

Strong leaders who punish freeloaders and cheats can benefit society: research

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A strong leader who punishes cheats and freeloaders can increase the cooperation and riches enjoyed by the rest of the group, according to psychology and economics research at the University of British Columbia, Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Kent.

In a study that looks at the evolutionary role of leaders in society, the researchers explored how having a leader in charge – with the power to punish – works better than spreading responsibility through the entire group. Their findings appear in today's issue of the online journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*.

"One person can make a difference," says UBC Assoc. Prof. Joe Henrich, who teaches in the departments of Psychology and Economics. "Having a solitary leader can efficiently galvanize group cooperation."

Henrich holds the Canada Research Chair in Culture, Cognition and Evolution. His co-authors are Rick O'Gorman of Sheffield Hallam University and Mark Van Vugt at the University of Kent.

The study ran a series of experiments with 135 undergraduate students at the University of Kent at Canterbury. The students, of whom 35 per cent were male, were divided into groups of 20-24. In the form of computer-based investment games, students each received \$20 and were given the opportunity to anonymously contribute some or all of their money toward a communal group project.

Once collected, that lump sum was doubled by the researchers and divided equally among the students regardless of their contribution. Within each group, one person would act as the leader with the power to see what the other students gave and punish those deemed shirking their responsibility to contribute.

"This addresses the classic human cooperation dilemma," says Henrich. "In society, you have those who cheat on their taxes, but still receive universal health care, or those who don't recycle, but will get the benefits of a cleaner environment."

To explore the motivation and behaviour of leaders, the researchers also designed an experiment in which the leader had to pay a fee before imposing punishment.

"Our findings show that even if a person has to sacrifice something to lead the group, they will do that to benefit the greater good," says Henrich.

Source: University of British Columbia

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