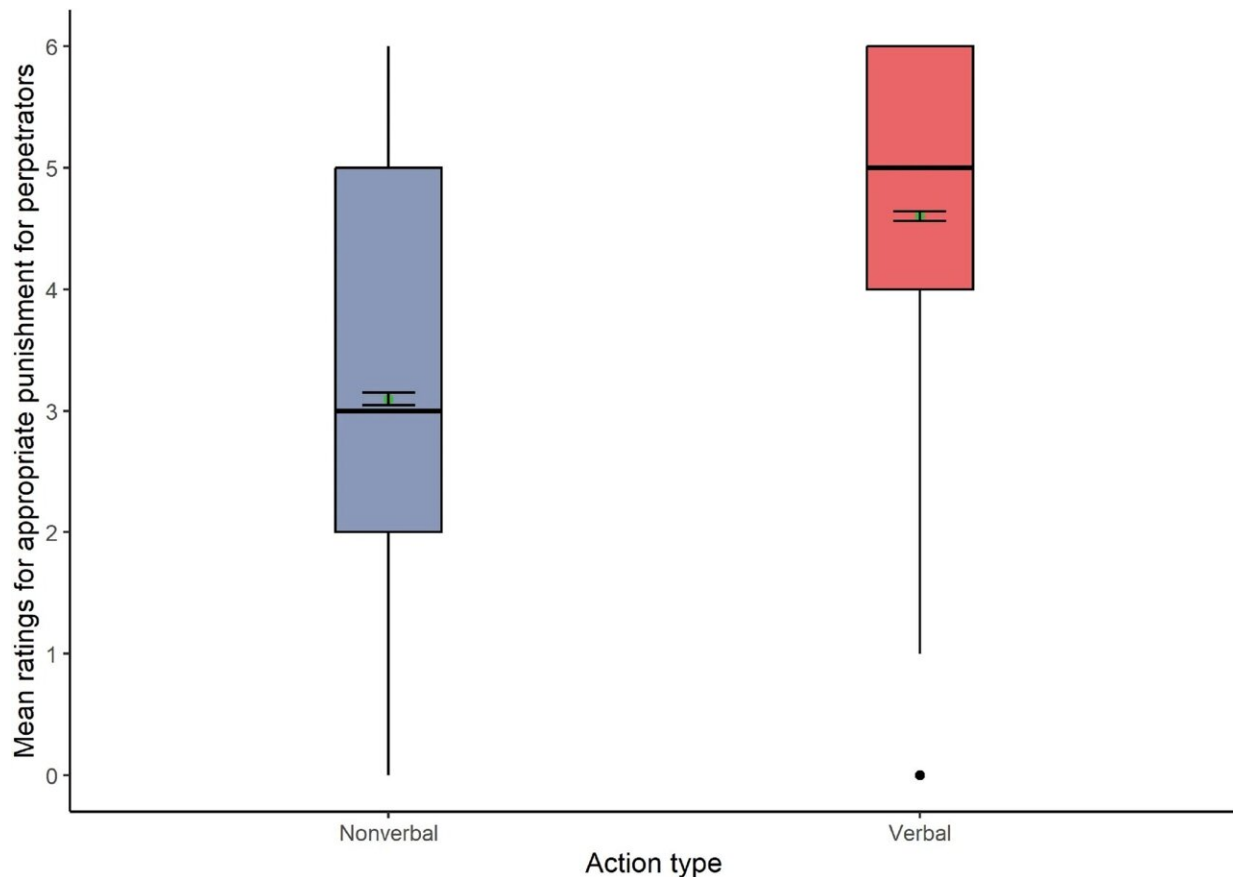


# Study shows people condemn hate speech more severely than nonverbal discrimination

June 22 2023



Box plots show the appropriate punishment for each action type (N = 1291).  
 Credit: *Scientific Reports* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-33892-8

Verbal attacks against marginalized groups can do serious harm to the

victims. Yet many instances of hate speech are never reported or prosecuted. "We see it in sports, on the street, in schools and in our parliaments," says Jimena Zapata of LMU's Chair of Philosophy of Mind, adding that the large proportion of unreported hate speech incidents is extremely worrying.

To find out the possible reasons, the qualified lawyer and language philosopher joined with her colleague Professor Ophelia Deroy in investigating how people react to different forms of discrimination. In their study, published in *Scientific Reports*, they compare how bystanders perceive and assess hate crimes where the hatred is expressed in either verbal or nonverbal form.

The findings surprised both academics: Contrary to their original expectation, the experiments showed that study participants judged verbal hate incidents as more worthy of punishment and condemnation and more harmful to the victim than nonverbal attacks. "The literature would predict that actions would be judged more harshly than words," philosopher and cognitive scientist Deroy says. "But the opposite seems to be the case."

For the purposes of the study, Zapata and Deroy confronted more than 1,300 participants with scenarios in which people were attacked because of their religious affiliation or ethnic origins, for example. In these scenarios, the intentions of the perpetrators and the consequences for the victims were identical for both verbal and nonverbal attacks.

The researchers focused in particular on those instances that are less frequently reported as a matter of course. For this reason, [physical violence](#) and extreme bad language were excluded from the study.

"Physical attacks obviously cause direct and visible harm. You see the bruise if someone hits me in the face because I belong to a certain group.

But if someone shouts that I do not belong here, you might not see the harm, but it is there—and may even last longer," Deroy explains. "Our findings show that, given identical consequences, [hate speech](#) is perceived as worse than a hate-driven physical act."

The nonverbal actions presented to study participants included spitting in front of someone or demonstratively sitting somewhere else on the subway, for example. The effect on bystanders remained even in cases where the victims themselves did not notice the hate-filled action.

## **Against groups and society**

The philosophers explain the finding that words are regarded as more reprehensible than actions by pointing to a phenomenon known as action aversion, according to which people feel a fundamental aversion to certain actions independently of their consequences—in this case, making a hateful statement in public.

In addition, verbal formulations of hatred are more explicit and therefore more difficult to reframe. Another factor is that discriminatory words do not only affect the individual victim: "Hate speech does not exclusively target a specific person: It addresses the individual as a member of a given group," Zapata clarifies. "It violates the principle of equal human dignity and [human rights](#) and affects the immediate victim, bystanders, other members of the targeted collective group and the whole of society."

Even if the [victims](#) themselves do not hear the words, the study leaders note, they can still cause harm to random bystanders.

The researchers admit that their study concentrates on less extreme forms of hate incident. Moreover, the study was conducted in the United Kingdom, where—unlike in other countries—there are already laws to

combat hate speech. They therefore stress that further research is needed in this field to determine the extent to which verbal and nonverbal violence can be compared and how such incidents affect different groups.

Notwithstanding, the authors believe that the findings of the new study will have a far-reaching impact on the disciplines of social psychology, moral theory and legal measures to combat hate speech: "Our work makes an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of hate speech. It deepens our understanding of the psychological processes behind moral condemnation," Zapata insists.

"By grappling with these issues, political decision-makers and society at large can develop more effective provisions and strategies to fight against hate speech and promote a more tolerant and inclusive environment."

**More information:** Jimena Zapata et al, Ordinary citizens are more severe towards verbal than nonverbal hate-motivated incidents with identical consequences, *Scientific Reports* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-33892-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-33892-8)

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

Citation: Study shows people condemn hate speech more severely than nonverbal discrimination (2023, June 22) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-people-condemn-speech-severely-nonverbal.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.