



# Cooperation, punishment and organized crime: a lab-in-the-field experiment in southern Italy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an experimental investigation which provides insights into the social preferences of organized criminals and how these differ from those of “ordinary” criminals on the one hand and from those of the non-criminal population in the same geographical area on the other. We develop experimental evidence on cooperation and response to sanctions by running prisoner's dilemma and third party punishment games on three different pools of subjects; students, ordinary criminals and Camorristi (Neapolitan ‘Mafiosi’). The latter two groups were recruited from within prisons. Camorra prisoners show a high degree of cooperativeness and a strong tendency to punish defectors, as well as a clear rejection of the imposition of external rules even at significant cost to themselves. The subsequent econometric analysis further enriches our understanding demonstrating inter alia that individuals' locus of control and reciprocity are associated with quite different and opposing behaviours amongst different participant types; a strong sense of self-determination and reciprocity both imply a higher propensity to punish for Camorra inmates, but quite the opposite for ordinary criminals, further reinforcing the contrast between the behaviour of ordinary criminals and the strong internal mores of Camorra clans.

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## 1. Introduction

Modern societies rely on the existence of cooperation and trust in many economic and social activities. These behaviours are often claimed as a major source of economic success and development, and, hence, as a key component in explaining why some countries are wealthier than others (Roth et al., 1991; Hayashi et al., 1999; Knack and Keefer, 1997). According to Gneezy et al. (2016), the principal reason that we observe significant differences in trust and co-operation across different populations is the existence of different social norms which favour or impede cooperation and trust. Social norms are rules or codes of behaviour which are broadly accepted by the members of a group and which “are enforced by internal and external sanctions such as shame or punishment, internalized through social learning and socialization, and may lead to an enduring change in individuals' motivations, such as their propensity to act pro-socially.” (Op. Cit., p. 1856). If we study

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cooperation and trust in specific environments, we may find that subjects' conduct can be explained by the existence of different norms regulating social behaviour.

There is a complex relationship between the propensity to cooperate and the establishment of social norms which favour cooperation. One approach to the relationship posits that norms are established and evolve in response to environmental requirements and needs (Boyd and Richerson, 2005; Gintis, 2003). For example, we can expect to observe pro-social norms in societies where most subjects benefit from cooperating and otherwise face losses if they act selfishly. On the contrary, in competitive environments, such norms will rarely be observed. A number of field experiments have provided robust results which demonstrate the importance of cooperation and of norms sustaining cooperation (Carpenter and Seki, 2011; Gneezy et al., 2016; Voors et al., 2016; see also Balliet et al., 2011, for references).

In the same vein, this paper presents the results of an investigation into the differences in cooperation observed in three sub-samples of the Southern Italian population. Specifically, the analysis reported here provides experimental evidence on prisoner's dilemma and third party punishment games for three different pools of subjects: "organized" criminals, "ordinary" criminals and the non-criminal population in the same geographical area, Campania.

The organized criminals were young members of an Italian criminal organization, the Camorra, which has its base in Campania. The Camorra is in some respects – although by no means all<sup>1</sup> – similar to the Mafia. Both attribute great importance to in-group co-operation, promoting a strong sense of loyalty among members of the same criminal family enforced also through heavy sanctioning of defectors. Since many Camorristi and Mafiosi become informants soon after their arrest, one might wonder just how real are the solidarity rules and 'honour' amongst members, that criminals – and movies – often claim. We argue below that these rules are indeed crucial for the survival and success of the organization. Such codes increase the efficiency of individual groups, reinforcing their ability to operate effectively in the towns they control. These organisations create fear, but they also provide alternative structures, which can pervade and influence the activities and interactions of the non-criminal population living in the same area. Moreover, the longevity of both the Mafia and the Camorra, suggests that the albeit imperfect imposition of these behavioural codes nevertheless constitutes an important element of their success.

The primary aims of our experiment are threefold. First, to test whether Camorra participants have a greater tendency to cooperate in the Prisoners' Dilemma game than ordinary criminals or students. Second, to test whether Camorra members differ from members of the other two groups in their reaction to the presence of external sanctions, and third, when the possibility of third party punishment is introduced, to analyse how the application of sanctions by members of the different groups under study varies. Because the Camorra has very specific codes regulating members' actions, we expect the behaviour of Camorra prisoners to differ significantly from ordinary criminals and from students, neither of which are subject to the same set of rigid social norms which promote the positive value of in-group loyalty and the extremely negative – and heavily punished – nature of betrayal.

The experimental sessions were run in two different prisons located in Campania, one of which hosted convicted members of the Camorra, and the other, ordinary criminals. We also conducted the same experiment with a pool of students enrolled in different faculties of the University of Campania – Luigi Vanvitelli, which is located in the Caserta area, a territory notorious for the strong presence of Camorra families. We complemented the experimental evidence with survey based measures of the propensity of participants to cooperate and to positively (or negatively) reciprocate others' behaviour.

A number of studies have examined altruism and co-operativeness amongst convicted criminals relying on dictator game experiments (Birkeland et al., 2014; Gummerun and Hanoch, 2012; Chmura et al., 2017) or prisoner's dilemmas (Khadjavi and Lange, 2013). These studies provide useful insights regarding crime prevention and the reintegration into society of ex-offenders (Jolls et al., 1998; Korobkin and Ullen, 2000; Khadjavi and Lange, 2013).

Experimental evidence on criminal behaviour using prison inmates as their subjects simplifies the identification of criminals; and, in our case, makes it possible to distinguish between ordinary and organized criminals. However, being in prison is not a neutral event; the fact of being incarcerated is itself likely to affect behaviour in addition to any group specific social norms. Prisoners face specific constraints: they lose their freedom, are rationed in many resources (i.e. good food, space, silence, etc.), have very little choice in the selection of companions with whom they associate or share a cell. Thus, for example, analyses of inmate behaviour (Kaminski, 2003, 2004; Gambetta, 2009)<sup>2</sup> show that prisoners are often challenged by other prisoners and need to fight frequently in order to establish their reputation within the prison hierarchy and to avoid being taken advantage of. In this context, since they fear that other inmates or prison authorities will punish them for any 'mistake' they make or weakness they signal, inmates are likely to behave strategically in all that they do or say. For experimenters this means that prisoners may be particularly concerned with the consequences of their decisions in experiments and/or their responses to questionnaires.

Taken as a whole, however, existing experimental evidence on prison inmates suggests that the typical pre-conception of criminals as highly selfish and anti-social may in part be mistaken. Prisoners give more than students

<sup>1</sup> One major difference between the Camorra and the Mafia concerns their organisational structure. Although both organisations are made up of a number of 'families' or 'clans', the Mafia has a hierarchical pyramidal structure, whilst the Camorra comprises a network of clans without any explicit – and above-all agreed – hierarchy. Consequently, the Camorra is considerably more violent than the Mafia with many more inter-clan struggles for predominance.

<sup>2</sup> Kaminski (2003, 2004) uses game theory to characterize the behaviour of prisoners and their interactions whilst incarcerated in Poland during the 1980s. Gambetta (2009), relying primarily on the observation of UK prisoners, constructs a coherent behavioural theory in order to explain violence amongst inmates.

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