

New study says a person's physical environment affects their likelihood of dishonest behavior

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A new study from researchers at leading business schools reveals that expansive physical settings (e.g. having a big desk to stretch out while doing work or a large driver's seat in an automobile) can cause individuals to feel more powerful, and in turn these feelings of power can elicit more dishonest behavior such as stealing, cheating, and even traffic violations.

"In everyday working and living environments, our body postures are incidentally expanded and contracted by our surroundings—by the seats in our cars, the furniture in and around workspaces, even the hallways in our offices—and these environments directly influence the propensity of [dishonest behavior](#) in our everyday lives," said Andy Yap, a key author of the research who spearheaded its development during his time at Columbia Business School.

The study states that while individuals may pay very little attention to ordinary and seemingly innocuous shifts in bodily [posture](#), these subtle postural shifts can have tremendous impact on our thoughts, feelings and behavior. Building on previous research that expansive postures can lead to a state of power, and power can lead to dishonest behavior, the study found that expanded, nonverbal postures forced upon individuals by their environments could influence decisions and behaviors in ways that render people less honest. "This is a real concern. Our research shows that office managers should pay attention to the [ergonomics](#) of their

workspaces. The results suggest that these physical spaces have tangible and real-world impact on our behaviors" said Andy Yap.

The research includes findings from four studies conducted in the field and the laboratory. One study manipulated the expansiveness of workspaces in the lab and tested whether "incidentally" expanded bodies (shaped organically by one's environment) led to more dishonesty on a test. Another experiment examined if participants in a more expansive driver's seat would be more likely to "hit and run" when incentivized to go fast in a video-game driving simulation.

To extend results to a real-world context, an observational field study tested the ecological validity of the effect by examining whether automobile drivers' seat size predicted the violation of parking laws in New York City. The field study revealed that automobiles with more expansive driver's seats were more likely to be illegally parked on New York City streets.

More information: The research, titled *The Ergonomics of Dishonesty*, will be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*.

Provided by Columbia Business School

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