

Social Image Concerns Promote Co-operation More than Altruistic Punishment

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Summary

Human co-operation is enigmatic for evolutionary theorists, since organisms are expected to act principally in their own interests. We conducted a series of novel experiments in a society in which existing social institutions make the evolutionary study of social image and punishment particularly salient. Participants were given the opportunity to punish non-co-operators, promote a positive social image or do so in combination with one another. We show that although all three mechanisms raise co-operation above baseline levels, only when social image is at stake do payoffs rise significantly above baseline. Punishment in combination with social image building and punishment alone yield significantly lower payoffs. Individuals' desire to establish a positive social image is thus a more decisive factor than punishment in promoting co-operation in human societies.