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College Admissions Scandal: A Psychologist on Why a Parent Would Cheat and Lie to Get Their Kids Into School

Actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman are two of 50 people charged in one of the biggest college admissions scandals of all time.

By **Samantha Lauriello**

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If you remember how damn hard you worked to get into college *and* how stressed you were as you waited to see where you would be accepted, then you must certainly have strong feelings about college admissions scandal surrounding *Full House* actress Lori Loughlin and *Desperate Housewives*' Felicity Huffman, and their families.

Clearly, the legal system does, too: On Friday, August 21, Loughlin, 56, was sentenced to two months in prison, along with a \$150,000 fine for her involvement in the scandal, while her husband Mossimo Giannulli received a five-month prison sentence and a \$250,000 fine, according to [USA Today](#). Huffman, too, previously served 11 days of a two-week prison sentence, and was ordered to pay a \$30,000 fine in 2019, per [CNN](#).



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The \$25 million bribery scheme the actresses and their families participated in aimed to get students into top universities like Yale and Stanford by cheating on college admissions tests like the SAT and ACT. They also reportedly bribed college athletics coaches to recruit students for their teams—even though the kids weren't competitive athletes and never intended to play. Some parents paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to facilitate these bribes, and many did so without their children knowing. So that leaves us with one question: Why?

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[Robert Feldman](#), PhD, a professor of psychology at University of Massachusetts Amherst, has spent years researching how people use lying strategically in their social interactions. He also has three children who went to college. Needless to say, he has many thoughts on why these parents crossed the line.

"There's an overriding idea that you have to protect your kids, so you feel this is just one more thing you do to pave the way for your kids to be successful," Feldman tells *Health*. "This wasn't the first thing they did to make life easy for their kids. This wasn't the first step they took, but probably one in a series of many steps to help their kids appear to be successful. It's just one more step."

These parents likely got used to helping their children take other kinds of shortcuts, Feldman explains, such as shelling out big bucks for the best high schools, the right wardrobe to fit in socially, and cars that made them popular. Getting them into college, then, was just another thing to check off the list.

Other factors also explain why these parents chose to lie and cheat. They may have had no faith in their child's abilities, or they wanted to spare their kid the embarrassment of a string of college rejection letters. They also likely wanted to uphold their child's reputation, and more importantly, uphold their own reputation as parents—something Feldman calls the "phenomenon of reflected glory."

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"If your kid is going to Stanford or Yale, that reflects very well on you," he says. "You want your son or daughter to not only do well but to look like they're doing well to others."

But getting your child into a top-notch college doesn't mean you have to do something illegal. A percentage of rich parents have always donated crazy amounts of money to their child's school of choice, knowing the cash would grease the wheels in the admissions office. So if you're wealthy enough to take a sketchy-yet-legal side door, why choose to take a blatantly illegal back door and risk criminal charges if you're caught?

Of course, Loughlin, Huffman, and the other parents who were indicted didn't think anyone would ever uncover what they did. They thought they found a way to make it look like their child got accepted to a great college on their own merit, without the help of their parents' money. But Feldman says there may be another reason they decided to play dirty. Some people, the wealthy in particular, get satisfaction out of being able to cheat the system.

He says it "reinforces their sense of entitlement," meaning if someone already feels superior to other people, breaking the rules and getting away with it only enhances that feeling. Feldman adds that when a famous person is constantly showered with public praise and adulation, they can easily start believing that flattery is deserved, and that they really *are* better than the average person.

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Transcripts from wiretapped phone calls make it clear that the parents did know they were breaking the law. What's remarkable, however, is that they didn't seem to think it was a big deal.

Apparently, being wealthy makes the law seem a lot less scary, even when you're committing a felony. "Money buys you the opportunity to get your way," Feldman says, adding that it's not uncommon for wealthy people to get used to having the freedom to bribe and cheat to cut corners. "It would be shocking to me if we

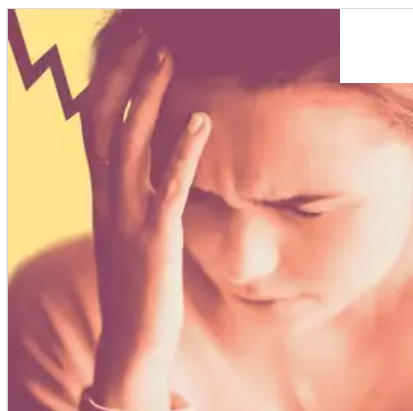
looked into these people's lives and this was the very first thing they did that was dishonest," he comments.

Again, some of the students had no idea about what their parents did, and the news came as a total shock. "All of us have something called imposter syndrome," Feldman says. The average college student regularly doubts their abilities and worries that they aren't as smart as their peers, he explains, adding, "now these students found out that in fact they are the imposters." That would take a serious toll on anyone, and because it's been exposed in such a public way, it can be very difficult to process.

We can't know for sure what these parents were thinking when they got involved in this scheme, but we do know there's nothing that could justify their actions. They likely knew that, too. "These people are successful, they're not stupid," Feldman says. "There's no bubble that you could live in that where you could think that this wasn't not only illegal, but also totally immoral."

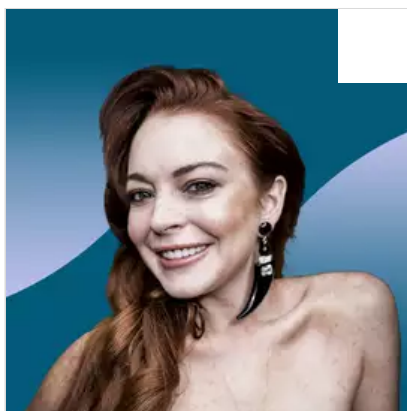
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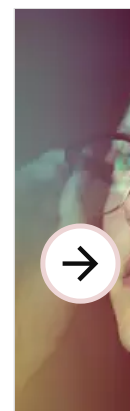
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