

# Discrimination, Cooperation, and Building Communities

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What happens to people’s cooperative behavior when they experience discrimination? I explore this question in the context of discrimination against the Roma in Slovenia. I find that Roma who report having experienced discrimination are much less likely to contribute to a public good. This has cyclical implications not only for the individuals affected but also for the communities in which they live, as an overall lower use of cooperative strategies likely affects the community as a whole.

The Roma, also known derogatively as “Gypsies,” make up the largest ethnic minority in Europe. Historically, the Roma have been variously enslaved, deported, forcibly assimilated, and subjected to genocide. While many Roma have integrated into their respective majority populations, most remain segregated and face widespread discrimination and substantial social disadvantages. Roma often live without essential utilities like electricity or sewerage, typically receive substandard health care, face significant barriers in accessing education and employment, and are frequently considered not to deserve social welfare. The Roma have been socially excluded for generations, and continue to be so today.

In this study, a random sample of 131 Roma from the two towns with the highest Roma population in Slovenia participated in a series of multi-round public goods and indirect reciprocity games. These games have been used in social science scholarship to estimate levels of cooperative behavior.

As Roma and non-Roma are reluctant to interact in the same room, and because levels of literacy are low in some segments of Romani populations, I developed a simple videogame incorporating the two games. The videogame is played in a group of 8 players, but all players other than the participant are simulated (the participants are aware of this). In the videogame, participants collect personal victory points (VPs), which translate into remuneration for participation at the end of the session.

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The public goods game presents a scenario where the group is best off when everyone contributes to the good, but where incentives to free-ride without cooperating are high. In the videogame, players are given a brick (1VP) which they can either hoard or contribute to a common tower (see Figure 1). As the tower rises, all players receive extra victory points (even those who did not contribute to the tower). The more players contribute, the better off they all are; but the player who defects when many cooperate is best off. In the indirect reciprocity phase that follows tower building (not analyzed here), players have an opportunity to reward another player based on whether that player contributed to the tower in the phase just before. The cycle then repeats, starting with another tower building phase.

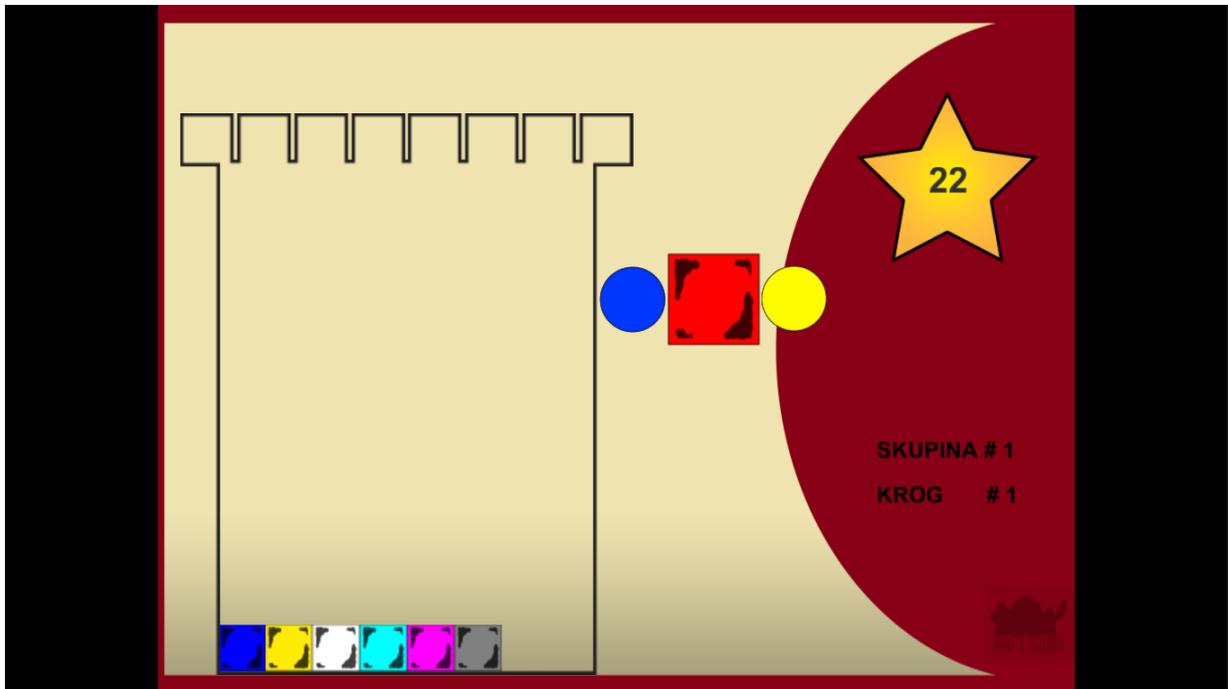


Figure 1: Videogame screenshot. In tower building, participants press blue to contribute their brick to the tower and yellow to keep their brick. The star displays the victory points gained so far.

After participants played the videogame, I asked them about their experience with discrimination and exclusion. A Roma is assigned to the “experienced discrimination” group if she answers yes to at least one of ten composite questions on discrimination. For example, if she answered 1) that she had been denied entrance to a restaurant and 2) that she thinks this happened because she is Roma, then she would have answered one of the ten composite questions. Of the 131 Roma, 73 percent reported having experienced discrimination and 27 percent did not. In what follows, I compare tower building decisions by individuals from these two groups.

Are individuals who report having experienced discrimination less likely to contribute to the public good? My results suggest that they are. Figure 2 presents the predicted probability of tower building for the two groups. Roma who reported having experienced discrimination on average contributed to the tower 45 percent of the time, while Roma who did not on average contributed 67 percent of the time. Roma who reported having experienced discrimination and social exclusion were much less likely to contribute to the public good.

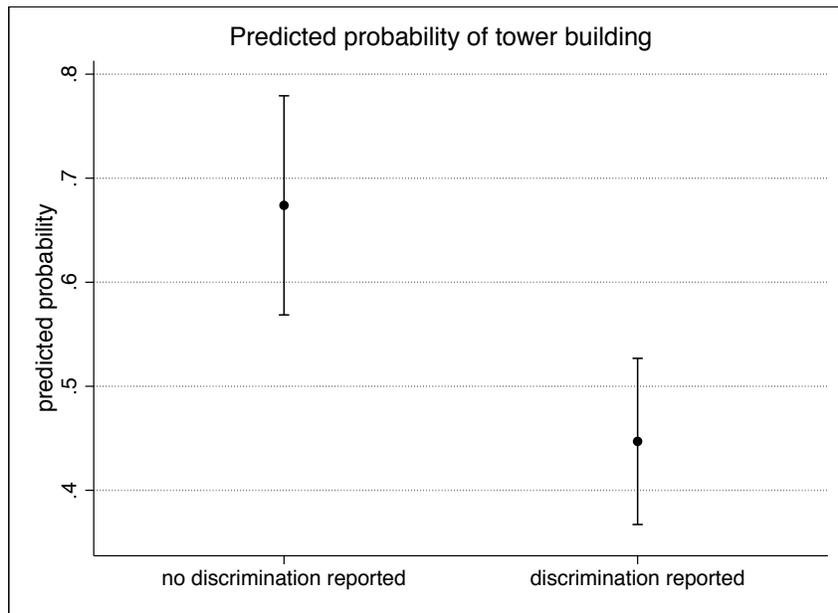


Figure 2: This figure presents predicted probabilities of tower building for both groups, based on a logit model with clustered errors at the individual level. This model only includes the very first decision to contribute to the tower (participants played seven games, each with twelve iterations), but the results are robust to including all iterations. The basic controls included are those for generalized trust, location, age, gender, level of education, wealth, and period of play (player fatigue control).

This result has at least two implications. First, the Roma do not behave uniformly. In light of persistent stereotyping of the Roma as cheaters and thieves, this obvious fact bears repeating. In fact, cooperative behavior varies widely among individuals.

Second, social exclusion may have cyclical harmful effects. Scholars have shown that systemic and generational exclusion has devastating consequences, resulting in interrelated disparities that range from health to justice. My findings suggest that the personal experience of discrimination worsens the situation. Because individuals who experience discrimination are less likely to contribute to a public good, they may suffer additional repercussions by not exhibiting socially expected behaviors.

Policymakers should take heed. When groups are marginalized, excluded individuals are not only constrained in their life choices, but perhaps also in their community-building strategies. While I conducted this study in the context of the Roma, the experience of other marginalized groups may follow similar patterns. And finding such other groups is not hard; marginalized populations exist throughout the world, and may increase rapidly in Europe as refugees flow into the continent. If policymakers wish to avoid perpetuating long-term negative dynamics between majority and marginalized populations, or creating new ones, they should give sustainable inclusion serious thought. The participants in this study suggest that such efforts would not be in vain.