

## Measuring morals



### Researchers ask if Americans are cheating more often -- and what can be done about it

By Laura Secor, 1/18/2004

"IN CORPORATE AMERICA TODAY," declared former Vermont governor Howard Dean in last Sunday's Iowa debate, "this president has turned a blind eye to morality. We have lost our moral compass in this country. . . ."

Dean might well have taken a leaf out of a provocative new book by David Callahan. In "The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead" (Harcourt), Callahan argues that while conservatives crow about family values and sexual morality, their fiscal policies have created a culture that not only permits but encourages immoral economic behavior.

Thanks to the deregulation of the market, the widening gap between rich and poor, and the over-emphasis on material values, Americans more and more frequently take the quick, dishonest route to wealth, writes Callahan, who runs the public-policy think tank Demos. "It is just too easy in this society for cheaters to float seamlessly upward, seeing few downsides along the way," he maintains. We cheat on our taxes and our SATs, we lie on our resumés, we overcharge our clients and customers, and from there it is a short leap to the sorts of business and investment fraud that swept America in the 1990s and exploded with scandals like Enron and WorldCom.

But Callahan's is just one of a cluster of recent books on how people make moral choices in everyday life. What motivates our choices? Is it reason? Emotion? Biological instinct? Social norms? Is the moral satisfaction of doing right enough to tempt us away from the material rewards of doing wrong? Economist Robert H. Frank argues that in fact we do the right thing more often than we rationally should, while a group of Harvard education researchers, who talked to young professionals in depth about the ethical choices they make in their work, concluded that too many of them deceived themselves about the significance of the compromises they made.

That Americans cheat more than they used to sounds like an impossible hypothesis to prove. And yet, Callahan's book is thick with convincing examples.

In the legal world, for instance, it was once possible to become a partner at a major law firm on the basis of honest hard work. But the shape of the profession has changed, he argues, with fewer people able to reach its pinnacle and more money for those who do. Partners make their fortunes on the backs of associates who work punishing hours and have little chance of advancement. Under intense financial and professional pressure, and with little contact with or personal loyalty to their clients, associates chronically overestimate their billable hours.

Similar pressures impel athletes to take performance-enhancing drugs, accountants to cook the books of valued clients, and ordinary people to under-report their income to the IRS. Two baseball players Callahan cites estimate steroid use among players at 85 percent and 60 percent respectively.

Not only are the monetary incentives to cheat often enormous, the penalties for doing wrong are frequently negligible or nonexistent. White-collar crime is rarely severely punished (former Enron CFO Andrew Fastow's recent 10-year sentence notwithstanding). No one will be socially ostracized for stealing cable service -- as 10 percent of Chicago households do, according to one study -- or pirating music online. In high schools where students compete fiercely for admission to the Ivy League, teachers and parents often turn a blind eye to academic fraud.

Across the board, laments Callahan, we have created a social context in which cheating has become both a rational choice and one subject to little moral censure. "Simply put," he writes, "we have a nastier, more cut-throat set of values than previous generations did. As the race for money and status has intensified, it has become more acceptable for individuals to act opportunistically and dishonestly to get ahead."

America needs a new social contract, Callahan concludes, as well as more individuals unafraid to be "chumps" if they are honest when others aren't.

In more everyday situations than not, as it happens, we do choose to be chumps -- or to "incur unnecessary costs," as Cornell University economist Robert H. Frank prefers to say. How and why we choose to do right is the subject of "What Price the Moral High Ground? Ethical Dilemmas in Competitive Environments" (Princeton), the latest contribution by Frank, author of "The Winner-Take-All Society" and "Luxury Fever."

Doing right can be as simple and small as leaving a tip in a roadside restaurant where you'll never be seen again. Rational-choice theory -- the hypothesis, popular in economics and political science, that we behave in ways that efficiently serve our self-interest -- can't explain such behavior. Nor can it explain why we make anonymous gifts to charity, return lost wallets to strangers, or choose to work for modest pay at socially useful jobs.

Moral behavior is not irrational, however, Frank insists. The challenge is to define self-interest in a manner capacious enough to accommodate the real motives for people's choices. Frank does this with a mixture of Darwinian science, psychology, and flexible common sense.

Like many critics of rational-choice theory, Frank trains his attention on what is known as the prisoner's dilemma. Two people are separately informed that they must choose to either cooperate with their unseen partner or defect. If both cooperate, both receive \$2. If both defect, neither receives anything. If one cooperates and the other defects, the cooperator receives nothing, and the defector receives \$3. The rational choice -- the one that affords the possibility of winning \$3 rather than \$2 -- is to defect, but experimental subjects cooperate nearly as often.

Frank's studies show that people base their choices on what they think their partners are likely to do. And with a little bit of exposure to one another, his subjects predicted fairly accurately who would cooperate and who would defect. That accuracy increases the better we know each other. It is not irrational to cooperate -- in fact, some 75 percent of Frank's subjects did so -- if the chances are pretty good that we have chosen our partners wisely.

But Frank uncovered a curious exception to this cooperative spirit: his own peers. He hypothesized that economists would be more likely to defect, because rational-choice theory would lead them to expect others to behave selfishly. Sure enough, when he conducted the same experiment with undergraduate economics majors, 60 percent defected.

Frank's outlook may seem more optimistic than Callahan's, but his results actually bolster Callahan's observations. That is to say, we base our behavior partly on trust. And if we really do live in a society that tolerates and predicts cheating, we are that much more likely to cheat.

Although neither Frank nor Callahan propounds a simplistic rational-choice model, both assume that for the most part reason guides our choices, and guides us toward universally shared goals, whether these are material or, in Frank's Darwinian sense, mere survival and reproduction.

Frank offers a place for the emotions in his model, but they are subordinate to reason. Sympathy and guilt evolved to help us make choices that are in the long run rational, he argues, even if in the short term they compel us to override what appears to be our most rational option. But isn't it possible for emotions to be ends unto themselves? Might we make rational choices to avoid negative emotions and seek positive ones, whatever the impact on our material self-interest?

Similarly, Callahan's argument hinges on the expectation that people make moral choices based on material desires, and that shifting economic arrangements have produced a greater tendency to cheat. By and large, he supports this claim.

But some of the cheaters he profiles don't quite fit the mold. For example, he attributes journalistic fraud, like that of former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair, to the same lust for profit as securities fraud. But journalism tends to be a poorly paid profession, rarely chosen for its riches. Ambitious journalists are more likely motivated by the promise of fame and prestige -- rewards that deregulation has affected not at all.

In the forthcoming "Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work" (Harvard), Howard Gardner, professor of cognition and education at Harvard, and researchers Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, and Deborah Greenspan capture the complex and often abstract values that shape people's professional goals and guide their decisions. Following a series of in-depth interviews, the Harvard researchers assessed the degree to which young professionals in three fields -- journalism, genetic science, and acting -- were willing to compromise their own ideals to achieve success.

Fischman, Solomon, Greenspan, and Gardner are concerned less with prisoner's-dilemma-style moral questions than with the struggles of their subjects to be true to themselves despite homogenizing pressures from above.

A journalist for a suburban paper, for example, attends the funeral of a local 16-year-old basketball star, then returns to the newsroom to be told that he must slap his story together quickly and turn his attention instead to the death of a celebrity, John F. Kennedy Jr. According to Gardner and his coauthors, "Bill was torn between his journalistic values and those of his editors. He felt a responsibility to report on the young athlete's funeral because it 'meant so very much to the small community of people' to whom he was reporting."

Geneticists in the study report that their advisers sometimes pressure them to release partial findings, in order to get a jump on competing scientists. Actors struggle to decide whether or not they should accept roles they consider demeaning to women, for instance, or to their race, or to play a role as a director envisions it even when the actor's vision is starkly different.

The researchers found that the geneticists were the most likely to succeed in reconciling their values with professional expectations; the journalists were the least so, and seemed the most unhappy with their jobs. (Jayson Blair was supposed to participate in the study, but he never showed up.) Some members of all three groups rationalized making ethical compromises early in their careers, on the assumption that later on they would have more and better choices.

On the face of it, this sort of research has little bearing on the sort of moral reasoning Frank analyzes or the political culture Callahan critiques. But if there is one relevant insight the Harvard study provides, it's that most of us conceive of our self-interest in a manner neither purely material nor obviously adaptive. There are genetic scientists who believe their work is guided -- and ethically bounded -- by God. Most actors know they have chosen lives of poverty and obscurity, but feel an emotional calling to the stage that overrides all else. Veteran journalists speak passionately about their commitment to the First Amendment, even when it places them in a profession with modest financial rewards and pervasive frustrations.

If such commitments -- spiritual, emotional, political, idealistic -- are not easily explained as rational, so much the better. Because if Callahan is right that it has become increasingly rational to cheat in American society, the best hope to reverse that trend is for Americans to stop listening to reason.

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