

New research reveals why honest people cheat sometimes

Submitted by: BlueSky Education

Tuesday, 25 August 2020

Every day we have the opportunity to lie, cheat and be dishonest for personal gain. Alternatively, we can choose to be a 'good person' and uphold our positive moral self-image. It is generally assumed that our cognitive control or "willpower" steers people away from immoral decisions.

However, according to new research from Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM), cognitive control does not serve the same purpose for everyone. In fact, this control actually enables cheating for people who are usually honest, while it facilitates honest decisions for cheaters.

Using an MRI scanner, RSM PhD candidate Sebastian Speer, Professors Ale Smidts and Maarten Boksem, examined how different areas of the brain promote cheating or honesty. They found that a brain region frequently associated with the processing of reward was more strongly activated for cheaters during the decision-making process, whereas honest people showed higher activity and connectivity in a network of regions related to self-referential thinking. The most remarkable findings, however, concerned the involvement of brain areas responsible for cognitive control.

"Surprisingly, we found that for honest participants, more cognitive control was needed to cheat, whereas for participants who cheated frequently, control was needed in order to be honest," explains PhD candidate Sebastian Speer and lead author of the paper.

So, if you are a fundamentally honest person, it will take cognitive effort to cheat, while compulsive cheaters will have to work hard in order to be honest. That is, whether someone will cheat or not is not only dependent on her willpower, but also on her moral default.

Professor Boksem: "These findings speak to the age-old question of whether people are at their core moral or immoral. The answer, it turns out, is 'it depends': individuals are distributed along a continuum ranging from extremely honest, to dishonest. Cheaters must exert willpower to override their greedy tendencies to be honest, while honest people need to inhibit their honesty to occasionally profit from small lies. Thus, the role of willpower depends on a person's moral default."

Cheating was measured by using a visual search task in the MRI scanner. Participants were presented with pairs of images and were told that there were always three differences between the image pairs. In reality however, these differences were not always present. So, when participants indicated they found three differences but there were actually only one or two differences between the images, the researchers knew that the participants lied. The greater the reward for finding the differences, the greater was the temptation to lie.

Professor Smidts: "There are immense economic costs caused by dishonest behaviour, such as tax evasion, music piracy or business scandals, so finding effective ways to reduce dishonest behaviour are of great relevance to policy makers. Also, during the COVID 19 pandemic dishonesty in form of selling low quality face masks and fraud on governmental subsidies are highly prevalent, which highlights the relevance of our findings".

The researchers at RSM suggest that, by understanding how different neurocognitive processes determine honesty or dishonesty in different individuals these insights can prove instrumental in the development of more efficient strategies to reduce dishonesty and strengthen trust in society.

The study was published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS).

For more information, a copy of the research paper, or to speak with the researchers, contact Kate Mowbray at BlueSky PR on Kate@bluesky-pr.com or call +44 710022871