

Profit as justification: the relationship between the outcomes of dishonest behavior and ethical dissonance

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Imagine you cheated on an exam...

2 weeks later you get the results and find out you failed. Do you feel bad about cheating? How immoral do you feel? Now imagine your score was 97. How do you feel now?

BACKGROUND

Two competing approaches can be used to explain the relationship between the magnitude of profit from unethical behavior and the magnitude of guilt that accompanies this ethical violation:

- Normative law models posit that people who gain more profit from a crime should also feel guiltier
- A psychological model of ethical dissonance suggests that guilt results from the discrepancy between an individual's need to maintain positive self-esteem, and the desire to profit from unethical behavior



Paradoxically, a large profit can provide a 'good enough' reason or justification for an ethical violation, diminish the discrepancy and attenuate the experienced guilt. A small profit, however, cannot be used to justify the transgression, thus leaving the dissonance unresolved

PILOT – Guilty past

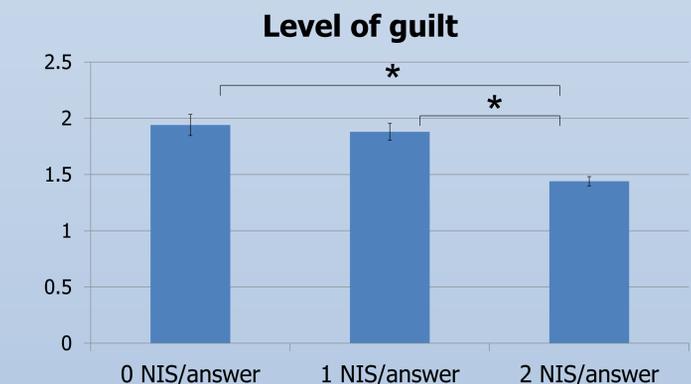
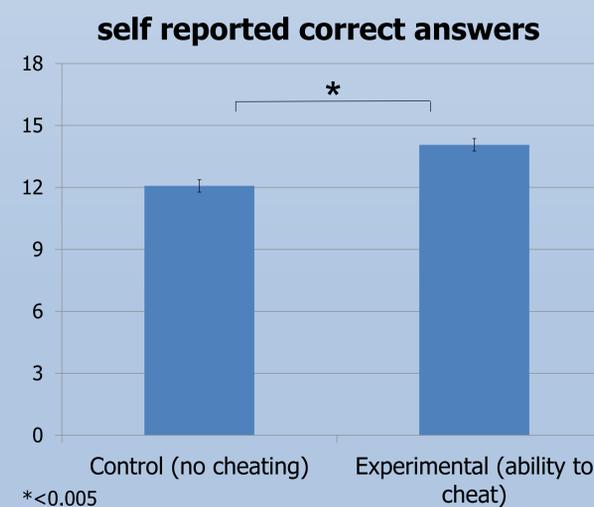
A preliminary pilot was designed to initially examine intuitive judgments regarding the relationship between unethical behavior and the resulting guilt. Participants were asked to recall and describe two personal occurrences from the past month/year in which they committed an ethical violation. Participants then rated the benefits and the level of guilt they experienced as a result. In line with the ethical dissonance hypothesis, the findings revealed a negative correlation such that more guilt resulted from the smaller profit from the ethical violation

STUDY 1 – The higher the payoff the lower the guilt

- 94 Participants engaged in a cognitive task and their payment for participation was a function of both self-reports of performance and a random mechanism. Specifically, after the experiment, participants rolled a die and, according to the outcome of the die-roll, their self-report of performance was multiplied by 0, 1, or 2 NIS
- Half the participants had an opportunity to cheat and earn more money (as their reports were not monitored), and half the participants could not cheat (their reports were monitored)
- After getting paid participants completed a short questionnaire that explicitly measured guilt

RESULTS

Replicating past experiments, the findings showed that when given the opportunity to cheat, people inflate their performance's self-reports and earn more money



Importantly, participants in the experimental group who were randomly paid the highest sum based on the die roll, reported significantly lower feeling of guilt compared to the other groups. A significant negative correlation was found between payoff and guilt

CONCLUSIONS

- In contrast to normative models, people's judgments of themselves are stricter under situations of low personal profit from unethical behavior
- High profit from unethical behavior serves as a justification mechanism that leads to lower guilt feelings and allows cheaters to benefit without suffering pangs of conscience