Matthew Cashman

Postdoc, MIT Sloan

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Education

Ph.D. MIT Sloan, Cambridge, MA — 2023
Marketing
Committee: Drazen Prelec (chair), Rahul Bhui, David Rand

A.B. Hamilton College, Clinton, NY
Chemistry & Philosophy

Academic Employment

MIT Sloan, Cambridge, MA — 2025 –
Postdoc, PrioR Lab (PIs: Rahul Bhui & Abdullah Almaatouq)

Warwick Business School, Warwick, UK — 2023 – 2025
Houlden Fellow, Behavioural Science Group

MIT Sloan, Cambridge, MA — 2023 – 2025
Research Affiliate, Marketing

Harvard Human Evolutionary Biology, Cambridge, MA — 2021 –
Associate, Culture, Cognition, & Coevolution Lab (PI: Joe Henrich)

Harvard Psychology, Cambridge, MA — 2015–2017
Lab Manager, Moral Psychology Research Lab (PI: Fiery Cushman)

Grants & Awards

Award for Outstanding Postdoctoral Achievements (research) University of Warwick		2025
Univ. of Warwick Primary Data Support Fund	£5,000	2025
Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Postgraduate Programs (teaching) University of Warwick		2024
Univ. of Warwick Primary Data Support Fund	£4,000	2024
Harvard Kennedy School Program on Negotiation Next-Generation Grant	$5,000	2021
Harvard Dean's Competitive Fund PI: Prof. Fiery Cushman	$34,000	2019

Publications

Cashman, M., Maciejovsky, B. & Wernerfelt, B. (2025). **Small talk as a contracting device: trust, cooperative norms, and changing equilibria.** Forthcoming, *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization.*

> Cheap talk and costly signaling are the canonical forms of communication in game theory, but much communication seems to happen outside the context of a game. We operationalize "small talk" as pre-*knowledge-of*-game communication, and investigate the phenomenon using a series of real-time video interaction experiments. We show experimentally that even very brief small talk with a potential trading partner functions as a contracting device by enhancing trust and cooperation. In contrast to formal contracts, pre-deal socializing can cover contingencies that are truly unforeseen, and unlike relational contracts, it is independent of repeated play.

Voelkel, J.G., Stagnaro, M.N., Chu, J., Pink, S., Mernyk, J.S., Redekopp, C., **Cashman, M.**, [Qualifying Strengthening Democracy Challenge Submitters], Druckman, J.N., Rand, D.G. & Willer, R.[a] (2024). **Megastudy testing 25 treatments to reduce antidemocratic attitudes and partisan animosity.** *Science*.

> The Strengthening Democracy Challenge, an N=32,059 study, finds that 23 of 25 interventions designed to reduce anti-democratic attitudes and partisan animosity are effective. These interventions are also effective in reducing support for undemocratic practices and partisan violence, among a variety of other secondary outcomes.

[a] Note: Authors divided into study team members and intervention submitters.

Cashman, M. P. & Cushman, F. A. (2020). **Learning from Moral Failure.** In Schwenkler, John & Lambert, Enoch (eds.) Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change. Oxford University Press.

> Pedagogical environments are often designed to minimize the chance of people acting wrongly, and this is surely a sensible approach. But could it ever be useful to design pedagogical environments to permit, or even encourage, moral failure? We consider the possibility that moral failure can be an especially effective tool for fostering learning, and the costs involved.

Cao, C., Cao, X., **Cashman, M.**, Kumar, M., Timoshenko, A., Yang, J., Yu, S., Zhang, J., Zhu, Y., & Wernerfelt, B. (2019). **How do successful scholars get their best research ideas? An exploration.** *Marketing Letters.*

> We interview 24 authors to ask how they got the ideas for 64 of their papers. More than three quarters of the papers were inspired by holes in the literature, by a "stylized fact" that the current literature cannot explain, or by an interaction with a manager. The rest fall into several smaller categories that to a large extent can be seen as special cases of the three big ones. We describe how papers from each of the three big categories help move the literature forward.

Selected Working Papers

Cashman, M., Zeng, T.C., and Kroupin, I. (2026). **Schooled Minds for Standardized Worlds: A Model of Cognitive Variation.**

We present a formal account of cognitive variation between schooled and unschooled populations. Using Rate Distortion Theory, we model minds as constrained mappers of different types of territories. Schooled minds are provided with standardized information ecologies, enabling compact, portable representations ("Red means stop"), whereas low-standardization ecologies reward high-fidelity, niche-tuned maps ("Tracking deer by the river is hard when the wind blows from the water"). In highly standardized settings, small informational investments yield broad performance gains, favoring abstraction; in low-standardization settings, gains require encoding nuanced local detail. The framework predicts trade-offs, universally helpful tools, and mismatch losses across ecologies.

Cashman, M. (2025). **From Pluralistic Ignorance to Common Knowledge with Social Assurance Contracts.**

I introduce social assurance contracts as a mechanism for safely revealing a hidden consensus. Many people privately hold controversial beliefs, but remain silent due to fear of social censure. In this case, beliefs discussed in the public sphere do not accurately reflect true, underlying beliefs. This prevents honest and open discourse and can fuel political polarization. Social assurance contracts surface suppressed beliefs safely by revealing hidden consensus only when sufficient support has been privately committed. Formal analysis shows this mechanism can resolve coordination problems and mitigate free-rider issues related to expressive acts, allowing honest expression and expanding the space of beliefs expressible in public (the Overton window).

Cashman, M. & Prelec, D. (2025). **The Positional Order Effect: How Sequential Timing and Self-Interest Drive Prosocial Choice**

We provide experimental evidence for a positional order effect that encourages cooperation specifically among self-interested participants. In one-shot Public Goods Games where players move one after another but do not observe others' moves, self-interested players contribute more to the public good when they are at the beginning of the sequence and less as order increases. Telling these self-interested players that everyone moving after them has their move made randomly for them eliminates the effect, suggesting they are conditioning their own moves on the as-yet undetermined moves of other players. This has direct implications for choice in charitable giving, among other settings.

Hayes, T., **Cashman, M.** & Isoni, A. (2025). **VEE: A Video Interaction Wrapper for the Online Lab.**

Online panels and experiment platforms have facilitated large-scale experimental research. However, the increasing sophistication of LLM-driven bots presents a growing challenge in ensuring participant authenticity and engagement. This paper introduces VEE: The Video Experiment Environment, a tool which seamlessly integrates video into online experiments. VEE operates as a wrapper application, developed to work with oTree but extensible to Qualtrics, jsPsych, psychopy, and more. VEE enables real-time video interaction between experimenters and participants and among participants. We argue that video interaction is essential for maintaining the validity of online behavioral research in the near future.

Cashman, M. (2024). **Humans as next-token predictors: measuring the flow of memes through minds.**

In this work I develop a content-agnostic, continuous, quantitative measure of culturally-transmitted information that is applicable to a wide range of phenomena—anything that can be represented as a cloze completion (what comes next?) task. Using cloze tasks I estimate entropy (bits per character or word) with a treatment group (Readers, those that have been exposed to a target work) and a control group (Non-Readers, those who have not been exposed). I take a difference measure between those estimates to arrive at the amount of information from the target work that is retained in Readers' minds.

Conference Talks

IAREP	Talk	2025
Human Behavior & Evolution Society	Talk	2025
Thurgau Experimental Economics Meeting	Talk	2025
Society for Judgment & Decision-Making	Poster	2024
Cogsci	Poster	2024
Cognitive Science of Culture	Talk	2024
Winter American Marketing Association	Talk	2024
Society for Judgment & Decision-Making	Poster	2023
SPUDM	Short talk	2023
IAREP-SABE	Talk	2023
Society for Judgment & Decision-Making	Poster	2021
Int'l Conference on Thinking	Talk	2021
Max Planck Summer Institute	Short talk	2021
Cogsci	Poster	2020
Human Behavior and Evolution Society	Talk	2019
Boston JDM Conference	Talk	2019

Invited Talks

Harvard Human Evolutionary Biology		2024
MIT Sloan Behavioral Group		2024
Harvard Psych. Cushman-Greene meeting		2024
UPF Center for Brain and Cognition		2024
Decision Research @ Warwick		2024
Culture, Cognition, and Co-ev. Lab	PI: Joe Henrich	2024
MIT Brain & Cognitive Sciences Cog Lunch		2024
Konstanz Social Norms Workshop		2023
Warwick Modeling Group		2023
University of Warwick Psychology		2023

WBS Behavioural Science Lab		2023
Culture, Cognition, and Co-ev. Lab	PI: Joe Henrich	2021
Human Cooperation Lab	PI: Dave Rand	2020
MIT Sloan Marketing Seminar		2020
Culture, Cognition, and Co-ev. Lab	PI: Joe Henrich	2019
Human Dynamics Lab	PI: Sandy Pentland	2019
MIT Neuroeconomics Lab	PI: Drazen Prelec	2019
Moral Psychology Research Lab	PI: Fiery Cushman	2017
Moral Psychology Research Lab	PI: Fiery Cushman	2016

Teaching

Lead, Big Data Analytics	WBS	2025
Economics of Wellbeing	WBS	2024
Data-Driven Decision Making	WBS	2023, 24
TA, Psychology and Economics	MIT Economics	2020
TA, Applied Behavioral Economics	MIT Sloan	2020, 23

Service & Volunteer

Advisory board member, MIT Open Publishing 2020–23

MAPS Public Benefit Corporation 2016–18
Consulting work for a non-profit pharmaceutical company

Fellow, MIT Center for Collective Intelligence 2013–15
Managed Climate CoLab teams as part of research on crowdsourcing

References

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Birger Wernerfelt Professor, MIT Sloan Marketing
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David Rand Professor, MIT Sloan Marketing; Brain & Cognitive Sciences
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Joe Henrich Professor, Harvard Department of Human Evolutionary Biology
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