

The more you take the more you lose

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In everyday social exchanges, being mean to people has a lot more impact than being nice, research at the University of Chicago has shown.

Feeling slighted can have a bigger difference on how a person responds than being the recipient of perceived generosity, even if the net value of the social transaction is the same, the research on reciprocity—giving and taking—shows.

"Negative reciprocity, or taking, escalates," said Boaz Keysar, Professor of Psychology at the University of Chicago and lead author of the paper "Reciprocity is Not Give and Take: Asymmetric Reciprocity to Positive and Negative Acts," published in the December issue of *Psychological Science*. The study was based on giving-and-taking games conducted on students and people in downtown Chicago.

The games provided data on how people respond to give-and-take social exchanges.

"For instance in driving, if you are kind and let someone go in front of you, that driver may be considerate in response. But if you cut someone off, that person may react very aggressively, and this could escalate to road rage," Keysar said.

The situation can escalate when the person doing the slighting doesn't appreciate how strongly the slight is being experienced, Keysar said. "The one receiving the slight cannot imagine that the slighter lacks that appreciation. And so it goes, because of such differential perception,

they respond more and more strongly. Small slights could escalate to unbelievable, irrational feuds," he explained.

Nicholas Epley, Professor in the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, and University graduate students Benjamin Converse and Jiunwen Wang joined Keysar in the research. To examine how people respond to situations involving reciprocity, researchers conducted experiments on campus as well as in downtown Chicago with people on the street.

One such experiment tested 40 college students. The students were divided into two groups and asked to conduct experiments that began in two different ways using money which the players didn't actually keep at the end. In the first group, one player learned that another player had \$100 and was going to share it. In each situation, the player with the money the other player \$50. When the roles were reversed and the players who were the first to receive received \$100. In that exchange, those players gave their partners on average \$49.50.

In a companion experiment, the scholars found that the act of taking had a far bigger impact on people's responses than did the act of sharing. A player received \$100 from which another player was able to take as much as desired. That player took \$50, leaving the first player with \$50 just like in the sharing experiment. But when the roles were reversed, the first players took back much more, an average of \$48, leaving the partners with an average of \$42.

Another experiment confirmed the pattern, showing that taking quickly escalated as players became increasingly greedy over repeated exchanges. In the college experiments, the players did not keep the money, but the results were the same in an experiment in downtown Chicago, where \$10 was exchanged and players kept their money.

The study shows various social exchanges differ from those in the marketplace, where goods are bought and sold, Keysar said. "Acts of giving are perceived as more generous in social exchanges than objectively identical acts of taking," Keysar said. "Taking tends to escalate. Reciprocity appears to operate on an exchange rate that assigns value to the meaning of events, in a fashion that encourages pro-social exchanges."

Source: University of Chicago

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