



When the cat's away, some mice will play: A basic trait account of dishonest behavior



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ABSTRACT

In line with every-day observation, research has established substantial individual differences in ethical behavior, especially dishonesty and cheating. However, these individual differences have remained mostly unexplained, especially in terms of traits as specified in models of basic personality structure. Theoretically, a prime candidate to account for these differences is the Honesty–Humility factor proposed as the sixth basic personality dimension within the HEXACO Model of Personality. Despite clear theoretical links, corresponding behavioral evidence is scarce and limited due to methodological caveats. In a series of six behavioral experiments we thus bridge the gap between behavioral ethics and personality research – critically testing whether individual differences in dishonest behavior can be accounted for by basic traits in general, and Honesty–Humility in particular. We implement different cheating paradigms, tasks, incentive structures, samples, and sets of covariates to evaluate the robustness and generality of results. Overall, variance in dishonest behavior was indeed accounted for by Honesty–Humility which was the only consistent predictor of cheating across the various experimental setups and beyond relevant covariates including other personality factors. The results thus corroborate that individual differences in ethical behavior can be accommodated by comprehensive models of personality structure in general and the Honesty–Humility factor in particular.

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1. Introduction

Dishonesty, deceit, and fraud are among the most severe social and economic challenges societies face (Mazar & Ariely, 2006). Indeed, few would fail to name at least one athlete recently convicted of doping, one company violating antitrust laws, or one politician accused of corruption or involved in some scandal. Correspondingly, the study of behavioral ethics at the intersection of economics, psychology, and other social sciences has seen an upsurge of interest in recent years (e.g. Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013; Gino & Ariely, 2012; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Peer, Acquisti, & Shalvi, 2014; Shalvi, Eldar, & Bereby-Meyer, 2012). So far, many important determinants of deceitful behavior have been uncovered (for an overview, see Bazerman & Gino, 2012) and research has consistently revealed that most people are willing to cheat at least a little – though mostly engaging in relatively “minor” transgressions that preserve a positive self-view (Hilbig & Hessler, 2013; Mazar et al., 2008; Shalvi, Handgraaf, & De Dreu,

2011). Nonetheless, the sum of these small transgressions incurs societal costs in the billions annually. For example, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service estimates that close to 200 billion USD are lost annually to individual income tax evasion, that is, underreporting of tax owed (Mazur & Plumley, 2007).

Importantly, empirical findings also confirm the everyday intuition that there are noteworthy individual differences in the extent of dishonest behavior: For example, in a large-scale study ($N = 746$) by Fischbacher and Heusi (2008), about 39% of participants were completely honest, that is, they were unwilling to misreport the outcome of a hidden dice-roll to their advantage. By contrast, up to 22% of participants were completely dishonest, misreporting to the very maximum (larger reported outcomes were associated with larger payoffs). All others showed some intermediate degree of cheating, thus misreporting to some extent while avoiding extreme maximization. However, in most of the behavioral ethics literature, such individual differences are merely acknowledged, but rarely linked to theoretically well-established dispositional factors or personality traits.

The latter, in turn, is arguably one of the primary tasks for personality research: To account for variation in relevant “actual” behavior (King, 2010) – the imperative criterion for all

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psychological research (Funder, 2009a). Over a decade ago, Funder (2001) noted that “the catalog of basic facts concerning the relationships between personality and behavior remains thin” (p. 213) and more recent samples of personality research turned out no different (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007; Furr, 2009). Provocatively speaking, one might conclude that actual behavior has remained an elusive criterion in personality research. At the same time, there are important to-be-explained individual differences in relevant behavior. In particular, personality traits have been largely ignored – and individual differences thus remained unaccounted for – in the behavioral ethics field. It is thus straightforward to attempt to bridge the two disciplines.

So far, the few existing approaches considering individual differences in dishonesty have focused on rather specific or narrow constructs with little theoretical overlap such as moral identity (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Aquino & Reed, 2002), regulatory focus (Gino & Margolis, 2011), or creativity (Gino & Ariely, 2012). Thus, individual differences in ethical behavior have not been systematically related to or explained through broad, basic traits as conceptualized in models of personality structure. In turn, to avoid construct inflation in personality theory, models of basic personality structure – that specify the “latitudes and longitudes” for the study of individual differences (e.g. Ozer & Reise, 1994, p. 361) – should be among the first to be considered. Indeed, the study of personality has greatly profited from the development of such models (Funder, 2001) – given that they are sufficiently broad to cover the many ways in which individuals differ while subsuming these many variants in a few basic traits or factors to achieve theoretical parsimony.

Most strikingly, recent advances in theories of personality structure actually imply that individual differences in honesty, morality, and prosociality represent a core dimension of personality: These aspects are subsumed in the Honesty–Humility factor (e.g. Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2008) as conceptualized within the HEXACO Model of Personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton, Lee, & De Vries, 2014). Stated briefly, the HEXACO model originated from lexical studies across several languages and cultures (Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2008) the results of which suggested an extension and slight variation of the more widely known Big Five approach (e.g. McCrae & John, 1992). Several more fine-grained alterations notwithstanding (Lee & Ashton, 2004; Lee, Ashton, Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Shin, 2010), addition of the Honesty–Humility factor represents the most striking difference whereas the other five factors of the HEXACO model either resemble (Emotionality, Agreeableness) or exactly match (eXtraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience) the classical five factors in terms of factor content. In what follows, we will describe the proposed sixth personality factor, Honesty–Humility, in more detail and argue that it is the quintessential basic trait to account for individual differences in (un)ethical behavior. Next, we briefly describe the scarce evidence on this association and finally present a series of experiments that aim to fill this gap and overcome limitations of prior work. As such, we aim to demonstrate that individual differences in dishonest behavior can indeed be accounted for by a broad, basic trait as specified within a general model of personality structure.

1.1. Honesty–Humility and dishonest behavior

Honesty–Humility can be understood to subsume individual differences in morality, covering socially desirable attributes such as being sincere, faithful, and honest versus sly, deceitful, and greedy (Ashton & Lee, 2008a; Lee & Ashton, 2012). Generally speaking, Honesty–Humility has been defined as “the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156), thus representing people’s willingness to refrain

from exploiting others or bending rules and norms – even if such actions would be individually beneficial and bear little risk of retaliation or sanctions (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009). Indeed, various studies have demonstrated that this sixth basic factor accounts for variance in socially desirable outcomes and behavior – often beyond the influence of the remaining five factors within the HEXACO model and/or the classic Big Five (De Vries, De Vries, De Hoogh, & Feij, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Lee, Ogunfowora, & Ashton, 2005). Specifically, Honesty–Humility has been associated with more prosocial behavior and cooperativeness (Hilbig, Glöckner, & Zettler, 2014; Hilbig, Thielmann, Hepp, Klein, & Zettler, 2015; Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013), less socio-sexuality and fewer sexual quid pro quos (Ashton & Lee, 2008b; Lee et al., 2013), more moral behavior and honest responding (Hilbig, Moshagen, & Zettler, 2015) as well as higher integrity, less counterproductive work behavior, and other related criteria (Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005; Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007; Zettler & Hilbig, 2010). However, the extant evidence is rather indirect due to predominant reliance on self- and observer-report data and none of the above studies have specifically considered dishonest behavior as the criterion.

The only exception is a study by Hershfield, Cohen, and Thompson (2012, Study 4) which – as a sidelined aspect – found that Honesty–Humility negatively predicts self-scored performance. That is, participants were asked to solve eight anagrams within 15 min, losing part of their monetary endowment for each unsolved anagram. Importantly, anagrams were to be solved in the provided order and both the second and seventh anagrams were very difficult (though not impossible) to solve, i.e. very uncommon words. Participants self-scored their performance and were paid correspondingly. An unrealistically high level of self-scored performance – i.e. exceeding one solved anagram – was considered to be indicative of dishonesty. Results showed a medium-sized negative effect of Honesty–Humility on this performance measure.

Despite this encouraging piece of evidence, it must be noted that Hershfield et al. did not design their study with the intent to provide a basic trait account of individual differences in dishonesty. As such, three limitations remain that need to be addressed – apart from the vital and often dangerously neglected necessity of replication per se (Asendorpf et al., 2012; Johnson, 2013; Pashler & Wagenmakers, 2012). First, it is difficult to interpret performance on Hershfield et al.’s anagram task, primarily because it is unknown how many participants actually (thought they) solved the difficult anagrams. In turn, in line with many experimental designs used in the behavioral ethics field (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Mazar et al., 2008), a paradigm is needed in which (alleged) performance can be compared against some well-defined baseline, i.e. a performance level to be conclusively expected if no cheating occurred. Second, cheating was self-incriminating: Even and especially if participants did take the instructions seriously and realize they had not solved more than one anagram, claiming to have done so was tantamount to a barefaced lie that is obvious to the experimenter. As is well established in indirect questioning research (Lensvelt-Mulders, Hox, Van der Heijden, & Maas, 2005; Moshagen, Hilbig, & Musch, 2011), the mere fact that a response is deterministically self-incriminating is sufficient to produce substantial effects of social desirability. In turn, a paradigm is needed in which the responses of any one individual can never be conclusively linked to (dis)honesty although the degree of dishonesty can still be estimated on the aggregate (so long as the average extent of random noise is conclusively known, e.g. Moshagen, Hilbig, Erdfelder, & Moritz, 2014). Third, participants in Hershfield et al.’s study cheated only to avoid losses (and essentially had to cheat at least once to avoid losing 88% their endowment). Given that gains and losses are neither perceived nor treated equally

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