

Society can have a strong influence on how honest we are, says a new study

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The societies we live in can have a direct influence on how dishonest people may be, according to a new study from The University of Nottingham.

The study 'Intrinsic Honesty and the Prevalence of Rule Violations across Societies' found that people from more corrupt societies were likely to be more dishonest than those from societies where rule-breaking is frowned upon.

The experiment was carried out in 23 different countries, which differ strongly in levels of [corruption](#). More than 2,500 people were tested to see how honest they would be in a situation where people could lie without being found out.

In the experiment, people were seated in an isolated booth and asked to

roll a die twice. They were then asked to report back on what the first number was. They were told that they would receive a cash incentive depending on how high the number was that they rolled.

People are 'surprisingly honest'

The study was led by Simon Gächter, Professor of the Psychology of Decision Making from the School of Economics at The University of Nottingham and Jonathan Schulz, now at Yale University (USA).

"This was a simple experiment where you asked participants to report the first roll of the die. If people were honest, then all numbers would be equally likely," said Professor Gächter. "They had financial incentives to report the highest number. This is completely private, no one can see and they get paid, no questions asked. It's impossible to determine if they are lying, unless they tell you.

"We cannot say for each individual person whether they were dishonest or not, but in a group of people, we can judge this based on the laws of statistics.

"We observed that higher numbers are much more likely than they would be if everybody reported the true number rolled. Interestingly, however, we don't observe that everybody reports the highest number, which earns the most money. Homo economicus would always report the highest number – but it isn't what people did. (Homo Economicus is a term that describes the rational human being assumed by some economists when deriving, explaining and verifying theories and models.)

"What was immediately clear from the results was that people, despite some apparent cheating, are surprisingly honest all over the world given that in this experiment they could cheat maximally with impunity. This

is obviously a positive thing, as we didn't see blatant lying in any single country."

Justified dishonesty

"Despite the lack of blatant lying however, people everywhere have a tendency to 'cheat a little bit'. For example, people are asked to roll the die twice, but instead of reporting the first number as requested, they will give you the highest number of the two rolls.

"This implies another pattern of data and that pattern is largely consistent with people's actual behaviour all over the world.

"But there are interesting differences across countries: people from societies where there was high levels of corruption – political fraud, political embezzlement and cheating etc., reported higher die rolls (that is, they were more dishonest) than people in a society, such as the UK, where there is little corruption.

"People benchmark their dishonesty with what they think is justifiable in their society and what they are surrounded by in their daily lives. A psychological theory for these results is that people want to maintain a positive self-image of being an honest person, and therefore will cheat only a little to their advantage, which allows them to maintain their positive self-image.

How much cheating is acceptable?

"These results give us a much bigger picture about the universality of different character traits - people have this self-image of being honest everywhere and the dishonesty they allow themselves is benchmarked by the dishonesty they see in their society and environments. How much

cheating do you find acceptable? If you live in a [society](#) where everybody breaks the rules all the time – then you are more likely to think its ok to do it."

Professor Gäechter adds: "Most dishonesty that occurs, takes place every day in all societies, but most of it is just cheating a little bit – tweaking the rules for one's advantage. But the amount deemed acceptable seems to be influenced by how much of this rule breaking you see in your societal environment. So by doing it in 23 countries with different levels of corruption, we see variation from very different places."

The authors conclude that weak institutions, which allow for a lot of corruption and other rule violations, not only have adverse economic consequences on societies, but also affect [people's](#) intrinsic honesty.

More information: Simon Gächter et al. Intrinsic honesty and the prevalence of rule violations across societies, *Nature* (2016). [DOI: 10.1038/nature17160](#)

Provided by University of Nottingham

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