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Cheating's Surprising Thrill

By [JAN HOFFMAN](#)

When was the last time you cheated?

Not on the soul-scorching magnitude of, say, Bernie Madoff, Lance Armstrong or John Edwards. Just nudge-the-golf-ball cheating.

Maybe you rounded up numbers on an expense report. Let your eyes wander during a high-stakes exam. Or copied a friend's expensive software.

And how did you feel afterward? You may recall nervousness, a twinge of guilt.

But new research shows that as long as you didn't think your cheating hurt anyone, you may have felt great. The discomfort you remember feeling then may actually be a response rewritten now by your inner moral authority, your "should" voice.

Unethical behavior is increasingly studied by psychologists and management specialists. They want to understand what prompts people to abrogate core values, why cheating appears to be on the rise, and what interventions can be made. To find a powerful tool to turn people toward ethical decisions, many researchers have focused on the guilt that many adults feel after cheating.

So some behavioral ethics researchers were startled by [a study published recently in The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#) by researchers at the University of Washington, the London Business School, Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. The title: "The Cheater's High: The Unexpected Affective Benefits of Unethical Behavior."

"Showing people feeling positively after committing a moral transgression is pretty novel," said [Scott Wiltermuth](#), an assistant professor in the business school at the University of Southern California, who writes about behavioral ethics and was not involved in this study.

One reason for pervasive garden-variety cheating is "that we have so many ways to cheat anonymously, especially via the Web," Professor Wiltermuth said. The exhilaration, he added, may come from "people congratulating themselves on their cleverness."

The impact is real: According to some estimates, software piracy costs companies [\\$63 billion a year globally](#). The I.R.S. has reported an annual gap between actual and reported taxes of about \$345 billion, more than half of that because incomes are underreported and deductions inflated.

In the study's initial experiments, participants were asked to predict how they would feel if

they cheated. Badly, they generally reported.

Another set of participants was given a baseline assessment of their moods. Then they took a word-unscrambling test. After finishing, they were handed an answer key, told to check their answers and asked to report the number of correct ones. For every right answer, they would earn \$1.

Participants did not know that researchers could tell if they corrected wrong answers; 41 percent did so.

The follow-up assessment of their moods indeed showed that the cheaters, on average, felt an emotional boost that the honest participants didn't.

“The fact that people feel happier after cheating is disturbing, because there is emotional reinforcement of the behavior, meaning they could be more likely to do it again,” said [Nicole E. Ruedy](#), the study's lead author and a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Washington's Center for Leadership and Strategic Thinking.

Then she and her colleagues removed the financial incentive. A new group would take a test on a computer. The results, they were told, would correlate with intelligence and a likelihood of future success.

But 77 participants were told that if they saw a pop-up message offering them the correct answer, they should ignore it and continue working.

About 68 percent of this group cheated at least once, clicking the button for the correct answer. In the follow-up assessment, this group also reported a rise in upbeat feelings.

Why did people feel so good about cheating? Was it relief at not being caught? That would imply that while cheating, they felt stress or distress. Or had they deceived themselves, rationalizing or minimizing the cheating to feel better?

Stripping away these possibilities, the researchers found that those who cheated experienced thrill, self-satisfaction, a sense of superiority.

The effect persisted even when subjects cheated indirectly. Next, they would solve math problems with someone who was just pretending to be a participant. The fake participant reported the results, elevating the scores, thus cheating for both. But no actual participant objected. And again, they felt just fine about it.

“We were a little appalled,” Dr. Ruedy said.

The researchers did not measure whether the “high” was short-lived. Nonetheless, the elated, addictive feelings triggered by cheating point to the difficulty in changing behavior, since old-fashioned guilt tripping seems ineffective.

One way may be to remove the potential cheater's cloak of anonymity.

A study last year in [The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) looked at documents on which cheating often occurs, like tax forms and car insurance policies. Typically, individuals fill out information first, creatively or honestly, only attesting to accuracy with a signature at the end. But researchers sent an audit form to customers of an auto insurer, asking for their signatures at the top, like a swearing-in before court testimony. This form resulted in a 10.25 percent bump in the mileage reported, even though higher mileage usually translates into higher premiums.

Another solution to everyday subterfuge, suggested Professor Wiltermuth, would be to undercut the cheater's self-satisfaction. Companies could send a message that "a monkey could game our system," undercutting cheating as clever and emphasizing how much employee integrity is valued, he said.

Dr. Ruedy noted that the study's cheaters believed that no one was hurt by their actions. "Perhaps people could be made aware of the costs that others actually bear," she said. "Identify victims of their behavior."