

Dominant practice of public relations, competition, is not best, study finds

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Within public relations, the standard practice of looking out for No. 1 and viewing relationships as sources of conflict and competition is defended by best-selling textbooks and a generation of research. A

growing body of scientific evidence, however, supports a different vision of PR, a University of Kansas researcher has found. Discoveries in evolutionary biology and economics show that helping others and building mutually beneficial relationships can boost an organization's reputation and build resources.

Charles Marsh, Oscar Stauffer Professor of Journalism & Mass Communications, has published a study analyzing the effectiveness of indirect reciprocity in evolutionary biology and economics. In essence, indirect reciprocity is the idea that party A helps party B, knowing that B cannot reciprocate or pay them back. They are then rewarded by party C, who has observed or learned of A's treatment of B. Marsh has been building an interdisciplinary case for cooperation and justice as the better approach to building the resource-securing relationships that organizations need to survive and to flourish.

"Some professionals and academics would tell me, 'We wish that were true, but read Darwin: It's a dog-eat-dog world,'" Marsh said. "So I did read Darwin, and it turns out that he and modern evolutionary biologists have found that helping others with no expectation of immediate return is highly effective. That seemingly selfless behavior builds good relationships, good relationships bring in resources, and resources are what we need to achieve our goals."

Marsh analyzed studies from evolutionary biology as well as 14 recent economics experiments that examined indirect reciprocity. All concluded that the concept exists and is strongly embedded in human nature. Marsh's summary of the research from those other disciplines was recently published in the journal *Public Relations Review*.

The economics findings were unanimous, though often not expected by the researchers themselves.

"Several of the economics researchers said, 'This isn't what we expected to find,'" Marsh said of the studies. "Indirect reciprocity runs counter to standard economic theory. These new findings, however, have been so dramatic that they've helped to launch a relatively new area of economics, behavioral economics. Behavioral economics studies what seem to be persistent oddities within human economic behavior."

Basic [economic](#) theory holds that people tend to act for their own identifiable benefit. Why, then, would they help others when they know they probably won't be directly rewarded? Interdisciplinary research, Marsh says, shows that there are two main reasons: First, such behavior can be a calculated move, designed to boost one's reputation because others will see the good the party did in helping another. Second, such behavior tends to be human nature. Evolutionary biologists' findings, which Marsh also analyzes in the study, show that indirect reciprocity appears to be genetically embedded within our species, assisting our survival.

That conclusion from evolutionary biology has led Marsh to analyze research in other disciplines to see what they say about indirect reciprocity. He is now studying work of neuroscientists who examine which parts of the brain are active when a person engages in indirect reciprocity. He plans to examine what scholars in psychology and primatology say about the practice as well, all to better understand the effectiveness of cooperation and justice in relationships as effective means of acquiring needed resources.

Marsh said he hopes that as [public relations](#) scholars review the compelling interdisciplinary evidence for indirect reciprocity, they will begin to include it in the textbooks they write and classes they teach. Ideally, he said, students in those classes will begin to practice that approach when they become professionals. Public relations is still a young discipline, with the first university courses on the topic being

offered in 1923, meaning plenty of room still exists for growth and change.

Marsh will present his summary of neuroscientific analyses of indirect [reciprocity](#) at the Barcelona International Critical PR Theory conference this summer. Last year, he authored the book "Public Relations, Cooperation and Justice: From Evolutionary Biology to Ethics," which made the argument for a cooperative approach to PR with backing from [evolutionary biology](#), philosophy and rhetoric. It also contained 20 recommendations on how cooperation can be implemented by public relations professionals.

Public relations is a wide-ranging profession that touches many aspects of everyday lives, Marsh said, so how the discipline is taught to students is important. He said he hopes to eventually show that the pervasive approach of viewing relationships as venues of conflict and confrontation is, at best, the second-best approach.

"PR is a [relationship](#) business, and we need to look carefully at how we build those relationships," he said. "To be able to present such clear evidence that cooperation and justice generally outperform conflict and competition is very gratifying."

More information: Charles Marsh, Indirect reciprocity and reputation management: Interdisciplinary findings from evolutionary biology and economics, *Public Relations Review* (2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.04.002 , [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.04.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.04.002)

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