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# Cooperation as a signal of time preferences

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## Abstract

Many evolutionary models explain why we cooperate with non kin, but few explain why cooperative behavior and trust vary. Here, we introduce a model of cooperation as a signal of time preferences, which addresses this variability. At equilibrium in our model, (i) future-oriented individuals are more motivated to cooperate, (ii) future-oriented populations have access to a wider range of cooperative opportunities, and (iii) spontaneous and inconspicuous cooperation reveal stronger preference for the future, and therefore inspire more trust. Our theory sheds light on the variability of cooperative behavior and trust. Since affluence tends to align with time preferences, results (i) and (ii) explain why cooperation is often associated with affluence, in surveys and field studies. Time preferences also explain why we trust others based on proxies for impulsivity, and, following result (iii), why uncalculating, subtle and one-shot cooperators are deemed particularly trustworthy. Time preferences provide a powerful and parsimonious explanatory lens, through which we can better understand the variability of trust and cooperation.

**Keywords:** cooperation, trust, time preferences, evolution, costly signaling

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1 Human cooperation is inherently variable. Cooperation varies with the indi-  
2 vidual. We are not all equally likely to help an unrelated stranger in the field or  
3 in the lab, and report differing levels of cooperative behavior in surveys (Akee  
4 et al., 2018; Amir et al., 2018; Andreoni et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2013; Guinote  
5 et al., 2015; Korndörfer et al., 2015; Lettinga et al., 2020; McCullough et al.,  
6 2013; Nettle et al., 2011; Piff et al., 2010; Schmukle et al., 2019; Stamos et al.,  
7 2020; Wu et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2020; Zwirner & Raihani, 2020). Coopera-  
8 tion is also a function of historical and social context. Social trust tends to be  
9 lower in poorer countries, and in the aftermath of conflict or other dramatic  
10 events (Albanese & de Blasio, 2013; Balliet & Lange, 2013; Besley & Reynal-  
11 Querol, 2014; Bjørnskov, 2007; Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011; Rohner et al., 2013).  
12 For the same interaction, the norm may even be to cooperate in one society,  
13 and defect in another (Henrich, Ensminger, et al., 2010; Henrich, Heine, et al.,  
14 2010). Finally, the value of cooperation itself is variable. We place more trust  
15 in spontaneous and inconspicuous cooperators than we do in individuals who  
16 help others in deliberate or overt fashion (Bird & Power, 2015; Bird et al., 2018;  
17 Critcher et al., 2013; Everett et al., 2016; Gambetta & Przepiorka, 2014; Jordan,  
18 Hoffman, Nowak, et al., 2016; Levine et al., 2018).

19 Evolutionary biologists and game theoreticians explain the evolution of co-  
20 operation with non kin based on the principle of reciprocity. We trust and help  
21 those who have helped us (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Trivers, 1971) or others,  
22 and have thus acquired a trustworthy reputation (Alexander, 1987; Nowak &  
23 Sigmund, 1998; Ohtsuki & Iwasa, 2006; Panchanathan & Boyd, 2003). These  
24 approaches, however, are chiefly concerned with explaining the existence of co-  
25 operation, and rarely attend to its variable nature. In most models helpful be-  
26 havior varies because of exogenous noise (Boyd, 1989; McNamara et al., 2008;  
27 McNamara et al., 2004; Nowak & Sigmund, 1993). Cooperative variability re-  
28 mains an open question: we are unable to predict who is more prone to help,  
29 where cooperation is more likely to emerge and what determines its informa-  
30 tional value.

31 The variable nature of cooperation may be studied following a framework  
32 introduced by Leimar (1997). His model is based on the assumption that indi-  
33 viduals derive differing payoffs from cooperation, and may thus be differentially  
34 motivated to help others (see also Boyd, 1992). In line with honest signaling  
35 theory (Grafen, 1990; Zahavi, 1975), an individual’s behavior in cooperative  
36 encounters will then reveal her private payoffs, and therefore her future cooper-  
37 ative intentions — making it reasonable to trust others based on past behavior  
38 (André, 2010; Leimar, 1997; Leimar & Hammerstein, 2001).

39 Leimar’s model provides the general framework for our study. At first glance  
40 however, his central assumption seems unrealistic. Virtually all the resources or  
41 services that we acquire on our own may be obtained via cooperative exchanges;  
42 it is therefore difficult to conceive that some of us could systematically benefit  
43 more from cooperation than others. In order to better understand the who, the  
44 where and the what of cooperation, we must first explain why individual payoffs  
45 should vary *in general*.

46 One answer to these questions may lie in differences in individual time pref-  
47 erences. Laboratory and field experiments performed in a diversity of contexts  
48 reveal that individuals can be distinguished according to their level of prefer-  
49 ence for immediate vs. future rewards (Amir et al., 2019; Frederick et al., 2002;  
50 Kirby et al., 2002; Tanaka et al., 2010). These time preferences are stable in the

51 short to medium term (Chuang & Schechter, 2015; Meier & Sprenger, 2015),  
52 and across similar decisions (Harrison et al., 2002; Ubfal, 2016).

53 Interindividual differences could originate from adaptive phenotypic plastic-  
54 ity, as harsher environments make future rewards more uncertain and/or present  
55 needs more pressing, and select for stronger preference for the present (Chu et  
56 al., 2010; Ellis et al., 2009; Fawcett et al., 2012; Mell et al., 2021; Nettle &  
57 Frankenhuys, 2020; Pepper & Nettle, 2017; Stevens & Stephens, 2010). At a  
58 fundamental level, cooperation entails paying immediate costs (to help others)  
59 and, following the principle of reciprocity, receiving delayed benefits (in the form  
60 of future help) (André, 2010; Barclay & Barker, 2020; Leimar, 1997; Leimar &  
61 Hammerstein, 2001; Nowak & Sigmund, 1998). In theory, an individual's time  
62 preferences should equivalently affect *all* the payoffs she derives from coopera-  
63 tive encounters.

64 In this paper, we formally explore the hypothesis that time horizon is the  
65 underlying cause of the variability of human cooperation. We develop a mathe-  
66 matical model of cooperation in which individuals are characterized by a hidden  
67 discount rate, which remains constant throughout their life, and affects all fu-  
68 ture payoffs. Individuals face strangers in a cooperative setting, and may use  
69 their reputation to discriminate between trustworthy and exploitative partners.  
70 Help emerges as an honest signal of time preferences in our model. Variation of  
71 time horizon ensures behavioral variability at evolutionary equilibrium, which  
72 stabilizes cooperation (Ferriere et al., 2002; Fishman et al., 2001; Lotem et al.,  
73 1999; McNamara & Leimar, 2010; Sherratt, 2001). In addition, assuming that  
74 individual time preferences vary allows us to account for all three dimensions of  
75 cooperative variability.

76 First, we predict that more future-oriented individuals should be more prone  
77 to help. At equilibrium in our model, trustworthy partners are individuals  
78 whose time horizon surpasses a certain threshold. This result conforms with  
79 empirical data. Many studies report a positive correlation between individual  
80 time horizon and cooperation (Curry et al., 2008; Fehr & Leibbrandt, 2011;  
81 Harris & Madden, 2002; Kocher et al., 2013; Sjästad, 2019), although it should  
82 be noted that some of the evidence is inconclusive (Barclay & Barker, 2020;  
83 Wu et al., 2017). Our first result also helps explain interindividual cooperative  
84 variability. In surveys and field studies, individual cooperation is associated to  
85 environmental affluence (Andreoni et al., 2017; Korndörfer et al., 2015; Lettinga  
86 et al., 2020; Nettle et al., 2011; Schmukle et al., 2019; Zwirner & Raihani, 2020)  
87 — a variable which closely aligns with time horizon (Adams & White, 2009;  
88 Amir et al., 2019; Bulley & Pepper, 2017; Griskevicius et al., 2011; Harrison  
89 et al., 2002; Kirby et al., 2002; Reimers et al., 2009; Tanaka et al., 2010). Time  
90 preferences have been found to mediate the relationship between environmental  
91 affluence and individual investment in collective actions (Lettinga et al., 2020).

92 Second, we predict that more future-oriented populations should have access  
93 to a wider range of stable cooperative opportunities. In surveys and field studies,  
94 average cooperation and trust are associated to collective wealth (Albanese & de  
95 Blasio, 2013; Korndörfer et al., 2015; Lettinga et al., 2020; Nunn & Wantchekon,  
96 2011; Schmukle et al., 2019). Our model offers two complementary explanations  
97 for these observations. Following our first result, we expect higher aggregate  
98 cooperation when many individuals are future-oriented. Following our second  
99 result, we expect cooperation and trust to emerge in a wider range of contexts  
100 when population distribution of time preferences shifts towards the future.

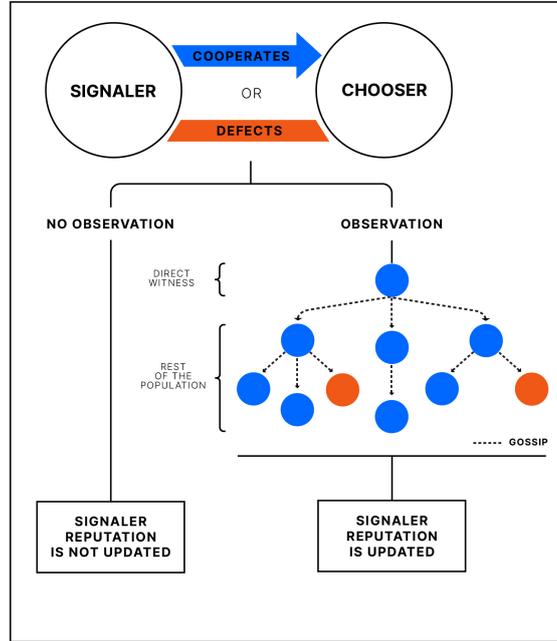


Figure 1: Reputation formation. Signaler behavior is observed with probability  $p$  and error  $\sigma$  by the entire population in our model ( $0 < p < 1$  and  $0 < \sigma < \frac{1}{2}$ ). This may be interpreted to reflect direct observation by one or several witnesses, and rapid social transmission of information (gossip) (Giardini & Vilone, 2016; Nowak & Sigmund, 1998, 2005). Direct observers mention their observation to several acquaintances, who in turn inform their acquaintances, etc. When this process is rapid relative to social interactions, all individuals receive information by the next trust game. Error  $\sigma$  can thus be seen to reflect the noisiness of social transmission: when a Signaler is observed cooperating,  $1 - \sigma$  percent of individuals form a trustworthy image of that Signaler, and  $\sigma$  percent an exploitative image (and vice-versa with defection). We assume that new information replaces old information, and that individuals never forget. In future trust games, partners of that Signaler may condition their trust on (their private view of) her reputation.

101 Third, we predict that cooperation should be a more informative signal of  
 102 time preferences when observation is unlikely, or when the cost-benefit ratio is  
 103 low. Our theory may explain why we place more trust in helpful partners who  
 104 maintain a low profile or make impromptu decisions (Bird & Power, 2015; Bird  
 105 et al., 2018; Critcher et al., 2013; Everett et al., 2016; Gambetta & Przepiorka,  
 106 2014; Jordan, Hoffman, Nowak, et al., 2016; Levine et al., 2018). Inconspic-  
 107 uous cooperators are indeed less likely to be observed and, since spontaneous  
 108 cooperators help more frequently (Jordan, Hoffman, Nowak, et al., 2016; Levine  
 109 et al., 2018; Rand et al., 2012), they stand to gain less from the average en-  
 110 counter. Both behaviors reveal strong preference for the future in our model,  
 111 and therefore strong cooperative motivation.

# 1 Cooperating with strangers

Table 1: Payoffs for the trust game.

		Signaler	
		Cooperate ( $C$ )	Defect ( $D$ )
Chooser	Accept ( $A$ )	$(b, r - c)$	$(-h, r)$
	Reject ( $R$ )	$(0, 0)$	$(0, 0)$

We model cooperative encounters following a trust game with two roles (adapted from Jordan, Hoffman, Bloom, et al., 2016). The game consists in two stages: in the first, the "Chooser" may either accept the "Signaler" or reject partnership with that prospective partner, putting an early end to the interaction. Accepted Signalers reap reward  $r$ .

Partnership is only advantageous with trustworthy Signalers. In the second stage, the Signaler may cooperate with the Chooser, or opt to defect. Cooperation costs  $c$  and benefits the Chooser, who earns  $b$ . In contrast, defection is free and harms the Chooser, who loses  $h$ . We assume cooperation is net beneficial for Signalers:  $r > c$ . Payoffs are summarized in Table 1.

When in the role of Chooser, individuals always face a strange Signaler, with whom they have never interacted before, and of whom they possess no privileged information. Choosers may however condition their play on their partner's reputation. Signalers are observed with probability  $p$ , and error  $\sigma$ . Individuals form a trustworthy or exploitative image of Signalers based on the most recent observation (see Figure 1).

Signalers have varying time preferences. We assume that individuals engage in a large number of cooperative interactions throughout their life, and that lifetime payoffs can be calculated following a discounted utility model (Frederick et al., 2002). A Signaler's time preference is represented by her discount rate  $\delta$ : obtaining payoff  $\pi$  at future time  $t$  is worth  $(\frac{1}{1+\delta})^t \times \pi$  now.  $\delta$  is positive and fixed at birth, by drawing in the population distribution of discount rates. The closer  $\delta$  is to zero, the more an individual is future-oriented.

In the Supplementary Information, we give a full description of the model, and provide a thorough equilibrium analysis. Below we focus on the conditional trust and trustworthiness (CTT) strategy profile, which is defined in relation to a threshold discount rate  $\hat{\delta}$ , and whereby, throughout their life, (i) Choosers accept strangers given trustworthy reputation, and reject them given exploitative reputation; and (ii) Signalers cooperate when their discount rate is smaller than  $\hat{\delta}$ , and defect when their discount rate is larger than  $\hat{\delta}$ . Demonstrations for this strategy profile are detailed in the Materials and Methods section.

## 2 Results

### 2.1 Cooperative equilibrium

We show that CTT is an evolutionarily stable strategy (ESS) if and only if (Maynard Smith & Price, 1973):

$$\hat{\delta} = p \times [(1 - \sigma)\left(\frac{r}{c} - 1\right) - \sigma\frac{r}{c}] \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{\sigma h}{\sigma h + (1 - \sigma)b} < P(\delta < \hat{\delta}) < 1 - \frac{\sigma b}{\sigma b + (1 - \sigma)h} \quad (2)$$

148 Equation (1) specifies the strategy profile under study, by specifying the  
 149 value of the threshold discount rate. Since  $\hat{\delta}$  must be positive for cooperation  
 150 to actually occur, we deduce an upper bound on error  $\sigma$ :

$$\sigma < \frac{\frac{r}{c} - 1}{2\frac{r}{c} - 1} \quad (3)$$

151 Cooperation is stabilized by variation of individual time preferences. Follow-  
 152 ing equation (2), CTT is an ESS when at least  $\frac{\sigma h}{\sigma h + (1 - \sigma)b}$  percent of individuals  
 153 have a discount rate which is smaller than  $\hat{\delta}$ , and therefore cooperate when in  
 154 the Signaler role; and at least  $\frac{\sigma b}{\sigma b + (1 - \sigma)h}$  individuals are above that threshold,  
 155 and therefore defect. Both fractions are positive, increasing functions of error  $\sigma$ :  
 156 cooperation is evolutionarily stable in our model when behavior at equilibrium  
 157 is sufficiently variable (Ferriere et al., 2002; Fishman et al., 2001; Lotem et al.,  
 158 1999; McNamara & Leimar, 2010; Sherratt, 2001), and error sufficiently small  
 159 (Giardini & Vilone, 2016).

## 160 2.2 Who: cooperators are sufficiently future-oriented in- 161 dividuals

162 At equilibrium, trustworthy Signalers are individuals whose discount rate is  
 163 inferior to  $\hat{\delta}$ . When individuals play CTT, Signalers who cooperate pay im-  
 164 mediate cost  $c$  and increase their chances of facing well-disposed partners in  
 165 the future, once they have been observed. The value of establishing and main-  
 166 taining a trustworthy reputation  $\hat{\rho}$  depends on the average delay Signalers have  
 167 to wait before they are observed, which is proportional to  $\Delta t = \frac{1}{p}$ , and on  
 168 the benefit of consistently cooperating instead of defecting after observation,  
 169  $\hat{\beta} = (1 - \sigma)(r - c) - \sigma r$ .

170 We can in fact write:  $\hat{\rho} = p[(1 - \sigma)(r - c) - \sigma r] = \frac{\hat{\beta}}{\Delta t}$ . Since  $\sum_{t=1}^{\infty} (\frac{1}{1 + \delta})^t = \frac{1}{\delta}$ ,  
 171 an individual's social future may be represented by a single trust game whose  
 172 payoffs are discounted with rate  $\frac{1}{\delta}$ . Signalers cooperate at equilibrium if and  
 173 only if the value they attach to gaining  $\hat{\rho}$  their entire future social life exceeds  
 174 the immediate cost of cooperation  $c$  — mathematically,  $\delta < \hat{\delta} \iff \frac{1}{\delta} \times \hat{\rho} > c$ .  
 175 Everything is as if trustworthy Signalers pay  $c$  to secure benefit  $\hat{\beta}$  in a future  
 176 trust game which occurs with probability  $p$ . (Note that  $\hat{\rho}$  tends towards  $r - c$   
 177 when  $p$  tends toward 1 and  $\sigma$  towards 0; when observation is highly faithful and  
 178 certain, trustworthy Signalers pay  $c$  in order to gain  $r - c$  their entire future life,  
 179 with quasi-certainty.)

## 180 2.3 Where: future-oriented populations have access to a 181 wider range of cooperative opportunities

182 When average discount rates are low, equation (2) is verified for a wide range  
 183 of possible parameter values, including when  $\hat{\delta}$  is small — i.e. when the cost-

184 benefit ratio  $\frac{r}{c}$  of cooperation is low, and/or when observation is unlikely (small  
185  $p$ ) or unreliable (large  $\sigma$ ). Even the most demanding forms of cooperation are  
186 stable in sufficiently future-oriented populations.

## 187 **2.4 What: cooperation reveals underlying time prefer-** 188 **ences**

189 Cooperation evolves as a signal of time preferences. At equilibrium, when a Sig-  
190 naler cooperates, she reveals that her discount rate is under  $\hat{\delta}$ . What's more, co-  
191 operation emerges as a signal, and not merely a cue, of Signaler time preferences  
192 (Biernaskie et al., 2018). Cooperation is selected because it affects Choosers'  
193 behavior: future-oriented Signalers cooperate in order to increase their chances  
194 of being trusted in the future; effectively paying  $c$  now in order to gain  $\rho > 0$   
195 their entire future life. In contrast, cooperation cannot evolve in the absence of  
196 such an effect. If for instance Choosers accept whatever the information they  
197 are presented with, cooperative Signalers do not increase their relative chances  
198 of being trusted in the future; in such a case, they would pay  $c$  now to gain  
199 nothing later.

200 In addition, the informative value of cooperation increases when  $\hat{\delta}$  decreases.  
201 When a Signaler helps given small cost-benefit ratio  $\frac{r}{c}$  or unlikely observation  $p$ ,  
202 she reveals that her temporal discount rate must be small — and that she could  
203 therefore potentially be trusted in a wide array of cooperative interactions.

## 204 **3 Discussion**

205 In this paper, we have shown that cooperation can be understood as a signal of  
206 time preferences, using a formal model. We derived three predictions from our  
207 model: (i) future-oriented individuals should be more motivated to cooperate,  
208 (ii) future-oriented populations should have access to a wider range of coopera-  
209 tive opportunities, and (iii) cooperators who reveal stronger preference for the  
210 future should inspire more trust. These results shed light on the variability of  
211 cooperative behavior and trust.

### 212 **3.1 Environment and cooperation**

213 Results (i) and (ii) help explain why individual and aggregate cooperation are  
214 associated to environmental affluence in large representative surveys (Albanese  
215 & de Blasio, 2013; Korndörfer et al., 2015; Lettinga et al., 2020; Nunn &  
216 Wantchekon, 2011; Schmukle et al., 2019), in field studies (Andreoni et al.,  
217 2017; Nettle et al., 2011; Zwirner & Raihani, 2020) and a natural experiment  
218 (Akee et al., 2018) — since people in more privileged circumstances tend to  
219 display stronger preferences for the future (Adams & White, 2009; Amir et al.,  
220 2019; Bulley & Pepper, 2017; Griskevicius et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2002;  
221 Kirby et al., 2002; Reimers et al., 2009; Tanaka et al., 2010) (see also de Courson  
222 & Nettle, 2021).

223 Due to adaptive phenotypic plasticity, the environment in which we grow up  
224 and live may in fact directly fashion our time preferences; and therefore fashion  
225 our cooperative inclinations (Ellis et al., 2009; Nettle & Frankenhuys, 2020; Pep-  
226 per & Nettle, 2017). Evolutionary models show that it is adaptive to be more

227 present-oriented in adverse circumstances, i.e. when future rewards are uncer-  
228 tain (Fawcett et al., 2012; Stevens & Stephens, 2010), or when present needs are  
229 pressing (Chu et al., 2010; Mell et al., 2021). Interindividual differences in time  
230 preferences and cooperation could thus arise from an adaptive plastic response  
231 to one’s environment, for either of these reasons. In support of this hypothesis,  
232 a recent study finds that present biases partially mediate the relationship be-  
233 tween affluence and investment in collective actions (Lettinga et al., 2020), while  
234 a meta-analytic review finds a negative correlation between early-life stress and  
235 self-reported cooperation (Wu et al., 2020).

236 It should be noted that the evidence from behavioral experiments is mixed.  
237 While some economic games have produced a positive association between afflu-  
238 ence and cooperation (Balliet & Lange, 2013; Henrich, Ensminger, et al., 2010;  
239 Korndörfer et al., 2015; McCullough et al., 2013; Nettle et al., 2011; Schmukle  
240 et al., 2019), other laboratory experiments yield the opposite association (Amir  
241 et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2013; Guinote et al., 2015; Piff et al., 2010), or no  
242 effect at all (Stamos et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2017). The previously mentioned  
243 meta-analysis finds no significant overall correlation (Wu et al., 2020). In some  
244 instances, this discrepancy is attributable to small sample sizes (Korndörfer et  
245 al., 2015; Stamos et al., 2020). More largely, the generalizability and ecological  
246 validity of many laboratory experiments can be questioned; in particular when  
247 only one economic game is performed. Recent studies find that measures derived  
248 from a single economic game do not correlate with self-reported cooperation or  
249 real-life behavior, but that a general factor based on several games does (Galizzi  
250 & Navarro-Martinez, 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2019).

## 251 **3.2 Trust depends on revealed time preferences**

252 Result (iii) helps explain why we infer trustworthiness from traits which appear  
253 unrelated to cooperation, but happen to predict time preferences. We trust  
254 known partners and strangers based on how impulsive we perceive them to be  
255 (Peetz & Kammrath, 2013; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011); impulsivity being as-  
256 sociated to both time preferences and cooperativeness in laboratory experiments  
257 (Aguilar-Pardo et al., 2013; Burks et al., 2009; Cohen et al., 2014; Martinsson  
258 et al., 2014; Myrseth et al., 2015; Restubog et al., 2010). Other studies show  
259 we infer cooperative motivation from a wide variety of proxies for partner self-  
260 control, including indicators of their indulgence in harmless sensual pleasures  
261 (for a review see Fitouchi et al., 2021), as well as proxies for environmental  
262 affluence (Moon et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2016).

263 Time preferences further offer a parsimonious explanation for why different  
264 forms of cooperation inspire more trust than others. When probability of obser-  
265 vation  $p$  or cost-benefit ratio  $\frac{r}{c}$  are small in our model, helpful behavior reveals  
266 large time horizon — and cooperators may be perceived as relatively genuine or  
267 disinterested. We derive two different types of conclusion from this principle.

## 268 **3.3 Inconspicuous cooperation**

269 First, time preferences explain why we trust our partners more when they co-  
270 operate in an inconspicuous manner (see also Bird & Power, 2015; Bird et al.,  
271 2018; Hoffman et al., 2018; Quillien, 2020). In our model, the average delay  
272 cooperators have to wait before help can be profitable varies like  $\Delta t = \frac{1}{p}$ . Given

273 smaller probability of observation  $p$ , helpful individuals literally reveal they are  
274 able to wait for a longer amount of time. In contrast, when immediate rewards  
275 are added (e.g. when blood donors are promised payment), help becomes much  
276 less informative; and less valuable to the more genuinely prosocial (Benabou &  
277 Tirole, 2003).

278 In particular, only acutely future-oriented individuals will help when observ-  
279 ability  $p$  is tiny. Their cooperation is akin to a "message in a bottle": a powerful  
280 demonstration of their intrinsic cooperativeness, which, so long as  $p \neq 0$ , will  
281 eventually be received by others. This could explain why some of us cooperate  
282 in economic games which are designed to make our help anonymous (Raihani &  
283 Bshary, 2015), so long as we assume that anonymity is never absolutely certain  
284 (see also Delton et al., 2011).

### 285 **3.4 Spontaneous cooperation**

286 Second, time preferences explain why we trust our partners more when they  
287 cooperate spontaneously — when their behavior appears more natural, unhesi-  
288 tant, intuitive, uncalculating or underlain by emotion (Cricher et al., 2013;  
289 Everett et al., 2016; Gambetta & Przepiorka, 2014; Jordan, Hoffman, Nowak,  
290 et al., 2016; Levine et al., 2018). Since they help their partners more frequently  
291 (Jordan, Hoffman, Nowak, et al., 2016; Levine et al., 2018; Rand et al., 2012),  
292 including when defection is tempting, more spontaneous cooperators enjoy lower  
293 expected payoffs in the typical encounter (see also Hoffman et al., 2015). Greater  
294 spontaneity could thus indicate willingness to help given smaller values of  $\frac{r}{c}$ ; and  
295 therefore stronger preference for the future.

### 296 **3.5 Time preferences and other partner qualities**

297 Our analysis has fixated on time preferences. This is somewhat arbitrary. Many  
298 other characteristics affect our cooperative interests, and are revealed by our  
299 social behavior — underlying costs and benefits (Jordan, Hoffman, Bloom, et al.,  
300 2016; Jordan, Hoffman, Nowak, et al., 2016), revelation probability (Hoffman et  
301 al., 2018), and, when interacting with known associates, specific commitment to  
302 the shared relationship (Barclay, 2020; Barclay & Barker, 2020; Barclay et al.,  
303 2021; Bird et al., 2018; Quillien, 2020) (this latter dimension is absent in our  
304 model). These qualities shape our strategic interests in a given social context:  
305 we stand to gain more from cooperation when it involves a partner we know  
306 and are committed to; and when it occurs in a social network we value and  
307 are embedded in, where we should enjoy higher observability and payoffs. Yet,  
308 context changes fast. We can help a close friend today, and donate anonymously  
309 tomorrow.

310 In contrast to other partner qualities, time preferences appear remarkably  
311 stable. Communication of time preferences is likely to be a fundamental element  
312 of human cooperation. It may even underlie other facets of our social life. The  
313 larger our time horizon, the more likely we are to invest in our social surround-  
314 ings, via dyadic help as well as collective actions or policing. Contribution to  
315 public goods (Gintis et al., 2001) and prosocial punishment (Jordan, Hoffman,  
316 Bloom, et al., 2016), which function as signals of cooperative intent, may also  
317 rely on communication of time preferences.

## 318 Materials and methods

319 This section gives a sketch of the evidence regarding the conditional trust and trust-  
 320 worthiness strategy profile, in a simplified setting. For a full description of the model,  
 321 and a thorough equilibrium analysis, see the Supplementary Information.

322 Two types of players engage in a repeated trust game: Choosers and Signalers. In  
 323 each round, a Chooser faces a Signaler she has never encountered before. She may  
 324 first accept or reject the Signaler, putting an early end to the interaction. If accepted,  
 325 the Signaler reaps reward  $r$ , and may then cooperate or defect. Cooperation involves  
 326 the Signaler paying cost  $c$  for the Chooser to gain  $b$ ; defection is free, and harms the  
 327 Chooser, who loses  $h$ .

328 Choosers may condition their strategy on their private view of the Signaler's repu-  
 329 tation. Each time a Signaler acts, she is observed with probability  $p$ . When a Signaler  
 330 is observed cooperating,  $1 - \sigma$  percent of Choosers receive information  $\mathcal{T}$ , correctly  
 331 indicating that the Signaler behaved in a trustworthy manner; and the remaining  $\sigma$   
 332 percent receive information  $\mathcal{E}$ , falsely indicating exploitative behavior (and vice-versa  
 333 with defection). We assume new information replaces old information.

334 Signalers may condition their strategy on their discount rate  $\delta$ . To simplify things,  
 335 we assume here that Signalers play a stationary strategy (always cooperate, or always  
 336 defect), and that they are initially certain to be accepted (before the first observation).  
 337 We relax both these assumptions in the Supplementary Information, and obtain the  
 338 same results.  $\delta$  is fixed at birth, by drawing in a continuous probability distribution  
 339 which characterizes the Signaler population. Signalers engage in a large number of  
 340 rounds of the repeated trust game, a payoff  $t$  rounds in the future being discounted  
 341 by factor  $(\frac{1}{1+\delta})^t$  now.

342 According to the conditional trust and trustworthiness (CTT) strategy profile, (i)  
 343 Choosers accept given trustworthy reputation  $\mathcal{T}$ , and reject given exploitative repu-  
 344 tation  $\mathcal{E}$ ; and (ii) Signalers cooperate if their discount rate is smaller than a certain  
 345 threshold value  $\hat{\delta}$ , and defect if their discount rate is larger than  $\hat{\delta}$ . We show that CTT  
 346 is an evolutionarily stable strategy (ESS) (Maynard Smith & Price, 1973) under the  
 347 conditions set by equations (1-2), by computing equilibrium and deviation payoffs for  
 348 Signalers first, and Choosers second.

### 349 Signaler equilibrium payoffs

350 We consider a Signaler of discount rate  $\delta$ . Let  $\Pi_C$  and  $\Pi_D$  be the lifetime discounted  
 351 payoff she can expect from cooperation and defection respectively. We show that  
 352 when the value of  $\hat{\delta}$  is given by equation (1), the Signaler stands to strictly lose from  
 353 deviation from CTT.

354 Let us first calculate  $\Pi_C$ . When the Signaler cooperates, she gains  $r - c$  every  
 355 round she is accepted. She will eventually be observed, from which point she can  
 356 expect to be accepted  $1 - \sigma$  percent of the time in equilibrium, in rounds where she is  
 357 paired with a Chooser who has (correctly) received information  $\mathcal{T}$ . In other words, she  
 358 eventually gains payoff  $\Pi_C^\infty = \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} (\frac{1}{1+\delta})^t (1 - \sigma)(r - c) = \frac{1+\delta}{\delta} (1 - \sigma)(r - c)$ , starting  
 359 from the point of first observation.

360 In the initial round however, she is certain to be accepted, and gain  $r - c$ . Obser-  
 361 vation affects her payoffs starting in the next round, which are discounted by factor  
 362  $\frac{1}{1+\delta}$ : if she is observed, she gains  $\Pi_C^\infty$  starting the next round, if not, she continues to  
 363 gain payoff  $\Pi_C$ . In other words, we have:

$$\Pi_C = r - c + \frac{p \times \Pi_C^\infty + (1 - p) \times \Pi_C}{1 + \delta}$$

364 From which we deduce:

$$\Pi_C = (r - c + \frac{p \times \Pi_C^\infty}{1 + \delta}) \times \frac{1 + \delta}{p + \delta}$$

365 We can apply an analogous reasoning to calculate  $\Pi_D$ . When the Signaler defects,  
 366 she gains  $r$  every round she is accepted. After the first observation, the Signaler can  
 367 expect to be accepted  $\sigma$  percent of the time, when paired with a Chooser who has  
 368 (incorrectly) received information  $\mathcal{T}$ . She eventually gains:  $\Pi_D^\infty = \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} (\frac{1}{1+\delta})^t \sigma r =$   
 369  $\frac{1+\delta}{\delta} \sigma r$ . Starting from the initial round, she therefore gains:

$$\Pi_D = r + \frac{p \times \Pi_D^\infty + (1-p) \times \Pi_D}{1 + \delta}$$

370 Which yields:

$$\Pi_D = (r + \frac{p \times \Pi_D^\infty}{1 + \delta}) \times \frac{1 + \delta}{p + \delta}$$

371 By comparing both expressions, we deduce that the Signaler strictly benefits from  
 372 cooperation if and only if the cost of cooperating now is smaller than the benefit of  
 373 receiving  $\Pi_C^\infty$  instead of receiving  $\Pi_D^\infty$  in the future, with probability  $p$ :

$$\Pi_D < \Pi_C \iff c < p \times \frac{\Pi_C^\infty - \Pi_D^\infty}{1 + \delta}$$

374 And, by replacing  $\Pi_C^\infty$  and  $\Pi_D^\infty$  by their values, we deduce the logical equivalence:

$$\Pi_D < \Pi_C \iff \delta < p \times [(1 - \sigma)(\frac{r}{c} - 1) - \sigma \frac{r}{c}]$$

375 Under condition (1), the Signaler therefore always stands to strictly lose from  
 376 deviation from CTT. If her discount rate  $\delta$  is smaller than  $\hat{\delta}$ , she strictly gains on  
 377 average from cooperating her whole life instead of defecting her whole life; if conversely,  
 378  $\delta > \hat{\delta}$ , she strictly benefits from defecting. Note that CTT does not prescribe behavior  
 379 for the Signaler when her discount rate is precisely equal to the threshold. Here, we  
 380 neglect this possibility, based on the fact that the population distribution of discount  
 381 rates is continuous (we come back to this in the Supplementary Information).

## 382 Chooser equilibrium payoffs

383 We show that in equilibrium, Choosers stand to strictly lose from deviation from CTT  
 384 when equation (2) is verified. Let us first consider a Chooser faced with information  
 385  $\mathcal{T}$ . If the Chooser rejects the Signaler, she gains nothing; if she accepts, she stands to  
 386 gain expected benefit  $P(C|\mathcal{T}) \times b + P(D|\mathcal{T}) \times (-h) = P(C|\mathcal{T})(b + h) - h$ . Accepting  
 387 given  $\mathcal{T}$  is therefore strictly beneficial iff:

$$P(C|\mathcal{T}) > \frac{h}{b + h}$$

388 Let  $\tau = P(C) = P(\delta < \hat{\delta})$  be the equilibrium probability that the Signaler is  
 389 trustworthy. Following Bayes' rule,  $P(C|\mathcal{T}) = \frac{P(\mathcal{T}|C)}{P(\mathcal{T})} \times \tau$ . The above inequality can  
 390 be rewritten as:

$$\frac{1 - \sigma}{\tau(1 - \sigma) + (1 - \tau)\sigma} \times \tau > \frac{h}{b + h}$$

391 This is equivalent to:

$$\tau > \frac{\sigma h}{\sigma h + (1 - \sigma)b} \quad (2a)$$

392 Let us now consider a Chooser faced with information  $\mathcal{E}$ . An analogous calculation  
393 shows that rejecting given  $\mathcal{E}$  is strictly beneficial iff:

$$P(C|\mathcal{E}) < \frac{h}{b+h}$$

394 Using Bayes' rule, we find:  $P(C|\mathcal{E}) = \frac{P(\mathcal{E}|C)}{P(\mathcal{E})} \times \tau = \frac{\sigma}{\tau\sigma + (1-\tau)(1-\sigma)} \times \tau$ . By replacing  
395 in the above inequality, we deduce that rejection given  $\mathcal{E}$  is strictly beneficial iff:

$$\tau < 1 - \frac{\sigma b}{\sigma b + (1-\sigma)h} \quad (2b)$$

396 Combining equations (2a) and (2b), and replacing  $\tau = P(\delta < \hat{\delta})$  we deduce equa-  
397 tion (2). Under that condition, Choosers therefore stand to strictly lose from deviation  
398 from CTT. We deduce that CTT is an ESS under the conditions set by equations (1-2):  
399 any mutant is strictly counter-selected. We show in the Supplementary Information  
400 that we in fact have an equivalence; CTT is an ESS if and only if both equations are  
401 verified.

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