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Corrupt Collaboration

=== Theoretical background / Presenting problem ===

Humans are an exceptionally cooperative species. We cooperate in large groups which extend beyond the boundaries of genetic kinship even when reputational gains are unlikely or impossible. These cooperative tendencies are essential for completing tasks that individuals cannot accomplish alone. In many cases establishing sustainable cooperative relationships sets successful individuals and groups apart from less successful ones. The benefits of cooperation are indeed clear and numerous. Little is known, however, about its possible negative aspects.

=== Research question / Objectives ===

We conjectured that corrupt collaboration—the attainment of personal profits by joint unethical acts— would be (i) particularly prevalent when both interaction partners equally share the profits generated by dishonest acts, and (ii) more frequent than individual dishonest behavior in a comparable setting.

=== Method ===

We introduce a novel sequential dyadic die-rolling paradigm in which player A privately rolls a die, reports the result to player B, who then privately rolls and reports the result as well. Participants (N=316) were assigned to one of eight experimental conditions. In the main experimental treatment both players are paid the value of the reports if, and only if, they are identical (a ‘double’; e.g., if both report rolling a four, each earns four Euros). Since rolls are truly private, players could inflate their profits by misreporting the actual results.

=== Results & interpretation of findings ===

In 20 repeated trials, the proportion of reported doubles was more than four times higher than the expected proportion if participants were reporting honestly. Despite the fact that player B is the one that ultimately determines whether a double is reported or not, modifications to the incentive structure of both A or B had nearly identical effects on the frequency of reported doubles. The tendency to lie in a collaborative dyadic setting was amplified relative to a comparable individual setting. When the payoffs of both players were perfectly aligned, an unusually high portion of players (50%) behaved in a totally brazen manner, reporting doubles in each and every one of the twenty trials.

=== Conclusion ===

Our results show that that collaborative settings—in particular when the interests of both partners are perfectly aligned—steer people’s cooperative tendencies towards dishonest behavior, and provide fertile ground for the emergence of ‘corrupt collaboration’.