



Social control, social learning, and cheating: Evidence from lab and online experiments on dishonesty



Martina Kroher^a, Tobias Wolbring^{b,*}

^a Leibniz University Hanover, Schneiderberg 50, 30167 Hanover, Germany

^b University of Mannheim, A5, 6, 68131 Mannheim, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Varying the conditions of the decision-making environment we offered participants the opportunity to increase their payoff by undetectable lies. In addition to a baseline treatment, in which subjects rolled a die in private and showed a high extent of dishonest behavior, we increased the degree of social control by a novel treatment in which subjects played in randomly assigned pairs of two. The presence of others proved to substantially, but only temporarily reduce dishonest behavior. Furthermore, one treatment group received feedback on unethical behavior of participants in a similar experiment. Knowing that others betrayed in the experiment facilitated social learning and led to a higher prevalence of cheating. Finally, increasing the degree of anonymity by re-running the experiment online increased the extent of norm transgressions slightly.

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1. Introduction

In the social sciences a long standing debate, which dates back to David Hume and Adam Smith, has spun on the question whether the idealized image of a purely self-interested homo oeconomicus or a norm-following homo sociologicus offers a more adequate description of human behavior. More recent results from dictator and ultimatum games suggest that both motives are important driving factors for distributional decisions and their acceptance (Camerer, 2003; Engel, 2011). Furthermore, the relevance of both aspects seems to depend on characteristics of the decision environment: Henrich et al. (2001, 2012) report strong cultural variation and numerous studies indicate that selfish behavior is morally more acceptable in competitive environments (Camerer and Fehr, 2006; Falk and Szech, 2013; Fischbacher et al., 2009). Thereby, the validity of social norms and the extent of norm-abiding behavior depend on *social learning*: the degree of selfishness increases if others behave similarly (Bicchieri and Xiao, 2009; Servátka, 2009).

Moreover, the visibility of decisions (*social control*) influences the degree of norm-abiding behavior. Increasing the anonymity in the lab (e.g., by a double blind condition or the randomized response technique) induces a decrease of pro-social behavior in the dictator game (Charness and Gneezy, 2008; Cherry et al., 2002; Dana et al., 2006; Franzen and Pointner, 2012; Frey and Bohnet, 1995; Hoffmann et al., 1996). And even for subtle cues of monitoring, such as displaying a pair of watching eyes on the computer screen, several studies have documented effects of social control on the degree of other-regarding behavior in the lab and in real world settings (Haley and Fessler, 2005; Nettle et al., 2013; Rigdon et al., 2009).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 621 181 1974.

E-mail addresses: m.kroher@ish.uni-hannover.de (M. Kroher), wolbring@uni-mannheim.de (T. Wolbring).

Besides these results from classical behavioral game theory, several experimental studies on deception in the lab (see Section 3 for a review) report similar effects, suggesting that voluntary giving and dishonest taking are simply two sides of the same coin. Mazar et al. (2008), Zhong et al. (2010), and Gino et al. (2013) document effects of (perceived) social control on cheating: subjects were more likely to behave dishonestly if the experimenter or other subjects were not able to validate their answers, if the room was only dimly lit, or if the subjects wore sunglasses. As well, studies by Diekmann et al. (forthcoming), Gino et al. (2009), and Rauhut (2013) provide evidence for the presence of social learning: the provision with information that members of the in-group behaved unethically increased the extent of cheating. However, there is also mixed and even contrary evidence on the effects of social control and social learning: Fischbacher and Föllmi-Heusi (2013) report that cheating rates were only slightly higher in a condition with a double blind procedure. Mazar et al. (2008) and Fischbacher and Föllmi-Heusi (2013) found no indications for imitation and social learning.

Against the background of this mixed empirical evidence this paper aims at contributing to the literature on cheating and social norms in three distinct ways. First, our lab and online experiments add to the research on the effects of social control. Whereas behavioral game theory has extensively studied the effects of anonymity, consequences of monitoring and social control have been seldom investigated in laboratory research on cheating.¹ This comes as a surprise, since due to their practical relevance potential interventions to increase social control (e.g., policing, CCTV cameras) are extensively discussed in criminological research. Staging the experiment in the lab and online and observing behavior in privacy as compared to a condition with surveillance by peers we contribute to the literature on anonymity effects in the lab.

Second, we test the robustness of the mixed findings on social learning. Thereby our study particularly adds to the study by Diekmann et al. (forthcoming) who observed a deterioration of the honesty norm after providing the participants with information on the – for most participants surprisingly high – prevalence of cheating. However, the statistical significance of the observed contagiousness of norm violations in this study rests on an implausible time trend in the control group which cheated less in the second round of the experiment, while one would expect a constant or increasing rate of cheating. We thus partly replicated the study by Diekmann et al. in order to investigate whether their result that deviant behavior spreads is a chance finding or actually of substantial relevance.

Third, we show usability of a novel treatment, in which randomly paired subjects mutually control each other and can observe whether their assigned partner behaves honestly or not. This enables us to study the effects of social control, the role of social learning from peers, and the interplay of both effects. More specifically, we expect the decay of initial informal mutual social control (without formal sanctioning power) and increasing contagion of dishonest behavior over time. The empirical results of the current study in combination with theoretical considerations give us some hints which mechanisms are at work.

2. Theoretical background

Our theoretical point of departure is the assumption that cheating is the result of an individual decision which is based on a subjectively rational cost-benefit calculus. A helpful baseline model which improves analytical clarity is Becker's (1968) rational choice theory of crime. In the most parsimonious version of the model (see Brown and Reynolds, 1973; Heineke, 1975 for extensions) the utility function only contains three elements: the monetary utility from honest or deviant behavior and, in the case of the latter, the probability of being caught and sanctioned, and the disutility from monetary sanctions. The prediction therefore is that an actor behaves unethically if the expected utility from deviance exceeds the baseline utility for honest behavior. Hence, if the detection probability or the strength of sanctions increases, the extent of deviance should decline. The model may thus be a good starting point to explain why people, for example, park their car or ride the train without buying a ticket. Rational models of crime have, thus, motivated and influenced policy decisions on sentence fees and surveillance activity. More important for the topic under study, the model has also been applied to explain lying (Lewicki, 1984).

However, as is commonly known, empirical estimates of the rate of norm-abiding behavior far exceed predictions from such a “narrow” version of the rational choice theory. Moreover, the simple rational choice model does not explain why a significant share of people behaves honestly or does not choose an individual rational distribution in situations in which no sanctions are imminent, as is the case in the aforementioned dictator game and cheating experiments. Criminological theories of self-control and social control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 2009 [1969]) have highlighted that the internalization of social norms in the course of socialization is one important reason for these findings, as have proponents of a “wide” version of rational choice theory (Opp, 2013). Moreover, identity theory and theories of self-concept-maintenance propose that humans have a preference for honesty and strive to maintain a positive self-image (Mazar et al., 2008; Stets and Carter, 2012). However, numerous studies showing that the extent of cheating substantially varies with different treatment conditions suggest that explanations recurring to internalized norms only partially solve the puzzle. Most humans do not unconditionally abide to social norms, but are influenced by social forces and decide differently in different situations.

¹ While the effects of social control and social learning on cheating in the lab are understudied, certainly the experimental literature on other forms of deviant behavior, such as tax evasion (Coricelli et al., 2010; Lefebvre et al., 2011), has made important contributions on this issue. In addition, numerous field experiments add to the literature on social control and social learning in “natural” environments (Cialdini et al., 1990; Keizer et al., 2008, 2011; Keuschnigg and Wolbring, 2015).

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