



RESEARCH & IDEAS

# Are Creative People More Dishonest?

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In a series of studies, **Francesca Gino** and **Dan Ariely** found that inherently creative people tend to cheat more than noncreative people. Furthermore, they showed that inducing creative behavior tends to induce unethical behavior. It's a sobering thought in a corporate culture that champions out-of-the-box thinking. Key concepts include:

- In a series of experiments, the researchers found links between creativity and unethical behavior.
- Inherently creative people tend to cheat more than noncreative types. Furthermore, inducing creative behavior tends to induce unethical behavior.
- Creativity is not necessarily bad, but managers would do well to consider how to structure the creative process to get the good outcomes of creativity without triggering the bad ones.

In his 1641 treatise, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, philosopher René Descartes introduced the concept of an "evil genius," a powerful force of nature who is equally clever and deceitful. Since then, the world has given us plenty of examples—Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, fictional Wall Street villain Gordon Gekko, and real-life Wall Street villain Bernie Madoff, to name a few. Not only were these classic bad guys unquestionably unethical, but all were inarguably creative in carrying out their bad behavior as well. Indeed, it's rare to hear anyone described as both evil and unoriginal.

This raises a question: Is there a link between creativity and unethical behavior?

**"Dan and I started wondering whether there is something about the creative process that triggers dishonest behavior."**

There certainly is, according to an article in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of*

*Personality and Social Psychology*. In "The Dark Side of Creativity: Original Thinkers Can Be More Dishonest," the authors report that inherently creative people tend to cheat more than noncreative types. Furthermore, they show that inducing creative behavior tends to induce unethical behavior.

It's a sobering thought in a corporate culture that champions out-of-the-box thinking.

"In any organization, especially in contexts that are global and very competitive, there is so much focus on trying to be innovative and creative," says Francesca Gino, an associate professor at Harvard Business School, who wrote the article with Dan Ariely of Duke University. "But is creativity always good? We often hear of cases in which people use innovative behavior to create a sense that what they're doing is not morally wrong. So, Dan and I started wondering whether there is something about the creative process that triggers dishonest behavior. Specifically, we decided to explore the idea that enhancing the motivation to think outside the box can drive individuals toward more dishonest decisions when facing ethical dilemmas."

## Creativity and ambiguity

To begin their research, Gino and Ariely surveyed 99 employees across 17 departments at an American advertising agency, where some jobs—copywriting, for example—required much more creativity than others. In the anonymous survey, on a seven-point scale, the respondents indicated how likely they were to engage in various ethically questionable work behaviors such as "take home office supplies from work" and "inflate your business expense report." Respondents also evaluated scenarios describing a hypothetical person who has the opportunity to behave dishonestly, and then indicated, again on a seven-point scale, how likely they would be to behave unethically in each instance. Finally, the respondents reported how much creativity was required in their respective jobs, with three managers in the executive office rating the creativity level required in each department, as well.

Overall, the researchers learned, the higher the creativity required for the job, the higher the

level of self-reported dishonesty.

Then, through a series of experimental studies, the researchers tested—and largely proved—the theory that creative people are more likely to exhibit unethical behavior when faced with ethical dilemmas.

The first study tested the hypothesis that a naturally creative person is predisposed to dishonest behavior. (The week before the experiment, the participants, 71 university students, completed an online survey that included dispositional measures of creativity.) The experiment included a computerized task in which participants viewed 20 dots inside a diagonally bisected square. They were told to indicate whether there were more dots on the right side of the square or on the left, and that their answers would affect how well they would be compensated for taking part in the experiment: each "more-on-the-right" decision would earn them 10 times as much as a "left" decision.

In half the trials, it was obvious that one side of the square had more dots than the other—2 dots versus 18, for example. But in the other half, the task was a little more ambiguous, with several dots appearing near or on the line in the middle of the square. The researchers focused on the results of the "ambiguous" tasks, with the idea that these were the ones that allowed more room for interpretation—participants could easily misrepresent what they actually perceived and report "more on the right" in order to incur a higher payoff.

The results showed that participants who had scored high on the creativity scale were the most likely to fudge their answers for monetary gain.

"Ambiguity, having some room to justify our behavior, seems to be a really important component of explaining when and why we cross ethical boundaries, and these results show us that creativity helps with that process," Gino says. "It suggests that moral flexibility is the mechanism explaining why being in a creative mindset or being a creative person puts you more at risk to do the wrong thing."

**The perils of inducing**

## creativity

In another study, which included 111 university students, the researchers tested whether they could actively induce creativity, and whether doing so would temporarily induce dishonest behavior. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups: the "creative mindset" group and the control group. All were asked to construct sentences from sets of randomly positioned words. But in the creative mindset group, more than half of the sentences included words related to creativity: "novel," "imagination," "invention," "originality," and so on.

*"We're not saying that creativity's bad, but we are saying that it can lead to problems."*

To test whether the creativity prime worked, the researchers asked participants to solve a cognitive puzzle created by the Gestalt psychologist Karl Duncker. Known as Duncker's candle problem, it presents participants with the task of affixing a candle to a wall in such a way that when lit, the candle won't drip wax on the floor. To complete the task, participants can use a box of tacks, a book of matches, and the candle. The ideal solution, which requires ingenuity, involves emptying the box, tacking the box to the wall as a

candleholder, placing the candle inside, and lighting the candle with the match. The researchers found that 47.3 percent of participants in the creative mindset group solved the candle problem ideally, versus 26.8 percent in the control group.

Next, participants completed a series of computerized tasks, including the ambiguous dots-in-the-square task from the first study. The results showed that those in the creative mindset group were much more likely to give dishonest answers for monetary gain than those in the control group.

"These were simple studies, but they were powerful in showing that our ability to justify things is significantly greater if we are in a creative mindset or when we are creative people," Gino says.

That said, Gino is quick to add that she and Ariely are not suggesting that companies put the kibosh on innovation in order to keep dishonesty at bay.


"We're not saying that creativity is bad," Gino says. "But we are saying that it can lead to problems. And so the question from a manager's perspective is: How do you get the good outcomes of creativity without triggering the bad outcomes?"

While "The Dark Side of Creativity" doesn't answer that question directly, Gino hopes that the research will remind innovative organizations not to give short shrift to ethics.

"As a manager, if you're highlighting the importance of being creative and innovative, it's important to make sure that you're stressing the

presence of ethics, too," Gino says. "Dan and I are of the hope that managers will start thinking about how to structure the creative process in such a way that they can keep ethics in check, triggering the good behavior without triggering the bad behavior."

## Invitation to participate

*Are you a manager at an organization that stresses the importance of creativity in the workplace? Do you have thoughts about how to encourage creativity while discouraging unethical behavior? Please share your thoughts in the comments section below. You can also reach Francesca Gino directly at [fgino@hbs.edu](mailto:fgino@hbs.edu) or follow her on Twitter, [@francescagino](https://twitter.com/francescagino). *

## About the author

**Carmen Nobel** is senior editor of *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*.

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