

Commitment to honesty*
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Abstract

We administer an incentivized online questionnaire and show that dishonest behavior is discouraged when decision makers are given the opportunity to commit to honesty. In so doing, based on the temptation theory, we start with describing dishonest behavior as an optimum solution of decision makers facing a self-control problem under the temptation to cheat. The theoretical prediction is summarized as two hypotheses for our experiment: (i) the presence of commitment opportunities discourages dishonest behavior; and (ii) taking advantage of the commitment opportunity implies a higher preference for honesty. To test the validity of the hypotheses, 2077 participants are randomly assigned to one of three groups A, B, and C to complete tasks in a rock-paper-scissors game, designed so that players can win by dishonestly reporting their hand-shapes. In group A, participants work only on the tasks for which they have no commitment opportunity. The group B participants work only on tasks in the presence of commitment opportunities. The group C participants work randomly on both tasks with no commitment opportunity and with commitment opportunities. The experimental results support the two hypotheses. Furthermore, the data show that the past decisions not to use the commitment device tend to be habituated, which promotes dishonest behavior afterward.

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Keywords: commitment, dishonesty, habituation, temptation, self-control, cheating.

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