

INSIDE THE CHEATER'S MIND

By **Maria Konnikova** October 31, 2013

A few years ago, acting on a tip, school administrators at Great Neck North High School, a prominent, academically competitive public school in Long Island, took a closer look at students' standardized test scores. Some of them seemed suspiciously high. What's more, some of the high scorers had registered to take the test well outside their home district. When the Educational Testing Service conducted a handwriting analysis on the suspect exams, they concluded that the same person had taken multiple tests, registering each time under a different name. In November, 2011, twenty students from schools in Nassau County were arrested and accused of cheating. The arrests, combined with the social prominence of the school and its students, made the case one of the most prominent cheating scandals in recent history.

When a student sits down at a test, he knows *how* to cheat, in principle. But how does he decide whether or not he'll actually do it? Is it logic? An impulse? A subconscious reaction to the adrenaline in his blood and the dopamine in his brain? People cheat all the time. But why, exactly, do they decide to do it in the first place?

One early theory, promoted by the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, held that cheating is governed by our moral development: the more advanced we are, the less likely we are to cheat. According to Kohlberg, we pass through six stages as we grow older, during which we become progressively less egotistical and more practiced at reasoning through the problems of morality. With each step in development, we become less likely to cheat. Cheating, in other words, is the result of a lack of moral fortitude and education. Later views contended that people cheat based on the situation. In 1996, the psychologist and economist George Loewenstein presented a cold, rational formula: people weigh the benefits of the unethical action against the costs of committing it, and decide accordingly. That same year, the psychologists David Messick and Max Bazerman countered with a less precise, more emotional approach, positing that cheating is the result of a highly subjective reasoning process that includes three types

of argument: how we think about the world, how we think about other people, and how we think about ourselves. Eight years later, Bazerman offered an addendum to his initial view. For the most part, he said, our decision to cheat or not cheat occurs on a subconscious level. It's a result of situational forces of which we are hardly, if at all, aware.

Most modern research on cheating explores the subtle behavioral influences that form the noisy background to our daily choices. In a typical laboratory set-up to measure cheating behavior, people are placed in a situation where they think their actions are anonymous and where there is no chance of getting caught. In reality, of course, what they do is observed. As it turns out, almost anyone will cheat when given even minor, consciously imperceptible behavioral cues. For instance, in a series of three experiments, a group of psychologists found that lighting could affect cheating. In one study, participants in a dimly-lit room cheated more often than those in a lighter one. While both groups performed equally well on a set of math problems, students in the darker room self-reported that they correctly solved, on average, four more problems than the other group—earning \$1.85 more as a result, since they were being paid for each correct answer. The authors suggested that the darkness created an “illusory anonymity”: even though you aren't actually more anonymous in the dark than in the light, you feel as though you are, making you more likely to engage in behaviors you otherwise wouldn't.

Similar effects have been observed with a variety of situational factors that don't seem directly related to cheating. We cheat more, for instance, when we're in a messy environment—one that has more signs of socially deviant behavior, like litter, graffiti, and other rubble. We're also more likely to cheat when we think there's more to go around, since there are plenty of resources and we believe that our own behavior won't have much of an impact. We cheat, too, when we're simply exposed to a statement that highlights determinism—when we're told that our behavior is a result of genes and the environment, as opposed to free will. When we are placed in a position of perceived power, the likelihood of cheating also goes up. New research from the psychologists Andy Yap, Dana Carney, and colleagues suggests that people who assume expansive power poses, such as standing with their feet shoulder-width apart and their hands on their hips, become, consciously or not, more likely to steal money or cheat on a test. When they sit in expansive car seats, which allow them to spread out, instead of

constricting them as a tighter seat would, they become more likely to commit a traffic violation during a driving simulation—and, in a real-world version, cars with more expansive drivers' seats were more likely to be illegally double-parked. One recent study, out last month in the journal *Psychological Science*, even suggests that the common societal values of power and achievement can lead to cheating in and of themselves: they create a competitive mindset that in turn makes us more likely to engage in unethical self-promotional behavior. The results echo earlier findings that “achievement” goals—a focus on results, rather than on understanding—as opposed to “mastery” goals, increase cheating.

We also cheat more when we're feeling tired, either physically or mentally. In a 2011 study led by the cognitive psychologists Francesca Gino and Dan Ariely, researchers asked students to watch a video and either do nothing or actively ignore words that appeared on the screen at the same time. The students who made the effort to ignore the words cheated far more during a subsequent problem-solving task. Sleep deprivation led to similar results: individuals who were more tired became more likely to cheat in a work environment. We don't cheat spontaneously when we're sleepy or drained; it's that, when the opportunity to cheat presents itself, we become increasingly more likely to take advantage of it, as our self-control is depleted. One possible reason for cheating on standardized tests? Most of them are held early in the morning on Saturdays, when students are at their sleep-deprived worst.

Most perniciously, cheating can become self-reinforcing. When we cheat, we have a tendency to rationalize the behavior. We can't change the past, so we change our attitude and justify our actions. But that adjustment, while it may make us feel better, also makes us more likely to cheat again: we cheat, we rationalize it, we accept it, and we cheat once more. Recent research from Harvard University suggests that, in both hypothetical scenarios and real-world tasks, people who behave dishonestly are more likely to become morally disengaged from their environment and to forget moral rules, such as honor codes. Cheating, it seems, can cause a self-justifying temporary block on ethical information.

Fortunately, the same is true for preventing cheating: small shifts in the environment that seem unrelated to honesty but trigger self-reflection can make people less likely to cheat. If we know we're being watched, for instance, we become less likely to behave

dishonestly. Even subtle signs of surveillance are persuasive: mirrors or pictures of eyes can dissuade cheating. In one study, people contributed three times more money to a coffee-payment honesty box when they were under a poster of eyes, as opposed to one of flowers. And while having an honor code or other ethical-behavior standard in and of itself may not reduce cheating, it does help to bring such codes to mind before placing people in situations where cheating is possible. The psychologist Nina Mazar and colleagues found that simply asking students to write down the Ten Commandments lowered their rate of cheating, whether or not they could actually recall any of the commandments or were even religious. The phenomenon is known as the mere reminder effect. Cheating was likewise reduced when students saw a short honor-code statement (“I understand that this short survey falls under M.I.T.’s honor system”) on the top of a page before taking a test. Even asking someone to recall when they behaved immorally in the past reduces the likelihood of their cheating in the future.

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Social norms, too, play an important role in the decision to cheat: if cheating seems more widely accepted, people are more likely to be dishonest; the reverse is true as well. In one set of experiments, psychologists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University found that if someone had obviously cheated, by finishing a problem-solving task much more quickly than would be possible had he completed it honestly, other people in the room became more likely to cheat as well—but only if they perceived the cheater to be like them. If the cheater seemed different—in this case, if he wore a rival school's T-shirt—students became far less likely to cheat. In the case of the Long Island students, it seems that, while relatively few students actually cheated, most were aware that it was a regular occurrence. It was a student, in fact, who first brought the alleged cheating to the attention of a Great Neck counsellor. Cheating was a known, somewhat accepted norm; little wonder that it swept through five separate schools.

Those early theorists who thought of cheating as a matter of character and moral development, though, may not have been entirely wrong. No matter the circumstances, it appears that some people simply will not cheat. In Gino and Ariely's 2011 work—the studies on self-control and mental fatigue—certain people didn't cheat no matter how tired they became. Individuals who rated characteristics like honesty, fairness, and compassion as more important remained immune to the cheating temptation. A solid moral compass can, in other words, lead one safely through dim rooms with graffiti-covered walls.

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Maria Konnikova is the author of "The Confidence Game" and "Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes." [Read more »](#)

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