



# Self-serving altruism? The lure of unethical actions that benefit others



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 March 2013

Accepted 1 April 2013

Available online 17 April 2013

### Keywords:

Cheating

Ethical judgment

Morality

Social utility

Unethical behavior

## ABSTRACT

In three experiments, we propose and find that individuals cheat more when others can benefit from their cheating and when the number of beneficiaries of wrongdoing increases. Our results indicate that people use moral flexibility to justify their self-interested actions when such actions benefit others in addition to the self. Namely, our findings suggest that when people's dishonesty would benefit others, they are more likely to view dishonesty as morally acceptable and thus feel less guilty about benefiting from cheating. We discuss the implications of these results for collaborations in the social realm.

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## 1. Introduction

It seems a day does not go by without a revelation of unethical behavior by a politician, a movie star, a professional athlete, or a high-ranking executive. To take one example, in 2007, Major League Baseball pitcher Andy Pettitte was accused of using human growth hormones, a substance banned by the league. Pettitte publicly confessed that he did not take the drugs “to try to get an edge,” but rather to try to get off the disabled list so that he “would not let his team down.” According to Pettitte, his unethical actions were motivated by the benefits that would accrue to others rather than by potential direct benefits to himself.

How does the presence of others who may benefit from our dishonesty influence our willingness to cross ethical boundaries? This paper suggests that the potential benefits dishonesty may create for others not only help people justify their bad behavior but also act as a (self-serving) motivator for it. We propose and find that by focusing on the social utility of others, people can more freely categorize their own actions in positive terms and avoid negative updating of their moral self-image (Baumeister, 1998; Mazar et al., 2008; Schweitzer and Hsee, 2002). As a result, people feel less guilty about their dishonest behavior when others (in addition to themselves) can benefit from it.

### 1.1. Cheating motivated by potential benefits to others

Ethical dilemmas often involve an apparent conflict: by behaving ethically, people can maintain their positive self-image; by behaving unethically, they can advance their self-interest (Gino et al., 2011; Mead et al., 2009). People often resolve this

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conflict through creative reassessments and self-serving rationalizations (Gino and Ariely, 2012; Shalvi et al., 2011), such that they can act dishonestly enough to profit from their unethicity but honestly enough to maintain a positive self-concept (e.g., Gino et al., 2009; Mazar et al., 2008). Recent research has found that when individuals have the opportunity to cheat when the probability of being caught and reputational costs are minimized, most people do cheat, but not as much as they could (e.g., Ayal and Gino, 2011; Gino et al., 2009). They cheat enough to benefit financially, but not to the extent that they feel obligated to negatively revise their self-image (Mazar and Ariely, 2006).

Using their creativity, people can recruit a variety of reasons to justify “minor” cheating (Gino and Ariely, 2012). For instance, they might decide that others would surely cheat under the same circumstances or that a little cheating would not hurt anyone. People may make these (self-serving) justifications to convince themselves and others that their behavior is in fact ethical (Diekmann, 1997; Gino and Ariely, 2012; Lewis et al., 2012). Wiltermuth (2011) found that people are more likely to behave unethically if they split the spoils of such behavior with another person than when they are the sole beneficiaries. They find it easier to discount the moral concerns associated with unethical behavior that benefits another person than to discount behavior that only benefits themselves (Wiltermuth, 2011; see also Erat and Gneezy, 2012; Gino and Pierce, 2010; Shalvi and Leiser, 2013). Overall, this research suggests that people use the potential benefits for others to justify their self-serving, often unethical actions. When dishonest actions only benefit the self, there can be little doubt that they were self-serving. But ambiguity clouds this clear motivation when others benefit from one’s cheating.

In addition to using others to justify selfish behavior, research shows that people truly care about improving the outcomes of their peers (Loewenstein et al., 1989). According to this research, the utility function that individuals gather from monetary outcomes is a composite of nonsocial utility (one’s own payment) and social utility (another’s payment) (Loewenstein et al., 1989; Messick and Sentis, 1985). Consistent with this explanation, research has found that concern for the outcomes and wellbeing of others can lead people to behave unethically when they feel empathy toward the beneficiaries of their dishonesty (Gino and Pierce, 2009) or feel similar to them (Gino et al., 2009).

Taken together, these findings suggest two different mechanisms through which the presence of other beneficiaries of one’s own dishonesty may lead to increased cheating. First, the presence of other beneficiaries may help people easily justify their dishonesty. Second, people may genuinely care about the potential benefits of their actions for others. We conducted three experiments to investigate how these two mechanisms interact to affect dishonesty.

## 1.2. Predictions

Our research contributes to prior work demonstrating that the presence of beneficiaries influences one’s own likelihood to behave dishonestly (e.g., Gino and Pierce, 2009; Wiltermuth, 2011) by distinguishing among different mechanisms that may explain greater cheating when benefits are split with others. In addition, our research considers cases in which more than one other person can benefit from one’s cheating. Finally, unlike prior investigations, this paper directly examines the consequences of cheating that only benefits oneself versus cheating that benefits oneself and others on both one’s levels of guilt and moral self-image. We predicted that although participants would be more likely to behave unethically when others in addition to themselves could benefit from their dishonesty, they would also experience less guilt after their cheating and thus be better able to preserve their moral self-image. We tested these hypotheses in three experiments in which participants had the opportunity to cheat.

## 2. Experiment 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants and design

Participants were 193 college and graduate students (105 male;  $M_{age} = 21$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) from local universities in a Midwestern U.S. city. The study employed two between-subjects manipulations: the possibility of cheating (control vs. shredder) and the party who stands to gain from the act of cheating (individual vs. dyad vs. group).

#### 2.1.2. Procedure

Participants received the entire set of instructions for the experiment, such that they knew exactly what it would involve. Each participant received a test sheet with 20 matrices and a separate collection slip on which to later write down how many of the matrices they solved correctly. Each matrix included a different set of 12 three-digit numbers (e.g., 6.18, see Mazar et al., 2008), and participants had 5 min to find two numbers per matrix that added up to 10. In all conditions, participants received \$0.50 for each matrix solved correctly.

In the individual-control condition, once the 5 min had passed, participants counted the number of matrices they had solved correctly and then wrote down that number on their collection slips. The experimenter verified the number once participants handed in their test sheet and paid them based on their performance.

In the individual-shredder condition, once the 5 min had passed, participants were asked to count the number of matrices they had correctly solved, place the test sheet into a shredder, and only then write down the number of correctly solved matrices on their collection slip. They then handed their collection slip to the experimenter and were paid based on their

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