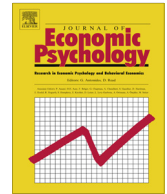


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Trust behind bars: Measuring change in inmates' prosocial preferences

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the results of a Longitudinal Lab-in-the-Field Experiment implemented between September 2015 and July 2016 performed in two State Prisons in California (USA) to measure change in prosocial preferences. A subset of eligible inmates willing to undertake GRIP (Guiding Rage Into Power) program, were randomly assigned to it. The paper tests whether the participation to this program (used as a treatment in the experiments) affects prosocial preferences of participants, with specific reference to trust. The results of a Difference-in-Differences (DID) estimation procedure show that trust significantly increased in GRIP participants compared to the control group. This result is robust to alternative estimation techniques and to the inclusion of an endogenous behavioral measure of altruism.

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1. Introduction

A long debate persists in Economics on whether the discipline, by focusing on decisions and actions of rational actors, should abide by the principle of methodological individualism by which “all explanations must run in terms of the actions and reactions of individuals” (Arrow, 1994, p. 1). Most economic models also assume stable exogenous preferences since “without these assumptions, one cannot infer the causal connection between changes in opportunity sets and predicted changes in choices” (Dasgupta, Gangadharan, Maitra, & Mani, 2017, p. 17). Either or both of assumptions have been repeatedly challenged throughout the decades – from Veblen (1899) to Tarde (1902); from Hirschman (1984) to Bowles (1998) in the attempt to consider individuals as embedded in a socio-cultural environment and influenced by their relational networks.

Some recent approaches (notably arising from Behavioral Economics) have stressed the effects of forces outside the individuals which may shape their decisions and actions away from individualistic maximization procedures. In particular, Hoff and Stiglitz (2016) distinguish 3 types of economic literature: “(1) standard economics with *rational actors*, who have stable, exogenous preferences; (2) behavioral economics with *quasi-rational actors*, who make seemingly inconsistent choices; and (3) behavioral economics with *enculturated actors*, who have endogenous preferences, perception, and cognition” (Hoff & Stiglitz, 2016, pp. 27–28, our italics). The literature records many Lab Experiments highlighting the existence of quasi-rational actors and providing evidence of priming and framing phenomena (based on influences in the moment of decision), whereas there are few Field and/or Lab-in-the-Field Experiments exploring decisions and actions of enculturated actors, measuring the potentially durable impact of experience and exposure phenomena on their behaviors. Experience and exposure require actors to be observed in real life situations, where decisions are influenced by social identities, peer-effects, world-views and narratives.

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This paper aims at contributing to this strand of literature by testing whether the participation to an offender accountability program (GRIP¹), run by the US-based NGO *Insight-Out*, significantly changes prosocial attitudes (trust and altruism²) of violent crime offenders detained in two Californian state prisons. Changing preferences enhancing prosocial behavior of long-term prisoners is particularly difficult since, as shown by the literature (Haney, 2003), time spent in prison negatively affects inmates ability of trusting and engaging in enduring relationships. Our empirical results are in line with such claim by showing that trust and altruism decreased in prisoners not attending the GRIP program (i.e. in our control groups); however, the decrease of the relevant indicators is not statistically significant.

As outlined in the program's website, "the 10 months GRIP program functions as a peer education model where experienced students co-facilitate the classes and mentor newer students. The program employs a methodology that is called 'normative culture' wherein the students cultivate intrinsic motivation by being actively involved in both setting and enforcing the standards and norms that are integral to the course".³ Thus GRIP may well qualify as an ideal test-bed for assessing the effects of experience and exposure in changing social preferences.

The way *Insight-Out* administers the program particularly fits the requirements for an experimental setting. The NGO's limited capacity (until 2016 *Insight-Out* has been able to manage only one GRIP class of about 25 inmates per prison each year) allows for the implementation of a Lab-in-the-Field Experiment⁴ involving 42 treated (inmates participant to GRIP) and 38 controls (inmates not attending the program), in two Californian State prisons. All 80 inmates were surveyed twice, the first time before the beginning of GRIP and the second time about ten months later (after the end of the program). The experimental protocol, designed to run a panel data Difference-in-Differences analysis, envisaged a set of behavioral games, devised to elicit prosocial behavior (and in particular trust and altruism) and a series of questions based on a set of validated psychological scales of forgiveness and self-forgiveness.⁵

The novelty of our contribution is threefold:

1. *Longitudinal analysis.* We implemented a longitudinal study in the framework of prosocial behavioral games, concerning the change of prosocial attitudes and preferences over time, with reference to trust and altruism, experienced by people exposed to a "rehab" program. While longitudinal studies – according to Chuang and Schechter (2015, pp. 153–154) have been extensively used to test the stability of risk and time preferences, changes in social preferences have been investigated by a handful of papers. In particular, to the best of our knowledge, only one paper (Lönnqvist, Verkasalo, Walkowitz, & Wichardt, 2015) specifically uses the trust game in a longitudinal analysis, though as an indicator of risk attitudes; while another paper (Brosig-Koch, Riechmann, & Weimann, 2017) uses a Dictator Game in a longitudinal analysis whose main focus is the learning process of a quasi-rational actor.⁶
2. *Experience and Exposure rather than Priming and Framing.* Our Lab-in-the-Field Experiment, designed to measure the changes in trust and altruism displayed by a group of Californian inmates, is specifically designed to test the effect of the exposure to a different environment (the GRIP program as opposed to the prisons general environment) and on the experience of a strong sense of collective identity.
3. *Non-student population.* While conventional Lab Experiments use university students as targeted population, in this paper, we applied a behavioral economics set of games within an environment (state prisons) rarely investigated by the behavioral economics literature to a non-standard adult population (prison inmates) in which, as described by Hardin (2002) and Haney (2003), distrust among prisoners is often encouraged by corrections officers and managers to strengthen their control capacity.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the main features of the GRIP program, highlighting its core targets; Section 3 presents the research design and experimental methods; Section 4 presents the methodology to estimate the Average effect of the Treatment on the Treated (ATT); Section 5 provides results and robustness checks, and Section 6 provides a discussion of the main findings and conclusions.

2. Guiding Rage Into Power (GRIP): outline of the rehabilitation program

Jacques Verduin has been running the GRIP (*Guiding Rage Into Power*) Program in San Quentin Prison (California, USA) since 2011,⁷ the founder of *Insight-Out*, an NGO based in the San Francisco's area. GRIP originates from its founder's vision that

¹ GRIP is the acronym for *Guiding Rage Into Power* an offender accountability program which is currently administered in seven Californian prisons and involves around 500 inmates. See more details in Section 2.

² In a somehow similar experimental setting, Blattman, Jamison, & Sheridan (2017) investigates the "malleability" of a number of noncognitive skills and preferences in criminally engaged adults.

³ <http://www.insight-out.org/index.php/programs/grip-program>.

⁴ Following the taxonomy proposed by Harrison and List (2004), a Lab-Like Field or Lab-in-the-Field experiment involves participants drawn from the field and asks them "to perform laboratory tasks that are not part of their day-to-day environment" (Viceisza, 2016, p. 836).

⁵ The forgiveness-related questions are not analyzed in this paper due to their different nature and scope. Therefore, we have postponed their illustration to a future work.

⁶ Both papers are based on Lab Experiments performed on university students. See point 3 of this list.

⁷ His experience with prison programs is much longer: in 1997, he founded the *Insight Prison Project* (IPP), pioneering innovative in-prison rehabilitation programs designed to create transformational change among prisoners at California's San Quentin State Prison.

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