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# Ego-relevance in team production

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Ego-relevance in team production

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## Abstract

We study how individuals' effort contribution to a team production task varies depending on whether the task is ego relevant or not. We conduct an experiment to test the effect of ego-relevance when the team production depends on the team's top- or bottom-performer. Ego-relevance is manipulated by calling the Raven IQ Test an "IQ Task" or a "Pattern Task." We find that the effort contributed to the task is affected by ego-relevance and the impact of the team production function on effort contribution is mediated by the teammate's expected effort contribution. Ego-relevance increases the responsiveness to the teammate's expected effort contributions. Similarly, more responsive behavior is noticeable when the team production depends on the bottom-performer. However, we do not observe interaction-effects between ego-relevance and the team production function that affect effort contributions.

## Introduction

Team production environments are generally prone to free-riding and shirking among teammates [1, 2]. However, the literature is silent on how this may depend on the ego-relevance of tasks in a team project. A familiar example is preparing a co-authored academic project. One could easily distinguish between tasks that would affect one's ego depending on success or failure (e.g., writing a mathematical proof or programming a statistical test) and tasks whose completion would not affect ego (e.g., producing a project's expense report).

The standard economic theory makes no distinctions concerning the ego-relevance of the team production task that individuals are required to undertake. However, behavioral economics and psychology predict that ego-relevance may boost or hinder individual contributions to a team task through separate mechanisms. On the one hand, ego-relevance may stimulate the willingness to contribute costly effort by raising individuals' self-confidence and intrinsic motivation [3–5]. On the other hand, ego-relevance may demote this willingness to contribute effort because of ego-protection. This behavior, known in the literature as a self-handicapping motive in effort and task selection [6, 7], predicts that fear of failing the task might reduce individuals' effort to justify their non-fulfillment instead of receiving a signal of low ability or incompetence. The relationship between ego-relevance, confidence levels, and effort choices has been studied before in individual decision-making settings [8, 9], whereas



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