

Deliberation is staunchest ally of selfishness

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(Medical Xpress)—Over the last two years, Yale psychologist David Rand and colleagues have investigated what makes people willing to help each other. Their latest research shows that while initial reactions are shaped by daily experience, deliberation consistently favors selfishness.

In a new paper published online April 22 in the journal *Nature Communications*, Rand and collaborators at Yale and Harvard

universities gave subjects money and asked them to choose how much to keep and how much to contribute to benefit their group. Half of the subjects were forced to respond quickly. Half were asked to think carefully before deciding.

"In the early studies, participants contributed much more when we made them rely on their intuitions," said Rand. "But as they gained more exposure to these kind of experiments, things changed."

Over time, participants' intuitions became increasingly [selfish](#). Decisions made after careful thought, however, stayed relatively selfish over the whole two-year period.

Rand and colleagues offer a theory to explain these results: For most people, cooperation is a winning strategy in daily life because selfish people get ostracized. These people tend to be intuitively cooperative. Deliberation, however, reins in these intuitions in different situations, such as interactions with strangers, and favors selfishness.

But people who have participated in many economic game experiments learn that their intuitions lead them astray, explain the researchers. Since these games are played with total strangers, players' intuitive choices tend to become more selfish. The same is likely true of exposure to real-world settings that reward selfishness, like being hired into a highly competitive business environment, or living in a country with a corrupt government, they say.

Even in our own daily lives, we can see effects like this, said Rand. "If someone you know asks for help, it's natural to agree, and the first time you meet a panhandler asking for change, it's the same—your instinct is to give. But soon enough, we get hardened, and our immediate response becomes 'No.'"

The findings illustrate that many of our social intuitions are malleable, not hard-wired by evolution, Rand added.

"We are shaped by our experiences, and so the social world we live in can have a profound effect on what comes naturally to us," he said.

Provided by Yale University

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