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People in power who are guilt-prone are less likely to be corrupt

Guilt. It's a horrible feeling that causes us to question our worth as human beings. But while it's something that induces sleepless nights and stress-related physical symptoms in individuals, for society at large, the tendency toward guilt might have some benefits.

"People who are prone to feeling guilt in their everyday lives are less likely to take bribes," said UC Santa Barbara psychology professor [Hongbo Yu](#), who specializes in how social emotions give rise to behaviors. He is a senior author of a [paper](#) that appears in the journal Social Psychological and Personality Science.

In a study he conducted in collaboration with partners at East China Normal University and Zhejiang Normal University, Yu looked at guilt not as an episodic state — such as how we feel after specific instances in which we hurt someone — but rather as a personality trait, in which people tend to worry about the potential harm their actions cause.

"So I could be a person for whom it is really easy to feel guilt in my everyday life," he explained, "while others might be less likely to feel guilt, or have a higher bar for feeling that emotion."

We all can probably intuit that anticipatory guilt might make us think twice before undertaking an action with potentially bad consequences for others. But what has

been less clear is how this crucial morality-related personality trait affects decision makers in situations involving temptation and incentives, balanced against potential harm to others.

“The question was whether the trait of guilt is associated with a lower probability of engaging in corrupt behavior,” Yu said.

In their study, the researchers concentrated on bribery, an act in which a person that typically has some level of power and influence is tempted to act illegally or unethically in exchange for favors or gifts from someone who wishes to use that influence unfairly for their gain.

In one of the researchers’ online experiments, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire to record both demographic and personality information, and also their fairness concerns. They also participated in one of two scenarios. The first one put them into the role of an arbitrator with the power to assign students grades. They were each paired with a “co-player,” who, unbeknown to them, was fictitious. The co-players (in this case the fictitious students who had been graded) would attempt to bribe the participants to change their grades in exchange for a portion of the reward the co-players would receive for passing the test above a certain threshold.

The second scenario gave each participant 100 tokens, ostensibly to donate to a children’s charity, such as UNICEF. Then co-players attempted to bribe the participants to give them the money, in exchange for keeping a certain portion for themselves.

“So the structure of the two scenarios is similar, but the critical difference is that in the charitable donation scenario, the victim is obvious,” Yu said. “The first scenario is more of just a violation of moral principle.”

As would be expected, participants who scored high in guilt-proneness (from the questionnaire) were less likely to accept a bribe in either of the two scenarios. The effect was more pronounced in the charitable donation scenario.

“You know someone’s going to get hurt,” Yu said. “In the paper we argue that when the victim is more salient, the association between the guilt trait and corrupt behavior becomes stronger.” Concern for others’ suffering, they said, might play a significant role in how guilt-proneness influences bribe-taking behaviors.

This study joins a growing body of work that associates guilt-proneness with fewer unethical decisions, such as cheating for personal gain and counterproductive work behaviors. But it's important to note that this study is correlational, Yu said. "We can't make a causal claim that if we make people more guilt-prone, we will necessarily see less corruption. That needs more research."

Indeed, the researchers say, guilt proneness is not the only trait that might predict corrupt behaviors (or lack of them), and it's worth studying how this trait, along with other personality traits, might "serve as a reliable anti-corruption predictor in personnel selection," such as when choosing people for leadership positions or for high-stakes jobs.

"We can't claim causality, but we can leverage the association between the guilt trait and the lower likelihood of corruption to make us more confident about their integrity," Yu said. "Maybe that's something we can apply to the real world."

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