
When Foul Play Seems Fair : Dishonesty as a Response to Violations of Meritocratic Fairness

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Abstract

The distributive justice norm of "just deserts"-i.e. the notion that one gets what one deserves-is an essential norm in a market society, and honesty is an important factor in economic and social exchange. We experimentally investigate the effect of violations of the distributive justice norm of "just deserts" on honesty in a setting where behaving dishonestly entails income redistribution. We find that the violation of the just deserts norm results in a greater propensity toward dishonesty. We then test a more general proposition that violations of just deserts induce dishonesty, even in cases where dishonesty does not have redistributive consequences. Our results confirm this proposition but only for cases in which the violation of just deserts also entails income inequality.

Keywords: Dishonesty, Meritocracy, Equity, Just Deserts

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