

Dishonesty and Creativity: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

February 20, 2014

New research shows that lying about performance on one task may increase creativity on a subsequent task by making people feel less bound by conventional rules.

The findings are published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“The common saying that ‘rules are meant to be broken’ is at the root of both creative performance and dishonest behavior,” says lead researcher Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School. “Both creativity and dishonesty, in fact, involve rule breaking.”

To examine the link between dishonesty and creativity, Gino and colleague Scott Wiltermuth of the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California designed a series of experiments that allowed, and even sometimes encouraged, people to cheat.

In the first experiment, for example, participants were presented with a series of number matrices and were tasked with finding two numbers that added up to 10 in each matrix. They were told they would be compensated based on the number of matrices they had been able to solve and were asked to self-report the number they got correct. This setup allowed participants to inflate their own performance — what they didn’t know was that the researchers were able to track their actual performance.

In a subsequent and supposedly unrelated task, the participants were presented with sets of three words (e.g., sore, shoulder, sweat) and were asked to come up with a fourth word (e.g., cold) that was related to each word in the set. The task, which taps a person’s ability to identify words that are so-called “remote associates,” is commonly used to measure creative thinking.

Gino and Wiltermuth found that almost 59% of the participants cheated by inflating their performance on the matrices in the experiment.

And cheating on the matrices seemed to be associated with a boost to creative thinking — cheaters figured out more of the remote associates than those who didn’t cheat.

Subsequent experiments provided further evidence for a link between dishonesty and creativity, revealing that participants showed higher levels of creative thinking according to various measures after they had been induced to cheat on an earlier task.

Additional data suggest that cheating may encourage subsequent creativity by priming participants to be less constrained by rules.

Previous work has focused on the factors that might lead to unethical behavior. In earlier research, Gino

had found that encouraging out-of-the-box thinking can lead people toward more dishonest decisions when confronted with an ethical dilemma.

This research, however, focuses on the consequences of dishonesty:

“We turned the relationship upside down, in a sense,” says Gino. “Our research raises the possibility that one of the reasons why dishonesty seems so widespread in today’s society is that by acting dishonestly we become more creative — and this creativity may allow us to come up with original justifications for our immoral behavior and make us likely to keep crossing ethical boundaries.”

Gino and Wiltermuth are following up on these findings by investigating how people respond when dishonesty and creativity are combined in the form of “creative” cheating. Their initial findings suggest that people may give cheaters a pass if they cheat in particularly creative ways.