AN ‘ENVIRONMENT’ OF CORRUPTION

There is no getting away from corruption in today’s day and age. A high point of public discourse these days, corruption is rampant in public life, although public tolerance may have reached a saturation point. In fact, despite knowing fully well the wrong they are about to commit and that their act could have serious consequences, people still cheat all the time. There are students who cheat in exams and conmen and fake babas who dupe innocents. Even rich celebrities steal groceries.

Why do they do it? Is it due to a lack of moral fortitude and education? Is it an impulse? Is their a subconscious reaction to the adrenaline in the blood and the dopamine in the brain? Are some people programmed to cheat? Perhaps, all of these, to some extent.

The first-ever neurological study of honesty and cheating at the Harvard University has shown that honest people are not even tempted to cheat. In a study designed to test truthfulness, Joshua Greene and Joseph Paxton recorded brain activity of volunteers in their prefrontal cortex and other regions associated with decision making and behavioural control by way of fMRI.

The fMRI scans of honest volunteers showed no increase in brain activity even when they had a chance to cheat. In contrast, dishonest volunteers showed increased brain activity whenever they had a chance to cheat. Greene and Paxton could even predict each volunteer’s degree of cheating from their brain activity with remarkable accuracy. Their study was published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (DOI: 10.1073/pnas.0900152106).

Researchers, led by Nicole Ruedy at the University of Washington, have also studied fMRI brain scans and come to the conclusion that often, rather than feeling shameful and guilty, people engaging in unethical behaviour get a neurochemical rush after cheating. In their study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, the researchers call this feeling of excitement after unethical behaviour the ‘cheater’s high’. This ‘high’ may encourage them to cheat again and again.

Are there certain environmental conditions that promote cheating? Researchers seem to think so. Psychologists Francesca Gino and Dan Ariely showed in a 2011 study that people cheat more when they are feeling tired, either physically or mentally. Perhaps this is because when the opportunity to cheat presents itself, people become increasingly more likely to take advantage of it, as their self-control is depleted.

A group of psychologists found that lighting could affect cheating. Participants in a dimly-lit room cheated more often than those in a lighted one. In fact, a study published in Psychological Science even gives out the time when we are most likely to be vulnerable to immoral behaviour or cheating – the afternoon.

Psychologists Andy Yap, Dana Carney, and colleagues have shown that people cheat when they are placed in a position of perceived power. For instance, those who assume expansive power poses, such as standing with their feet shoulder-width apart and their hands on their hips, when they sit in expansive car seats, which allow them to spread out, they become more likely to commit a traffic violation during a driving simulation.

People are also likely to cheat when they think there are plenty of resources and that their own behaviour would not have much of an impact. Most importantly, the surrounding environment may often drive people to immoral behaviour. While a study found people were more likely to cheat in an environment that displays signs of socially deviant behaviour, like litter, graffiti, and other rubble, psychologists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University have found that in an environment where cheating seems more widely accepted, people are more likely to be dishonest.

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