Case Report

The spark that ignites: Mere exposure to rivals increases Machiavellianism and unethical behavior

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We observe evidence of a rivalry relational schema that promotes unethicality.
- People who recalled rivals, versus non-rivals, exhibited greater Machiavellianism.
- Exposure to rivals also increased the frequency of two forms of deception.
- Rivalry crowded out moral identity; it no longer protected against unethical behavior.
- Rivalry can significantly affect behavior even outside of head-to-head competition.

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ABSTRACT

Rivalry is prevalent across many competitive environments and differs in important ways from non-rival competition. Here, we draw upon research on relational schemas and automatic goals to explore whether mere exposure to or recall of a rival can be sufficient to increase individuals' Machiavellianism and unethical behavior, even in contexts where their rivals are not present. Across four experiments, we found that activation of the rivalry relational schema led to increased Machiavellianism (Experiments 1 and 2), false inflation of performance (Experiment 3), and deception of an online counterpart for self-gain (Experiment 4). In Experiment 4 we also observed an interaction between rivalry and moral identity such that when the rivalry relational schema was activated, moral identity no longer safeguarded against unethical behavior. This finding suggests that a rivalry mindset crowds out moral identity as a guide to behavior. Overall, the current research depicts rivalry as an important relationship that activates a unique mindset and has a more widespread influence on behavior than prior research has suggested.

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Anecdotal evidence has long spoken to the power of rivalry to affect behavior. Rivalries often turn ugly, from Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla in science and technology to Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan in figure skating to Virgin Atlantic and British Airways in the airline industry. Academic research on rivalry, still in its incipient stage, has conceptualized it as a relational form of competition that goes beyond economic stakes to uniquely affect both motivation and unethical behavior (Converse & Reinhard, 2016; Kilduff, 2014; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010; Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2016).

This existing research has focused primarily on situations in which rivals are directly in competition with one another, such

runners in a race (Kilduff, 2014) or business owners engaged in a negotiation (Kilduff et al., 2016). However, for every instance of head-to-head competition between rivals, there may be many more indirect experiences of rivalry. An employee can walk past the office of a rival coworker, an individual could see a Facebook post from a high school rival, a manager at American Airlines may read a newspaper article about a rival airline (e.g., United or Delta), or a Michigan graduate might walk past someone wearing an Ohio State shirt. Indeed, an acquaintance who worked at Microsoft in the late 1990s described how the company tried to activate employees' feelings of rivalry by hanging punching bags emblazoned with the Linux penguin and distributing hats that read "We put the NO in Nokia." The current research explores whether head-to-head competition is necessary for rivalry to affect behavior, or whether these experiences of seeing or even imagining a rival can affect how individuals approach non-rival competitors and non-competitive situations.

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1. Rivalry

In contrast to classic structural conceptions of competition, which exists when the desired outcomes of actors are opposed (Deutsch, 1949), recent work on rivalry has emphasized its historical and relational components (Converse & Reinhard, 2016; Kilduff, 2014; Kilduff et al., 2010, 2016). Specifically, Kilduff and colleagues conceptualized rivalry as a relationship between a focal actor and target actor that serves to heighten the psychological stakes for the focal actor in competitions against the target actor, independent of the objective characteristics of the situation (Kilduff, 2014; Kilduff et al., 2010).

Consistent with this relational model, studies of rivalry have found that the strength of rivalry between actors is largely driven by their relationships and competitive histories; specifically, the level of similarity, repeated competition, and evenly-decided competition the actors have experienced (Kilduff, 2014; Kilduff et al., 2010). In turn, rivalry predicts increased motivation and effort-based performance (Kilduff, 2014). Most recently, a series of studies found that people behave more unethically towards their rivals than non-rival competitors (Kilduff et al., 2016). For example, Ohio State students lied more to Michigan students than students from a non-rival university, and people were more willing to employ ethically questionable negotiation tactics when paired with their personal rivals.

The present research extends these findings by exploring whether mere exposure to, or recall of, a rival is enough to lead people to 1) adopt a more Machiavellian worldview; 2) behave more unethically even in contexts unrelated to the rivalry. In doing so, we extend the conceptualization of rivalry to encompass a mindset that can exist outside of direct competition between rivals.

2. Relational schemas

Research finds that individuals associate significant relationship partners, including their parents, friends, and supervisors, with sets of expectations, norms for behavior, and goals (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003), sometimes referred to as *relational schemas* (Baldwin, 1992). As a result, exposure to significant others can activate these goals and alter behavior (Shah, 2005). For example, individuals subconsciously primed with their father exhibited greater effort (Shah, 2003), and individuals asked to think about a friend versus a co-worker exhibited greater helpfulness (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003).

Recently, Converse and Reinhard (2016) argued that rivalry also has a relational schema associated with it which leads people to view contests against their rivals as embedded in an ongoing narrative. Thus, in contrast to non-rival competition, contests between rivals are seen as connected to past competitions, and expected to be better remembered going forward. This leads people to experience greater concerns over their legacies when competing against their rivals, which leads to more eager goal pursuit (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

We seek to extend understanding of the rivalry relational schema by exploring the specific goals and norms for behavior that it invokes, in addition to feelings of embeddedness. We propose that the rivalry relational schema will entail increased pursuit of high performance and success, with decreased regard for the means used to achieve these goals. Indeed, Kilduff et al. (2016) observed that people adopted a greater performance orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) in contests against their rivals – that is, they placed greater importance on their relative performance, which mediated the effect of rivalry on unethical behavior. Here, we predict that the rivalry relational schema will invoke a greater willingness to do whatever it takes to increase one's performance in general, even outside of competition against the rival. We predict that this will manifest itself in both increased unethical behavior, and a more cynical and utilitarian view of the world, in the form of increased Machiavellianism.

3. Moral identity versus the rivalry relational schema

We also conduct an initial exploration into how activation of the rivalry relational schema interacts with individuals' moral identity, a primary dispositional determinant of ethical versus unethical behavior. Moral identity is a type of social identity that captures the extent to which individuals see morality as central to their self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). High moral identity individuals engage in less unethical behavior in general (e.g., Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008), which should include situations void of rivalry. However, given the inherent incongruity between the 'win at all costs' rivalry schema and moral identity, one of two things could happen when high moral identity individuals are exposed to rivals.

First, high moral identity might protect against the unethical tendencies triggered by rivalry exposure. That is, moral identity might be such an integral part of these individuals' identities that they are immune to the effects of rivalry, similar to how high moral identity protects against the effects of self-control depletion in predicting unethical behavior (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). Thus, high moral identity individuals might exhibit low levels of unethical behavior even when exposed to their rivals.

However, individuals' social identities are dynamic. Their salience fluctuates across situations (Hogg, 1992; Hogg & Terry, 2000), and they typically only influence behavior when salient (Forehand, Deshpandé, & Reed, 2002; Reed, 2004). Indeed, in their original paper on moral identity, Aquino and Reed (2002) were careful to note that it is not a personality characteristic; rather, "like other social identities that make up a person's social self-schema, (moral identity) can be activated or suppressed by contextual, situational … variables" (p. 1425). Given the intensity of the rivalry relationship and the incongruity between its relational schema and moral identity, exposure to a rival would seem to be exactly the kind of cue that can suppress the salience of moral identity, making it less influential on behavior. This would result in low and high moral identity individuals exhibiting similar levels of unethical behavior after exposure to rivals. This perspective is supported by research showing that the priming of significant others inhibits goals inconsistent with the associated relational schemas (Shah, 2003, 2005), which is an example of the more general phenomenon of 'goal shielding' whereby activation of one goal inhibits the accessibility of alternative goals (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002).

4. Overview of experiments and theoretical contributions

Four experiments investigated the effects of exposure to rivals. To more closely connect to the research on relational schemas and to isolate rivalry from intergroup dynamics, the studies examined inter-individual rivalry. The first two experiments explored whether activation of the rivalry schema increases Machiavellianism, which is "synonymous with amoral action…and unethical excess" (Nelson & Gilbertson, 1991, p. 633) and predicts a wide range of unethical behaviors (Hegarty & Sims, 1978; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Experiment 1 used a recall task and Experiment 2 experimentally created rivalry in the lab. Experiment 3 explored the effect of recalling a rival on subsequent cheating on a task unrelated to one's rival. Finally, Experiment 4 explored how moral identity interacted with exposure to rivals in predicting deception use in a negotiation.

The present research makes several theoretical and empirical contributions. First, it increases our understanding of rivalry. By showing that mere recall of a personal rival increases unethical behavior towards non-rivals, our results indicate that rivalry-driven behavior may be substantially more common than previous work would suggest. Second, our findings for Machiavellianism show that rivalry can alter individuals' fundamental worldviews and produce insights into the nature of the rivalry mindset. Third, we demonstrate the limits of moral identity to guide behavior, as it can be crowded out by the rivalry