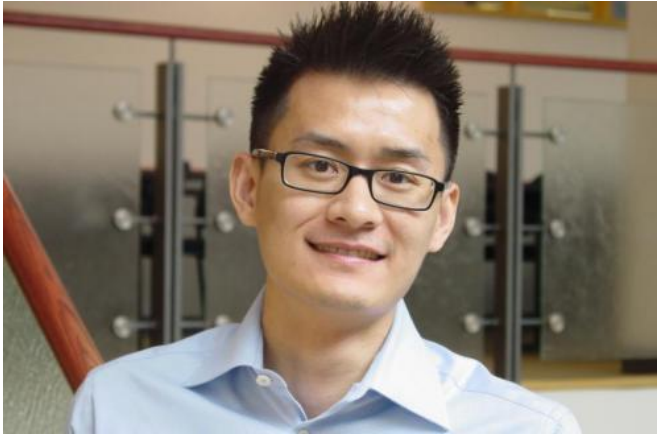


Number-crunching could lead to unethical choices, study shows

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Chen-Bo Zhong is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. His research focuses on ethics, moral psychology, decision making and unconscious processes. He has published in journals such as, the *Science*, *Psychological Science*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* and *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Credit: Rotman School

Calculating the pros and cons of a potential decision is a way of decision-making. But repeated engagement with numbers-focused calculations, especially those involving money, can have unintended negative consequences, including social and moral transgressions, says new study co-authored by a professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

Based on several experiments, researchers concluded that people in a "calculative mindset" as a result of number-crunching are more likely to analyze non-numerical problems mathematically and not take into account social, moral or interpersonal factors.

"Performing calculations, whether related to money

or not, seemed to encourage people to engage in unethical behaviours to better themselves," says Chen-Bo Zhong, an associate professor of [organizational behavior](#) and [human resource management](#) at the Rotman School, who co-authored the study with Long Wang of City University of Hong Kong and J. Keith Murnighan from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

Participants in a set of experiments displayed significantly more selfish behaviour in games where they could opt to promote their self-interest over a stranger's after exposure to a lesson on a calculative economics concept. Participants who were instead given a history lesson on the industrial revolution were less likely to behave selfishly in the subsequent games. A similar but lesser effect was found when participants were first asked to solve math problems instead of verbal problems before playing the games. Furthermore, the effect could potentially be reduced by making non-numerical values more prominent. The study showed less self-interested behaviour when participants were shown pictures of families after calculations.

The results may provide further insight into why economics students have shown more self-interested behaviour in previous studies examining whether business or economics education contributes to unethical corporate activity, the researchers wrote.

The study was published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

Provided by University of Toronto

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