



The Gray Side of Creativity: Exploring the Role of Activation in the Link Between Creative Personality and Unethical Behavior



Ke Michael Mai ^{a,*}, Aleksander P.J. Ellis ^b, David T. Welsh ^c

^a SKK Graduate School of Business, Sungkyunkwan University, Jongro-gu, Seoul 110-745, Republic of Korea

^b Department of Management & Organizations, Eller College of Management, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721-0108, USA

^c Department of Management, W. P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Using three studies from diverse samples, we explore the relationship between creative personality and unethical behavior.
- We extend previous research by applying trait activation theory and integrating self-concept maintenance theory.
- The effects of creative personality on unethical behavior are determined by the presence of activators in the work context.
- Such effects are mediated by the development of unethical justifications.

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ABSTRACT

Although creative personality is generally viewed as a desirable characteristic (e.g., Amabile, 1988), there may be a dark side associated with creative thinking in terms of increasing unethical behavior (e.g., Gino & Ariely, 2012). By integrating trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) and self-concept maintenance theory (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008), we expand current understanding of the relationship between creative personality and unethical behavior. More specifically, consistent results across three studies using both student and nonstudent samples suggest that the effects of creative personality on unethical behavior are determined in large part by the presence of activators and are mediated by the development of unethical justifications. Implications for the creativity and behavioral ethics literatures are discussed as well as directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Creativity has been identified as a critical factor to facilitate economic growth and social reform at the macro level (Florida, 2004; Zhou & Shalley, 2011) and enhance individual performance and competitiveness at the micro level (Amabile, 1988, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Zhou, 1998). Therefore, one strategy would be to hire employees based on their creative potential. One determinant of creative potential is creative personality (e.g., Barron, 1969; MacKinnon, 1978; Martindale, 1999; Simonton, 1999). However, selecting individuals who possess a highly creative personality may have unintended consequences in certain organizations. Whereas following appropriate norms and ethical standards requires conformity and convergent thinking, those with a creative personality possess a unique ability to engage in

cognitive flexibility (Amabile, 1983; Eysenck, 1993) and divergent thinking (Guilford, 1968, 1982). Consequently, creative employees may be more likely to think outside the box in a number of contexts, including those with ethical implications.

Researchers across disciplines have become increasingly interested in understanding the link between creativity and unethicality (Beaussart, Andrews, & Kaufman, 2013; Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014), and recent research has shown that individuals with a highly creative personality may be more likely to make unethical decisions (Gino & Ariely, 2012). In this study, we extend this line of research by integrating self-concept maintenance theory (Mazar et al., 2008) and trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000) in order to identify key moderating and mediating mechanisms. First, in Study 1, we investigate whether the effects of creative personality on unethical behavior (i.e., any individual action that violates widely accepted [societal] moral norms, such as lying, cheating, and stealing; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) are constrained primarily to contexts that activate the trait. Second, in Studies 2 and 3, we seek to replicate the effects found in Study 1 and determine whether justifications play a

* Corresponding author at: SKK Graduate School of Business, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul 110-745, Republic of Korea.

E-mail addresses: kemike.mai@gmail.com (K.M. Mai), aleks@email.arizona.edu (A.P.J. Ellis), davidwelsh@asu.edu (D.T. Welsh).

mediating role. We predict that creative people will be more likely to come up with justifications to allow them to act unethically, but only when their creative personality is activated by the content of the task. Our results contribute to the rapidly growing literatures related to creativity and behavioral ethics by identifying relevant boundary conditions related to the effect of creative personality on unethical behavior and by uncovering the underlying mechanism.

1.1. The Effects of Creative Personality on Unethical Behavior

Researchers have found that creative people are able to perceive things that remain obscured from the view of others (Carson, Peterson, & Higgins, 2003), and that they interpret problems from a unique perspective (Simonton, 1999). To act creatively, individuals must often violate conventional ways of thinking (Newell, Shaw, & Simon, 1962) and consider information that appears irrelevant to others (Smith, Ward, & Finke, 1995). Creative individuals differ from less creative individuals in terms of the degree of cognitive flexibility that they possess (Amabile, 1983; Eysenck, 1993). *Cognitive flexibility* is defined as the ability of individuals to reconnect given information and restructure knowledge in multiple ways depending on demands, and enables creative individuals to switch their approach to meet the needs of the situation at hand (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008). Researchers have argued that cognitive flexibility can help creative individuals obtain unique perspectives, find new approaches to obstacles, and, most importantly, find creative ways to solve problems (Amabile, 1983; Eysenck, 1993; Simonton, 1999; Spiro & Jehng, 1990).

However, in the context of behavioral ethics, the ability to engage in flexible thinking might be problematic, providing the opportunity for creative individuals to rationalize unethical behavior in unique ways (Baucus, Norton, Baucus, & Human, 2008; Gino & Ariely, 2012). This idea was recently tested by Gino and Ariely (2012), who found that creative thinking increased unethical behavior. Across a series of five laboratory studies, including a scenario choice task, a problem solving task, and a dice-throwing game, they found that creative participants were more likely to cheat to gain higher monetary rewards. Given their consistent findings, we expect to replicate their results and hypothesize that individuals with creative personalities will be more likely to engage in unethical behavior.

1.2. The Effects of Activation

Stemming from the long-standing trait versus situation debate (Bowers, 1973; Ekehammar, 1974; Endler & Magnusson, 1976), trait-activation theory (TAT) suggests that dispositional variables, such as creative personality, more strongly predict trait-relevant outcomes (e.g., behaviors) in contexts that offer trait-relevant situational cues (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). A situation is considered to be trait-relevant if it provides cues for the expression of trait-relevant behavior (Tett & Guterman, 2000). Similar ideas were raised in earlier work, such as Murray's (1938) notion of "situational press," Allport's (1937, 1966) perspective of situational demands on trait activation, and Bem and Funder's (1978) idea that individuals characterize situations using "template-behavior pairs."

TAT may help to explain why the effects of personality in the workplace are often not as robust as one would expect (see Morgeson et al., 2007). Tett and Burnett (2003) argue that, in order for personality to have an effect in the workplace, either the task, the social interaction, or the organization must contain trait-relevant elements that activate individuals' tendencies to express personality-related work behaviors. The role of activation has received empirical support in a variety of different contexts. For example, Ng, Ang, and Chan (2008) demonstrated that the effects of three personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness) on leader effectiveness were enhanced when these traits were activated by leader job demands. In a similar vein, Farh, Seo, and Tesluk (2012) demonstrated that employees with high

overall emotional intelligence and emotional perception ability exhibited higher teamwork effectiveness when the work situation contained many emotion-based cues.

While the role of activation is central to TAT, the concept has been applied in other areas. For example, the role of activation represents an important component of Lau and Murnighan's (1998) theory of demographic faultlines (see Pearsall, Ellis, & Evans, 2008). Similarly, integrating research on idealized and situated selves, Farmer and Van Dyne (2010) argued that identity-relevant behaviors are most likely to occur in the workplace when activating forces make those identities salient. We argue that TAT has implications for the relationship between creative personality and unethical behavior. More specifically, we argue that it is not merely possession of a creative personality, but rather the activation of one's creative personality that facilitates unethical behavior. According to TAT, creative people will be more likely to engage in creative processes when the trait is activated.

Research has shown that creative personality can be activated. For example, when using non-creative tasks to study brain activation, both Katz (1983) and Uemura (1980) did not find significant differences in brain hemisphere activation between creative and non-creative individuals. However, when using creative tasks, Martindale, Hines, Mitchell, and Covello (1984) found that creative people showed greater activation in the right-hemisphere of the brain. Martindale (1989) concluded that creative personality needs to be activated by using a creative task in order to elicit variance in behavior between creative and non-creative individuals.

In line with the trait-activation theory, we hypothesize that the effects of creative personality on one's tendency to engage in unethical behavior will be significantly stronger when activated.

1.3. The Role of Justifications

Recent research has shed new light on the psychological processes associated with unethical behavior (Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014). According to self-concept maintenance theory, people contemplating unethical behavior often face two competing motivations: gaining a valued outcome versus maintaining a positive self-concept as a moral person (Mazar et al., 2008). The theory predicts that people resolve this motivational dilemma by finding a balance between these two motivations, such that profitable outcomes can be achieved while still maintaining a positive self-concept. One way to do this is to temporarily adjust one's self-concept by inventing reasons why one could or even should engage in unethical behavior. By diverting attention away from moral standards and instead towards justifying desired outcomes, individuals are able to behave as they want without feelings of guilt or hypocrisy. In contrast, ethical primes that make one's self-concept more salient have been shown to reduce unethical behavior (e.g., Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014).

In a study by Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, and Mentzer (1979), participants were asked to choose one of two rooms where they would watch a movie with another person— one with a handicapped person and the other with a non-handicapped person. Snyder and colleagues found that participants were more likely to choose the room with the handicapped person when the same movie was shown in both rooms, but less likely to do so when different movies were shown, purportedly because they could now come up with a justification for their behavior.

Snyder et al.'s classic study has received more recent support from research on moral disengagement, which indicates that individuals who are able to generate justifications in order to rationalize questionable decisions are more likely to behave unethically (e.g., Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008; Lowell, 2012). For example, lying to a competitor may be redefined as "strategic misrepresentation" (Steinel & De Dreu, 2004), questionable decisions may be blamed on one's superiors, or stealing from a wealthy company may be rationalized as having little impact. According to Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky (1993), decision makers often seek and construct reasons to resolve conflict when

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