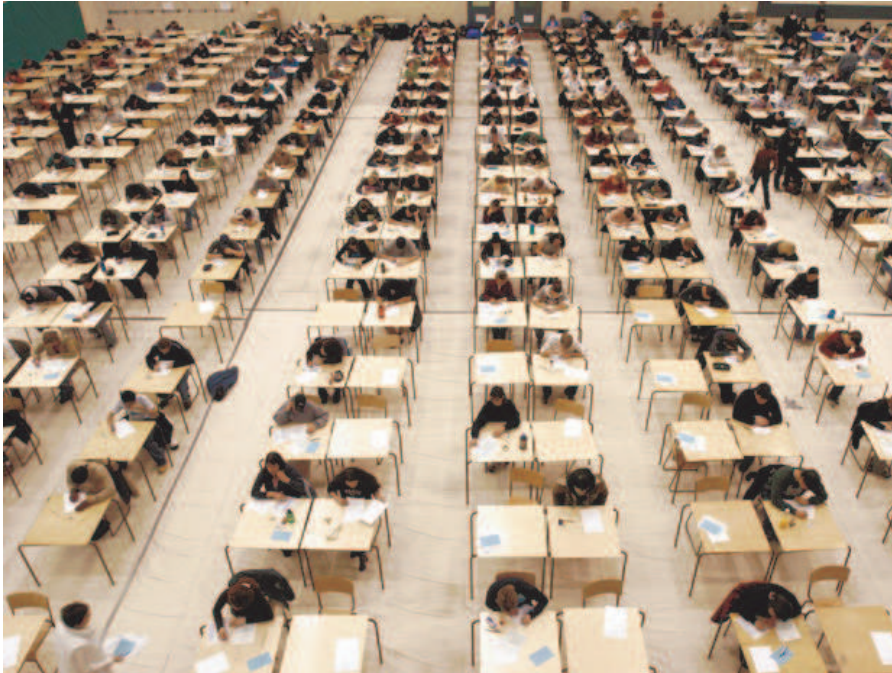


National Post

News

Emotions play strong role in cheating, study finds



People tend to be pretty bad at predicting what they'll do when placed in the hot seat, according to a new study from the University of Toronto

Greg Pender/Postmedia News Files

Sarah Boesveld, National Post · Feb. 23, 2011 | **Last Updated: Feb. 24, 2011 10:39 AM ET**

Many people plot out their moral decisions, deciding ahead of time on the exact steps they'll take.

But according to a new study from the University of Toronto Scarborough, people tend to be pretty bad at predicting what they'll do when placed in the hot seat.

To test how accurate people are in predicting moral decision-making, researcher Rimma Teper and her colleagues split 67 U of T students into three groups and hooked them up to machines that would test the level of sweat on their palms, their breathing and their heart rate.

The first group were told they were going to do a math test, but there was a glitch in the system. If they touched the spacebar, they could see the answers, thus giving them the chance to cheat.

The second group had the moral dilemma described to them and were asked to predict whether or not they would cheat.

The third group simply did the math test and were not given any kind of moral dilemma.

As it turned out, people actually facing the moral dilemma decided not to cheat, while people asked to predict their behaviour were more likely to say they'd cheat.

On average, people in the predictor group said they would cheat on five out of the 15 questions.

In the moral dilemma group, on average, members cheated on only one question. Their physiological responses were also higher than the dilemma group, meaning their emotions were showing through quickened breath, heartbeat and sweaty palms.

"I think the take-home message of the study is emotions, whether they're moral emotions or they're self-serving emotions, are really what will drive the decision you make," the social psychology PhD student said.

“We have to be careful when looking at what people say they might do and what people think is right because it might not always translate to real-life behaviour.”

Fear tends to be the predominant emotion, causing people to change their minds at the last second — in the cheating case, fear of getting caught.

While emotions caused the students to make the moral decision not to cheat, emotions could easily play the other way in other situations, she said.

For example, one might have decided to confront someone and tell them the truth and decide at the last second to lie instead.

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LONGPOORRICH

Score: -1

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6:31 AM on February 24, 2011

Sometimes I don't know why they do studies. If you spent an hour in the education and a second in life you would know this. I spent 19 years listening to a certain kind of morality so I assume when faced with a tough choice I'm going to have a conversion with the devil.

IMFREDERICK

Score: 1

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6:41 AM on February 24, 2011

The best indicator of what you will do confronted with a moral decision is your philosophy. If you are a rationally selfish individual who values reason as his tool of survival, then you will not cheat....unless you have a gun to your head with someone saying that if you don't he will shoot you.

I always got a kick out of these studies. I have seen many students in my previous career as a teacher. Most of them don't consider cheating a big deal...they also didn't have their hierarchy of values worked out. Besides, when they see what lies the green zealots and politicians tell, do you blame them?

ANONYMOUS66

Score: 1

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8:57 AM on February 24, 2011

IMFREDERICK - "If you are a rationally selfish individual who values reason as his tool of survival, then you will not cheat"

What?

If you're practicing complete rational selfishness, the only reason NOT to cheat is if the probability of being caught multiplied by the negative value of the predicted punishment is greater than the probability of getting away with it multiplied by the positive value you could gain from cheating. If:

$P * (\text{punishment}) < (1-P) * (\text{benefit}),$

go ahead and cheat.

Speaking completely rationally, honour and integrity are for chumps. If you can pull it off successfully, cheating your way to the best grades you can, inflating your resume to land that lucrative job, and lying to seduce a woman who's out of your actual league into marrying you anyway, and then sleeping around behind her back when she loses her youthful good looks are all excellent life choices. If the only value in life is taking the steps that most probably enhance your own material position, why ever would you even consider any qualms other than whether you can get away with it?

2 replies