

Are you prone to feeling guilty? You may be less likely to take a bribe

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Bribery is among the most recognizable forms of corruption, and new research is shedding light on personality traits that could deter this behavior. Guilt-prone people are less likely to accept bribes, particularly

when the act would cause obvious harm to other people.

The research, published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, contributes to a growing body of literature on [individual differences](#) in corrupt behaviors.

"Our results have important implications for current world events, particularly in the realm of politics and governance where corruption and bribery are major concerns," says author Prof. Xiaolin Zhou, of East China Normal University. "More specifically, our results highlight the importance of assessing candidates' guilt proneness in personnel selection, especially when electing a leader for a group."

Researchers conducted two online experiments with 2,082 [college students](#), combining economic games with personality measures. The first study demonstrated that being guilt-prone was negatively associated with accepting bribes, while the second revealed a connection between people's concerns for others and their willingness to take a bribe. The research also highlights the potential of utilizing [computational modeling](#) to study moral decision-making and the underlying psychological mechanisms that shape ethical behavior.

Dr. Zhou notes that the study is correlational rather than causal, meaning that researchers cannot definitively conclude that making someone more guilt-prone will reduce their likelihood of engaging in corrupt behavior. He also notes that the [research](#) focuses on being guilt-prone as a single personality trait and does not account for other moral-related [personality traits](#) that could influence bribery.

"It would be intriguing to investigate alternative psychological mechanisms—such as responsibility, obedience, or conformity—beyond the concern for others' suffering, that may underlie the relationship between guilt proneness and [bribery](#)," Dr. Zhou explains.

In the meantime, the researchers would like to see the insights from this study leveraged to deter corrupt behavior.

"We hope that our findings can inform policies and interventions aimed at preventing corruption and promoting ethical behaviors in various domains, such as business and government," says the first author Dr. Yang Hu.

More information: Yang Hu et al, Are Guilt-Prone Power-Holders Less Corrupt? Evidence From Two Online Experiments, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506231168515](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506231168515)

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