

Study finds honesty varies significantly between countries

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Research from the University of East Anglia (UEA) has found that people's honesty varies significantly between countries.

It also suggests that [honesty](#) is less important to a country's current economic growth than during earlier periods in history.

The study examined whether people from different countries were more

or less honest and how this related to a country's economic development. More than 1500 participants from 15 countries took part in an online survey involving two incentivised experiments, designed to measure honest behaviour.

Firstly, they were asked to flip a coin and state whether it landed on 'heads' or 'tails'. They knew if they reported that it landed on heads, they would be rewarded with \$3 or \$5. If the proportion reporting heads was more than 50 per cent in a given country, this indicated that people were being dishonest.

The same participants were then asked to complete a music quiz where they were again rewarded financially if they answered all questions correctly. They were asked not to search for the answers on the internet, and had to tick a box confirming they had answered on their own before moving on to the next question. Three of the questions were deliberately difficult so it would be highly likely that participants would need to look up the answer—getting more than one of these questions right indicated cheating.

Data from the tests was compared to estimate whether people from particular countries were more likely to tell the truth.

The countries studied—Brazil, China, Greece, Japan, Russia, Switzerland, Turkey, the United States, Argentina, Denmark, the United Kingdom, India, Portugal, South Africa, and South Korea—were chosen to provide a mix of regions, levels of development and levels of social trust.

The study's author Dr David Hugh-Jones, of UEA's School of Economics, found evidence for dishonesty in all the countries, but that levels varied significantly across them. For example, estimated dishonesty in the [coin flip](#) ranged from 3.4 per cent in the UK to 70 per

cent in China. In the quiz, respondents in Japan were the most honest, followed by the UK, while those in Turkey were the least truthful.

Participants were also asked to predict the average honesty of those from other countries by guessing how many respondents out of 100 from a particular country would report heads in the coin flip test. However, participants' beliefs about other countries' honesty did not reflect reality.

Dr Hugh-Jones, a senior lecturer in economics, will present his findings today at the London Experimental Workshop conference, hosted by Middlesex University London. "Differences in honesty were found between countries, but this did not necessarily correspond to what people expected," he said. "Beliefs about honesty seem to be driven by psychological features, such as self-projection. Surprisingly, people were more pessimistic about the honesty of people in their own country than of people in other countries. One explanation for this could be that people are more exposed to news stories about dishonesty taking place in their own country than in others."

In the coin flip test, the four least honest countries were China, Japan, South Korea and India. However, Asian countries were not significantly more dishonest than others in the quiz, where Japan had the lowest level of dishonesty. Dr Hugh-Jones said the difference between Asian and other countries in the coin flip may be explained by cultural views specific to this type of test, such as attitudes to gambling, rather than differences in honesty as such.

People expected Greece to be the least honest country but in the coin flip it was one of the most honest, while in the quiz it ranked in the middle. Of the respondents who expected less honesty in their own country, Greece and China were the most pessimistic. Another finding was that less honest respondents also expected others to be less honest, as, unexpectedly, did those from more honest countries.

Dr Hugh-Jones said there was increasing interest in the cultural and behavioural roots of [economic development](#). He found that while the honesty of countries related to their economic growth—poor countries were less honest than rich ones—this relationship was stronger for growth that took place before 1950.

"I suggest that the relationship between honesty and economic growth has been weaker over the past 60 years and there is little evidence for a link between current growth and honesty," said Dr Hugh-Jones. "One explanation is that when institutions and technology are underdeveloped, honesty is important as a substitute for formal contract enforcement. Countries that develop cultures putting a high value on honesty are able to reap economic gains. Later, this [economic growth](#) itself improves institutions and technology, making contracts easier to monitor and enforce, so that a culture of honesty is no longer necessary for further growth."

Dr Hugh-Jones added: "People's beliefs about the honesty of their fellow citizens, and those in other countries, may or may not be accurate, and these beliefs can affect how they interact. For example, a country's willingness to support debt bailouts may be affected by stereotypes about people in the [countries](#) needing help. So it is important to understand how these beliefs are formed."

More information: 'Honesty and beliefs about honesty in 15 countries' [www.uea.ac.uk/documents/315429 ... c1-afc2-b872ea0ac882](http://www.uea.ac.uk/documents/315429...c1-afc2-b872ea0ac882)

Provided by University of East Anglia

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