

Dishonest individuals perceived as less capable

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If you saw someone steal an expensive item from a department store, would you think he is less capable at his job? Most people would think that, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Although arguments can be made that an individual's [moral behavior](#) is, or should be, irrelevant to their overall competence, we found consistent support that immoral behavior reduced judgments of people's competence," said lead author Jennifer Stellar, PhD, of the University of Toronto. The research was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Stellar and her co-author, Robb Willer, PhD, of Stanford University, conducted a series of six experiments involving more than 1,500 participants. Across these experiments, the researchers depicted individuals acting immorally in hypothetical scenarios (e.g., shoplifting), acting selfishly in economic games, cheating on a lab task or receiving low morality ratings from coworkers.

Participants were asked to rate their perception of each person's overall competence or competence at a task. For instance, in one experiment, participants were asked how good they thought the hypothetical individual was at his or her job on a scale of 1 to 10. For some individuals, participants were presented with information indicating that the individual had committed a moral transgression (e.g., stole money from a donation jar) or that they had acted morally (e.g., donated money

to a charity).

In each of these experiments, participants consistently rated individuals who had committed moral transgressions as less capable of doing their jobs, completing specific tasks or being generally competent. They also found that these effects did not merely represent a halo effect, whereby people who acted immorally were simply less well-liked and therefore perceived as worse in every way, including being less competent.

Stellar said she was surprised by the results because in one of their early experiments, the researchers asked participants if morality was relevant to determining competence. "We found that most people rated [immoral behavior](#) in one's private life as irrelevant to determining how good that person was at their job. Essentially, people said they didn't think they would use moral information in that way, but when they were provided with it, they did."

Further evidence suggested that immoral individuals were seen as less competent because their actions caused them to be viewed as low in [social intelligence](#).

"Social intelligence is often conceived of as the ability to manage complex social situations," said Stellar. "It includes characteristics such as taking the others' perspectives, being adaptable, managing impressions of oneself and adhering to established social norms. A person who is socially intelligent would understand when and why a coworker is angry and effectively manage their coworker's potentially destructive emotional response."

In one study, they counteracted the concerns about social intelligence by telling some [participants](#) that the hypothetical individual's coworkers rated him or her high in social intelligence.

"We found that when targets received high social [intelligence](#) ratings, immoral targets were no longer perceived as less competent than moral targets," said Stellar.

While further research is necessary, Stellar believes that the results suggest that people view immoral but socially intelligent individuals as Machiavellian, cunning and strategic, rather than socially incompetent.

More information: "Unethical and Inept? The Influence of Moral Information on Perception of Competence," by Jennifer Stellar, PhD, University of Toronto, and Robb Willer, PhD, Stanford University. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published Jan. 31, 2018.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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