

The more collective feeling in a society, the more its members are likely to offer bribes: study

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Why are some places more prone to bribery and corruption than others? Part of the answer seems to be the level of collective feeling in a society, according to research by Pankaj Aggarwal, University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) professor of marketing in the Department of Management, and Nina Mazar, University of Toronto professor of marketing.

Aggarwal and Mazar discovered that people in more collectivist cultures – in which individuals see themselves as interdependent and as part of a larger society – are more likely to offer bribes than people from more individualistic cultures. Their work suggests that people in collectivist societies may feel less individually responsible for their actions, and therefore less guilty about offering a bribe.

In their paper to be published in an upcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, the researchers used data from a group called Transparency International, which rated the tendency of business people from 22 different countries to offer bribes to foreign business partners. They compared this with scores from another existing study that rated how collectivist each of those countries was. And finally they adjusted for the wealth of each country.

Adjusted for wealth, the degree of collectivism in a country predicted just how likely a business person was to offer a bribe to a business

partner.

It's not that those business people saw bribes as acceptable – other surveys have shown that bribery is widely seen as morally repugnant across cultures. To figure out what was happening, the researchers turned to the laboratory.

They brought in 140 business students, and first had them do a word search task, circling pronouns in a written vignette. In one version, the story contains singular pronouns (I, me, my), in the other plural (we, us, our). Previous research shows that the task with the plural pronouns "primes" people to feel more interconnected and collectivist, at least for a while.

Immediately after the word search task, the students were asked to imagine that they were sales agents competing against two other firms for a contract from an international buyer, and asked whether they would offer a bribe. Fifty-eight percent of the students who had been primed with the collectivist task said that they would offer a bribe, compared with 40 percent who had been primed with the individualist word task.

All of the participants still thought that [bribery](#) was wrong, according to a questionnaire they filled out. But the collectivist-primed students saw themselves as much less personally responsible for offering the bribe.

Provided by University of Toronto Scarborough

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