

Social Class and Unethical Behaviour

Key points

- ‘Upper-class’ individuals are more likely to behave unethically than ‘lower-class’ individuals.
- The greater tendency of the ‘upper-classes’ to perceive greed as positive and beneficial gives rise to unethical behaviour.

New research from the field of psychology suggests that characteristics traditionally associated with a ‘gentleman’ are the prerogative of the ‘lower-’ not the ‘upper-classes’. The ‘upper-class’ were found to be more likely to engage in actions that harm others, behave in ways that are illegal, such as breaking the law whilst driving, or act in a morally objectionable manner, including lying in a negotiation and cheating to increase their chance of winning.

The research, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, was led by Paul Piff and undertaken by researchers at the University of California and the University of Toronto. The more favourable attitudes towards greed displayed by ‘upper-class’ individuals was considered, by the researchers, to be an important explanatory factor for their greater tendency to behave unethically.

Seven studies using naturalistic and experimental methods and involving university, community and nationwide samples of people were employed to assess the association between class and unethical behaviour. Social class was understood as an individual's rank “vis-a-vis others in society in terms of wealth, occupational prestige and education”. It was assessed according to both self-reported and objective assessments of unethical behaviour, while controlling for other characteristics associated with class, such as age and ethnicity, that could also explain the results. Two studies assessed unethical tendencies in a naturalistic setting: researchers examined the frequency of illegal behaviour by drivers at a four-way intersection and pedestrian crossing, identifying social class by visible markers of vehicle status. A further study used a more direct measure of self-reported social class in conjunction with an assessment of individuals' tendency towards unethical decision-making. A fourth study drew upon experimental methods to examine whether the experience of a higher social class has a causal effect on ethical behaviour.

Participants were first asked to compare themselves to people in other classes. They were then asked to complete a series of unrelated tasks before being presented with a jar of sweets and informed that, although the sweets were intended for children in a nearby laboratory, they were permitted to take some. Taking sweets from the jar was considered a measure of unethical behaviour.

Studies 5 - 7 examined attitudes towards greed in order to explain why 'upper-class' individuals behave more unethically than 'lower-class'. Participants were asked to adopt the role of an employer conducting a job interview to test whether they would lie or sidestep awkward facts in pay negotiation. In a separate task participants played an online game involving rolling dice and self-scoring. Participants understood the two underlying premises of the game to be that high scores were associated with a cash prize and the veracity of their score was not monitored. The final study examined whether encouraging positive attitudes towards greed prior to a specified task increases the unethical tendencies of 'lower-class' individuals to match the greed of their 'upper-class' counterparts.

The researchers found that in all studies individuals from 'upper-class' backgrounds were more likely to behave unethically than 'lower-class' individuals. This held true when using both self-reported and objective assessments of unethical behaviour and material symbols of social class identity and subjective assessments of social class. The 'upper-classes' were more likely to jump across other cars at intersections, cheat in online games, lie in negotiations and take resources (sweets) intended for and valued by others.

The relative aloofness of 'upper-class' individuals from structural constraints and risk, feelings of entitlement among members of this group and inattention to the consequences of one's actions on others were seen by the authors to create a set of "culturally shared norms" among the 'upper-classes' which facilitate unethical behaviour. The research also drew attention to 'upper-class' individuals' more favourable attitudes to greed as an explanation for their tendency towards unethical behaviour. Increased resources and reduced dependency on others, economic education focusing on the advantages of self-interest and economics-orientated training in a work setting were thought to promote values among 'upper-class' individuals that "justify and even moralise positive beliefs about greed".

The authors conclude by warning that unethical behaviour which, motivated by favourable attitudes to greed enhances an individual's wealth and rank may, as a self-perpetuating social phenomenon, further economic disparities within society.

Reference

Piff PK, Stancato DM, Côté S, Mendoza-Denton R, Keltner D. Higher Social Class Predicts Increased Unethical Behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 2012; 109(11): 4086-91.

