Shaul Shalvi and

Carsten K. W. De Dreu

Oxytocin promotes group-serving dishonesty

*PNAS 2014* published ahead of print March 31, 2014

doi:10.1073/pnas.1400724111

**Abstract**

To protect and promote the well-being of others, humans may bend the truth and behave unethically. Here we link such tendencies to oxytocin, a neuropeptide known to promote affiliation and cooperation with others. Using a simple coin-toss prediction task in which participants could dishonestly report their performance levels to benefit their group’s outcome, we tested the prediction that oxytocin increases group-serving dishonesty. A double-blind, placebo-controlled experiment allowing individuals to lie privately and anonymously to benefit themselves and fellow group members showed that healthy males (*n* = 60) receiving intranasal oxytocin, rather than placebo, lied more to benefit their group, and did so faster, yet did not necessarily do so because they expected reciprocal dishonesty from fellow group members. Treatment effects emerged when lying had financial consequences and money could be gained; when losses were at stake, individuals in placebo and oxytocin conditions lied to similar degrees. In a control condition (*n* = 60) in which dishonesty only benefited participants themselves, but not fellow group members, oxytocin did not influence lying. Together, these findings fit a functional perspective on morality revealing dishonesty to be plastic and rooted in evolved neurobiological circuitries, and align with work showing that oxytocin shifts the decision-maker’s focus from self to group interests. These findings highlight the role of bonding and cooperation in shaping dishonesty, providing insight into when and why collaboration turns into corruption.