

Research suggests good rules can instill 'habits of virtue'

September 17 2015, by Bill Hathaway



Rules that encourage cooperative behavior lead people to develop altruistic responses even in new contexts, a new Yale-led research found. This spillover effect suggests it is possible for organizations or even entire cultures to foster "habits of virtue," said David Rand, assistant professor of psychology and economics at Yale and senior author of the

paper appearing in the journal *Management Science*.

Using experiments inspired by [game theory](#), the researchers found that "people are more cooperative, trusting, and altruistic, and are even more willing to punish selfishness" after interacting under rules that are rigged to reward [prosocial behavior](#), Rand said.

When the rules are reversed and selfish behavior is rewarded, people are more likely subsequently to act selfishly in new situations, he added.

The authors found that these changes were driven by changing people's intuitive gut responses and not their conscious reasoning—which explains why learning to cooperate in one setting spills over into other contexts, they noted. After gaining the habit of being altruistic—or selfish—people continue to act the same way because it "feels right," even in different social settings or environments, they said

Levels of cooperation vary markedly across companies and organizations, with some being supportive and others being cut-throat. Different cultures also show more or less kindness towards strangers. Rand and co-author Alexander Peysakhovich, an affiliate of Rand's Human Cooperation Lab at Yale, wanted to understand what causes these differences.

They theorized that the way people treat each other in their personal lives is heavily influenced by the laws and rules that govern their public lives. To test this theory in the lab, they had one group of subjects play an economic game in which cooperation could be rewarded and selfishness punished by other players. A second group played a game with little accountability to others. Afterwards, members of both groups had the chance to help strangers, and to punish people for exploiting others.

The members of the group who had played games which rewarded altruism were much more likely to sacrifice for others than those who had played games in which selfishness was rewarded, researchers found. They found that this was particularly true for people who tended to "go with their gut" and not think things through carefully, they report.

These findings suggest that managers and policy-makers can influence how ethical their employees and citizens are, noted the researchers.

"Good laws and rules can foster prosocial attitudes from the top down" and help to establish cultures of cooperation, Rand said

"If you could design organizations where cooperation is rewarded and becomes a habit, people are much more like to be both happy and productive," Rand said.

More information: "Habits of Virtue: Creating Norms of Cooperation and Defection in the Laboratory." [dx.doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2015.2168](https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2015.2168)

Provided by Yale University

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