Rude Assessment and I'm Faking It: Does Witnessing Incivility Compel People to Cheat?

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Key Digested Message

The ease and convenience of personality testing for personnel selection purposes is somewhat marred by concerns that test-takers might fake their responses if they believe it is advantageous to do so. Whether or not a candidate fakes is determined by both the ability as well as the motivation to do so, and both are subject to individual difference as well as contextual factors. Here we report an experiment that demonstrates a powerful contextual link between rudeness and cheating. Participants who witnessed a rude encounter prior to a performance-linked cognitive task, subsequently overstated their performance (i.e. cheated) to a greater extent than participants who witnessed a neutral encounter but had the same opportunity to cheat. We suggest therefore that rudeness increases propensity to cheat. Consequently, to minimize the risk of test-takers providing fake responses, it is of practical importance to ensure a civil atmosphere before and during any testing situation that might afford an opportunity to cheat.

Faking in testing and crossing social norms

Personality testing is a key tool in pre-employment assessment and personnel development. However, there is increasing concern that test-takers might fake responses to appear more qualified than they are. Recent research suggests that faking is determined by the *ability* to fake as well as the *motivation* to do so (Goffin & Boyd, 2009; Tett & Simonet, 2011). Ability and motivation are both influenced by individual differences (e.g. skill, moral fortitude) as well as contextual antecedents (e.g. opportunity, perceived need to fake). We focus on this latter aspect: how task-irrelevant manipulations of context can increase people's propensity to cheat.

We build on earlier work that showed how violation of one social norm leads to increased violations of other, unrelated norms (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008) and present evidence of such cross-norm violation from rudeness to cheating: participants who had the opportunity to overstate their performance on a cognitive task for financial gain did so to a higher extent when they witnessed the experimenter behaving rudely towards a peer compared to participants who observed a civil experimenter.

We employed a well-established rudeness manipulation, whereby a confederate arrived late for a group-experiment (Porath & Erez, 2007; 2009). The experimenter dismissed the latecomer either politely or rudely. Importantly, none of the participants were victims of rudeness; they merely *witnessed* a peer being treated rudely.

We combined this with a longstanding method to measure cheating (Ariely, 2012; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008): participants solved a series of numerical problems with the prospect of a performance-dependent reward and reported the number of problems solved in the allocated time on a self-report sheet. For half the participants, the experimenter checked their report against their worksheet, thus ensuring they reported the correct performance level; the other half was instructed to shred their worksheet and only hand in the self-report, making it obvious that they could cheat.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred and ten students participated in a 2x2 (civility x cheating) between-subjects experiment and were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: rude-cheat (N=36), rude-not cheat (N=26), civil-cheat (N=22), and civil-not cheat (N=26). Data were collected at eight timeslots, each hosting 4-18 participants and lasting 30 minutes, with data for each condition being collected in two timeslots.

Procedure and Materials

Upon arrival, participants began filling in various personality measures, which served as filler tasks. About seven minutes into the experiment, a confederate arrived and said, ''I am really sorry that I am late, my seminar group were released late''. In the *civil* conditions, the experimenter accepted the apology but politely asked the confederate to leave because he was too late. In the rudeness conditions, the experimenter said (in a slightly raised tone of voice): "What is it with you... you arrive late... you're irresponsible... how do you expect to succeed in third year if you cannot even turn up on time to something like this?", and then asked the confederate to leave.

After witnessing the rude or civil dismissal of the confederate and completing the personality measures, participants were given a booklet containing 20 matrix problems (Ariely, 2012; Mazar et al., 2008). Each problem comprised a 3x4 grid of three-digit numbers, and participants had to find the two numbers that added up to 10 (see Figure 1). Participants had four minutes to solve all matrices and were given a return sheet on which they indicated the number of correctly solved problems.

In non-cheating conditions, participants handed in their worksheets and return slips to the experimenter, who checked their results. In cheating conditions, participants were told to shred their worksheet in a nearby shredder, and only hand in the return slip; this meant the experimenter could not verify their performance against their worksheet. Previous research (Ariely, 2012; Mazar et al., 2008) showed that this manipulation reliably succeeds in getting people to overstate their performance, and consequently we operationalized and measured cheating via higher self-reported performance in the cheating vs. no-cheating conditions. A lottery via which 2 randomly selected participants would earn £1 for each correctly solved matrix at the end of the experiment served as a performance incentive.

Results

In line with previous findings (Ariely, 2012; Mazar et al., 2008) figure 2 suggests people cheated when they had the opportunity to do so, as shown by higher self-reported performance ($M = 6.78$, $SD = 2.56$) compared to participants who had no opportunity to inflate their scores ($M= 4.04$, $SD = 2.21$). Importantly, participants who witnessed the rude encounter and had no opportunity to cheat returned the lowest performance scores (M=3.73, $SD = 1.69$), whereas rudeness combined with the opportunity to cheat inflated performance reports by 100% (M=7.53, $SD = 2.30$).

Because the distribution of reported performance scores significantly deviated from a normal distribution, we focus on non-parametric tests[1]: A Kruskal-Wallis test reveals an overall effect of group $\chi^2(3)$=37.07, p<0.01; more importantly, a direct comparison of reported performance amongst participants who could cheat reveals a significant difference between those who witnessed the rude (Med=7.00) and civil

encounter (*Med*=5.50), *U*=226.00, *p*=.006, suggesting that the former overstated their performance to a larger extent than the latter. Amongst participants would had no opportunity to cheat, those who witnessed the rude encounter (*Med*=3.50) numerically performed worse than those who observed civility (Med=4.00), but the difference was not statistically significant, *U*=319.00, *p*>.250,

Discussion

In this experiment, people were either free to inflate self-reported performance on a cognitive task for financial gain, or had no such opportunity. Amongst those who were free to cheat, the reported performance was higher for those who earlier witnessed the experimenter treat a peer rudely than for those who observed a civil encounter. Importantly, performance in a separate group of participants who had no opportunity to cheat was numerically lower (and statistically no different) amongst those who encountered rudeness earlier compared to those who didn't. Taking this as a baseline measure for performance level allows us to conclude that amongst participants who were able to cheat, those in the rudeness group did so to a higher extent.

We replicated this rudeness → cheating link in in a second experiment (not reported here), where participants merely watched a video depicting the rude or civil dismissal of a late participant. Because the rude protagonist in the video was not the experimenter administering the task, this ruled out desire for retaliation against a rude authority as an incentive to cheat. Furthermore, the ability to replicate the finding even when rudeness was delivered indirectly and much less viscerally (via video), demonstrates how powerful the rudeness → cheating link is.

Previous literatures suggest two possible frameworks for a rudeness → cheating link: Rudeness may lead to depletion of self-control (Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009), or a spread of norm-violating behaviour (Keizer et al., 2008). Our purpose was not to arbitrate between these two explanations, but to demonstrate the link. From a practical perspective, the distinction may be irrelevant, because our results send a clear and unambiguous message to practitioners: When setting up an assessment where faking or cheating could lead to personal advantage, providing a courteous and respectful context is desirable not only for moral, ethical, or aesthetic reasons, but even on purely utilitarian grounds.

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Footnotes

1   An ANOVA conducted on the data reports a main effect of cheating, $F(1, 106)=30.95$, as well as a significant rudeness x cheating interaction, $F(1,106)=8.37$, both ps<.01

Figures

Figure 1. Example of a matrix problem. The task was to find the two numbers that add up to 10. The correct solution is highlighted only for illustration purposes.

Figure 2. Mean self-reported performance of correctly solved matrices (out of 20) in as a function of witnessing civil vs rude behaviour and opportunity to cheat. Error bars correspond to the standard error of each condition. Note that the civil/no cheat condition serves as a baseline measure of performance (Ariely, 2012; Mazar et al., 2008).

6.12	2.44	6.15	2.31
4.21	1.89	5.89	9.11
7.88	3.88	6.99	3.02

Figure 1

Figure 2