



“Before the Internet, people were forced to great lengths to commit a sex offense.”

Samantha Smithstein, Psy.D.

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# In the Eye of the Beholder

The science of social perception.

by Jason Plaks, Ph.D.

## Underestimating How Moral We Are

Are you more moral than you think?

Published on January 24, 2011

If you had an opportunity to cheat on a test and you were certain no one would find out, would you do it? If asked about this hypothetically, you probably believe you have enough self-insight to admit that, at least some of the time, you would go ahead and cheat. But what if instead of making a prediction in the abstract, you were actually put into that situation? Would you actually cheat?

Recent research by University of Toronto social psychologists Rimma Teper, Michael Inzlicht, and Elizabeth Page-Gould suggests that in at least some cases, people behave more morally than they predict.

Here is what Teper and colleagues did. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the Math Task condition, they had to complete 15 tedious arithmetic problems (e.g.,  $45+679+8+11+234+50-71-1-524-25=$ ) presented on the computer screen. They were told that they would win \$5 if they got 10 or more questions correct. This is where things get interesting. Participants were also told that there was a "glitch" in the program such that the answer to each question would appear on the screen if they pressed the spacebar. They were further told that the experimenters would have no way of knowing whether or not they pressed the spacebar.

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Those assigned to a second condition, the Forecasting condition, were presented with the same math problems one by one. After each one, they were asked not for the answer, but whether or not they would press the spacebar to reveal the answer. In a third condition, the control condition, participants simply completed the problems with no opportunity to cheat.

While all this was going on, participants were connected to a measure of automatic physiological activity, namely respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA). RSA has been associated with the coordination of complex social behaviors, including prosocial actions. The authors predicted that because of the vividness and engagement of the actual dilemma, those in the Math task condition would show higher RSA than those in the Forecasting condition. They also predicted that the higher the RSA, the lower the cheating. In other words, something about higher RSA would help people to overcome the temptation to cheat.

Teper et al. found that, in fact, participants in the Forecasting condition predicted they would cheat an average of 5 times, but the actual cheating rate was an average of only once. In other words, hypothetical cheating was greater than actual cheating. In addition, the researchers' prediction about RSA was confirmed: RSA was higher for those facing the actual dilemma, compared to those facing the hypothetical dilemma. Also as hypothesized, higher RSA predicted less cheating.

On the surface, these results seem to fly in the face of numerous studies in social psychology showing that people tend to overestimate, not underestimate, their desirable qualities. The vast majority of people think they're "above average" on a range of traits including intelligence and kindness - which is, of course, statistically impossible.

So what's going on in the Teper et al. data? The physiological data suggest that when people underestimate their morality it is not because they are being modest. In fact, they are simply making an error in reasoning: They are failing to take into account the natural curbs on undisciplined behavior that are often provided by our emotions. When you are standing at the

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