

# Wilfully ignoring inconvenient information decreases prosociality across diverse cultures

In a cross-national behavioural experiment, we examined how providing information about negative externalities and making decisions observable influence prosocial behaviour. Across countries, we found that knowledge of negative externalities (as compared with opportunities for ignorance) robustly increased prosociality, and that guilt-prone individuals were more responsive to information about these negative consequences of their actions.

## This is a summary of:

Molho, C. et al. Guilt drives prosociality across 20 countries. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02286-3> (2025).

## Publisher's note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Published online: 13 August 2025

## The question

Influential theories in psychology, anthropology and cultural evolution propose that societies vary in their prosociality towards strangers<sup>1,2</sup>. Existing studies have provided mixed findings regarding the magnitude of such variation in prosociality and cooperation<sup>3</sup>. Our study investigated whether observed patterns of variation might be due to different societies relying on distinct mechanisms to promote prosociality, emphasizing either guilt and internalized norms or shame and external reputation. Whereas guilt tracks adherence to internal moral standards even in private situations, shame specifically tracks devaluation by others in public situations. Previous studies demonstrated that explicit information about the negative consequences of one's choices for others can induce guilt and self-image concerns, and ultimately increase prosociality<sup>4</sup>. By contrast, opportunities to ignore inconvenient information alleviate the guilt of choosing selfishly. Other studies have shown that publicizing decision-makers' choices induces reputational concerns and shame, and increases prosociality<sup>5</sup>. Prior to our study, these findings were limited to samples from a handful of Western countries, which raised questions about the generalizability of guilt-driven and shame-driven prosociality across cultures.

## The observation

To examine how guilt and shame drive prosociality across diverse cultures, we conducted a preregistered decision-making experiment with 7,978 participants from 20 countries. To assess prosociality towards strangers, we asked participants to make monetary allocations with real-world consequences for themselves and strangers. In so-called dictator games, participants could choose between a selfish and a prosocial allocation. In the standard version of this task, participants make private decisions with full information about how their choices affect their own and others' payoffs. We introduced two key variations to study how guilt-related and shame-related factors influence prosociality. First, we varied the information available by introducing a hidden information setting, in which participants could avoid information about the consequences of their choices (thereby displaying wilful ignorance). Second, we varied observability by introducing a public setting, in which individuals not only received explicit information about the consequences of their actions but also knew that their choice would be publicized online for all participants to see. Last, we used a well-validated questionnaire to assess the importance that individuals and countries

place on guilt over shame (their relative guilt-proneness versus shame-proneness) in response to imagining committing hypothetical offenses such as lying, damaging property or committing fraud.

We found that allowing individuals to avoid inconvenient information has a robust negative effect on prosociality (Fig. 1a). Across all countries, participants made fewer prosocial choices when they could choose to remain wilfully ignorant, even though seeking information was costless. By contrast, when we removed the option to avoid inconvenient information, we observed more prosocial choices especially among guilt-prone individuals (those who tended to experience more guilt when committing offenses; Fig. 1b). Together, these results lend support to the idea that guilt drives prosociality across culturally diverse countries. However, we found that making participants' decisions public among strangers had only negligible effects on prosociality, even among more shame-prone individuals (those who tended to experience more shame when committing offenses). These results were consistent across countries, irrespective of the importance placed on guilt over shame at the country level. Thus, we found notable similarities around the world in how distinct mechanisms promote (or not) prosociality.

## The interpretation

Our findings revealed the presence of wilful ignorance and guilt-driven prosociality beyond a small set of Western countries. Their worldwide prevalence highlighted the importance of developing strategies that limit opportunities for wilful ignorance. Creating transparent information-sharing environments might prove a useful tool to encourage prosocial choices across domains such as charitable giving and sustainable behaviour.

We found little support for the importance of observability and shame-driven prosociality. However, our study was only able to examine how publicizing decisions among anonymous strangers influences prosocial behaviour. Being observed by more relevant audiences, such as those who can track and act on one's reputation in the future, might well have much stronger effects on prosocial behaviour<sup>5</sup>.

Besides substantial similarities, we also observed heterogeneity in the strength of guilt-driven prosociality across countries. An intriguing open question concerns the socio-ecological, cultural or institutional factors that relate to this variation in wilful ignorance.

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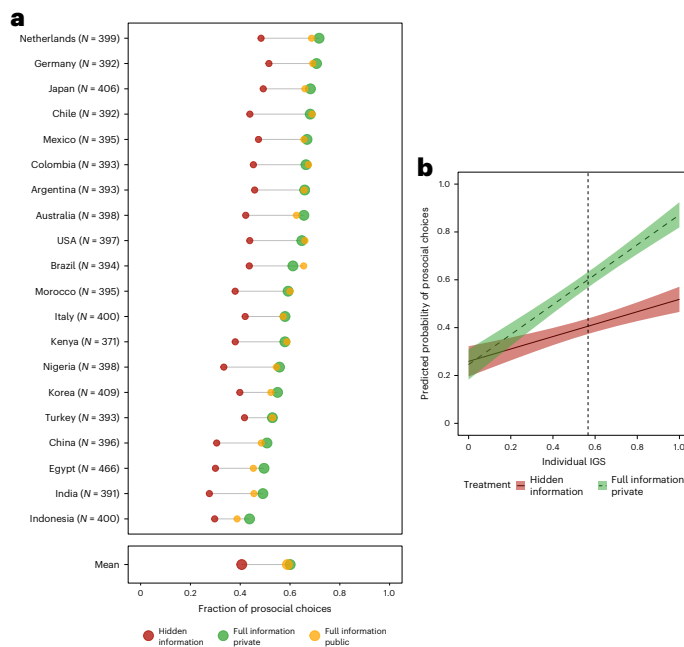
## EXPERT OPINION

"The registered report aims to investigate the hypotheses that activating guilt by varying information more strongly increases prosociality among guilt-prone individuals and societies, whereas activating shame by varying observability more strongly increases prosociality among shame-prone

individuals and societies. The questions guiding the research, the validity of the approach, and the methods used are valid and judged positively within the relevant scientific context."

**Constanza Abbate, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy.**

## FIGURE



**Fig. 1 | Across countries, providing information about negative externalities positively influences prosociality, especially among guilt-prone individuals.** Participants made monetary allocations between themselves and strangers. **a**, The fraction of prosocial choices based on decisions of 7,978 participants from 20 culturally diverse countries. Participants made more prosocial choices when they received information about negative externalities (green dots) as compared with when they could wilfully ignore information (red dots). Publicizing decisions did not increase prosocial choices (yellow dots). **b**, The effect of providing information varies with the importance that individuals place on guilt over shame (individual IGS), measured via a well-validated questionnaire. Individuals who tend to experience more guilt relative to shame when committing hypothetical offenses were more sensitive to receiving full information (green, dashed line) as compared with being able to avoid it (red, solid line). © 2025, Molho, C. et al.

## BEHIND THE PAPER

Submitting a registered report for a cross-national experiment may feel like a daunting task — or so it seemed to us! Yet, consistent with our team's previous positive experiences with this format, we found it to be a valuable choice. First, it allowed us to incorporate feedback to the design before embarking on large-scale data collection. Second, committing to a detailed analysis plan gave us a clear roadmap once the data were in. Personally, I found that this way of limiting researcher degrees of freedom

not only strengthens scientific rigour but also offers reassurance for researchers themselves.

One of the most time-intensive aspects of cross-national research is, perhaps surprisingly, coordinating translations and implementing surveys in multiple languages. We were fortunate that many colleagues generously stepped in to help us to ensure the quality of our surveys across languages. Their cooperation was truly indispensable! **C.M.**

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## FROM THE EDITOR

"Existing research has shown that considerable differences in prosocial behaviour exist across cultures. What makes this registered report so interesting is that it offers us a glimpse into the potential mechanisms that underlie these differences." **Editorial Team, Nature Human Behaviour.**