

Study shows money cues can trigger unethical behavior

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Credit: David Eccles School of Business

The word "money" triggers a slew of negative connotations, often including corruption, greed, power, and, most dramatically, the "root of all evil." But while we often associate money and vice, can the mere allusion to it make a person more likely to act or even intend to act unethically? According to a recent set of four studies conducted by

researchers at the University of Utah's David Eccles School of Business, the answer is yes.

The empirical tests—the first of their kind—go deeper than the notion of overt greed, showing a link between [money](#) and corruption. The researchers found that participants "primed" with money-related activities, including being asked to unscramble phrases and view images associated with money, were more likely to be unethical compared to control group participants who were not exposed to the concept of money. Researchers found that this mere exposure to the concept of money triggered in participants a "business decision frame," causing them to think narrowly in terms of cost-benefit calculations and pursuing their own interests to the exclusion of moral considerations.

In two studies, participants read [hypothetical scenarios](#) entailing [unethical behavior](#), and then indicated how likely they would be to engage in these behaviors.

In another two studies, each designed to measure actual unethical behavior, participants could earn more money in a "deception game" or in a performance task by being dishonest than they could by being honest. In all of these studies, participants who were first exposed to the concept of money were more unethical in their intentions and behavior than those participants who were not exposed to the concept of money.

"We tested our [hypotheses](#) across different studies with different samples, using somewhat different materials so that we could infer that this is really happening," Kristin Smith-Crowe, associate professor in the Department of Management at the David Eccles School of Business, said. "And we found that, yes, there really is an effect here."

Smith-Crowe noted that the study's findings had many implications about how we may be influenced "outside the lab," even by something as

commonplace as a bank advertisement. "There may be a lot of things in our environment that are affecting the way we're thinking and acting," she said, "but we have no idea they're affecting us."

The study also hints at how easily this unethical, money-induced mindset can be triggered. Smith-Crowe was surprised at how readily these money "primes" led to unethical outcomes, as they were as simple as reading money-related words or looking at a picture of currency.

These are "very weak stimuli," she said. "And even these very weak stimuli were having these [unethical] effects."

As society strives to counteract unethical decision-making in business, the studies' findings have the potential to shape the way [business ethics](#) is being taught in universities. While traditional business ethics courses include normative philosophy and case studies, Smith-Crowe says that a contemporary approach to business ethics education includes behavioral ethics as well, addressing questions of what human nature is and how the brain functions. She also notes there may be a need to expand perceptions of the traditional business frame to include moral and ethical implications, as well as cost-benefits analysis and self-interest.

Provided by University of Utah

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