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What Do We Learn about Culture from Experimental Economics?

The significance of culture in economic decision making and economic behavior was founded by a number of pioneering studies (Roth, 1991; Henrich, 2000; Henrich, Boyd, Bowles, Camerer, Fehr, Gintis; 2004). Using experimental results from ultimatum bargaining games, Henrich et al. (2004) conducted a cross-cultural study in fifteen small-scale societies in Latin America and Africa. They found enormous variation in behavior across communities. Some societies closely conformed to the game-theoretic prediction, while others made extremely generous offers. They are able to relate this difference to interaction patterns of everyday life and the social norms operating in these various communities. In recent years, studies using experimental approaches to isolate the contribution of culture to explaining and predicting economic behavior are piling up. Henrich (2000) states that "economic decisions and economic reasoning may be heavily influenced by cultural differences--that is, by socially transmitted rules about how to behave in certain circumstances (economic or otherwise) that may vary from group to group as a consequence of different cultural evolutionary trajectories." (Ibid, p. 973) In this paper, we shall survey the findings from the literature of cultural economic experiments conducted in the context of bargaining games, prisoner's dilemma games, ultimatum games, dictator games, public good games, common pool resource games and many others to update what Henrich made above.