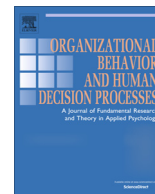




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The hungry thief: Physiological deprivation and its effects on unethical behavior

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ABSTRACT

We conducted five studies to examine the effects of physiological deprivation on unethical behavior. Consistent with predictions from Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory, we found that physiologically deprived participants engaged in unethical behavior related to obtaining physiological satiation. Contrary to models in which deprivation increases global unethical behavior, hungry and thirsty participants also engaged in less physiologically-unrelated unethical behavior compared to control participants (Studies 1–3). Studies 4 and 5 confirmed that the effects of physiological deprivation on both types of unethical behavior were mediated by a heightened engagement of the Behavioral Approach System (BAS). In addition, we found that the salience of an organizational ethical context acted as a boundary condition for the mediated effect. Participants reminded of the organizational ethical context were less likely to engage in need-related unethical behavior even when physiologically deprived. We conclude by considering the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

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Introduction

Daily experience suggests that our behaviors are heavily influenced by physiological drives. We eat when we are hungry, drink when we are thirsty, and rest when we are fatigued. Positive changes in physiological states normally have a direct hedonic impact (Loewenstein, 1996) in that the satisfaction of such drives can be construed as a primary source of reward (Hull, 1943). Organizational life, however, particularly in times of economic or social crisis, can disrupt the fulfillment of such physiological drives. Stories of employees who were deprived or deprived themselves physiologically in the name of organizational productivity abound. In the developing world, it is common for underpaid factory and field laborers to work long hours with little concern for their physiological well-being. Even in developed nations, these basic bodily needs are sometimes neglected in order to meet work demands: a day trader needs to be engaged while the market is open and cannot afford to break for lunch; a busy bank teller remains dehydrated to avoid the disruption of frequent bathroom breaks. In such cases, the needs of the body are temporarily put aside in order to perform well at work.

In the current research, we examine the relationship between physiological deprivation and unethical conduct. Physiological deprivation is relevant for ethics because physiological drives, while entirely natural, are often in conflict with an individual's long-term interests. As examples, individuals who want to lose weight are often unable to resist the temptation to eat when hungry, and sexual excitement can lead to actions that would never be undertaken in a non-aroused state (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006). More generally, states of physiological arousal can have a powerful effect on cognition and motivation, with important implications for unethical behavior. In particular, deprived individuals may engage in unethical behavior to fulfill their physiological needs, even when the behavior is in conflict with personally-valued long-term goals. To date, a great deal of research on unethical behavior has focused on higher-level processes, whether they be deliberate and rational cognitive processes or automatic and emotional responses (for recent reviews and discussions, see; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). Surprisingly, however, we know very little about the effects of fundamental physiological drives on unethical behavior.

To explore this relationship, we draw upon insights from Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (Corr, 2008; Gray & McNaughton, 2000). This biopsychological theory explains general behavioral activities as a consequence of three neural systems, each with their own functions and objectives. We suggest that the theory

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generates several interesting predictions about physiological deprivation and unethical behavior: (1) that physiological deprivation will be positively associated with unethical behavior, but only with behavior related to the satiation of the deprived physiological state; (2) that physiological deprivation will be *negatively* associated with unethical behavior unrelated to the deprived physiological state; (3) that a heightened drive state mediates this relationship; and (4) that the salience of an organizational ethical context can moderate this relationship. We test our hypotheses in five studies using a variety of methods and samples to maximize both internal and external validity. Ultimately, this research makes a contribution to the literature by providing a deeper scholarly understanding of when, how, and why physiological deprivation influences unethical behavior.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory

Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST) suggests that three primary systems, the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), the Behavioral Approach System (BAS), and the Fight–Flight–Freeze System (FFFS) interact to produce motivated behavior (Gray, 1982; Gray & McNaughton, 2000). The BIS is a system of brain structures involved in the slowing or cessation of behavior in response to goal-conflict, and represents the neural basis of anxiety. This conflict-related anxiety is distinct from fear, which reflects the operation of the FFFS to support the active avoidance of aversive stimuli (i.e., pure avoidance motivation with no conflicting goals). When uncertainty regarding the appropriate behavioral response to a situation exists (e.g., whether to approach or avoid an ambiguous stimulus), the BIS temporarily suppresses the conflicting behaviors and boosts arousal and environmental scanning so that the individual can identify the most appropriate response (Hirsh, Mar, & Peterson, 2012). In an organizational context, BIS may serve, as an example, to inhibit an employee's impulse to retaliate against a difficult colleague or to engage in counterproductive workplace behavior. In either case, it is the awareness of how such actions would conflict with other important goals (such as maintaining a positive reputation) that triggers the inhibition of the impulsive action.

The BAS, in contrast, is a brain circuit associated with the approach and pursuit of potential rewards, acting as the seat of approach motivation (Gray, 1978, 1982). The BAS supports appetitive movement toward a desired goal, and is often associated with positive affect (Gray, 1990; Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999). The BAS is instantiated by the mesolimbic dopamine system, which is the brain's primary reward system that supports incentive motivation and drive states (Berridge, 1996; Schultz, Dayan, & Montague, 1997; Wise, 2004). When the BAS is activated, the individual's attention tends to hone in on attaining the currently desired goal (Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2008). This narrowing of attention is mediated by dopaminergic activity in response to reward cues, and has been described as a "wanting" or "craving" state (Berridge, 1996). In extreme cases of wanting, such as addiction, the dopaminergic BAS comes to dominate an individual's actions, with attention being fully captured by the potential reward to the exclusion of all other concerns (Hyman & Malenka, 2001). Under normal situations, the narrowing of attention to potential rewards facilitates goal-directed behavior by eliminating distractions from competing goals (Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2008).

Importantly, the BIS and BAS are mutually antagonistic; as one system becomes more strongly activated, the other becomes less strongly activated (Corr, 2002; Hirsh, Galinsky, & Zhong, 2011). In other words, producing goal conflict by increasing the salience of alternative goals tends to increase the BIS and reduce the BAS.

Conversely, strengthening the BAS so that only a single goal is salient will decrease goal conflict and the related BIS activity (Corr, 2002). In an organizational context, a disinhibited BAS could lead to beneficial outcomes such as motivated engagement with a work task, or detrimental outcomes such as the zealous pursuit of self-interest (which may ultimately lead to unethical behavior) with no concern for competing goals (Hirsh et al., 2011). In the following sections, we employ RST, focusing specifically on the consequences of BAS activation, as the theoretical foundation for our hypotheses.

Physiological deprivation and unethical behavior

Satiation of physiological needs (e.g., hunger, thirst) is critical for survival (Maslow, 1943). In classic behavioral research, food deprivation was established as a reliable way of inducing a motivated drive state, increasing the perceived value of food-related rewards (Hull, 1943). More recent developments in behavioral neuroscience have established that this deprivation-induced drive state is mediated by the mesolimbic dopamine reward system (Berridge, 1996; Lowe, Van Steenburgh, Ochner, & Coletta, 2009). Put differently, food deprivation increases activity in the BAS, strengthening goal pursuit by dramatically increasing the salience of actions that lead to food while rendering competing goals less salient. BAS activation has similarly been observed in response to other physiological drive states, such as sexual arousal (Janssen, Vorst, Finn, & Bancroft, 2002) and thirst (Dourish, 1983). Importantly, the outcome is the same regardless of the specific deprivation state, in that the individual primed by a physiological need develops a single-minded pursuit of achieving satiation (cf. Loewenstein, 1996). Because physiological needs are widely recognized to be the most fundamental of needs (e.g., Maslow, 1943), their deprivation can lead to a myopic state in which the individual ignores other conflicting goals until the need is satiated. This extreme focus on one particular goal-directed behavior is consistent with the function of the BAS in facilitating goal pursuit.

We suggest that unethical behaviors that are instrumental in reducing the deprived physiological state will be facilitated by BAS activation. To the extent that a physiological need is present and its satiation requires the individual to cause harm or violate a moral norm (i.e., to act unethically, Jones, 1991; Reynolds, 2006a), the BAS will drive the individual to do so by reducing the relative salience of competing goals. Such a response may be detrimental to the long-term interests of the individual, but as the BAS limits awareness of alternative goals (e.g., about maintaining a particular ethical standard). Thus, the individual would nevertheless commit the unethical behavior. One example of this process would be hungry restaurant employees stealing food from the kitchen instead of focusing on the moral injunction not to steal. Importantly, an increased chance of unethical behavior would only emerge when it provides a quicker route to satiating the deprived need than any other ethical options. It is worth pointing out, however, that unethical behaviors often provide a more direct and immediate path to a given goal compared to ethical actions, because they are less restricted by moral norms (e.g., cheating on an exam is easier than studying for it days in advance). Thus, we posit the following two hypotheses:

H1a. Physiologically deprived participants will engage in more need-related unethical behavior.

H1b. The effect of physiological deprivation on need-related unethical behavior will be mediated by increased BAS activation.

Whereas Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory suggests that physiological deprivation will lead to unethical behaviors that are associated with the deprived physiological need, it also suggests a

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