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# Bad sports

## Why people cheat when they don't have to

The Boston Globe



By Drake Bennett | September 23, 2007

IT'S BEEN A tough month for fair play in New England.

Three weeks ago, a police prosecutor in Hanover, N.H., announced that he might bring felony charges against nine students accused of breaking into their high school to steal advance copies of AP exams. The taping scandal that engulfed the New England Patriots after their season opener was finally resolved last week, with no penalties beyond the \$750,000 in fines and probable loss of a first-round draft pick. And the Patriots remain without safety Rodney Harrison, suspended until Oct. 2 for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs.

All of which has left people scratching their heads. Why would smart students steal a test? Why would the favorites to win the Super Bowl break a rule, especially when they had already been warned about the behavior? Why, in other words, do people cheat in situations where there is little to gain - one

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good grade, a slight edge in a game - and so much to lose?

This irrationality may be the rule, rather than the exception, when it comes to cheating, according to a group of scholars who have turned their attention to the mysteries of the cheating mind. Cheating is often thought of as something that is done after cold calculation. But, the new research has found, people are prone to cheat even when it is not in their best interest. Instead of carefully weighing the costs and benefits of breaking the rules, people can be heavily swayed by peer pressure, their mood, their image of themselves. Sometimes, people even cheat out of a sense of fairness.

"A lot of the time people are thinking about the broader costs and benefits, but there are biases or blind spots or other psychological factors that are actually driving their behavior," says Maurice Schweitzer, an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School who studies deception.

The new research into the psychology of cheating comes at a time when others, largely economists, are finding stark evidence that cheating is a widespread part of sports, and not merely in the sort of cases that make the news. Using economics as a forensic tool, they're arguing that foul play, either by referees or players, is common in sports as varied as figure skating, basketball, and sumo wrestling.

Whether it's corporate malfeasance, academic dishonesty, tax fraud, or point shaving, researchers are looking with renewed interest at the motivations behind breaking the rules - and whether we fully understand what we're doing when we do it. Cheating has always interested social scientists, but increasingly today they're trying to find ways around the secrecy and obfuscation that surrounds cheating, and designing experiments that expose telltale patterns.

Economists who have looked specifically at sports argue that their work is more than just an investigation of games, but a window into the workings of the human mind. They see their field as promising in large part because sports and games serve as ready-made experiments - people competing on roughly equal terms, under agreed-upon rules, for the same clear, quantifiable goals - with the potential to yield insights into how we live the rest of our lives.

"It's a metaphor," says Justin Wolfers, an assistant professor at the Wharton School who has looked at point shaving in college basketball. "The data are plentiful, and we can have very sharp predictions and test them. And the lessons, hopefully, are generalizable."

...

Even setting aside the Patriots, any sports fan could reel off a list of recent cheating scandals: the doping revelations in professional cycling and baseball; Tim Donaghy, the NBA referee who admitted to betting on games he worked; and, last year, match fixing in Italian professional soccer involving some of the most storied teams in Europe.

But if economists like Wolfers are to be believed, cheating is more widespread than we hear about. Wolfers looked at the scores of more than 44,000 Division 1 college basketball games from 1989 to 2005 and found that the number of times that the winning team just failed to beat the "spread," the expected margin of victory as determined by Las Vegas bookmakers, couldn't be explained by chance. More likely, he argues, players on the winning team were holding back just a little bit. They would still win, but so would gamblers who had bet against the spread - and who, Wolfers surmised, had colluded with the players beforehand. Wolfers found that 5 percent of the games with large spreads showed this sort of suspicious score.

Perhaps the best-known study of this kind was by Steven Levitt, an economics professor at the University of Chicago and co-author of the best-selling book "Freakonomics," who looked at match fixing in sumo wrestling. But in recent years other economists have started doing work to uncover sports cheating - some instances more intentional than others. Eric Zitzewitz, an associate professor of economics at Dartmouth, has found evidence of vote trading among figure skating judges in the Olympics. Luis Garicano and Canice Prendergast of the University of Chicago, along with Ignacio Palacios-Huerta of Brown University, have looked at systematic favoritism among Spanish soccer referees.

Paradoxically, one of the most powerful motivations for cheating, according to scholars who study decision-making, is a desire for fairness. In the past couple weeks, on New England sports blogs and radio shows, the most widely heard justification for the Patriots cheating was that other teams in the league were almost certainly doing the same thing. Professional cyclists describe similar pressures to take performance-enhancing drugs - a complaint only strengthened by the recent confirmation of Tour de France champion Floyd Landis's positive drug test.

In a way, this is common sense: If an opponent is illegally gaining some advantage over me, I'll want to balance things out. But what's more surprising is the way the effect extends beyond situations in which cheating confers an advantage. Robert Kurzban, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, has found that players in a game he created are less likely to behave selfishly when they know that other players aren't behaving selfishly, even though being the only player to behave selfishly actually increases one's winnings at the game. That would suggest that most people, if they could be assured no one else was cheating, would be content not to cheat.

Daylian Cain, an assistant professor specializing in decision-making at the Yale School of Management, believes that the "defensive" model explains much of the cheating one sees in professional sports. Since coaches and players can't know what opponents are doing, they "tend to think that others are doing what they are doing and thinking what they are thinking," he says. "You think you were doing things for a reason, and assume other people have the same reasons, so you think it's likely that they're cheating."

Findings like these emerge from a broader wave of social science research looking at the ways in which we calculate - and miscalculate - costs and benefits in making decisions, whether it's a coach choosing to go for it on fourth down or a head of state choosing to go to war. And while the idea of defensive cheating emerges from a new model of how people react to incentives, other research is looking at the complicated, sometimes conflicting ways in which we think about costs.

In particular, people seem willing in some cases to simply ignore the cost of getting caught. In a set of experiments carried out in 2005 by the economists Nina Mazar and Dan Ariely, of MIT, and On Amir, a marketing expert at the University of California at San Diego, subjects were given a timed test of general-knowledge questions and paid for each correct answer. They varied the setup of the experiment and found that people would tend to cheat when given the chance, but that the risk of being discovered did not deter them. Even more surprisingly, the experimenters found a way to limit cheating that had nothing to do with the threat of getting caught. When they asked subjects to write down as many of the Ten Commandments as they could remember before taking the test, it virtually eliminated cheating.

Researchers are only beginning to understand what shapes the propensity to cheat, but some economists believe more answers will come from looking directly at the brain, says Colin Camerer, an economics professor at the California Institute of Technology who is involved with the research. In the meantime, researchers, like the rest of us, can only speculate about the

famously tight-lipped Bill Belichick's motives. But if they're right, even the coach may be unsure of why he did what he did.

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