



Case Study : Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly?



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Article

A recent study published in *Nature Human Behaviour* suggests that making a promise to be honest — known as an honesty oath — can encourage people to tell the truth, even when they have a reason to lie. Researchers from Aarhus University in Denmark studied over 21,000 people in the UK and US, using an online game where participants earned money and had to report their income. They were told that 35% of their earnings would be taxed with the money going to the Red Cross, but they could lie about how much they made to pay less tax without any consequences.

Some participants were asked to make one of 21 honesty oaths, while others made no promise. These oaths varied in wording and timing — some were general, like “I am an honest person,” while others were specific, such as “I will provide honest income when reporting.” Some people simply ticked a box to agree to the oath, while others had to type it out.

The results showed that about 25.1% of the participants lied to reduce their tax, with 28.1% of those claiming they earned nothing. However, only 10 of the 21 oaths actually reduced dishonesty. The most effective ones were clear, direct, and closely tied to the task. For example, the best-performing oath cut dishonesty almost in half. Oaths that were too vague or focused on feelings of guilt were not effective.

Typing the oath instead of ticking a box also made some oaths more powerful, likely because it made people think more about what they were promising. The timing of the oath didn't matter much but saying it just before reporting income worked slightly better.

While these promises didn't stop all lying, they did help reduce it, offering a simple and cheap way to encourage honesty — not just in taxes, but in workplaces and everyday life too.

To access the full paper, please visit the article and follow the link at the very bottom: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-02009-0>

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Links to Specification

2.2 Experiments

2.2.1 Designing and conducting experiments including field and laboratory experiments.

2.2.2 Independent and dependent variables.

6.1.2 Social explanations including labelling, self-fulfilling prophecy.

6.2.3 Issues of reliability, validity, objectivity, credibility and ethics in research in criminological psychology.

6.2.4 Data analysis

- Analysis of quantitative data: Calculating measures of central tendency.
- Analysis of, use of, and drawing conclusions from quantitative data including use of inferential statistical testing.

6.6 Issues and debates.

- Psychology as a science.

Recommended revision and research activities:

What is an independent variable and how were they operationalised in this study?

What is a dependent variable and how was it operationalised in this study?

Challenge task: Summarise the results of the Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly? study. Explain how they could be used to reduce crime and recidivism.

Why may the results not be useful in reducing crime and recidivism?

Exam style questions*

1. Describe the results from the Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly? study. (2)
2. Explain one strength of the Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly? study in terms of validity. (2).
3. Explain one strength and one weakness of the use of quantitative data in the Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly? study. (4)

[\(Click here to view Model Response sections\)](#)

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

Evaluate one biological treatment for offenders. (8)

Assess whether psychology is a science (8)

*Exam style questions are not necessarily the exact format of those that will appear in the qualification examination papers but are written to elicit student responses that meet the assessment criteria, which are exemplified by the answers provided. The length of response in the answers is not indicative of expected student responses, and are provided to support centre teaching, student practice and self-assessment.





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Model Response - [Click here to return to question page](#)

Exam style questions:

Describe the results from the Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly? study. (2)

Zickfield et al. found that 25.1% of the participants were dishonest about their tax returns with 28.1% of those who were dishonest evading all taxes (1). It was found that there was a significant increase in honesty in those who had completed an honesty oath compared to the control group who had not (1).

Explain one strength of the Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly? study in terms of validity. (2).

The task is realistic as people do fill in tax returns and they do have to tick a box saying what they have written is accurate, so the study has validity (1) as the results are more likely to reflect how honest people are in real life depending on the type of honesty oath they have to submit (1).

Explain **one** strength and **one** weakness of the use of quantitative data in the 'Do honesty oaths really make us behave honestly?' study. (4)

One strength of using quantitative data in the form of income stated is that it is objective and does not require interpretation from the experimenters (1), which increases the reliability of the study as other researchers could check the data on the effects of honesty oaths to see if the results are consistent and can be replicated (1).

One weakness of using quantitative data is that the researchers do not get any detail about why the participants did not accurately fill in their income (1), which reduces the validity of the study as it may be because they did not want their money going to the Red Cross rather than they are dishonest about their taxes (1)

Marks awarded and commentary

Q1. This answer gains both marks as there are two clear, and accurate descriptive points about what the results of the study were. 1 mark is for the percentage of participants who were dishonest. The second mark is for the point about a significant difference between the two groups.

Q2. This answer gets both marks. The answer is focused on task validity and has identified how the task is realistic for the first mark. The second mark comes from the justification of this point about how this means that the results reflect real life.

Q3. This answer gains all 4 marks. The strength gains two marks, 1 mark for identifying how quantitative data is objective, with a clear link to what the quantitative data was in this study. They then go on to justify this as a strength in terms of reliability and being able to gain consistent results.

The weakness also gets 2 marks. 1 mark for identifying a weakness as the fact they do not get an explanation for why people were dishonest with a clear link to this study. The answer then justifies this in terms of validity and how there may be other reasons for the dishonesty.





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Model Responses - ([Click here to return to question page](#))

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

Evaluate one biological treatment for offenders. (8)

AO1: One biological treatment is drug therapy, such as MPA, which targets testosterone to reduce aggressive criminal behaviour. It reduces the production of testosterone as well as lowering the impact testosterone has on the body and breaking down testosterone quicker. All of this means that a criminal's sexual drive is lowered making it more likely that they will not reoffend.

AO3: However, the use of hormone therapy reduces the behaviour but does not reduce the cognitive reasons behind the behaviour so may not be an effective long-term cure. This is supported by the findings of Zickfield et al. as it contradicts then biological claim about hormone treatment and suggests that getting offenders to write out a statement about how they would not reoffend would also help reduce recidivism and could be used as part of the treatment of offenders to hopefully change their cognitive processes around offending.

Assess whether psychology is a science (8)

AO1: To be scientific variables must be empirical, which means that the behaviour should be directly observable. This is usually done through the use of experiments where the dependent variable is observed and measured to determine if the independent variable had an effect on it. Quantitative data is often empirical.

AO3: Zickfield et al. can be considered to be scientific as it gathered empirical data in the form of how much earnings the participants wrote down on their tax return after having signed honesty oaths. This is quantitative data as there is no interpretation needed, the number was written down and it either was or was not their total earnings. However, as this was not a real tax return with any consequences it could be considered that this reduces the empiricism as the actual impact of honesty oaths in real life is not being observed.

Level awarded and commentary

Evaluate one biological treatment for offenders. (8)

The first paragraph demonstrates accurate and through knowledge about drug therapy (AO1). Other similar paragraphs may focus on the reasoning behind drug therapy, the use of drugs that target neurotransmitters such as serotonin, and other drugs that target male androgens.

The second paragraph demonstrates a well-developed logical evaluation in the form of an alternative therapy with the use of the results of the study to support that an alternative therapy may be better than drug therapy. Other similarly structured paragraphs could focus on studies that show drug therapy works, issues with drug therapy such as side effects and non-compliance, and studies that show drug therapy is not effective in the long term, which if all well developed could lead to a level 4 response.

Assess whether psychology is a science (8)

The AO1 shows accurate and through knowledge of a factor that makes a science (AO1). Other paragraphs could include other factors that make a subject a science, such as reductionism, reliability, falsifiability and the use of controls.

The AO3 is logical and well-developed with a judgement in the form of whether psychology is a science. It uses the data collected by Zickfield et al. to support why psychology could be seen as scientific and also offers an opposing argument about how it may not be scientific. Further paragraphs with this level of detail and explanation would enable the answer to get level 4, as long as there was a balance between issues that had and had not been resolved.

