How Experiencing Unequal Opportunities Shapes Redistributive Preferences

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PRE-ANALYSIS PLAN

1 Motivation

Beliefs about the fairness of social and economic outcomes often depend on whether people think success results from effort or circumstance. Yet individuals may not experience structural barriers firsthand. As a result, they tend to over-attribute success or failure to individual effort, neglecting the role of unequal opportunities.

This study investigates how experiencing unequal opportunities shapes redistributive preferences. Prior experimental research has shown that experiencing success or failure in effort tasks can shift redistribution choices, largely through self-serving updating about the role of luck and effort (e.g., Deffains et al. (2016), Cassar and Klein (2019)). However, these designs confound beliefs about fairness with emotional reactions to winning or losing. Our approach isolates the experience of inequality itself: participants perform tasks that differ subtly in difficulty but appear comparable, mimicking the hidden nature of structural barriers.

By comparing those who face disadvantage (the harder task) to those who do not, we examine whether direct exposure to unequal opportunities increases willingness to redistribute income and shifts attributions away from effort toward circumstance. In doing so, we test whether experiencing disadvantage improves belief accuracy and influences fairness judgments—without the confounding effects of personal success or failure. Beyond belief updating, we also explore empathy as a potential mechanism: experiencing disadvantage may enhance spectators' ability to imagine the situation of those facing structural barriers, thereby increasing compassion and fairness-driven redistribution.

Our design contributes to the literature on fairness preferences (Cappelen et al., 2007, 2013; Konow, 2000; Stantcheva, 2021) and belief formation from personal experience (Malmendier

and Nagel, 2016; Kuchler and Zafar, 2019). It provides novel evidence on how direct, non-self-interested experience with unequal circumstances shapes moral reasoning about inequality and redistributive behavior.

2 Experimental design

We adopt the spectator design by Cappelen et al. (2007), which comprises an Agent and a Spectator Phase. We now discuss them in detail.

2.1 Agents

Agents complete an effort task with different levels of difficulty (as in Deffains et al., 2016; Fehr and Vollmann, 2025).

The effort task consists of a counting task (as introduced in Abeler et al., 2011). Agents count how many times a character appears in a table like the one below (see Figure 1). After receiving general instructions, we assign each agent to perform either an `EASY` version of the task or a `HARD` version of the task. Notice, we never refer to the versions of the task as easy and hard, but rather as Version A and Version B. For the `EASY` version, we assign agents to count As. For the `HARD` version, we assign agents to count Bs. We made counting Bs relatively harder by increasing the size of As with respect to the other characters and by including decoys that can be confused with Bs. Another feature of our task is that the difference in difficulty is not so noticeable at first glance, mimicking the apparent invisibility of structural barriers and privileges. Other features of our task are the following: after one incorrect attempt, individuals need to wait 20 seconds before trying again, after two attempts they receive an entirely new table to count. We added these features to avoid guessing and made the experience even more frustrating for Version B, where agents are more prone to make mistakes.

B	B	β	α	α	A	β	I	8	I
I	I	I	8	α	A	A	α	8	I
B	I	ß	β	A	ß	β	β	A	α
I	β	8	α	8	I	β	ß	I	α
8	β	α	α	β	β	8	B	A	ß
β	8	β	8	β	8	β	I	β	α
8	B	β	ß	8	A	I	β	A	8
ß	B	A	A	A	β	ß	8	A	I
A	β	8	A	I	A	B	A	A	8
β	α	B	I	ß	B	I	A	A	8

Figure 1: Counting Task Example

Agents complete as many encryptions as possible in a limited time period of 4 minutes. We inform agents that better performance can increase their chances of getting an additional payment. Additionally, we tell them that to be eligible to the bonus, they need to have completed at least one table correctly.

After completing the task, we match agents in pairs. Each pair is composed of one agent assigned to the `EASY` version of the task and one agent assigned to the `HARD` version of the task. We form pairs in two ways, depending on our needs for the spectator survey. For the spectator task and redistribution decisions, we form pairs with the ad hoc constraint that the agents performing the hard task end up performing worse than the agent performing the easy task, following Dong et al. (2024). For the belief questions that spectators need to answer, we form pairs completely randomly.

We then ask agents to imagine to have won (`EASY`) or lost (`HARD`) a bonus when matched in a pair with an agent that completed a task opposite to theirs. Next, we ask them to state what they would do in a hypothetical redistribution situation, in which they can redistribute a 6 USD bonus to a pair like them, in which the bonus was initially assigned to the best performer. Afterwards, we inform the agents that that there will be a bonus that will depend on the decision of a third party, and that they can write a text that can be shown to the third party to persuade

them to act in a certain manner. The content of this open text might be used for later studies.

Agents receive a participation fee and, after the spectators from Section 2.2 make their redistributive decisions, may also receive a bonus payment.

2.2 Spectators

Spectators' participation is divided in three main phases. In the first (experience) phase, they work on effort tasks. In the second (spectator) phase, they make redistributive decisions as spectators. In the third phase, they mostly answer demographics questions. Figure 2 shows the complete experiment flow. We now discuss each element in detail. Precise questions are available in Table 2.

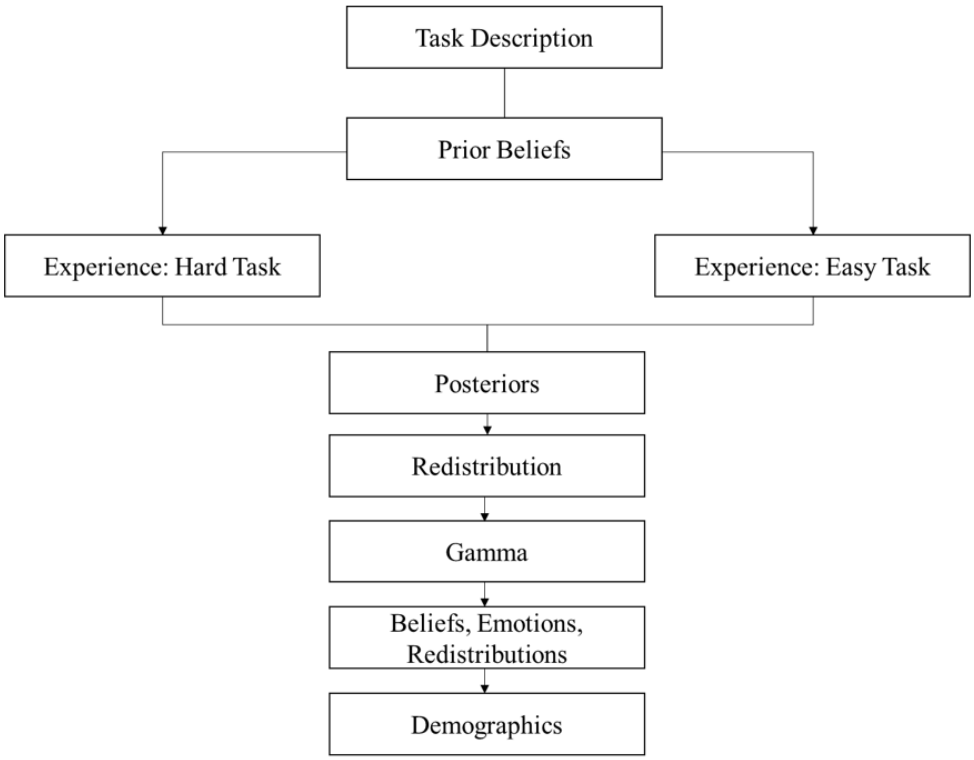


Figure 2: Survey Design

2.2.1 Setting

We introduce spectators to the same task as the agents. The versions of the tasks are always referred as version A (i.e., the `EASY` version) and version B (i.e., the `HARD` version). The explanation does not disclose which version of the task each spectator will practice with. We require the correct response of two comprehension questions before moving on.

2.2.2 Prior Beliefs

We ask spectators asked three questions to measure their prior beliefs about differences between the versions of the task and about the determinants of success in a competition where individuals are assigned two different versions of the task.

2.2.3 Experience

We tell spectators they will have a chance to get familiar with the task. We do not mention any incentives and we do not implement any. Yet, we invite spectators to try to solve as many tables as possible. We randomly assign spectators either to practice with the easy version or with the hard version. This is the main treatment manipulation of our study and creates two treatment groups: `T1: EASY` and `T2: HARD`.

We include an attention check in the middle of the experience. We record both the answer submitted and the time taken to answer to it. We also ask spectators to report the version of the task they practiced with at the end of the experience. After the experience is over, we inform spectators that they get a 1 USD bonus payment to reward their effort so far.

2.2.4 Incentivized Posterior Beliefs

We introduce spectators to the context of our agents survey. To ensure correct understanding, we require correct response of three comprehension questions before proceeding. We ask three estimations of beliefs about Agents A and Agents B at the group level (that is, not about a specific pair of agents A and B). We ask spectators to estimate: (1) the average number of tasks the agents have completed for the easy version; (2) the average number of tasks the agents have completed for hard version; and (3) the likelihood that a random agent assigned to the easy version outperforms a random agent assigned to the hard version. For each estimation, we also ask the perceived confidence. We inform spectators that one of the three guesses will be compared to the results of our agent's study, and that they will get a bonus if their estimate is correct.

2.2.5 Consequential Redistribution Decisions

We present two identical pairs of agents. Each pair is composed of one agent that completed the easy version of the task and one that completed the hard version of the task. A 6 USD bonus payment is initially assigned to the agent within the pair that completed more correct tasks. By design, the agent that completed the easy version is always assigned the initial bonus.

We ask spectators to decide whether and how much of the initial bonus to redistribute. We include three comprehension questions and an attention check before the first redistribution decision. We show spectator the conditions to which each agent was randomly assigned, which agent performed better and the initial bonus distribution.[1]

Spectators decide for each pair. The decision for the first pair is our main outcome. It is followed by an open text form, in which we ask spectators to explain their reasoning. The decision for the secondary pair allows us to measure the weight assigned to fairness considerations. To do so, we introduce a modification with respect to the first pair: we add a monetary cost in spectators' decision-making. We require spectators to pay a fixed 0.20 USD (from the 1 USD they received earlier) if they want to change the initial income distribution. The screen automatically displays the spectator's resulting bonus when they decide for the agent's pair. The rest of the setting is identical to the decision for the first pair.

2.2.6 Non-incentivized Posterior Beliefs & Emotions

We ask spectators additional questions about the situation they were described. The first questions refer to their posterior beliefs about the task, and mirror the prior beliefs asked earlier. Next, we ask some additional beliefs questions about Agents A and Agents B at the group level, followed by two beliefs questions about the specific pair of Agent A and B for which they made the decision (we call these "individual level" beliefs)[2]. The last questions concern their ability to imagine the agents' experience and their own emotions when learning about the (initial) situation of the two agents.

2.2.7 Non-consequential Redistribution Decisions

We ask spectators to make four hypothetical redistribution decisions. First, for a pair of agents in which both completed the same version of the task (we randomize the version to be either the easy or hard for both) and the bonus is initially assigned to the best performer. Second, for a pair of agents in which both participated in a coin toss and the bonus is initially assigned to the winner of the coin toss. These two redistribution decisions mirror the settings of pure merit and pure luck often used in the literature (see e.g., Almås et al., 2025; Harrs and Sterba, 2023). Third, for a pair of agents that completed different versions of the task (one A and one

[1] The decisions are probabilistically consequential, as we inform the spectators that we will randomly select 1 out of every 10 participant, and, for that person, we will randomly implement one of their two decisions for a pair of real agents.

[2] We try to differentiate between beliefs about the group-level and the individual-level, even though our study is mostly suited to capture the former as we do not equip the spectators with many information about the individuals.

B) in which Agent B performed better and was initially assigned the bonus. Fourth, for a pair of agents with unequal opportunities that mirrors the one by Dong et al. (2024). After this, we ask them to self-identify in one of five fairness views (libertarian, egalitarian, non-compensating meritocrats, compensating meritocrats and others).

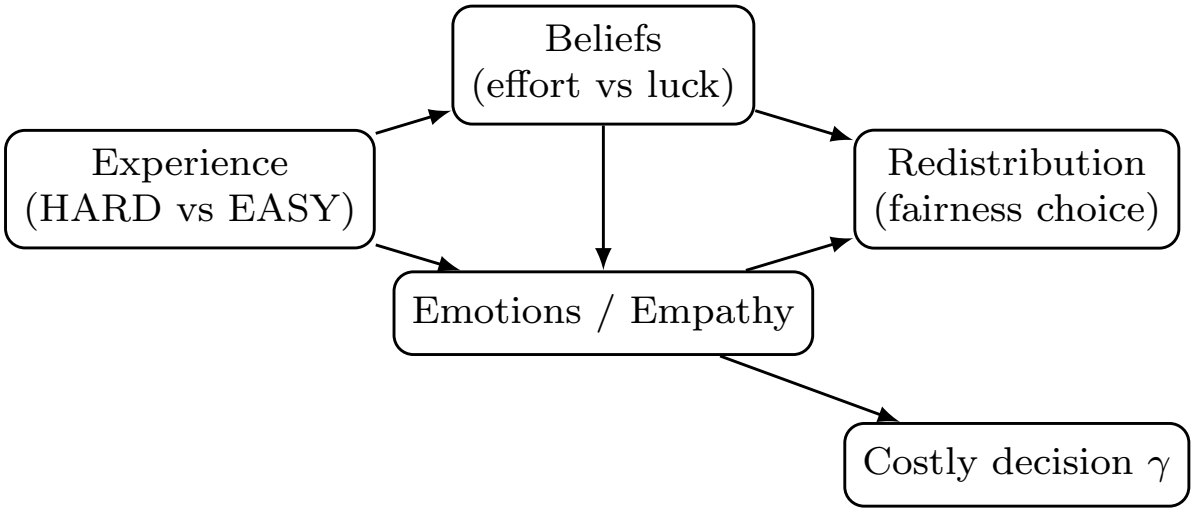
2.2.8 Demographics

We collect the following demographics: sex, age, race, state of residence, education, dyslexia, employment status, personal and household gross annual income, political affiliation, political leaning in social and economic issues. Additionally, we collect attitudes on political and societal issues (see Appendix).

3 Hypotheses

3.1 Main Hypotheses

Our main treatment effect regards the redistribution decision with unequal opportunities:



Hypothesis 1. Experiencing the `HARD` version, compared to experiencing the `EASY` version, leads to higher redistribution when evaluating a pair formed by agents that had unequal opportunities.

We expect the effect for **H1** to be stronger for the sub-sample of individuals who identify as meritocrats.

We expect this effect to be mediated by a change in beliefs about the importance of task version in determining the outcome of the competition, which we measure with a battery of posterior beliefs.

Hypothesis 2. Experiencing the `HARD` version, compared to experiencing the `EASY` version, leads to attributing more importance to the task version in determining success.

Hypothesis 3. Experiencing the `HARD` version, compared to experiencing the `EASY` version, increases one's willingness to pay a cost to implement their preferred redistribution.

4 Data Analysis

See a list of our variables in Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix.

4.1 Data Quality and Descriptives

4.1.1 Screening

We will drop respondents that fulfill three or more out of the following checks:

- Fail the mid-experience attention check
- Take more than 40 seconds to answer the mid-experience attention check
- Fail the post-experience attention check
- Take more than 40 seconds to answer the post-experience attention check
- Fail to attempt twice on the effort task
- Fail the pre-redistribution attention check

4.1.2 Balance Check

We will check whether our demographic variables and prior beliefs are balanced across treatments by means of t-tests or Mann-Whitney and Chi-Square tests or F-tests.

4.2 Main Hypotheses

4.2.1 Spectators' Data

To study **H1** and **H2**, we analyze differences in a specific direction for some variables. This will be tested by one-sided Mann–Whitney U tests or t-tests (depending on the nature of the data) and regressions. Most categorical variables will be treated as continuous. For the others we will use either a Chi-square test or a Wilcoxon rank-sum test.

For **H1**, we expect the following to be higher for `HARD` than for `EASY`:

- SPECTATORAB_SHAREB

Since our treatment manipulation should affect meritocrats, we plan to conduct the aforementioned test specifically for those individuals that identify as meritocrats based on the VIEWS question (i.e., VIEWS equal to 3 or 4), and within types of meritocrats (i.e., VIEWS equal to 3 and to 4 individually).

As an auxiliary hypothesis for **H1**, we expect that spectators in HARD consider initial inequality less fair than spectators in EASY. That is we expect a lower fairness score in this variable:

- POSTERIOR_FAIR

For **H2**, we first focus on beliefs at the group-level. We expect the following to be higher for HARD than for EASY:

- POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEA - POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEB
- POSTERIOR_LUCK

and the following to be lower for HARD than for EASY:

- POSTERIOR_FREQUENCY
- POSTERIOR_HARDWORKGL
- POSTERIOR_INTENSITY

We plan to incorporate a Benjamini–Hochberg (BH) correction to account for multiple hypotheses testing in **H2**.

We also plan to analyze beliefs at the individual level. We expect treatment differences in the following variables:

- POSTERIOR_COUNTERFACTUAL
- POSTERIOR_HARDWORK

To study **H3**, we analyze differences in a specific direction for a constructed dummy on paying for implementing a decision. This will be tested by one-sided Mann–Whitney U tests or t-tests

(depending on the nature of the data) and regressions. We would expect such variable to be higher for HARD than for EASY.

We ideally would want to compare the difference in redistribution between the costless and costly redistribution decisions (i.e., SPECTATORABCOSTLY_SHAREB - SPECTATORAB_SHAREB). We would expect such a difference to be lower for HARD than for EASY.

Yet, this approach might be biased by the fact that spectators in HARD are more likely to redistribute in the first place in the costless decision. To account for this, we will also examine whether experiencing the HARD version increases costly redistribution after accounting for baseline redistribution. Specifically, we will estimate a regression of costly redistribution (SPECTATORABCOSTLY_SHAREB) on treatment assignment (HARD) while controlling for costless redistribution (SPECTATORAB_SHAREB):

$$\texttt{SPECTATORABCOSTLY\_SHAREB}_i = \alpha + \beta\, \texttt{HARD}_i + \gamma\, \texttt{SPECTATORAB\_SHAREB}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

The coefficient β captures the treatment effect on costly redistribution holding baseline redistribution constant. We expect $\beta > 0$: spectators who experienced the HARD version will maintain higher redistribution levels when a cost is introduced.

4.3 Exploratory Analysis

4.3.1 Spectators' Data

Prior Beliefs We expect to find that spectators hold the following beliefs prior to the treatment:

- PRIOR_RANKING shows that individuals place Effort and Ability before Version
- PRIOR_ADVANTAGE shows that individuals do not expect one version to lead to better performance
- PRIOR_INTENSITY shows that individuals expect the two versions to be pretty much comparable (i.e., they give a score non-different to 4),

Mediation Analysis for H1 We explore whether the effect of experiencing unequal opportunities (HARD vs. EASY) on redistribution is mediated by (i) posterior beliefs and (ii) emotions.

We will extend the main regression models by sequentially adding mediators. First, we regress

redistribution (i.e., SPECTATORAB_SHAREB) on treatment and control variables. Then, we include belief variables (i.e., POSTERIOR_LUCK, POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEA – POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEB, etc.). Then, we also include emotion variables (i.e., POSTERIOR_ANGER, POSTERIOR_COMPASSION, POSTERIOR_INDIFFERENCE, POSTERIOR_SADNESS, POSTERIOR_IRRITATION).

We will interpret a reduction in the treatment coefficient when beliefs or emotions are added as evidence consistent with partial mediation.

Posterior Beliefs We expect to find a positive correlation between posterior beliefs (i.e., POSTERIOR_LUCK, POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEA - POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEB, POSTERIOR_FREQUENCY[3], POSTERIOR_FAIR[4], POSTERIOR_HARDWORK[5]) and SPECTATORAB_SHAREB. We plan to incorporate a Benjamini–Hochberg (BH) correction to account for multiple hypotheses testing.

Heterogeneity Analyses For our main hypotheses, we plan to explore heterogeneities in the treatment effect, focusing on the effect on our main variables (SPECTATORAB_SHAREB, beliefs, and SPECTATORABCOSTLY_SHAREB) for the interaction between treatment and:

- Political_Orientation
- Age
- Gender
- Income
- Education
- Economic_Ideology (left–right economic stance)
- Perspective_Taking

These moderators allow us to assess whether the treatment effects vary with individuals' sociodemographic characteristics and their ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes.

Mediation Analysis for H3 We explore whether emotions help to explain the variation in the response to costs under **H3** by means of adding emotions to our **H3** model.

[3] inversely coded

[4] inversely coded

[5] inversely coded

Additional variables We will also analyze treatment effects for additional variables we collect. To do so, we will use two-sided Mann–Whitney U tests or T-tests (depending on the nature of the data) and regressions.

We expect to find treatment differences in the following variables:

- POSTERIOR_EXPERIENCEB
- POSTERIOR_EXPERIENCEA
- SPECTATORUNDERDOG_SHAREB
- Emotion variables (i.e., POSTERIOR_ANGER, POSTERIOR_COMPASSION, POSTERIOR_INDIFFERENCE, POSTERIOR_SADNESS, POSTERIOR_IRRITATION)

We expect the treatment not to have any effect in the following variables:

- SPECTATORLUCK_SHAREB
- SPECTATORMERIT_SHAREB
- SPECTATORVIGNETTE_SHAREB

Fairness views We also plan to check if the VIEWS question aligns with participant's in the redistribution decisions. We will use the redistribution decisions in merit, luck, and costless unequal opportunities conditions (i.e., SPECTATORMERIT_SHAREB, SPECTATORLUCK_SHAREB and SPECTATORAB_SHAREB) to determine spectators' fairness preferences. We do so in the following way.

We categorize as libertarians the spectators that do not to redistribute (i.e., assign 0 to Agent B) in all three conditions. We categorize as egalitarians those who equalize earnings (i.e., assign 3 to Agent B) in all three conditions. We categorize as meritocrats those who equalize earnings for luck (i.e., assign 3 to Agent B), but redistribute less for merit and unequal opportunities (i.e., assign less than 3 to Agent B). We further sub-categorize as not-compensating meritocrats those to redistribute the same under merit and unequal opportunities conditions (i.e., SPECTATORAB_SHAREB = SPECTATORMERIT_SHAREB), while as compensating meritocrats those who redistribute more under unequal opportunities (i.e., SPECTATORAB_SHAREB > SPECTATORMERIT_SHAREB).

We will cross tabulate self reported fairness views with the categories we determined based on the redistribution decisions.

4.3.2 Agents' Data

We compare the redistribution decisions of agents and spectators for `HARD` vs `EASY`, assuming to find no difference. We study this through regressions and Mann-Withney U test. Similarly we compare the performance of agents and spectators for `HARD` vs `EASY`, expecting to find no difference. We also determine whether the two samples are comparable based on their socio-demographic characteristics.

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Table 1: Overview of Survey Variables - Agents

Variable	Type	Question
	(1)	(2)
PERFORMANCE	Integer	[Number of tables solved correctly]
AGENTAB_SHAREB	0-6	How would you split the 6 USD bonus?
PERSUASION	Open Text	What would you like to tell the participant before they decide how to split the bonus?

Table 2: Overview of Survey Variables - Spectators

Variable	Type	Question
	(1)	(2)
PRIOR_RANKING	Categorical (9 categories)	What matters more for deciding who wins?
PRIOR_ADVANTAGE	Categorical (4 categories)	If there is a difference between the versions, which version do you expect would lead to better performance?
PRIOR_INTENSITY	1-7 score	In a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is 'Getting Version A is a major advantage' and 7 is 'Getting Version B is a major advantage', Which version do you think provides a greater advantage for performance?
ATTENTION_CHECK1	Categorical (4 categories)	The following question is an attention check. Please select letter C. Select one of the following letters.
EXPERIENCE_CHECK	Categorical (2 categories)	Which version of the task did you just complete?
SPECTATORS_PERFORMANCE	Integer	# of succesfully completed tables
POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEA	Integer	On average, how many tables do you think Agents A successfully solved in 4 minutes?
CERTAINTY_PERFORMANCEA	Ordinal (4 categories)	How sure are you about your answer?

Variable	Type	Question
	(1)	(2)
POSTERIOR_PERFORMANCEB	Integer	On average, how many tables do you think Agents B successfully solved in 4 minutes?
CERTAINTY_PERFORMANCEB	Ordinal (4 categories)	How sure are you about your answer?
POSTERIOR_FREQUENCY	1-100	In how many pairs (out of the 100) do you think that the Agent B solves more tables than the Agent A?
CERTAINTY_FREQUENCY	Ordinal (4 categories)	How sure are you about your answer?
ATTENTION_CHECK2	Binary	Attention check: Do not select this option.
SPECTATORAB_SHAREB	0-6	How would you split the 6 USD bonus?
POSTERIOR_EXPLANATION	Open Text	Explain, in at least 2 or 3 sentences, the reasoning behind why you made this decision.
SPECTATORABCOSTLY_SHAREB	0-6	How would you split the 6 USD bonus? (redistribution costs 0.20 USD)
POSTERIOR_FAIR	Ordinal (4 categories)	In this pair, how fair was that the agent that solved more correct tables was initially assigned all the bonus?
POSTERIOR_HARDWORKGL	Ordinal (5 categories)	Imagine all agents complete the same Version of the task, but are still randomly assigned to be called either Agents A or Agents B. Which group of agents do you think would solve more correct tables?
POSTERIOR_HARDWORK	Ordinal (4 categories)	In this pair, if Agent B had worked really hard they could have solved more correct tables than Agent A.
POSTERIOR_COUNTERFACTUAL	Categorical (3 categories)	Imagine that both agents in this pair completed the same Version of the task. Who do you think would have solved more tables in that case?

Variable	Type	Question
	(1)	(2)
POSTERIOR_EFFORT	0-100	How much does effort explain which of the agents solves more tables?
POSTERIOR_ABILITY	0-100	How much does ability explain which of the agents solves more tables?
POSTERIOR_LUCK	0-100	How much does luck explain which of the agents solves more tables?
POSTERIOR_INTENSITY	1-7 score	Do you think the version of the task assigned to each agent provided any advantage in the competition?
POSTERIOR_EXPERIENCEA	Ordinal (4 categories)	It is easy for me to imagine Agent A's experience with the task.
POSTERIOR_EXPERIENCEB	Ordinal (4 categories)	It is easy for me to imagine Agent B's experience with the task.
POSTERIOR_ANGER	Ordinal (4 categories)	How much did you feel Anger?
POSTERIOR_COMPASSION	Ordinal (4 categories)	How much did you feel Compassion?
POSTERIOR_SADNESS	Ordinal (4 categories)	How much did you feel Sadness?
POSTERIOR_INDIFFERENCE	Ordinal (4 categories)	How much did you feel Indifference?
POSTERIOR_IRRITATION	Ordinal (4 categories)	How much did you feel Irritation?
SPECTATORLUCK_SHAREB	0-6	How would you split the 6 USD bonus?
SPECTATORMERIT_SHAREB	0-6	How would you split the 6 USD bonus?
SPECTATORUNDERDOG_SHAREB	0-6	How would you split the 6 USD bonus?
SPECTATORVIGNETTE_SHAREB	0-6	How would you split the 6 USD bonus?
VIEWS	Categorical (5 categories)	...