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Study links happiness, helping out

- Emory University used the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ game in its study of cooperation.

By **AMANDA GOEHLERT**, *Missourian staff*

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Cooperation isn’t just a way to get things done. One recent study has found that it might make humans feel good as well.

The Emory University study included 36 women age 20 to 60 who each participated in 20 rounds of the “prisoner’s dilemma” game. The game paired the participating women either with another woman or a computer opponent. The prisoner’s dilemma, a simple game used in many studies, allows the participant to cooperate or defect against his or her opponent, resulting in varying monetary rewards.

Gregory Berns, an associate professor of psychiatry at Emory University, said that because the interactive game could be monitored through an MRI scanner, it was possible to link cooperation with specific pleasure paths within the brain.

Berns said the MRIs showed that through cooperating, the participant’s part of the brain closely related to unexpected pleasures such as money, food and drink was activated. The chance that this pleasure was derived from the study’s monetary reward was ruled out by substituting a computer opponent in some cases. What the experimenters found was that the participants didn’t get as much pleasure out of cooperating in those cases.

The researchers concluded this might suggest it’s the human aspect of working together that makes people feel good.

“At the very simplistic level, you can do things for other people and feel good about it,” Berns said. “You don’t need a brain scan to know that. It shows biologically why and where in the brain that might be occurring. It could be that function in the brain that keeps our society together.”

Laura Salih, an assistant teacher for 4- and 5-year-olds at Columbia’s Child Development Center, can see that cooperation doesn’t need to be taught. Salih said the children naturally work together in the group activity planned for that day.

“When we’re doing cooking activities, a lot of times someone needs help holding the bowl and someone else will just reach over and hold the bowl for them,” Salih said.

“They have a little bit more fun when they’re with other people working together.”

Ken Sheldon, an assistant professor of psychology at MU and expert in the prisoner’s dilemma, said even though people, including Salih’s students, are naturally altruistic, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy of selfishness in the United States. Sheldon said by overthrowing this stigma, our whole culture could change.

“East Asian cultures, which are collectivist, are more cooperative,” Sheldon said. “That seems to be because their culture tells them ‘we’re all in this together.’ You’re expected to cooperate.”

Changes in American culture would have to be done with a large-scale effort that could be worth the results, Sheldon said.

Neil Dwyer, a facilitator with Experiential Education at MU, sees people becoming more cooperative almost every day. “It’s very, very rare when we have to push a group to cooperate,” Dwyer said.

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