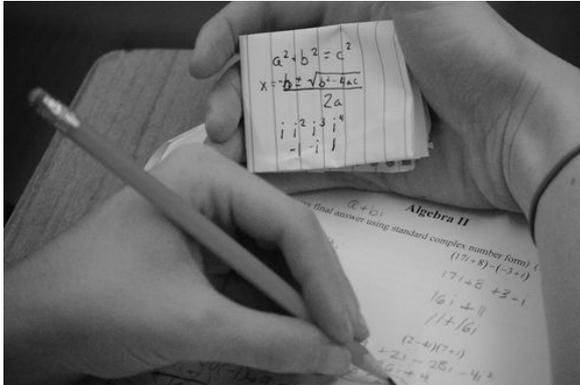


Why Do People Forget Dishonest Actions?

By ACSH Staff — June 7, 2016



Credit: [Sclafani](#) [1], [CC BY-NC-ND](#) [2]

In a 1997 [U.S. News and World Report survey](#) [3], 1,000 Americans were asked: “Who do you think is most likely to get into heaven?”

According to respondents, then-president Bill Clinton had a 52 percent chance; basketball star Michael Jordan had a 65 percent chance; and Mother Teresa had a 79 percent chance.

Guess who topped even Mother Teresa? The people who completed the survey, with a score of 87 percent.

As the results of this survey suggest, most of us have a strong desire to view ourselves in a positive light, especially when it comes to honesty. We care very much about being moral.

In fact, psychological [research](#) [4] on morality shows that we hold an overly optimistic view of our capacity to adhere to ethical standards. We believe that we are [intrinsically more moral](#) [5] than others, that we will behave more ethically than others in the future and that transgressions committed by others are morally worse than our own.

So, how do these beliefs of our moral selves play out in our day-to-day actions? As researchers who frequently study how people who care about morality often behave dishonestly, we decided to find out.

Unethical amnesia

One key result of our [research](#) [6] is that people engage in unethical behavior repeatedly over time because their memory of their dishonest actions gets obfuscated over time. In fact, [our research shows](#) [6], people are more likely to forget the details of their own unethical acts as compared to other incidents – including neutral, negative or positive events, as well as the unethical actions of others.



What do we forget? [Lew \(tomswift\) Holzman](#) ^[7], [CC BY-NC-ND](#) ^[2]

We call this tendency “unethical amnesia,” or an impairment that occurs over time in our memory for the details of our past unethical behavior. That is, engaging in unethical behavior produces real changes in memory of an experience over time.

Our desire to behave ethically and see ourselves as moral gives us a strong motivation to forget our misdeeds. By experiencing unethical amnesia, we can cope with the psychological distress and discomfort we experience after behaving unethically. Such discomfort has been demonstrated in [prior research](#) ^[8], including [our own](#) ^[9].

How forgetting works

We found evidence of unethical amnesia in nine experimental studies we conducted on diverse samples with over 2,100 participants, from undergraduate students to working adults. We conducted these studies between January 2013 and March 2016.

We chose a wide range of populations for our studies to provide a more robust test of our hypotheses and show that unethical amnesia affects not only college students but also employed adults.

In our studies, we examined the vividness and level of detail of people's memories when they recalled unethical acts as compared with other acts.

For instance, in one of our studies, conducted in 2013, we asked 400 people to recall and write about their past experiences: some people recalled and wrote about their past unethical actions, some about their past ethical actions, and others recalled and wrote about other types of actions not related to morality.

We found that, on average, participants remembered fewer details of their actions and had less vivid memories of unethical behaviors as compared to ethical behaviors or positive or negative (but not unethical) actions.



We have less vivid memories of unethical behavior. [Brain image via www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com) [10]

In follow-up studies conducted either in the laboratory at a university in the northeast United States or online in 2014 and 2015, we gave people the opportunity to cheat on a task. A few days later, we asked them to recall the details of the task.

For instance, in one study, we gave 70 participants the opportunity to cheat in a dice-throwing game by misreporting their performance. If they did, they would earn more money. So, they had an incentive to cheat.

When we assessed their memory a few days later, we found that participants who cheated had less clear, less vivid and less detailed memories of their actions than those who did not.

Why does it matter?

Is having a less-vivid memory of our misdeeds such a big problem? As it turns out, it is.

When we experience unethical amnesia, our research further shows, we become more likely to cheat again. In two of the studies we conducted out of the nine included in our [research](#) [6], we gave over 600 participants an opportunity to cheat and misreport their performance for extra money.

A few days later, we gave them another chance to do so. The initial cheating resulted in unethical amnesia, which drove additional dishonest behavior on the task that participants completed a few days later.

Because we often feel guilty and remorseful about our unethical behavior, we might expect that these negative emotions would stop us from continuing to act unethically.

But we know that is not so. Our experiences and news headlines from across the globe suggest that [dishonesty is a widespread and common phenomenon](#) [11].

Our work points to a possible reason for persistent dishonesty: we tend to forget our unethical actions, remembering them less clearly than memories of other types of behaviors.

So, what if people actively pursued scheduled time to reflect on their daily acts? In our research we showed that unethical amnesia most likely happens because people limit the retrieval of unwanted memories about when they engaged in dishonesty. As a result, these memories are obfuscated.

Perhaps creating a habit of self-reflection could help people keep such memories alive and also learn from them.

By [Francesca Gino](#) [12], Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School and [Maryam Kouchaki](#) [13], Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations, Northwestern University. This article was originally published on *The Conversation*. Read the [original article](#) [14].

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[3]

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<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/55dcde36e4b0df55a96ab220/t/569fafbbd82d5ea920307b0d/1453305787311/Gino+Understanding+Ordinary+Unethical+Behavior.pdf>

[5] <http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/08-012.pdf>

[6] <http://www.pnas.org/content/113/22/6166.full>

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[8] http://www-2.rotman.utoronto.ca/facbios/file/Mazar_Dishonesty_forthcomingJMR.pdf

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<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/55dcde36e4b0df55a96ab220/t/55e872c4e4b051470ecd23b3/1441297092685/Ps2015-Gino-983-96.pdf>

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