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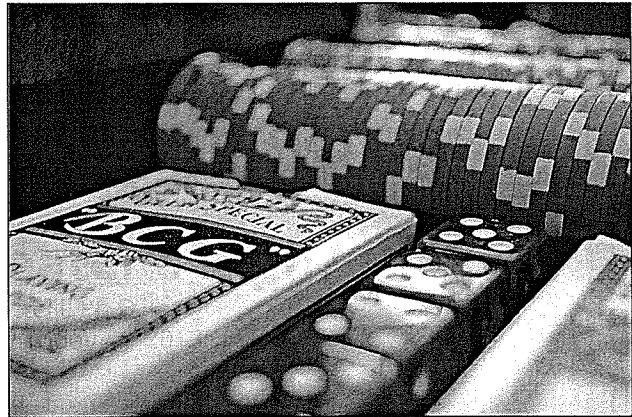
Is There a Cheater's High?

By Romeo Vitelli, Ph.D.
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In his article "Is There a 'Cheater's High'?" Romeo Vitelli, Ph.D. examines people like the con artist Frank Abagnale to determine whether or not the act of cheating—and getting away with it—can be a positive motivator. As you read, make an outline of the author's psychological analysis and conclusion.

I was heady with happiness. Since I hadn't yet had my first taste of alcohol, I couldn't compare the feeling to a champagne high, but it was the most delightful sensation I'd ever experienced.

—Frank Abagnale, *Catch Me If You Can*



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- [1] Is there an emotional high that people experience when they get away with doing something underhanded? In his book, *Catch Me If You Can*, Frank Abagnale described how successfully pulling off his numerous confidence schemes left him "heady with happiness" and even more determined to repeat the experience. While tempting to dismiss Abagnale and others like him as being substantially different from law-abiding people with a well-developed moral sense, is that necessarily the case?

Though models of ethical decision-making argue that negative emotions such as guilt, shame, and fear of detection help discourage most people from acting unethically, whether by cheating, stealing, or other actions, research testing this assumption have usually focused on why people obey orders that cause harm to someone else (i.e., the Milgram obedience studies)¹ which appear to provoke strong emotion.

But what about relatively victimless crimes such as computer piracy, tax evasion, insurance fraud, or cheating on tests? Does guilt or shame actually deter people from doing these things? While no offense is truly victim-free since society as a whole is damaged to some extent by these activities, that distinction is often too subtle for many people to take seriously. According to available statistics on the real prevalence of consumer crime, the economic costs of these crimes is astronomical with billions of dollars lost each year to bogus insurance claim, false tax statements, employee theft, etc.

1. In 1963, Stanley Milgram conducted a study on obedience, measuring participant compliance with an authority figure even to the harm of another person. Participants were asked to shock someone (one of Milgram's associates) if the other person answered a question incorrectly. Unknown to the participant, the shocks and pain were faked, but a surprising amount of participants continued the experiment, even with increasing shocks delivered.

Considering the sheer pervasiveness of unethical behavior demonstrated by crime statistics, the “cheater’s high” that people experience when engaging in forbidden activities may be a more potent motivator than most people realize. Researcher Paul Ekman has already commented on the “duping delight” experienced after successfully carrying out a deception which is commonly seen in many confidence artists such as Frank Abagnale. As well, people are attracted by “forbidden fruit” making taboo activities more attractive than they might have been otherwise. While acting unethically does not necessarily lead to “feeling high”, guilt is obviously not the deterrent people assume it to be.

- [5] As a test of the “cheater’s high”, a recent paper published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology presents a series of experiments that suggest that acting unethically can trigger positive feelings rather than the guilt/shame previously believed. A team of researchers led by Nicole Ruedy of the University of Washington’s Foster School of Business examined the role that emotion plays in ethical behavior and how it shapes the decisions that we tend to make.

In one experiment using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk,² 282 participants took part in an online field experiment in which they were randomly assigned to conditions requiring them to be either honest or to cheat in an experimental scenario. The actual purpose of the study was concealed from the participants. Although the subjects predicted that cheating would lead to more negative emotions than honesty would, that did not appear to be the case in actual performance. In later experiments comparing affect in cheating and honest conditions, evidence for a “cheater’s high” seemed relatively consistent when the cheating was successful and when there was a financial incentive. Though the “high” was often only marginal, the feeling of having “gotten away” with cheating seems to override feelings of guilt or shame at cheating.

In most of the studies, people seemed to have no idea that they would feel anything but guilty over cheating or that they would experience positive emotions instead. There were also some research subjects who were completely ambivalent over whether they cheated or not. This had nothing to do with looking virtuous for the researchers since the ones expecting to feel bad after cheating expected the others in the experiments to feel the same. In all cases, the cheater’s high was greatest when there was no victim to be harmed by cheating, i.e., when they weren’t competing against another research subject.

While the research is based on experiments that may not generalize to the real world, Nicole Ruedy and her fellow researchers suggest that emotions play a stronger role in ethical decision-making than conventional models seem willing to acknowledge. In addition to simply measuring the costs and benefits of unethical behavior (such as in the Prisoner’s Dilemma),³ the “high” that some people get from cheating needs to be taken into consideration as well.

What these studies suggest is that people can engage in unethical behavior for different reasons whether for simple gain or the emotional high that getting away with something seems to bring. One interesting finding is that the study participants failed to predict how cheating would make them feel afterward. Though they assumed they would feel guilty, they often felt the opposite. Whether continued experience with the “cheater’s high” would make people more likely to cheat again is something future researchers should investigate.

2. Amazon Mechanical Turk is an Internet marketplace that allows individuals and businesses to coordinate the use of human intelligence to perform tasks that computers are currently unable to do.
3. In game theory, it refers to a situation in which two players each have two options whose outcome depends on the simultaneous choice made by the other. It is often portrayed in terms of two prisoners separately deciding whether to confess to a crime.

[10] The motivation provided by the “cheater’s high” can drive a wide range of different problem behaviors, including the billions of dollars in damage caused by online hackers who bypass security systems largely for the “bragging rights” involved. Still, the authors of the study were quick to point out that their research does not suggest that all unethical behavior can produce a “high”. It may well be that positive emotions only occur after some types of unethical behavior, i.e., things that do not cause direct harm to other people.

Though we tend to associate things like the “cheater’s high” with sociopathic⁴ behavior, it is likely more common that we care to believe. In any important contest, the temptation to cheat is often present although we can usually resist it out of a desire to win honestly or a fear of being caught. That people who cheat successfully can often feel motivated to cheat again is probably an important thing to bear in mind in any competition that relies more on honesty than actual monitoring of how people behave. Understanding how and why the “cheater’s high” occurs can help explain why unethical behavior occurs as frequently as it does in our society.

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4. The term “sociopathic” refers to a personality disorder that manifests itself in extreme antisocial attitudes and behavior and a lack of conscience and empathy.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Humans are innately unethical and immoral.
 - B. Feelings of joy after acting unethically may be a motivation factor in cheating, stealing, deception, etc.
 - C. Deception and cheating produce feelings of guilt rather than happiness.
 - D. People will do anything, no matter how bad, if they know that they will not get caught.

2. Which of the following best summarizes why the author dismisses the concept of guilt [RI.3] in behavior?
 - A. The author mentions guilt as a potential deterrent to acting unethically, but dismisses it because shame makes a better deterrent.
 - B. The author mentions guilt as a potential deterrent to acting unethically, but dismisses this theory because it implies that all people would feel guilty about the same things.
 - C. The author mentions guilt as a potential deterrent to acting unethically, but dismisses it because it is an unsupported theory.
 - D. The author mentions guilt as a potential deterrent to acting unethically, but based on crime statistics and recently published studies (led by Nicole Ruedy), that theory is incomplete.

3. PART A: What does the word “astronomical” most likely mean as used in paragraph 3? [RI.4]
 - A. Extremely large
 - B. Of or related to the stars
 - C. Heavy or weighty
 - D. Inconceivable

4. PART B: Which of the following phrases best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. “too subtle for many people to take seriously” (Paragraph 3)
 - B. “real prevalence of consumer crime” (Paragraph 3)
 - C. “the economic costs” (Paragraph 3)
 - D. “billions of dollars” (Paragraph 3)

5. What does the section on the experiments conducted by Nicole Ruedy contribute to the author's argument and/or central ideas? [RI.5]

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why do you think people cheat? Use evidence from your own experience to answer this question.
2. In your opinion, is guilt a strong emotion? Explain your answer.
3. According to this article, study participants expected to feel guilt after cheating but instead felt positive emotions. In your opinion, what does this say about most people's morality?
4. In the context of the passage, why do good people do bad things? Use evidence from this article, your own experience, and other art and literature to answer this question.