



How selfish is memory for cheaters? Evidence for moral and egoistic biases



Raoul Bell ^{a,*}, Cécile Schain ^b, Gerald Echterhoff ^b

^a Department of Experimental Psychology, Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, Germany

^b Social Psychology Group, Department of Psychology, University of Münster, Münster, Germany

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ABSTRACT

We remember very well when another person has cheated us, but is this due to the cheating's immorality or due to its negative consequences? Theories claiming that reputational memory helps retaliate cheating imply that we should be sensitive both to the norm violation and to the personal consequences of another person's cheating. In the present study, faces were presented with descriptions of immoral and moral behavior. In contrast to previous studies, the morality and the personal consequences of the behaviors were orthogonally manipulated (both cheating and trustworthy behavior could lead to personal benefits or costs). In a surprise memory test, participants were required to remember whether the faces were associated with moral or immoral behaviors, or with personal benefits or costs. Overall, the morality of the behaviors was better remembered than were the personal consequences of the same behaviors. However, the immorality of morally questionable behaviors was well remembered when associated with personal costs, and poorly remembered when associated with personal benefits. Apparently, people's categorization of the social environment is based on moral judgments, but also reflects self-serving biases.

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1. Introduction

Navigating the social world affects our memory (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012). To establish social structures that help us to successfully manage everyday life, good memory for other people's behavior is essential. Specifically, we have to remember whom we can trust, and whom to avoid. Accordingly, there has been an increasing interest in memory for negative and positive reputations (Barclay, 2008; Bell, Buchner, & Musch, 2010; Buchner, Bell, Mehl, & Musch, 2009; Suzuki & Suga, 2010; Volstorf, Rieskamp, & Stevens, 2011). Reputational memory might be functionally associated with the regulation of social cooperation (e.g., Mealey, Daood, & Krage, 1996). From an evolutionary perspective (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Trivers, 1971),

cooperation can only be successful when cheating is retaliated (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Trivers, 1971) or punished (Fehr, Fischbacher, & Gächter, 2002), which requires memory for the negative reputation of norm violators (Buchner et al., 2009; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Importantly, face recognition alone is not useful in social exchange. Instead, the association between the face and the cheating has to be remembered. In line with these arguments, source memory for faces of cheaters was found to be particularly good (Buchner et al., 2009).

Norms of fairness and cooperation constitute the fundamental basis of social groups and societies. Morality is often characterized by impartiality and indifference to specific outcomes (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009), and can therefore be viewed as being incompatible with egoism and selfishness. Cheating threatens systems of cooperation because it erodes people's faith in reciprocity, dependability, and fairness. Thus, one can argue that cheating is well remembered because it represents a violation of fundamental

* Corresponding author. Address: Institut für Experimentelle Psychologie, Heinrich-Heine-Universität, D-40225 Düsseldorf, Germany. Tel.: +49 211 811 5643.

E-mail address: Raoul.Bell@hhu.de (R. Bell).

social norms, and therefore is a distinct and salient type of behavior (Kroneisen & Bell, 2013). However, in many situations people do not impartially judge the behavior of third parties, but are involved in social exchange as victims, perpetrators, beneficiaries, or mere observers. Individuals pursue goals that are consistent with these roles, such as justifying one's own immoral behavior, or seeking allies to retaliate against the perpetrator (Krebs & Denton, 2005). This view suggests that moral cognition, including reputational memory, is guided by personal interests, specifically considerations of the individual costs or benefits resulting from an immoral behavior. In a nutshell, then, memory for cheating behavior should be subject to self-serving biases.

In previous studies examining memory for cheaters the morality of the behavior (whether a behavior was immoral or moral) has been manipulated together with the personal consequences of this behavior (whether it was associated with potential costs or benefits). Several studies (Barclay, 2008; Bell et al., 2010; Oda, 1997; Oda & Nakajima, 2010; Suzuki & Suga, 2010; Volstorf et al., 2011) employed social dilemma games in which participants were in danger of becoming victims of the cheating. In other studies, participants read descriptions about interactions between others, thereby taking the role of a third-party observer (Buchner et al., 2009). However, the individual's role (victim, beneficiary, or observer) has not been manipulated directly.

In the present study, the morality of a behavior (immoral, moral) and its personal consequences (cost, benefit) were orthogonally manipulated, which allowed us to address the following questions: Do we classify and remember another person's behavior according to whether it is immoral as opposed to moral, or whether it is harmful or beneficial to us personally? Do personal consequences affect memory for morality and vice versa? A functional perspective on reputational memory (e.g., Nairne, 2010) leads to the prediction that we should be sensitive to the personal consequences of another person's cheating. If cheating is directly harmful to us, good memory for the cheating can help us retaliate against, and avoid, the cheater in the future (Buchner et al., 2009). If, in contrast, another person's fraudulent act involves positive consequences for one's own self, there is no personal threat associated with this behavior and, therefore, little reason to remember it. It may even be in line with one's self-serving goals to quickly forget that one's own benefits were unjustly obtained.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Seventy-four students at the University of Münster (60 female; mean age = 22.82, $SD = 4.96$) participated for course credit.

2.2. Materials

Eighty color photographs (242×303 pixels) of young male white adults (Solina, Peer, Batagelj, Juvan, & Kovac, 2003) were randomly paired with 20 descriptions of

immoral behaviors, and 20 descriptions of moral behaviors. For auditory presentation, the behavior descriptions were recorded in a female voice in audio files. Four parallel versions of the same 40 descriptions were used. First, the immoral and moral behaviors were associated with either personal costs or benefits. Second, to ensure that the behavior descriptions differed only in morality and personal consequences, and not on other dimensions (e.g., familiarity, ease of imagination), two versions of each sentence were created. Examples of immoral behaviors were created by negating the moral behaviors. Examples for moral behaviors were created by negating the immoral behaviors (see Table 1, for examples). Whether a particular sentence would serve as an example for immoral or moral behavior, and whether it would be associated with a personal cost or benefit, was randomly determined. Ten descriptions were used in each cell of the 2 (immoral, moral) \times 2 (cost, benefit) design. Whether the descriptions were expressed positively or negatively was counterbalanced between conditions.

In a pretest, the behavior descriptions were presented in a neutral format by replacing the personal, second-person references (Table 1) by third-party references, yielding, for example, "He gave the promotion to A rather than to B because A was most qualified." 18 participants rated these third-party descriptions on a scale ranging from -3 (dishonest, immoral, antisocial) to $+3$ (honest, moral, cooperative). Results confirmed that the immoral descriptions ($M = -1.87$; $SD = 0.52$) were rated more negatively than the moral descriptions ($M = 1.83$; $SD = 0.36$), $t(39) = 28.28$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .95$.

2.3. Procedure

In the encoding phase, 40 of the faces were randomly paired with descriptions of immoral and moral behaviors implying personal costs or benefits. Each participant saw one of the four versions of each behavior description. In each trial the face was first presented without a behavior description for 2 s. Then, a behavior description appeared on the screen while the corresponding audio file was played. After 4.5 s, a likability rating scale was shown that participants used to rate the likability of the person on a 6-point scale from 1 ("not likable at all") to 6 ("very likable") to promote encoding of the behaviors. The face and the description stayed on screen until participants confirmed their rating by clicking a "continue" button.

After the encoding phase, participants immediately received the instructions for the test phase. In the memory test, participants saw a random sequence of 40 old and 40 new faces. After a likability rating of the face, participants were asked whether the face was "old" or "new". If the "old" option was selected, half of the participants were asked whether the behavior accompanying the face was "dishonest, immoral, antisocial" or "honest, moral, cooperative", independent of the personal outcome. In this condition, memory for the morality of the behaviors was tested. The other half were asked whether the behaviors accompanying the faces led to an immediate personal "cost" or "benefit", independent of the behavior's morality.

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