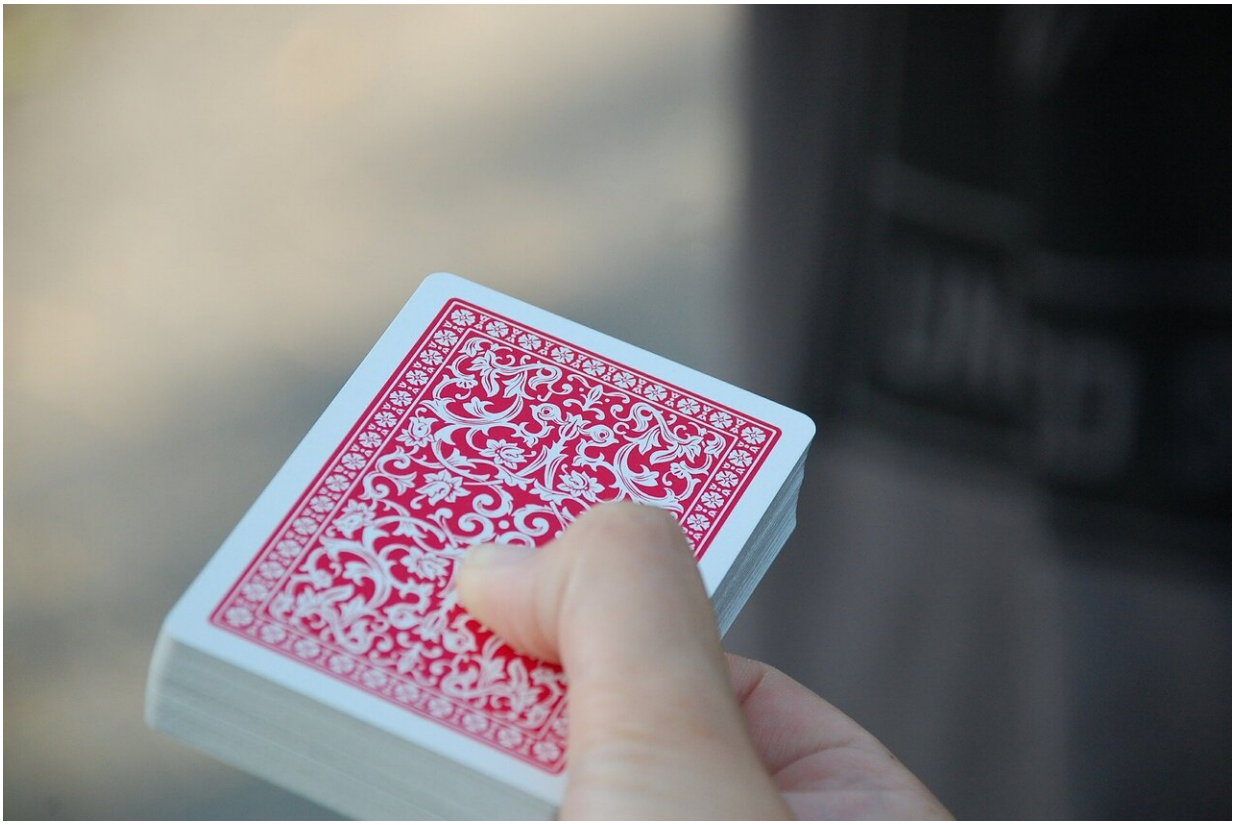
Win or lose: Rigged card game sheds light on inequality, fairness

July 17 2019



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Researchers at Cornell University are using a rigged card game to shed light on perceptions of inequality.

After noticing that card game winners attributed the game's outcome to skill and losers blamed their defeat on the rules, doctoral students Mario Molina and Mauricio Bucca decided to conduct an experiment. Working with Michael Macy, the Goldwin Smith Professor of Arts and Sciences and director of the Social Dynamics Laboratory, they adapted their idea into the Swap Game, a simple card game they rigged to favor either winners or losers, in a study designed to measure perceptions of inequality.

They found that winners were far more likely to believe the game's outcome was fair, even when it was heavily tilted in their favor by rules requiring losers to hand over their strongest cards. Their paper, "It's Not Just How the Game Is Played, it's Whether You Win or Lose," was published in *Science Advances*.

Before participating in the experiment, people were taught how to play the Swap Game, in which one player discards a card and the second player must discard a higher card, or pass. The first person to discard all their cards wins the round.

Though the first player had an advantage, the first round's winner was determined mostly by luck, with no skill involved. But at the end of each round, the winners either traded their best card for the loser's worst card—making the game more equal—or their worst card for the loser's best, giving the winner an increased advantage. In other games, the winners exchanged cards randomly, and in some versions the players traded two cards.

The winners' perceptions of the game's fairness declined more sharply than losers' as their advantage increased—"indicating that winner's perceptions are more sensitive than losers' to a system that is rigged in their favor" according to the paper.

As inequality becomes increasingly rampant around the world, the study offers insights into how people perceive opportunity, failure and success. In real life, inequality can operate in opaque ways, making it difficult to determine whether people succeed through talent, skill, luck or advantage. Though the study's findings can't easily be generalized to society at large, they have potential implications for how public policy to combat inequality might be implemented.

"The findings from our study may shed light on perceptions of the fairness of silver spoons and regressive tax codes in an era of rapidly escalating economic and political division," Macy, the paper's senior author, said. "Beliefs about distributive justice and the relative importance of talent versus luck seem to confirm 50 years of research in social psychology on the universal need to reduce cognitive dissonance."

More information: M. Molina el al., "It's not just how the game is played, it's whether you win or lose," *Science Advances* (2019). advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/7/eaau1156

Provided by Cornell University

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