

# Humans reciprocate intentional harm by discriminating against group peers<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

Cycles of intergroup revenge appear in large scale conflicts. We experimentally test the hypothesis that humans practice group-based reciprocity: if someone harms or helps them, they harm or help other members of that person's group. Subjects played a trust game, then allocated money between other people. Senders whose partners returned more in the trust game gave more to that partner's group members. The effect was about 60 per cent of the size of the direct reciprocity effect. Receivers' allocations to group members **did not depend on** their partner's play, suggesting that group reciprocity was only triggered when the partner's intentions were unequivocal.



## 1 Introduction

Human society is organized in groups, including families, clans, firms and nations. This structure is reflected in individual behaviour and cognition. Humans identify with their ingroup and are altruistic and prosocial towards ingroup members; towards outgroup members, they display stereotyping and


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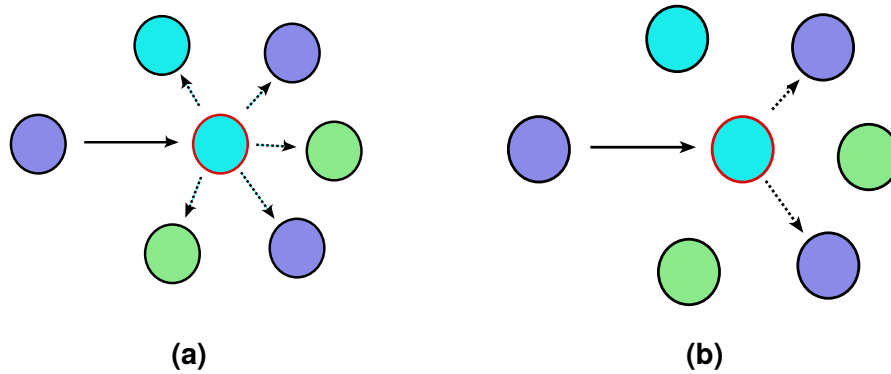
prejudice [1, 7, 8, 10, 32, 35]. Group structure provides the backdrop for inter-group conflict—from economic and political competition to inter-ethnic violence and war—which is pervasive in the species. 

Intergroup conflicts often follow a tit-for-tat logic, in which one group's violence leads to revenge from the other side [6, 19, 20, 28]. This suggests that humans practice intergroup *reciprocity*. Reciprocity is a well-known mechanism that may underlie the evolution of cooperation [24, 25]. While in direct reciprocity, individuals help those who have helped them in the past (and similarly for harm), in indirect reciprocity, individuals help or harm other people than those who have helped them. Indirect reciprocity comes in two flavours: *downstream* reciprocity follows the maxim 'do unto thy neighbour as they have done to others', whereas *upstream* reciprocity follows the maxim 'do unto thy neighbour as others have done unto you'.

Compared to downstream reciprocity, upstream reciprocity is cognitively easier to implement, as it does not require tracking individual reputations, but is more difficult to understand from an evolutionary point of view [5, 27]. Nonetheless, upstream reciprocity can co-evolve with direct or spatial reciprocity [26]. Furthermore, laboratory experiments provide positive evidence for upstream reciprocity: individuals are more generous to others if a third party was generous to them [11, 16, 18], and the mere possibility of being harmed by a third party reduces cooperation in a social dilemma [34].

In this paper we examine group-based upstream reciprocity, or *group reciprocity*. That is, an individual who is harmed (helped) by a member of an out-group becomes more likely to harm (help) others from that group. Whereas group-based downstream reciprocity [3, 4] follows the maxim 'do unto others as they have done to members of *my* tribe', group-based upstream reciprocity follows the maxim 'do unto others as members of *their* tribe have done to me' (Figure 1). Both up- and downstream group reciprocity can expand the scope of an individual-level conflict into an inter-group conflict. While (group-based) downstream reciprocity can bring a victim's groupmates in as retaliators, upstream reciprocity makes members of the aggressor's group into potential targets.   


Upstream group reciprocity has different cognitive requirements from re-



**Figure 1:** Upstream reciprocity. (a) Someone who was helped or harmed becomes more likely to help or harm others. (b) Upstream group reciprocity targets people who belong to the same group as the initial partner.

lated phenomena. While in-group altruism and group-based downstream reciprocity require people to differentiate their own group from outsiders—“us” from “them”—upstream group reciprocity requires them to differentiate between different outgroups—between “them and them”—and to keep a mental account of outgroups’ reputation. Upstream group reciprocity could thus provide an evolutionary basis for outgroup stereotyping.

We ran a laboratory experiment to test the hypothesis that people reciprocate towards groups. Although field observations from conflict are highly suggestive, they are loaded with individual and group context and history. Observing group reciprocity under controlled laboratory conditions with artificial groups identifies group reciprocity as an innate human tendency. Cleanly identifying group reciprocity requires controlling for three confounds: individual level reciprocity, e.g. if subjects’ actions affect an entire group including the original actor who helped or harmed them; generalized reciprocity, where subjects reciprocate not just towards the original actor’s group but also to members of other groups; and strategic interactions, where apparent reciprocity is driven by reputation-building. While none of the previous work [14, 21, 31] has satisfied all three conditions simultaneously, our experiment fulfils all three: subjects can differentiate the original actor from his or her group members, they interact both with these group members and with members

of other groups, and we minimize strategic concerns by not giving feedback about subjects' actions.

After an initial group-formation stage, participants interacted in two strategic stages. The **first stage** represented the upstream interaction, in which the individual could be helped or harmed by another person. We implemented this as a Trust Game (TG) [2], in which the Sender (S) receives 150 money-equivalent tokens, and chooses how many of them to send to the Responder (R). The amount sent is multiplied by a factor of 3, so that R receives between 0 and 450 tokens, of which he can send any number back to S. The TG enables us to model two types of interactions. Whereas R is clearly kind when returning money (and nasty when exploiting a generous proposer by keeping the received amount), S's intentions are equivocal. Sending money can be driven by selfish expectations of reciprocity, while not sending can be driven by caution. Thus, while all subjects experience helpful or harmful actions, only senders experience actions that clearly reflect their counterpart's preferences and intentions [17, 22].

The second stage represented the reciprocal action, in which the individual could help others. We implemented this as an **allocation game** in which subjects divided a fixed amount between two recipients. In Direct Reciprocity rounds, the recipients included the TG partner; in Group Reciprocity rounds, a member of the TG partner's group; and in In-Group Favouritism rounds, a member of the allocator's group. The other recipient was always a member of a third, neutral, group. Baseline rounds included two neutral recipients, to test whether the TG experience leads to arbitrary discrimination in the absence of any reciprocal or group motivations.

## 2 Method

Each session consisted of 24 participants, randomly allocated into six *teams* of four. Each participant was identified throughout the experiment by team colour and individual number (1–4) within the team. At the beginning of the experiment, participants were informed that the experiment had five distinct

stages, and that they might interact with the same people in different stages. Specific instructions for each stage were distributed and read aloud at the beginning of the stage. The five stages were a group formation stage, the TG stage, the AG stage, a social value orientation elicitation [23] stage and a collectivism scale measurement [adapted from the horizontal collectivism scale in 29].

Following ~~Chen and Li~~ [8], we created group identity in the first stage by allowing participants to consult each other by anonymous chat while solving a simple task. Participants solved five Raven matrices (see supplementary material). Each matrix was presented on screen for 120 seconds, during which each participant could both send written messages to the team and update her own answer. The final answer submitted at the end of the 120 seconds determined payoffs, with 10 tokens paid for each correct answer. To further boost group identity through a common goal, team members each earned an additional bonus of 5 tokens if all four team members answered correctly.

Next, participants were rematched into pairs to play the one-shot TG. To facilitate understanding, participants played five practice rounds, in which they entered decisions both as S and as R. In the actual interaction, participants could see their TG partner's team colour and individual number. The kindness of the sender was measured as the share of the endowment sent, and that of the responder as the share of the received amount sent back. Responder's kindness was not defined for six (out of 96) responders whose partner did not send any money.

The third stage consisted of six rounds. In each round, participants interacted in groups of three. Individuals in each group were identified to each other by team colour and number. Each round consisted of a random dictator game, as follows. Each player in the group of three had to allocate 100 tokens within the group. The allocator received a fixed 30 tokens, and could freely allocate the remaining 70 tokens between the other two players. Previous research found that people do not harm, but refrain from helping negatively perceived out-groups [33]. Accordingly, we set the parameters of the game so that, compared to the reference point of the allocator's own share, an equal division benefits both other players. Table 1 shows the matching scheme over the six rounds. Each participant was in the same group of three in one of the six rounds

**Table 1:** Matching example

Round	Allocates to		Treatment
1	Red 1	/ Yellow 1	Group reciprocity (GR)
2	Yellow 4	/ Brown 2	Group reciprocity (GR)
3	Green 3	/ Yellow 2	Direct reciprocity (DR)
4	Red 1	/ Brown 1	Baseline (B)
5	Brown 2	/ Brown 4	Baseline (B)
6	Blue 3	/ Green 2	Ingroup (IG)

Note: Example treatments shown for player Blue 2, who played the TG with Yellow 2 (see the supplementary material for the full matching scheme).

with a member of her own team (*in-group* condition), in one round with her TG partner (*direct reciprocity* condition), and in two rounds with other members of the TG partner's team (*group reciprocity* condition). The remaining two rounds served as the baseline condition. No feedback was provided between rounds. Stage payoffs were determined by one randomly chosen round of the six rounds, and the allocation decision of one randomly chosen player in each group. Note that the matching is not independent. For example, if one player is in the direct reciprocity condition, then one other player is in the direct reciprocity condition and the third player is in either the baseline or group reciprocity condition.

The fourth stage implemented the slider measure of social value orientation [9, 23], in which participants choose nine allocations between themselves and another person. For consistency with the previous stages, the team identity of the partner was known. To keep the decision independent of previous experience with the different teams, we matched participants within teams. Therefore, this measure captures within-group social value orientation. Payoffs were determined by one randomly chosen decision of the nine decisions made by one randomly chosen player in each dyad. The decisions yielded a social orientation angle for each participant, with  $0^\circ$  corresponding to selfishness,  $45^\circ$  to pure altruism, and negative angles to spitefulness.

After the fifth and final stage (a non-strategic and non-incentivised collec-

**Table 2:** Allocations and Discrimination

	Allocation	Discrimination	Reciprocity
<b>Senders</b>			
Baseline	35.00 (—)	4.15 (0.97)	—
Direct Reciprocity	33.98 (2.30)	22.00 (1.51) ***	15.64 (5.12)**
Group Reciprocity	34.39 (0.77)	8.08 (1.61) ***	7.78 (2.37)**
In-Group	38.98 (1.11) ***	15.46 (2.99) ***	0.20 (5.50)
<b>Responders</b>			
Baseline	35.00 (—)	2.25 (0.51)	—
Direct Reciprocity	35.38 (1.08)	22.17 (2.30) ***	20.87 (6.04)***
Group Reciprocity	34.79 (0.62)	6.12 (1.51) **	1.20 (2.08)
In-Group	42.13 (1.99) ***	17.20 (3.40) ***	4.72 (7.62)

Mean allocation, mean discrimination, and reciprocity (marginal effect of TG partner’s kindness on allocation) by condition. Robust standard errors clustered on sessions. Significance of comparison to Baseline is marked. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , and  $p < 0.001$ , respectively.

tivism measurement), participants learned their cumulative payoff in tokens, and final payment in New Israeli Shekels. One hundred and ninety two participants, recruited using ORSEE [15] participated in eight sessions conducted between June 2014 and January 2015. The experiment was programmed in z-Tree [13]. The average payment was 72 NIS (approximately \$18) for a duration of 70 minutes.

### 3 Results

We report results on allocations, discrimination between recipients (measured as the absolute difference between the two recipients’ allocations), and direct and group reciprocity. All reported statistical tests are based on mixed-effects regressions with bootstrapped standard errors clustered on subjects. See the supplementary material for the full specification and results.

The first column in Table 2 presents the mean allocations. Participants gave significantly more to members of their own team at the expense of the neutral recipient ( $z = 3.63, p < 0.001$  for senders,  $z = 3.59, p < 0.001$  for responders), establishing that our group formation manipulation was successful in

inducing group identity and triggering in-group favouritism. Allocations to the TG partner and his team mates were not significantly different to the baseline 35 ( $p > 0.47$  for all comparisons). Nonetheless, as the second column of Table 2 shows, allocators discriminated significantly more than in the baseline both when interacting with their TG partner ( $z = 9.08, p < 0.001$ ) and with his team mates ( $z = 3.93, p < 0.001$ ). This effect was not significantly different between TG senders and receivers (F test 0.50,  $p = 0.68$ ).

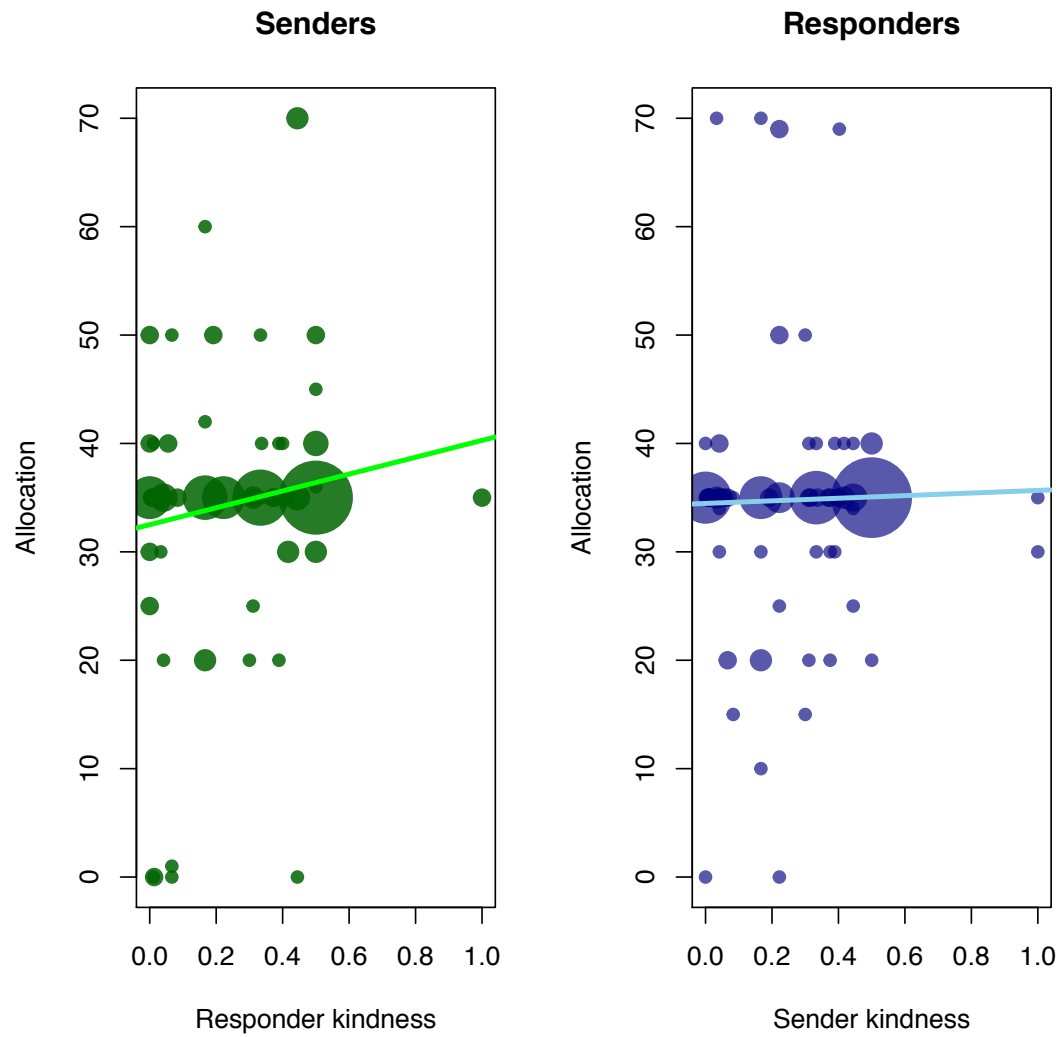
### *Direct and group reciprocity*

The third column of Table 2, *Reciprocity*, reports the slope of allocations regressed on the *kindness* of subjects' TG partners. There is strong direct reciprocity: allocations to the TG partners increase with that partner's kindness both for senders ( $z = 3.06, p < 0.01$ ) and for responders ( $z = 3.46, p < 0.001$ ).

Group reciprocity, however, is only observed for senders, who allocate less to team mates of a responder who sent less—an intentionally harmful action. Responders, on the other hand, although directly reciprocating the TG partner, do not systematically discriminate against team mates of a sender who sent little—a harmful action that does not unequivocally signal a bad intention. The regression analysis shows no significant effect of sender kindness on responder's allocation to the sender's team mates ( $z = 0.58, p = 0.56$ ). The responder's kindness, on the other hand, significantly increases allocations made to his team mates ( $z = 3.29, p < 0.01$ ). The estimated ratio of the group and direct reciprocity coefficients is 50%, so that for every allocation dollar a responder loses due to an unkind action in the TG, his team mates lose 50 cents.

Senders' group reciprocity was related to their social value orientation. The slope of kindness on allocations was 15.97 for those with less than median SVO, and -1.06 for those with median or greater SVO (interaction,  $p = 0.061$ ). These results should be interpreted cautiously, since both scores were affected by the kindness of subjects' partners.





**Figure 2:** Allocations in the Group Reciprocity condition versus partner's kindness in the TG. Circles show individual data points (circle size proportional to number of observations). Lines show linear regressions.

## 4 Discussion

Our results show that upstream reciprocity is moderated by social boundaries.



We distinguish between reciprocity towards harm and towards intentional harm [30]. People discriminate against others who harm them even if the harmful action does not necessarily indicate bad intentions. However, they only generalize to the perpetrator's group members if the intentions behind the harmful actions are unequivocally bad.

This observation raises new questions regarding the nature of reciprocity and the role of intentions (or perceptions thereof). One possible interpretation stems from the distinction between intention-based and outcome-based motives in reciprocal behaviour [12]. It is possible that humans generalize intentions across group members more than they generalize actions across group members. So, if (e.g.) group member 1 wishes to harm them, they are prone to infer that group member 2 also wishes to do so; but if group member 1 takes an action that harms them, they do not necessarily infer that group member 2 would also have done so. Indeed, the conjecture 'One member of the Blue group is a bad person, therefore all Blue members are bad' is plausible. The conjecture 'One member of the Blue group did not send any money, therefore other Blue members did not send money' is not—as, given subjects' knowledge, the other Blue members were not even necessarily senders.

Upstream reciprocity is notoriously difficult to understand in evolutionary terms [5, 26]. Group reciprocity may provide another piece of the puzzle, as it provides two new channels by which upstream reciprocity may evolve. First, group members are interdependent, especially in the small groups that were the norm during most of human evolutionary history. Punishing a perpetrator's group member therefore indirectly harms the perpetrator, who is dependent on his peers for, e.g., public goods provision. Thus, group reciprocity may bridge upstream indirect reciprocity and direct reciprocity.

Second, the evolution of indirect reciprocity acts by way of chains of reciprocal actions, which return with some probability to the original instigator of the chain [26]. In a population organised in groups, such that people interact more frequently with their own group members, group reciprocity may in-

crease the likelihood of successful reciprocal chains, facilitating the evolution of upstream reciprocity. We aim to explore these ideas in future work.



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## Appendix A: Complete matching scheme

Period	Group							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Blue 2 (GR)	Blue 1 (GR)	Green 4 (GR)	Blue 3 (B)	Red 2 (DR)	Blue 4 (B)	Green 1 (IG)	Red 4 (B)
	Red 1 (B)	Yellow 2 (GR)	Brown 4 (B)	Green 3 (GR)	Brown 2 (DR)	Red 3 (DR)	Green 2 (IG)	Yellow 3 (IG)
	Yellow 1 (GR)	Purple 2 (B)	Purple 3 (GR)	Purple 4 (GR)	Purple 1 (B)	Brown 3 (DR)	Brown 1 (B)	Yellow 4 (IG)
2	Green 3 (GR)	Red 3 (B)	Blue 4 (GR)	Blue 2 (GR)	Blue 3 (DR)	Green 2 (DR)	Blue 1 (B)	Red 2 (IG)
	Yellow 1 (B)	Green 1 (GR)	Green 4 (B)	Yellow 4 (GR)	Red 1 (B)	Brown 4 (B)	Brown 1 (IG)	Red 4 (IG)
	Purple 1 (GR)	Purple 3 (GR)	Yellow 2 (GR)	Brown 2 (B)	Yellow 3 (DR)	Purple 2 (DR)	Brown 3 (IG)	Purple 4 (B)
3	Red 1 (GR)	Red 4 (GR)	Blue 3 (B)	Red 3 (GR)	Green 4 (DR)	Blue 2 (DR)	Blue 1 (IG)	Yellow 3 (B)
	Brown 4 (GR)	Yellow 4 (B)	Red 2 (GR)	Green 2 (B)	Yellow 1 (B)	Green 3 (B)	Blue 4 (IG)	Purple 2 (IG)
	Purple 1 (B)	Brown 1 (GR)	Brown 3 (GR)	Brown 2 (GR)	Purple 4 (DR)	Yellow 2 (DR)	Green 1 (B)	Purple 3 (IG)
4	Blue 4 (GR)	Blue 3 (GR)	Green 2 (GR)	Blue 1 (B)	Red 4 (DR)	Blue 2 (B)	Green 3 (IG)	Red 2 (B)
	Red 3 (B)	Yellow 4 (GR)	Brown 2 (B)	Green 1 (GR)	Brown 4 (DR)	Red 1 (DR)	Green 4 (IG)	Yellow 1 (IG)
	Yellow 3 (GR)	Purple 4 (B)	Purple 1 (GR)	Purple 2 (GR)	Purple 3 (B)	Brown 1 (DR)	Brown 3 (B)	Yellow 2 (IG)
5	Green 4 (GR)	Red 4 (B)	Blue 3 (GR)	Blue 1 (GR)	Blue 4 (DR)	Green 1 (DR)	Blue 2 (B)	Red 1 (IG)
	Yellow 2 (B)	Green 2 (GR)	Green 3 (B)	Yellow 3 (GR)	Red 2 (B)	Brown 3 (B)	Brown 2 (IG)	Red 3 (IG)
	Purple 2 (GR)	Purple 4 (GR)	Yellow 1 (GR)	Brown 1 (B)	Yellow 4 (DR)	Purple 1 (DR)	Brown 4 (IG)	Purple 3 (B)
6	Red 2 (GR)	Red 3 (GR)	Blue 4 (B)	Red 4 (GR)	Green 3 (DR)	Blue 1 (DR)	Blue 2 (IG)	Yellow 4 (B)
	Brown 3 (GR)	Yellow 3 (B)	Red 1 (GR)	Green 1 (B)	Yellow 2 (B)	Green 4 (B)	Blue 3 (IG)	Purple 1 (IG)
	Purple 2 (B)	Brown 2 (GR)	Brown 4 (GR)	Brown 1 (GR)	Purple 3 (DR)	Yellow 1 (DR)	Green 2 (B)	Purple 4 (IG)



## Appendix B: Experimental instructions

### *General instructions*

*<Placed on table>*

welcome to the experiment!

From this moment you are not to talk to the other participants in the experiment.

During the experiment you will be able to accumulate points according to the decisions you make.

Your final payment in the experiment will be determined according to your gains in points in addition to a base payment of 10 NIS.

The points will be converted into money at a conversion rate of 6 points = 1 NIS.

At the end of the experiment, please wait for the experimenter to call you for payment.

In a short moment we will distribute the instructions and read them out loud. If you have any questions, please wait until we finish reading and raise your hand, and the experimenter will come to you.

## *Instructions for the experiment*

*<Presented as a pdf document and available throughout the experiment>*

**These instructions are identical to all the participants.**

**The experiment is composed of five separate and different phases.** At the beginning of the experiment, all participants will be allocated into **teams of four**. Each team has a unique **colour**. These teams will remain fixed throughout the experiment.

Before each part, we will distribute and read the relevant instructions for that part. In each part the participants will be reallocated into groups. The number of participants in a group can change from part to part. The payments in the part will be determined according to the decisions of the participants in the team. It is possible, but not necessary, that another participant will be in the same group as you in two different parts. In each part of the experiment you will be able to know which team each of the participants in your group belongs to.

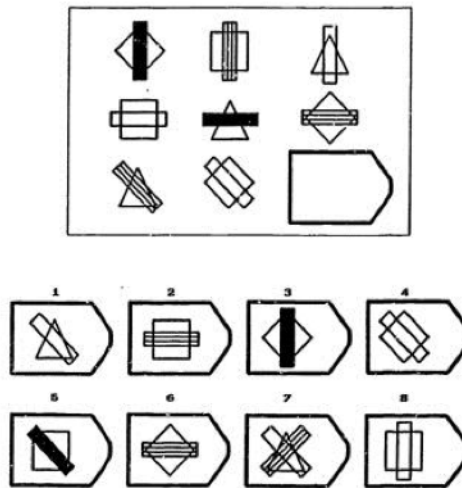
**Your final payment in the experiment will be the total of your gain in all of the parts.**

At the end of the experiment, you will be presented with the payments in each part and your total payment, in points and in shekels. Please remain seated until the experimenter calls you for payment.

**If you have any questions, please raise your hand now and the experimenter will come to you.**

### *Experiments for the first part*

In this part, you and the members of your team perform a pattern completion task. The computer will present you with five questions. Each question is comprised of eight pictures, and the team members will be asked to choose a ninth picture out of eight possible pictures to complete the pattern. For example:



Each team member must answer all of the questions. For each correct answer, the team member will receive **10 points**. Additionally, if all of the team members answer correctly, the whole team will receive a **team bonus of 20 points, to be equally divided among the team members**.

**Each question will be allocated two minutes.** During this time, the team members can **consult each other** using electronic chat. Enter your answer and click Confirm. You can change your answer and click Confirm again at any point during the two minutes. The last answer to be entered is the final answer.

**Attention:** Do not reveal any identifying information. If any participant in the session identifies themselves, we will stop the experiment and release all participants with only the showup fee.

**If you have any questions, please raise your hand now and the experimenter will come to you.**

### *Instructions for the second part*

In this part participants will be matched in **pairs**. In each pair, one participant will be in role A and the other participant in role B. Participant A receives an allocation of **150 points** and decides how many of the 150 points to **send to Participant B**. The amount is **tripled**. Next, Participant B will decide how many points out of the points received to **send back to Participant A**. These points will not be multiplied.

If you are allocated to role A, your payment in this part will be:

150	-	The number of points you sent to Participant B	+	The number of points Participant B sent back	=	Second part earnings
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If you are allocated to role B, your payment in this part will be:

3	×	The number of points Participant A sent you	-	The number of points you sent back	=	Second part earnings
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Before making your decision, you will be able to test the payment calculation in a **practice phase**, in which you will be able to make decisions as both **Participant A** and as **Participant B**. In this stage, you will enter decisions in both roles, and see the final payments. The practice will repeat five times.

**If you have any questions, please raise your hand now and the experimenter will come to you.**

### *Instructions for the third part*

In the third part, all participants will be matched in **groups of three**. Each of the three participants in the group will choose how to **divide 100 points** between the three group members, such that he himself receives **30 points**, and **freely allocates** the remaining **70 points** between the other two group members. This stage has **6 rounds**, and you will be **rematched in a new group**.

### *Payment calculation in the part*

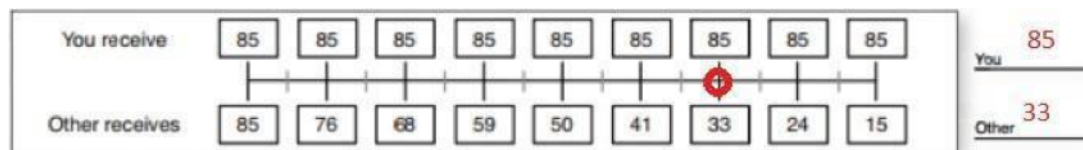
At the end of the experiment, the computer will randomly choose one of the six rounds, and one participant in each group. The payment for this part will be determined according to the decision of the randomly chosen participant in the randomly chosen round.

**If you have any questions, please raise your hand now and the experimenter will come to you.**

### *Instructions for the fourth part*

In this part, participant will be matched in **pairs**.

Each participant will be presented with **6 rulers** that include nine possible allocations of money to the two participants. The amount you chose to **keep for yourself** is indicated above each ruler, and the amount you choose to **give to the other participant** is indicated below the ruler. You are to choose your preferred allocation of the nine possible allocations. For example,



You can choose any point on the ruler. For example, assume you chose the point marked in red. You will receive 85 points and the other participant will receive 33 points.

At the end of the part, the computer will randomly choose one of the two participants in the pair and one of the nine rulers. your payment in this part will be determined by the decision of the randomly chosen participant for the randomly chosen ruler.

**If you have any questions, please raise your hand now and the experimenter will come to you.**

### *Instructions for the fifth part*

In this part you will be asked to answer several questions. The questions have to do with the way one sees himself and his surroundings in different situations. Your task is to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement, using the following scale:

1. Strongly disagree.
2. Disagree.
3. Neither agree nor disagree.
4. Agree.
5. Strongly agree.

Note: there are no right and wrong answers. Please indicate the answer that best reflects your character with respect to the statement. Take your time and think about your answer.