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People like to think of themselves as honest. However, dishonesty pays—and it often pays well. How do people resolve this tension? This research shows that people behave dishonestly enough to profit but honestly enough to delude themselves of their own integrity. A little bit of dishonesty gives a taste of profit without spoiling a positive self-view. Two mechanisms allow for such self-concept maintenance: inattention to moral standards and categorization malleability. Six experiments support the authors' theory of self-concept maintenance and offer practical applications for curbing dishonesty in everyday life.

*Keywords:* honesty, decision making, policy, self

## The Dishonesty of Honest People: A Theory of Self-Concept Maintenance

It is almost impossible to open a newspaper or turn on a television without being exposed to a report of dishonest behavior of one type or another. To give a few examples, “wardrobing”—the purchase, use, and then return of the used clothing—costs the U.S. retail industry an estimated \$16 billion annually (Speights and Hilinski 2005); the overall magnitude of fraud in the U.S. property and casualty insurance industry is estimated to be 10% of total claims payments, or \$24 billion annually (Accenture 2003); and the “tax gap,” or the difference between what the Internal Revenue Service estimates taxpayers should pay and what they actually pay, exceeds \$300 billion annually (more than 15% noncompliance rate; Herman 2005). If this evidence is not disturbing enough, perhaps the largest contribution to dishonesty comes from employee theft and fraud, which has been estimated at \$600 billion a year in the United States alone—an amount almost twice the market capitalization of General Electric (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2006).

### WHY ARE PEOPLE (DIS)HONEST?

Rooted in the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, and the standard economic model of rational and

selfish human behavior (i.e., homo economicus) is the belief that people carry out dishonest acts consciously and deliberately by trading off the expected external benefits and costs of the dishonest act (Allingham and Sandmo 1972; Becker 1968). According to this perspective, people would consider three aspects as they pass a gas station: the expected amount of cash they stand to gain from robbing the place, the probability of being caught in the act, and the magnitude of punishment if caught. On the basis of these inputs, people reach a decision that maximizes their interests. Thus, according to this perspective, people are honest or dishonest only to the extent that the planned trade-off favors a particular action (Hechter 1990; Lewicki 1984). In addition to being central to economic theory, this external cost–benefit view plays an important role in the theory of crime and punishment, which forms the basis for most policy measures aimed at preventing dishonesty and guides punishments against those who exhibit dishonest behavior. In summary, this standard external cost–benefit perspective generates three hypotheses as to the forces that are expected to increase the frequency and magnitude of dishonesty: higher magnitude of external rewards (Ext-H<sub>1</sub>), lower probability of being caught (Ext-H<sub>2</sub>), and lower magnitude of punishment (Ext-H<sub>3</sub>).

From a psychological perspective, and in addition to financial considerations, another set of important inputs to the decision whether to be honest is based on internal rewards. Psychologists show that as part of socialization, people internalize the norms and values of their society (Campbell 1964; Henrich et al. 2001), which serve as an internal benchmark against which a person compares his or her behavior. Compliance with the internal values system provides positive rewards, whereas noncompliance leads to negative rewards (i.e., punishments). The most direct evi-

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dence of the existence of such internal reward mechanisms comes from brain imaging studies that reveal that acts based on social norms, such as altruistic punishment or social cooperation (De Quervain et al. 2004; Rilling et al. 2002), activate the same primary reward centers in the brain (i.e., nucleus accumbens and caudate nucleus) as external benefits, such as preferred food, drink, and monetary gains (Knutson et al. 2001; O'Doherty et al. 2002).

Applied to the context of (dis)honesty, we propose that one major way the internal reward system exerts control over behavior is by influencing people's self-concept—that is, the way people view and perceive themselves (Aronson 1969; Baumeister 1998; Bem 1972). Indeed, it has been shown that people typically value honesty (i.e., honesty is part of their internal reward system), that they have strong beliefs in their own morality, and that they want to maintain this aspect of their self-concept (Greenwald 1980; Griffin and Ross 1991; Josephson Institute of Ethics 2006; Sanitioso, Kunda, and Fong 1990). This means that if a person fails to comply with his or her internal standards for honesty, he or she will need to negatively update his or her self-concept, which is aversive. Conversely, if a person complies with his or her internal standards, he or she avoids such negative updating and maintains his or her positive self-view in terms of being an honest person. Notably, this perspective suggests that to maintain their positive self-concepts, people will comply with their internal standards even when doing so involves investments of effort or sacrificing financial gains (e.g., Aronson and Carlsmith 1962; Harris, Mussen, and Rutherford 1976; Sullivan 1953). In our gas station example, this perspective suggests that people who pass by a gas station will be influenced not only by the expected amount of cash they stand to gain from robbing the place, the probability of being caught, and the magnitude of punishment if caught but also by the way the act of robbing the store might make them perceive themselves.

The utility derived from behaving in line with the self-concept could conceivably be just another part of the cost-benefit analysis (i.e., adding another variable to account for this utility). However, even if we consider this utility just another input, it probably cannot be manifested as a simple constant, because the influence of dishonest behavior on the self-concept will most likely depend on the particular action, its symbolic value, its context, and its plasticity. In the following sections, we characterize these elements in a theory of self-concept maintenance and test the implications of this theory in a set of six experiments.

### THE THEORY OF SELF-CONCEPT MAINTENANCE

People are often torn between two competing motivations: gaining from cheating versus maintaining a positive self-concept as honest (Aronson 1969; Harris, Mussen, and Rutherford 1976). For example, if people cheat, they could gain financially but at the expense of an honest self-concept. In contrast, if they take the high road, they might forgo financial benefits but maintain their honest self-concept. This seems to be a win-lose situation, such that choosing one path involves sacrificing the other.

In this work, we suggest that people typically solve this motivational dilemma adaptively by finding a balance or equilibrium between the two motivating forces, such that

they derive some financial benefit from behaving dishonestly but still maintain their positive self-concept in terms of being honest. To be more precise, we posit a magnitude range of dishonesty within which people can cheat, but their behaviors, which they would usually consider dishonest, do not bear negatively on their self-concept (i.e., they are not forced to update their self-concept).<sup>1</sup> Although many mechanisms may allow people to find such a compromise, we focus on two particular means: categorization and attention devoted to one's own moral standards. Using these mechanisms, people can record their actions (e.g., "I am claiming \$x in tax exemptions") without confronting the moral meaning of their actions (e.g., "I am dishonest"). We focus on these two mechanisms because they support the role of the self-concept in decisions about honesty and because we believe that they have a wide set of important applications in the marketplace. Although not always mutually exclusive, we elaborate on each separately.

### Categorization

We hypothesize that for certain types of actions and magnitudes of dishonesty, people can categorize their actions into more compatible terms and find rationalizations for their actions. As a consequence, people can cheat while avoiding any negative self-signals that might affect their self-concept and thus avoid negatively updating their self-concept altogether (Gur and Sackeim 1979).

Two important aspects of categorization are its relative malleability and its limit. First, behaviors with malleable categorization are those that allow people to reinterpret them in a self-serving manner, and the degree of malleability is likely to be determined by their context. For example, intuition suggests that it is easier to steal a \$.10 pencil from a friend than to steal \$.10 out of the friend's wallet to buy a pencil because the former scenario offers more possibilities to categorize the action in terms that are compatible with friendship (e.g., my friend took a pencil from me once; this is what friends do). This thought experiment suggests not only that a higher degree of categorization malleability facilitates dishonesty (stealing) but also that some actions are inherently less malleable and therefore cannot be categorized successfully in compatible terms (Dana, Weber, and Kuang 2005; for a discussion of the idea that a medium, such as a pen, can disguise the final outcome of an action, such as stealing, see Hsee et al. 2003). In other words, as the categorization malleability increases, so does the magnitude of dishonesty to which a person can commit without influencing his or her self-concept (Baumeister 1998; Pina e Cunha and Cabral-Cardoso 2006; Schweitzer and Hsee 2002).

The second important aspect of the categorization process pertains to its inherent limit. The ability to categorize behaviors in ways other than as dishonest or immoral can be incredibly useful for the self, but it is difficult to imagine that this mechanism is without limits. Instead, it may be possible to "stretch" the truth and the bounds of mental representations only up to a certain point (what

<sup>1</sup>Our self-concept maintenance theory is based on how people define honesty and dishonesty for themselves, regardless of whether their definition matches the objective definition.

Piaget [1950] calls assimilation and accommodation). If we assume that the categorization process has such built-in limits, we should conceptualize categorization as effective only up to a threshold, beyond which people can no longer avoid the obvious moral valence of their behavior.

*Attention to Standards*

The other mechanism that we address in the current work is the attention people pay to their own standards of conduct. This idea is related to Duval and Wicklund’s (1972) theory of objective self-awareness and Langer’s (1989) concept of mindlessness. We hypothesize that when people attend to their own moral standards (are mindful of them), any dishonest action is more likely to be reflected in their self-concept (they will update their self-concept as a consequence of their actions), which in turn will cause them to adhere to a stricter delineation of honest and dishonest behavior. However, when people are inattentive to their own moral standards (are mindless of them), their actions are not evaluated relative to their standards, their self-concept is less likely to be updated, and, therefore, their behavior is likely to diverge from their standards. Thus, the attention-to-standards mechanism predicts that when moral standards are more accessible, people will need to confront the meaning of their actions more readily and therefore be more honest (for ways to increase accessibility, see Bateson, Nettle, and Roberts 2006; Bering, McLeod, and Shackelford 2005; Diener and Wallbom 1976; Haley and Fessler 2005). In this sense, greater attention to standards may be modeled as a tighter range for the magnitude of dishonest actions that does not trigger updating of the self-concept or as a lower threshold up to which people can be dishonest without influencing their self-concept.

*Categorization and Attention to Standards*

Whereas the categorization mechanism depends heavily on stimuli and actions (i.e., degree of malleability and magnitude of dishonesty), the attention-to-standards mechanism relies on internal awareness or salience. From this perspective, these two mechanisms are distinct; the former focuses on the outside world, and the latter focuses on the inside world. However, they are related in that they both involve attention, are sensitive to manipulations, and are related to the dynamics of acceptable boundaries of behavior.

Thus, although the dishonesty that both self-concept maintenance mechanisms allow stems from different sources, they both tap the same basic concept. Moreover, in many real-world cases, these mechanisms may be so inter-related that it would be difficult to distinguish whether the source of this type of dishonesty comes from the environment (categorization) or the individual (attention to standards). In summary, the theory of self-concept maintenance that considers both external and internal reward systems suggests the following hypotheses:

- Ext&Int-H<sub>1</sub>: Dishonesty increases as attention to standards for honesty decreases.
- Ext&Int-H<sub>2</sub>: Dishonesty increases as categorization malleability increases.
- Ext&Int-H<sub>3</sub>: Given the opportunity to be dishonest, people are dishonest up to a certain level that does not force them to update their self-concept.

*EXPERIMENT 1: INCREASING ATTENTION TO STANDARDS FOR HONESTY THROUGH RELIGIOUS REMINDERS*

The general setup of all our experiments involves a multiple-question task, in which participants are paid according to their performance. We compare the performance of respondents in the control conditions, in which they have no opportunity to be dishonest, with that of respondents in the “cheating” conditions, in which they have such an opportunity. In Experiment 1, we test the prediction that increasing people’s attention to their standards for honesty will make them more honest by contrasting the magnitude of dishonesty in a condition in which they are reminded of their own standards for honesty with a condition in which they are not.

On the face of it, the idea that any reminder can decrease dishonesty seems strange; after all, people should know that it is wrong to be dishonest, even without such reminders. However, from the self-concept maintenance perspective, the question is not whether people know that it is wrong to behave dishonestly but whether they think of these standards and compare their behavior with them in the moment of temptation. In other words, if a mere reminder of honesty standards has an effect, we can assert that people do not naturally attend to these standards. In Experiment 1, we implement this reminder through a simple recall task.

*Method*

Two hundred twenty-nine students participated in this experiment, which consisted of a two-task paradigm as part of a broader experimental session with multiple, unrelated paper-and-pencil tasks that appeared together in a booklet. In the first task, we asked respondents to write down either the names of ten books they had read in high school (no moral reminder) or the Ten Commandments (moral reminder). They had two minutes to complete this task. The idea of the Ten Commandments recall task was that independent of people’s religion, of whether people believed in God, or of whether they knew any of the commandments, knowing that the Ten Commandments are about moral rules would be enough to increase attention to their own moral standards and thus increase the likelihood of behavior consistent with these standards (for a discussion of reminders of God in the context of generosity, see Shariff and Norenzayan 2007). The second, ostensibly separate task consisted of two sheets of paper: a test sheet and an answer sheet. The test sheet consisted of 20 matrices, each based on a set of 12 three-digit numbers. Participants had four minutes to find two numbers per matrix that added up to 10 (see Figure 1). We selected this type of task because it is a search task, and though it can take some time to find the right

Figure 1  
A SAMPLE MATRIX OF THE ADDING-TO-10 TASK

1.69	1.82	2.91
4.67	4.81	3.05
5.82	5.06	4.28
6.36	5.19	4.57

answer, when it is found, the respondents could unambiguously evaluate whether they had solved the question correctly (assuming that they could add two numbers to 10 without error), without the need for a solution sheet and the possibility of a hindsight bias (Fischhoff and Beyth 1975). Moreover, we used this task on the basis of a pretest that showed that participants did not view this task as one that reflected their math ability or intelligence. The answer sheet was used to report the total number of correctly solved matrices. We promised that at the end of the session, two randomly selected participants would earn \$10 for each correctly solved matrix.

In the two control conditions (after the ten books and Ten Commandments recall task, respectively), at the end of the four-minute matrix task, participants continued to the next task in the booklet. At the end of the entire experimental session, the experimenter verified their answers on the matrix task and wrote down the number of correctly solved matrices on the answer sheet in the booklet. In the two recycle conditions (after the ten books and Ten Commandments recall task, respectively), at the end of the four-minute matrix task, participants indicated the total number of correctly solved matrices on the answer sheet and then tore out the original test sheet from the booklet and placed it in their belongings (to recycle later), thus providing them with an opportunity to cheat. The entire experiment represented a 2 (type of reminder)  $\times$  2 (ability to cheat) between-subjects design.

### Results and Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 confirmed our predictions. The type of reminder had no effect on participants' performance in the two control conditions ( $M_{\text{Books/control}} = 3.1$  versus  $M_{\text{Ten Commandments/control}} = 3.1$ ;  $F(1, 225) = .012, p = .91$ ), which suggests that the type of reminder did not influence ability or motivation. Following the book recall task, however, respondents cheated when they were given the opportunity to do so ( $M_{\text{Books/recycle}} = 4.2$ ), but they did not cheat after the Ten Commandments recall task ( $M_{\text{Ten Commandments/recycle}} = 2.8$ ;  $F(1, 225) = 5.24, p = .023$ ), creating a significant interaction between type of reminder and ability to cheat ( $F(3, 225) = 4.52, p = .036$ ). Notably, the level of cheating remained far below the maximum. On average, participants cheated only 6.7% of the possible magnitude. Most important, and in line with our notion of self-concept maintenance, reminding participants of standards for morality eliminated cheating completely: In the Ten Commandments/recycle condition, participants' performance was undistinguishable from those in the control conditions ( $F(1, 225) = .49, p = .48$ ).

We designed Experiment 1 to focus on the attention-to-standards mechanism (Ext&Int- $H_1$ ), but one aspect of the results—the finding that the magnitude of dishonesty was limited and well below the maximum possible level in the two recycle conditions—suggested that the categorization mechanism (Ext&Int- $H_2$ ) could have been at work as well.

A possible alternative interpretation of the books/recycle condition is that over their lifetime, participants developed standards for moral behavior according to which overclaiming by a few questions on a test or in an experimental setting was not considered dishonest. If so, these participants could have been completely honest from their point of view. Similarly, in a country in which a substantial part of the cit-

izenry overclaims on taxes, the very act of overclaiming is generally accepted and therefore not necessarily considered immoral. However, if this interpretation accounted for our findings, increasing people's attention to morality (Ten Commandments/recycle condition) would not have decreased the magnitude of dishonesty. Therefore, we interpreted these findings as providing initial support for the self-concept maintenance theory.

Note also that, on average, participants remembered only 4.3 of the Ten Commandments, and we found no significant correlation between the number of commandments recalled and the number of matrices the participants claimed to have solved correctly ( $r = -.14, p = .29$ ). If we use the number of commandments remembered as a proxy for religiosity, the lack of relationship between religiosity and the magnitude of dishonesty suggests that the efficacy of the Ten Commandments is based on increased attention to internal honesty standards, leading to a lower tolerance for dishonesty (i.e., decreased self-concept maintenance threshold).

Finally, it is worth contrasting these results with people's lay theories about such situations. A separate set of students ( $n = 75$ ) correctly anticipated that participants would cheat when given the opportunity to do so, but they anticipated that the level of cheating would be higher than what it really was ( $M_{\text{pred_Books/recycle}} = 9.5$ ), and they anticipated that reminding participants of the Ten Commandments would not significantly decrease cheating ( $M_{\text{pred_Ten Commandments/recycle}} = 7.8$ ;  $t(73) = 1.61, p = .11$ ). The contrast of the predicted results with the actual behavior we found suggests that participants understand the economic motivation for overclaiming, but they overestimate its influence on behavior and underestimate the effect of the self-concept in regulating honesty.

### EXPERIMENT 2: INCREASING ATTENTION TO STANDARDS FOR HONESTY THROUGH COMMITMENT REMINDERS

Another type of reminder, an honor code, refers to a procedure that asks participants to sign a statement in which they declare their commitment to honesty before taking part in a task (Dickerson et al. 1992; McCabe and Trevino 1993, 1997). Although many explanations have been proposed for the effectiveness of honor codes used by many academic institutions (McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 2002; see <http://www.academicintegrity.org>), the self-concept maintenance idea may shed light on the internal process underlying its success. In addition to manipulating the awareness of honesty standards through commitment reminders at the point of temptation, Experiment 2 represents an extension of Experiment 1 by manipulating the financial incentives for performance (i.e., external benefits); in doing so, it also tests the external cost-benefit hypothesis that dishonesty increases as the expected magnitude of reward from the dishonest act increases (Ext- $H_1$ ).

### Method

Two hundred seven students participated in Experiment 2. Using the same matrix task, we manipulated two factors between participants: the amount earned per correctly solved matrix (\$.50 and \$2, paid to each participant) and the attention to standards (control, recycle, and recycle + honor code).

In the two control conditions, at the end of five minutes, participants handed both the test and the answer sheets to the experimenter, who verified their answers and wrote down the number of correctly solved matrices on the answer sheet. In the two recycle conditions, participants indicated the total number of correctly solved matrices on the answer sheet, folded the original test sheet, and placed it in their belongings (to recycle later), thus providing them an opportunity to cheat. Only after that did they hand the answer sheet to the experimenter. The recycle + honor code condition was similar to the recycle condition except that at the top of the test sheet, there was an additional statement that read, "I understand that this short survey falls under MIT's [Yale's] honor system." Participants printed and signed their names below the statement. Thus, the honor code statement appeared on the same sheet as the matrices, and this sheet was recycled before participants submitted their answer sheets. In addition, to provide a test for Ext-H<sub>1</sub>, we manipulated the payment per correctly solved matrix (\$.50 and \$2) and contrasted performance levels between these two incentive levels.

### Results and Discussion

Figure 2 depicts the results. An overall analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a highly significant effect of the attention-to-standards manipulation ( $F(2, 201) = 11.94, p < .001$ ), no significant effect of the level of incentive manipulation ( $F(1, 201) = .99, p = .32$ ), and no significant interaction ( $F(2, 201) = .58, p = .56$ ). When given the opportunity, respondents in the two recycle conditions (\$.50 and \$2) cheated ( $M_{\text{recycle}} = 5.5$ ) relative to those in the two control conditions (\$.50 and \$2:  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.3$ ;  $F(1, 201) = 15.99, p < .001$ ), but again, the level of cheating fell far below the maximum (i.e., 20); participants cheated only 13.5% of the possible average magnitude. In line with our findings in Experiment 1, this latter result supports the idea that we were also observing the workings of the categorization mechanism.

Between the two levels of incentives (\$.50 and \$2 conditions), we did not find a particularly large difference in the

magnitude of cheating; cheating was slightly more common (by approximately 1.16 questions), though not significantly so, in the \$.50 condition ( $F(1, 201) = 2.1, p = .15$ ). Thus, we did not find support for Ext-H<sub>1</sub>. A possible interpretation of this decrease in dishonesty with increased incentives is that the magnitude of dishonesty and its effect on the categorization mechanism depended on both the number of questions answered dishonestly (which increased by 2.8 in the \$.50 condition and 1.7 in the \$2 condition) and the amount of money inaccurately claimed (which increased by \$1.4 in the \$.50 condition and \$3.5 in the \$2 condition). If categorization malleability was affected by a mix of these two factors, we would have expected the number of questions that participants reported as correctly solved to decrease with greater incentives (at least as long as the external incentives were not too high).

Most important for Experiment 2, we found that the two recycle + honor code conditions (\$.50 and \$2:  $M_{\text{recycle} + \text{honor code}} = 3.0$ ) eliminated cheating insofar as the performance in these conditions was undistinguishable from the two control conditions (\$.50 and \$2:  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.3$ ;  $F(1, 201) = .19, p = .66$ ) but significantly different from the two recycle conditions (\$.50 and \$2:  $M_{\text{recycle}} = 5.5$ ;  $F(1, 201) = 19.69, p < .001$ ). The latter result is notable given that the two recycle + honor code conditions were procedurally similar to the two recycle conditions. Moreover, the two institutions in which we conducted this experiment did not have an honor code system at the time, and therefore, objectively, the honor code had no implications of external punishment. When we replicated the experiment in an institution that had a strict honor code, the results were identical, suggesting that it is not the honor code per se and its implied external punishment but rather the reminder of morality that was at play.

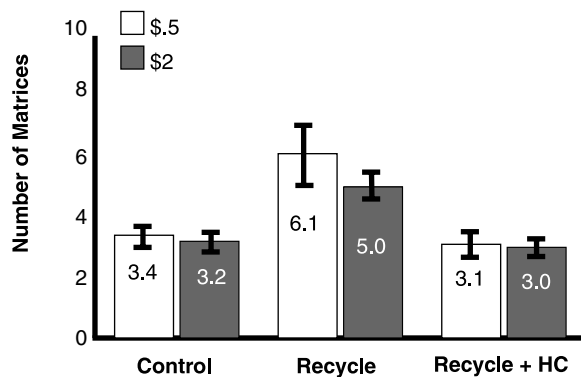
Again, we asked a separate set of students ( $n = 82$ ) at the institutions without an honor code system to predict the results, and though they predicted that the increased payment would marginally increase dishonesty ( $M_{\text{pred}, \$2} = 6.8$  versus  $M_{\text{pred}, \$.50} = 6.4$ ;  $F(1, 80) = 3.3, p = .07$ ), in essence predicting Ext-H<sub>1</sub>, they did not anticipate that the honor code would significantly decrease dishonesty ( $M_{\text{pred}, \text{recycle} + \text{honor code}} = 6.2$  versus  $M_{\text{pred}, \text{recycle}} = 6.9$ ;  $F(1, 80) = .74, p = .39$ ). The contrast of the predicted results with the actual behavior suggests that people understand the economic motivation for overclaiming, that they overestimate its influence on behavior, and that they underestimate the effect of the self-concept in regulating honesty. In addition, the finding that predictors did not expect the honor code to decrease dishonesty suggests that they did not perceive the honor code manipulation as having implications of external punishment.

### EXPERIMENT 3: INCREASING CATEGORIZATION MALLEABILITY

Making people mindful by increasing their attention to their honesty standards can curb dishonesty, but the theory of self-concept maintenance also implies that increasing the malleability to interpret one's actions should increase the magnitude of dishonesty (Schweitzer and Hsee 2002). To test this hypothesis, in Experiment 3, we manipulate whether the opportunity for dishonest behavior occurs in terms of money or in terms of an intermediary medium (tokens). We posit that introducing a medium (Hsee et al.

Figure 2

EXPERIMENT 2: NUMBER OF MATRICES REPORTED SOLVED



Notes: Mean number of "solved" matrices in the control condition (no ability to cheat) and the recycle and recycle + honor code (HC) conditions (ability to cheat). The payment scheme was either \$.50 or \$2 per correct answer. Error bars are based on standard errors of the means.

2003) will offer participants more room for interpretation of their actions, making the moral implications of dishonesty less accessible and thus making it easier for participants to cheat at higher magnitudes.

#### Method

Four hundred fifty students participated in Experiment 3. Participants had five minutes to complete the matrix task and were promised \$.50 for each correctly solved matrix. We used three between-subjects conditions: the same control and recycle conditions as in Experiment 2 and a recycle + token condition. The latter condition was similar to the recycle condition, except participants knew that each correctly solved matrix would earn them one token, which they would exchange for \$.50 a few seconds later. When the five minutes elapsed, participants in the recycle + token condition recycled their test sheet and submitted only their answer sheet to an experimenter, who gave them the corresponding amount of tokens. Participants then went to a second experimenter, who exchanged the tokens for money (this experimenter also paid the participants in the other conditions). We counterbalanced the roles of the two experimenters.

#### Results and Discussion

Similar to our previous findings, participants in the recycle condition solved significantly more questions than participants in the control condition ( $M_{\text{recycle}} = 6.2$  versus  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.5$ ;  $F(1, 447) = 34.26, p < .001$ ), which suggests that they cheated. In addition, participants' magnitude of cheating was well below the maximum—only 16.5% of the possible average magnitude. Most important, and in line with Ext&Int-H<sub>2</sub>, introducing tokens as the medium of immediate exchange further increased the magnitude of dishonesty ( $M_{\text{recycle} + \text{token}} = 9.4$ ) such that it was significantly larger than it was in the recycle condition ( $F(1, 447) = 47.62, p < .001$ )—presumably without any changes in the probability of being caught or the severity of the punishment.

Our findings support the idea that claiming more tokens instead of claiming more money offered more categorization malleability such that people could interpret their dishonesty in a more self-serving manner, thus reducing the negative self-signal they otherwise would have received. In terms of our current account, the recycle + token condition increased the threshold for the acceptable magnitude of dishonesty. The finding that a medium could be such an impressive facilitator of dishonesty may explain the incomparably excessive contribution of employee theft and fraud (e.g., stealing office supplies and merchandise, putting inappropriate expenses on expense accounts) to dishonesty in the marketplace, as we reported previously.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that our results differ from what a separate set of students ( $n = 59$ ) predicted we would find. The predictors correctly anticipated that participants would cheat when given the opportunity to do so ( $M_{\text{pred\_recycle}} = 6.6$ ;  $t(29) = 5.189, p < .001$ ), but they anticipated that being able to cheat in terms of tokens would not be any different than being able to cheat in terms of money ( $M_{\text{pred\_recycle} + \text{token}} = 7$ ;  $t(57) = 4.5, p = .65$ ). Again, this suggests that people underestimate the effect of the self-concept in regulating honesty.

#### EXPERIMENT 4: RECOGNIZING ACTIONS BUT NOT UPDATING THE SELF-CONCEPT

Our account of self-concept maintenance suggests that by engaging only in a relatively low level of cheating, participants stayed within the threshold of acceptable magnitudes of dishonesty and thus benefited from being dishonest without receiving a negative self-signal (i.e., their self-concept remained unaffected). To achieve this balance, we posit that participants recorded their actions correctly (i.e., they knew that they were overclaiming), but the categorization and/or attention-to-standards mechanisms prevented this factual knowledge from being morally evaluated. Thus, people did not necessarily confront the true meaning or implications of their actions (e.g., "I am dishonest"). We test this prediction (Ext&Int-H<sub>3</sub>) in Experiment 4.

To test the hypothesis that people are aware of their actions but do not update their self-concepts, we manipulated participants' ability to cheat on the matrix task and measured their predictions about their performance on a second matrix task that did not allow cheating. If participants in a recycling condition did not recognize that they overclaimed, they would base their predictions on their exaggerated (i.e., dishonest) performance in the first matrix task. Therefore, their predictions would be higher than the predictions of those who could not cheat on the first task. However, if participants who overclaimed were cognizant of their exaggerated claims, their predictions for a situation that does not allow cheating would be attenuated and, theoretically, would not differ from their counterparts' in the control condition. In addition, to test whether dishonest behavior influenced people's self-concept, we asked participants about their honesty after they completed the first matrix task. If participants in the recycling condition (who were cheating) had lower opinions about themselves in terms of honesty than those in the control condition (who were not cheating), this would mean that they had updated their self-concept. However, if cheating did not influence their opinions about themselves, this would suggest that they had not fully accounted for their dishonest behaviors and, consequently, that they had not paid a price for their dishonesty in terms of their self-concept.

#### Method

Forty-four students participated in this experiment, which consisted of a four-task paradigm, administered in the following order: a matrix task, a personality test, a prediction task, and a second matrix task. In the first matrix task, we repeated the same control and recycle conditions from Experiment 2. Participants randomly assigned to either of these two conditions had five minutes to complete the task and received \$.50 per correctly solved matrix. The only difference from Experiment 2 was that we asked all participants (not just those in the recycle condition) to report on the answer sheet the total number of matrices they had correctly solved. (Participants in the control condition then submitted both the test and the answer sheets to the experimenter, who verified each of their answers on the test sheets to determine payments.)

In the second, ostensibly separate task, we handed out a ten-item test with questions ranging from political ambitions to preferences for classical music to general abilities. Embedded in this survey were two questions about partici-

pants' self-concept as it relates to honesty. The first question asked how honest the participants considered themselves (absolute honesty) on a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 100 ("very"). The second question asked participants to rate their perception of themselves in terms of being a moral person (relative morality) on a scale from -5 ("much worse") to 5 ("much better") at the time of the survey in contrast to the day before.

In the third task, we surprised participants by announcing that they would next participate in a second five-minute matrix task, but before taking part in it, their task was to predict how many matrices they would be able to solve and to indicate how confident they were with their predictions on a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 100 ("very"). Before making these predictions, we made it clear that this second matrix task left no room to overclaim because the experimenter would check the answers given on the test sheet (as was done in the control condition). Furthermore, we informed participants that this second test would consist of a different set of matrices, and the payment would depend on both the accuracy of their prediction and their performance. If their prediction was 100% accurate, they would earn \$.50 per correctly solved matrix, but for each matrix they solved more or less than what they predicted, their payment per matrix would be reduced by \$.02. We emphasized that this payment scheme meant that it was in their best interest to predict as accurately as possible and to solve as many matrices as they could (i.e., they would make less money if they gave up solving some matrices, just to be accurate in their predictions).

Finally, the fourth task was the matrix task with different number sets and without the ability to overclaim (i.e., only control condition). Thus, the entire experiment represented a two-condition between-subjects design, differing only in the first matrix task (possibility to cheat). The three remaining tasks (personality test, prediction task, and second matrix task) were the same.

*Results and Discussion*

The mean number of matrices "solved" in the first and second matrix tasks appears in Table 1. Similar to our previous experiments, on the first task, participants who had the ability to cheat (recycle condition) solved significantly more questions than those in the control condition ( $t(42) = 2.21, p = .033$ ). However, this difference disappeared in the

second matrix task, for which neither of the two groups had an opportunity to cheat ( $t(42) = .43, p = .67$ ), and the average performance on the second task ( $M_{2ndMatrixTask} = 4.5$ ) did not differ from the control condition's performance on the first task ( $M_{1stMatrixTask/control} = 4.2; t(43) = .65, p = .519$ ). These findings imply that, as in the previous experiments, participants cheated when they had the chance to do so. Furthermore, the level of cheating was relatively low (on average, two to three matrices); participants cheated only 14.8% of the possible average magnitude.

In terms of the predictions of performance on the second matrix task, we found no significant difference ( $t(42) \sim 0$ , n.s.) between participants who were able to cheat and those who were not in the first matrix task ( $M_{control} = 6.3$ , and  $M_{recycle} = 6.3$ ). Moreover, participants in the control and recycle conditions were equally confident about their predictions ( $M_{forecast\_control} = 72.5$  versus  $M_{forecast\_recycle} = 68.8; t(42) = .56, p = .57$ ). Together with the difference in performance in the first matrix task, these findings suggest that those who cheated in the first task knew that they had overclaimed.

As for the ten-personality-questions survey, after the first task, participants in both conditions had equally high opinions of their honesty in general ( $t(42) = .97, p = .34$ ) and their morality compared with the previous day ( $t(42) = .55, p = .58$ ), which suggests that cheating in the experiment did not affect their reported self-concepts in terms of these characteristics. Together, these results support our self-concept maintenance theory and indicate that people's limited magnitude of dishonesty "flies under the radar"; that is, they do not update their self-concept in terms of honesty even though they recognize their actions (i.e., that they overclaim).

In addition, we asked a different group of 39 students to predict the responses to the self-concept questions (absolute honesty and relative morality). In the control condition, we asked them to imagine how an average student who solved four matrices would answer these two questions. In the recycle condition, we asked them to imagine how an average student who solved four matrices but claimed to have solved six would answer these two questions. As Table 1 shows, they predicted that cheating would decrease both a person's general view of him- or herself as an honest person ( $t(37) = 3.77, p < .001$ ) and his or her morality compared with the day before the test ( $t(37) = 3.88, p < .001$ ).<sup>2</sup> This finding provides further support for the idea that people do not accurately anticipate the self-concept maintenance mechanism.

Table 1

EXPERIMENT 4: PERFORMANCE ON THE MATRIX AND PERSONALITY TESTS

First Matrix Task Condition	Matrix Task		Personality Test			
	Matrices Solved (0 to 20)		Absolute Honesty (0 to 100)		Relative Morality (-5 to +5)	
	First Task	Second Task	Predicted	Actual	Predicted	Actual
Control	4.2	4.6	67.6	85.2	.4	.4
Recycle	6.7	4.3	32.4	79.3	-1.4	.6

Notes: Number of matrices reported as correctly solved in the first and second matrix task, as well as predicted and actual self-reported measures of absolute honesty and relative morality in the personality test after the control and recycle conditions, respectively, of the first matrix task.

*EXPERIMENT 5: NOT CHEATING BECAUSE OF OTHERS*

Thus far, we have accumulated evidence for a magnitude of cheating, which seems to depend on the attention a person pays to his or her own standards for honesty as well as categorization malleability. Moreover, the results of Experiment 4 provide some evidence that cheating can take place without an associated change in self-concept. Overall, these

<sup>2</sup>We replicated these findings in two other prediction tasks (within and between subjects). Students anticipated a significant deterioration in their own self-concept if they (not another hypothetical student) were to overclaim by two matrices.

findings are in line with our theory of self-concept maintenance: When people are torn between the temptation to benefit from cheating and the benefits of maintaining a positive view of themselves, they solve the dilemma by finding a balance between these two motivating forces such that they can engage to some level in dishonest behavior without updating their self-concept. Although these findings are consistent with our theory of self-concept maintenance, there are a few other alternative accounts for these results. In the final two experiments, we try to address these.

One possible alternative account that comes to mind posits that participants were driven by self-esteem only (e.g., John and Robins 1994; Tesser, Millar, and Moore 1988; Trivers 2000). From this perspective, a person might have cheated on a few matrices so that he or she did not appear stupid compared with everybody else. (We used the matrix task partially because it is not a task that our participants related to IQ, but this account might still be possible.)

A second alternative for our findings argues that participants were driven only by external, not internal, rewards and cheated up to the level at which they believed their dishonest behavior could not be detected. From this perspective, participants cheated just by a few questions, not because some internal force stopped them but because they estimated that the probability of being caught and/or the severity of punishment would be negligible (or zero) if they cheat by only a few questions. As a consequence, they cheated up to this particular threshold—in essence, estimating what they could get away with and cheating up to that level.

A third alternative explanation is that the different manipulations (e.g., moral reminders) influenced the type of social norms that participants apply to the experimental setting (see Reno, Cialdini, and Kallgren 1993; for focusing effects, see Kallgren, Cialdini, and Reno 2000). According to this norm compliance argument, a person who solves three matrices but knows that, on average, people report having solved six should simply go ahead and do what others are doing, namely, report six solved matrices (i.e., cheat by three matrices).

What these three accounts have in common is that all of them are sensitive to the (expected) behavior of others. In contrast, our self-concept maintenance theory implies that the level of dishonesty is set without reference to the level of dishonesty exhibited by others (at least in the short run). This contrast suggests a simple test in which we manipulate participants' beliefs about others' performance levels. If the level of cheating is driven by the desire for achievement, external costs, or norm compliance, the number of matrices that participants claim to have solved should increase when they believe that the average performance of others is higher. However, if the level of cheating is driven by self-concept maintenance considerations, the belief that others solve many more matrices should have no effect on the level of dishonesty.

#### *Method*

One hundred eight students participated in a matrix task experiment, in which we manipulated two factors between participants: the ability to cheat (control and recycle, as in Experiments 2) and beliefs about the number of matrices the average student solves in the given condition in the time

allotted (four matrices, which is the accurate number, or eight matrices, which is an exaggeration). Again, the dependent variable was the number of matrices reported as being solved correctly. The experiment represented a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design.

#### *Results and Discussion*

On average, participants in the two control conditions solved 3.3 and 3.4 matrices, and those in the corresponding recycle conditions solved 4.5 and 4.8 matrices (in the 4 and 8 believed standard performance conditions, respectively). A two-factorial ANOVA of the number of matrices solved as a function of the ability to cheat and the belief about others' performances showed a main effect of the ability to cheat ( $F(1, 104) = 6.89, p = .01$ ), but there was no main effect of the beliefs about average performance levels ( $F(1, 104) = .15, p = .7$ ) and no interaction ( $F(1, 104) = .09, p = .76$ ). That is, when participants had a chance to cheat, they cheated, but the level of cheating was independent of information about the average reported performance of others. This finding argues against drive toward achievement, threshold due to external costs, or norm compliance as alternative explanations for our findings.

#### *EXPERIMENT 6: SENSITIVITY TO EXTERNAL REWARDS*

Because the external costs of dishonest acts are central to the standard economic cost-benefit view of dishonesty, we wanted to test its influence more directly. In particular, following Nagin and Pogarsky's (2003) suggestion that increasing the probability of getting caught is much more effective than increasing the severity of the punishment, we aimed to manipulate the former type of external cost—that is, the likelihood of getting caught on three levels—and to measure the amount of dishonesty across these three cheating conditions. If only external cost-benefit trade-offs are at work in our setup, we should find that the level of dishonesty increases as the probability of being caught decreases ( $\text{Ext-H}_2$ ). Conversely, if self-concept maintenance limits the magnitude of dishonesty, we should find some cheating, but the level of dishonesty should be roughly of the same magnitude, regardless of the probabilities of getting caught.

#### *Method*

This experiment entailed multiple sessions with each participant sitting in a private booth ( $N = 326$ ). At the start of each session, the experimenter explained the instructions for the entire experiment. The first part of the experimental procedure remained the same for all conditions, but the second part varied across conditions. All participants received a test with 50 multiple-choice, general-knowledge questions (e.g., "How deep is a fathom?" "How many degrees does every triangle contain?" "What does  $3!$  equal?"), had 15 minutes to answer the questions, and were promised \$.10 for each question they solved correctly. After the 15 minutes, participants received a "bubble sheet" onto which they transferred their answers. Similar to Scantron sheets used with multiple-choice tests, for each question, the bubble sheet provided the question number with three circles labeled a, b, and c, and participants were asked to mark the corresponding circle. The manipulation of our conditions pertained to the bubble sheet and to what participants did with it after transferring their answers.



In the control condition, participants received a standard bubble sheet. When they finished transferring their answers, they handed both the test and the bubble sheet to the experimenter, who checked their answers, summed up the number of correct answers, and paid the participants \$.10 for each correct answer. In the no-recycle condition (first cheating condition), the bubble sheet had the correct answers pre-marked, such that the circles representing the correct answers were shaded in gray. This design prompted a dilemma for participants when they faced a question they had answered incorrectly on their test sheet; they could be honest and fill in the corresponding incorrect bubble or be dishonest and fill in the correct bubble. After participants finished transferring their answers, they summed up the number of their correct answers, wrote that number at the top of the bubble sheet, and handed both the test and the bubble sheet to the experimenter, who paid them according to their self-summed score. In this condition, participants could cheat with some risk that the experimenter might discover it, if the experimenter compared the answers on the bubble sheet with the answers on the test sheet. The recycle condition (second cheating condition) was similar to the no-recycle condition, with the difference that participants were instructed to transfer their answers to the premarked bubble sheet and then walk to a shredder, shred their original test sheet, and take only the bubble sheet to the experimenter, at which point they would be paid accordingly. Because of the shredding, this condition offered a lower probability of being caught cheating than the no-recycle condition. Finally, the recycle+ condition (third cheating condition) further decreased the probability of being caught by instructing participants to shred both their test sheet and the bubble sheet, walk over to a large jar with money at the corner of the room, and take the amount they earned. In addition, by making the payment “self-service,” the recycle+ condition eliminated any interactions with the experimenter, thus decreasing social concerns with cheating.<sup>3</sup> At the start of each experimental session of the recycle+ condition, the jar was filled with different denominations that totaled \$100. After each session (out of the sight of students), we collected the jar and measured the amount of money in it.<sup>4</sup>

### Results and Discussion

On average, participants in the control condition solved 32.6 questions, and those in the no-recycle, recycle, and recycle+ conditions solved 36.2, 35.9, and 36.1 questions, respectively. An overall ANOVA of the number of questions reported as solved revealed a highly significant effect of the conditions ( $F(3, 322) = 19.99, p < .001$ ). The average reported performance in the three cheating conditions was significantly higher than in the control condition ( $F(1, 322) = 56.19, p < .001$ ), but there was no difference in

<sup>3</sup>In a separate study, we asked participants to estimate the probability of being caught across the different conditions and found that these conditions were indeed perceived in the appropriate order of the likelihood of being caught (i.e., no recycle > recycle > recycle+).

<sup>4</sup>The goal of the recycle+ condition was to guarantee participants that their individual actions of taking money from the jar would not be observable. Therefore, it was impossible to measure how much money each respondent took in this condition. We could record only the sum of money missing at the end of each session. For the purpose of statistical analysis, we assigned the average amount taken per recycle+ session to each participant in that session.

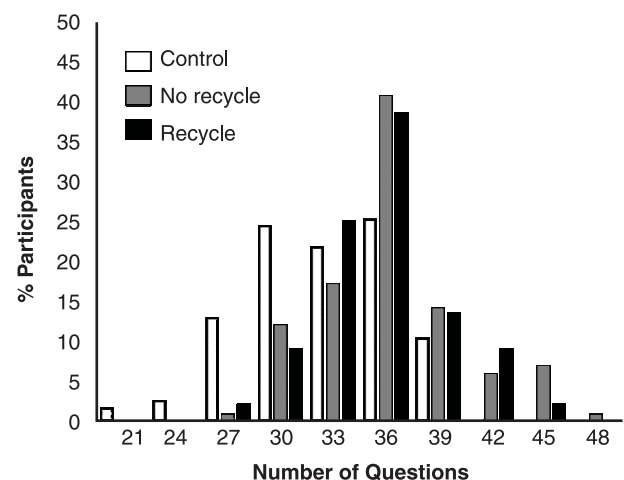
dishonesty across the three cheating conditions ( $F(2, 209) = .11, p = .9$ ), and the average magnitude of dishonesty was approximately 20% of the possible average magnitude, which was far from the maximal possible dishonesty in these conditions (similar to findings by Goldstone and Chin 1993). These latter results suggest that participants in all three cheating conditions seemed to have used the same threshold to reconcile the motivations to benefit financially from cheating and maintain their positive self-concept.

Experiment 6 is also useful in testing another possible alternative explanation, which is that the increased level of cheating we observed in the three cheating conditions was due to a “few bad apples” (a few people who cheated a lot) rather than to a general shift in the number of answers reported as correctly solved (many people cheating just by a little bit). As Figure 3 shows, however, the dishonesty seemed to be due to a general increase in the number of “correct responses,” which resulted in a rightward shift of the response distribution.<sup>5</sup> To test this stochastic dominance assumption, we subjected the distributions to a series of quantile regressions and found that the cheating distributions dominated the control distribution at every possible point (e.g., at the 10th, 20th, 30th, 40th, 50th, 60th, 70th, 80th, and 90th percentiles, the number of questions solved was significantly higher in the cheating conditions than in the control condition:  $t(210) = 3.65, 3.88, 4.48, 4.10, 2.92, 3.08, 2.11, 2.65, \text{ and } 3.63, ps < .05$ ), but the distributions across the cheating conditions did not differ from one another (no  $ps < .35$ ).

Although Experiment 6 was particularly useful for this analysis (because it included multiple cheating conditions),

<sup>5</sup>This analysis did not include the recycle+ condition, because we were not able to measure individual-level performance; instead, we were limited to measuring performance per session.

Figure 3  
EXPERIMENT 6: NUMBER OF MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS REPORTED SOLVED



Notes: Frequency distribution of number of “solved” questions in the control condition (no ability to cheat) and two cheating conditions: no-recycle and recycle. The values on the y-axis represent the percentage of participants having “solved” a particular number of questions; the values on the x-axis represent  $\pm 1$  ranges around the displayed number (e.g., 21 = participants having solved 20, 21, or 22 questions).

a stronger test would be to determine whether this conclusion also holds across *all* six experiments. To do so, we converted the performance across all the experiments to be proportional, that is, the number of questions reported solved relative to the maximum possible. Analyzing all conditions across our experiments ( $n = 1408$ ), we again find strict stochastic dominance of the performance distributions in conditions that allowed cheating over conditions that did not ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $t(1406) = 2.98$ ,  $p = .003$ ). We obtain similarly reliable differences for each quantile of the distributions, suggesting that the overall mean difference ( $\beta = .134$ ,  $t(1406) = 9.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was indeed caused by a general shift in the distribution rather than a large shift of a small portion of the distribution.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

People in almost every society value honesty and maintain high beliefs about their own morality; yet examples of significant dishonesty can be found everywhere in the marketplace. The standard cost–benefit model, which is central to legal theory surrounding crime and punishment, assumes that dishonest actions are performed by purely selfish, calculating people, who only care about external rewards. In contrast, the psychological perspective assumes that people largely care about internal rewards because they want, for example, to maintain their self-concept. On the basis of these two extreme starting points, we proposed and tested a theory of self-concept maintenance that considers the motivation from both external and internal rewards. According to this theory, people who think highly of themselves in terms of honesty make use of various mechanisms that allow them to engage in a limited amount of dishonesty while retaining positive views of themselves. In other words, there is a band of acceptable dishonesty that is limited by internal reward considerations. In particular, we focus on two related but psychologically distinct mechanisms that influence the size of this band—categorization and attention to standards—which we argue have a wide set of important applications in the marketplace.

Across a set of six experiments we found support for our theory by demonstrating that when people had the ability to cheat, they cheated, but the magnitude of dishonesty per person was relatively low (relative to the possible maximum amount). We also found that, in general, people were insensitive to the expected external costs and benefits associated with the dishonest acts, but they were sensitive to contextual manipulations related to the self-concept. In particular, the level of dishonesty dropped when people paid more attention to honesty standards and climbed with increased categorization malleability (Dana, Weber, and Kuang 2005).

Some of the results provide more direct evidence for the self-concept maintenance mechanism (Experiment 4) by showing that even though participants knew that they were overclaiming, their actions did not affect their self-concept in terms of honesty. Note also that, in contrast, predictors expected dishonest actions to have a negative effect on the self-concept. This misunderstanding of the workings of the self-concept also manifested in respondents' inability to predict the effects of moral reminders (Ten Commandments and honor code) and mediums (tokens), suggesting that, in general, people expect others to behave in line with the standard economic perspective of an external cost–benefit

trade-off and are unappreciative of the regulative effectiveness of the self-concept.<sup>6</sup>

In principle, the theory we propose can be incorporated into economic models. Some formalizations related to it appear in recent economic theories of utility maximization based on models of self-signaling (Bodner and Prelec 2001) and identity (Bénabou and Tirole 2004, 2006). These models can be adopted to account for self-concept maintenance by incorporating attention to personal standards for honesty (meta-utility function and salience parameter  $s_1$ , respectively) and categorization malleability (interpretation function and probability  $1 - \lambda$ , respectively). These approaches convey a slowly spreading conviction among economists that to study moral and social norms, altruism, reciprocity, or antisocial behavior, the underlying psychological motivations that vary endogenously with the environment must be understood (see also Gneezy 2005). The data presented herein offer further guidance on the development of such models. In our minds, the interplay between these formal models and the empirical evidence we provide represents a fruitful and promising research direction.

Some insights regarding the functional form in which the external and internal rewards work together emerge from the data, and these findings could also provide worthwhile paths for further investigations in both economics and psychology. For example, the results of Experiment 2 show that increasing external rewards in the form of increasing benefits (monetary incentive) decreased the level of dishonesty (though insignificantly). This observation matches findings from another matrix experiment in which we manipulated two factors between 234 participants: the ability to cheat (control and recycle) and the amount of payment to each participant per correctly solved matrix (\$.10, \$.50, \$2.50, and \$5). In this  $2 \times 4$  design, we found limited dishonesty in the \$.10 and \$.50 conditions but no dishonesty in the \$2.50 and \$5 conditions. Furthermore, the magnitude of dishonesty was approximately the same for \$.10 and \$.50. Together, these observations raise the possibility of a step function–like relationship—constant, limited amount of dishonesty up to a certain level of positive external rewards, beyond which increasing the external rewards could limit categorization malleability, leaving no room for under-the-radar dishonesty. In this way, dishonesty may actually decrease with external rewards.

Finally, it is worthwhile noting some of the limitations of our results. The first limitation is related directly to the relationship between external and internal rewards. Arguably, at some point at which the external rewards become very high, they should tempt the person sufficiently to prevail (because the external reward of being dishonest is much larger than the internal reward of maintaining a positive self-concept). From that point on, we predict that behavior would be largely influenced by external rewards, as the standard economic perspective predicts (i.e., ultimately, the magnitude of dishonesty will increase with increasing, high external rewards).

<sup>6</sup>Note that our manipulations in their general form may be viewed as priming. In this sense, our results may generalize to a much larger class of manipulations that would curtail cheating behavior and may be useful when, for example, the Ten Commandments or honor codes are not a feasible solution, such as purchasing environments.

Another limitation is that our results did not support a sensitivity to others' reported behaviors, implying that, for example, self-esteem or norm compliance considerations do not influence people's decisions about being dishonest. We do not imply that such effects are not prevalent or perhaps even powerful in the marketplace. For example, it could be that the sensitivity to others operates slowly toward changing a person's global internal standards for honesty, rather than having a large influence on the local instances of dishonesty, such as those that took place in our experiments.

From a practical perspective, one of the two main questions about under-the-radar dishonesty pertains to its magnitude in the economy. By its very nature, the level of dishonesty in the marketplace is difficult to measure, but if our studies are any indication, it may far exceed the magnitude of dishonesty committed by "standard, run-of-the-mill" criminals, who consider only the external rewards in their decision. Across the six experiments (excluding the recycle + token condition), among the 791 participants who could cheat, we encountered only 5 (.6%) who cheated by the maximal amount (and, thus, presumably engaged in external cost–benefit trade-off analysis, leading to standard rational dishonesty), whereas most cheated only slightly (and, thus, presumably engaged in a trade-off of external and internal rewards, leading them to engage in limited dishonesty that flies under the self-concept radar). Furthermore, the total costs incurred as a result of limited dishonesty were much greater than those associated with the maximal dishonesty. Taken at face value, these results suggest that the effort that society at large applies to deterring dishonesty—especially standard rational dishonesty—might be misplaced.

Another important applied speculation involves the medium experiment. As society moves away from cash and electronic exchanges become more prevalent, mediums are rapidly more available in the economy. Again, if we take our results at face value, particular attention should be paid to dishonesty in these new mediums (e.g., backdating stocks) because they provide more opportunities for under-the-radar dishonesty. In addition, we observed that the medium experiment not only allowed people to cheat more but also increased the level of maximal cheating. In the medium experiment, we observed 24 participants who cheated maximally, which indicated that the tokens not only allowed them to elevate their acceptable magnitude of dishonesty but also liberated them from the shackles of their morality altogether.

When we consider the applied implications of these results, we must emphasize that our findings stem from experiments not with criminals but with students at elite universities, people who are likely to play important roles in the advancement of the United States and who are a lot more similar to the general public. The prevalence of dishonesty among these people and the finding that, on an individual level, they were mostly honest rather than completely dishonest suggest the generalizability of our results. As Goldstone and Chin (1993) conclude, people seem to be moral relativists in their everyday lives.

From a practical perspective, the next question is thus related to approaches for curbing under-the-radar dishonesty. The results of the honor code, Ten Commandments, and token manipulations are promising because they sug-

gest that increasing people's attention to their own standards for honesty and decreasing the categorization malleability could be effective remedies. However, the means by which to incorporate such manipulations into everyday scenarios in which people might be tempted to be dishonest (e.g., returning used clothes, filling out tax returns or insurance claims), to determine how abstract or concrete these manipulations must be to be effective (see Hayes and Dunning 1997), and to discover methods for fighting adaptation to these manipulations remain open questions.

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# Commentaries and Rejoinder to “The Dishonesty of Honest People”

## Hypermotivation

SCOTT RICK and GEORGE LOEWENSTEIN\*

In their clever and insightful article, Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008) propose that people balance two competing desires when deciding whether to behave dishonestly: the motivation for personal gain and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept. Their studies focus on the latter factor, showing that people behave dishonestly when it pays, but only to the extent that they can do so without violating their perception of themselves as honest. The research is innovative and important. It has already had an influence on policies dealing with conflicts of interest in medicine (Association of American Medical Colleges 2007) and, even before its own publication, has spawned significant follow-up research (Vohs and Schooler 2008).

In our opinion, the main limitation of Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's article is not in the perspective it presents but rather in what it leaves out. Although it is important to understand the psychology of rationalization, the other factor that Mazar, Amir, and Ariely recognize but then largely ignore—namely, the motivation to behave dishonestly—is arguably the more important side of the dishonesty equation.

The motivation side is especially important, in part because the propensity to rationalize is itself a function of the motivation to do so. Given sufficient motivation, people can persuade themselves of almost anything, including why behavior they normally would consider unethical is morally acceptable. Research on the self-serving fairness bias (for a summary, see Babcock and Loewenstein 1997) shows that people tend to conflate what is fair with what is in their personal interest, and the same is no doubt true of people's judgments of what is ethical. Given a sufficiently powerful motivation to commit an act of fraud, in general, people are more than capable of rationalizing why it does not conflict with their own ethical precepts. Furthermore, after people have taken the first step toward unethical behavior, a large body of research shows that subsequent steps into the abyss of immorality become progressively easier (e.g., Lifton 1986; Milgram 1963).

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## HYPERMOTIVATION

A closer examination of many of the acts of dishonesty in the real world reveals a striking pattern: Many, if not most, appear to be motivated by the desire to avoid (or recoup) losses rather than the simple desire for gain. A wide range of evidence suggests that people who find themselves “in a hole” and believe that dishonest behavior is the only apparent means of escape are more likely to cheat, steal, and lie. For example, several studies have found that people are more likely to cheat on their taxes when they owe than when they are due for a refund (e.g., Chang and Schultz 1990; Schepanski and Kelsey 1990).

Prospect theory's (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) concept of loss aversion might seem to provide a natural account of what could be called “hypermotivation”—a visceral state that leads a person to take actions he or she would normally deem to be unacceptable. Loss aversion suggests that the motivation to avoid a loss will be greater—approximately two to three times so—than the motivation to obtain a gain of equivalent value, which helps explain why being in a hole produces such strong motivation. However, such simple amplification of value does not fully capture the magnitude of motivation produced by such situations, which often has a powerful emotional component—a feeling of intense misery and desperation. Much as miseries, such as hunger and pain, tend to crowd out altruism (Loewenstein 1996), hypermotivation can cause people to shed, temporarily, the ethical constraints of everyday life.

In a remarkable study of the causes of hypermotivation, Cressey (1950) personally interviewed hundreds of incarcerated embezzlers and pored through large data sets collected by other researchers. He found that such crimes were a response to problems that often began with, as he put it, “gambling, drink, and extravagant living” (p. 739). One prisoner spontaneously came to a similar conclusion:

The more I think about it, the more I'm inclined to think that before a person does a thing like that he must have done something previously that the community wouldn't approve of. If he's in an environment and isn't leading a double life and doesn't have anything to hide, I can't conceive of him starting with an embezzlement. He has to do something previously. (Cressey 1953, p. 40)

After subjecting his extensive database to an intense scrutiny, which he labeled “negative case analysis,” and systematically attempting to challenge his own conclusions, Cressey (1950, p. 742) proposed the following:

Trusted persons become trust violators when they conceive of themselves as having a financial problem which is non-shareable, have the knowledge or aware-

ness that this problem can be secretly resolved by violation of the position of financial trust, and are able to apply to their own conduct in that situation verbalizations which enable them to adjust their conceptions of themselves as trusted persons with their conceptions of themselves as users of the entrusted funds or property.

The rationalizations (or “verbalizations”) that Mazar, Amir, and Ariely study play a role in Cressey’s framework. However, they are only the final step in a process set into motion when people find themselves in trouble as a result of “non-shareable financial problems.”

A further difference between Cressey’s (1950) embezzlers and Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s cheaters is how the two evaluate their dishonesty in retrospect. Participants in Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s Experiment 4 realized that they had cheated, but they did not believe that they needed to update the extent to which they viewed themselves as honest. In contrast, Cressey’s (1953, p. 120) embezzlers “define themselves as criminals, find this definition incompatible with their positions as trusted persons, and usually condemn themselves for their past behavior.” Although rationalizations likely preceded the dishonesty observed both in Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s (2008) laboratory studies and in Cressey’s real-world cases, Cressey’s findings suggest that serious acts of dishonesty can be rationalized only for so long.

DePaulo and colleagues (2004) observe a similar pattern in a study in which undergraduate students and nonstudent adults were asked to describe the most serious lie they ever told. They found that “the vast majority of serious lies originate with bad behaviors” (p. 164). Unlike the participants in Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s studies, who lied to achieve a modest amount of additional profit, participants in DePaulo and colleagues’ study lied to hide extramarital affairs, gambling debts, and other serious transgressions that could jeopardize careers or marriages if revealed. Moreover, DePaulo and colleagues’ participants reported feeling distressed while telling their lies, and those who were ultimately caught reported feeling guilty and remorseful. Again, as in Cressey’s (1950, 1953) studies, it appears that many of DePaulo and colleagues’ participants were ultimately forced to update their self-concept.

The feeling of being in a hole not only originates from nonshareable unethical behavior but also can arise, more prosaically, from overly ambitious goals (Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999). In the lab, Schweitzer, Ordóñez, and Douma (2004) find that participants who had ambitious goals overstated their productivity significantly more often than participants who were simply asked to do their best. In the classroom, the prospect of falling short of one’s own performance goals (Murdock and Anderman 2006) or perhaps parents’ goals (Pearlin, Yarrow, and Scarr 1967) appears to encourage cheating. Likewise, in organizational settings, the desire to meet ambitious profit goals often leads to questionable accounting practices (DeGeorge, Patel, and Zeckhauser 1999; Jensen 2001; Prentice 2007).

#### ACADEMIC, HEAL THYSELF

Another important reference point that can lead to the perception of being in a hole is the attainments of others. Research on social preferences has shown that as much as

people are loss averse, they are also powerfully averse to inequality (Loewenstein, Thompson, and Bazerman 1989).

Academia is a domain in which reference points are particularly likely to be defined in terms of the attainments of others. Academia is becoming increasingly competitive, and the (professional) achievements of others have never been easier to assess (through online curricula vitae or profiles). The increasing intensity of competition within academia can be felt at all levels. More undergraduate students are entering graduate school with curricula vitae that elicit jealousy from some of their older peers, and the publication requirements for getting a first job are approaching a level that not long ago would have been sufficient for tenure at most institutions. Even journals are becoming increasingly competitive with one another (Huber 2007; Lawrence 2003). With standards ratcheting upward, there is a kind of “arms race” in which academics at all levels must produce more to achieve the same career gains. Some of this increased productivity is enabled by new technology, such as computers and the Internet, and some comes from people putting in longer hours. However, some of it, we fear, comes from researchers pushing the envelope of honesty—or worse.

An unfortunate implication of hypermotivation is that as competition within a domain increases, dishonesty also tends to increase in response. Goodstein (1996) feared as much over a decade ago:

Throughout most of its recent history, science was constrained only by the limits of imagination and creativity of its participants. In the past couple of decades that state of affairs has changed dramatically. Science is now constrained primarily by the number of research posts, and the amount of research funds available. What had always previously been a purely intellectual competition has now become an intense competition for scarce resources. This change, which is permanent and irreversible, is likely to have an undesirable effect in the long run on ethical behavior among scientists. Instances of scientific fraud are almost sure to become more common.

Whereas recent high-profile instances of data falsification in the medical sciences have received much attention in *Science* (e.g., Couzin and Schirber 2006; Normile 2006; Xin 2006), anonymously self-reported data falsification has recently been documented in fields closer to home as well (in marketing, see Mason, Bearden, and Richardson 1990; in economics, see List et al. 2001). In addition, Martinson, Anderson, and De Vries (2005) measured self-reported misconduct among more than 3000 researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health and found that one-third reported engaging in “questionable research practices” (e.g., dropping observations or data points from analyses because of a gut feeling that they were inaccurate). Surely, the moderate amount of self-reported misconduct is a mere lower bound on the actual amount of misconduct occurring.

#### CLOSING COMMENTS

The economist Andrei Shleifer (2004) explicitly argues against our perspective in an article titled “Does Competition Destroy Ethical Behavior?” Although he endorses the premise that competitive situations are more likely to elicit unethical behavior, and indeed offers several examples

other than those provided here, he argues against a psychological perspective and instead attempts to show that “conduct described as unethical and blamed on ‘greed’ is sometimes a consequence of market competition” (p. 414). However, we believe that he makes a fundamental mistake in implicitly viewing greed as an individual difference variable that can be contrasted with market conditions. In contrast to Shleifer, we argue that conditions of extreme competition lead to unethical behavior exactly because they lead to greed—that is, hypermotivation.<sup>1</sup> By raising aspirations above what is possible to attain with normal, moral means, competition creates the psychological conditions for fraud.

Shleifer (2004) concludes optimistically, arguing that competition will lead to economic growth and that wealth tends to promote high ethical standards. We are more pessimistic and, we believe, more pragmatic. Competition may promote progress, but it also inevitably creates winners and losers, and usually more of the latter than the former. The perceived difference in outcomes between winners and losers (e.g., get the job and the good life versus remain unemployed and deprived) has the potential to hypermotivate would-be losers to turn themselves into winners through unethical behavior.

How should society respond to the problems caused by hypermotivation? Unfortunately, practical concerns limit the potential for muting the forces of competition, for example, by offering rewards that linearly increase with performance rather than offering all rewards to a single winner or a small number of winners. What, for example, can companies offer rejected job applicants beyond assurance that the decision was a difficult one and the obligatory promise to keep their resume on file? If making competition more humane is impractical, what can be done to curb dishonesty?

We are not quite as pessimistic as Mazar, Amir, and Ariely regarding the importance of factors identified as important by the standard economic perspective, such as the probability of getting caught and the magnitude of punishment if caught. There is evidence that such factors can be influential (Cox, Cox, and Moschis 1990; Scholz and Pinney 1995), particularly when they are made salient (Ariely, Loewenstein, and Prelec 2003, p. 101). However, we do not believe that the key to deterring fraud lies in increasing the probability of getting caught or the severity of punishment. Instead, we believe that fostering an atmosphere of openness and transparency will be most effective, in part by making it more difficult to commit acts of fraud. In the academic domain, for example, transparency could be promoted by establishing registries that make publicly available the raw data and complete descriptions of methods for both published and unpublished studies. Medical scientists have long advocated the creation of such registries to overcome the “file drawer problem” (Dickersin and Rennie 2003; Simes 1986). We advocate the creation of

such registries for the behavioral sciences because they should also offer the added benefit of making it more difficult for researchers to fudge their data.

Some may object to the use of registries on the grounds that they will invariably lower productivity. However, we believe that (slightly) reduced productivity could be beneficial, for at least two reasons. One reason is based on the vicious circle in which fraud and standards act to influence one another: Fraud increases productivity, which in turn raises standards, which in turn stimulates fraud. Curbing research transgressions could break the cycle, reducing productivity and bringing standards back down to earth. The second benefit is that making it more difficult to publish fudged findings would benefit those who otherwise would have based subsequent research on those findings. There is a nonnegligible proportion of findings in our field that is difficult to replicate. Whereas some of these failures to replicate are due to differences in subject populations, to hidden moderators, or to good luck on the part of the initial researchers or bad luck on the part of those conducting follow-up studies, some are surely due to the research misdemeanors or felonies of the original authors. Making it more difficult for researchers to misbehave could reduce the amount of time spent trying and failing to replicate the unreproducible.

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<sup>1</sup>Although we essentially equate hypermotivation with greed here, other conceptualizations of greed would not be consistent with what we call hypermotivation. For example, Wang and Murnighan (2007, p. 21) propose that greed “typically starts with inner desire/temptation, i.e., a potential, desirable outcome.” In contrast, we propose that hypermotivation is driven by the desire to avoid or recoup losses rather than the desire to obtain positive outcomes.



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## Homo Economicus' Soul

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Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's (2008) claim that microeconomic models fail to account for altruism and other social phenomena is not entirely accurate: The neoclassical economist's perspective is only that behavior can be modeled as orderly maximization of utility functions that capture whatever it is that a person cares about (Becker 1991). That said, in recent years, behavioral scientists have conducted a great deal of important experimental work, demonstrating ways that human behavior deviates from the material reward maximizer, "Homo Economicus." Evolutionary biologists played a founding role, specifying mechanisms by which "selfish genes" produce altruistic organisms (Hamilton 1964; Trivers 1971), and experimentalists provided abundant confirmation that benevolent and malevolent social motives are potent (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987; Camerer and Thaler 1995) and engage much of the same neural circuitry as other motivations (Sanfey et al. 2003; Tabibnia and Lieberman 2007). Mazar, Amir, and Ariely further suggest that dishonesty is constrained by the unconscious tendency to preserve a favorable self-image. The logic of this "self-signaling" mechanism is as follows: (1) People value a particular conception of their own self; they want to possess certain traits and qualities (some of which are "moral"); (2) people infer their own traits in much the same way they infer the traits of others (Bem 1965; Mead [1934] 1962); and thus (3) people's behavior is in part shaped by wanting to provide evidence (to themselves) that they possess the desirable traits.

We agree but note that neglect of self-signaling in most economic models is not a mere oversight; there are difficulties inherent in quantifying self-signaling motivations. As Mazar, Amir, and Ariely suggest, people treat new diagnostic information about their personal qualities in self-serving ways, exploiting ambiguity and ignoring evidence when possible to allow cheating that "flies below the radar." Specifically, they suggest that if a person takes a little extra from the proverbial cookie jar, even in the absence of risk of external punishment, there is a cost to bear in terms of potentially aversive diagnostic information indicating a dishonest self. What complicates matters is that this cost may be reduced or avoided through diversion of attention

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and rationalization (what we loosely refer to as “self-deception”).

Compare self-signal valuation with the valuation of money: \$10,000 is differentially valued, but barring exotic circumstances, it will always have some positive value, and its value can be inferred on the basis of what a person will trade for it. However, as Mazar, Amir, and Ariely rightly argue, the value of self-signals depends crucially on the degree of prevailing self-deception. That superficial moral reminders (i.e., the researchers’ Ten Commandments manipulation) have such a large impact is, in itself, an important observation (Shariff and Norenzayan 2007), but it also suggests enormous volatility in the price of diagnostic information that could complicate the transition from a clever demonstration to actual modeling of the behavior.

*CAN COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENCE HELP  
DISTINGUISH SELF-DECEPTION FROM DECEPTION  
OF OTHERS?*

Although Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s behavioral methods achieve a high level of external validity, they do not allow individual occurrences of cheating to be recorded. This is understandable; tempting participants and surreptitiously capturing individual acts of dishonesty may be incompatible with the standards of informed consent. However, many critical questions cannot be addressed by group distributions (e.g., What distinguishes those who cheat from those who do not?). Moreover, if Mazar, Amir, and Ariely are correct that deception of others is constrained by self-signaling and that, in turn, self-signaling is constrained by self-deception (and we believe that they make a compelling case), further progress will depend on finding ways to study these underlying processes. Here, there may be an opportunity for the methods of cognitive neuroscience to be productively brought to bear.

Cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience have well-developed methods for decomposing complex processes (Aguirre and D’Esposito 1999). These methods have already been applied to the study of deception, intent, and awareness, using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which allows changes in brain activity to be measured on a spatial scale of a few millimeters and a temporal scale of approximately one second (Haynes 2008; Langleben 2008; Soon et al. 2008; Spence 2008). Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s participants lied, but did they lie to themselves, to others, or both? To what extent were the participants’ behaviors conscious and motivated? In other words, can self-deception and interpersonal deception (“other-deception”) (Sackeim and Gur 1979) be teased apart by neuroscience? Previous fMRI studies of deception used forced-choice protocols that produced motivated, intentional, and conscious deception. These studies produced a reproducible pattern of lateral prefrontal and parietal activation that has been hypothesized to be due to the cognitive effort involved in inhibiting the “prepotent” tendency toward veridical responding (Langleben et al. 2002; Spence et al. 2004). This early hypothesis is likely to be an oversimplification (Langleben et al. 2005; Sip et al. 2008; Spence et al. 2008; Ward et al. 2003).

At the time of this writing, we are not aware of published fMRI studies dedicated to self-deception. Repression (motivated exclusion of distressing material from attention) has

been found to be associated with increased activation in the right ventral and lateral prefrontal cortex and decreased response in the limbic system (Anderson et al. 2004). This pattern is similar to other-deception, with the addition of the limbic system. We speculate that brain activity associated with labeling self-signals as unwanted and keeping them from entering awareness may help distinguish self from other-deception. The mechanism through which a conflict between the existing self-image and an incoming self-signal is detected may be similar to the one involving the medial prefrontal and insular cortices and employed in error monitoring (Klein et al. 2007). This mechanism may be deficient in certain addictive disorders (Forman et al. 2004), which also involve gross discrepancies between self-image and reality. The role of the limbic system as the modulator of the prefrontal cognitive and motor control (Goldstein et al. 2007; Schaefer et al. 2002) makes it a candidate for a similar role in modulating the degree of awareness of unwanted self-signals. Thus, we anticipate that neuroscience experiments using functional imaging technology would be able to characterize the self-deception and other-deception, as well as other processes underlying the dishonesty of honest people.

The idea that immoral behavior is constrained by motivations related to a desired self-concept is not new. Among other places, it is well developed in the work of Sigmund Freud, as is the idea of motivated avoidance of undesirable self-signals (some Freudian “defense” mechanisms, including repression, can be so characterized). However, the idea has largely been ignored by hard-nosed empirical behavioral scientists because there has not been an obvious way to move to the type of well-specified predictive models that made economics the most practically useful of the social sciences. The recent interest from economists (Bodner and Prelec 1997) and empiricists, such as Mazar, Amir, and Ariely, may clear a path forward, and neuroimaging may provide the best hope yet of elucidating the neural mechanisms of the processes underlying human self-signaling. The most exciting implication of Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s findings may be that they highlight the long way left to go. In the meantime, the authors may find themselves in demand the next time U.S. Congress debates the merits of school prayer.

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## More Ways to Cheat: Expanding the Scope of Dishonesty

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In our article on the dishonesty of honest people (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely 2008), we proposed a theory of self-concept maintenance that allows people who consider themselves honest human beings and have high beliefs in their own morality to cheat "a little bit" without altering their self-image. In other words, they can benefit financially from their dishonesty without paying the cost involved in "recognizing" themselves as being dishonest. This concept results in a substantial amount of "mostly honest" people. Although this is the pessimistic interpretation of our results, the optimistic perspective is that our participants did not cheat enough (i.e., as much as standard economics would predict)! That is, even when there were no external consequences to cheating and even when the amount they could gain was substantial, they did not cheat much.

The general idea behind the theory of self-concept maintenance is that there is a range of dishonesty within which people do not need to confront the true meaning or implications of their actions. Although our experimental evidence supports our theory, we agree with Monterosso and Langenben (2008) that a necessary next step is to find ways to distinguish, at the process level, between dishonesty based on the explicit trade-off of external costs and benefits and the self-concept maintenance idea we propose (see also Wirtz and Kum 2006). In this regard, we suspect that neuroimaging research could prove useful (though we are also obliged to mention that Amos Tversky used to say that the main finding of neuroimaging is that people think with their brains), but achieving this goal would require a different research methodology than the one we used in our studies. In particular, instead of confronting participants with a one-shot game in which there is only one opportunity to be dishonest and participants need to decide whether and to what extent to cheat, a neuroimaging experiment would require multiple decision-making trials, each of which

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would require that participants face the dilemma of benefiting from dishonesty or acting honestly.<sup>2</sup>

One approach to such a multiple-trial type of experiment is to use the “dots game” that we recently developed to investigate the dynamics of people’s decisions to cheat over time (Mazar and Ariely 2008). The procedure is simple, involving a computer-based task in which participants see a box divided by a diagonal line with 20 small dots inside the box. On each trial, the dots are presented for only one second, after which they disappear; participants are then asked to indicate whether there were more dots in the left half of the box or in the right half of the box. When the response is made, a new trial appears, and this goes on for a while. Although the task explicitly asks participants to indicate on which side there are more dots, the payment in this design is such that it tempts participants to indicate that there are more dots on the right side. That is, a participant receives higher payoffs (\$.05) for every trial in which he or she correctly or incorrectly identifies that the box has more dots on the right side (similar to the situations physicians face) and lower payoffs (\$.005) when he or she correctly or incorrectly identifies that the box has more dots on the left side. By creating this asymmetric payment, the task essentially represents a conflict of interest, such that the main task of telling the truth sometimes stands in opposition to the financial incentives physicians encounter on a daily basis.

The results of a few experiments with this paradigm revealed two main findings: First, participants cheat when they have the incentive and opportunity to do so. More important, when participants’ behavior is plotted over the course of the entire experiment (100 trials), at some point, almost all participants switch to a response strategy in which they cheat in every trial. This latter observation suggests that people who consider themselves honest try to limit their cheating over multiple temptations to cheat, which is why they cheat only once in a while in the early stages of the experiment; presumably, this behavior does not pose any threat to their self-concept. However, if they overstretch the tolerance of their self-concept, they create a new situation in which they must face their own dishonesty, which in turn causes them to give up and cheat all the way—a phenomenon similar to the “what-the-hell” effect in the domain of dieting (Baumeister and Heatherton 1996; Polvy and Herman 1985).

These results suggest that a neuroimaging experiment could be useful to distinguish between different phases of the process. For example, a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technique could deliver further support for the different types of dishonesty we observe in the dots experiment. In particular, it could help determine whether different areas of the brain are involved in the early trials (when there is a conflict between the temptation to be dishonest and the benefits of keeping a positive self-concept), the trials in which people switch to a new strategy, and the final stage in which people adopt a different strategy and cheat continuously. Such knowledge could also be crucial in discerning the different mechanisms involved in different types of deception as well as in self-deception.

<sup>2</sup>Moreover, care should be taken to convince participants that their dishonesty may go unnoticed.

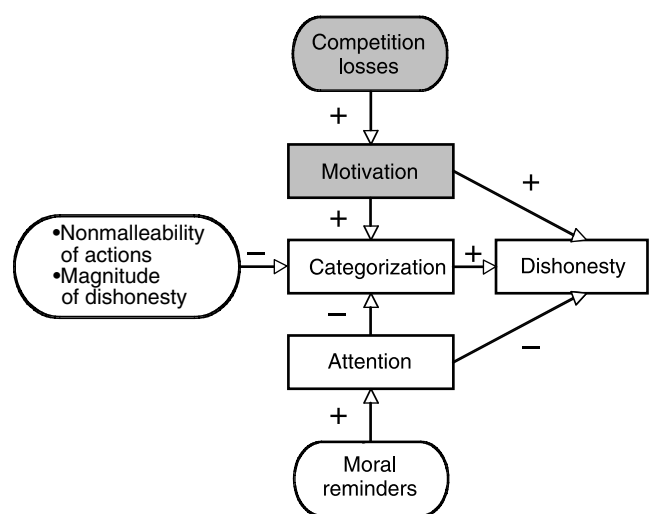
A second way we want to expand our understanding of dishonesty is by incorporating the perspective that Rick and Loewenstein (2008) propose. In our basic theory of self-concept maintenance, we emphasize the role of two distinct but interrelated mechanisms: categorization and attention to moral standards. We hypothesize that for certain types of actions and magnitudes of dishonesty, people can categorize their actions into more compatible terms and find rationalizations for them. As a consequence, people can cheat while avoiding any negative self-signals that might affect their self-concept and thus avoid negatively updating their self-concept altogether (Gur and Sackeim 1979). Whereas the categorization mechanism depends heavily on the external world in terms of the type of exchange, the objects in question, and so forth, the attention to standards mechanism relies on salience.<sup>3</sup>

Rick and Loewenstein (2008) emphasize the role of motivation as another important factor. In particular, they point to two sources of motivation for dishonesty: competition and avoidance or recoup of losses. Motivation can influence people’s dishonesty in two major ways. First, motivation to get “out of a hole” can increase people’s propensity for self-serving categorization, thus increasing self-concept maintenance dishonesty. Second, it can have a direct effect on dishonesty through standard rational dishonesty. In particular, it can lead to a point at which the perceived external costs and benefits of dishonesty trump any considerations of maintaining an honest self-image; at this point, people may carry out dishonest acts consciously and deliberately.

Figure 1 depicts an extended framework for dishonesty that considers the three different mechanisms of categorization, attention, and motivation. Although these mechanisms are not independent from one another, Mazar and Ariely (2006) point out that making the right policy recommenda-

<sup>3</sup>The two mechanisms are somewhat related. For example, more salient moral standards could also make it more difficult to categorize behavior as not pertaining to morality.

Figure 1  
AN EXTENDED FRAMEWORK FOR DISHONESTY



tions to curb dishonesty requires the identification of the mechanism that is driving dishonesty in a particular situation.

If the cause for dishonesty lies mainly in motivation and standard rational dishonesty (i.e., dishonesty stemming from an explicit analysis of external cost and benefit), the benefits of being dishonest must be greater than its costs. The solution then is to shift the imbalance such that the costs become greater than the benefits. This can be achieved by the standard legal approach of controlling the external costs: increasing either the probability of being caught or the severity of the punishment. Good examples for this approach are the introduction of governmental task forces, such as the Department of Justice's task force on intellectual property, which, among other combat strategies, invests in increasing the number of specially trained prosecutors. The same is true for the Internal Revenue Service's increase in audits and the music industry's aggressive increase in filing lawsuits against individual deceivers.

Recent evidence suggests that the probability of punishment is more important than increasing the severity of the punishment (Nagin and Pogarsky 2003). From this finding, there might be ways to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of standard measures accordingly. Informing the important question of what is the optimal probability for deterrence, Barkan, Zohar, and Erev (1998) suggest that the best approach is eliminating the probability of being caught altogether—that is, moving to nonprobabilistic punishments (see also Erev et al. 2003). According to this perspective, a person who expects that driving through a red light would involve a \$500 fine in 5% of the cases is more likely to drive through it than a person who has the same expected value but with certainty of being caught (i.e., a definite \$25 fine). More important, over time, the person in the probabilistic punishment setting is going to discount the probability of the punishment further (as long as he or she is not caught), which in turn will lead to an even greater tendency for violation. Eliminating the probabilistic component from all undesirable behaviors is impossible, but it is clear that there are some cases (e.g., driving through an intersection at a red light) in which this is possible and desirable.

A less common approach for fighting standard rational dishonesty is to decrease the benefits of dishonesty and to help people deal with their losses so that they do not feel trapped. This theory implies that measures such as debt consolidation and credit counseling might prove successful.

If the cause for dishonesty is inattention to moral standards, however, implementing contextual cues at the point of temptation might prove much more effective. For example, the Internal Revenue Service could slightly change its forms by asking people to sign an honor code statement before filling out their tax forms or by making them more personal. Another variation worth trying might be to include a survey that asks taxpayers questions such as how much they care about their country, how important honesty was to their parents, how many people they think lie on their taxes, or what the typical profile is of tax evaders.

If dishonesty is mainly driven by categorization, the challenge is to decrease the malleability of actions or to give people less room for various interpretations by increasing transparency. For example, to decrease employee theft

of office supplies, companies could place salient monetary values on these office supplies. In another example targeting the accounting profession, Bazerman, Loewenstein, and Moore (2002; see also Bazerman and Loewenstein 2001) suggest passing laws or enforcing standards that bar auditors from offering both consulting and tax services to clients to decrease deceptive audits.

Finally, it is also clear that dishonesty is complex and driven by many factors, including cultural norms and the strengths of a person's own moral standards. For example, in a recent study on the influence of cultural norms and legal enforcement in controlling corruption, Fisman and Miguel (2007) found that diplomats from high-corruption countries accumulated significantly more unpaid parking violations. Together with other observations, such studies suggest that societies cannot underinvest in their educational efforts to strengthen the internalization of moral standards to make them part of their cultural norms. This basic premise requires the consideration of key questions, such as the following: How best can this be done? Is there a critical age period for the internalization of such standards (as in language and visual development)? What should the limits of such efforts be? and Should societies allow all ideologies to participate in the creation of internal standards? In addition, the consideration of self-concept maintenance also suggests that the theory of optimal punishment (optimal punishment trades off the benefits of deterrence and the cost of punishing innocent people) should be reconsidered. If the punishment magnitude is determined in a way that makes the costs slightly higher than the benefits and if these costs also include internal standards, the optimal punishment will be lower by that amount. For example, if the expected benefit for a particular crime is  $Y$  and the internal reward for honesty is  $X$ , the standard rational model would prescribe a punishment with an expected magnitude of  $-(Y + \epsilon)$ , whereas the model that includes internal rewards would prescribe  $-(Y + \epsilon) + X$ . The complexity is that not everyone has the same level of internal standards, and to the degree that these are unobservable, it is difficult to assess the true level of optimal punishment (though it is possible that someday there will be a test for this). Conversely, signs of repeated criminal behavior, for example, can be taken as an indication for a lower level of internalized standards, causing the magnitude of  $X$  to be updated as lower. This type of framework, in which  $X$  is an individual variable, has the potential to help build a theory of repeated punishment with the same desired principles of optimal punishment but with more effectiveness (i.e., a logical guideline for the magnitude of these policies).

In summary, there is no doubt that dishonesty is prevalent in daily life. To increase the effectiveness and efficiency of measures to prevent dishonesty, it is vital to understand which of the distinct mechanisms is underlying the behavior in a particular situation.

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