

Telling people there is no free will makes them behave unethically, but only temporarily

Making people believe there is no such thing as free will can be a dangerous thing. Previous research has shown that if people believe there is no free will, they are more likely to cheat and behave unethically. This has led some to advocate not telling the public about research that suggests we may not have free will. The assumption is that people use the fact that free will doesn't exist as an excuse to behave unethically. In this study we tested that assumption.

Participants were randomly assigned to learn there was no such thing as free will (according to science) and then played a game with other players. The game was a cooperation game where participants could take money from others, share their wealth, or behave anywhere in between. We also gave some people time to make their decision or made them decide quickly. If people were using no free will as a conscious justification, we would have seen more unethical behavior when people were given time to think about their choice. Instead, we only observed unethical behavior when people were forced to choose very quickly. This suggests that the reason learning there is no free will makes you more unethical is not by providing conscious justifications, but instead creates an immediate impulse that is repressed after only a few seconds of waiting. Therefore, we do not need to worry about the public learning about the science of free will. It is unlikely to cause large-scale unethical behavior.

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Publication

[Believing there is no free will corrupts intuitive cooperation.](#)

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