

Why do people behave badly? Maybe it's just too easy

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Many people say they wouldn't cheat on a test, lie on a job application or refuse to help a person in need.

But what if the test answers fell into your lap and cheating didn't require any work on your part? If you didn't have to face the person who needed your help and refuse them? Would that change your [behaviour](#)?

New research out of the University of Toronto Scarborough shows it might. In two studies that tested participants' willingness to behave immorally, the UTSC team discovered people will behave badly – if it doesn't involve too much work on their part.

"People are more likely to cheat and make immoral decisions when their transgressions don't involve an explicit action," says Rimma Teper, PhD student and lead author on the study, published online now in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. "If they can lie by omission, cheat without doing much legwork, or bypass a person's request for help without expressly denying them, they are much more likely to do so."

In one study, participants took a math test on a computer after being warned there were glitches in the system. One group was told if they pressed the space bar, the answer to the question would appear on the screen. The second group was told if they didn't press the enter key within five seconds of seeing a question, the answer would appear.

"People in the second group – those who didn't have to physically press a

button to get the answers – were much more likely to cheat," says Associate Psychology Professor Michael Inzlicht, second author on the study.

In another study, the team asked participants whether they would volunteer to help a student with a learning disability complete a component of the test. One group of participants had only the option of checking a 'yes' or 'no' box that popped up on the computer. The second group of people could follow a link at the bottom of the page to volunteer their help or simply press 'continue' to move on to the next page of their test. Participants were five times more likely to volunteer when they had to expressly pick either 'yes' or 'no.'

"It seems to be more difficult for people to explicitly deny their help, by clicking 'no,' than it is for them to simply click 'continue' and elude doing the right thing. We suspect that emotion plays an important role in driving this effect" says Teper.

"When people are confronted with actively doing the right thing or the wrong thing, there are a lot of emotions involved – such as guilt and shame – that guide them to make the moral choice. When the transgression is more passive, however, we saw more people doing the wrong thing, and we believe this is because the moral emotions in such situations are probably less intense," Teper says.

The team's research on moral behaviour is unique in that it looks at how people behave in certain situations versus simply asking them to predict how they might behave, says Inzlicht. It also has critical implications for those in the business of soliciting peoples' good will, money or time.

"Forcing people to make an active, moral decision – a 'yes' or 'no' to donating, for example – is going to be much more effective than allowing them to passively skip over a request," he says.

Provided by University of Toronto

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