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Hypermotivation

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Abstract

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. While Mazar, Amir, and Ariely shed new and important light on how people rationalize dishonesty, the authors propose that they pay too little attention to the role of motivation, arguably the more important side of the dishonesty equation. When one takes a close look at many of the acts of dishonesty in the real world, a striking pattern emerges: many, if not most, appear to be motivated by the desire to avoid (or recoup) losses rather than the simple desire for gain. The authors propose that perceiving oneself as 'in a hole' leads to *hypermotivation* – a visceral state that leads one to take actions that would normally be considered unacceptable.

Keywords: dishonesty, motivation, greed, fraud

In their clever and insightful paper, 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 will behave dishonestly when it pays, but only to the extent that they can do so without violating their perception of themselves as an honest person. 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).

The main limitation of the paper, as we see it, is not in the perspective it presents, but in what it leaves out. While it is certainly important to understand the psychology of rationalization, the other factor that Mazar, Amir, and Ariely recognize, but then largely ignore – 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 that they normally would have considered to be unethical is in fact 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, people are generally more than capable of rationalizing why it does not, in fact, conflict with their own ethical precepts. And, once they have taken the first step toward unethical behavior, a large body of research shows (e.g., Lifton 1986; Milgram 1963), subsequent steps into the abyss of immorality get progressively easier.

HYPERMOTIVATION

When one takes a close look at many of the acts of dishonesty in the real world, a striking pattern emerges: many, if not most, appear to be motivated by the desire to avoid (or recoup) losses rather than the simple desire for gain. People who find themselves 'in a hole' from which they perceive that dishonest behavior provides the only apparent means of escape, a wide range of evidence suggests, 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., Schepanski and Kelsey 1990; Chang and Schultz 1990).

Prospect theory's (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) concept of loss aversion might seem to provide natural account of what could be called *hypermotivation* – a visceral state that leads one to take actions that one would normally deem unacceptable. Loss aversion suggests that the motivation to avoid a loss will be greater – around 2 to 3 times so – than the motivation to obtain a gain of equivalent value, which goes far to explaining why being 'in a hole' produces such strong motivation. But such simple amplification of value does not, we believe, 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.

Cressey (1950), in a remarkable study of the causes of hypermotivation, 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” (Cressey 1950, 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 data base to an intense scrutiny that he labeled "negative case analysis" in which he systematically attempted to challenge his own conclusions, Cressey (1950) proposed that:

Trusted persons become trust violators when they conceive of themselves as having a financial problem which is non-shareable, have the knowledge or awareness 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 (p. 742).

Clearly, the rationalizations (or “verbalizations”) studied by Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008) play a role in Cressey’s framework. However, they are only the final step in a process set into motion when people found themselves 'in a hole' as a result of "non-sharable financial problems."

A further difference between Cressey’s embezzlers and Mazar, Amir, and Ariely’s cheaters is how the two evaluate their dishonesty in retrospect. Participants in the fourth experiment presented by Mazar, Amir, and Ariely realized they had cheated yet felt no need to update the extent to which they viewed themselves as honest. Cressey's embezzlers, in contrast, “define themselves as criminals, find this definition incompatible with their positions as trusted persons, and usually condemn themselves for their past behavior” (1953, p. 120). Though

rationalizations likely preceded the dishonesty observed both in Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's laboratory studies and in Cressey's real world cases, Cressey's findings suggest that serious acts of dishonesty can only be rationalized for so long.

DePaulo et al. (2004) observed a similar pattern in a study in which undergraduates and non-student 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 (2008), who lied to achieve a modest amount of additional profit, participants in DePaulo et al.'s study lied to hide extramarital affairs, gambling debts, and other serious transgressions that could jeopardize careers or marriages if revealed. And DePaulo et al.'s participants reported feeling distressed while telling their lies, and those who were ultimately caught reported feeling guilty and remorseful. Again, as in Cressey's studies, it appears that many of DePaulo et al.'s participants were ultimately forced to update their self-concept.

The feeling of being in a hole does not only originate from non-sharable unethical behavior, but can also arise, more prosaically, from overly ambitious goals (Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999). In the lab, Schweitzer, Ordonez, and Douma (2004) found that participants who had ambitious goals overstated their productivity significantly more often than did 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 the goals of one's parents (Pearlin, Yarrow, and Scarr 1967), appears to encourage cheating. In organizational settings, the desire to meet ambitious profit goals likewise 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, 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 (via online CVs or profiles). The increasing intensity of competition within academia can be felt at all levels. More and more undergraduates are entering graduate school with CVs 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 have to produce more to achieve the same career gains. Some of this increased productivity is, of course, 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 will also tend to increase in response. David 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.

While 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 (e.g., marketing [Mason, Bearden, and Richardson 1990] and economics [List et al. 2001]). Additionally, Martinson, Anderson, and Vries (2005) measured self-reported misconduct among over 3,000 NIH-funded researchers and found that one-third reported engaging in 'questionable research practices' (e.g., “dropping observations or data points from analyses based on 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

Andrei Shleifer (2004), an economist, explicitly argues against our perspective in a paper titled "Does competition destroy ethical behavior?" While he endorses our premise that competitive situations are more likely to elicit unethical behavior, and indeed offers several examples other than those we provide above, he argues against a psychological perspective and instead seeks to show that "conduct described as unethical and blamed on "greed" is sometimes a consequence of market competition" (p. 414). We believe that he makes a fundamental mistake, however, in implicitly viewing greed as an individual difference variable that can be contrasted with market conditions. In contrast to Shleifer, we would argue that conditions of extreme competition lead to unethical behavior *exactly because* they lead to greed – i.e.,

hypermotivation.¹ By raising aspirations above what is possible to attain with normal, moral means, competition creates the psychological conditions for fraud.

Shleifer concludes his paper 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 vs. 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 by, for example, 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, then what can be done to curb dishonesty?

We are not quite as pessimistic as Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008) 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 made salient (Ariely, Loewenstein, and Prelec 2003, p. 101). However, we do

¹ Although we essentially equate hypermotivation and greed here, there are other conceptualizations of greed that 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.” We propose, by contrast, that hypermotivation is driven by the desire to avoid or recoup losses, rather than the desire to obtain positive outcomes.

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 both 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 (Simes 1986; Dickersin and Rennie 2003). 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. We believe, however, 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 non-negligible proportion of findings in our field that are difficult to replicate. While 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 unreplicable.

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