

New study finds people cheat for others who belong in the same social circles

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As the old saying goes, birds of a feather flock together, but according to a new study by researchers from Canada and China, birds—or people in this case – also tend to cheat for others in the same social group without any personal gain.

"Cheating happens all the time, whether it's intentional deceit or it's perceived to be harmless," says Fei Song, one of the study's co-authors and a professor in organizational behaviour at Ted Rogers School of Business Management at Ryerson University. "People lie for a variety of reasons, but not only for themselves. Our study demonstrates that sometimes people cheat to help others with whom they have a connection at the expense of third parties who are more socially distant from the cheater."

Song and her co-authors, Professor Bram Cadsby from the Department of Economics and Finance at the University of Guelph and Professor Ninghua Du of the College of Economics at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, conducted a series of tests to investigate their theory on social groups and cheating.

The researchers asked 900 students from two universities in China to participate in different scenarios of a simple money-allocation task. The students were divided into two main groups: allocators and recipients. The allocators were asked to divide 50 yuan (\$10 CDN) between two students: one from the same university considered to be part of their same [social group](#), and one from the other university who would be an

"outsider".

The allocators were told to either pick from a list of six options on how to split the money or choose the option based on a dice rolled privately. But there was a catch: none of the six options allowed the allocator to evenly split the 50 yuan between the two recipients.

The allocators who could select any option had the choice of giving either 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, or 50 yuan to the student from the same university with the rest going to the recipient from the other university.

When choosing freely, more than 70 per cent gave the student from their own university more money. However, they were only slightly generous with their money. Nearly two thirds of this group gave the student attending the same university 30 yuan with the rest of the money going to the student from the other university.

As for the allocators who chose the option based on their dice roll, the researchers found that 60 per cent of the students tended to cheat and choose options that would favour the recipient from the same university despite the number rolled on the dice. The average amount allocated to the student from their university was 28 yuan.

"Such cheating is likely widespread," says Cadsby. "Students lend their homework to their classmates to copy, organization members lie about the bad behavior of their colleagues to protect them from punishment, skating judges conspire to award points that favor skaters from their own country and companies hire less qualified relatives of current employees. Our study examines students from very similar universities and backgrounds. Cheating for others might well be far more likely when one's own group is in a competitive or hostile relationship with the other group. Loyalty will often trump abstract ethical principles, and a loyal cheater may even be hailed as a hero."

The study, In-Group Favoritism and Moral Decision-Making, has been published online in the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* and has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

More information: Bram Cadsby et al. IN-GROUP FAVORITISM AND MORAL DECISION-MAKING, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jebo.2016.05.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2016.05.008)

Provided by Ryerson University

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