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Ideological Altruistic Cheating – Testing Robin Hood in a Lie Detector

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Abstract

Behavioral ethics research suggests that people strive to maintain a positive moral self, but at the same time, they are also tempted to benefit from unethical behavior. This conflict creates psychological distress defined as ethical dissonance (Barkan, Ayal & Ariely, 2015). Justifications, which turn cheating into the "right thing to do", were found to facilitate dishonesty and quantitatively increase the magnitude of cheating. The current study focuses on the specific type of justification that we termed *Altruistic-Cheating*, according to which people justify dishonest behavior by benefiting others. Measuring dishonesty in the lab with a subsequent lie detection test revealed that the presence of altruistic justification not only increased cheating behavior, but also reduced the physiological distress attached to it.

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Introduction

According to a recent psychological model of dishonesty, people are caught between a rock and a hard place (Ayal, Gino, Barkan & Ariely, 2015). On the one hand, people strive to maintain a positive self-image (Jones, 1973; Rosenberg, 1986), and value morality and honesty very highly (Chaiken et al., 1996; Greenwald, 1980; Sanitoso et al., 1990). On the other hand, most people are tempted to increase their personal gain by cheating, even if to a limited extent (Gino, Ayal & Ariely, 2009; Hochman, Fiedler, Glöckner & Ayal, 2016; Mazar et al., 2008; Ordóñez et al., 2009; Shalvi et al., 2011). This conflict creates psychological distress defined as ethical dissonance (Ayal & Gino, 2011; Barkan, Ayal & Ariely, 2015), which is manifested in increased physiological arousal (Hochman et al., 2016). As this arousal is unpleasant, it requires tension-reduction mechanisms which allow people to behave dishonestly while maintain a positive self-image (e.g., Barkan, Ayal, Gino & Ariely, 2012; Jordan, Mullen & Murnighan, 2011; Peer, Acquisti & Shalvi, 2014; Sachedva, Iliev & Medin, 2009).

Behavioral ethics research indicates that different type of justifications can serve as such tension-reduction mechanism (Shalvi, Gino, Barkan & Ayal, 2015). Such justifications were found to facilitate dishonesty and quantitatively increase the magnitude of cheating (e.g. Ariely, 2012; Ayal & Gino, 2011; Gino & Ariely, 2012; Shalvi et al., 2011; Ayal et al., 2016; Mazar et al., 2008). However, to our knowledge no direct evidence exists to show how these justifications effect the ethical dissonance people experience when tempted to cheat. The aim of the current study is to achieve this goal. While many kinds of justifications exist (e.g. Shalvi et al., 2015), in the current study the focus is on *Altruistic-cheating*, that is cheating that benefits others (e.g., Erat & Gneezy, 2015; Waisel & Shalvi, 2015).

Previous research shows that the benefit of others can serves as a justification to cheat behaviorally (Gino et al., 2013). Based on these findings we hypothesized:

H1: People would cheat more to benefit others relative to cheating to benefit themselves.

Furthermore, as justified dishonesty was found to be associated with lower levels of guilt (Gino et al., 2013), we hypothesized:

H2: Justified dishonesty will lead to lower levels of physiological arousal relative to unjustified dishonesty.

Method

Design and procedure. To test our hypotheses, participants from Tel-Aviv University engaged in the flexible dot task (Hochman et al., 2016). The Flexible Dot task is a visual perception task which induces a conflict between the desire to be accurate (and honest), and the desire to maximize profit by dishonestly choosing high-incentive (but erroneous) responses. The task was validated as a reliable measure of cheating behavior in previous research (e.g., Gino et al., 2010; Hochman et al., 2016). In the task, participants are presented with multiple trials of 50 non-overlapping dots appearing in different arrangements within a square. The square is divided down the middle by a vertical line. The task is to determine which side of the screen, right or left, contains more dots. While participants are always requested to accurately judge which side of the square contains more dots, they are paid more if they say there are more points on a specific side. Participants aiming to maximize their profit should thus indicate the highest paying side on each trial, and disregard the number of actual dots appearing in the square. Participants played 100 trials of the task for real money under one of three conditions. In the Egocentric Condition participants were told they were playing for themselves (i.e., keep the money), whereas in the Altruistic Condition they were told they were playing for a social organization of their choice. In the Control Condition, payment was divided equally between themselves and the social organization. After completing the task, participants were taken to another room, where they were asked about their honesty during the task while we monitored their physiological arousal on a standard lie detector test.

Psycho physiological measures. Participants' Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) were recorded using the Limestone technologies© system (Data Pac_USB Ltd.) connected to a laptop computer. The stimulus questions of the test and GSR signals were recorded using the cogito software (Ltd.) by SDS © (Suspect detection systems). Two 24k gold plated Electrodes were attached to the palma surface of participants' index and ring fingertips of their Right hand. The data were sampled at 60 Hz with 16 bits per sample. GSR data was down-sampled to 30 Hz after smoothed by 3 sample kernels. Data was then separated using wavelets to analyze pick of tension and temporal responses by an in-house MATLAB script.

GSR measures included arousal in response to control and relevant questions in a format which is similar to the most common acknowledged polygraph test, also known as the Control Question Test (CQT; see Honts and Reavy, 2015). Questions were presented to participants via the computer screen and auditory using a headphone set attached to their ears. Answers were recorded orally via a microphone attached to the headset. All participants answer all the questions in a changing order and their average GSR responses to the questions are calculated to the final result in a scale

called sympathetic arousal index. This scale ranges from -1.2 to 1.8 escalating as GSR levels of the participant grow higher to the relevant questions regarding their honesty in the dots task.

Results

Our behavioral results supported H1 and demonstrated that altruistic justifications increase cheating behavior. Participants cheated the least in the unjustified Egocentric condition, more in the Control condition, and the most in the justified Altruistic condition. This means that behaviorally speaking, the benefit of others serves as a strong justification for cheating behavior.

In a similar vein, our physiological results supported H2. Specifically, in the Egocentric Condition, the lie detector was sensitive to the level of cheating in the dots task and differentiated well between participants who cheated to a large extent and those who cheated to a small extent. This sensitivity was eliminated in the other two conditions. Moreover, in the Altruistic Condition, participants who cheated more, exhibited lower levels of physiological arousal, and were thus less likely to be detected cheating than thus who cheated to a lower extant.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to test whether altruistic motivations increase cheating propensity and also reduce the physiological tension associated with this dishonest behavior. Indeed, our findings suggest that the benefit of others acts as a strong justification for dishonesty and significantly increase cheating extant. At the same time, however, this cheating behavior is associated with lower levels of physiological arousal.

This pattern of results lends credence to our claim that justified dishonesty (in the form of altruistic cheating), not only increases the level of cheating, but also produces less guilty feelings. In other words, our results suggest that people who have a reason to act dishonestly, cheat more and feel less guilty doing so and thus, are less likely to be detected as cheaters. Of course, the current study is just the first step in establishing the connection between altruistic justification, cheating behavior and feeling of guilt. However, as justifications, which turn cheating into the "right thing to do" (e.g. Zee, Anderson & Poppe, 2016), may come in different shapes and flavors, a great importance lays on further investigating their effect on behavior, judgment and physiological arousal.

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