

Creative excuses: Original thinkers more likely to cheat

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Creative people are more likely to cheat than less creative people, possibly because this talent increases their ability to rationalize their actions, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Greater creativity helps individuals solve difficult tasks across many domains, but creative sparks may lead individuals to take unethical routes when searching for solutions to problems and tasks," said lead researcher Francesca Gino, PhD, of Harvard University.

Gino and her co-author, Dan Ariely, PhD, of Duke University, conducted a series of five experiments to test their thesis that more creative people would cheat under circumstances where they could justify their [bad behavior](#). Their research was published online in APA's [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

The researchers used a series of recognized psychological tests and measures to gauge research subjects' creativity. They also tested participants' intelligence. In each of the five experiments, participants received a small sum for showing up. Then, they were presented with tasks or tests where they could be paid more if they cheated. For example, in one experiment, participants took a general knowledge quiz in which they circled their answers on the test paper. Afterward, the experimenter told them to transfer their answers to "bubble sheets" – but the experimenter told the group she had photocopied the wrong sheet and that the correct answers were lightly marked. The experimenters also

told participants they would be paid more for more correct answers and led them to believe that they could cheat without detection when transferring their answers. However, all the papers had unique identifiers.

The results showed the more creative participants were significantly more likely to cheat, and that there was no link between intelligence and dishonesty – i.e., more intelligent but less creative people were not more inclined toward dishonesty.

In another experiment, test subjects were shown drawings with dots on two sides of a diagonal line and asked to indicate whether there were more dots on the left side or right side. In half of 200 trials, it was virtually impossible to tell whether there were more dots on one side or another. However, participants were told they'd be paid 10 times as much (5 cents vs. 0.5 cents) for each time they said there were more dots on the right side. As predicted, the more creative participants were significantly more likely to give the answer that paid more.

"Dishonesty and innovation are two of the topics most widely written about in the popular press," the authors wrote. "Yet, to date, the relationship between creativity and dishonest behavior has not been studied empirically. ... The results from the current article indicate that, in fact, people who are creative or work in environments that promote creative thinking may be the most at risk when they face ethical dilemmas."

The authors concede some important limitations in their work, most notably that they created situations in which participants were tempted by money to cheat. They suggested that future research should investigate whether [creativity](#) would lead people to satisfy selfish, short-term goals rather than their higher aspirations when faced with self-control dilemmas, such as eating a slice of cake when trying to lose

weight.

More information: "The Dark Side of Creativity: Original Thinkers Can Be More Dishonest," Francesca Gino, PhD, Harvard Business School, Harvard University, and Dan Ariely, PhD, Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, online.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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