

Collaboration study shows people lie more when colluding

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Credit: Karen Arnold/public domain

(Phys.org)—A pair of researchers, one with the University of Nottingham in the U.K., the other with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, has carried out a study on the downside of collaborative efforts, and has found, in at least one academic setting, that people tend to lie more when collaborating on a joint effort when they believe it will result in a better outcome for both, if they engage in collusion. Ori Weise and Shaul Shalvi describe their study and results in their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Prior research has shown that people in general are willing to lie in situations where a friend will benefit—in this new effort the research pair sought to better understand how lying might come into play when two people are able to collaborate on a project that will benefit them both equally, if they lie to a third party about the results.

The test involved asking two people to sit in an isolated room and roll a single die. The first person would roll the die once and then report to the second via intercom what they had rolled—no one but that first person could actually see what was rolled. The second person would then roll a single die (which was also unseen by anyone else) and report the number (again via intercom) that came up to the researchers—if the numbers of the two rolls matched, both of the participants would receive a monetary reward equal to that number. If there was no match, there would be no reward. The pair would repeat the experiment over and over.

The experiment was rife with opportunities for lying—it would benefit the first person rolling to report higher numbers rolled, because if there was a match, both would receive a higher monetary reward. The second person would obviously benefit by reporting matches when there were none. There was also an opportunity for collusion despite both participants operating in isolation—everyone knows that there is an equal chance for high or low number rolls, which means if the first person reports more than an average number of high rolls to the second

person, the second person will soon catch on. And that, the researchers suggest, is what led to massive lying by the volunteers in the experiment. Teams reported matches on average five times the average (some teams actually reported rolling matches on every toss) and more than an average number of those matches were high numbers.

When the results were manipulated, the degree of lying fell, such as when only one of the participants was told they would receive the reward. The researchers suggest their study reveals the dark side of [collaboration](#) and highlights just how easily such pairings can result in collusion for ill-gotten gain.

More information: The collaborative roots of corruption, Ori Weisel, *PNAS*, [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1423035112](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1423035112)

Abstract

Cooperation is essential for completing tasks that individuals cannot accomplish alone. Whereas the benefits of cooperation are clear, little is known about its possible negative aspects. Introducing a novel sequential dyadic die-rolling paradigm, we show that collaborative settings provide fertile ground for the emergence of corruption. In the main experimental treatment the outcomes of the two players are perfectly aligned. Player A privately rolls a die, reports the result to player B, who then privately rolls and reports the result as well. Both players are paid the value of the reports if, and only if, they are identical (e.g., if both report 6, each earns €6). Because rolls are truly private, players can inflate their profit by misreporting the actual outcomes. Indeed, the proportion of reported doubles was 489% higher than the expected proportion assuming honesty, 48% higher than when individuals rolled and reported alone, and 96% higher than when lies only benefited the other player. Breaking the alignment in payoffs between player A and player B reduced the extent of brazen lying. Despite player B's central role in determining whether a double was reported, modifying the incentive structure of

either player A or player B had nearly identical effects on the frequency of reported doubles. Our results highlight the role of collaboration—particularly on equal terms—in shaping corruption. These findings fit a functional perspective on morality. When facing opposing moral sentiments—to be honest vs. to join forces in collaboration—people often opt for engaging in corrupt collaboration.

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