Professor James Moriarty had only a brief literary career, but his persona looms much larger than his deeds. Criminal mastermind and archenemy of Sherlock Holmes, the professor is remembered today as the archetypal evil genius. The same penetrating intellect that made Moriarty a mathematical prodigy also made him—in Holmes’ words—“the controlling brain of the underworld.”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s villain is not the only figure to embody both criminality and creativity. The mix of wit and deviltry has long fascinated storytellers, and today its intrigue is drawing the attention of psychological scientists as well. What do dishonesty and wit have in common, that they so readily occupy the same mind? Does creativity lead to unethical behavior, or do cheating and lying spur the imagination? Is creativity just a socially acceptable form of violating norms and breaking the rules?

Francesca Gino of the Harvard Business School is on the case, with some sleuthing assistance from Scott Wiltermuth of USC’s Marshall School of Business. The duo knew from previous work that creative thinking can sometimes nudge people toward questionable ethical decisions, but they were more interested in looking at it the other way around. Can nefarious behavior actually enhance creativity? They devised a series of experiments to untangle this ethical mystery.

The experiments were all variations on the same basic idea. In one, for example, subjects were assigned to a problem-solving task, one that deliberately allowed for them the opportunity to cheat: That is, they could easily inflate their scores—and by doing so take away more money. But what they didn’t know was that the scientists were observing them in the act, and keeping a record of their dishonest acts. Afterward, all the volunteers participated in a task that required creative thinking. The scientists expected that those who cheated would be more creative subsequently, and that’s just what they found, even when they controlled for inherent creative skills. Cheating wasn’t at all rare—indeed nearly six in ten finagled some undeserved cash—and these cheaters were much better at coming up with creative solutions to problems afterward. The investigators ran other versions of this experiment and got the same results.

But these findings still left open the question of motive. Why would wrongdoing make the mind more innovative and original? Gino and Wiltermuth reasoned that the link might be a heightened feeling of being unconstrained by rules. After all, both chiseling and creativity are forms of rule breaking—immoral in one case and admirable in the other. The duo tested this theory by again giving volunteers an opportunity to cheat on a task, followed by the same test of creative thinking. But in this case they also measured the subjects’ feelings of being constrained by rules. The rules were commonplace—like “No cycling here”—so violations were not vile. But violations did nevertheless indicate a rule-breaking state of mind.

The evidence was plain. As reported in an article to appear in the journal *Psychological Science*, those
who cheated also cared less about rules in general than did those who didn’t cheat. The swindlers were also better on every measure of creativity, and there was no doubt the rule-breaking mentality was the link between dishonesty and innovative thinking. The very act of cheating primed the mind for rule breaking in general, and this sense of freedom translated into creativity.

So two cheers for petty crime? No quite. The investigators’ findings raise the disturbing possibility that by acting dishonestly, people become more creative, which allows them to come up with more imaginative justifications for their odious and immoral actions. They might therefore become more likely to commit another, more serious, crime, creating a reinforcing cycle of criminality and creativity. The scientists speculate that this psychological dynamic could be a reason why dishonesty is so widespread in today’s society.

Professor Moriarty was an imaginary miscreant, but Bernie Madoff’s swindling was quite real, costing innocent people billions of dollars. And he is just the most famous of the evil geniuses at work in today’s underworld. These findings are clues for deconstructing the immoral mind, but there is much more to learn. The chase is afoot.

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