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Brief Report

Eliciting promises from children reduces cheating

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ABSTRACT

Widespread cheating can undermine rules that are necessary for maintaining social order. Preventing cheating can be a challenge, especially with regard to children, who as a result of their limited executive function skills may have particular difficulty with resisting temptation to cheat. We examined one approach designed to help children resist this temptation: eliciting a verbal commitment to not cheat. We tested 4- to 7-year-olds (total $N = 330$) and found that starting at 5 years of age, a verbal commitment to not cheat led to a substantial reduction in cheating. The results suggest that verbal commitments can be used to help children overcome temptations and comply with rules.

Introduction

One fundamental dilemma faced by individuals around the world is how to respond in situations where complying with societal rules conflicts with one's self-interest. When individuals choose to disregard the rules by cheating, it can have a wide range of corrosive societal effects such as encouraging others to cheat (Rettinger & Kramer, 2009) and undermining trust in individuals and institutions (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). Resisting the temptation to cheat may be especially difficult for children due to their immature executive function skills (Zelazo, Carlson, & Kesek, 2008). This raises the

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question of how to discourage cheating during childhood. The current research examines one potential strategy for accomplishing this end: asking children to make a verbal commitment not to cheat.

There are many factors that affect decisions about whether to cheat, and individuals may consider both potential costs and potential benefits of cheating. Some of the costs and benefits are largely external to the individual (Becker, 1968) such as what can be gained by cheating and the likelihood and consequences of getting caught. However, costs and benefits can also be more psychological in nature such as those relating to a desire to maintain a positive sense of self (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). If individuals determine that cheating in a particular situation gives them an identity of being cheaters, they may forgo potential benefits of cheating so as to avoid needing to think of themselves in this way (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013).

One way to decrease the ability of adults to cheat without needing to think of themselves as cheaters is to make it clear that the task at hand has moral implications. Mazar et al. (2008) eliminated cheating among college students by requiring them to sign statements indicating that the task they were working on fell under their university's honor system. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that honor codes can sometimes be effective (Dix, Emery, & Le, 2014; Ely, Henderson, & Wachsman, 2013; Hutton, 2006; McCabe & Treviño, 2002; McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 1999; McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2001; O'Neill and Pfeiffer, 2012), especially when accompanied by a high level of commitment to academic integrity in the broader community (McCabe & Treviño, 2002).

Another reason that asking individuals to sign statements such as the one provided by Mazar et al. (2008) might be effective is that participants could regard them as implicit promises not to cheat. Previous research suggests that when adults make promises, it sometimes leads to increased commitment and changes in behavior (Devlin-Scherer, Devlin-Scherer, Schaffer, & Stringfield, 1985; Efran, Goldsmith, McFarland, & Sharf, 1979; Geller & Lehman, 1991; Kulik & Carlino, 1987; Wang & Katzev, 1990). For example, parents of children who suffer from inner ear infections are more likely to give their children the full course of prescribed antibiotics if they promised to do so (Kulik & Carlino, 1987). There is also evidence that it may be possible to increase the rate of safety belt use by asking people to sign written promises to wear them (Geller & Lehman, 1991). Social psychological research suggests that one possible reason for this effect is that people have a need for consistency that motivates them to avoid uncomfortable discrepancies between their commitments and their actions (Briñol & Petty, 2005).

Whether promises have similar consequences for young children remains an open question, especially given that developmental research has documented significant limitations in the way that children under 9 years of age understand promises (Astington, 1988; Maas & Abbeduto, 2001; Mant & Perner, 1988). For example, Astington (1988) found that 5- and 7-year-old children had trouble in differentiating promises from the outcomes of the promises and classified statements as promises only when the promises were actually fulfilled. Mant and Perner (1988) showed that before 9 or 10 years of age, children often overgeneralize their notions of commitment by inferring that a protagonist who predicts that he or she will act in a particular way must be committed.

Alongside the limitations in young children's abilities to reason about promises are some core capacities (Hussar & Harris, 2009; Hussar & Horvath, 2013; Mant & Perner, 1988). Hussar and Harris (2009) found that among children as young as 6 years, both vegetarians and non-vegetarians made negative judgments of individuals who ate meat after committing to vegetarianism but did not make negative judgments of individuals who ate meat in the absence of making such a commitment. Hussar and Harris also found that their participants were sensitive to the reason the commitment was made and judged individuals who ate meat after committing to vegetarianism more negatively if the commitment was made for moral reasons (e.g., explanations related to the suffering of animals) than if it was made for personal reasons (e.g., explanations related to matters of taste). These findings suggest that even before 7 years of age, children hold negative views of people who fail to uphold their commitments and may see such failures as being particularly problematic when moral issues are involved.

There is also some evidence suggesting that promises can have an influence on young children's moral behavior; children as young as 3 years are more likely to truthfully acknowledge their own transgressions after promising to do so (Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2004). However, it is unclear whether this finding extends beyond the specific experimental