

Study suggests that many conflicts could be avoided with more deliberation

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When someone lashes out in an argument, are they doing so to strategically end the conflict? Or are they simply acting rashly, without considering the consequences?

According to new research from University of Chicago scholars,

negative escalation is more often rooted in impulsive gut reactions—suggesting that many conflicts could be avoided with more deliberate thought and consideration of future consequences.

"People are often motivated by retribution, even if they themselves don't realize that," said Boaz Keysar, a senior author on the study and the William Benton Professor in Psychology. "This is not something that's always in our consciousness, but it tends to be a very strong motivator for behavior."

Published recently in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, the new study relied on a series of seven experiments conducted in public places in Chicago. In every experiment, the researchers used [financial incentives](#) to simulate the stakes of real-life conflicts, offering participants opportunities to give or take money from someone else.

Analyzing the behavior of more than 1,000 participants across the seven experiments, the scholars found that encouraging deliberation led to fewer examples of conflict escalation—taking more money in response to a perceived slight. Indeed, they discovered that even asking very simple questions would alter the participants' behavior, reducing the likelihood of a negative response.

"These retributive responses only emerge when you aren't thinking that hard about the issue," said Prof. Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, a senior author of the study and a leading scholar in the field of social cognition. "You're instead acting on your immediate emotional response."

The experiments were based on the doctoral dissertation of James VanderMeer, Ph.D., the study's first author. For the past four years, VanderMeer has worked as a patrol officer with the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C. He was drawn to that job, in part,

because he saw an intersection between psychology and the strategies discussed in police reform.

"These seemed like problems that were meant for behavioral scientists to tackle," VanderMeer said. "How do officers see themselves and their roles? How do agencies benchmark their progress? How do we optimize on those questions? It was exciting for me to think about."

He credited his academic background for shaping the way he views [police work](#): "Being in these intimate moments in people's lives are opportunities to effect some positive change."

UChicago alum Christine Hosey, Ph.D., also co-authored the study.

In surveying the participants, the scholars found that people could not predict conflict escalation with any sort of consistent accuracy. One reason may be that many participants expected others to behave strategically, calculating the costs and benefits of social interactions rather than acting on impulse.

"People believe that when others escalate, they are trying to deter future harm to themselves," said Keysar, whose research has discovered systemic reasons for miscommunication and misunderstandings. "That's why they predicted escalation exactly when they didn't happen."

For Epley, the John Templeton Keller Professor of Behavioral Science at Chicago Booth, the study highlights the disparity between expectations and reality. One abandoned experiment, he added, involved asking participants to insult each other; nearly all of them refused.

"From my perspective," Epley said, "the most interesting thing that came out of our work was actually how hard it is to get people to escalate—and how easy it is to flip the switch and keep them from

escalating."

More information: James Vandermeer et al. Escalation of negative social exchange: Reflexive punishment or deliberative deterrence?, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103823](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103823)

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