The age of sanctions: how we punish one another says a lot about our emotional state

Heightened emotions dictate the punishment for breaking social norms, especially in individualistic societies.

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Imagine standing next to an acquaintance as they are being rude to service workers. Or maybe they are singing loudly in a library. Would you confront them or would you simply give

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them a wide berth from that point on?

The answer may depend on what kind of feeling their social infraction stirred in you.

In a new study, a global group of researchers, including IESE's Alvaro San Martin, analyzed data from 56 countries and found that two emotions, in particular, led to sanctions for the breaking of social norms: anger and disgust.

They also found that the higher the autonomy of the culture or of the individual, the stronger the reliance on emotions when deciding whether to impose sanctions on others.

To confront or to avoid?

In the widest study of its kind, 17,774 participants in all continents (except Antarctica) were first asked how appropriate a particular behavior was and what emotions it evoked in them, before choosing whether to engage in one of three different actions: confrontation, ostracism or gossip.

From a range of nine emotions (anger, disgust, satisfaction, fear, surprise, sadness, happiness and another positive or another negative emotion), they found that individuals who experience anger or disgust are the most likely to retaliate with social sanctions.

More specifically, the data showed that when a person feels angry, they are more likely to engage in confrontation, whereas a person feeling disgust will tend more toward avoidance and ostracism. This was true for all but two of the countries in the study.

The researchers offer some explanation as to why this might be the case.

Studies have found that anger is associated with increased willingness to confront because it causes others to bend to the angry person's will.

By contrast, disgust has its roots in helping us avoid pathogens (and in this case, people who elicit disgust). Disgust is, therefore, slightly less likely to result in an aggressive altercation.

Both feelings can instigate the sharing of gossip — a mechanism designed to protect a group against threats — though to a lesser extent.

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Emotional autonomy

Although feelings of anger and disgust correlate with the increased use of sanctions across the board, the study nevertheless found that societies and individuals with higher levels of autonomy were more likely to be guided by emotions when imposing sanctions.

The authors measured this by asking each participant to rate themselves and their culture on obedience, religious faith, independence and determination, in addition to selecting their key values when raising children.

Since human beings use both internal and external sources of guidance when making judgments, a lack of higher authority in the form of religious edicts or strong parental authority figures can mean fewer external sources of guidance, leading individuals and societies to rely more heavily on their emotions — or internal sources of guidance — to help them make their judgements.

By contrast, in less autonomous societies, social sanctions can be so tightly proscribed as to eliminate the need for emotional involvement in the decision to punish.

Whether one extreme or the other is positive for society, the authors note, is open to debate. But with many people suggesting that, as a society, we are getting angrier, we may be entering the age of confrontation.

Methodology

In the widest study of its kind, using data from the International Study of Metanorms, 17,774 participants in all continents (except Antarctica) were asked how appropriate a particular behavior was and which emotions it evoked in them, among nine positive and negative emotions, before choosing whether to engage in one of three different actions: confrontation, ostracism or gossip. This information was then correlated with participants' attitudes and indicators of cultural values.

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