

How do we punish norm violators?

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An international team of researchers including Loukas Balafoutas (University of Innsbruck), Nikos Nikiforakis (NYU Abu Dhabi) and Bettina Rockenbach (University of Cologne) has conducted pioneering research on the question of how people punish strangers for norm violating behavior. In their article on direct and indirect punishment, which appeared in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, they were able to show that both forms of punishment play an important role in the field. If possible, however, people prefer to punish indirectly by refusing to help instead of directly confronting the norm violator. The researchers were also able to show that women are more often punished directly, men more often indirectly.

The three economists are interested in questions of cooperation. Balafoutas describes the underlying theory as follows: "Our basic assumption is that humans, in contrast to animals, cooperate with each other on various levels—not just in small groups, but also with strangers." In the elaborately designed field experiment, the [researchers](#) wanted to find out why (and how) people punish strangers for violating norms. The economists focused on two possible options. "We were particularly interested in forms of direct and indirect punishment," Nikiforakis notes.

The first question the researchers addressed was whether bystanders punished people who violated a social norm by means of direct confrontation or by means of the indirect refusal to help. The economists designed an experimental setting in which an actor or actress deliberately litters on a railway platform, throwing away a plastic cup. Shortly afterwards, this deviant person "accidentally" drops some books. The researchers observed the reactions of the bystanders who witnessed the scene. In less than one fifth of cases (18.6 percent) did these people help the norm violator pick up his or her books. Without prior deviation from the norm (i.e., throwing away the cup), people's readiness to help was more than twice as high at 39.7 percent. While a person who

littered was directly confronted in 17.0 percent of all cases and asked to pick up the cup, a direct confrontation was significantly less likely (6.8 percent) when people were able to indirectly express their resentment by refusing to help. "This clearly shows that people prefer to punish by refusing to help than by directly confronting norm violators," Rockenbach sums up.

In their second research question, the three economists investigated whether or not those who directly confronted norm violators were rewarded for their actions by others. According to Nikiforakis, "one assumption was that a person who is brave enough to intervene will gain some sort of benefit, for example an increase in his or her social recognition." However, the results indicate that these "heroes" do not receive any special esteem or praise from the surrounding bystanders.

The research team observed an interesting result in the area of gender distribution. "We were able to show that women are more often punished directly while men are more often punished indirectly," Balafoutas explains. One possible explanation for this is that people might rather have the courage to directly confront women because the risk of an escalation is deemed lower. In turn, men were more often punished indirectly by the refusal to help.

In sum, directly punishing norm violators—regardless of whether they are men or women—does not entail any sort of benefit or reward for the individual. "Hence, the question why and in which situations people still choose a direct confrontation remains open," Rockenbach reflects. "Cooperation is a very complex field. With this study, we were able to observe and analyze the functions of direct and indirect [punishment](#) in the field for the first time," the three researchers conclude.

More information: "Direct and indirect punishment among strangers in the field," Loukas Balafoutas (University of Innsbruck), Nikos

Nikiforakis (NYU Abu Dhabi) and Bettina
Rockenbach (University of Cologne), *Proceedings
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