

# Cynicism and disrespect: A vicious cycle

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An international team of scientists has found out that being treated disrespectfully can lead people to develop cynical beliefs about human nature. Cynical beliefs about human nature, in turn, contribute to again being treated disrespectfully by others—and behaving disrespectfully towards others oneself. Through elaborate cross-sectional, longitudinal

and experimental studies, the scientists showed that disrespect and cynicism constitute a vicious circle.

The joint publication by the social psychologist Dr. Daniel Ehlebracht (University of Cologne) as well as Dr. Olga Stavrova (Tilburg University, Netherlands) and Dr. Kathleen D. Vohs (University of Minnesota, USA), is now available in an online version and will soon appear in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

The researchers used different methods: They proved the causal effect of experienced disrespect on [cynicism](#) as well as the opposite case, i.e., of cynicism on experiencing disrespect, in a total of five experimental studies with 1,149 participants, and one diary study with 462 participants.

A cross-sectional analysis of data from the European Social Survey (ESS) with representative population samples of European countries (a total of 53,333 respondents) showed a clear connection between experienced disrespect and cynicism in 28 out of 29 countries.

A longitudinal analysis of data from the US Health and Retirement Study (HRS) with a total of 19,922 respondents showed that, on the one hand, experienced disrespect predicted the development of cynicism over a period of four years. On the other hand, harboring cynical beliefs about [human nature](#) also made future experiences of disrespect more likely.

Daniel Ehlebracht remarked: "When people are treated disrespectfully by others, they often tend to generalize their [negative experiences](#) and unwarrantedly consider other people to be immoral, unfair and selfish in general. However, such a distorted image of humanity can paradoxically lead to provoking renewed bad experiences with other people and also to a tendency to treat others badly oneself."

According to Ehlebracht, the scientists' new findings can also help to understand why cynicism and disrespect towards others are on the rise in many societies.

**More information:** Olga Stavrova et al, Victims, perpetrators, or both? The vicious cycle of disrespect and cynical beliefs about human nature., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000738](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000738)

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