

People Overestimate the Dishonesty of Others

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Abstract

Beliefs about others' dishonesty or honesty can shape judgments and behaviors in the marketplace and society. How accurate are people's beliefs? Do people believe others are similarly, more, or less dishonest than others truly are? In the current research, we incentivized participants to cheat without repercussions and asked them to estimate what percentage of others would cheat. Initially, our meta-analysis, including both incentivized and marketplace scenarios ($k=20$, $N=5,561$), revealed a significant overestimation of others' dishonesty by an average of 10.8 percentage points (meta-analytic effect size: $g = .480$). Further, a controlled experiment ($N=595$) demonstrated that this overestimation of others' dishonest behavior is robust, irrespective of the order of belief elicitation and decision-making, as well as any variations in the given instructions. These findings reveal a pervasive tendency to overestimate others' dishonesty, which can undermine trust and trigger over-surveillance of consumers (e.g., self-checkouts, insurance claims) and employees (e.g., timecards, reimbursements) alike.

Subject Areas: *Cognition, Consumer Behaviour, Decision-Making*

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