Why do people behave badly? Maybe it's just too easy

BY APRIL KEMICK

Many people say they wouldn’t cheat on a test, lie on a job application or refuse to help a person in need. But what if the test answers fell into a skip and cheating didn’t require any work on your part? If you didn’t have to face the person who needed your help and refuse them? Would that change your behaviour?

New research out of U of T Scarborough shows it might. In two studies that tested participants’ willingness to behave immorally, the UTSC team discovered people will behave in situations they couldn’t help with after they were given a screen and told to move to the next page. “People are more likely to cheat and make immoral decisions when their transgressions don’t involve an explicit action,” said Kimma Tepner, PhD student and lead author on the study, published online now in Social Psychological and Personality Science. “If they can lie by omission, cheat without doing much legwork or bypass a person’s request for help without expressly denying them, they are more likely to do so.”

In one study, participants took a math test on a computer after being warned there were glitches in the system. One group was told if they pressed the space bar, the answer to the question would appear on the screen. The second group was told if they didn’t press the enter key within five seconds of seeing a question, the answer would appear.

“People in the second group — those who didn’t have to physically press a button to get the answers — were much more likely to cheat,” said Professor Michael Inzlicht of psychology, second author on the study. In another study, the team asked participants whether they would volunteer to help a student with a learning disability complete a component of the test. One group of participants had only the option of checking a yes or no box that popped up on the computer. The second group of participants could follow a link at the bottom of the page to volunteer their help or simply press “continue” to move on to the next page of their test. Participants were five times more likely to volunteer when they had to expressly pick either yes or no.

“It seems to be more difficult for people to explicitly deny their help, by clicking ‘no,’ than to simply click ‘continue’ and elude doing the right thing. We suspect that emotion plays an important role in driving this effect,” said Tepner.

“People are confronted with actively doing the right thing or the wrong thing, there are a lot of emotions involved — such as guilt and shame — that guide them to make the moral choice. When the transgression is more passive, we saw that people doing the wrong thing and we believe this is because the moral emotions in such situations are probably less intense,” Tepner said.

The team’s research on moral behaviour is unique in that it looks at how people behave in certain situations versus simply asking them to predict how they might behave, said Inzlicht. It also has critical implications for those in the business of soliciting peoples’ good will, money or time.

“Forcing people to make an active, moral decision — a yes or no to donating, for example — is going to be much more effective than allowing them to passively skip over a request,” he said.

Institute, NSERC band together to foster commercialization

BY ANJUM NAYAR

Faculty and students looking for a springboard to launch their research ideas into the marketplace got the chance to bridge the gap between themselves and industry representatives at the Institute for Optical Sciences (IOS) recent technology forum. The Emerging Technology Forum, sponsored by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), provided a way to foster interaction, collaboration and innovation between all three groups. It marked the first time IOS has had an NSERC-funded event focused on helping academics and industry tap into government programs.

The Institute for Optical Sciences (IOS) is an emerging technology and commercialization centre embedded in the University of Toronto with a mandate to act as a technology bridge between university research and industry to transfer technology into industry and develop industrial capabilities and highly qualified personnel. It is supported by 27 faculty researchers and two post-doctoral fellows in the disciplines of chemistry, materials science and engineering and electrical and computer engineering. IOS areas of expertise include nanoelectronics, high-powered laser, ultrafast lasers, spectroscopy, surface characterization, optical design, optical simulation and laser micro-processing. Services include contract research, feasibility studies, prototype development, instrument testing, rental use of specialized instruments and laboratories and optical training.

The themes running through the IOS Industry Day were nanotechnology and clean technology, photonics and instruments and laboratories and optical processing. Services include contract research, optical design, optical simulation and laser micro-processing. Services include contract research, feasibility studies, prototype development, instrument testing, rental use of specialized instruments and laboratories and optical training.

Sewty people attended the day-long seminar in addition to the 10 speakers taking part. “At the IOS we really believe that our research knowledge has to make it out to society and we're trying to find out how to do that,” said Professor Cynthia Goh, director of IOS. “We'd like to contribute to society, however, our expertise is doing leading-edge research. By making the connection to companies that actually know what we're facing in the market, we can do some problem-solving and our knowledge can be applied and we can find out what companies need.”

One industry representative attending the seminar said the event was a great opportunity for his company to learn about current research. “I know some of the research that U of T is doing in this area,” said a representative from a company that partners with the Institute. “And so with a group like this, it helps me to figure it out.”

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Facial features predictor of future success, says U of T researcher

Psychologists at U of T and Tufts University have shown that law firms are more profitable when led by managing partners with powerful looking faces. Further, an individual’s career success can be predicted as much as 30 to 40 years earlier simply by looking at their faces.

“Appearance matters a great deal when it comes to judging people,” said Professor Nicholas Rule of psychology at U of T and lead author of a new study published in Social Psychological and Personality Science. “This includes clothing, posture and hairstyles but the real window to judging people is the face. We developed a method to measure facial power and found that it is a strong predictor of law firm profitability.”

Rule and co-investigator Nanini Ambady of psychology at Tufts University had people judge photos of 73 managing partners from the top 100 law firms in the United States for 2007. They used a scale of one to seven for indicators of future success, such as dominance, facial maturity, likeability and trustworthiness, with seven indicating high amounts of those qualities. Half of the judges rated current photos downloaded from law firm websites, while the other half rated college yearbook photos of the same individuals, which on average were taken 33 years prior. The ratings of dominance and facial maturity for photos averaged together to form a measure of perceived power for each leader, said Rule. “We correlated those scores with the profits of the leaders’ respective firms and found that they are positively associated with one another, both for the judgments made from current photos and those made from college yearbook photos.”

“So, if you knew nothing about law firms other than what the faces of their leaders looked like when they were in college, you could predict their firms’ profits today,” Rule said. “Facial cues to success may therefore be consistent across much of the lifespan — approximately 20 to 50 years.”

Although the researchers studied only leaders of law firms, Rule said that the findings could have applications for business, government and other sectors. “In previous work, we’ve found similar effects with CEOs and political candidates,” he said. “Judgments of faces predicted a Fortune 1,000 company’s success and the percentage of votes that candidates received in the U.S., Canada and Japan. These findings suggest that judging college yearbook photos might predict the outcomes for leaders in those domains as well.”