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The dark side of creativity revisited: Is students' creativity associated with subsequent decreases in their ethical decision making?[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Both creativity and ethical decision making have been identified as 21st century skills that need to be facilitated in modern educational policy and practice. Prior research on the “dark side of creativity” suggests that creativity impacts ethical decision making adversely. This study is the first to study the reciprocity of students' creativity and ethical decision making longitudinally and to specifically investigate whether students' creativity is longitudinally associated with decreases in their ethical decision making. In addition, we investigated whether the observed longitudinal relations between creativity and ethical decision making hold after controlling for students' reasoning skills. Middle school students (overall $N = 1869$; 48.3% male) were assessed at two time points of measurement. To obtain measures of students' creativity and ethical decision making, we employed self-ratings as well as teacher-ratings. Reasoning test scores were available for a subsample of 417 students. No association between creativity assessments and changes in subsequent ethical decision-making assessments was found. This resulting pattern held after controlling for students' reasoning skills. Collectively, these findings suggest that creativity is not a general predictor of decreases in ethical decision making, indicating that being a creative student unlikely implies being an unethical decision maker.

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1. Introduction

The continuing importance of information technology has led to a shift from routine toward novel, dynamic, and non-routine tasks at the average workplace in the 21st century (e.g., Autor, Levy, & Murnane, 2003). These changes provide an enormous challenge for modern education. With the ever-growing need for individuals to adapt to new situations, to generate and implement novel ideas, and to make decisions in an efficient and ethical manner, the need for transversal skills that enable today's students to successfully navigate through life in the 21st century similarly increases (e.g., Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Griffin, McGaw, & Care, 2012; National Research Council, 2012). Significant progress has already been

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made in identifying these so-called 21st century skills, and both creativity and ethical decision making are seen as crucial (e.g., Binkley et al., 2012; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Creativity has been defined as the ability to move beyond what currently exists and to generate and implement new ideas (Ward, 2004), allowing the individual to remain flexible and to become a successful problem solver (cf. Runco, 2010). Accordingly, creativity has been identified as being of eminent importance not only for economic and technical development, healthy psychological functioning, and emotional growth but also for academic success (see Plucker, Beghetto, & Dow 2004). Ethical decision making, in contrast, can be described as the ability and willingness to be moral, for example, to consider others' needs, goals, and perspectives in one's own decisions (see, e.g., Moran, 2014). Managerial decisions in the 21st century, for instance, have a potential impact on the financial and health status of millions of people and it is therefore important that they are ethical (e.g., Lawton & Paez, 2014; Trevino, de Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014). As ethical decision making is a precondition for cooperating, working, and living together in a society, teaching ethical decision making can therefore be considered one of the important educational goals (Perri, Callanana, Rotenberry, & Oehlers, 2009).

In contrast to many other 21st century skills (including ethical decision making), various scholars question whether creativity genuinely exerts only beneficial impacts (for overviews: Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010; Glazer, 2009; Moran, Cropley, & Kaufman, 2014). For example, one might assume that creative students more successfully find innovative ways to cheat on their exams. In fact, prior research highlighting the "dark side of creativity" (Gino and Ariely, 2012; p. 445) suggests that creativity impacts ethical behavior adversely (e.g., Beaussart, Andrew, & Kaufman, 2013; Gino and Ariely, 2012). These findings raise questions as to whether enhancing students' creativity decreases their ethical decision making over the long term. To the best of our knowledge, there is no study investigating the reciprocity of students' creativity and ethical decision making in the long run and, thus, whether creativity is actually associated with decreases in ethical decision making over time. Furthermore, educational research on this topic is meager. To address this deficiency, the present study subjected the dark side of creativity to further empirical scrutiny by examining self-assessments and teacher-assessments of creativity and ethical decision making in middle-school students using a longitudinal design.

1.1. *The dark side of creativity: does creativity impact ethical decision making negatively?*

Due to its obvious beneficial characteristics, creativity has been proposed as a helpful tool for mastering modern societal demands. However, creativity is also said to have a dark side. Creative people, who are more inclusive in their thinking and who use broad conceptions, have been found to be more prone to developing schizophrenia and psychotic disorders (Eysenck, 1993). Moreover, creative thinkers have been found to be less conscientious and less conventional, to tolerate ambiguity, to interpret rules leniently, to be impulsive, more dominant, and more hostile; indeed, the least favored students are perceived as being the most creative (Feist, 1998; Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014; Tegano, 1990; Westby & Dawson, 1995). In line with this, Beaussart et al. (2013) suggested that fostering creativity potentially resulted in violating social norms and expectations as it encouraged people to think in different ways than others. In fact, the authors found some cross-sectional evidence supporting their suggestions in that creative performance (i.e., assessed by an association test) was found to be negatively and significantly related to integrity assessments (i.e., self- and observer-assessed integrity; Beaussart et al., 2013).

Investigating this dark side of creativity in a series of studies, Gino and Ariely (2012) concluded that creativity increases unethical behavior by making people more cognitively flexible. In particular, the authors showed that creativity is associated with justifying immoral actions by generating reasons why immoral actions might be appropriate in a particular situation. Gino and Ariely (2012) demonstrated that creative people behaved more dishonestly and that the ability to successfully generate options to justify their immoral actions mediated the degree of dishonesty. For instance, the authors confronted participants with an ambiguous task, in which participants earned their profit only based on their responses and not based on their accuracy. Creative participants were more likely to intentionally generate responses to increase their payoff. In another problem solving task, participants had 5 min to solve 20 matrices anonymously, with 5 min not enough to solve all 20 matrices. After solving the 20 matrices, creative participants were more likely to overstate their performance to increase their payment for the task. These findings highlight a potential dark side of creativity and therewith eventually raise the question as to whether or not creativity should be promoted in students without reservation, as it may have undesired effects on students' ethical behavior. However, in Gino and Ariely's (2012) experimental studies, participants were confronted with ethical dilemmas that stimulated cheating in that participants were not only given the opportunity to behave dishonestly but were also tempted to do so (Gino and Ariely, 2012). In a situation in which cheating is a normative response, creativity may in fact be a tool that people who desire to cheat use to do so successfully. Thus, it remains an open question whether creativity really diminishes a global trait, such as ethical decision making, over time. Because this situation was largely artificial in Gino and Ariely's experiments as the authors used only tasks that enhance participants' desire to cheat, the current study investigates whether creativity is associated with subsequent decreases in students' ethical decision making in a sample of students not exposed to any experimental manipulation per se.

Another construct that should be taken into account when revisiting the dark side of creativity is intelligence. In fact, creativity and intelligence have not only been repeatedly suggested to be entangled (cf. Kim, Cramond, & VanTassel-Baska, 2010), prior research has also found a negative relation between intelligence and ethical decision making (Rayburn & Rayburn, 1996). Thus, an observed relation between creativity and ethical decision making in favor of a dark side of creativity (i.e., a negative relation between both constructs) might eventually only reflect a potential negative impact of intelligence on

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