

Humans might be hard-wired to 'love thy neighbor'

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Researchers report people were less likely to punish those standing closer to them.

(HealthDay) -- The amount of physical space between people may influence how they react to each other in certain situations, new research suggests.

British [psychologists](#) from the University of Lincoln argue that people may actually be hard-wired to "love thy neighbor."

In conducting the study, the researchers analyzed the behavior of contestants in first-round episodes of the BBC quiz show, "The Weakest Link."

"In the show contestants must make a choice about who is the worst

player based on two very different sources of information," study leader Paul Goddard, senior lecturer in the School of Psychology, explained in a Lincoln news release. "The primary and most reliable source comes from the game itself. If one player gets all their questions wrong, it's a fairly straightforward decision to vote them off. The quandary for contestants arises when there is no clear consensus about who is the worst player, such as in rounds where several players get just one question wrong. In these circumstances, contestants have to rely on a secondary source of information -- their own judgment. This is where [bias](#) can really come to the fore."

The researchers calculated the probability of votes and compared these projections to what actually happened. The study found contestants showed a strong reluctance to vote for the person standing next to them. The researchers dubbed this pattern, 'the neighbor avoidance effect.' They noted this bias was stronger when the group of contestants didn't agree on which players was the weakest.

When forced to make decisions, the study revealed people were less likely to vote off the people next to them and target other contestants who were standing farther away.

The researchers said their observations drew parallels from a controversial [social psychology](#) experiment conducted in the 1960s. In this experiment, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram found people were more likely to punish people with an [electric shock](#) if they were in another room. If people were located in the same room however, they were more reluctant to administer this punishment.

Aside from the distance between players, the [researchers](#) found evidence of a gender bias in voting patterns as well. Men and women, they found, were more likely to vote off a woman than a man.

The study was presented recently at the 2012 Society for the Advancement of Behavioral Economics Conference in Granada, Spain. Data and conclusions should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

More information: The U.S. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke provides more information on [the human brain](#) and how it works.

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