

IS IT WORSE TO STEAL MONEY OR IDEAS:
IMPRESSION FORMATION AND PUNISHMENTS FOR A MOTIVATED THIEF

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ABSTRACT

Employee theft is widely recognized as an extremely problematic workplace phenomenon (Forbes, 2015). As such, a large body of research has sought to illuminate the factors surrounding theft (e.g. Greenberg, 1990; Greenberg, 2002). Theft research tends to operationalize theft in terms of tangible property, such as money and supplies (Wimbush and Dalton, 1997). With intellectual forms of property becoming increasingly relevant (Hughes, 1988; Amabile, 1996), this work explores the possibility that the interpersonal implications of stealing one form of property (i.e. tangible property, like money) compared to another (i.e. intellectual property, like ideas). In a series of experimental studies, I measure the warmth and competence perceptions of a thief who has stolen money vs. one who has stolen an idea. Three studies find that thieves who steal ideas are perceived to be significantly less warm and less competent than those who steal money. Study 2 shows that inferred instrumental motives mediate the relationship between *type of theft* and warmth and competence impressions, such that idea theft is thought to be more closely associated with selfish motives, thus resulting in “worse” impressions of a thief. Study 3 considers the downstream consequences for this effect, in terms of formal vs. informal punishments.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lillien Montanye Burns (Ellis) earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial and Labor Relations from Cornell University in May of 2014. She entered the MS/PhD program in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) in August of 2015 and is completing the first semester of her fourth year in the Department of Organizational Behavior. Lily's research focuses on the ownership and theft of ideas. Specifically, she is interested in how creative individuals generate and protect their creative contributions to both organizations and society at-large. Further, she is particularly interested in how individuals respond when idea protection mechanisms are not available or adequate for policing the distribution of credit for creativity.

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IS IT WORSE TO STEAL MONEY OR IDEAS:
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“Don’t be afraid to steal, just steal the right stuff.” - Mike Monteiro

INTRODUCTION

We know it is bad to be a thief. Employee theft is often cited as one of the most widespread challenges faced by organizations today, costing US companies \$60 billion per year-\$3.7 trillion globally (Hiscox, 2015; Forbes, 2015). Management scholars are keenly aware of this growing phenomenon, referencing theft as “one of the most pervasive and serious problems” in our field (Greenberg, 1990, pp.561). Thus, a large body of research has amassed to illuminate the antecedents and consequences of theft in the workplace (e.g. Hollinger & Clark, 1983; Greenberg, 1990; Greenberg & Scott, 1996; Pierce, Snow, & McAfee, 2015); however, this work has focused primarily on tangible theft, like that of money and supplies (e.g. Greenberg, 2002; Wimbush and Dalton, 1997). As knowledge-based work becomes more prevalent, “atypical forms of property, such as intellectual property, become increasingly important relative to the old paradigms of property” (Hughes, 1988, pp. 1). In fact, a recent survey showed that 29% of employees report having had an idea “stolen” from a colleague, at least once. While the US justice system clearly treats the theft of tangible vs. intellectual property as two distinct phenomena (Matteson & Metivier, 2018), scholars have yet to explore whether these two types of theft have meaningful psychological distinctions. It is the purpose of this work to explore the perceptual differences between these two types of theft, and ascertain whether it is “worse” for a thief to steal money or ideas.

Previous research shows that we rely on several sources of information while forming judgements of a transgressor, including process (i.e. how the act was carried out) and motive (i.e.

what motivated the actor) (Wiltermuth, Vincent, and Gino, 2017; Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002). Another source of information that may be useful when evaluating a thief is the utility of the stolen good. For example, the impression one forms of an individual who steals a loaf of bread would likely differ from that of an individual who steals a new Ferrari; while the former resembles an act of desperation, the latter reflects greed. Thus, what someone steals can reveal his motivations, and thus provide information with which an impression can be formed (Reeder et al., 2002).

Intellectual capital is recognized as having significant value to organizations and individuals, alike (Dzinkowski, 2000). As such, creative ideas provide a competitive edge in a rapidly changing and cut-throat business community (Amabile, 1988; Goncalo & Staw, 2006). As the knowledge economy continues to dominate, it is widely accepted that good ideas help us to get ahead in twenty-first century (New York Times, 2014). Therefore, when evaluating someone who has stolen an idea, a simple explanation may be “well, clearly he wanted to get ahead.” On the other hand, while financial capital has direct and explicit value, the utility of money is not described in such singular terms. Money can certainly be utilized for instrumental purposes (e.g. buying the Rolex), but it can also mitigate the discomfort of hard times. In other words, the utility of money is substantially more diverse than an idea (Brunner & Meltzer, 1971). Therefore, when forming judgements about someone who has stolen money, there may be a variety of potential motivations that come to mind, including desperation or situational threats.

Taken together, money may not signal a dominant motivation for theft as easily as an idea. When someone steals an idea, its singular nature could make selfish motives of the thief more readily accessible than other possible drivers. Money, in contrast, is known to have far more diverse utility (Brunner & Meltzer, 1971), and one who steals money could be thought to have a wide range of potential motivations; some may believe a money thief was motivated by

selfishness, while others could claim he was backed into a corner. Therefore, we may use the nature of property - the utility of a particular good - as a source of information about a thief and his motivations.

Reeder et al. (2002) show that a transgressor motivated by personal gain is judged significantly more harshly than one motivated by other factors, like desperation or revenge. Thus, if a thief steals an idea, he may be perceived more negatively than if he steals money. Warmth and competence have long been cited as the most important impressions we form of others (e.g. Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Cuddy, Fiske, Glick, 2008; Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011). These two primary judgements capture the degree to which we like (warmth) and respect (competence) someone, and often dictate our tendency to approach or avoid them (e.g. Cuddy et al., 2008). Given what we know about the consequences for instrumental unethical behavior, I hypothesize that when a thief steals an idea, he will be judged as less warm and less competent than when he steals money (H1). I propose this is because stealing an idea is perceived to be more clearly selfish and self-seeking than stealing money (H2). In the following sections, I define *idea theft*, as well as review the literatures related to impression formation and motive inference.

Defining Idea Theft

Disparate areas of research have studied constructs similar to *idea theft*. For example, an extensive body of work in the field of education explores plagiarism, which involves “literary theft, stealing (by copying) the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one’s own without crediting the source” (Park, 2003, pp. 472). This research has explained a great deal about the meaning of plagiarism (Ercegovic & Richardson, 2004), why students copy (Robinson & Kuin, 1999), how they rationalize it (McCuen, 2008), strategies and tools for prevention and detection, including punishment (e.g. Liles & Rozalski, 2004; Wiedemeier, 2002), as well as the

long-term behavioral implications of a student learning to rationalize cheating during their post-secondary career (Iyer & Eastman, 2006). This literature provides a meaningful starting point from which to conceptualize idea theft. While plagiarism is typically operationalized as the blatant copying of works protected by intellectual property legislation (i.e. copyright, patent, and trademark laws), which can include papers previously submitted by a student or his peers (e.g. Hoffman & McGrath, 1990), idea theft involves the copying of an idea prior to its eligibility for these legislative protections. In an effort to provide clarification on the phenomenon to be operationalized in the following studies, I have adapted a description of plagiarism (Dictionary.com) to establish a definition of idea theft: *taking someone else's idea and passing it off as one's own.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Warmth & Competence Impressions

The warm and cold dimension was institutionalized during Solomon Asch's (1946) study of person perception, in which college students were asked to form impressions of individuals characterized by a number of traits. Asch found that altering the warmth of a target had significant implications for the impressions students formed, establishing warmth as a "central trait" worthy of continued attention. Warmth continues to be thought of as a central trait, and more contemporary perspectives have suggested that warmth, coupled with competence, are the primary dimensions of all social cognition (Cuddy et al., 2007).

Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger (2011) argue that we "use two trait dimensions, labeled... warmth and competence, to "sort" our social worlds, judging people as relatively high or low on each dimension" (pg. 74). Warmth and competence impressions capture the degree to which we

like (warmth) and respect (competence) the person we're evaluating (e.g. Cuddy et al., 2008). Cuddy and colleagues (2008) establish the primacy of warmth and competence impressions, identifying a convergence of person perception research on these two essential dimensions, highlighting how this work frequently considers the role of judgements associated warmth (i.e. liking, trust, morality) and competence (i.e. efficacy, dominance, respect) (Fiske et al., 2007; Cuddy et al., 2008).

Warmth and competence impressions have frequently been cited as having significant implications for human behavior (Fiske et al., 2007). Cuddy et al. (2007) suggest that warmth judgements typically lead to more active behaviors (i.e. attacking (-), helping (+)), while competence judgements promote more passive behaviors (i.e. neglect (-), convenience cooperation (+)). In addition, previous research has illustrated the significant consequences for such impressions on more organizationally relevant processes, including selection (Krings & Sczesny, & Kluge, 2011), promotion (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004), and integrative decision-making (Tjosvold & Sun, 2003).

Impressions and Inferred Motives

Research on person-perception illustrates an intuitive connection between impression formation and motive inference. From the motivation perspective, Cuddy and colleagues (2011) explain that warmth impressions are essentially a representation of how trustworthy we perceive a target's motives to be, whereas competence is our belief in a target's ability to act on those motives. These impressions help us distinguish friend from foe, and more specifically "whether others are likely to have positive or negative intentions toward us" (pg. 76).

Warmth is commonly related to helping behaviors (e.g. Cuddy et al., 2007). In a similar vein, research shows that perceived warmth varies as a function of the available resources of a

target, and the likelihood that the target will make them available to the perceiver (Scholer & Higgins, 2008). This suggests that if a target has access to resources that are valuable to the perceiver, and appears to be willing to make those resources available for the perceiver's use, the perceiver will draw favorable conclusions about the target's warmth. Scholer and Higgins (2008) argue that "what drives the importance of warm and cold is the information these attributes convey about how an individual will use his or her resources...in his or her relationship with a perceiver" (pg. 1112).

Scholer and Higgins (2008) provide an interesting foundation upon which to build a theory of why perceiving selfish motives for theft leads to a reduction in warmth impressions. To illustrate, if a deviant target steals an idea for reasons that appear self-seeking, the perceiver may believe the target is selfish and therefore likely to withhold resources that may be of value to the perceiver. Further, given the nature of the theft (motivated by personal gain at the expense of a similar-other), the perceiver is likely to assume that the target will have no interest in sharing his or her resources, depressing the target's perceived warmth.

While elements of the agency/competence dimension suggest that highly motivated and goal-oriented individuals are seen as more competent, in the context of a theft, a target whose act appears based in self-interest may suffer a discount in competence perceptions due to lack of respect. A critical component of the competence dimension is the respect we feel towards an individual (e.g. Cuddy et al., 2007). Therefore, it is likely that when an individual is appeared to be motivated by selfishness, he will garner less respect, and therefore judged as less competent.

In sum, to say that thieves are perceived as less warm and less competent than non-thieves is not a meaningful contribution. Where this work builds on past research is by showing that the damage to one's reputation, in terms of warmth and competence impressions, can be

significantly better or worse depending on what has been stolen. This effect is guided by the different types of motives attributed to different types of theft. In the following section, I will further discuss the process by which we form judgements about the motives of others, and how these judgements relate directly to perceptions of unethical behavior.

Inferring Motives

Motive inference is the process by which we form judgements about what motivates the people around us (e.g. Reeder & Trafimow, 2005). It is widely accepted that we frequently take note of what motivates people (e.g. Fein, 1996; Lillard, 1998; Reeder et al., 2002), in an effort to assign meaning to human behavior (e.g. Reeder & Spores, 1983). Reeder and Trafimow (2005) explain that “perceivers think of motives as mental states that describe the goals and aims of a person’s intentional actions” (pg. 98). This description of the goals and aims of others provides a “particularly satisfying explanation of human behavior” (Reeder & Trafimow, 2005). In other words, it is more fulfilling to understand *why* someone has done something, than simply *that* someone has done something.

Scholars agree that approaching others as if they are intentional agents – with goals and aims that motivate behavior – is an effective interpersonal strategy, as it allows us to interpret behavior in terms of patterns and thus form predictions about an actor’s future tendencies (e.g. Dennett, 1993; Reeder & Trafimow, 2005). Regarding an actor as intentional may not always be accurate, but acting as such lets us believe we can prepare for engaging with this person in the future. Reeder and Trafimow (2005) suggest that “from an evolutionary perspective, an interest in motives appears necessary for survival in the social environment,” (pg. 100). The authors explain that understanding a target’s motives helps a perceiver to make sense of a target’s behavior, identifying patterns that could be mistaken for noise. This informs the perceiver of

both the meaning of events, as well as provides information about the personality of the target (Reeder, 1993).

Motive inferences is akin to Regulatory Focus Theory, in which Higgins (1997, 1998) describes two self-regulatory systems that map onto the basic principle that people seek pleasure and avoid pain. This theory of motivation is similar to motive inference in that its subject-matter involves motivation. Regulatory Focus Theory and the motive inference process are distinct in that the former describes the psychological processes that drive human behavior, whereas the latter describes the process by which others form judgements about the drivers of *another's* behavior. In other words, motive inference is concerned with someone's perception of another person's motives, while theories of motivation like Regulatory Focus Theory are concerned more with the antecedents of an individual's motivation.

Scholars consider two theories of how motives are inferred (Reeder & Trafimow, 2005), adapted from classical person perception work related to inferring the feelings and beliefs of others (e.g. Jones & Davis 1965; Kelley, 1973; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). Reeder and Trafimow (2005) explain that perceivers will simulate a target's behavior, such that they imagine being in the target's shoes in order to understand what may have motivated a given behavior. The authors discuss two forms of simulation: simple projection and more effortful perspective taking. In simple projection, the perceiver simply projects his or her own perspective onto the target, without consideration for the target person's experience. In contrast, effortful perspective taking is far more active and involves a thoughtful comparison of the target's experience and the perceiver's experiences.

Another method by which perceivers infer motives is to rely on implicit theories of human behavior (Reeder & Trafimow, 2005) Reeder and Trafimow (2005) pull from social

psychology research on both the principle of covariation (e.g. Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973) and the constraint-satisfaction process (Heider, 1958; Read & Miller, 1993; Reeder et al., 2002) to illustrate this approach. Essentially, these two processes suggest that perceivers endeavor to find the appropriate “fit” between motive and behavior (constraint-satisfaction), and are therefore particularly sensitive to cues that appear to cause the behavior, especially if these same cues have been present when similar behaviors occurred in the past (covariation). Therefore, if a motive of particularly good “fit” is readily available, a perceiver is not likely to pursue alternative explanations.

Motive Inference & Unethical Behavior

While the research on motive inference is limited, it has been linked to unethical behavior both implicitly (e.g. Moore, Detert, Trevino, Baker, & Mayer, 2012) and directly (e.g. Reeder et al., 2002). In a series of laboratory experiments, Reeder and colleagues (2002) explored the perceived morality of an aggressor whose behavior was motivated by either *instrumental* (i.e. motivated by situational rewards; personal gain) or *reactive* (i.e. motivated by situational threats) motives. The authors discuss instrumental motives as those that are facilitated by the need to achieve a personal reward. In other words, “the (target’s) focus is on the rewards of the situation” (pg. 790). In contrast, reactive motives are those that are typically attributed to situational provocation, or “when the action is encouraged by (a situational force)” (pg. 290). Reeder et al. (2002) assert that motives matter when forming impressions of others. More specifically, they found that when a target was perceived to be motivated by instrumentality, he was seen as significantly less moral than when his behavior was perceived to be reactive.

Past research clearly supports the idea that inferred motives often mediate the relationship between behavior and the impressions we form of an actor, and therefore may be useful in

understanding the qualitative differences in how we perceive an individual who steals ideas vs. money. Given that ideas are particularly relevant in an organizational context, and frequently linked with the pursuit of creativity as a means for remaining competitive (e.g. Amabile, 1996; Goncalo & Staw, 2006), idea are clearly instrumental and presents a satisfactory “fit” between idea theft and selfish motives. Achieving this “fit” means the perceiver is satisfied with the selfish motive, and stops looking for alternative explanations (other potential motivations) for the theft. Further, from a perceiver’s perspective, selfish motives may be the most readily accessible and convincing explanation for the theft.

Money is known to have an impressively diverse utility (Brunner & Meltzer, 1971). Thus, relying on implicit theories of behavior may not be an effective means for determining a thief’s motivation. As such, a perceiver would likely need to simulate the target’s behavior – to varying degrees depending on perceiver-level factors- to arrive at a seemingly plausible explanation for a thief’s behavior. Moreover, in an effort to draw convincing inferences about the motives of a thief, a perceiver may be required to engage in more effortful perspective taking. This exercise could decrease psychological distance, which has been shown to influence our impressions of a transgressor such that less distance results in more lenient evaluations (Gino & Galinsky, 2012).

In conclusion, a myriad of factors can influence the way in which one individual infers the motives of another (Reeder & Trafimow, 2005). These factors may include the utility of a stolen good. Given that ideas are widely-recognized as being used for self-promotion (e.g. Amabile, 1996), a perceiver could reasonably rely on an implicit theory of human behavior to determine motive: “ideas are instrumental to success- this person stole for success-related reasons.” In contrast, a dominant theory for why people steal money may not be as readily

available, in which case a perceiver would need to engage in more effortful perspective taking. During this process, a wide range of potential motives could be generated, and not all suggesting a selfish, self-seeking thief. Thus, our impression of a thief's warmth and competence may depend on what he has stolen, and it could be worse when he steals an idea.

METHOD & RESULTS

Overview of Studies

The purpose of Study 1 was to test the main effect of *type of theft* (ideas vs. money) on warmth and competence impressions (H1). Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1, tested the hypothesized mediator (H2), and considered a competing hypothesis. Study 3 replicated the findings of studies one and two in a new domain (advertising), addressed the effect of gender on warmth and competence impressions, and investigated implications for punishment through the lens of formal vs. informal punishments.

Sample size decisions for the three studies presented followed guidelines suggested by Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn (2011). It was predetermined that at least 100 participants would be recruited per experimental condition (more than twice the minimum sample size per cell recommended by Simmons et al., 2011). All experiments employed experimental vignette methodology (EVM), which has been established as an effective method for measuring the causal effects of different types of events on individuals' attitudes (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). For example, Reeder et al. (2002) used EVM across a series of experimental studies to assess perceivers' impressions of an aggressor who enacted aggressive behaviors on the basis of distinct motivations. Given the similar nature of this study, the approach taken in Reeder et al. (2002)

was adapted to fit the present research. These studies were designed following the applicable best-practices asserted by Aguinis and Bradley (2014) for EVM.

Participants

Participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Following past measures of rigorous subject screening (e.g. Effron, Lucas, & O'Connor, 2015), participation was restricted to IP addresses traceable to the US and duplicate IPs were ineligible. Researcher has cited Mechanical Turk as more demographically diverse than the traditional undergraduate sample, as well as comparably reliable to traditional sample pools (Effron, Lucas, & O'Connor, 2015; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Horton, Rand, & Zeckhauser, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010).

Study 1 Procedure

Two hundred and two participants were recruited to participate in Study 1. These participants were randomly assigned to one of two theft conditions: money or ideas. In both conditions, participants read the following scenario:

“John works for a research and development firm. Recently, he took credit for one of his coworker’s ideas for a new product (stole some money from one of his coworkers).”

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to discuss what they believe had motivated the theft in an open-response format. Then participants indicated their impressions of John’s warmth and competence (in a randomized order) on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g. 1- extremely cold to 7- extremely warm). Next, participants completed an attention check in which they were asked to recall what was stolen (free response). Finally, participants provided demographic information. It was predetermined that demographical data would be used to provide contextual information about the sample (i.e. indicating percentage of female

participants in the results section); however, demographic variables were excluded from all other analyses.

Study 1 Results

Criteria for exclusion: It was predetermined that participants would be excluded from the study prior to analysis if they either (1) failed to properly recall what was stolen or (2) expressed disbelief that a theft occurred. This second specification was necessary and important because this research concerns impressions of people who *have* stolen. While it would be interesting to explore the believability of different types of theft, that was not the aim of the present research. Therefore, anyone who indicated they did not believe theft had occurred (e.g. “the idea probably belonged to John to begin with; he didn’t really steal it”), was excluded prior to analysis.

Nine participants failed to successfully recall what had been stolen and zero participants indicated they did not believe a theft had occurred, resulting in a final sample size of 193 participants (59.1% female).

Warmth & Competence. Independent-samples t-tests revealed significant main effects of type of theft on warmth and competence impressions. When a target stole an idea, he was seen as significantly less warm ($M=2.85$, $SD=1.13$) than when he stole money ($M=3.53$, $SD=1.44$); $t(176)=-3.64$, $p=.000$, Cohen’s $d=.52$. Similarly, when a target stole an idea, he was seen as significantly less competent ($M=3.07$, $SD=1.23$) than when he stole money ($M=3.70$, $SD=1.57$); $t(176)=-3.10$, $p=.002$, Cohen’s $d=.44$.

Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to replicate the findings of Study 1, test the hypothesized mechanism, and investigate an alternative explanation for the effect of *type of theft* on warmth and competence impressions.

Two hundred and fifty-five participants were recruited to participate in Study 2 and randomly assigned to either the idea theft or money theft condition. This study followed Study 1 with two additions: First, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which a thief was motivated by situational rewards. Two items were developed for a measure of inferred instrumental motives. These items were generated using theoretical explanations provided by previous work on instrumental (personal gain, reward-related) motives (e.g. “John’s primary motive for stealing was to secure a personal reward”) (Reeder et al., 2002).

The second contribution of this study involves the testing of a competing hypothesis: is the type-of-theft-effect just about value? In other words, perhaps it is worse to steal ideas because we see them as more valuable than money. A preliminary test of this hypothesis was included in Study 2. Participants were asked to rate the perceived value of what was stolen on a 10-point Likert scale.

Study 2 Results

Twenty-three participants failed to successfully recall what was stolen and ten participants indicated they did not believe a theft had occurred, resulting in a final sample size of 222 participants (51% female).

Perceived Value. Simple linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the role of perceived value of the stolen property on warmth and competence ratings. These analyses

revealed no such relationship at the $p < .05$ nor $p < .1$ level. In other words, value was not even a marginally significant predictor of warmth or competence impressions.

Inferred Instrumental Motives Scale. First, confirmatory factor analysis, using orthogonal rotation, was conducted to assess the instrumental motives scale. A Spearman Brown coefficient was calculated to assess the reliability of this scale. This analysis reflected a reliability score of $r = .75$.

Mediation

Warmth. Mediation analyses were conducted using the Lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) in R (R Core Team, 2013). This analysis first examined whether type of theft was a significant predictor of warmth impressions. As predicted, and as found in Study 1, participants in the idea theft condition rated their target as significantly less warm ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.11$) than those in the money theft condition ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.27$); ($b = -.382$, $SE = .162$) $t(220) = -2.356$, $p = .01$. When the instrumental motives scale was included in this model, it emerged as a significant predictor of warmth impressions ($p < .05$), while type of theft was reduced to non-significance ($p > .05$). These analyses met all criteria for *full mediation*, as determined by Baron and Kenny (1986). Finally, a Lavaan bootstrapping procedure (with 10,000 iterations) showed that the indirect effect through instrumental motives was significant at the $p < .05$ level, indicating that inferred instrumental motives fully mediate the relationship between type of theft and warmth impressions.

Competence. Mediation analyses were conducted using the Lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) in R (R Core Team, 2013). This analysis first examined whether type of theft was a significant predictor of competence impressions. As predicted, and as found in Study 1, participants in the idea theft condition rated their target as significantly less competent ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.35$) than those in the money theft condition ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.45$); $t(220) = -2.915$, $p = .004$.

When the motives scale was included in this model, instrumental motives emerged as a significant predictor of competence impressions ($p < .05$), while type of theft was reduced to non-significance ($p > .05$). Similar to warmth impressions, these analyses met all criteria for *full mediation*, as determined by Baron and Kenny (1986). Finally, a Lavaan bootstrapping procedure (with 10,000 iterations) showed that the indirect effect through instrumental motives was significant at the $p < .05$ level, indicating that inferred instrumental motives fully mediate the relationship between type of theft and competence impressions.

Study 3

Two hundred and sixty participants were recruited to participate in this study for pay. Study 3 followed the procedure of Study 1 with a few exceptions. First, past work shows that gender can have significant implications for warmth and competence impressions (e.g. Cuddy et al., 2011). Therefore, it is not clear if the main effects of this research are only present when the target is male. In an effort to address this concern, Study 3 introduces a new scenario with a gender-neutral name (“Casey”). In addition, Study 3 tests the type of theft effect in the advertising domain, as a mild test of robustness.

In addition to these changes, Study 3 builds on the main effect of this research by exploring the punishment implications for being known as someone who steals money vs. ideas. Given the ambiguous legality of idea theft, Study 3 considers two types of punishment prescriptions: formal and informal punishments.

Formal Punishments. Participants rated the likelihood¹ that Casey would be (1) placed on probation at work, (2) suspended from work, and (3) fired on 7-point Likert scales.

¹ I also tested behavioral intent of participant (e.g. “how likely are you to subject the target to this punishment”) and found no significant differences between general perceived likelihood of Casey experiencing these punishments and the participant’s willingness to subject Casey to these punishments.

Informal Punishments. Informal punishments were generated based on the guidelines suggested by previous work. More specifically, these informal punishments are (1) expected to be carried out by persons without authority over the target; (2) befit the context, and (3) are social in nature (Hollinger & Clark, 1982). Participants rated the likelihood that they would (1) invite Casey to collaborate on a project relevant to (his/her) expertise, (2) share information with Casey, (3) invite Casey to a weekly lunch, and (4) sabotage one of Casey's creative projects, all on 7-point Likert scales.

Study 3 Results

Twenty-four participants failed to properly recall what was stolen and zero participants indicated they did not believe a theft occurred, resulting in a sample size of 236 participants (55% Female).

Warmth. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare warmth ratings in the idea theft and money theft conditions. There was a significant difference in ratings of warmth in the idea theft ($M=2.91$, $SD=1.29$) and money theft ($M=3.43$, $SD=1.32$) conditions ($t(234)=3.044$, $p=.003$, Cohen's $d=.39$). These results indicate that individuals who have stolen ideas are perceived as less warm than individuals who have stolen money.

Competence. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare competence ratings in the idea theft and money theft conditions. There was a significant difference in ratings of competence in the idea theft ($M=3.64$, $SD=1.40$) and money theft ($M=4.0$, $SD=1.39$) conditions ($t(234)=3.044$, $p=.04$, Cohen's $d=.25$). These results suggest that individuals who have stolen ideas are perceived as less competent than individuals who have stolen money.

Formal Punishments

Suspended. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare ratings of how likely the target is to get suspended from work in the idea theft and money theft conditions. There was a significant difference in ratings of likelihood of suspension in the idea theft (M=4.32, SD=1.69) and money theft (M=5.9, SD=1.39) conditions ($t(234)=7.86$, $p=.000$, $d=1.02$). These results indicate that individuals who have stolen ideas are perceived to be less likely to be suspended from work than individuals who have stolen money.

Probation. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare ratings of how likely the target is to be placed on probation at work in the idea theft and money theft conditions. There was a significant difference in ratings of likelihood of work-related probation in the idea theft (M=4.61, SD=1.79) and money theft (M=6.02, SD=1.34) conditions ($t(234)=6.85$, $p=.000$, $d=.89$). These results indicate that individuals who have stolen ideas are perceived to be less likely to be placed on probation at work than individuals who have stolen money.

Fired. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare ratings of how likely the target is to be fired in the idea theft and money theft conditions. There was a significant difference in ratings of likelihood of being fired in the idea theft (M=4.15, SD=1.53) and money theft (M=5.84, SD=1.38) conditions ($t(234)=8.86$, $p=.000$, $d=1.1$). These results indicate that individuals who have stolen ideas are perceived to be less likely to be fired than individuals who have stolen money.

Informal Punishments

Invite to Collaborate. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare participants' intentions to invite the target (Casey) to collaborate on an advertising campaign relevant to Casey's expertise in the idea theft and money theft conditions. There was a significant

difference in participants' intentions to invite in the idea theft ($M=1.95$, $SD=1.23$) and money theft ($M=2.73$, $SD=1.68$) conditions, such that when the target had stolen money, the participant was significantly more likely to invite Casey to collaborate ($t(234)=4.05$, $p=.000$, $d=.52$).

Share Information. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare participant's intentions to share information with the target that might help (him/her) get ahead at work in the idea theft and money theft conditions. Results show there was a significant difference in participants' intentions to share information in the idea theft ($M=1.93$, $SD=1.21$) and money theft ($M=2.54$, $SD=1.67$) conditions ($t(234)=3.21$, $p=.002$, $d=.41$). These results indicate that, on average, participants are more likely to share information that could help Casey get ahead at work when (he/she) has stolen money, compared to ideas.

Invite to Lunch. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare participants' intentions to invite the target to a weekly lunch with other members of the creative team in the idea theft and money theft conditions. There was a significant difference in participants' intentions to invite to Casey to lunch in the idea theft ($M=2.20$, $SD=1.48$) and money theft ($M=2.87$, $SD=1.66$) conditions ($t(234)=3.23$, $p=.001$, $d=.42$). These results indicate that, on average, participants are more likely to invite Casey to the weekly brainstorming lunch when (he/she) has stolen money, compared to ideas.

Sabotage. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare participants' intentions to sabotage one of the target's creative campaigns in the idea theft and money theft conditions. Results indicate that there was no significant difference in participants' intentions to sabotage in the idea theft and money theft conditions ($p>.05$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the effect of type of theft (money theft vs. idea theft) on warmth and competence impressions. I argue that stolen property acts as a source of information that sheds light on the motivations of the thief. Further, I assert that when a thief steals an idea, the self-promoting nature of ideas communicates selfish motives, which result in the thief being judged more harshly. In contrast, money has a far more diverse utility (Brunner & Meltzer, 1971), which makes motive inference much more complex. In other words, inferring a range of motives- some related to personal gain, some reactive- shields a money thief from the penalty of being seen as instrumental. This argument supports a main effect of type of theft on warmth and competence impressions.

This research addresses other phenomena that could mediate the relationship between warmth and competence impressions, including value perception. In other words, is stealing ideas “worse” because we believe them to have more value than money? Study 2 finds that ideas are - in fact – perceived as more valuable than money; however, value has no effect on the warmth or competence impressions of a thief. In addition to value, I also address the role of the thief’s gender in the evaluation of his warmth and competence. Given previous findings on the effects of gender on warmth and competence impressions (e.g. Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004), it could be the case that an idea thief is only “worse” if he is male. In Study 3, I provide an initial test of the role of gender in this effect, by utilizing a gender-neutral name (i.e. “Casey”) in the theft vignettes. Study 3 replicated the result of studies one and two, demonstrating that the type of theft effect still holds when the gender of a thief is ambiguous.

Study 3 further explores the differences between stealing money and ideas through the lens of formal and informal punishments. Results show that we are more likely to subject a money thief to formal punishments, like firing and suspension. These findings make sense given

that previous research shows we often rely on punishment norms when determining how to sanction a transgressor (Jacoby & Cullen, 1998). Stealing money holds no legal ambiguity and therefore people feel comfortable prescribing normative punishments to a thief. In contrast, stealing ideas is not illegal, and may not even be considered unethical by some moral codes. This difference in the degree of ethical certainty afforded to stealing money vs. ideas is reflected in the differential rates of formal punishment prescription across the two theft conditions.

Given the previous findings, from a legal standpoint it's worse to steal *money* than ideas; however, the purpose of this work is to explore these two types of theft from an interpersonal perspective. Thus, several items are included in Study 3 to explore how informal, socially-oriented punishments are prescribed across the two conditions. Results show that the idea thief is significantly more likely to experience social punishments than the money thief. The only informal punishment that did not reflect this trend was sabotage (no significant difference). Given the active nature of sabotage (i.e. do something negative, rather than NOT do something positive), it could be that most people wouldn't feel comfortable prescribing this punishment. This raises several interesting questions to be explored by future research. For example, what are the boundaries of social punishments? What dictates the degree of activation deemed acceptable by the prescriber? Questions like these would further illuminate the process by which people address their need to deter behavior and seek justice for a victim without the clarity of knowing an act is illegal.

Utility as a Source of Information

The present research offers a novel theoretical perspective on the psychological processes involved in forming judgements about a thief. Previous work in the employee theft domain has

converged on two particular types of tangible theft: money and supplies (e.g. Greenberg, 2002); however, the long-standing legal distinction between intellectual and tangible property provides a launching pad from which to explore the antecedents and consequences of different types of theft. Perceivers rely on available information to form impressions of a target (e.g. Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977). As such, considering atypical sources of information can help illuminate the factors that may lead to bad behavior. The utility of a stolen good may communicate a great deal about a thief, including his needs, aims, and goals. While this information is subject to the, sometimes erroneous (e.g. Bazerman & Moore, 2008), human decision-making processes, it nevertheless is received as a powerful signal of a person's motivations, character, and personality (e.g. Reeder, 1993).

Idea Theft

Another contribution of the present research is that it highlights an interesting organizational phenomenon that has, thus far, received little attention. Idea theft is related to several constructs, including plagiarism and intellectual property (IP) theft. While these types of theft fall under the same umbrella of "intellectual" or intangible property theft, they distinguish themselves from idea theft in operationalization by focusing on intellectual goods that are eligible for intellectual and informational protections, either by policy or law (e.g. Bently & Sherman, 2014). The distinction between idea theft, IP theft and plagiarism is meaningful because the mere awareness of legal protections could influence a thief's willingness to steal, an originator's willingness to share, and even the path a victim takes to seek justice. Future research could further explore this distinction empirically and theoretically. For example, future work might consider how idea theft can be defined as either an experience – wherein an originator

believes his idea was stolen when, in fact, it was not – or a concrete event, in which someone has taken an idea and passed it off as their own. For the purposes of comparing money and idea theft, the present work operationalizes idea theft as a concrete event; however, other meaningful research questions might explore the experience of idea theft.

Limitations

A key limitation of this research is its reliance on vignettes and Amazon Mechanical Turk. While rigorous measures were taken to ensure the highest quality of online participant data, these results would be even more compelling if real-world results could reflect this effect. Unfortunately, given that the comparison between money and ideas is primarily motivated by previous research, finding a convincing real-world setting in which the two can be compared presents further methodological challenges. That being said, this work would be improved by the presence of data collected in a more natural setting.

Another limitation of this work lies in the exploration of alternative hypotheses. Measuring and controlling for the perceived value of the stolen good may not be a convincing method for eliminating the expectation that value plays a role in this phenomenon. One method for addressing this concern could be to assign a concrete monetary value to both the idea and the sum of money stolen by the thief; however, this may present a confound in that participants would then be comparing money to money, rather than money to ideas. Given that perceived value, as measured in Study 2, was not a significant predictor of warmth or competence impressions, the data did not compel future exploration of the role of value. That being said, an additional study could provide even more evidence to support the present findings concerning value and type of theft.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not good to be a thief. That being said, all theft is not created equal and what one steals can act as a source of information about one's motivations for theft. These motives influence the impressions we form of a thief, as well as the types of punishments we believe are most appropriate. This research highlights that idea theft is a relevant and costly organizational phenomenon, which the present results show has interpersonal consequences that out-pace those of money theft. In a series of experimental studies, these findings provide convincing evidence that an idea thief is seen as less warm and less competent than a money thief, because idea theft signals a selfishness that makes the theft seem worse. In other words, *what we steal matters*- it tells the world *who we are*.

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