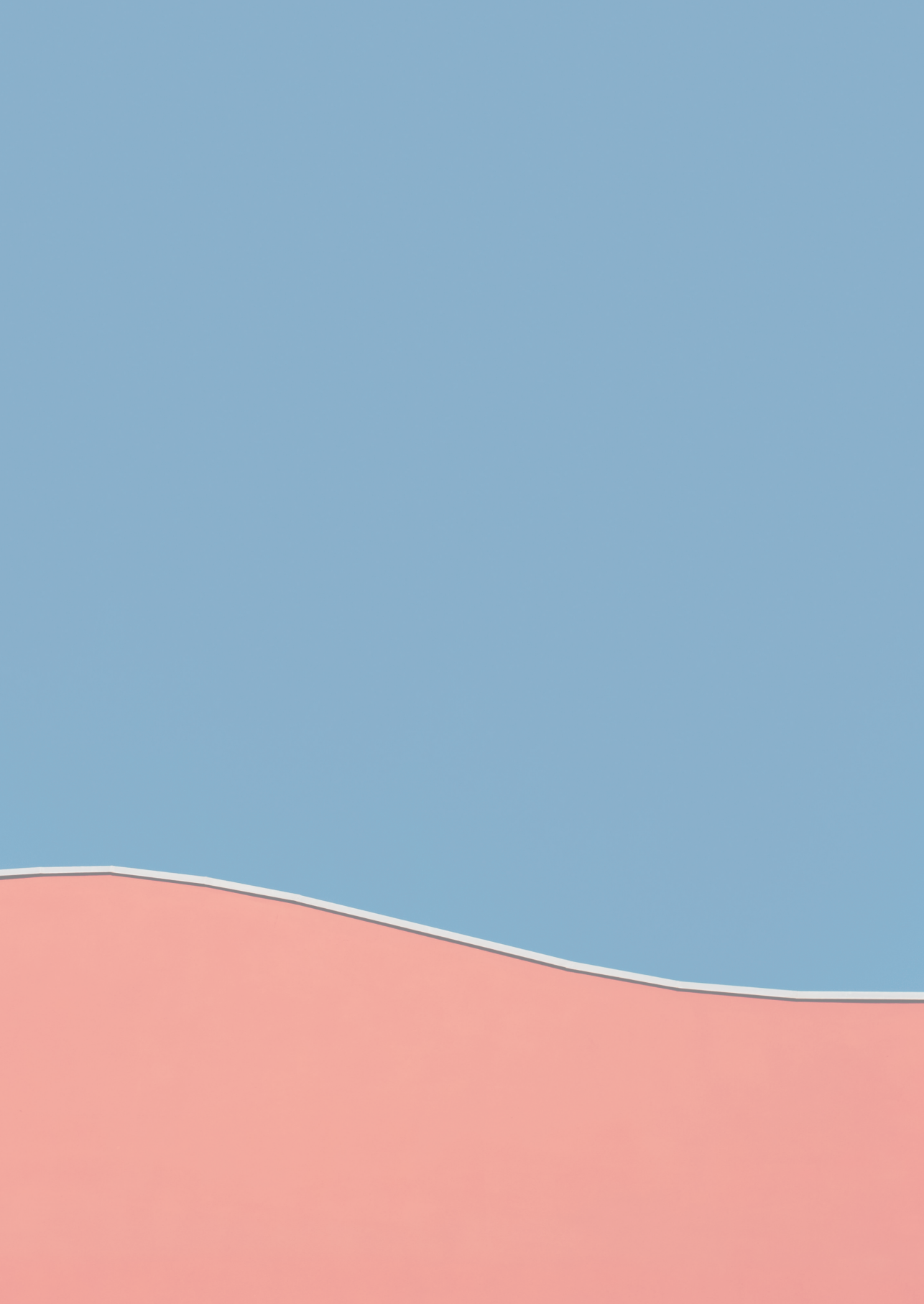
Snijder, L. L. (2025, June 12). *The social organization of human cooperation and intergroup conflict under inequality*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4250005>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4250005>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Appendix

Summary

With collective action being fragile and at times destructive, a foundational question is when and how groups can create stability and predictability in collective action. Key to this is how groups (re)organize themselves for collective action. Much of the existing experimental research on the social organization of cooperation and intergroup conflict has assumed that individuals or groups are equal – possessing equal resources, abilities to cooperate, and occupying similar positions in intergroup conflicts. However, in real-world societies, inequality is pervasive. Individuals vary in their ability to contribute to public goods, with some being able to generate more welfare than others through cooperation, and intergroup conflicts are often asymmetric, with one group forced to defend against attacks from another. How inequality influences the bottom-up and top-down social organization of cooperation and intergroup conflict, and how groups can socially organize themselves to achieve important societal goals, such as promoting overall welfare, reducing inequality, and minimizing intergroup conflict, are questions I addressed in this dissertation.

Chapter 2 began by examining how individuals who differ in their endowment and productivity select partners to interact with in a public goods game. We found that people prefer to be paired with partners assigned a high endowment and high productivity factor and cooperate with such partners to maximize welfare. However, individuals assigned a high endowment and high productivity almost exclusively interact with each other. As a result, individuals assigned a lower endowment and productivity factor become forced to work together, cooperate less well, and lack the capital or production facilities to render themselves attractive partners for cooperative exchange. Over time, this process of partner selection and cooperation helps those who are highly endowed and assigned a high productivity factor to accumulate more resources, while prohibiting individuals assigned a low endowment and low productivity factor from creating welfare. Whereas partner choice may enable individuals to build and maintain public goods from which everyone can benefit, we found that in societies in which individuals differ in their endowment and productivity, partner choice can be a curse rather than a cure: through partner selection, segregation endogenously emerges, and cooperation with similar others amplifies pre-existing differences between those who are advantaged and those who are not.

To counteract this, groups and societies often implement top-down policies that restrict partner choice. In Chapter 3, we aimed to derive how people should have chosen partners, if the goal would be to minimize wealth inequality or maximize overall earnings (regardless of how these earnings are distributed), and to which degree decision-makers are willing to implement partner matching interventions. Our data reveal that partner matching interventions involve an equality-efficiency trade-off, such that interventions either reduce wealth inequality or increase efficiency, but not both at the same time. We found that uninvolved decision-makers prioritize interventions aimed to reduce wealth inequality, whereas involved decision-makers assigned a high endowment and high productivity prioritize efficiency. Under economic inequality, preferences for governing free (partner) choice can thus polarize, possibly creating the foundation for political conflict, diverging fairness standards within groups, and opposing demands for freedom versus regulation.

The mechanisms that enable cooperation can also escalate conflict. Individuals often voluntarily participate in conflict to provide critical resources to their group, but not all individuals may be willing to contribute to conflict. In Chapter 4, we investigated stay-or-leave decisions of defenders during intergroup conflict. We showed that individual-level economic cost factors increase the likelihood that defenders abandon their group. Defenders are more inclined to leave when i) it is less costly for them to do so, ii) when they are risk averse, and iii) after they experience defeat, resonating with the idea that they are primarily concerned with maximizing personal gains. Yet, even when the cost of leaving is low, defenders stay when some fellow group members cannot leave. Staying, however, does not always mean selflessness. Some participants stay due to strategic concerns, attempting to benefit from the conflict contributions of those who cannot leave. Most participants, however, stay at a personal cost, thereby helping fellow group members to defend themselves. This has adverse consequences. When more defenders stay, both attacker and defender groups increase their contributions to conflict, wasting more resources and lowering collective welfare on both sides. Somewhat paradoxically, social concerns can thus exacerbate the intensity and costs tied to intergroup conflicts, at least in the short run.

To counter such selfish motivations to leave, top-down leadership plays a key role. In Chapter 5, we hypothesized that to increase support for aggressive actions, leaders may invoke historical myths to increase perceived positive interdependence within their group. By referencing shared history, leaders can foster a sense of collective fate, improving group cohesion and increasing participation in offensive conflicts. Leaders not only distort the immediacy or stakes of the conflict but can also manipulate perceptions about the very nature of the conflict itself. Building on this, in Chapter 6 we demonstrated how leaders fabricate enemy threats to justify acts of aggression that would otherwise be unjustifiable. First, we established that throughout history, leaders consistently reference enemy threats and the need for defense and protection, even when the issuing countries' actual objectives are conquest, subjugation, and exploitation. Second, we showed that participants report stronger support for leaders' causes when they perceive them to be non-revisionist defenders, and crucially, that this is independent of the leader's actual revisionist or non-revisionist stance in the conflict. And finally, we found that when attacking leaders misleadingly invoke self-defense, their followers increase their contributions to the conflict, free-ride less, and are more likely to win the contest. When leaders resort to false signaling, it can escalate conflicts that benefit warring leaders at significant cost to society.

Overall, this dissertation shows the double-edged nature of the bottom-up and top-down social organization of cooperation and intergroup conflict under inequality. The very mechanisms that enable cooperation can also increase inequality and escalate conflict. Finding and maintaining the right balance between bottom-up liberties and top-down restrictions to organize collective action is crucial yet challenging. Both mechanisms have the potential to promote cooperation, reduce inequality, and minimize intergroup conflict, but also carry inherent risks. We should be careful that the tools meant to unite us do not become the weapons that drive us apart.

