

# How honest are you at work?

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The research suggested people find it harder to tell lies at home.

(Medical Xpress)—A new study has revealed we are basically honest. The research by the University of Oxford and the University of Bonn suggests that it pains us to tell lies, particularly when we are in our own homes.

It appears that being honest is hugely important to our sense of who we are. However, while it might bother us to tell lies at home, we are more likely to bend the [truth](#) at work, suggests the study.

The researchers conducted simple honesty tests by ringing people in their own homes in Germany and asking them to flip a coin. The study participants were asked over the phone to report on how it landed. The catch to this test was that each of the individuals taking part was given a strong financial incentive to lie without the [fear](#) of being found out. The study participants were told that if the coin landed tails up, they would

receive 15 euros or a gift voucher; while if the coin landed heads up, they would receive nothing.

Using randomly generated home phone numbers, 658 people were contacted who agreed to take part. Although the researchers could not directly observe the behaviour of the individuals in their own homes, the aggregated reports show a remarkably high level of honesty. Over half of the [study participants](#) (55.6 per cent) reported that the coin landed heads-up, which meant they would receive nothing. Only 44.4 per cent reported tails up, collecting their [financial reward](#) as a result.

A second similar test was done involving 94 participants over the phone. This time they were asked to report on the results of four consecutive coin tosses with the promise of five euros for every time the coin landed tails up. Despite a potential maximum pay-off of 20 euros, the reports they received from the [respondents](#) reflected the likely distribution of a fair coin. This is based on the premise that the coin would have landed tails up around 50 per cent of the time.

All those taking part in the experiments answered questions about their gender, age, views on dishonesty and their religious background. The study suggests, however, that personal attributes play no part here as the overall level of honesty demonstrated in both experiments was high.

This latest study can be compared with previous similar studies, which were conducted with students in tightly controlled laboratory situations. In those studies around 75 per cent of participants reported tails up, which the researchers suggest could infer that people are more honest when they are in their own homes.

Dr Johannes Abeler, from the Department of Economics at the University of Oxford, said: 'The fact that the financial incentive to lie was outweighed by the perceived cost of lying shows just how honest

most people are when they are in their own homes. One theory is that being honest is at the very core of how we want to perceive ourselves and is very important to our sense of self identity. Why it is so important? It may be to do with the social norms we have been given about what is right and wrong from the moment we could walk and talk.

'This study has implications for policy-makers. For instance, if they want to catch those involved in fraudulent behaviour, perhaps the forms and questionnaires could be designed to reveal more about our personal lives and sense of self-identity. Our experiments showed that if people plainly see that to lie in a given situation would be fraudulent, they shy away from it. However, if people are given "wriggle room", they can convince themselves that their behaviour is not fraudulent and this does not attack their sense of who they are.'

The computer-assisted telephone interviews were carried out by the Institute for Applied Social Sciences (infas), a private, well-known German research institute. They were conducted between November 2010 and February 2011. Telephone numbers were selected using a random digit dialling technique with numbers randomly based on a data set of all potential landline telephone numbers in [Germany](#). Part of the study consisted of questions relating to the participants' social background, age and education, their economic and political preferences, their religious beliefs, their attitudes to crime, and their beliefs about other people's behaviour in the experiment.

**More information:** <ftp://iza.org/dp6919.pdf>

Provided by Oxford University

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