Does competition create cheaters?

We live, for better or for worse, in a competition-driven world. Rivalry powers our economy, sparks technological innovation, and encourages academic discovery. But it also compels people to manipulate the system and commit crimes. Some figure it’s just easier — and even acceptable — to cheat.
But what if instead of examining how people behave in a competitive setting, we wanted to understand the consequences of competition on their everyday behavior? That is exactly what Amos Schurr, a business and management professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and Ilana Ritov, a psychologist at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, discuss in a study in this week’s Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. “How can it be,” Schurr asks, “that successful, distinguished people — take (former New York Gov.) Eliot Spitzer, who I think was a true civil servant when he started out his career with good intentions — turn corrupt? At the same time, you have other successful people, like Mother Teresa, who don’t become corrupt. What distinguishes between these two types of successful people?”

Schurr and Ritov found that when people win a competition in which success is measured by social comparison rather than by a fixed standard, they are more likely to engage in unrelated unethical behavior — in the case of this study, to cheat their peers out of money. “We are the first to ask what happens to contestants and their behavior after a competition ends,” Schurr says, “and we found that competitions have long-lasting effects.”

The researchers performed a series of experiments to test these effects. For the initial competition, they had groups of students take part in an estimation task. The students were told that those who performed best at estimating the number of signs that flashed across a computer screen would be considered “winners” — and given a pair of earbuds as a prize. In reality, however, winners were randomly assigned in order to avoid selection bias.

The students were then assigned another task, with a different payoff. They were randomly split into pairs: one student was given two dice and a cup with a hole in the bottom; the other was told to simply watch. The pair then played a game over 12 shekels (the equivalent of 12 quarters), in which the first student put the cup over the dice and shook it so that only he could see the results of the roll. His outcome, between 2 and 12, would dictate how many shekels he could take; his partner would receive the remaining amount. No one except Schurr and Ritov knew who had won or lost the initial competition. Compared with a control group, in which the claimed payout was approximately 7, or the expected value (halfway between 2 and 12), students who had previously won the competition over-claimed the outcomes of their rolls and took on average of 8.75 shekels. “You should note that they’re not stealing from me, the researcher,” Schurr says. “They’re taking from their fellow students, from their friends.”

Schurr and Ritov repeated the dice-under-a-cup game after students participated in a number of other tasks in which “winning” was defined by different parameters. The researchers found that competitive settings determine behavior. “You have two types of success,” Schurr says. “One involves social
comparison (as in the case of being a better estimator) and the other does not. And when you measure success in terms of ‘how good am I’ in reference to other people, that’s when people may turn corrupt.”

For instance, participants were asked to recall either an experience in which they won a competition or a situation in which they met a specified goal. The students who recalled winning a competition cheated in the subsequent dice-under-a-cup game, whereas the students who recalled meeting a goal did not.

Similarly, participants who had simply won a lottery did not end up cheating when they reported the outcome of the dice roll but participants who had outplayed their peers in a trivia competition (again, controlled for selection bias) did later overclaim their winnings. “When we win in competition, in particular when we establish we are above others in rank, we will feel more powerful,” says Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley. “And dozens of studies have found that the simple feeling of power makes people feel above the scrutiny of others and act in impulsive, self-gratifying and unethical ways. Feelings of power, whether it comes from wealth, a person’s position in a hierarchical structure or in this case competition, can indeed lead to various abuses like lying and stealing.”

Schurr and Ritov attribute the cheating that occurred in their study to a number of possible psychological mechanisms, particularly entitlement. Their study “ties into recent work that relates to the influence of social-economic status and its influence on ethical behavior,” says Shaul Shalvi, a behavioral economist at the University of Amsterdam who was not part of this study. “People who are of higher status would break the rules more often. So, for example, you’re more likely to see a very fancy car ignoring the red traffic light compared to the guy in the normal car because they apparently feel entitled. So it’s nice that this study links to that, because people of high status have probably had the experience of winning.”

Schurr plans to continue his line of research. “We could look at the other side of the coin and see how much competition winners contribute to society as a whole,” he says. “Instead of doing bad things, will people do good things after the competition ends?” He also mentioned the possibility of better understanding gender differences in winner behavior. And it would no doubt be valuable to analyze real-world competitions. “There’s always a trade-off between experimental control, which was high in this study, and the ability to generalize the findings,” Shalvi says. “So these experiments are very important and telling in clarifying underlying psychological mechanisms of the dark or dangerous consequences of competition. But what still remains to be seen is whether these effects cannot also be seen when analyzing data from sport competitions and business-related competitions.”

If confirmed by such analyses, the research suggests that discouraging social comparisons and focusing instead on fixed goals might be a good way for organizations — from sport teams to businesses to governments — to reduce corruption.
We had a tremendously positive response from students and staff with our first issue. Thank you so much for your support! Due to limited funding, however, our future issues will only be available online. Visit Miller High School’s school website to see our publications and be sure to follow us on Instagram at Falcon.Feature. As always, please share your feedback with us as well, so we can continue to improve our publications.

Sean W.
Ms. Lawler
Drum roll, please...the results of last week's questionnaires!

From the article, “Do you pledge your allegiance?” Forty people responded to the poll.

Is not standing for the American flag disrespectful?

From the “Cast your vote” survey. Forty people responded to the poll.

Whom should foot the bill (pay) on the first date?

Last week’s riddle: What belongs to you, but others use it more than you do?
Answer: Your name
Teacher Feature:
Mr. Phipps

What do you want the students of Miller to know about you? “Mi casa, su casa...my door is always open. If I’m here, you’re welcome to come in and talk. I want to see my students be successful and go on and do great and wonderful things.”

Is there something going on in Miller right now that you’re excited about? “I love the fact that we’re going on college trips, that students are applying to universities and getting in, and that students are taking rigorous classes and challenging themselves.”

What is your favorite ________? Why? “My favorite college team is the Mountaineers because I am a graduate of West Virginia University. I graduated in 1993 and I have been a Mountaineer fan all of my life.”

Explain your views on __________. “I believe that all students can be successful if they put their minds to it and work hard, and challenge themselves to go above and beyond what they think they can do.”

Gryffindor or Slytherin? Why? “Gryffindor because they are courageous and honest, though Slytherin are smart and cunning.”

Student Spotlight:
Winter C. and Victoria D.

What is your favorite class this year?
Winter: “World Studies because we get to see how stuff was back before we were born.”
Victoria: "Strength and Fitness because I like to be outside.'

What is your favorite memory of high school so far?
Winter: “When I met my three best friends: Victoria D., Michaela E., and Sammy F.”
Victoria: “The Kids on Campus baseball trip last year.”

What would you be doing right now if you weren’t in school?
Winter: “I would probably be at my dad’s house walking around in the woods because I love nature. I really do.”
Victoria: “I’d probably be at home drawing or listening to music and cooking for my family.”

Harry Potter or Hermione Granger?
Winter: “Hermione Granger because Harry is just so predictable. And she’s smart.”
Victoria: “I have not watched or read any Harry Potter.”
The following comprises our favorite original artwork from Mr. Miller’s department. Submit your own!
Dear Abby

Dear Abby is an advice column founded in 1956 by Pauline Phillips under the pen name "Abigail Van Buren" and carried on today by her daughter, Jeanne Phillips, who now owns the legal rights to the pen name. This section of our newspaper is a spinoff of that pen name. You can write in about your problems (drop your letter into the media box in Ms. Lawler’s room) and “Abbie” will respond to you with helpful advice.

DEAR ABBIE:

I’m 17 and have been in a relationship with “Mr. Right” for three years. Though we have our issues to work through, we get along beautifully overall. Still, many adults don’t think our relationship is real because we’re still in high school. It’s true that we don’t have bills to pay or children to raise, but we care for each other deeply and are extremely compatible. I’ve always thought that these are the most important things between two people. We aren’t naive either—we know our relationship isn’t perfect, but no relationship is; we’re committed to working on it, becoming closer, and supporting each other.

Having said that, I keep getting comments from teachers and my friends’ parents about how we should be prepared to “out grow” the relationship because we’re so young and have so many other things to experience. This advice is annoying and disheartening. How can I prove to these “non-believers” that teens feel love and can have stable relationships, too?

Sincerely,
FOREVER IN LOVE

DEAR FOREVER IN LOVE:

I don’t blame you for feeling frustrated, because being patronized is annoying. The way to prove to “non-believers” that they are wrong is simply to continue successfully in your relationship. You appear to be mature and grounded, and it seems that you and “Mr. Right” treat each other well. I don’t know what your plans are for the future, but if you keep the lines of communication open, I see no reason why this couldn’t lead to a lifelong relationship one day -- a good one, based on mutual respect and compromise.

Sincerely,
Abbie
In honor of Veterans Day, we present “Secret Respect,” a poem written by Joanna Fuchs:

“There’s not a Fascist in the USA
Who doesn’t, in their true heart, say
I’m thankful for those who serve and fight,
So I can peacefully sleep at night.

No partisan politics can keep away
The gratitude I feel, but cannot say
To veterans who kept America secured,
With all the hardships they endured.

Away from family, friends and more,
They knew what they were working for:
Keeping freedom really free
For the right, the middle, and even me.

Veterans, you have my deep respect,
Even if it isn’t politically correct.”