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Creativity in unethical behavior attenuates condemnation and breeds social contagion when transgressions seem to create little harm

Scott S. Wiltermuth [a,*], Lynne C. Vincent [b], Francesca Gino [c]

[a] University of Southern California, United States
[b] Syracuse University, United States
[c] Harvard University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Across six studies, people judged creative forms of unethical behavior to be less unethical than less creative forms of unethical behavior, particularly when the unethical behaviors imposed relatively little direct harm on victims. As a result of perceiving behaviors to be less unethical, people punished highly creative forms of unethical behavior less severely than they punished less-creative forms of unethical behavior. They were also more likely to emulate the behavior themselves. The findings contribute to theory by showing that perceptions of competence can positively color morality judgments, even when the competence displayed stems from committing an unethical act. The findings are the first to show that people are judged as morally better for performing bad deeds well as compared to performing bad deeds poorly. Moreover, the results illuminate how the characteristics of an unethical behavior can interact to influence the emulation and diffusion of that behavior.

1. Introduction

People often differ in how immoral they regard transgressions to be (e.g., Crissman, 1942; Rettig & Pasamanick, 1959). Even transgressions that violate the same ethical principles and create the same amounts of harm for the same victims can evoke drastically different degrees of condemnation from different people (Gorsuch & Smith, 1972; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Lovett, Jordan, & Wiltermuth, 2012; Wiltermuth, Monin, & Chow, 2010). Moreover, the same person may have two quite different reactions to seeing two transgressions that violate the same ethical principles and generate equivalent amounts of harm (Edmonds, 2013). For example, people may judge an ingeniously creative jewelry heist to be less unethical than a simple smash-and-grab heist that nets the same jewels.

This apparent inconsistency in moral opinions clearly has costs. People may question the fairness and legitimacy of systems when similar transgressions yield different reactions from onlookers and different punishments from authorities (see Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001 for review). Conflicts can surface when only some people see a type of behavior as immoral, and tensions can arise when societies or organizations deploy resources to curb behavior that only a part of the population condemns. Understanding the factors that shape people's moral judgments might therefore be useful in allowing individuals to predict when people are likely to condemn behaviors, when they are likely to take little notice of them, and when they are likely to approve of them. Because transgressions are learned (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009), understanding the factors that shape people's moral judgments of others' transgressions might also be useful in predicting which types of misdeeds are likely to become socially contagious.

Fortunately, scholars have devoted significant attention to understanding these factors and the roots of moral diversity. Dispositional differences, such as locus of control (Treviño, 1986), and moral development (Kohlberg, 1976) account for some of the diversity in moral judgments, as do situational differences (Treviño, 1986; Zey-Ferrell, Weaver, & Ferrell, 1979). For example, being in a strongly ethics-focused organizational culture can increase moral condemnation (Douglas, Davidson, & Schwartz, 2001), as can possessing power within an organization (Wiltermuth and Flynn, 2013). Moreover, the interaction of dispositional factors and situational factors (Treviño, 1986), as well as issue-specific factors about the transgression and its consequences (e.g., Edmonds, 2013), can influence moral judgments. In particular, Jones (1991) theorized, and other researchers have demonstrated empirically, that social consensus and magnitude of consequence each strongly influence how aware people are that

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: wiltermu@usc.edu (S.S. Wiltermuth).

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a behavior involves morality and, consequently, how harshly they condemn that behavior (Barnett, 2001; Butterfield, Trevino, & Weaver, 2000; Chia & Mee, 2000; Frey, 2000; Harrington, 1997).

Yet, our collective understanding of what leads people to judge others lightly or harshly for their misdeeds is far from complete. So too is our collective understanding of the factors that lead people to emulate unethical behavior. In particular, little is known about how the style in which people transgress affects people's judgments of those transgressions and their likelihood of emulating those transgressions. In this paper, we draw from research on person perception (e.g., Wojciszke, 1994) and existing models of moral judgment (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño, 1986) to enrich those models and illuminate how people react to unethical behaviors that display creativity. We use Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model of moral judgment, which holds that affectively laden moral intuitions drive moral judgment, to provide the overarching theoretical framework that allows us to understand and predict the effects of creativity on people's judgments of transgressions and likelihoods of emulating them. Specifically, we argue that people view creativity as a positive, valuable trait and that this perception provides creative cheaters with a halo that simultaneously makes their transgressions more palatable and more socially contagious – particularly when the transgressions appear to cause relatively little harm. We therefore examine whether creativity in transgressions influences how socially punitive people are toward those who commit those transgressions. We also examine whether creativity influences how likely people are to emulate those transgressions themselves because the creativity attenuates how harshly people would judge themselves for committing these transgressions. Although previous research has shown that judgments of competence can positively color judgments of sociality and ethicality (e.g., Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968), this work is the first to show that the competence exhibited in acting unethically can reduce how unethical the act and the actor are judged to be.

In examining how the creativity of an act affects moral judgment, we hope to make three main contributions to theory. First, we add to the literature on social perception by showing that judgments of people's competence can positively affect judgments of their warmth and morality, even when those perceptions of competence stem from behavior that most people would consider to be unethical. Second, we show that people's judgments of the unethicality of behaviors depend in part on the style with which people behave unethically. Whereas previous research on the moral intensity of issues has examined how characteristics of the consequences of the action affect how strongly compelled people feel to act in a morally correct fashion (e.g., Jones, 1991; McMahon & Harvey, 2007), our work shows that *how* people violate ethical norms also affects the strength of this compulsion. Our work therefore builds on the social-intuitionist model of moral judgment (Haidt, 2001) and Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen's dual process model (2008) by illustrating a new factor that affects moral judgment. Third, we contribute to the literature on social contagion by examining how the characteristics of an unethical behavior interact with other characteristics of the unethical behavior to influence the repetition and diffusion of that behavior.

1.1. Factors influencing moral judgment

Scholars have debated how much people rely upon conscious reasoning or intuition when engaging in moral judgment (e.g., Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Pizarro, Uhlmann & Bloom, 2003), which is the process by which people decide that one course of action is morally right and another course of action is morally wrong (Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997). Kohlberg (1969, 1976) and followers have emphasized the role of conscious reasoning, and Haidt (2001) has emphasized the role of intuition; Greene and colleagues (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) have proposed dual-process models in which conscious reasoning drives utilitarian judgments and intuitions drive deontological or rule-based judgements.

The usage of these models of moral judgment has influenced which factors scholars have identified as drivers of moral judgment. Kohlberg's (1976) focus on moral reasoning led early empirical research to examine how developmental stage (Eisenberg-Berg, 1979), personality traits (Treviño, 1986), and gender (Bussey & Maughan, 1982; Franke, Crown, & Spake, 1997) influence moral judgment by influencing moral reasoning. Later research has considered how the characteristics of moral issues affect how people consciously reason about issues (McGraw, 1987). As Jones (1991) postulated and subsequent researchers have empirically tested (Barnett, 2001; Harrington, 1997; Morris & McDonald, 1995; Singer, Mitchell, & Turner, 1998; Singer & Singer, 1997), people judge behaviors more harshly when those behaviors create or are likely to create great harm for others, create immediate harm, create harm for people physically or emotionally close to the people judging, or have concentrated harmful effects. More recently, research has shown that the degree to which people could generate plausible explanations for behaving unethically influenced their own and others' moral judgments of those acts (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Shalvi & Leiser, 2013).

People do not appear, however, to have access to all of the factors that affect their moral judgment (Cushman et al., 2006). This disconnect between the factors that people think affects moral judgment and what actually affects moral judgment is consistent with both Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model and Greene's dual-process model (Greene et al., 2008). It is also consistent with much of the empirical research stemming from these models in that it shows that a large number of subtle situational cues that may not appear relevant to the moral judgment itself can nonetheless influence the severity of moral judgment. To wit, the cleanliness of the physical environments in which moral judgments are made (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005) and the time of day at which those judgments are made (Gunia, Barnes, & Sah, 2014; Kouchaki & Smith, 2014) can affect moral judgment.

Although most behavioral ethics scholars acknowledge that a host of subtle situational factors can influence moral judgment, extant research has not systematically examined whether, for a given level of harm, the way in which people behave unethically influences moral judgment. Research has not explored, for example, whether people would judge an ingenious theft that displays extraordinary creativity to be as unethical as a simple theft that yields the same rewards. Exploring how the creativity of a transgression affects how people judge the unethicality of the transgression may allow for a fuller understanding of how harshly people are to punish these transgressions. It may also reveal whether creativity in a transgression alters how people would feel about committing such a transgression and, ultimately, how likely they are to emulate such transgressions.

1.2. Creativity and social judgment

Creativity is often defined as the ability to produce ideas that are both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful, adaptive to task constraints) (Amabile, 1983, 1988). Creativity correlates with perceptions of competence in many domains (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). People who display creativity in their unethical behavior may therefore be judged more positively on the competence/agency dimension of social judgment than would peo-