

# MORE OR LESS

This simple game can be played with as few as 3 participants or as many as 30 or 50, depending on class size and other constraints. Five to ten players is an ideal group size. The game involves giving away inexpensive items, such as coupons for coffee drinks or online music purchases, so the more participants you have, the more such materials will be needed. Preparation time is minimal and the game itself can be played in just a few minutes.

The game centers on a social situation called the *volunteer's dilemma*. Like all social dilemmas, this situation forces people to balance personal desires for gain against hopes for the community and their beliefs about how others are likely to act. Here, each player

makes a choice between a larger and a smaller reward. As long as enough people request the smaller reward, everybody gets exactly what they asked for—but if too many people opt for the larger reward, nobody gets anything. Therefore, players must consider their own willingness to accept less so that everybody gets something. In the real world, we experience this dilemma every time we are impatient to exit a bus, plane, or movie theater: as long as most people wait their turn, the line proceeds smoothly, but if too many people push ahead to get out first, everyone gets jammed up in the exit door. (This may sound trivial, but sometimes the plane or theater is on fire. In such cases, this social dilemma can lead to tragedy.)

## PROCEDURE

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### MATERIALS

- Discount coupons—for a local store, for coffee drinks, for online music purchases, or the like—in two denominations: one smaller (e.g., \$1) and the other larger (\$5). You could also use inexpensive knickknacks, like key fobs or stickers. Essentially, you need enough of each item to give away one or more to each student in the event that everyone receives something, which will depend on game play.
- Slips of paper and pens or pencils for students to record their choices.

### PREPARATION

Gather your rewards. If you are using coupons, separate them into two piles, one for smaller amounts and another for larger. Determine how many people will play the game. If you decide on a 10-player game and your class is larger than that, ask for 10 volunteers to play. Give each a piece of paper and a pencil.

## PROCEDURE (CONT'D)

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### INSTRUCTIONS (BASED ON A 10-PLAYER GAME)

Tell your students:

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This game is called More or Less. To play, all *each* of you has to do is make a simple choice: Do I want more, or do I want less? Specifically, do I want a \$5 coffee coupon (or other reward), or do I want a \$1 coffee coupon?

But here's the catch: As long as at least seven of you choose the smaller coupon, everyone gets exactly what they ask for. So if eight of you choose the \$1 coupon and two choose the \$5 coupon, each person gets exactly what was asked for.

But if fewer than seven of you choose the smaller coupon—that is, if four or more of you choose the larger—nobody gets anything. If five of you choose the \$1 and five choose the \$5, you're all out of luck.

Now you have one minute to talk amongst yourselves and decide how to choose. Then I'll ask *each* of you to hand me a slip of paper with your choice on it. I'll tally them and we'll see what happened. Make sure to put your initials on your papers. I won't announce each person's choice, but I'll need those initials to give you your rewards later—if you actually get a reward! Ready? ”

When you have all of the players' papers, tally them *without identifying individual* choices, then announce whether or not players will receive rewards. Give players their rewards later in individual meetings.

See the Variations section for different ways to run this activity.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- How did each of you decide what to choose? What was your reasoning process? Did you try to imagine how others would choose? How did you do that? Did you find yourself thinking about things such as human nature or trust? Did you ever compare what was in it for you and what was in it for the group?
- How might the game be different if you hadn't had a chance to talk about your choices first?
- What if we'd used different rewards? Suppose instead of \$1 and \$5 coupons, we'd played for either \$1,000 or \$5,000. How do you think your choices would have been different? Do you think the group would have been more or less likely to get rewards?
- Is this game about "fairness?" Does fairness mean that everyone gets the same thing? Is there always a clear way to determine what is and isn't fair? Where do we learn what's fair? Are we born with a sense of fairness?
- Can you think of real-world examples where something like this happens? Think about your own everyday life (school, family, interpersonal relations), other social situations (helping others, peer pressure), or even national and international political or economic situations.

## VARIATIONS

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- Try the game with a different threshold. What happens if you lower the threshold so that only 60% need to choose the smaller amount for players to receive rewards? If you raise it to 80% or even 90%?
- As suggested in the Discussion Questions, try it with a different kind of reward. Even fake money might change the way people play the game. What do your students predict?
- Players may choose differently if they can't negotiate first. Ask for the class to predict how that could change the game, then play a round and see if their prediction is confirmed.
- Anonymity may also affect players' choices. In this game, players' choices were anonymous. What would happen if players had to show their choices to everyone?
- Try the game by playing several rounds. What would happen if an average of 70% of players had to choose the smaller reward over 5 rounds?
- Give the players more time to think about their choices, perhaps by announcing the rules on one day and collecting paper slips the next. How do students think this will affect the outcome?

## RESOURCES

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### ***The Bonobo and the Atheist (2014)***

Influential primatologist Frans de Waal presents a persuasive case that morality is a product of evolution.

### ***Thinking Fast and Slow (2013)***

Nobel-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman discusses research suggesting that we have two ways of processing information—a quick, intuitive, often unconscious method and a slower, more deliberative method.

### ***Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them (2013)***

In this thought-provoking book, Harvard psychologist Joshua Greene reviews research on how people do and don't work together to solve common problems and discusses the implications for human societies.

### **Volunteer's Dilemma**

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer%27s\\_dilemma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer%27s_dilemma)

An introduction to the Volunteer's Dilemma.

### **Moral Behavior in Animals**

[ted.com/talks/frans\\_de\\_waal\\_do\\_animals\\_have\\_morals](http://ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_do_animals_have_morals)

Primatologist Frans de Waal discusses research suggesting that nonhuman animals understand and use concepts like fairness and equity.

### **Elephants Lend a Helping Trunk, Pass Cooperation Test**

[wired.com/2011/03/elephant-cooperation](http://wired.com/2011/03/elephant-cooperation)

These clips show elephants engaging in cooperative behavior—more evidence that behaviors we often associate only with humans can be found in other creatures.

### **Bystander Effect**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander\\_effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect)

A discussion of social psychological research on the *bystander effect*, a situation in which people may not offer help to someone in need.



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