Rewarding honesty and punishing deception

Understanding the dynamics within different cultures can help reduce misconceptions

by CYTHIA S WANG

The Wikileaks’ release of sensitive information from US State Department diplomatic cables has sent the world reeling with revelations. Yet, this same information can put “courageous” lives at risk, through global counterterrorism operations, and jeopardises diplomatic relations among countries. How much will Wikileaks be punished for any potential damage it causes versus being rewarded for whistle-blowing?

Recent research on the subject of rewarding honesty and punishing deception suggests that culture has a big part to play. Our analysis in five experiments reveals that individuals reward honesty more intensely than they punish deception, and that different patterns of rewards and punishments emerge for North American and East Asian cultures.

These divergent patterns could be explained by differences in social mobility, as Americans tend to be more mobile than East Asians, being more inclined to relocate from state to state for work and family.

Individuals in highly mobile countries have relatively loose relationship boundaries in which they can easily enter into and exit from a relationship, job, or marriage. Relationships in such mobile cultures are therefore more transient than that in stable cultures, leading to increased importance being placed on the personal rather than the collective.

This increased self-focus in mobile cultures, such as in the West, gives rise to relationships that are tied with less collective duties and responsibilities in contrast to the more tight-knit social networks in East Asian societies which engender relationships with more obligations and responsibilities.

For example, in one study, Japanese and American participants read about a food poisoning case that occurred in a school context. Though participants did not differ in the amount of blame they assigned to the teacher, Japanese participants were more likely than American participants to hold the school and the principal responsible for the incident.

This is because, Japanese, being less mobile, individuals have to be vigilant of possible acts that can impact the people in a close-knit network, as they risk collective punishment if they fail to keep troublemakers within bounds via punishments. In contrast, Westerners feel less obligated to deliver punishment to wrongdoers because the effect of an individual’s negative act is less likely to spill over to others in the form of collective culpability.

A mobile environment also offers people the option to avoid不好意思 individuals who give the relative ease of exiting from problematic relationships, thus sparing the use of punishment.

Differences in social mobility also accounts for an individual’s attitudes towards rewarding good behaviour. Mobile individuals interact more with strangers, and are actively inclined to seek out positive relationships with trustworthy people. In contrast, individuals in less mobile cultures tend to avoid transactions with untrusted and potentially mistrustworthy outsiders, preferring instead to interact with close kin, neighbours, and friends with whom they have established trust.

As a result, individuals from highly mobile societies might more readily recognize and trust a stranger’s honest act than individuals from less mobile societies. They are also more likely to cultivate positive social relationships by rewarding individuals who have proven themselves trustworthy.

Our analysis supports these proposed social mobility arguments by revealing the following culturally divergent patterns of rewards and punishments:

- Americans reward more than they punish, while East Asians reward and punish in equal amounts.
- East Asians residing in North America display reward and punishment responses that resemble their American counterparts.
- Americans with lower perceived mobility respond more like East Asians for rewarding and punishing equivalently, while those with higher perceived mobility respond more like Americans (i.e. rewarding more than punishing).

Both East Asians and Americans evaluate dishonest people more negatively than they evaluate honest people positively. However, Americans still punish deception less than they reward honesty.

It is likely that Americans punish less than they reward because of their tendency to be confused by high-mobility situations to avoid deception and approach honest actors. In contrast, stronger evaluations of honest behaviour and deceptive traits trigger greater reward and punishment behaviour in East Asians respectively.

Perceptions of trustworthiness mediate the relation between culture and the decision to reward. Americans reward more than East Asians do because they perceive individuals who have acted honesty to be more trustworthy.

On the other hand, the relation between culture and punishments is mediated by the psychological response of guilt obligations. East Asians feel more obligated to punish deception than Americans, but feel as obligated as Americans to reward honest behaviour. Understanding the dynamics behind punishing deception and rewarding honesty within different cultures can help in reducing misunderstandings and misconceptions between cultures.

A prominent example of cultures colliding was the 1998 casing of Michael Fay, a US teenager who vandalised public property in Singapore. The ruling sparked outrage from the United States, culminating in then US president Bill Clinton calling the punishment excessive and requesting dem- ence.

Wikileaks has vowed to continue leaking confidential information. So far, the US has been unable to prosecute or put a stop to Wikileaks from revealing more.

In contrast, Singapore’s Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam has warned that anyone caught looking any official government documents in Singapore would be “jailled with family”. This, perhaps, underscores cultural dynamics at play in the way rewards and punishments are used as social control mechanisms.

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