

The Telegraph

Honesty is best policy - unless cheating is easy, research shows

Honesty is the best policy...unless cheating is easy, new research shows.

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From finding a £50 note on the floor to being accidentally given the answers to test questions, even normally honest people can suddenly become dishonest, it found.

But they will only cheat if it does not involve any work, said the academic study for the journal Psychological and Personality Science.

In an experiment on 84 students, researchers set up a trial involving a maths test on a computer, without telling them the reasons why they were doing it.

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Half the students were warned the system was not working properly. If they pressed the space bar on the keyboard the answers would come up.

The other half were told that if they did not press the enter key immediately after seeing the question, then the answer would come up.

Overall, few cheated at all. But those who did not have to press a key to cheat were almost TEN times as likely

to do so, said the researchers from the University of Toronto.

They said it was because pressing a key was like 'intentionally' trying to cheat while those who didn't acted as if they were cheating by accident, so they did not feel they were making an immoral choice.

In a second test, the volunteers were tested on their willingness to help a fellow student with a disability complete an exam paper.

Half were told the way to volunteer was to follow an online link, the other half simply had to click 'yes' or 'no' on the screen.

Those who had to follow the link were five times less likely to volunteer to help, because it was easier for them to get out of it than the others who had a clear choice to make.

Study author Rimma Teper (corr) said: "People are more likely to cheat and make immoral decisions when their transgressions don't involve an explicit action.

"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."

The researchers believe the findings could help charities and other organisations looking for help, money or volunteers.

Teper added: "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." ends

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