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**I ALREADY GAVE AT THE OFFICE:  
INEQUALITY AND THE ETHICS OF FREE-RIDING IN PORTFOLIOS OF  
SOCIAL DILEMMAS**

**Abstract**

Nothing worthwhile in life can be accomplished alone; it takes a group of individuals working effectively together – cooperating – in order to accomplish what none could accomplish alone. Unfortunately, cooperation is risky. The risk inherent in cooperation is captured by the idea of a social dilemma – an individual may invest personal resources on behalf of the collective, only to have other members of the collective opportunistically ‘free ride’ on those contributions. Typically decisions to invest personal resources in collective action reflect consideration of the costs of cooperating, the potential value of successful collective action, and the probability that others will ‘free ride.’

Casting ‘free riding’ in collective action as selfish and even unethical opportunism may represent a misguided artifact of the way social dilemmas historically have been studied. Social dilemmas typically are considered in isolation. An individual (I) contemplating a collective action with A and B must decide whether to contribute, based on whether I believes A and B are likely to contribute their fair share to the collective action. In the real world, however, this isolation seems unrealistic. Individuals are likely to have a portfolio of interests they pursue, and a portfolio of contacts whose cooperation they need to pursue those interests. Portfolios of interests and portfolios of contacts create portfolios of social dilemmas – multiple social dilemmas that any particular individual (I) must simultaneously manage. Given that any individual (I) is likely to be working with a finite pool of resources (time, money, attention) to allocate to any particular social dilemma, the key dependent variable in social dilemmas is not whether to contribute but rather where to contribute.

Critical to this contribution decision is that not all social dilemmas are created equal. For example, I is managing one collective action with A and B, while simultaneously managing a second collective action with C and D. The collective action with C and D offers a higher-valued outcome than the collective action with A and B. I therefore may choose to allocate his/her scarce personal resources to the collective action with C and D, thus appearing to ‘free ride’ on the collective action overtures of A and B.

Similarly, I could be involved in two simultaneous social dilemmas that differ instead in the probability of the collective action outcome being achieved. I therefore may choose to allocate his/her scarce personal resources to the higher-likelihood of success collective action with C and D, thus appearing again to “free ride” on the collective action overtures of A and B.

Traditionally, social dilemma research has conceptualized the decision to cooperate as a choice between whether to selflessly do one's fair share, or selfishly 'free ride.' However, facing multiple dilemmas that are not created equal – some promising higher-value outcomes, some promising higher likelihoods of achieving those outcomes – 'free riding' in any particular collective action may reflect prioritization of scarce resource investments across unequal opportunities, rather than selfish or even unethical behavior.