

New study shows that people who were encouraged to judge each other's morals cooperated better in groups

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Sociology Professor Robb Willer says a new study shows that moral judgments are a powerful means for encouraging cooperation. Credit: L.A. Cicero

People value their moral reputation to such an extent that they will work

to behave well and cooperate with each other rather than risk being judged negatively for their actions, according to new Stanford research.

In a study recently published in *Scientific Reports*, Stanford sociologist Robb Willer and researchers at the University of South Carolina found that [people](#) who were given the opportunity to judge each other's morality were more likely to cooperate and trust each other in a [group](#) than those who could not make such evaluations.

"Generally, people think of [moral judgments](#) negatively," Willer said. "But they are a critical means for encouraging good behavior in society."

Researchers also found that the groups who were allowed to make positive or negative judgments of each other were more trusting and generous toward each other.

In addition, the levels of cooperation in such groups were found to be comparable with groups where monetary punishments were used to promote collaboration within the group, according to the study, titled "The Enforcement of Moral Boundaries Promotes Cooperation and Prosocial Behavior in Groups."

The power of social approval

The idea that moral judgments are fundamental to social order has been around since the late 19th century. But most existing research has looked at moral reasoning and judgments as an internal psychological process.

Few studies so far have examined how costless expressions of liking or disapproval can affect individual behavior in groups, and none of these studies investigated how moral judgments compare with monetary sanctions, which have been shown to lead to increased cooperation as well, Willer said.

As part of the study, Willer and other researchers recruited 54 four-person groups who were randomly put into four conditions: control, interpersonal moral judgments, and two variations of material sanctions.

Each study participant began with 20 monetary units and used a private computer terminal to anonymously interact with people in her or his assigned group. The interaction lasted about an hour and involved a set of exercises in which group members were encouraged to donate their money to a fund that would benefit the group. Participants could see whether someone in their group donated the money or not and they would then be able to either praise their moral actions or enact a monetary sanction, depending on their assigned condition.

The study's results showed that moral judgments appear to be superior to monetary sanctions in achieving cooperation in groups. Although both conditions resulted in a similar level of cooperation, the groups that used money to punish each other's unwanted behaviors led to instances of recrimination, where group members who were punished monetarily retaliated against those who sanctioned them.

Groups that used moral judgments showed lower rates of retaliation and higher levels of generosity, trust and trustworthiness compared to the material sanctions conditions.

"People really care about their moral reputation," Willer said. "So just knowing that you could be criticized keeps cooperation going."

The researchers also found that people were more likely to give their opinion of other [group members](#) than to enact costly monetary sanctions. People gave out monetary sanctions about 36 percent of the time while passing judgments at 74 percent.

But those judgments were largely positive. People praised each other's

actions about 60 percent of the time, while negative judgments happened 14 percent of the time, according to the study.

More research needed

The study's results provide an important contribution to the existing body of research on collective action, in which material sanctioning has emerged in the past decade as a prominent solution to achieve cooperation and harmony in groups, Willer said.

While the research focus on material sanctions has produced critical insights into the evolution of sanctioning systems, Willer and his research partners call for more studies to be done on the power of moral [judgment](#) because it appears to be a more effective, low-cost way to promote [cooperation](#) in groups.

"These findings suggest that the motivation to see ourselves, and be seen by others, as moral actors can be every bit as motivating as the drive to maximize material profit," Willer and other co-authors wrote in the report.

More information: Brent Simpson et al. The Enforcement of Moral Boundaries Promotes Cooperation and Prosocial Behavior in Groups, *Scientific Reports* (2017). [DOI: 10.1038/srep42844](https://doi.org/10.1038/srep42844)

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