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Title: What do games really reveal? Interpreting observed behavior in a framed field experiment in India with a grain of salt

As resource users interact and impose externalities on each other, institutions are needed to coordinate resource use and create trust and incentives for sustainable management. Studies have shown that broader social and biophysical context variables are important for understanding rule crafting trust and cooperation in common pool resources dilemmas. Those broader social contextual variables could include strong cultural norms that influence the relationship between game decisions and rules. Ghate et al. (2013) found that players from indigenous communities in India with long traditions of shared norms and mutual trust were able to cooperate in the absence of communication. Conversely, Narloch et al. (2012) found that collective rewards could be ineffective and crowd-out social norms, based on framed field experiments in the Bolivian and Peruvian Andes.

This study examines how participants’ beliefs regarding the shared forest and its governance affect observed behavior in a framed field experiment on community forest management. The experiment and subsequent surveys were carried out in 60 habitations in Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, India, with game participants grouped into groups of 4 men or women.

Habitations vary in the sophistication level of existing rules. Game participants vary in their beliefs regarding the values of forest ((use and non-use) and local rules governing resources. Interpreting cooperative behavior (under various game “nudges”) revealed from framed field experiment should account for such beliefs. This is especially important given the tension between the perceived non-use value of forest and those game rules that tend to drive economic maximization. This effect does not exist in vacuum, but is instead influenced by individual, group, and community characteristics, the three levels of analysis that should be addressed to move the conventional theory of collective action and the commons a step towards an integral understanding of the social-ecological systems.

Local collective action institutions do not always emerge, and where they have emerged, they can deteriorate in the face of increase in commercialization, economic integration, and pressure on shared resources. Understanding the role of cultural norms, as part of broader context, in shaping collect action and resource governance has important implications for sustainability and development.