

Press release

The Dark Side of Personality – trust, sanctions and antisocial individuals

Social life entails countless situations in which people have to trust each other. From mundane family matters to profane issues such as trade negotiations among world leaders in a conflicted globalized world – all require the trust and the trustworthiness of the involved individuals. But how do individuals with antisocial personality traits behave in such circumstances? A new study by an international team of Behavioral Economists and Social Psychologists sheds light on the matter.

Trust and sanctions

The study shows that antisocial individuals have little trust in others unless they have the chance to sanction them for betraying their trust. If that chance exists, they harshly punish untrustworthy behavior. At the same time, these individuals behave very untrustworthily themselves and betray the trust of others if they do not fear being sanctioned. Overall, these individuals exhibit a specific combination of behaviours and beliefs that indicates an assumption that others share their antisocial worldview.

Identifying the antisocial personality profile

Participants in the study first completed a series of personality questionnaires from which the researchers extracted an antisocial personality profile that was associated with Machiavellianism, a lack of empathy, and high levels of financial and social risk taking. When interacting in situations requiring trust and trustworthiness, individuals with this profile stood out by showing the behaviours described above.

Antisocial at every stage

“Our data-driven approach worked surprisingly well in clearly identifying traits of an antisocial personality,” says Jan Engelmann from the University of Amsterdam. “The antisocial personality profile consistently modulated behavior at every stage of the ‘trust game’: 1. for decisions whether and how much to trust, 2. for decisions whether and how much to reciprocate another player’s trust and to behave trustworthily and 3. for decisions whether and how much to punish untrustworthy behavior.”

Assuming a shared worldview

Individuals with antisocial traits adapted strategically to the absence versus presence of sanctions, and in doing so managed to earn significantly more than others. Here, the persistent and unique response to punishments seen among antisocial individuals suggests that they assume that their interaction partners share their antisocial worldview and adapt accordingly. These findings confirm that for certain people, the ability to attribute mental states to others (referred to as ‘theory of mind’ by social neuroscientists) may be influenced strongly by their own personality.

Engelmann, J. B., Schmid, B., De Dreu, C. K. W., Chumbley, J., & Fehr, E. (2019):

On the psychology and economics of antisocial personality. Proc Natl Acad Sci USA, 201820133. DOI:10.1073/pnas.1820133116

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