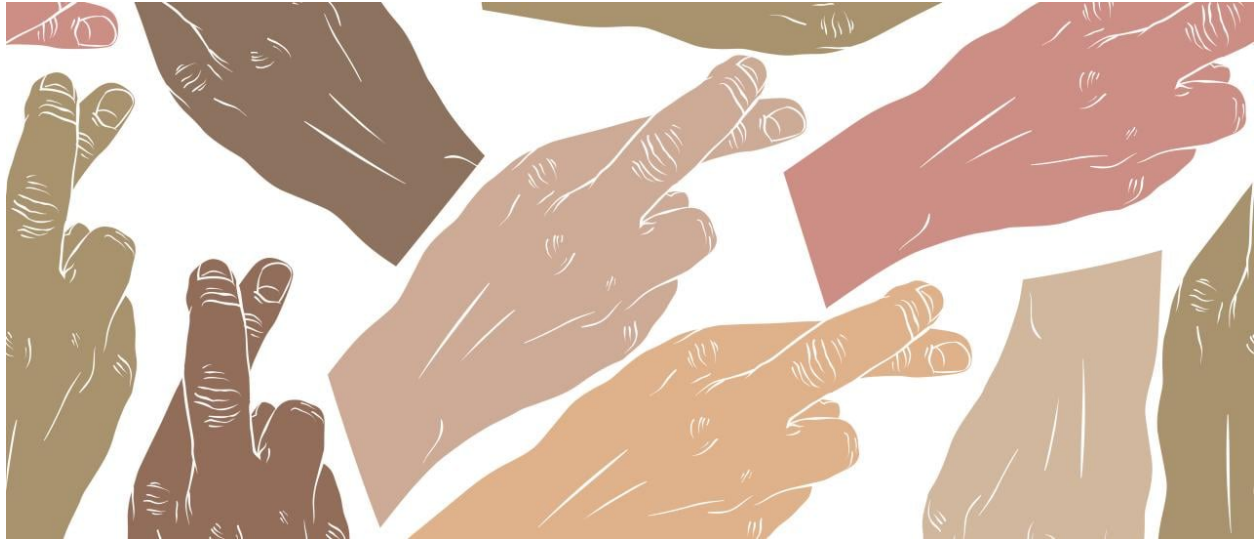

Does Social Class Impel Bad Behaviour?



By , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Marketing

Social class doesn't dictate unethical behaviour, but when the rich or the poor infringe laws and norms, they tend to do so for very different reasons.

Are the rich more unethical than the poor? Some anecdotal evidence would suggest that they are. Take former presidential candidate John Edwards who cheated on his wife or Mark Hurd, the CEO of Hewlett Packard, who falsified his expense reports. There's also Leona Helmsley, who was found guilty of tax evasion and famously declared, "we don't pay taxes, only the little people pay taxes." These three anecdotes suggest a positive relationship between social class and cheating: the higher the social class, the higher the propensity to behave unethically, as if social class freed people from laws and norms.

Yet, those of lower social class can also behave badly, but they tend to do so for different reasons. Take Mark Smith, aged 59, who walked into a bank in Watsonville, California and declared that he had a bomb in his backpack and demanded US\$2,000. It turns out that he was robbing the bank not to help himself but to help his friend pay his rent. In a famous case that has become

the foundation of moral psychology, the wife of a man named Heinz was near death and desperately needed a drug costing US\$2,000 but Heinz could not afford it. Heinz got desperate and broke into a store to steal the drug for his wife. Both of these robbers stole, but to help others, not themselves.

In a recent paper **Social Class, Power, and Selfishness: When and Why Upper and Lower Class Individuals Behave Unethically**, co-authored with Derek D. Rucker (Northwestern University) and Adam D. Galinsky (Columbia University), I investigated whether and how social class can predict when people are likely to behave unethically, and found that higher-class individuals are more likely to cheat when the unethical behaviour benefits the self but lower-class individuals are more likely to cheat when the unethical behaviour benefits another person. We argue that these tendencies stem from distinct motives: higher-class people, because they often feel powerful, look for ways to benefit themselves, while lower-class people, because they often feel powerless, look for ways to help others. This idea builds on [my earlier work](#) which demonstrated how feelings of power and powerlessness can change how people consume by affecting the psychological worth they give to themselves and others.

Tempting scenarios

Based on the ideas that the resources associated with higher social class are a source of power and the fact that higher power shifts a person's focus from others to themselves, we conducted a series of experiments to test the behaviour of high and low social class people across a variety of scenarios to see how they would react.

For instance, in one experiment, 150 participants played a virtual game of chance in the form of a dice rolling simulation. Participants were told they would be entered into a lottery for a US\$50 gift card if the total of all the dice rolls added up to 14 or more. But this was broken down into two conditions; one set of participants were told they would receive the lottery entry directly, while the other set were told the gains would go to a person of their choice.

Participants were also told that their rolls wouldn't be tracked and that they would be trusted to submit them honestly afterwards. The die roll was programmed to add up to 12 so any reports of 14 or higher predicted cheating.

To test the behaviour of different social classes, participants were asked to indicate where they saw themselves in the social strata on a 10-step ladder. As predicted, higher-class individuals tended to cheat more when they were told they could win the lottery than when someone of their choice could win the lottery. In contrast, lower-class participants cheated more when cheating could benefit another person than when it could benefit them.

The power of power

To explain these effects, we looked at whether feelings of power could explain these different effects either by manipulating power or by directly measuring feelings of power. For instance, in one experiment, we manipulated power by asking participants to imagine themselves in the role of a boss or in the role of an employee. When presented with a tempting scenario, we found very similar patterns as the ones found with social class: that high-power individuals cheated more when their lie was self-beneficial; in contrast, low-power individuals cheated more when their lie benefitted another person.

These findings suggest that social class can bestow a psychological sense of power on individuals that can prompt selfish or giving behaviours. In one of our experiments we found that income generated more of a sense of power than education, illustrating that not all other contributors to “social class” affect an individual’s sense of power. Money is clearly considered a tool to control valued resources, sharing a close relationship with power.

One reason for the differences in how social class steers behaviour might be evolutionary. Bending the rules for the self might have traditionally helped the privileged maintain their rank. In contrast, circumventing the rules on behalf of others might have allowed the unprivileged to form stronger social bonds that were crucial to survive with limited resources. Helping others in this way could also have built strong groups that could one day help the underprivileged rise up and collectively challenge authority.

In closing, one useful step to effectively combat unethical behaviour within organisations might be to recognise the motivations for wrongdoing – and directly address them. For instance, preventative messages targeted at the upper classes and the powerful may want to warn against the potential harm unethical behaviour could have on the self. In contrast, messages targeted at the lower classes and the powerless might warn against the potential harm of unethical behaviour on others.



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