

Winners Overlook Rigged Games' Lack of Fairness, Study Finds

By The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON — When it comes to fairness and privilege, a new study finds it really is not about how you play the game. It's about whether you win or lose.

A new experiment, played out as a card game, shows that even when the deck is literally stacked in people's favor — and they know it — most winners still think it's fair anyway. Losers don't, according to a study in Wednesday's journal *Science Advances* .

The study "tells us something about privilege and about society," said Bates College sociologist Emily Kane, who wasn't part of the research. "It reminds us how powerful perceptions are — it's not just what is happening that matters, it's often more a matter of what we think is happening," she wrote in an email.

The research shows how people who have advantages in life can give themselves too much credit in explaining how they got so far, Kane said.

It all started when some Cornell University sociology graduate students were playing a card game that rewards someone who has already won. Study lead author Mario D. Molina noticed that people who won — because the rules benefited them — thought it was their skill, when it mostly wasn't.

So Molina and colleagues created their own game that would take away randomness as much as possible and rewarded winners by letting them discard their worst cards and take away the losers' best cards. Nearly 1,000 players were shown how it works and how the game was rigged to help the winners.

The players were asked if the game was fair, based on luck or based on skill. Molina said 60% of the winners thought the game was fair, compared with 30% of the losers. And when it came to explaining who won, winners attributed it to talent three times more often than losers.

Once the game got even more unfair, with a second round of card exchanges to further benefit the winners, far fewer winners thought the game was fair. Molina called that "the Warren Buffett effect," after the billionaire who has called on higher taxes for the rich to level the playing field.

Molina said this is just a game and noted that the players tended to be younger, whiter and richer than America as a whole — so using these results to explain society more broadly could be too much of a leap. Yet he said it is useful when thinking about economic privilege.

The main message of the study was pessimistic, said Eliot Smith, a brain sciences professor at Indiana University who wasn't involved in the research: People have problems making moral judgments about fairness when it benefits them.

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This story has been corrected to show Eliot Smith is a brain sciences professor at Indiana University, not a sociologist at the University of Indiana.