

Hostility towards minorities can be contagious

May 9 2018



Deadly hatred: In Bosnia, latent tensions between different ethnic groups escalated into civil war in the early 1990s. The tragic climax was the Srebrenica massacre, during which more than 8,000 Bosniaks were murdered in July 1995. Today, a memorial site commemorates the victims. Based on game theory experiments, researchers have found that hostile behaviour towards other ethnic groups has contagious effects. Credit: Michael B ker, Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Inter-ethnic conflicts often escalate surprisingly quickly. In a recent study, researchers have investigated the influence of the environment on peoples' hostility against minorities with the help of experiments. They found that hostility towards members of other ethnic groups is much more often imitated than hostility towards co-ethnics.

Whether in Bosnia, Liberia, or Rwanda, violent conflicts have suddenly broken out between ethnic groups that have lived peacefully together for a long time. So far, there is no satisfactory scientific explanation as to why aggression can repeatedly develop such a dynamic.

Jana Cahlíková of the Max Planck Institute for Tax Law and Public Finance, together with colleagues from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, has developed a novel experiment to test how [social environment](#) influences hostile behaviour towards other ethnic groups. The scientific article was published by the prestigious international journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* of the United States of America (*PNAS*) in April 2018.

The study examines adolescents from schools in eastern Slovakia and their behaviour towards members of the Roma people – a minority against whom there are substantial prejudices, and in recent years, have been increasing acts of aggression. The unique element about this research project was that participants were able to act within their social environment.

Participants can live out their willingness towards destruction

To examine hostile behaviour, the researchers had the young people play a "Joy of Destruction game": a game in which the participants – if they so wish – can live out their willingness towards destruction. Two players

receive two euros each and simultaneously choose whether to pay 20 cents to reduce their counterpart's income by one euro or simply keep the money unchanged. The players remain anonymous and play against each other only once.

The researchers used a list of typical names to inform the participants of whether their counterpart was a member of the Slovak majority population or the Roma minority. In addition, the scientists designed the course of the game in such a way that three young people from the same school class made their decision shortly after each other. The following players knew the decisions of their classmates.

It turned out that the destructive behaviour of the peers had a significant influence on the players' choices. The willingness to also act aggressively grew significantly. It was striking that this influence more than doubled when hostility was directed against Roma rather than against one of their own [social group](#).

Own group members are spared

In a second related experiment, the researchers examined the stability of social norms. They asked [young people](#) from the same region to assess whether the hostile behaviour shown by their peers in the first experiment was appropriate. Here, too, it became clear that the social environment makes a significant contribution to whether an action is judged to be socially appropriate or not. In an environment without hostile peers, aggressive behaviour by players towards Roma or the subjects' own social group was rated negatively to a similar extent. However, knowing that one player showed destructive behaviour after his or her classmates had been hostile to a Roma, they rated this behaviour as more appropriate. The ratings of hostile behaviour directed against a member of their own social group are more stable – they depend less on whether the players had previously observed destructive

behaviour in the [environment](#).

"Our results suggest that fragile social norms can lead to a sudden change in individual [behaviour](#) towards other [ethnic groups](#) – from good coexistence to aggression," says Max Planck scientist Jana Cahlíková. It is therefore important to consistently prosecute and punish hate crimes. Cahlíková and her colleagues also point out that politics and society should react very sensitively when prejudices and hostilities against certain social groups increase.

More information: Michal Bauer et al. Social contagion of ethnic hostility, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1720317115](#)

Provided by Max Planck Society

Citation: Hostility towards minorities can be contagious (2018, May 9) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-05-hostility-minorities-contagious.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.