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Stretching the moral gray zone:

Positive affect, moral disengagement and dishonesty

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Abstract

We propose that positive affect promotes dishonest behavior by providing the cognitive flexibility necessary to reframe and to rationalize dishonest acts. This hypothesis was tested in two studies. The results of Study 1 showed that individuals experiencing positive affect morally disengage to a greater extent than individuals experiencing neutral affect. Study 2 built upon this finding by demonstrating that the ability to morally disengage can lead individuals who experience positive affect to behave dishonestly. Specifically, the results of Study 2 show that people experiencing positive affect are more likely to steal than individuals who experience neutral affect, particularly when self-awareness is low. Furthermore, moral disengagement fully mediated this effect. Taken together, the results suggest that positive affect paves the way for the commission of dishonest acts by altering how individuals evaluate the moral implications of their own behavior.

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Stretching the Moral Gray Zone:

Positive Affect, Moral Disengagement and Dishonesty

A typical organization loses approximately 5% of its revenue to fraud, resulting in a global loss of 2.9 trillion dollars annually (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, 2010). To address this issue, psychological research on theft has focused on the role of negative emotions to suggest that the dishonest individuals among us are angry, frustrated, hostile, prone to anxiety and likely to engage in dishonest behaviors as a reaction to injustice (Penney & Spector, 2007). In other words, to expose dishonesty, we should search the ranks of the disgruntled. However, in this paper, we trace the roots of dishonest behavior to a previously unconsidered source. We argue that positive affect promotes the ability to morally disengage, which, in turn, leads to dishonest behavior. Consequently, the mild feelings of happiness associated with a wide range of pro-social behavior (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002) can also contribute to dishonesty if left unchecked.

It is well known that positive affect increases cognitive flexibility, the ability to redefine and evaluate events and information in different, unusual ways (Isen, 2000). Positive affect broadens categories to facilitate connections between concepts that might ordinarily be viewed as unrelated (e.g. categorizing waste baskets as furniture or tractors as vehicles) (Isen & Daubman, 1984). Without denying the obvious benefits of cognitive flexibility for problem solving, we place this process in a very different context to theorize that the cognitively flexible may also be morally flexible. Dishonest behavior can threaten an individual's positive moral self-image, unless it can be rationalized or reframed (Mazar & Ariely, 2006) through moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). For instance, an individual can re-categorize theft as "just borrowing" something, thus paving the way for the commission of a dishonest act (Bandura, 1999; Detert,

Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008; Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011). Drawing on and extending the research on positive affect and categorization, we argue that if people experiencing positive affect create more inclusive categories, they may be more adept at stretching the definition of honesty to include behaviors that might ordinarily be viewed as dishonest. Therefore, we predict that people experiencing positive affect will be more likely to morally disengage than people experiencing neutral affect.

Study 1

Method

Participants and design

Eighty participants from a large U.S. university (40% male; *M*age = 20.26 years) participated for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of only two conditions: a positive affect or a neutral affect condition.

Procedure

Participants first completed an autobiographical memory task designed to induce positive or neutral affect (Ashton-James, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chartrand, 2009; Urada & Miller, 2000). In the positive affect condition, participants recalled a life experience that made them feel positive, uplifted, or happy. Participants in the neutral affect condition were asked to recall their actions of the current day. Following this task, participants completed a validated and widely used survey of moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008). Participants rated their agreement on a seven point scale to 32 statements such as, “It is ok to tell small lies because they don't really do any harm” (α=.90). To check the positive affect manipulation, participants completed a three-item measure by rating their affect on a seven point scale of happy to sad, pleasant to unpleasant, and good to bad (Ashton-James et al., 2009).

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants in the positive affect condition reported greater positive affect (M= 5.16, SD= 1.19) than individuals in the neutral affect condition (M= 4.38, SD= 1.20), $F(1, 78)= 8.47$, p=.005, $\eta^2 = .10$.

Moral Disengagement

Participants in the positive affect condition scored higher on moral disengagement (M= 2.92, SD= .66) than participants in the neutral affect condition (M= 2.52, SD= .62), $F(1, 78)= 8.00$, p=.006, $\eta^2 = .09$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 supported our hypothesis that positive affect promotes moral disengagement. Moral disengagement, in turn, may cause individuals experiencing positive affect to be more likely to engage in dishonest behaviors than those experiencing neutral affect, a possibility that we test in Study 2. This is not to say, however, that the morally diluting consequences of positive affect are inevitable. While positive affect may facilitate the ability to blur the lines between moral and immoral behaviors, self-awareness can counter this effect by making behavioral standards salient (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Therefore, in Study 2, we manipulated affect and self-awareness to investigate their interactive effects on dishonest behavior. We also measured the hypothesized mediator, moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008), to replicate the results of Study 1 and to trace the psychological process that links positive affect to dishonesty. We specifically test our hypothesis that, among participants who are low in self-awareness, moral disengagement will mediate the relationship between positive affect and dishonesty.

Study 2

Methods

Participants

Ninety students from a large U.S. university (64% male; *M*age = 21 years) participated in the study for $5 and an opportunity to earn up to an additional $10.

Procedure

Participants entered the laboratory and were randomly assigned to one of only four conditions based on a 2 (Affect: Positive versus Neutral) x 2 (Self-awareness: High versus Low) factorial design. First, following the procedures used by Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg (2000), we manipulated self-awareness by asking participants to sit at a cubical with a mirror or a cubicle without a mirror. Participants randomly assigned to sit at the cubicle with the mirror were in the high self-awareness condition whereas the participants seated at the cubicles without the mirror were in the low self-awareness condition. Participants then watched a short movie clip designed to induce positive or neutral affect (e.g. Fredrickson, 2001; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). Participants in the positive affect condition watched a clip of a cartoon duck showering. Participants in the neutral affect condition watched a clip of a screensaver-like animation of colored sticks (clips available upon request).

Next, participants performed a number search task (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). Participants received a worksheet with 20 number search matrices, each with a set of 12 three-digit numbers and a red pencil to use while completing the task. Participants had five minutes to find two numbers in each matrix that added up to 10 (e.g. 4.78 and 5.22); the time allotted was not sufficient for anyone to solve all 20 matrices. For each correct answer, they earned $0.50 for a maximum of $10. After five minutes had passed, the researcher collected the red pencil and

distributed a report form, pen, an answer key, and an envelope containing $10. Switching the red pencil and the pen disallowed participants from altering the number of problems solved after the five minutes. The participants corrected their own answers, reported the number of problems that they correctly solved on the report form, compensated themselves, and then placed all of their materials in a large box.

No identifying information was apparent on any of the task materials. Therefore, as the participants' actions appeared untraceable, participants could be dishonest by taking more money than they had earned. However, a system of identifying numbers written in invisible ink allowed the researcher to calculate the difference between how much money each individual earned and how much money they took, thus allowing for an accurate behavioral measure of dishonesty. Positive differences indicate that participants were dishonest by stealing money that they did not legitimately earn.

Following the number search task, participants completed a series of surveys that measured their perspectives on behaviors and themselves. They completed a measure of moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008; α=.88) and measures to check the affect (Ashton-James et al., 2009) and self-awareness manipulations (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; α=.87). The self-awareness scale asked participants to agree or disagree with statements such as "I generally pay attention to my behavior" on a seven point scale.

Results

Manipulation Check

Self-awareness. As expected, there was a significant main effect of self-awareness condition such that individuals in the high self-awareness condition experienced greater levels of self-awareness, (*M*= 5.50, *SD*= .94), than individuals in the low self-awareness condition (*M*=

5.11, *SD*= .82), *F*(1, 88)= 4.39, *p*= .04, η^2 = .05. There was no main effect of affect condition, *F*(1, 88)= .169, *p* = .68, η^2 = .002, or a significant interaction between the affect and self-awareness conditions, *F*(1, 88)= 2.29, *p* = .08, η^2 = .07.

Affect. As expected, individuals in the positive affect condition reported greater positive affect (*M*= 5.15, *SD*= .86) than individuals in the neutral affect condition (*M*= 3.50, *SD*= .51), *F*(1, 88)= 120.32, *p* < .001, η^2 = .58. There was no main effect of self-awareness condition, *F*(1, 88)= .03, *p* = .85, η^2 = .00, or a significant interaction between affect and self-awareness conditions, *F*(1, 88)= 1.74, *p* = .19, η^2 = .06.

Dependent Variables

Moral Disengagement. A 2 x 2 ANOVA showed a significant main effect of self-awareness such that individuals in the high self-awareness condition scored lower on the moral disengagement scale (*M*=2.41, *SD*= .64) than individuals in the low self-awareness condition (*M*= 2.75, *SD*= .45), *F*(1, 88)= 8.64, *p*= .004, η^2 = .09. The results also showed a significant main effect of affect condition, such that individuals in the positive affect condition scored higher on the more moral disengagement measure (*M*= 2.73, *SD*=.63) than individuals in the neutral affect condition, (*M*= 2.42, *SD*=.63), *F*(1, 88)= 6.56, *p*= .01, η^2 = .07, thus replicating the results of Study 1.

As predicted, there was also a significant interaction between the self-awareness and affect conditions, *F*(1, 88)= 4.25, *p* =.043, η^2 = .05. Within the low self-awareness conditions, participants who experienced positive affect reported greater moral disengagement (*M*=3.02, *SD*=.45) compared to participants who experienced neutral affect (*M*=2.48, *SD*=.57), *t*(45)= 3.57, *p*<.001. Conversely, within the high self-awareness conditions, participants who experienced

positive affect did not report greater moral disengagement (*M*= 2.37, *SD*= .68) than participants who experienced neutral affect (*M*= 2.43, *SD*= .49), *t*(41)= .33, *p*=.74.

Dishonesty. Consistent with prior research (Beaman, Klentz, Diener, & Svanum, 1979; Diener & Wallbom, 1976), a 2 x 2 ANOVA showed a significant main effect of self-awareness on dishonesty such that individuals in the high self-awareness condition stole less money (*M*=$0.16, *SD*= .44) than individuals in the low self-awareness condition (*M*= $0.98, *SD*= 1.11), *F*(1, 88)= 20.61, *p*< .001, η^2 = .19. There was also a significant main effect of affect condition, such that individuals in the positive affect condition stole more money (*M*= $0.78, *SD*= 1.09) than individuals in the neutral affect condition, (*M*= $0.36, *SD*= .70), *F*(1, 88)= 4.47, *p*= .04, η^2 = .05.

Consistent with our prediction, there was also a significant interaction between the self-awareness and affect conditions, *F*(1, 88)= 10.23, *p* < .001, η^2 = .26 (see Figure 1). Within the low self-awareness conditions, participants who experienced positive affect stole significantly more money (*M*=$1.27, *SD*=1.17) than participants who experienced neutral affect (*M*=$0.12, *SD*=.44), *t*(45)= 2.27, *p*=.03. Conversely, within the high self-awareness conditions, participants who experienced positive affect did not steal more money (*M*= $0.12, *SD*= .45) than participants who experienced neutral affect (*M*= $0.19, *SD*= .45), *t*(41)= .54, p=.59. Additional analyses showed that, even when self-awareness was low, participants who experienced neutral affect did not steal significantly more money (*M*=$0.55, *SD*=.88) than they did when self-awareness was high, (*M*=$0.19, *SD*=.45), *t*(39)=1.79, *p*=.08. Finally, a 3 to 1 contrast analysis indicated that individuals in the positive affect and low self-awareness condition stole significantly more money than participants in the other three conditions, *t*(88)= 5.22, *p* < .001.

The mediating role of moral disengagement

Taken together, the results demonstrate that dishonest behavior was highest among individuals who were both experiencing positive affect and low self-awareness. To test our prediction that moral disengagement mediated this effect, we used bootstrapping procedures, which establish a confidence interval for the indirect effect; mediation is established when the confidence interval does not include zero (Shrout & Bolger, 2002; MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). The positive affect and low-self-awareness condition was coded as "1" and the remaining three conditions as "0" for this analysis. The effect of positive affect/low self-awareness was reduced to non-significance (from $\beta = .65$, $p = .003$, to $\beta = .42$, $p = .08$) when participants' moral disengagement was included in the analyses, and moral disengagement was a significant predictor of dishonesty ($\beta = .31$, $p = .0083$). A bootstrap analysis showed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (0.0716, 0.6436), suggesting a significant indirect effect of positive affect on dishonesty (Shrout & Bolger, 2002; MacKinnon et al., 2007). Figure 2 outlines the meditational process.

Discussion

Most individuals operate in a moral gray zone within which the boundaries between honest and dishonest behavior are not always clear (Anteby, 2008). This work is the first to demonstrate that, within this gray zone, the experience of positive affect may facilitate moral disengagement, which allows the inclusion of a broader range of behaviors as moral. This flexibility of categories thereby promotes the commission of dishonest acts (Gino & Ariely, 2012). However, by increasing self-awareness, the facilitative effect of positive affect on dishonesty was removed. This finding dovetails with previous research showing that increasing self-awareness through the sensation of being watched (Bateseon, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006) or by

a mindful God (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012) can increase reputational concerns and cooperative behaviors.

The results make at least three important contributions to existing research. First, most research on dishonesty, particularly theft, has focused on the role of negative emotions (Penney & Spector, 2007), however, we show that positive affect can also cause dishonest behavior but through a different psychological process; namely by promoting moral disengagement. Future research might build on these findings by investigating how positive affect shapes judgments, not just of oneself, but also the behavior of a target other. It is possible that positive affect might broaden what an evaluator considers to be immoral behavior thus leading to the somewhat counterintuitive prediction that positive affect might make judges more morally conservative and perhaps even more punitive (Minson & Monin, 2012). In other words, cognitive flexibility might give rise to moral hypocrisy by making evaluators simultaneously harsher on others and more lenient on themselves. Similarly, our findings may also have implications for the literature on moral regulation. If considering past pro-social deeds increases positive affect, then positive affect might, in turn, lead to dishonesty thus explaining the licensing effect (Jordan, Mullen & Murnighan, 2011).

Second, the consequences of positive affect on dishonesty may be insidious as the ability to morally disengage from the negative implications of their behavior may allow individuals to steal with impunity. Indeed, our results suggest that although positive affect promoted theft, there were no discernible effects on participants' self-reported moral identity (see Supplementary section) suggesting that individuals can steal while at the same time retaining their positive moral self-image.

Finally, although conventional wisdom would suggest that happy people are less likely to be dishonest, our work suggests that anyone who buys into this simplistic cliché might be blindsided by the stealth behind the smile.

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