**Sustainable Cooperation in Organizations[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Cooperation, or the joint production of mutual benefits, is fundamental for organizations to thrive. However, cooperation can be vulnerable due to changing circumstances, or diverging needs and interests. Unfortunately, knowledge is lacking on how to sustaincooperation within and between organizations. This knowledge gap is one of the most immediate concerns for modern organizations, particularly because societal developments can render existing cooperative arrangements less effective or desirable over time. The gap is also a challenge for social scientists. Whereas organization scholars from a variety of disciplines have put much effort into understanding how to *get* cooperation going, relatively little is known about how to *keep* it going. This lecture wants to make a first step towards closing this gap. It consists of four main parts and learning objectives.

The first part introduces the *Puzzle of Sustainable Cooperation.* The puzzle results from the fact that cooperation scholars discovered *both* a much higher incidence of (durable) cooperation in settings that are generally considered as unfavorable for cooperation (e.g. one-shot or repeated transactions between anonymous strangers), and a much lower incidence or decline of cooperation in settings that are generally considered as highly conducive for sustainable cooperation (e.g. transactions in densely knit communities with a long shadow of the past and the future). We start by exploring the differences between cooperation and *sustainable* cooperation. I will argue that sustainable cooperation is joint production that is *both* stable and valuable. The latter requires a normative judgment about the internal benefits (for those involved in the joint production) and its social value (i.e. the external effects of the cooperative endeavor on third parties).

The second part presents several *Case Studies of Sustainable Cooperation*. I argue that for cooperation in and between organizations to become sustainable, it needs to successfully deal with three major threats: external shocks, cross-domain spillovers, and feedback effects. Drawing on empirical examples, we will illustrate how formal organizational governance structures, informal social networks and norms affect the ability of a cooperative arrangement to prevent or mitigate the potentially devastating impact of these three cooperation threats.

The third part introduces the essential building blocks of *Social Mechanism Theorizing* as it was developed in the field of Analytical Sociology. According to this approach, sociological explanations involving an *explanans* and an *explanandum* at the societal (“macro”) level need to specify the underlying situational (i.e. macro-micro), action generating (i.e. micro-micro), and aggregation (i.e. micro-macro) mechanisms. We will illustrate and practice this theoretical strategy by applying it to the abovementioned empirical cases.

The concluding part of the lecture sketches the contours of and challenges for a *Research Program on Sustainable Cooperation.* We will discuss the claim that theories of sustainable cooperation require to focus on the interplay between institutional arrangements at the level of society and the organization, and behavioral mechanisms at the level of the individual.

1. Guest lecture at ISEG, University of Lisbon, Tuesday, February 22, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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