

Cheater, cheater: Human Behavior Lab studies cheating as innate trait

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Is cheating a product of the environment or a character trait?

Dr. Marco Palma, director of the Human Behavior Lab at Texas A&M University and professor in the department of agricultural economics, and Dr. Billur Aksoy, assistant professor of economics at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York, took a closer look at cheating during periods of relative economic abundance and scarcity to determine whether cheating for [monetary gain](#) is a product of the economic environment.

During the experiment, they found evidence that cheating is more likely caused by an individual's propensity to cheat than external factors. To view the paper supporting their work, visit <http://bit.ly/scarcityoncheating>.

Famous criminals' propensity for cheating has been attributed to their circumstances and being a product of an impoverished upbringing, Palma explained. So to test this theory, researchers selected a remote community in Guatemala for a [field experiment](#) to help determine whether scarcity, or impoverished situations, truly influence a person's propensity to cheat and lie.

The experiment

According to Palma, the experiment gave participants the opportunity to

cheat without any repercussions, and they were tested both during times of scarcity and relative abundance. Since the village where the experiment was held relied solely on [coffee production](#) for their livelihood, the abundance period would be during the five-month window when coffee is harvested weekly, and scarcity would be tested during the seven months of no harvest, and therefore no income.

The experiment included giving participants a cup and dice and asking them to roll the dice with the cup. Depending on the number rolled, participants received monetary compensation for filling out a survey. If a one was rolled, the participant received five quetzales, which is a little bit less than a dollar. Rolling a two paid 10 quetzales, a three paid 15 quetzales and so on. Rolling a six received nothing. Participants were asked to roll the dice twice by shaking the cup.

"The first time is the one that counts, and then they shake it again so nobody else sees what they rolled," Palma said. "So now people have an opportunity to cheat in order to increase their earnings. We did this in the scarcity period, and again in the abundance period."

By even distribution, each number should be rolled about one-sixth of the time, he said.

Cheating for personal gain

"If you look at the high paying numbers, there are three numbers out of six. So, 50% of the time they should report a high payoff and 50% of the time a low payoff," he said. "We find that they reported about 90% of high numbers during scarcity and about 90% in abundance. So, there was no change in cheating across the two periods."

"This tells us there is no real change for the propensity to cheat during scarcity and abundance. Meaning, this is more like an inner

characteristic of an individual."

Cheating for a friend

The second part of the experiment gave people the opportunity to cheat for someone in their village, the in-group, like a family member or friend, and increase their monetary benefit.

"In general, people cheat for the in-groups, but at a lower rate than they would for themselves. And this doesn't really change across the scarcity and abundance conditions," he said.

Cheating for a stranger

Next, they were given the opportunity to cheat for a stranger, the out-group, someone outside of the community.

"During the abundance period, people did not cheat for the out-group," Palma said. "In other words, if it is somebody who is outside of the group, the level they reported for the high payoffs was exactly 50%, which is the expectation. But during the scarcity period, the gap between the in-group and the out-group was closed. All of a sudden people started cheating for the out-group at the same rate as they did for the in-group."

Results

Palma explained that the participants' willingness to cheat during scarcity was unexpected. During the scarcity period, the boundaries of the in-group and out-group disappear not only because people are willing to incur a moral cost, but they are also willing to incur monetary costs by giving the same amount of money to both groups.

"This experiment helped bridge the gap between the lab and the real world, and we can inform policy makers and make accurate predictions of how humans will react under different types of environments," Palma said.

According to Aksoy, these findings appear to be universal.

"In our experiment, we did not find any significant impact of scarcity on cheating behavior when the beneficiaries were the subjects themselves," she said. "In a recent unpublished study, titled "[Poverty negates the impact of social norms on cheating](#)," other researchers also reach the same conclusion in their experiment with rice farmers in Thailand. This suggests that our findings are not exclusive to Guatemalan coffee farmers, but, of course, there is more research that needs to be done in order to better understand this phenomenon. In fact, a study conducted in 23 countries highlights very little differences in [cheating](#) behavior across the countries. "

More information: Billur Aksoy et al, The effects of scarcity on cheating and in-group favoritism, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jebo.2019.06.024](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2019.06.024)

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