

Finally came the students who were told to shred not only their worksheets but the bubble sheets as well—and then dip their hands into the money jar and withdraw whatever they deserved. Like angels they shredded their worksheets, stuck their hands into the money jar, and withdrew their coins. The problem was that these angels had dirty faces: their claims added up to an average 36.1 correct answers—quite a bit higher than the 32.6 of our control group, but basically the same as the other two groups who had the opportunity to cheat.

What did we learn from this experiment? The first conclusion, is that when given the opportunity, many honest people will cheat. In fact, rather than finding that a few bad apples weighted the averages, we discovered that the majority of people cheated, and that they cheated just a little bit.\* And before you blame the refined air at the Harvard Business School for this level of dishonesty, I should add that we conducted similar experiments at MIT, Princeton, UCLA, and Yale with similar results.

The second, and more counterintuitive, result was even more impressive: once tempted to cheat, the participants didn't seem to be as influenced by the risk of being caught as one might think. When the students were given the opportunity to cheat without being able to shred their papers, they increased their correct answers from 32.6 to 36.2. But when they were offered the chance to shred their papers—hiding their little crime completely—they didn't push their dishonesty farther. They still cheated at about the same level. This means that even when we have no chance of getting caught, we still don't become wildly dishonest.

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\*The distribution of the number of correctly solved questions remained the same across all four conditions, but with a mean shift when the participants could cheat.