

Self-Selection and Dishonest Behavior: A Field Experiment on Hours Worked Reporting



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INTRODUCTION

Do cheaters select environments that enable cheating? In a field experiment, we tested whether employees perform their online tasks honestly and whether enabling the choice of an environment where cheating is possible will lead to an escalation of cheating. Moreover, we explored whether the selection of the cheating-enabling environment or the actual overreporting are associated with honesty-humility.

METHODS

Participants

We analyzed behavior of 284 employees (56 % female) hired by an IT firm to perform a task online.

Procedure

Hired applicants received a link to an introductory online training containing a description of the work and two ways of reporting the work hours: **manual reporting (MR)** and **automatic reporting (AR)**. Afterward, employees were divided into **two groups**. Two-thirds of participants assigned to **the experimental group chose between MR and AR**. In the MR, participants were asked to write a statement of the hours worked on the project and sent it to a project manager after their work was completed. As they were able to misreport the number of hours, **the MR condition enabled them to cheat**. In the AR scheme, the work hours were counted automatically and they only confirmed the hours worked by email after the work was completed. **Cheating was, therefore, not possible in the AR condition**. Those in **the control group were directly assigned to the MR**. The time on the task (mouse movement, clicking), as well as participants' inactivity (defined as 10 or more seconds of no mouse movement), were automatically measured for all employees.

After finishing their work, participants received a questionnaire containing measures of honesty-humility, conscientiousness, and emotionality from the HEXACO scale [1] and questions about satisfaction with the job and the remuneration for work performed, frequency of similar temporary jobs and perceived difficulty of the task. Voluntary completion of this questionnaire was compensated with an additional financial reward; 227 participants (i.e., 80%) completed the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Out of 186 employees assigned to the experimental condition, 131 opted for AR. We computed the difference between automatically recorded and reported time worked for employees who opted for or were assigned to MR ($N = 153$). Although employees significantly overreported their hours worked, $Z = 2.742$, $p = .006$, the median overreported time was only 5 minutes (see Figure 1). Unexpectedly, underreporting was quite common; 22 % of employees underreported more than 10 minutes and 16 % underreported 10 minutes or less. Twenty-two per cent of employees overreported 10 or less minutes and the remaining 40 % overreported more than 10 minutes. Only 15 participants overreported more than an hour and only 7 overreported more than two hours.

Using linear regression with reported time worked as the

dependent variable and centered automatically measured time, effect-coded experimental condition, and their interaction as predictors, we found no evidence of a difference in overreporting between employees who opted for MR and those who were assigned to it, $b = -4.49$, 95% CI $[-30.02, 21.04]$, $p = .729$, $\eta^2_p = .001$, as well as no significant interaction between the condition and automatically measured time, $b = 0.105$, 95% CI $[0.100, 0.310]$, $p = .312$, $\eta^2_p = .007$. There was also no significant correlation between honesty-humility and overreporting, $r_s = -.113$, 95% CI $[-.285, .661]$, $p = .214$, or self-selection into the MR scheme, $r_s = .012$, 95% CI $[-.148, .171]$, $p = .833$.

SUMMARY

- Although we found that people in MR slightly overreported the hours worked, employees who chose MR did not overreport their hours more than those who were assigned to MR at random.
- Moreover, participants lower in honesty-humility were not more likely to choose MR.
- The results show that even when enabled to cheat, online workers reported their hours worked honestly and the possibility for cheaters to select cheating enabling environments may not always lead to an increase of dishonesty in organizations.

REFERENCES

[1] Ashton, M. C., & Lee, K. (2009). The HEXACO-60: A short measure of the major dimensions of personality. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 91(4), 340-345.

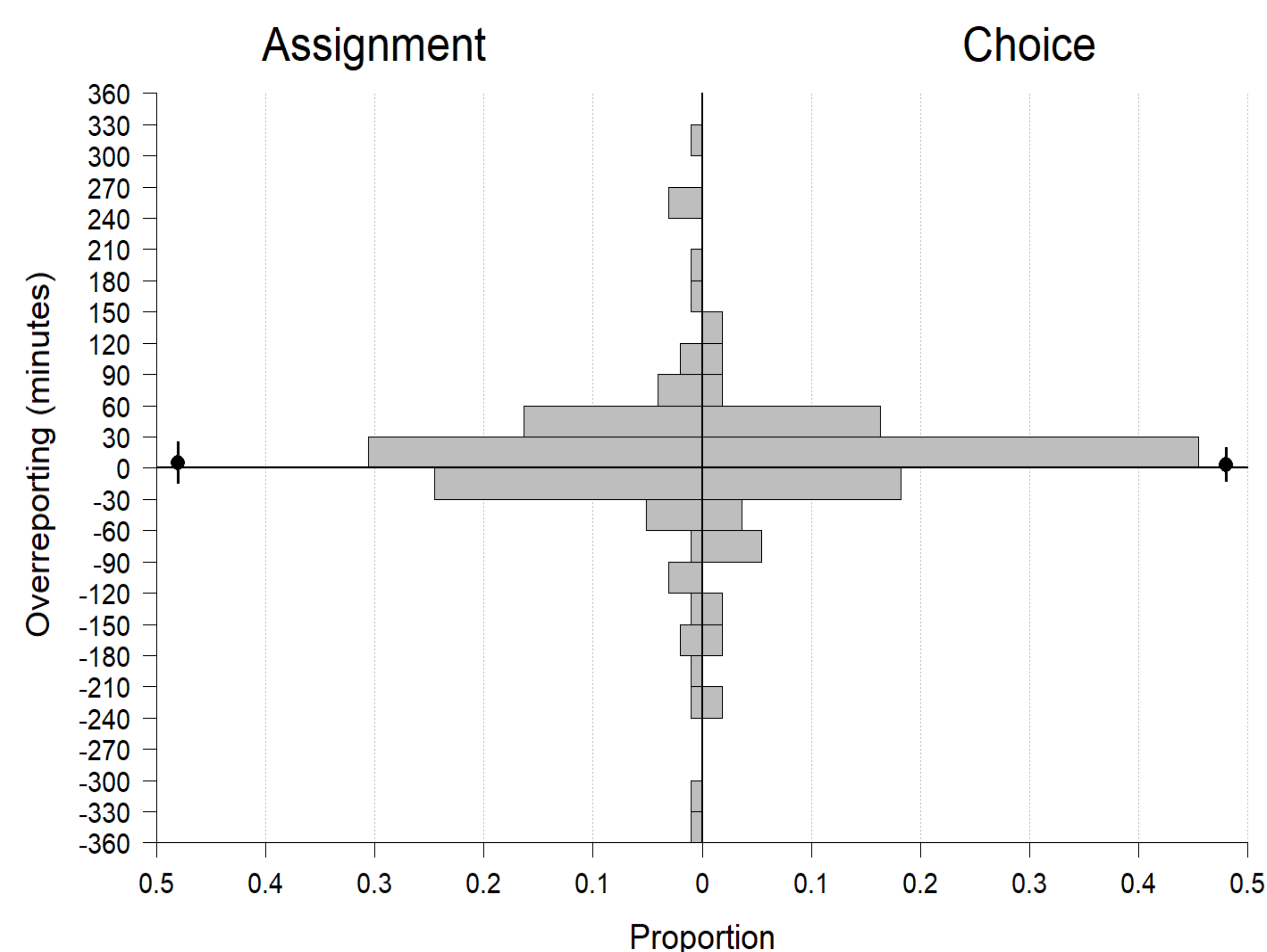


Figure 1. Overreporting of hours worked by participants with manual reporting. The histogram shows the distribution of under- and over-reporting of hours worked by participants assigned to the MR scheme and participants who chose it themselves. The points and error bars show means and 95% confidence intervals for the means of the two groups.