



Reports

The unhealthy road not taken: Licensing indulgence by exaggerating counterfactual sins[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Examined how thoughts of the “sinful road not taken” can license unhealthy behavior.
- ▶ Dieters made unhealthier choices after reflecting on foregone indulgences.
- ▶ To license indulgence, dieters inflated the unhealthiness of foods they had forgone.
- ▶ Inflating the sinfulness of foregone actions can allow one to succumb to temptation.

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ABSTRACT

This research examined two hypotheses: 1) reflecting on foregone indulgences licenses people to indulge, and 2) to justify future indulgence, people will exaggerate the sinfulness of actions not taken, thereby creating the illusion of having previously foregone indulgence. In Study 1 (a longitudinal study), dieters induced to reflect on unhealthy alternatives to their prior behavior (compared to dieters in a control condition) expressed weaker intentions to pursue their weight-loss goals – and one week later, they said that they had actually done less and intended to continue doing less to pursue such goals. In Study 2, weight-conscious participants who expected to eat cookies (compared to those merely shown cookies) inflated the unhealthiness of snack foods that they previously declined to eat, and exaggerated the extent to which dieting concerns explained why they had declined these snacks. Implications for moral behavior, self-control, and motivated construal processes are discussed.

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Introduction

Justifying indulgence is often easy even for individuals committed to avoiding it. For example, dieters will relax their resolve to avoid unhealthy foods when they can point to progress towards their weight-loss goals (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005), or when they can frame indulgence as a reward (de Witt Huberts, Evers, & de Ridder, 2012; Kivetz & Zheng, 2006). More broadly, being able to point to virtuous past actions can license people to act less-than-virtuously in the future (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009; Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001).

We propose that even when individuals lack salient past virtues, they can still justify indulgence by pointing to foregone sins. A dieter might justify eating cake by reflecting on how she previously ate fewer cookies than she could have. Building on the idea that imagined alternatives to reality (i.e., *counterfactual thoughts*) exert a powerful influence on how people evaluate their own and others' misdeeds (Mandel & Dhami, 2005; Miller, Visser, & Staub, 2005; Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994), we posit that reflecting on *counterfactual sins* (i.e., less-virtuous alternatives to one's past behavior) licenses people to act less virtuously. By imagining the sinful road not taken, individuals can reassure themselves of their virtue without having done anything actively virtuous – and can thus license future indulgence.

Unfortunately for individuals wishing to indulge, it is sometimes difficult to imagine how one's behavior plausibly could have been worse. The dieter may wish to use uneaten cookies to justify eating cake, but perhaps no cookies were previously available. In such situations, we propose, the motivation to indulge can lead people to distort their evaluations of their foregone behaviors. The dieter may convince herself that it would have been unhealthy to eat some

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low-fat crackers that she previously declined. We propose that when people are tempted to indulge, they will exaggerate the sinfulness of foregone actions, thereby creating the illusion that they previously refrained from bad behavior.

The present research tested these two hypotheses. First, we propose that people are more likely to relax their pursuit of “virtuous” self-control goals when they can point to counterfactual “sins” (i.e., goal-inconsistent behavior that they could have performed, but did not). Second, we propose that when people are tempted to indulge, they will strategically exaggerate the “sinfulness” of the road not taken.

Study 1 (a longitudinal study) examined whether inducing dieters to reflect on “sinful” alternatives to their prior actions would weaken their commitment to “virtuous” dieting/exercise behavior over the course of a week. Study 2 examined whether the temptation to eat an unhealthy food could lead participants to exaggerate the unhealthiness of foods that they had previously declined to eat. Because our hypotheses focus on individuals who feel uncomfortable indulging in unhealthy food without justification, our studies examined participants who expressed a desire to lose weight.

Study 1: license to exercise less self-control

Time 1 method

Participants

Participants were 77 members of a non-student subject pool (48 females, 29 males; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.09$, $SD = 11.57$) who said in a prescreening survey that their actual weight was higher than their ideal weight.¹ They completed Study 1 on the Web for a chance to win a \$20 gift card to amazon.com.

Procedure

Baseline measure and threat induction. After again reporting their actual and ideal weights, participants saw 20 blanks in which to list “everything [they] did in the last week to try to lose weight.” The number of blanks they completed provided a baseline for a dependent measure described below. To make participants feel that they would require a license to relax their pursuit of their weight-loss goals, we also used this task to make participants feel that they had fallen short of such goals: We expected few participants to complete all 20 blanks, which we thought would make them feel that they had done little to pursue their weight-loss goals (Schwarz et al., 1991); we told participants, “If you did not do very much [to try to lose weight], you may leave some of the blanks empty;” and we asked them to describe “any unhealthy things [they] did in the last week that interfered with the goal of losing weight” in a single text-entry box.

Manipulation. Participants randomly assigned to the *counterfactual sin* condition then described “how [their] behavior in the last week could have been less healthy than it actually was,” wrote about any “unhealthy things [they] could have done, but decided not to do, that could have made [them] gain weight,” explained “why [they] decided not to do these unhealthy things,” and rated how much these behaviors would have “interfered with the goal of losing weight.” Participants in a control condition instead described “something fun [they] did last week,” explained why they had decided to do it, and rated how much they had enjoyed it.

¹ The prescreening survey also contained a measure of restrained eating (Stunkard & Messick, 1985). Neither it nor gender moderated the results, though we note that sampling individuals with weight-loss goals restricted the range of scores on the restrained eating scale.

Perceptions of prior behavior. It is possible that counterfactual sins license less virtuous future behavior merely because they make one’s past behavior appear more virtuous in contrast. To test this potential contrast effect, we asked participants to rate their behavior from the previous week: how consistent or inconsistent it had been with a weight-loss goal, how healthy or unhealthy it had been, and how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with its healthiness (averaged for analyses; $\alpha = .86$). Response options ranged from extremely negative (e.g., *extremely dissatisfied*; -3) to extremely positive (e.g., *extremely satisfied*; $+3$).

Intended weight-loss behaviors. Participants next saw 20 blanks in which to list “everything that [they planned] to do in the next week” to work towards their weight-loss goals. The number of behaviors listed was our primary dependent measure. Participants also assessed their subjective intentions to lose weight in the next week compared to the prior week using a three-item scale ($\alpha = .95$): “How much do you plan to do” and “How hard do you plan to work” to lose weight, and “How healthy will your behavior be” ($-3 = \text{much less next week}$; $+3 = \text{much [more/harder/healthier] next week}$).

Other measures. As a late addition to the study design, we asked the final 32 participants to rate the helpfulness for weight-loss of each of the intended behaviors they had previously listed ($1 = \text{not at all}$; $5 = \text{extremely}$). Finally, participants rated the ease of completing the manipulation ($-3 = \text{extremely difficult}$; $+3 = \text{extremely easy}$).

Time 1 results

We excluded participants who, despite their prescreening responses, now said that their actual weight did not exceed their ideal weight ($n = 7$), who provided incomplete or uninterpretable data ($n = 3$; e.g., wrote numbers instead of listing behaviors), who took exceptionally long to complete the study (i.e., >4 SDs above the mean time; $n = 2$), or who filled in all 20 blanks on the baseline behavior-listing task (i.e., 5.56 SDs above the mean; $n = 1$). Exclusions did not differ significantly by condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 77) = .21$, $p = .65$, and left 34 participants in the control condition and 30 in the counterfactual sin condition.

We predicted that imagining less-healthy alternatives to their recent behavior would weaken participants’ commitment to weight-loss. Consistent with this prediction, participants listed fewer intended weight-loss behaviors in the counterfactual sin condition ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.86$) than in the control condition ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 2.77$), $F(1, 61) = 5.93$, $p = .02$ in an ANCOVA controlling for the number of behaviors listed at baseline, $d = .51$ based on unadjusted means.² (A t -test with d fs adjusted for heteroskedasticity was also significant, $t[58.06] = 2.07$, $p < .05$.) As illustrated in Fig. 1, participants in the control condition said they wanted to do more to lose weight next week compared to the prior week – an unsurprising result given that our threat induction in both conditions was intended to make participants feel that they had fallen short of their weight-loss goals. By contrast, participants who had reflected on unhealthy alternatives to their earlier behavior showed no such inclination to improve.

The three-item scale measuring subjective weight-loss intentions showed the same pattern as the behavior-listing measure. Compared to participants in the control condition ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .96$), participants in the counterfactual sin condition expressed weaker intentions to improve their weight-loss behavior ($M = .80$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(62) = 2.38$, $p = .02$, $d = .60$.

² In this and all subsequently reported ANCOVAs, the correlation between the covariate and the DV did not differ between conditions ($ps > .51$).

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