

## Ability to delay gratification may be linked to social trust, study finds

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A person's ability to delay gratification—forgoing a smaller reward now for a larger reward in the future—may depend on how trustworthy the person perceives the reward-giver to be, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Colorado Boulder.

A body of research that stretches back more than a half-century has shown that the ability to delay gratification is linked to a number of better life outcomes. On average, people who were able to delay gratification as children go on to have higher SAT scores, for example. They also tend to be more socially conscious as adolescents, less obese as adults, and less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol.

But despite the long history of studying delayed gratification, little research has focused on the role of social trust in a person's ability to wait for a larger payoff in the future.

"Most of the time, when people talk about delaying gratification, they talk about basic processes of evaluation and [self-control](#)," said Laura Michaelson, a CU-Boulder doctoral student in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience and co-lead author of the new study appearing in the online journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

In general, people who choose not to delay gratification have often been characterized as irrational and as having [poor impulse control](#). But if the role of social trust is considered, it introduces the possibility that the person who is choosing not to delay gratification may be acting rationally

after all, the researchers said.

"If you don't trust someone, it's rational not to wait for them to give you \$20 in a month instead of \$15 now," said study co-lead author Alejandro de la Vega, also a doctoral student in CU-Boulder's Department of Psychology and Neuroscience.

To determine the role of social trust, the research team—which also included Christopher Chatham, a former CU-Boulder doctoral student now at Brown University, and psychology and [neuroscience](#) Professor Yuko Munakata—recruited participants using Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online tool that can be used by scientists to quickly connect with a large number of people from a broad range of backgrounds.

The researchers paid participants up to \$1 to participate in an experiment in which they were asked to read the profiles of three fictional characters and then rate them on their trustworthiness. Participants were then asked whether they would opt to take a smaller amount of money offered immediately from each character or a larger amount of money that they would have to wait to collect.

The results showed that the participants were less likely to delay gratification when they distrusted the person who was offering the reward. A second experiment—which relied on a larger group but asked each participant to read the profile of only one character—had similar results. The second study also paired one of three sketches of a face with each character.

"This offers an alternative explanation for why certain populations might be notoriously bad at delaying gratification or notoriously impulsive, like criminals and addicts," Michaelson said. "It had been chalked up to a lack of self-control. But it may be the case that they are poor at delaying gratification because they have low social trust."

The findings could have implications for determining the best intervention strategies to use with children who find it difficult to delay gratification. Creating environments in which children can develop social trust, for example, could be more effective than having those children work solely on self-control, Michaelson said.

The findings also may be important for adults, especially in terms of economic decision-making, de la Vega said. Economists are interested in [delayed gratification](#) as it relates to making investments or building up savings instead of spending money immediately. The new CU-Boulder study suggests that how much a person trusts an investment banker or an economic adviser could affect the person's decisions about saving and spending.

"These economic decisions are not being made in a complete vacuum," de la Vega said. "They might really be affected by how you perceive the person you're interacting with."

The research team plans to follow up this study with research that involves participants interacting in person with the people who are offering the rewards.

"There is a very real possibility the this relationship between social trust and delaying gratification might be even more strong and even more salient when you're in a real situation," Michaelson said.

**More information:** [www.frontiersin.org/Cognition/ ...  
.2013.00355/abstract](http://www.frontiersin.org/Cognition/...2013.00355/abstract)

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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