

Does competition make us less moral? New research says yes, but only a little bit

June 6 2023, by Ozan Isler



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Many of our economic and even social interactions are competitive. We use markets to find jobs, but also dates. What does this mean for our morals? Does capitalism give us the American dream, or American

Psycho? Does the experience of competition keep us honest, or drive us towards cheating?

These profound questions preoccupied the minds of some of the great classical economists, who saw capitalism as rife with both good and bad moral influences. Adam Smith mostly focused on the good, whereas Karl Marx was admittedly less optimistic.

To test this question convincingly in the lab, our [project coordinators](#) invited dozens of behavioral scientists to contribute their own experimental designs, resulting in observations of more than 18,000 people in total.

Our results, [published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*](#), show that competitive interactions tend to make people's behavior slightly less moral—and offer some intriguing clues about why this might be so.

A difficult question to answer

We are not the first to take a scientific approach to the question of competition and [morality](#). However, individual tests have delivered mixed results, possibly because of differences in the definitions and measures of morality used.

Some of the early results were provocative, such as a [finding](#) that people in competition were less likely to prevent the death of a mouse. However, these results were [hard to replicate or interpret](#).

One way to account for differences in the design of individual studies is to conduct a "meta-analysis", evaluating and combining the results of many different studies. However, meta-analysis often has troubles of its own, as selective reporting and [publication bias](#) can influence which

studies are available to be included in the analysis.

What was different about our study

To really get some reliable results, we went a step further and carried out a "prospective meta-analysis".

The "prospective" part means that all the studies to be included in the analysis were registered before they were done. This prevents cherry-picking of results, or bias in what kind of results are published.

Our project involved 45 different experiments carried out by teams around the world. Each team independently designed an experiment to test the effects of competition on morality.

The results of these studies, which involved observations of more than 18,123 individual participants, were then collated and analyzed.

A small decline in morality (on average)

The meta-analysis revealed that competition has an overall negative effect on morality, but the effect is very small. (The effect is measured by a number called Cohen's d . A value of 0.2 is considered a small effect, and the value we found was only 0.1.)

As expected, we also observed a substantial variation in the effects as measured by different experiments. Some were positive, some were negative, and the sizes of the effects also varied.

So despite the advantages of our new prospective meta-analysis, the jury is still out regarding the overall effect of competition on morality.

Perhaps the question is too general to answer properly without a particular context. The devil may be in the details.

Loss, not competition, to blame?

My team (one of the 45 involved in the meta-analysis) used a number-guessing game between two people as an instance of competition. This was followed by an individual game of honesty, which was our measure for the effects on morality.

This individual experiment resulted in a small negative overall effect of competition ($d = -0.1$) much like the [meta-analysis](#), but it failed to reach statistical significance on its own.

However, exploratory analysis of our results revealed a potential breakthrough.

We found it was only the losers of the number-guessing game who became more dishonest, with a larger effect ($d = -0.34$). The winners of the competition stage, on the other hand, showed no change in their honesty behavior.

These exploratory results—yet to be replicated—suggest a reason why competition does not affect morality much on average. Perhaps it is being disadvantaged in a competitive process that corrupts, not [competition](#) per se.

More information: Christoph Huber et al, Competition and moral behavior: A meta-analysis of forty-five crowd-sourced experimental designs, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). DOI: [10.1073/pnas.2215572120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2215572120)

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