Dynamics of Pro-Social Behavior in Adults and Children:
The consequences of giving in to vs resisting a selfish black lie

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Abstract

We study to what extent humans' pro-social behavior is shaped by their previous (im)moral actions and the development of any such dynamics. Specifically, we study the effect of giving in to versus resisting the temptation to cheat for a desired prize on humans' subsequent decision to allocate a different set of valuable items between themselves and one anonymous other. We do so in a sample of university students (ages 17-30, N = 198) and a sample of primary school children (ages 6-12, N = 191) in Italy. In each sample we found that despite similar general altruistic tendencies a priori, posteriori participants became less altruistic after having given in to the temptation and cheated for the prize than after having truthfully won it or after having resisted the temptation and not gotten any prize. Together our findings show that other-regarding decisions are not stable but instead are malleable by previous moral transgressions; and this finding is surprisingly robust across age, gender, and household education level.

Theoretical Background

- Most economic behaviors are not isolated events. Instead they result in feelings and/or thoughts that may have significant subsequent behavioral consequences, "and thus tie various specific economic acts into dynamic sequences" (Etzioni, 1985, p. 191).

- Most recently researchers have started to extend their studies of pro-social behavior to examining their stability across transitory conditions, most notably, how they change in response to a previous deliberate decision to transgress for personal gain (see Cojoc and Stoian, 2014; Gneezy, Imas, and Madarász, 2014; Rahwan, Hauser, Kochanowska, and Fasolo, 2018).

➡ Our work extends work on the dynamics of social behavior by controlling for people's basic altruistic tendencies and examining possible a priori differences in social preferences between those that decide to cheat and those that decide not to.

➡ Our paper extends the examination to children to study to what extent are the observed dynamics innate or learned and, if the latter, when are the critical periods of learning.

Experiment (Between-SS-Design)

Week 1

Dictator Game 1

- Everyone is Sender playing with anonymous participant from other class
- Adults share $0-$4
- Children share 0-4 Silly Bands

Week 2

Morality Game

- Everyone has 50% chance of winning
  - Adults: 5 EUR bookstore gift card
  - Children: Colored pen
- Everyone self-reports outcome, but Experimenter was able to trace true outcome
- Everyone classified as one of three moral types: honest losers (Honest), cheating losers (Cheaters), and true winners (Control)

Dictator Game 2

- Everyone is Sender playing with anonymous participant from other class
- Adults share $0-$4
- Children share 0-4 Silly Bands

Additional Measures

- Adults: Self-reported feelings after Morality Game, motivations for sharing in Dictator Game 2, socio-demographics
- [Children: Info about family, child's extra school activities, child's strengths and difficulties (Goodman, 1997) — answered by parents one week before start of experiment]

- Distribution of Moral Types in Morality Game:
  - *Adults*: 8.6% Cheaters, 41.2% Honest, 49.5% Control
  - *Children*: 15.7% Cheaters, 36.7% Honest, 47.6% Control
- Sharing in Dictator Game 1: No significant differences in baseline generosity between the three moral types in either sample.

All results confirmed with Tobit regressions

Main Result: Altruistic Sharing
Adults (ages 17-30, N = 198)
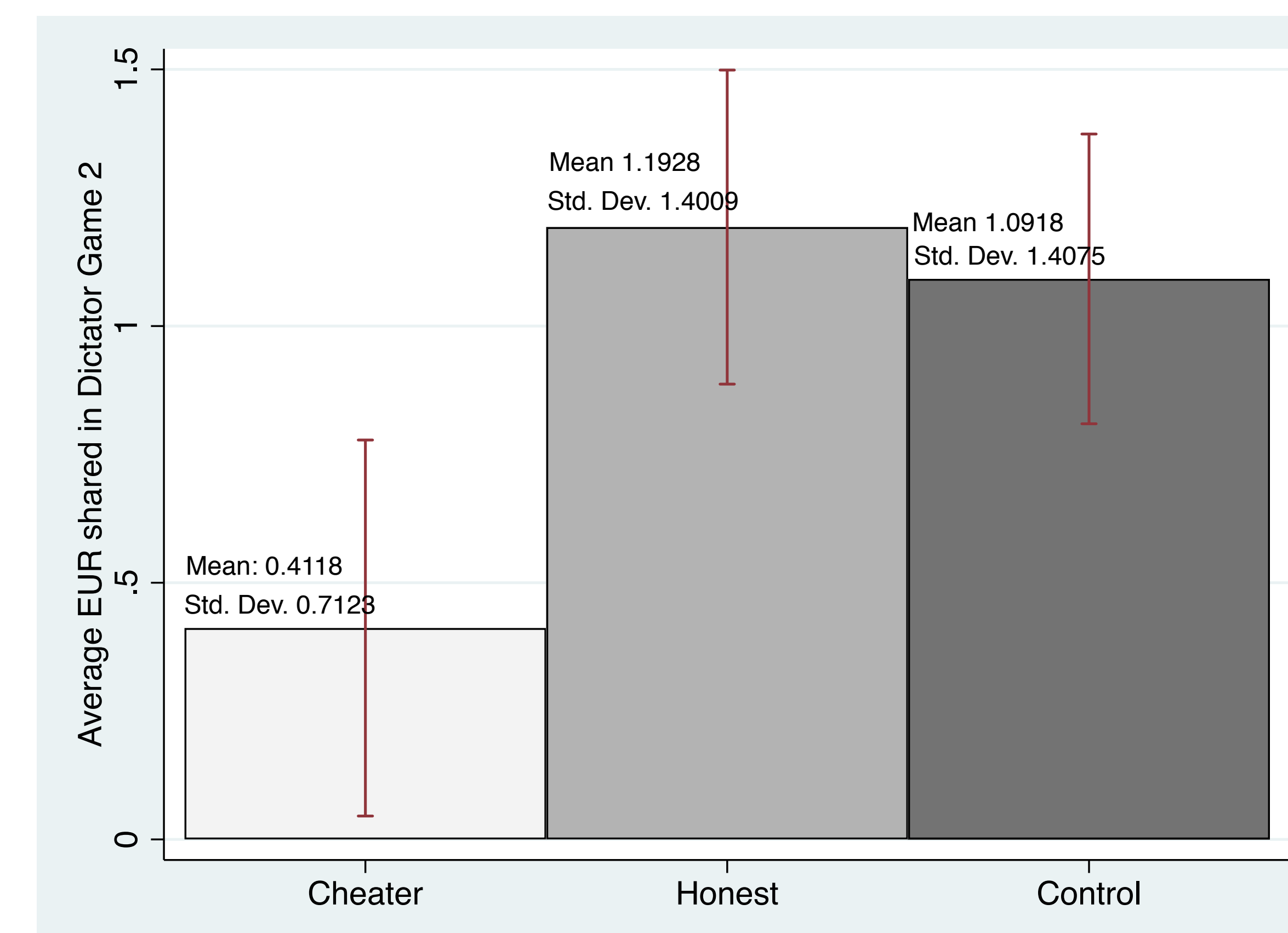
Children (ages 6-12, N = 191)
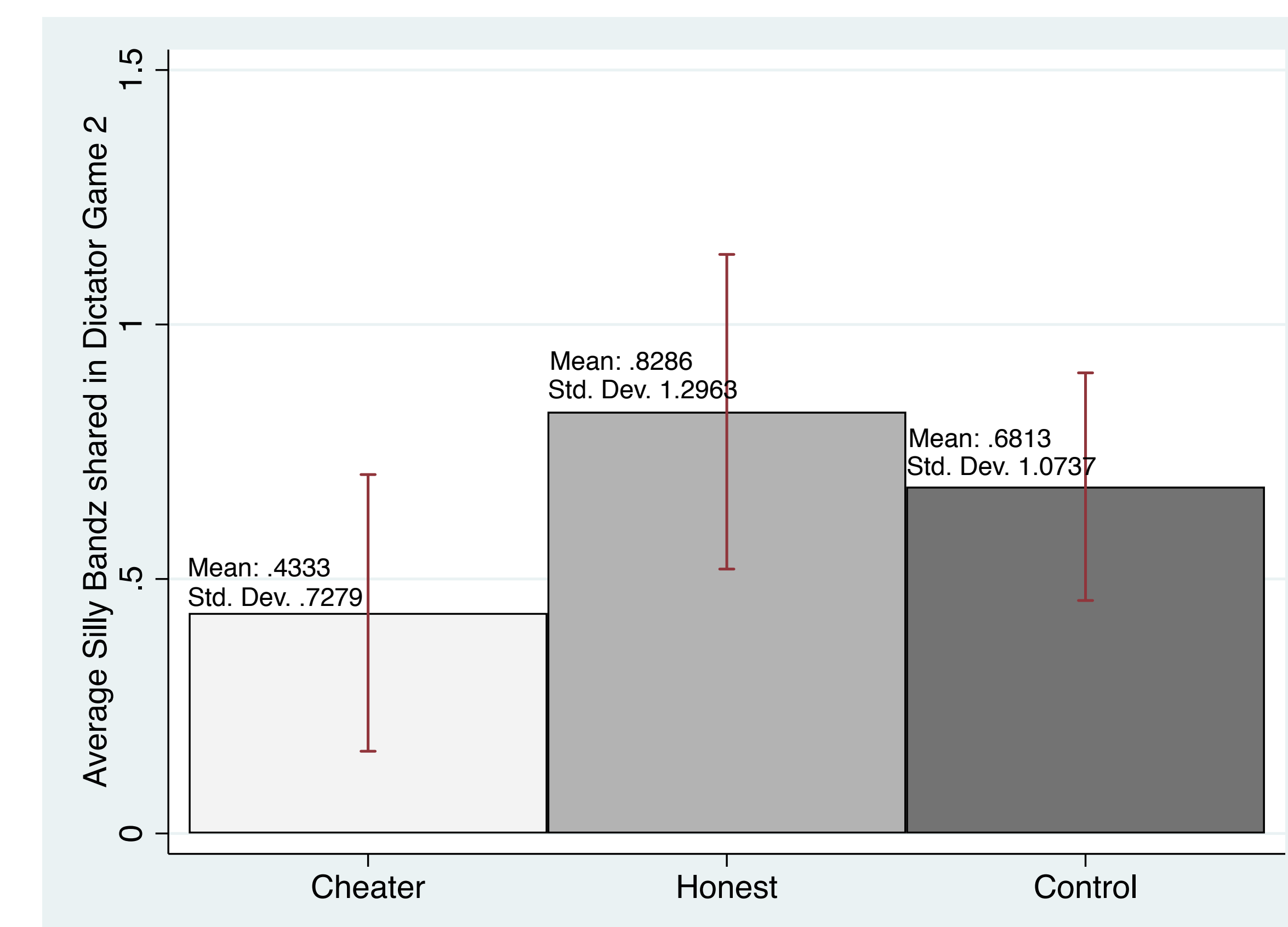
Discussion

➡ **A deliberate decision to cheat for personal gain has immediate detrimental effects**: Individuals, who previously did not differ in their self- versus other-regarding preferences (i.e. altruistic sharing in a dictator game) subsequently became more selfish.

➡ Our findings are consistent across both, adults and children, as well as across age, gender and household education level within each sample, suggesting **a relatively early developed and stable (i.e. more fundamental) dynamic of social degradation** following a deliberate violation of a moral principle.

Key References

Cojoc, D., & Stoian, A. (2014), Dishonesty and charitable behavior, *Experimental Economics,* 17, 717-732.

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Rahwan, Z., Hauser, O. P., Kochanowska, E., & Fasolo, B. (2018), High stakes: A litte more coating, a lot less charity. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization,* 152, 276-295.