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Strategic altruism: Cheating in monetary donations to social organizations

The current study examined how the willingness to cheat for the benefit of others is influenced by intergroup relationships and identifiability with the recipient of a donation. We developed a visual-perception task that creates an incentive to cheat to increase monetary payoff. In the Accuracy Condition, participants are paid more for accurate response. In contrast, in the Cheating Condition participants are paid more for a specific response (right click) regardless of the accuracy of their response. Thus, the Cheating condition induces a conflict between the desire to be accurate (and honest), and the desire to maximize profit.

In Experiment 1, we examined cheating behavior under different levels of identifiability with the recipient of a donation in a 2 (Accuracy vs. Cheating) X 4 (Negative-, Neutral-, Positive-, and No-identifiability) design. 168 Israeli students were randomly assigned to the accuracy or cheating conditions, and played 200 trials of the task. In each of the three first conditions, participants were required to donate 50% of their earnings to a social organization with Negative-, Neutral-, or Positive-identifiability. In the fourth (No-identifiability) condition, which served as a baseline for self-interest behavior, participants kept all the profits for themselves. The results revealed a significant interaction effect for the two independent variables on the number of right clicks ($F(3, 160) = 3.674, p < 0.02$). Consistent with our hypotheses, there were no differences in the number of right clicks in any of the four identifiability conditions when payment was for accuracy ($p = 0.6$), showing that our manipulation had no effect on performance level. In contrast, significant differences in the number of right clicks across the four conditions were observed in the cheating conditions ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, the highest level of cheating was found when a donation was made to a positively identified organization (68% right clicks), intermediate levels of cheating were found when donations were made to a neutral organization (59%) or when no donations were made (58%), and no cheating was observed when donations were made to a negatively identified organization (49%).

Experiment 2 employed a similar design but only involved the cheating condition. Additionally, 100% of the earnings were donated to the organization (or given to participants in the no-identifiability condition). In general, a similar pattern of results was observed, in which cheating was highest in the positive-identifiability condition (75%), intermediate in the neutral-identifiability (57%) and no-identifiability (65%) conditions, and most interestingly was the lowest in the negative-identifiability condition where participants engaged in vindictive cheating to reduce the magnitude of the donation (28%; $f(3,75) = 16.524, p < 0.0001$).

Overall our findings suggest that cheating may be used strategically to justify self-interests and promote desired goals. When donations were made to favorable organizations, the magnitude of cheating increased whether it involved self-benefit or not. In contrast to this altruistic cheating to support a just cause, vindictive cheating against groups with opposing agendas was observed only when harming others was not associated with inflicting harm to the self.