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Creative liars: The relationship between creativity and integrity

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is typically presented as a constructive activity. Some scholars have proposed the existence of *malevolent* creativity that has the potential to cause harm, either inadvertently or deliberately. But how do the values and beliefs of creative individuals influence malevolent behavior? In this study participants were given measures of creativity and self-reported integrity and then placed in a situation that required them to make a choice between delaying when they would receive their reward for participating in the experiment or immediately receiving their reward though the task was not complete. The results reinforce the significant negative link between observable integrity and creativity but also provide a significant negative connection between self-reported integrity and creativity. The implications of these findings challenge the prevailing wisdom of creativity being a benevolent construct.

1. Introduction

Creativity is a topic of study across many disciplines (e.g., Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010) and cultures (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2006). A consistent, basic definition (Kaufman, 2009) is that creativity is both new (or different, novel, or original) and appropriate to the task (or useful or relevant). Cultures vary on the value placed on different facets of creativity; Eastern cultures particularly consider moral goodness to be a key component (Niu & Sternberg, 2002). Yet across these many viewpoints, creativity is typically presented as a constructive activity. It is often associated with such positive personal attributes as humor and altruism (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1990), positive well-being (Carson, Bittner, Cameron, Brown, & Meyer, 1994), better mood (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005), and resiliency (Metzl, 2009). Creativity is also often thought to be connected with personal development to such a degree that it is considered both a positive and necessary part of the human experience (Richards, 2007; Rogers, 1961). In addition, creativity is considered beneficial for society in general, as it is a key force in progress and is considered one of the top economic resources (Florida, 2002). Sternberg (2010) conceptualizes wisdom itself as utilizing aspects of creativity and intelligence for the common good by balancing self-interest with the interests of others.

More recently, however, a new theoretical approach has emerged that questions the inherent benevolence of creativity. Cropley, Kaufman, and Cropley (2008) and Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, and Runco (2010) propose the idea of *malevolent creativity*, which is creativity that is designed with the intent of harming others. There are other, related concepts, such as *negative creativity* (Clark & James, 1999), which emphasize creative actions that have undesirable outcomes, regardless

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of intent. The roots of malevolent creativity can be seen in broader conceptions of the construct of creativity. For example, fostering creativity can also mean encouraging people to think in different ways than others. The end result can be violations of social norms and expectations; McLaren dubs being creative as a "quest for a radical autonomy apart from the constraints of social responsibility" (1999, p. 490). Can such a journey in the search of creativity lead toward less positive outcomes? Rothenberg (1990) hypothesized that the line between good and bad expression is crossed when creative behavior is used essentially to express negative personal aggression rather than as an artistic outlet. Indeed, some creative people report that their inspiration for engaging in their artistic activities is to redirect self-destructive behaviors (Neihart, 1998).

A wide variety of negative or malevolent acts can be creative. Extreme examples can be disturbing terrorist attacks, such as the innovative preparation and implementation that led to the 9/11 devastation, or other criminal behavior that uses creativity (Brower, 1999; Eisenman, 1999, 2008). Similarly, Lee and Dow (2011) found that physical aggression was correlated with the number of creative items linked with violence that a person would offer on a divergent test of creativity. Other examples include commonplace unethical behavior such as lying, committed by people who may value honesty but display unethical behavior for personal gain when given the opportunity (Gino & Ariely, 2011). Kaufman, Cropley, Chiera, and White (under review) studied how people perceive acts of varying malevolence. They found that people judged morally complex or ambiguous actions as being more creative than more straightforward actions (either benevolent or malevolent).

If creativity is a stable characteristic of an individual, as many have argued (Batey, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Feist, 1998; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010), then further evidence for malevolent creativity may be found by examining creativity's relationship with "negative" personality factors. Harris, Reiter-Palmon, and Kaufman (under review) found that people with lower emotional intelligence were more likely to have malevolently creative ideas.

In addition, creativity has been associated with the broad personality factor of Disagreeableness (Burch, Pavelis, Hemsley, & Corr, 2006; King, McKee Walker, & Broyles, 1996) and the related facets of hostility (Feist, 1993, 1998) and arrogance (Silvia, Kaufman, Reiter-Palmon, & Wigert, 2011). Creativity in the arts has also been associated with being low in Conscientiousness (Wolfradt & Pretz, 2001) a factor that is associated with the tendency to be irresponsible, prone to take risk, and acting impulsively (Goldberg, 1993; Lynam, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2003). But in the realm of creative behavior, there is a necessity for a certain level of sensible risk-taking and impulsivity (Friedman & Förster, 2001; George & Zhou, 2007). It is important to realize that some concepts, such as impulsivity or low Conscientiousness, illustrate ways that someone primed to be creative may also be more at risk for demonstrating malevolent creativity since some of the same personality traits overlap with those associated with low integrity (Collins & Schmidt, 1993; Murphy, 2000).

1.1. Integrity

Before the link between integrity and creativity can be explored in depth, the basic construct of integrity needs to be defined. Notably, the phenomenon of integrity is not well construed (Sackett & Wanek, 1996). In accordance with the public usage of the word, the term integrity is used in reference to a single absolute morality instead of in reference toward the assumptions of one's value system in question. In an absolute context, the idea of integrity conveys no meaning between individuals with differing definitions of absolute morality, and becomes indeed a vague statement of one being a good or ethical person (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Within the context of this study, we will say that others "have integrity" to the extent that they show a willingness to comply with rules, norms and expectations, according to an internalized set of values, beliefs, and principles they claim to possess (Murphy, 2005).

1.2. Creativity, honesty, and integrity

Often the concept of integrity can be confused with many philosophical facets, but probably none so much than as it is with honesty. Honesty refers to a facet of moral character that denotes the absence of lying or cheating and is defined by a close matching of what is being experienced and what is being expressed by the individual. Few studies have looked at how factors of integrity such as honesty are influenced by creativity. Gino and Ariely (2011) found that people with creative traits were more likely to manipulate the results of their tests than less creative people by lying more about how well they performed on each trial of the experiment. This tendency was especially true when there was ambiguity that could be interpreted in the favor of the more creative person. It was argued that this creativity then mediates a person's ability to justify cheating and therefore increases the extent that people would lie, leaving the authors to conclude from these results that creativity motivates dishonesty. In the same manner, Walczyk, Runco, Tripp, and Smith (2008) had students come up with solutions to scenarios in which deception would generally lead to successful outcomes. They found that telling many different lies correlated with divergent fluency (being able to derive many different ideas), which is related to creativity. Additionally, De Dreu and Nijstad (2008) studied creativity and conflict resolution and found that during competitive negotiation tactics, creativity was associated with integrity factors such as deception. Taken together, these findings suggest that some situational lying can be associated with certain components of increased creativity such as divergent thinking and cognitive flexibility.

How do the values and beliefs of creative individuals influence their behavior? If integrity is seen as the virtue of basing actions on an internally consistent framework of principles, then self-report integrity measures should theoretically reflect actual behavior. Yet people who show a tendency toward having low integrity, either behaviorally or in a personality measure of testing, will not necessarily exhibit that tendency in life situations (Ariely, 2008). Both anecdotally and empirically it has been shown that people seem to be more corruptible when they think they can get away with it (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009;

Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). What Gino and Ariely (2011) showed us was that creativity can play an important role in this phenomenon because it allows people to convince themselves they are not actually behaving without integrity as long as they do not overstep a self-designated boundary. However, this level of deception would likely be considered inconsequential "white lies," (Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004) since these lies only deviate from the truth by approximately 10%. In the tests of integrity that use an all-or-nothing framework, a lack of probity is unmitigated and therefore more difficult to rationalize. It is possible that creativity's mediating effect on lying, and by extension integrity, may depend on the measure chosen.

Based on past research on lying and malevolent creativity, we believe that when integrity is self-reported and assumed to be a personality trait, it will be significantly and negatively related to creativity (H_1). Furthermore, we believe that behavioral integrity will also be significantly and negatively related to creativity (H_2).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were volunteers from a public California university recruited to take an online survey via bulletin board and by e-mail. They were offered extra credit for participation in the study. There were a total of 566 participants (485 females and 81 males). There were 184 European Americans, 49 African Americans, 218 Hispanic Americans, 38 Asian Americans, 7 Native Americans, 10 Indians, 31 people of mixed ethnicity, and 29 people who declined to provide information about their ethnicity. Out of the 507 people who provided their age, the minimum was 18 and the maximum was 60, for a mean of 23 years old and a standard deviation of 3.3 years.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Self-reported integrity

An integrity test is a specific type of personality test designed to assess an applicant's tendency to be honest, trustworthy, and dependable. Sackett, Burris, and Callahan (1989) classified integrity tests into two categories: overt integrity tests and personality-based tests. Overt, or behavioral, measures indicate the specific type of unethical behavior in which the test taker may have participated in. There are also personality-based measures of integrity. These measures do not specify the unethical behavior, but rather assess self-described personality traits that are associated with the probability of the participant acting with integrity. These measures, such as the Integrity/Honesty/Authenticity Survey, have been shown to have good test validity and as such are accurate predicators of how one would respond when faced with an ethical dilemma (Wanek, 1999).

To evaluate the self-described dimension of integrity, participants were given the Integrity/Honesty/Authenticity (IHA) scale of the IPIP (Goldberg et al., 2006). Originally developed as part of the Values In Action measure for character strength of Integrity/Honesty/Authenticity, its intent is to measure integrity in terms of how one presents themselves both verbally and behaviorally in a manner that represents the situation in a legitimate way (Park & Peterson, 2008). The integrity scale is a 12 item, true or false scale with 5 positively keyed questions such as "Am trusted to keep secrets", 4 negatively keyed questions like "Lie to get myself out of trouble", and 3 neutral questions.

The Integrity scale demonstrated acceptable reliability in this sample with a Cronbach's Alpha of .72. The measure was scored by giving one point for each of the positively keyed questions that were answered with a "True" and one point for each negatively answered question "False" with no points being given for the neutral questions. A high score would indicate that the participant self-reported as being high in integrity. The scores ranged from 2 to 9 with a mean of 5.94 and an SD of 1.146.

2.2.2. Behavioral integrity

To observable a participants behavioral integrity, we gave the participants a test (as described in Section 3) to see if they would either take the extra credit for completing the survey even though the survey was not finished or go back and complete another part of the survey though they could have received their certificate for extra credit without doing so. Students who returned to the survey were considered to have passed the objective behavioral integrity test ($n = 529$) and students who did not return to the survey were said to have failed the objective behavioral integrity test ($n = 37$).

2.2.3. Creativity

To assess creative ability, participants were given an abbreviated version of the Remote Associates Test (RAT). Items were taken from the original form of the RAT devised by Mednick (1962, 1968). In this shortened version, fifteen triads of words were presented. The participant then had to come up with one word that related all three of the previous words together. For example, given a triad of Falling, Actor, and Dust, a correct answer would be Star (a falling star; an actor is a star; stardust). This test is based on the premise that creativity involves the ability to make rather remote associations among separate ideas. It is frequently used as a measure of convergent thinking and creativity in empirical studies (Ansburg & Hill, 2003) based on the premise that further apart conceptually two ideas are, the more creative a person must be to see the connection behind them. Using a measure of convergent thinking to test creativity allows us to contrast our results to other experiments that

have explored some of the other facets of creativity such as divergent thinking. In this study, participants were given 15 min to solve 15 RAT items. Based on instructions developed by Mednick (1962), we counted the number of correct responses for each individual and used this number as our measure of creativity in the analyses presented below. The mean score was 2.90 with a range of 0–13 and a standard deviation of 2.41.

3. Procedure

Students were first given the creativity test and then the self-reported integrity scale followed by the demographic questionnaire. To check observable integrity, we gave the students an objective behavioral integrity test (OBIT). When they were finished with the other measures, they were shown a "Thank You" page that gave them two choices; they could click on a button to "return to survey" or they could click on a button to "receive extra credit". When the mouse hovered over either button a fake error message popped up and told the students that a mistake had occurred and they had not finished taking the survey. They were then instructed to click on the "return to survey" button and complete all the measures. When the student closed the error message they were returned to the previous screen giving them the two choices of either returning to the survey or receiving their extra credit. If the student clicked on the option to return to the survey they were given a measure on religion that was not intended for analysis and then taken to the page to receive their extra credit. If they clicked on the extra credit button they were taken directly to the page to receive their extra credit.

4. Results

Before analyzing the primary hypothesis, gender differences were assessed by *t*-tests with both the self-reported integrity and RAT scores as dependent variables. There were no significant difference between males and females for either self-reported integrity ($t(564) = 7.06$, $p = n.s.$) or the RAT ($t(564) = 4.50$, $p = n.s.$). In addition, a chi-square of independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender and the OBIT. The relation between these variables was also not significant, X^2 $(2, N = 566) = .021$, $p = n.s.$

In order to determine the relationship between creativity and self-reported integrity, a Pearson product correlation was conducted between the RAT and the IHA scale which showed a negative correlation of $r(566) = -.12$, $p < .001$. It was hypothesized that those who failed the OBIT would have different self-reported integrity factors and creative abilities than those who passed it. Table 1 shows the results of the *t*-tests that were computed to test this prediction. Consistent with this hypothesis, creativity was significantly higher in the group that had failed the OBIT, $t(42.22) = -4.49$, $p < .001$, $d = -.71$, with means (*SD*) of 4.34(1.94) for the "failed" OBIT group and 2.79 (2.41) for the "passed" integrity group. However, self-reported integrity did not significantly differ between the two groups.

Since we found a correlation between creativity and self-reported integrity, but no difference between those who passed or failed the OBIT and the self-reported integrity measure, a logistic regression was performed on our 2 predictor variables (creativity and self-reported integrity) to ascertain whether they significantly predicted if someone had passed or failed the OBIT. The combination of creativity and self-reported integrity was significantly related to whether or not a person had failed the OBIT, $\chi^2 = 10.64$, $df = 2$, $N = 566$, $p = .005$. In Table 2 we present the logistic coefficient and Wald test of each predictor variable which shows that only creativity was statistically significant predictor of the OBIT ($p < .001$).

Table 1
Mean creativity and self-reported integrity scores for the passed and failed objective behavioral integrity groups.

	Integrity test			
	Passed	Failed	*T*	*D*
Creativity	2.79 (2.41)	4.34 (1.94)	−4.49***	−0.80
Self-reported integrity	5.95 (1.14)	5.80 (1.28)	.73	0.12

Note: $df = 566$ for the self-reported integrity analyses. Creativity scores where the Levene's test for equality in variance was significant were therefore adjusted and $df = 42.22$ was used. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below the mean.
*** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Summary of logistic regression analysis for variables predicting the objective behavioral integrity test ($N = 566$).

Personality variable	*B*	S.E.	Wald
Creativity	−.20***	.06	10.45
Self-reported integrity	.07	.16	.21

*** $p < .001$.

5. Discussion

The idea of malevolent creativity is a relatively new one (Cropley et al., 2008, 2010); there is far more theoretical debate than empirical evidence. Much of the work to date on how integrity (or a lack thereof) is associated with creativity has treated integrity as an observable phenomenon (e.g., Gino & Ariely, 2011) without emphasizing the personality dimension of the issue. This study reinforces the significant, negative link between observable behavioral integrity and creativity (supporting H_2) but also adds a significant, negative connection between self-reported personality factors of integrity and creativity (supporting H_1).

In this study, the IHA scale was used to determine whether individuals perceive themselves as being a person with integrity while the OBIT was used to explore a person's ability to act with integrity when faced with a moral problem. We found that people who passed the behavioral test of integrity were no different than those who failed the test when it came to their score on the self-described measure of integrity. Self-perceptions of morality were not related to actual honest behavior. Such findings are broadly consistent with the research on metacognition and self-assessments; for example, people with low ability do a worse job of estimating their own ability (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Furthermore, several studies have shown that people are not good at estimating their own creativity (Kaufman, Evans, & Baer, 2010; Lee, Day, Meara, & Maxwell, 2002; Priest, 2006).

This study indicates that people who "fail" an objective test of behavioral integrity (regardless of their self-perceived honesty) are more creative. In addition, self-perceived integrity was also negatively related to creativity. Before these findings can be extrapolated further, however, several caveats are needed. First, the lack of relationship between self-reported and behavioral integrity is notable. It is possible, of course, that people are not aware of their own ethics. But it is important to consider that the current study used extra credit as an incentive to participate in this study, which may have impacted participants' motives to be without integrity. Whereas Gino and Ariely (2011) found that money was a successful bait to induce deception on the part of creative individuals, extra credit for a course may have been too small of an incentive to obtain a reaction. If the incentive to "cheat" was not sufficient (supported by the low number of participants who failed the behavioral integrity measure), then other factors may have impacted which people "failed" the measure. In addition, Mazar et al. (2008) suggests that most people are tempted to cheat by only "a little bit." This behavioral integrity measure was an "all or nothing" scenario. Indeed, regardless of creative ability, fewer people were willing to cheat than they were in other studies (Gino & Ariely, 2011; Gino et al., 2009; Mazar et al., 2008). This may offer support to Gino and Ariely's (2011) research by demonstrating that when the gray zone between right and wrong is made smaller by only offering 2 choices, then the divergent thinking aspect of creativity becomes a deciding factor in which path a person will take.

It is important to consider the limitations of this study when interpreting the results. Ideally, future studies will use additional measures of creativity, such as actual creative performance (i.e., Kaufman & Baer, 2012). In addition, there was no confirmation that the participants knew that not completing the survey equaled a less-moral behavior. Though it was implied that they were supposed to complete the survey, there was no verification from the student that they knew they were cheating by not finishing it. In addition, as per the regulations of the University's institutional review board (IRB), the students were told before the survey begins that they could stop at any point without repercussions. Participants who ended the study early may have reasoned that they were within the ethical dimensions of research participation. In future research, participants might be asked to acknowledge that not completing the survey is against the "rules." This addition would have a dual purpose; one, it would confirm that the participant acknowledged the implication of the task and two, it would clarify that those who did fail the observable integrity task were not just testing the rules by asking themselves "what if" and then experimenting with the boundaries of the survey (as might be expected by creative people).

Clearly, future studies on behavioral integrity – ideally using measures with higher face validity – will be conducted to better clarify the research questions. What our study does offer is additional support for the existence of malevolent creativity. As with past work, we found curious connections between integrity and creative behavior. The implications of these and other related findings challenge the prevailing idea of creativity as a benevolent construct.

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