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Online

Lying for yourself or for others: does confession impact moral costs?



Guest speaker

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Session chair:

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(join online)

Abstract: Standard neoclassical models predict lying whenever benefits exceed costs, yet experimental evidence shows many individuals avoid dishonesty and may lie for altruistic or efficiency reasons (Gneezy, 2005; Erat and Gneezy, 2012; Fischbacher and Föllmi-Heusi, 2013; Abeler et al., 2019). This paper tests whether confession affects the moral cost of lying, either by reinforcing norms or providing moral relief. We conducted a field experiment during World Youth Day Lisbon 2023 using the die-under-the-cup paradigm (Fischbacher and Föllmi-Heusi, 2013). Participants reported private die rolls, with higher numbers yielding higher payoffs. Two treatments varied whether payoffs benefited participants or an NGO, capturing selfish versus altruistic lying, and we recorded same-day confession. Among 1,641 participants, reported outcomes exceed the truthful benchmark, indicating widespread dishonesty. However, lying does not differ significantly by confession status or treatment, with only minor variation across charities and no robust demographic effects.