

**What You Are is What You Ought to Do:
Experimental Evidence on The Interaction of Social Identity and Norms**

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Abstract

Akerlof and Kranton famously suggest that “choice of identity may be the most important ‘economic’ decision people make” because one’s identity determines how one sees oneself, but also what behavior others expect (Akerlof and Kranton 2000). Choosing one’s identity entails choosing a set of applicable social norms. We experimentally test whether group identity changes behavior through group-based norms and induces incentives to select one’s identity.

In our experimental design, we put individuals in a situation in which they can identify with one of two truly existing ‘small-scale societies’ with different sharing norms, the Hadza and Isanga in Tanzania. After being allocated to one society, we provide the subjects with truthful information about the modal giving behavior among the actual Hadza and Isanga, as found by Marlowe (2014, 2004) and McElreath (2014) in their experimental field work. While the modal giving among the Isanga is an egalitarian 50%, keeping 90% is the mode among the Hadza. By announcing the different giving behavior in the two reference groups, we emphasize two different norms of appropriate behavior and put our subjects into a situation in which the norm of their group exerts compliance pressure. This allows us to test the impact of identity on norm-compliance. Furthermore, we elicit subjects’ willingness to pay to be part of the preferred group.

Ours is possibly the first attempt to investigate experimentally the link between identity and norms. We find subjects to give less if they are members of the more “selfish” Hadza group. Interestingly, our results do not lend support to the thesis that identity is chosen strategically to avoid high compliance costs with a more demanding norm. Rather, we find that the preference to be in the group with the more egalitarian (or selfish) norm depends on one’s pro- (or anti-)social value orientation. This suggests that identities are chosen to fit with one’s values, even if that choice is costly in monetary terms.