

Punishment promotes human cooperation when people trust each other

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(Phys.org) —Why does the effectiveness of punishment to promote contributions to public goods differ among countries? According to psychologists Daniel Balliet and Paul van Lange at VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands, the answer lies in different levels of trust in societies. The scientists performed a meta-analysis by comparing 83 studies carried out in 18 countries. Taken together, the results show that punishment more strongly promotes human cooperation in societies with high trust rather than low trust. The meta-analysis was published in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

Punishment enforces cooperative norms

Levels of trust across societies were determined by asking people if they think, generally speaking, most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people. "In high-trust societies, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, punishment promotes human cooperation more strongly than in low-trust societies, such as Turkey and South Africa", says Paul van Lange. "In high-trust societies, punishment is likely to be viewed as attempts to enforce cooperative norms, which encourages others to behave according to such norms. In high-trust societies people may be more likely to notice norm violations such as free-riding on public transportation or having loud [phone conversations](#) in public places. And they may be more likely to enforce cooperative norms, also because they trust others to support such norm enforcement. Over time, such activities promote trust and cooperation in such a

manner that norm enforcement is less often called for."

Punishing non-cooperating free-riders

All investigated studies used an experiment in which participants interact in a small group and have to decide to either contribute to a public good or to free ride on the contributions of their group members. After making their decision, all [group members](#) learn about each others' decisions. Then, they decide to pay a small amount of money to punish the non-cooperating free-riders by reducing their earnings. Studies have shown different outcomes as to the effectiveness of punishment in different countries. Balliet and Van Lange showed that the amount of trust people have in each other explains these different results.

More information: The article Trust, punishment and cooperation across 18 societies: a meta-analysis was published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. pps.sagepub.com/content/8/4/363.abstract

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