

## ALL FOR ONE, AND ONE FOR ALL?

Maybe. Whether men are more likely to be cooperative or competitive with others appears to depend on their childhood, concludes a recent study performed by researchers in the USA<sup>1</sup>.



For many years psychologists and neuroscientists have wondered why some people cooperate with others while some exploit them. Understanding this would be both enlightening and useful. Wouldn't it be great if you could get that irritating, often-penalised, but very good, player to think a bit more about the team before acting?

The tool that the researchers use to characterise how people choose among the relative pay-offs for cooperation versus conspiracy is a role-playing game called the *prisoner's dilemma*, and it goes like this. Let's say two people are caught for robbery, and they are held in separate cells for interrogation. If one suspect incriminates the other and the second suspect stays silent, the first suspect goes free and the second gets 10 years. If both stay silent, they each get six months. If each incriminates the other, they both get five years. Which is the best strategy? Do you rat on your mate in the hope of going free, or do you stick together for a reduced sentence? Can you second-guess what your partner will do? And if your partner does defect, do you retaliate?

Researchers asked adult male and female study participants to play the prisoner's dilemma and also fill-out a questionnaire about their childhood – socioeconomic status, whether they experienced social neglect, family conflict or violence, neighborhood violence or crime. Researchers then associated their cooperativity rating with their childhood experiences to ask: Is it possible that adverse childhood experiences might shape how we interact with one another as adults?

Men, but interestingly not women, who had adverse childhood experiences were more likely to exploit their partners – ratting on them earlier in the game – and to retaliate if themselves exploited. One interpretation is that adult men who had a rough childhood continue to behave, many years later, as if the environment were still unstable. They appear to act to get what's coming to them now, without considering the long term consequences – a “live fast, die young” mentality, associated with high risk-taking. Another interpretation is that men who grew up with adverse childhoods have lower expectations of others. Either way, it's not great news for some guys. And given that New Zealand has unusually high rates of child maltreatment<sup>2</sup>, well... I'll let you draw your own conclusions.

*“If we do not hang together, we will all hang separately.”*  
- Benjamin Franklin

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### References:

1. McCullough ME et al. (2012) “Harsh childhood environmental characteristics predict exploitation and retaliation in humans.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23118435>.
2. <http://www.oecd.org/social/familiesandchildren/43570328.pdf>