

# People who rely on their intuition are, at times, less likely to cheat

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Sarah Ward determined that individuals who are prone to trust their instinctive hunches and gut feelings, may at times be less likely to commit immoral acts compared to those who tend to discount their intuition. Credit: Mizzou News Bureau

In psychological studies, intuition, or "gut instinct," is defined as the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning. Now, a University of Missouri graduate student has determined that individuals who are prone to trust their instinctive hunches and gut feelings, may at times be less likely to commit immoral acts compared to those who tend to discount their intuition. Findings also indicate that people who tend to rely on their gut feelings are less likely to cheat after reflecting on past experiences during which they behaved immorally.

"Some [people](#) trust their gut feelings when making decisions, whereas other people are less reliant on them and don't pay much heed to gut feelings even if they do experience them," said Sarah Ward, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychological Sciences in the MU College of Arts and Science. "We were interested in studying how individual differences in [intuition](#) affect moral behavior and other relevant outcomes."

Ward conducted two experiments to determine if individual differences in relying on one's intuition affected [moral behavior](#). Using more than 100 participants—three quarters of which were women—individuals first answered a series of questionnaires to determine their tendency to rely on intuition. In the first experiment, participants in the experimental group were asked to imagine that they had acted immorally in a workplace setting; participants each read a story about how they made a mistake at work but blamed a co-worker. Participants in the control group read the same story but instead imagined they took responsibility for the mistake.

Ward anticipated the manipulation involving imagining an immoral action might elicit self-conscious moral emotions, such as shame or guilt, which previous research shows can cause people to feel a sense of uncleanness or contamination. Based on this, she predicted that people

who imagined they had done something immoral would be willing to pay more for hand-cleaning products and she tested the theory.

"If you feel badly about a moral transgression, you might want to cleanse yourself," Ward said. "Our study found that participants who were more reliant on intuition were willing to pay more for hand sanitizer after reading about a moral transgression."

In the second experiment, participants were asked to write about a time they acted immorally (or a control topic) and then were asked to take an unsolvable IQ test. Ward was curious to see if more intuitive individuals would subsequently cheat less on an "unsolvable" IQ test. The "test" featured 10 questions; each participant received a paper with the answers placed face down on their desks and was told to grade his or her own test when finished. Participants were told the top 10 percent would receive a lottery ticket, which Ward says provided an incentive to cheat. Results showed that up to 23 percent cheated on the test.

"Our second experiment showed that people who tend to rely on their [gut feelings](#) are less likely to cheat after reflecting on a time when they behaved immorally," Ward said. "We feel this is because people try to compensate for past bad behavior by acting morally in the present, and that this tendency to try to compensate for past actions may be especially pronounced among people who rely on intuition."

Ward says her research has implications for the real world. In a workplace setting, for example, it might be beneficial for people to rely more on their intuitions when making morally relevant decisions. She also suggested getting people to trust their gut instincts about moral actions rather than discounting those feelings.

Ward worked with Laura A. King, a Curators Professor of Psychological Sciences, who assisted in the design of the research study. The study,

"Individual Differences in Intuitive Processing Moderate Responses to Moral Transgressions," recently was published in the journal, *Personality and Individual Differences*.

**More information:** *Personality and Individual Differences*,  
[www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ... ii/S0191886915005267](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0191886915005267)

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