

'Lower status' people more likely to share wealth than 'higher status' people

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

When playing an economic game those that were assigned as 'lower status' were more likely to share their wealth than their 'higher status' counterparts, according to a new study at Queen Mary University of London.

The social experiment involved a series of economic games in which

people played with other people for real [money](#). The games involved participants deciding how much money they kept and how much they gave to a group pot. The money in the pot was always shared out to the players.

Participants were assigned a status, either 'higher status' or 'lower status'. This determined how much more or less money they were allotted compared to a group of other others that they played with. In some experiments participants were allocated high or low status based on chance and in other experiments they were allocated high or low status based on effort.

The study found that overall, the low status participants contributed more than the high status participants. Also, high status participants contributed even less when they had earned their wealth through effort compared to those who had acquired their riches through chance.

The study, published in the journal *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, demonstrates under laboratory conditions that once we gain access to more resources, the way in which we gain access will determine how we behave with others.

Lead author Dr. Magda Osman from Queen Mary's School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, said: "For the high status individuals, the way in which wealth was achieved, whether through chance or effort, appeared to be the key factor determining the level of cooperation observed. This wasn't the case for the low status individuals. How they got to their low status made no difference to their behaviour in the [game](#)."

"If you gain high status through effort, rather than chance, you are even more likely to want to keep what you own. When you have limited status one obvious strategic way to increase it, is through cooperation. The point here being that even if one is acting cooperatively, there is no

reason to think that this is purely for altruistic reasons."

She added: "There is an element of risk in this game, because if you contribute anything to the shared pot there is no way of knowing, and no guarantee that anyone else from the group will do the same. So what is surprising is that low status individuals are willing to take a bigger risk, with fewer resources than the high status individuals. In other words, you take a risk by being pro-social because you have no idea if it will be reciprocated."

The study also goes to show that we can't rely on empathy as a way to improve the good will of those that are in high [status](#) positions, this consistently failed to work in the experiments.

Dr. Osman said: "The other surprising finding is that empathy has next to no impact on promoting pro-social behaviour, in other words contributing money to the group pot. This matters because there are a lot of claims that empathy is the glue that binds people to act socially. What we show is that when money matters, empathy plays virtually no role in improving pro-social behaviours."

Provided by Queen Mary, University of London

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