

Upfront

Where Nice is Naughty: In most parts of the world, strangers helping strangers is strange

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Where Nice Is Naughty

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With tea leaves still steeping in its harbor, Boston is the cradle of American independence. Yet the students wending through its cobblestone streets are remarkably cooperative, finds a study in the March 7, 2008, issue of *Science*.

Put four Boston students—all strangers—in a game where they must distribute tokens among themselves using rules that reward both selfish and cooperative moves; allow them to punish each other by taking back tokens (albeit at a cost to themselves); and then watch the chips fall. The students not only penalize free-loaders—that is, players who don't give enough tokens to the group—but also *respond* to each other's punishment by giving more to the group in subsequent rounds. So do students in western European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and Denmark.

But half a world away, in the more collectivist cultures of Istanbul, Turkey; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; and Muscat, Oman, the play is a little rougher. Students give less overall to the public weal. And when punished, the free-loaders strike back, exacting revenge from the do-gooders who penalized them in earlier rounds. Closer to home, students in Greece, Russia, and Belarus likewise act less altruistically and more readily ding their cooperative colleagues.

Having watched college students play the token game in 16 cities, the researchers conclude that “culture strongly influences cooperation and punishment,” says Simon Gächter, an

economist at the University of Nottingham in England and one of the study's authors.

Using data from the World Values Survey, the authors show that the more a country's residents support the rule of law and civic cooperation—as revealed in their disdain for tax evasion, welfare abuse, and dodging fares on public transport—the more prosocially they respond to chastisement for their stinginess.

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These more cooperative, law-abiding denizens are also less likely to retaliate against peers who penalize them for selfishness. When people trust law enforcement institutions, the authors explain, they need not take matters into their own hands and so eschew vengeance.

Ironically, a distaste for civic cooperation and the rule of law tends to travel with collectivism, data from the World Values Survey show. Collectivis-

tic societies stress interdependence between people and the pursuit of group goals. But not just any people or group's goals count, explains Gächter: “In these societies you cooperate with people inside your network, which is organized along family and friendship lines. In our experiments, everyone is an outsider to everyone else. You might not accept punishment from outside your network.”

Conversely, individualistic societies view each person as independent and value the pursuit of individual goals. These mores are more prevalent in wealthier democracies, notes Herbert Gintis, an economist at the Santa Fe Institute, in an accompanying article. “In modern, market-based societies, group boundaries aren't very important,” explains Gächter. “You have to be able to cooperate with unrelated strangers.” And so rather than being hotbeds of cut-throat competition, capitalist democracies are actually kinder and gentler than more traditional economies—at least for strangers. Accordingly, members of wealthier democracies are more likely to give substantial sums to charity and poverty relief, even though doing so increases the tax burden for the average voter, points out Gintis.

Although most research on cooperation and altruism is from individualistic societies, most of the world's people live in collectivist societies, write the authors, who include Benedikt Herrmann of the University of Nottingham and Christian Thöni of the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland. And so scientists—not to mention government and nonprofit leaders—may have prematurely concluded that strangers will readily help strangers, as well as that punishing selfishness will inspire beneficence.

—Alana Conner