

# Creativity in unethical behavior attenuates condemnation and breeds social contagion when transgressions seem to create little harm



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## ABSTRACT

Across six studies, people judged creative forms of unethical behavior to be less unethical than less creative forms of unethical behavior, particularly when the unethical behaviors imposed relatively little direct harm on victims. As a result of perceiving behaviors to be less unethical, people punished highly creative forms of unethical behavior less severely than they punished less-creative forms of unethical behavior. They were also more likely to emulate the behavior themselves. The findings contribute to theory by showing that perceptions of competence can positively color morality judgments, even when the competence displayed stems from committing an unethical act. The findings are the first to show that people are judged as morally better for performing bad deeds well as compared to performing bad deeds poorly. Moreover, the results illuminate how the characteristics of an unethical behavior can interact to influence the emulation and diffusion of that behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

People often differ in how immoral they regard transgressions to be (e.g., Crissman, 1942; Rettig & Pasamanick, 1959). Even transgressions that violate the same ethical principles and create the same amounts of harm for the same victims can evoke drastically different degrees of condemnation from different people (Gorsuch & Smith, 1972; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Lovett, Jordan, & Wiltermuth, 2012; Wiltermuth, Monin, & Chow, 2010). Moreover, the same person may have two quite different reactions to seeing two transgressions that violate the same ethical principles and generate equivalent amounts of harm (Edmonds, 2013). For example, people may judge an ingeniously creative jewelry heist to be less unethical than a simple smash-and-grab heist that nets the same jewels.

This apparent inconsistency in moral opinions clearly has costs. People may question the fairness and legitimacy of systems when similar transgressions yield different reactions from onlookers and different punishments from authorities (see Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001 for review). Conflicts can surface when only some people see a type of behavior as immoral, and tensions can arise when societies or organizations deploy resources to curb

behavior that only a part of the population condemns. Understanding the factors that shape people's moral judgments might therefore be useful in allowing individuals to predict when people are likely to condemn behaviors, when they are likely to take little notice of them, and when they are likely to approve of them. Because transgressions are learned (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009), understanding the factors that shape people's moral judgments of others' transgressions might also be useful in predicting which types of misdeeds are likely to become socially contagious.

Fortunately, scholars have devoted significant attention to understanding these factors and the roots of moral diversity. Dispositional differences, such as locus of control (Treviño, 1986), and moral development (Kohlberg, 1976) account for some of the diversity in moral judgments, as do situational differences (Treviño, 1986; Zey-Ferrell, Weaver, & Ferrell, 1979). For example, being in a strongly ethics-focused organizational culture can increase moral condemnation (Douglas, Davidson, & Schwartz, 2001), as can possessing power within an organization (Wiltermuth and Flynn, 2013). Moreover, the interaction of dispositional factors and situational factors (Treviño, 1986), as well as issue-specific factors about the transgression and its consequences (e.g., Edmonds, 2013), can influence moral judgments. In particular, Jones (1991) theorized, and other researchers have demonstrated empirically, that social consensus and magnitude of consequence each strongly influence how aware people are that

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a behavior involves morality and, consequently, how harshly they condemn that behavior (Barnett, 2001; Butterfield, Trevino, & Weaver, 2000; Chia & Mee, 2000; Frey, 2000; Harrington, 1997).

Yet, our collective understanding of what leads people to judge others lightly or harshly for their misdeeds is far from complete. So too is our collective understanding of the factors that lead people to emulate unethical behavior. In particular, little is known about how the style in which people transgress affects people's judgments of those transgressions and their likelihood of emulating those transgressions. In this paper, we draw from research on person perception (e.g., Wojciszke, 1994) and existing models of moral judgment (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño, 1986) to enrich those models and illuminate how people react to unethical behaviors that display creativity. We use Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model of moral judgment, which holds that affectively laden moral intuitions drive moral judgment, to provide the overarching theoretical framework that allows us to understand and predict the effects of creativity on people's judgments of transgressions and likelihoods of emulating them. Specifically, we argue that people view creativity as a positive, valuable trait and that this perception provides creative cheaters with a halo that simultaneously makes their transgressions more palatable and more socially contagious – particularly when the transgressions appear to cause relatively little harm. We therefore examine whether creativity in transgressions influences how socially punitive people are toward those who commit those transgressions. We also examine whether creativity influences how likely people are to emulate those transgressions themselves because the creativity attenuates how harshly people would judge themselves for committing these transgressions. Although previous research has shown that judgments of competence can positively color judgments of sociality and ethicality (e.g., Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968), this work is the first to show that the competence exhibited in acting unethically can reduce how unethical the act and the actor are judged to be.

In examining how the creativity of an act affects moral judgment, we hope to make three main contributions to theory. First, we add to the literature on social perception by showing that judgments of people's competence can positively affect judgments of their warmth and morality, even when those perceptions of competence stem from behavior that most people would consider to be unethical. Second, we show that people's judgments of the unethicity of behaviors depend in part on the style with which people behave unethically. Whereas previous research on the moral intensity of issues has examined how characteristics of the consequences of the action affect how strongly compelled people feel to act in a morally correct fashion (e.g., Jones, 1991; McMahon & Harvey, 2007), our work shows that *how* people violate ethical norms also affects the strength of this compulsion. Our work therefore builds on the social-intuitionist model of moral judgment (Haidt, 2001) and Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen's dual process model (2008) by illustrating a new factor that affects moral judgment. Third, we contribute to the literature on social contagion by examining how the characteristics of an unethical behavior interact with other characteristics of the unethical behavior to influence the repetition and diffusion of that behavior.

### 1.1. Factors influencing moral judgment

Scholars have debated how much people rely upon conscious reasoning or intuition when engaging in moral judgment (e.g., Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Pizarro, Uhlmann & Bloom, 2003), which is the process by which people decide that one course of action is morally right and another course of action is morally

wrong (Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997). Kohlberg (1969, 1976) and followers have emphasized the role of conscious reasoning, and Haidt (2001) has emphasized the role of intuition; Greene and colleagues (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) have proposed dual-process models in which conscious reasoning drives utilitarian judgments and intuitions drive deontological or rule-based judgements.

The usage of these models of moral judgment has influenced which factors scholars have identified as drivers of moral judgment. Kohlberg's (1976) focus on moral reasoning led early empirical research to examine how developmental stage (Eisenberg-Berg, 1979), personality traits (Treviño, 1986), and gender (Bussey & Maughan, 1982; Franke, Crown, & Spake, 1997) influence moral judgment by influencing moral reasoning. Later research has considered how the characteristics of moral issues affect how people consciously reason about issues (McGraw, 1987). As Jones (1991) postulated and subsequent researchers have empirically tested (Barnett, 2001; Harrington, 1997; Morris & McDonald, 1995; Singer, Mitchell, & Turner, 1998; Singer & Singer, 1997), people judge behaviors more harshly when those behaviors create or are likely to create great harm for others, create immediate harm, create harm for people physically or emotionally close to the people judging, or have concentrated harmful effects. More recently, research has shown that the degree to which people could generate plausible explanations for behaving unethically influenced their own and others' moral judgments of those acts (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011; Shalvi & Leiser, 2013).

People do not appear, however, to have access to all of the factors that affect their moral judgment (Cushman et al., 2006). This disconnect between the factors that people think affects moral judgment and what actually affects moral judgment is consistent with both Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model and Greene's dual-process model (Greene et al., 2008). It is also consistent with much of the empirical research stemming from these models in that it shows that a large number of subtle situational cues that may not appear relevant to the moral judgment itself can nonetheless influence the severity of moral judgment. To wit, the cleanliness of the physical environments in which moral judgments are made (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005) and the time of day at which those judgments are made (Gunia, Barnes, & Sah, 2014; Kouchaki & Smith, 2014) can affect moral judgment.

Although most behavioral ethics scholars acknowledge that a host of subtle situational factors can influence moral judgment, extant research has not systematically examined whether, for a given level of harm, the way in which people behave unethically influences moral judgment. Research has not explored, for example, whether people would judge an ingenious theft that displays extraordinary creativity to be as unethical as a simple theft that yields the same rewards. Exploring how the creativity of a transgression affects how people judge the unethicity of the transgression may allow for a fuller understanding of how harshly people are to punish these transgressions. It may also reveal whether creativity in a transgression alters how people would feel about committing such a transgression and, ultimately, how likely they are to emulate such transgressions.

### 1.2. Creativity and social judgment

Creativity is often defined as the ability to produce ideas that are both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful, adaptive to task constraints) (Amabile, 1983, 1988). Creativity correlates with perceptions of competence in many domains (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). People who display creativity in their unethical behavior may therefore be judged more positively on the competence/agency dimension of social judgment than would peo-

ple who display little or no creativity in their unethical behavior. Because neither people acting unethically in a creative fashion nor those acting unethically in a less creative fashion would be behaving benevolently toward others or society more generally, the effect of creativity on cheating should not have a direct positive effect on the warmth/communion dimension of social judgment, which along with the competence/agency dimension forms the two basic dimensions of social judgment (Fiske et al., 2007; Judd et al., 2005; Rosenberg et al., 1968; Wiggins, 1979).

The creativity of the unethical behavior may, however, have an indirect positive effect on evaluations of the behavior. Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model holds that those factors that influence people's affect toward a potential transgression may also influence their affect-laden, intuition-based moral judgments of the transgression. These factors may influence moral judgments even if the factors would not be expected to influence morality judgments directly because they change neither the outcome of a behavior nor, in most cases, the valence of the intentions of the actor. For example, the presence of a foul odor in a room should not influence people's views toward marriage between first cousins, yet some research (Schnall, Benton et al., 2008; Schnall, Haidt et al., 2008) suggests that it does. Such extraneous factors may also influence moral judgments when people are not consciously aware of these factors. As such, the social-intuitionist model allows for extraneous influences on moral judgment as a potential mechanism through which creativity may influence moral judgment.

### 1.3. Creativity and judgments of unethicality

In the research that follows, we investigate whether creativity may affect judgments of unethicality. We further examine the conditions under which creativity may attenuate judgment of unethical behaviors (i.e., the magnitude of harm caused and amount of deliberation about the negative consequences). We also examine two important consequences that may stem from attenuated judgments of the unethicality of behaviors (i.e., more severe punishment and heightened likelihood that people will emulate those behaviors). Fig. 1 depicts our theory about how and when creativity is likely to influence people's reactions to unethical behavior.

Because people view creativity as a positive, valuable trait (Amabile, 1983), they may come to judge some potentially unethical behaviors as less unethical when the behaviors involve creativity than otherwise similar behaviors that do not involve creativity. Why would people view potentially unethical actions as less unethical when they involve creativity? People's positive affective response to creativity may recast the unethical behavior in a more positive light and color perceptions of the ethicality of the act, consistent with the halo effect/error, defined as a "marked tendency to think of the person in general as rather good or rather inferior and to color the judgments of the [specific performance dimensions] by this general feeling" (Thorndike, 1920, p. 25). The positive attributes of a behavior carry over to influence judgments of other attributes because people are motivated to construct consistent, well-formed impressions of others and their behavior (Beckwith, Kassarjian, & Lehmann, 1978; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). When the creativity of a transgression is particularly salient, this creativity may attract attention and reduce how much attention people pay to the unethical nature of the transgression.

We therefore propose here that the ways in which people behave unethically may affect how unethical others perceive their actions to be. We specifically propose that:

**Hypothesis 1.** People judge highly creative unethical behaviors to be less unethical than less-creative unethical behaviors of the same magnitude.

However, there is reason to believe that creativity may not discernibly influence ratings of ethicality. Because information about an actor's warmth signals how beneficial or harmful her intentions are toward others, people seek out information about the actor's warmth before seeking out other information, including information about competence (Wojciszke, 1994, 2005; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). When forming impressions of others, people also weigh information about warmth more heavily than information about competence (Wojciszke et al., 1998). Moreover, they weigh information about others' morality more heavily than any other type of information, including other information reflective of interpersonal warmth (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). As Brambilla and Leach (2014, p. 398) have summarized, people are more strongly affected by information about the degree to which others behave benevolently toward them with the goal of facilitating "correct and principled relations" than they are affected by information about the degree to which people behave benevolently with the goal of facilitating affectionate relations. This primacy of morality-related information in impression formation may limit the impact that perceptions of creativity have on the ethicality ratings of people who behave unethically. If information about morality assumes such a central role in person perception, such information may trump any competence-related information about the style in which people behave unethically.

There is also reason to believe that creativity may have a negative effect on judgments of an unethical act. Transgressors who display heightened creativity in their transgressions may be seen as displaying a greater intention or greater resolve to transgress because they have gone to greater lengths to act unethically than have people who exhibit relatively little creativity in their unethical behavior. Because heightened intention is associated with more severe judgments of unethicality (e.g., Greene et al., 2009), displaying heightened creativity in unethical behavior may evoke harsher judgments.

When is creativity likely to attenuate moral condemnation and when is it likely to heighten moral condemnation? We argue here that when the magnitude of negative consequences (Jones, 1991) (i.e., amount of harm) is relatively low or not particularly salient (Pitesa, Thau, & Pillutla, 2013), people regard the transgression as less indicative of a lack of warmth or compassion toward others than they do when the transgression seems to cause great harm or when the harm is highly salient. When harm is relatively low, people may focus on the aspects of the transgression that may be admirable or interesting. In such cases, the positive effect of creativity on judgments of competence and the associated halo effect become relatively strong, and the signal about warmth and morality triggered by the person behaving unethically becomes relatively weak in comparison to transgressions that generate greater harm. Thus, creativity may attenuate judgments of unethicality. We posit that when harm is relatively high, the positive feelings people have toward creativity will not sufficiently offset the strong negative reaction to unethical behavior to attenuate moral judgment. We predict that the magnitude of consequences moderates the influence of creativity on judgments of unethicality in Fig. 1:

**Hypothesis 2.** Perceived harmfulness of the transgression moderates the relationship between creativity and attenuated judgments of unethicality, such that creativity attenuates judgments of unethicality when perceived harmfulness is low but not when it is high.

Why should we care about how people respond to unethical behaviors that do not generate significant harm? For three key reasons. First, transgressions that people perceive to be harmless can

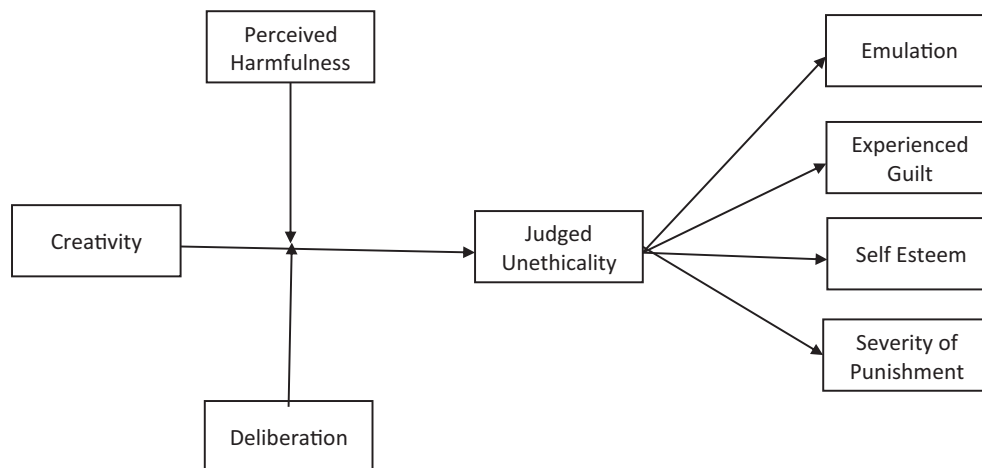


Fig. 1. Model of Creativity's Effects on Ethics-Related Outcomes.

strongly affect how unethical the transgressors are perceived to be. An emerging literature on person-centered morality shows people see some actions as relatively harmless but indicative of extremely poor moral character (e.g., Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermerier, 2015). For example, people view the act of harming a girlfriend's cat as indicative of worse moral character than harming a girlfriend, even though people see harming the girlfriend as more harmful than harming the girlfriend's cat (Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011). Thus, some acts that seem to create little harm can severely tarnish moral reputations if those acts are seen as diagnostic of moral character.

Second, moral foundations theory holds that harm and its opposite, care, form one of the five foundations of morality. People also often find behaviors that violate norms of fairness, purity, authority, loyalty, and liberty to be immoral even when those behaviors do not create great harm (e.g., Graham et al., 2012; but see Gray, Schein, and Ward (2014) for the argument that all moral transgressions involve harm). Thus, people's actions can morally offend others when there is little evidence that direct harm stems from the action.

Lastly, transgressions perceived to be relatively harmless often result in heavy societal costs. For example, when smog inspectors pass cars that would otherwise not pass emissions inspections (Gino & Pierce, 2010), society collectively pays the price, in terms of greater air pollution and associated disease. Similarly, when an employee steals a low-value item from a company valued at billions of dollars, the individual act may seem harmless; in aggregate, however, employee theft can significantly affect stakeholders' wellbeing. For these reasons, society and organizations often want to punish people for transgressions that may seem as if they create little harm.

We further believe that the degree to which a transgressor deliberates about the potential negative consequences of his/her transgression may moderate whether creativity attenuates how unethical the transgression is perceived to be. Across the world, legal systems punish criminals more harshly when their crimes are premeditated as compared to impulsive (Smit, de Jong, & Bijleveld, 2012). For example, murder and manslaughter, both of which involve killing, elicit drastically different sentencing recommendations because murder involves premeditation and deliberation over consequences, whereas manslaughter does not (United States Sentencing Commission). U.S. federal and state courts began adhering to this "premeditation-deliberation formula" in sentencing in 1794 (Mannheimer, 2011). Indeed, determining whether acts are premeditated is one of the chief tasks facing modern legal systems (Denno, 2003).

These legal practices reflect the fact that people judge crimes involving deliberation as less unethical than crimes that do not involve deliberation (Morewedge, Gray, & Wegner, 2010). As Klimchuck (1994) argues, people blame themselves and others more for lapses in self-control that lead to criminal behavior when those lapses are premeditated and involve deliberation than when such lapses lead to criminal behavior but do not involve premeditation or deliberation. We believe that when a transgressor has deliberated extensively about committing the transgression, the strong negative signal this sends about warmth and morality may mean that the creativity of the transgression would do little to attenuate people's judgments of its ethicality. In contrast, when a transgression is more impulsive, creativity may attenuate judgments of unethicality via a halo effect. We therefore propose:

**Hypothesis 3.** Perceived deliberation about the consequences of a transgression moderates the relationship between the creativity of the transgression and attenuated judgments of unethicality, such that creativity attenuates perceptions of unethicality when the perceived deliberation about consequences is low but not when it is high.

If people judge more creative transgressions to be less unethical than less creative transgressions, and punish transgressions they perceive to be highly unethical more severely than those they perceive to be less unethical (e.g., Blumstein & Cohen, 1980; Goldberg, Lerner, & Tetlock, 1999; North, 1987), then creativity should reduce the severity of punishment. This link between perceived unethicality and severity of punishment is certainly not new. Philosophical discussions of ethics dating back to Aristotle (350 BCE/1980) have connected ethics closely to punishment, and blameworthiness results most directly from evil intent regardless of outcomes (Bok, 1979). Building on the work of various scholars across disciplines (including Austin, Bruce, Carroll, McCall, & Richards 2001; Hart & Honoré, 1985; and Heider, 1958), Shaver (1985) developed a comprehensive theory of punishment. One of the five steps Shaver argues an observer should consider when evaluating the extent to which a person deserves punishment for an action is the action's perceived wrongness (Shaver, 1985). In addition, as suggested in other theories of blame (e.g., Alicke, 2000) and ethical decision making (e.g., Jones, 1991), people assign blame and punishment after observing negative outcomes or harmful consequences. Consistent with these arguments, we expect that observers' perceptions of the ethicality of a target's behavior will drive judgments of how severely the target should be punished. We therefore posit:



**Hypothesis 4.** People punish highly creative unethical behaviors less severely than they punish less-creative unethical behaviors of the same magnitude.

We expect the perceived harmfulness of the transgression and the transgressor's perceived deliberation about its consequences to moderate the relationship between creativity and judgments of unethicality. Consequently, we also expect these variables to moderate whether people punish more creative transgressions less severely. Specifically, we expect that both low perceived harmfulness and low perceived deliberation lead people to attenuate their judgments of unethicality of the transgression, which in turn leads them to punish people less punitively for such transgressions. We do not expect perceived harmfulness or perceived deliberation to moderate the relationship between creativity and severity of punishment. We therefore present:

**Hypothesis 5.** The perceived harmfulness of the transgression moderates the relationship between the creativity and severity of punishment, such that creativity attenuates punishment severity more strongly when perceived harmfulness is low than when it is high.

**Hypothesis 6.** Perceived deliberation about the negative consequences of the transgression moderates the relationship between creativity and less severe punishment, such that creativity reduces the severity of punishment when perceived deliberation is low but not high.

As outlined above, we propose that changes in the perceived unethicality of the behavior precipitate changes in the severity of punishment:

**Hypothesis 7.** Attenuated judgments of unethicality mediate the relationship between the creativity of the transgression and severity of punishment when the perceived harmfulness of the transgression is low but not high.

#### 1.4. Contagion of creative unethical behavior

If the amount of creativity exhibited in an unethical behavior does influence how unethical people perceive a potential transgression to be, creative transgressions that cause relatively little harm for others may be more socially contagious than less creative transgressions that create the same amount of harm. Similarly, creative transgressions that do not involve much deliberation about their consequences for others may be more socially contagious than less creative transgressions that do not involve much deliberation.

According to Self-Concept Maintenance Theory (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008), individuals want to promote a positive self-image, and for most people, being seen as moral is an important aspect of that positive self-image (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Gino et al., 2009). Reducing the moral concerns or implications of a behavior allows an individual to engage in those behaviors without harming that self-perception (Bandura, 1999; Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008; Gino & Ariely, 2012; Mazar & Ariely, 2006; Wiltermuth, 2011). In essence, people who act unethically in creative ways may experience less "ethical dissonance," or tension between wanting to benefit from unethical behavior and wanting to maintain a positive moral image (Barkan, Ayal, & Ariely, 2015; Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2012), than those who act unethically in less creative ways. By viewing a potentially unethical behavior as "creative," an individual may generate a positive association with the behavior or its perpetrator, and thus allow himself to engage in the behavior without experiencing as much moral threat.

Moreover, unethical behaviors can spread within a group when the behavior is seen as normative and legitimate within the group (Gino et al., 2009; Gino & Galinsky, 2012) and the behavior is not explicitly punished or disapproved (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). By reinterpreting the unethical behavior as creative and focusing on its positive components, other individuals may be able to remove the negative moral association, thus allowing them to also engage in the behavior (Detert et al., 2008). Individuals may therefore be better able to engage in the behavior, and the behavior may be more likely to diffuse within a group. Thus, individuals may be more willing to engage in creative unethical behavior and more likely to emulate such behavior. We therefore hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 8.** People are more likely to emulate highly creative forms of unethical behavior than less-creative forms of unethical behavior.

However, if people continue to focus on the negative signals about warmth and morality sent by transgressions that cause great harm, creativity may not have robust effects on their likelihood of emulating the behavior. We therefore propose:

**Hypothesis 9.** Perceived harmfulness moderates the relationship between the creativity of a transgression and attenuated judgments of unethicality, such that people are more likely to emulate highly creative transgressions than less-creative transgressions when the perceived harmfulness is low but not when it is high.

We argue that the reduction of perceived unethicality of the behavior removes the psychological barrier of engaging in a dishonest behavior by removing the harm to one's moral identity provided the moral implications of the behavior can be psychologically ignored (e.g. when the perceived harm of the transgression is low). Thus, we also expect that judgments of the unethicality of the transgression mediate the relationship between creativity and the heightened likelihood of emulation when perceived harmfulness is low. We suggest:

**Hypothesis 10.** Attenuated judgments of unethicality mediate the relationship between the creativity of the transgression and the heightened emulation of transgressions that cause relatively little harm.

**Hypothesis 11.** Perceived deliberation about negative consequences of the transgression moderates the relationship between creativity and the increased likelihood of emulation, such that creativity increases the likelihood of emulation when perceived deliberation is low but not high.

People can experience guilt, shame, and other forms of negative self-evaluation when they see themselves acting unethically in such a way that their actions (or inaction) cause negative outcomes for others (McGraw, 1987). If we find that creativity reduces how unethical people see their own transgressions to be, we might also expect individuals who engage in creative forms of unethical behavior to experience less guilt and more self-esteem as compared to individuals who engage in less creative forms of unethical behavior.

When an individual engages in a creative unethical act, the halo effect from the positive valence of the creativity evaluation reduces the individual's evaluation of the act's unethicality. As the individual's concern for the ethical violation is reduced, engaging in the creative unethical act causes less guilt and less of a decrease in self-esteem than engaging in a non-creative unethical act. Non-

creative forms of unethical behaviors may not have the positive association with the inherent creativity of the behavior. Without the positive association of creativity, individuals who engage in non-creative forms of unethical behavior would be less able to attenuate their feelings of guilt and less able to maintain a positive self-image. Thus, if our theorizing about how creativity should affect the likelihood of social emulation of transgressions, we would expect to see people emulating creative forms of unethical behavior to be less affected by self-conscious emotions than people emulating less-creative forms of unethical behavior would be. We therefore propose:

**Hypothesis 12.** People who commit transgressions that seem to generate relatively little harm in a creative way experience less guilt than do those who commit the same transgressions in a less creative way.

**Hypothesis 13.** People who commit transgressions that seem to generate relatively little harm in a non-creative way experience reduced self-esteem as compared to those who commit the same transgressions in a creative way.

In short, we expect that people will judge unethical behaviors that seem to create comparably little harm to be less unethical when those behaviors are also creative. We expect that people will consequently mete out less severe punishments for creative transgressions that produce relatively little harm than they will for less-creative transgressions that produce relatively little harm. We also expect the amount of deliberation about the potential negative consequences of transgressions will moderate whether creativity will influence the severity of punishments. Additionally, we argue that individuals will be more likely to engage in creative unethical behaviors and mimic creative unethical behaviors than they will be to engage in and mimic less-creative unethical behaviors. Finally, we expect that committing creative transgressions may create less guilt for transgressors and take less of a toll on their levels of self-esteem than would committing less-creative transgressions. Fig. 1 displays our predictions.

## 2. Overview of the research

We test our main hypotheses in a series of six laboratory studies. In Study 1, we use a law-student sample to examine whether creativity influences how severely people punish others who behave unethically in a transgression in which the victim is a large retail store. In Study 2, we manipulate the harmfulness of a transgression to determine whether creativity interacts with harm to predict moral judgment, punishment, and social contagion. In Study 3, we examine how the creativity of a transgression interacts with deliberation about consequences and perceived harm to predict the same dependent variables. In Studies 4 and 5, we examine whether the creativity of participants' own "bad" behavior affects the perceived ethicality of the act and how guilty participants feel about acting that way. In doing so, we aim to show that creativity across many forms of unethical behavior can weaken how unethical that behavior is perceived to be. Finally, in Study 6, we examine whether the creativity of an unethical act influences how socially contagious that unethical act is.

We consistently find that when transgressions seem to cause relatively little harm, individuals are more likely to be lenient toward creative transgressors and creative forms of unethical behavior than they are toward less-creative transgressors and less-creative unethical behavior. We also find that people become more likely to emulate unethical behavior that creates little harm when the transgression is judged as creative.

## 3. Study 1: Do people punish creative criminals less severely?

We first examined how the creativity of criminal acts affects how favorably people perceive the perpetrators of these crimes. We also investigated whether people would administer less severe punishments to people who commit creative criminal actions than to people who commit less creative criminal actions. Given our interest in punishment as the primary dependent measure and the influence of lawyers and judges on punishment in society, we collected data from master's degree students at a U.S. law school. The students read a short scenario describing a dishonest behavior that was either creative or less creative and then rated the perpetrator on a series of attributes. The victim of the transgression was a large retail store that presumably would be harmed, but not greatly, by a single theft of \$50.

### 3.1. Method

#### 3.1.1. Participants

Two-hundred forty-seven law students participated in the study. These students were enrolled in master's-level classes at the law school of a top university in the Northeastern United States. Because we wanted to keep the questionnaire short, we did not collect demographic information. Enrollment in the master's degree program was 54% female, and 72% of participants had at least two years of law practice experience or experience teaching law. Participants were offered a \$5 gift card at a local coffee shop for their participation.

#### 3.1.2. Creativity manipulation

We randomly assigned participants to the control or creative condition. Participants then read one of two short scenarios describing a dishonest behavior. In the control condition, participants read, "Pat works as a cashier at a large retail store. One day, a customer purchases \$50 worth of merchandise and pays with cash. After the customer leaves, Pat opens the cash register and takes the \$50 bill. As several cashiers use that register during the day, Pat's theft will not be connected directly to Pat." In the creative condition, participants read, "Pat works as a cashier at a large retail store. One day, a customer purchases \$50 worth of merchandise and pays with cash. After the customer leaves, Pat processes a fake return for the merchandise and takes the \$50 bill. As cashiers process multiple returns during the day, Pat's theft will not be connected directly to Pat."

After the creativity manipulation, participants completed a set of surveys designed to measure several key dependent variables of interest. The surveys measure participants' ratings of both the behavior and the individual described in the vignette. Each survey consisted of several attributes (e.g. "creative," "unique") that addressed a key variable (e.g. perceived creativity of each dishonest behavior) based on our hypotheses. In this study and all subsequent studies, we chose the measures to be included before examining our data.

#### 3.1.3. Creativity of the behavior

Participants rated how "creative," "unique," and "unconventional" the behavior was using a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree) ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ).

#### 3.1.4. Unethicality of the behavior

Participants used a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree) to indicate how "honest" (reverse-coded), "immoral," and "unethical" ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ) they judged the cashier's behavior to be.

### 3.1.5. Severity of punishment

Participants also rated how severely the dishonest behavior should be punished on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (No punishment) to 7 (A severe punishment).

## 3.2. Results

### 3.2.1. Manipulation check

Participants rated the highly creative dishonest behavior as significantly more creative ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) than the less-creative dishonest behavior ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ),  $t(245) = 5.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.63$ .

### 3.2.2. Main analyses

Consistent with [Hypothesis 1](#), participants rated the highly creative dishonest behavior as significantly less unethical ( $M = 6.42$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) than the less-creative dishonest behavior ( $M = 6.71$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ),  $t(245) = -2.69$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ,  $d = 0.35$ . As predicted in [Hypothesis 4](#), participants also recommended that the individual who engaged in the creative dishonest behavior should receive a less severe punishment ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) than the individual who engaged in the less-creative dishonest behavior ( $M = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $t(245) = -4.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.52$ . This finding suggests that the highly creative dishonest behavior is not only seen as less unethical but also as less deserving of punishment than less-creative dishonest behavior.

Furthermore, a bootstrap analysis with 10,000 samples revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero ( $-0.471$ ,  $-0.059$ ), suggesting a significant indirect effect of creativity condition on severity of punishment via unethicality of the behavior ([MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007](#); [Preacher & Hayes, 2004](#)). Supporting [Hypothesis 6](#), the perception of the unethicality of the dishonest behavior mediated the relationship between the creativity of the dishonest behavior and the severity of the punishment.

## 3.3. Discussion

Study 1 shows that people punish others less severely for creative transgressions than they do for less creative transgressions because they see creative transgressions as less unethical. These results suggest that there may be instances in which people facing fines or punishments for their transgressions would want to highlight their creativity when discussing their actions. Transgressors may have to do so very skillfully, however, as highlighting creativity may give the impression that the transgressor is proud or feels little remorse about the act – an impression that generally increases the severity of punishment (e.g., [Schwartz, 1978](#)).

## 4. Study 2: Manipulating harm

We examine in Study 2 whether the degree of harm caused by a transgression moderates whether creativity attenuates the moral judgment of that transgression and heightens people's likelihood of emulating that behavior themselves. We predict that creativity will attenuate moral judgment and heighten people's likelihood of contagion when the transgression causes relatively little harm but not when the transgression is particularly harmful.

### 4.1. Method

#### 4.1.1. Participants

We targeted 420 participants from Amazon's MTurk.com to participate in the study. We excluded results from 44 participants who either completed the survey twice or who, in the last week,

had completed a survey of the lead author's that used the same basic scenario. We replaced those 44 participants, but one of these did not finish the survey, which left us with 419 participants in the sample (41.7% Female,  $M_{age} = 34.87$ ,  $SD = 11.27$ ).

#### 4.1.2. Procedure

The study design was a 2 (Creativity: low creativity vs. high creativity)  $\times$  2 (Harm: low harm vs. high harm) between-subjects design. Participants read a vignette in which a character creates a malware program that allows him to extract information from people's computers. The vignette consisted of two paragraphs. In the first paragraph, we manipulated how creative the character's malware program was. In the second paragraph, we manipulated whether the malware program created great or little harm for those whose computers hosted the software. Participants then answered a number of questions about the vignette.

#### 4.1.3. Creativity manipulation

We randomly assigned participants to the control or creative condition. In the control condition, participants read, "Paul created a run-of-the-mill software program that sends people fake traffic tickets with a fake link. The emails, sent to residents in Tredyffrin, Pennsylvania, purport to come from the local police department. When opened, the link loads code onto users' computers. Emails that masquerade as something official are not rare, and these messages are not unique. These messages are said to contain accurate legal codes corresponding to traffic violations, the names of actual streets in the area, and the speed limits on those streets. Creating this program required a lot of effort but no creativity."

In the creative condition, participants read, "Paul created a highly ingenious software program that uses GPS data to catch drivers and send them fake traffic tickets with a fake link. The emails, sent to residents in Tredyffrin, Pennsylvania, purport to come from the local police department. When opened, the link loads code onto users' computers. Emails that masquerade as something official are not rare, but these messages are unique: they are said to contain accurate speeding data, including street names, speed limits, and actual driving speeds. Creating this program required a lot of effort and great creativity." We coded creativity as +1 in the high-creativity condition and -1 in the low-creativity condition.

#### 4.1.4. Harm manipulation

We randomly assigned participants to the low-harm or high-harm condition. In the low-harm condition, participants read, "Paul sent out this hidden software in order to extract information from consumers and then sell that data to marketing firms. The marketing firms use that information to send the consumers who unknowingly provided the data more targeted ads than they would otherwise be able to send. No victims had to pay the fake traffic fees. The software that Paul designed did not cause any significant harm for the people whose computer systems host the hidden software, as it did not cause computer problems." In the high-harm condition, participants read, "Paul sent out this hidden software in order to cause problems and trouble for others. Paul also sold the information extracted by the hidden software to marketing firms. No victims had to pay the fake traffic fees. However, the hidden software that loaded on victims' computers caused significant harm for people whose computer systems host the hidden software, as it robbed them of their privacy and caused computer problems." We coded harm as +1 in the high-harm condition and -1 in the low-harm condition.

After the manipulations, participants completed a set of surveys designed to measure several key dependent variables of interest. The surveys measured participants' ratings of both the behavior and the individual described in the vignette. Each survey consisted of several attributes (e.g. "creative," "unique") that addressed a key



variable (e.g. perceived creativity of each dishonest behavior) based on our hypotheses.

#### 4.1.5. Dependent measures

Participants used nine-point scales (1 = Not at All to 9 = Very Much) to rate how “creative,” “innovative,” and “novel” the behavior was ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ). They also used the same scales to indicate how “harmful,” “damaging,” and “hurtful” ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) the behavior was and how “severely” and “harshly” ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) the behavior should be punished. They used a scale ranging from 0 (Not at all) to 100 (Very) to indicate how “unethical,” “immoral,” and “wrong” ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ) they judged the behavior to be. We presented these measures in a randomized order.

After the above measures, participants used nine-point scales (1 = Not at All to 9 = Very Much) to indicate how “premeditated,” “calculated,” “intentional,” and “deliberate” ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) and how “effortful” and “lazy” (reverse-coded) ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ) the transgression was. Participants then answered two questions capturing how likely participants would be to emulate the transgression: “How likely would you be to emulate the transgression: ‘How likely would you be to employ the malware that Paul created if you had created it?’ and ‘How likely would you be to employ the malware that Paul created if you had created it?’” ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ). They concluded the questionnaire by providing their age and gender.

## 4.2. Results

### 4.2.1. Treatment of data

Twenty-one of the participants seemed to use a 1–10 scale for the unethical rating instead of the 1–100 scale that we asked them to use. We analyzed results both exclusive and inclusive of these 21 participants. We report results exclusive of these participants and note that all analyses that yielded significant results exclusive of these participants also yielded significant results inclusive of these participants (and vice versa).

### 4.2.2. Manipulation checks

We conducted two 2 (Creativity: low creativity vs. high creativity)  $\times$  2 (Harm: low harm vs. high harm) ANOVA analyses as manipulation checks. When perceived creativity was the dependent variable, participants perceived the behavior in the high-creativity condition to be more creative ( $M = 6.79$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ) than the behavior in the low-creativity condition ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ ),  $F(1,391) = 144.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 1.25$ . No other main effects or interactions were significant. When perceived harm was the dependent variable, participants saw the behavior in the high-harm condition as more harmful ( $M = 7.63$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) than the behavior in the low-harm condition ( $M = 6.01$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ),  $F(1,391) = 62.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.84$ . No other main effects or interactions were significant.

We also tested whether either of our manipulations affected how premeditated participants perceived the transgression to be and whether the manipulations affected how much effort participants perceived transgressors to have exerted to perform the transgression. We found that, on a marginally significant basis, participants perceived transgressions in the creativity condition to involve more perceived deliberation ( $M_{creative} = 8.13$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) than they perceived transgressions in the control condition to involve ( $M = 8.33$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ );  $F(1,393) = 3.729$ ,  $p = 0.054$ ,  $d = 0.16$ . The correlation between perceived deliberation and unethicality ratings was positive, so this between-condition difference is unlikely to account for any negative association between creativity and unethicality ratings. Perceived deliberation also negatively correlated with participants’ likelihood of emulating the behavior. We found that neither of our manipulations affected perceived effort.

### 4.2.3. Main analyses

**4.2.3.1. Perceived unethicality.** We first used 2 (Creativity: low creativity vs. high creativity)  $\times$  2 (Harm: low harm vs. high harm) ANOVA analyses with perceived unethicality as the dependent variable. Table 1 displays means by condition, and Table 2 displays correlations. There was a main effect of harm condition, such that participants viewed the behavior in the high-harm condition to be more unethical ( $M = 87.48$ ,  $SD = 19.25$ ) than the behavior in the low-harm condition ( $M = 77.71$ ,  $SD = 22.05$ ),  $F(1,395) = 11.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.47$ . The main effect of creativity was not significant ( $M_{creative} = 79.66$ ,  $SD = 22.72$  vs.  $M_{control} = 84.24$ ,  $SD = 19.44$ ),  $F(1,395) = 1.237$ ,  $p = 0.267$ ,  $d = 0.22$ . As predicted in Hypothesis 2, the Creative Condition  $\times$  Harm Condition interaction was significant,  $F(1,394) = 4.974$ ,  $p = 0.026$ . Creativity attenuated judgments of unethicality in the low-harm condition ( $M_{creative} = 75.57$ ,  $SD = 23.14$  vs.  $M_{control} = 82.18$ ,  $SD = 18.94$ ;  $B = -3.306$ ,  $SE = 1.508$ ,  $t = -2.20$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ) but not in the high-harm condition ( $M_{creative} = 89.30$ ,  $SD = 18.51$  vs.  $M_{control} = 86.06$ ,  $SD = 19.80$ );  $B = 1.624$ ,  $SE = 1.547$ ,  $t = -1.05$ ,  $p = 0.296$ .

**4.2.3.2. Recommended punishment severity.** We repeated the analyses described above with severity of recommended punishment as the dependent variable. There was a main effect of harm condition, such that participants recommended punishing the behavior in the high-harm condition more severely ( $M = 8.27$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) than the behavior in the low-harm condition ( $M = 7.51$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ),  $F(1,395) = 17.92$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 4.15$ . The main effect of creativity was not significant ( $M_{creative} = 7.75$ ,  $SD = 1.77$  vs.  $M_{control} = 7.90$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ),  $F(1,395) = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.875$ . Contrary to Hypothesis 5, the Creative Condition  $\times$  Harm Condition interaction was not significant,  $F(1,394) = 0.396$ ,  $p = 0.53$ .

**4.2.3.3. Social contagiousness.** We used similar ANOVA analyses to test Hypotheses 9 and 10, which stipulated that people would be more likely to emulate creative transgressions than they would be to emulate less-creative transgressions when those transgressions caused little harm, but not when they caused great harm. There was a main effect of harm condition, such that participants were less likely to indicate that they would emulate transgressions in the high-harm condition ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than in the low-harm conditions ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 2.20$ ),  $F(1,395) = 7.98$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ,  $d = -0.33$ . The main effect of creativity was not significant ( $M_{creative} = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 2.17$  vs.  $M_{control} = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ),  $F(1,395) = 0.843$ ,  $p = 0.359$ . As predicted in Hypothesis 9, the Creative Condition  $\times$  Harm Condition interaction was significant,  $F(1,394) = 4.974$ ,  $p = 0.026$ . Decomposing this interaction revealed that creativity increased participants’ likeliness to emulate transgressions in the low-harm condition ( $M_{creative} = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 2.36$  vs.  $M_{control} = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ;  $B = 0.146$ ,  $SE = 0.075$ ,  $t = 1.95$ ,  $p = 0.052$ ) but not in the high-harm condition ( $M_{creative} = 1.59$ ,  $SD = 1.41$  vs.  $M_{control} = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ),  $B = -0.087$ ,  $SE = 0.065$ ,  $t = -1.335$ ,  $p = 0.184$ .

We used Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS program Model 8 to test whether the degree of harm caused by the transgression moderated whether judgments of reduced unethicality of the transgression mediate the link between creativity and a heightened likelihood to emulate the transgression. Consistent with Hypothesis 10, the bootstrap estimate of the index of moderated mediation was negative, and the 95% confidence level for the index did not include zero (Index =  $-0.1007$ ,  $SE = 0.0453$ ,  $LLCI = -0.2003$ ,  $ULCI = -0.0202$ ). The conditional indirect effect of creativity on likelihood to emulate the transgression was mediated by perceptions of decreased ethicality in the low-harm condition ( $B = 0.0675$ ,  $Boot SE = 0.0299$ ,  $LLCI = 0.0153$ ,  $ULCI = 0.1346$ ) but not in the high-harm condition ( $B = -0.0332$ ,  $Boot SE = 0.0315$ ,  $LLCI = -0.0989$ ,  $ULCI = 0.0261$ ).



**Table 1**  
Study 2 means.

	Low Creativity & Low Harm N = 78		Low Creativity & High Harm N = 88		High Creativity & Low Harm N = 163		High Creativity & High Harm N = 69		Total N = 398	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Unethicality	82.18	18.95	86.06	19.80	75.57	23.14	89.30	18.51	81.57	21.51
Severity of Punishment	7.56	1.75	8.20	1.47	7.49	1.86	8.36	1.35	7.81	1.71
Likelihood of Emulation	2.03	1.76	1.94	1.77	2.62	2.36	1.59	1.41	2.18	2.02
Creativity	4.31	2.55	3.75	2.33	6.74	1.87	6.91	2.24	5.35	2.58
Harmfulness	6.13	2.16	7.36	1.64	5.95	2.19	7.98	1.50	6.64	2.13
Deliberation	8.10	1.47	8.16	1.18	8.23	1.18	8.57	0.98	8.25	1.22
Effortfulness	5.05	1.23	5.05	1.17	4.91	0.76	5.01	0.95	4.98	0.99
Age	34.00	10.13	34.08	11.58	34.45	10.99	38.90	12.94	35.06	11.42
Male	0.57	0.53	0.52	0.53	0.61	0.49	0.45	0.56	0.55	0.52

**Table 2**  
Study 2 correlations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Creative Condition											
2 Harm Condition	−0.24**										
3 Unethicality	−0.11*	0.22**									
4 Severity of Punish	−0.04	0.22**	0.55**								
5 Likel. Of Emulation	0.08	−0.16**	−0.46**	−0.32**							
6 Creativity	0.53**	−0.16**	−0.21**	−0.02	0.16**						
7 Perceived Harm	−0.05	0.37**	0.54**	0.52**	−0.29**	−0.13**					
8 Deliberation	0.08	0.06	0.37**	0.21**	−0.47**	0.04	0.21**				
9 Effortfulness	−0.05	0.04	0.07	0.10	0.02	0.00	0.17**	−0.01			
10 Age	0.08	0.08	0.18**	0.13**	−0.28**	0.09	0.07	0.26**	0.00		
11 Male	0.02	0.10	−0.12*	−0.02	0.20*	0.14**	−0.17**	−0.15**	0.00	−0.11*	

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

#### 4.3. Discussion

Study 2's results revealed that the creativity associated with a transgression interacted with the degree of harm caused to influence unethicality ratings and likelihood of emulation but not severity of punishment. Because punishment was not affected by the Creativity × Harm interaction in Study 2, yet creativity attenuated punishment in Study 1, we conducted another study using a similar scenario to gain more insight on the relationship between the creativity of a transgression and how severely people punished the transgression.

#### 5. Study 3: Manipulating deliberation about consequences

In Study 3 we examine whether creativity influences moral judgment differently when the transgressor deliberates about the consequences of the transgression than when she does not.

As in Study 3, we also test whether the amount of perceived harm caused by a transgression interacts with creativity to influence creativity. However, in this study we measure rather than manipulate perceived harm. We predict that creativity should attenuate perceived moral judgment when perceived harm is relatively low but not when it is relatively high. Although we explicitly manipulated how much the protagonist in our vignette deliberated about the potential negative consequences of distributing the malware that she created, we acknowledge that the degree of deliberation about whether to create malware is likely to be less variable and more uniformly high than it would be with a crime such as shoplifting, which can stem from a spontaneous decision. Thus, we are looking at the effects of deliberation over a fairly restricted range of deliberation.

A further aim of Study 3 is to test how aware people are that creativity may lead them to respond differently to creative and

less-creative forms of unethical behavior. We did so by testing whether participants explicitly endorse the idea that creativity makes unethical acts less unethical (Pizzaro & Uhlman, 2005), whether the effect is stronger in separate evaluation than in joint evaluation (Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, & Bazerman, 1999), and whether the effect is stronger when participants are under cognitive load.

Lastly, we tested whether moral character ratings produced meaningfully different results than ratings of the morality of the act did, as people could have been attending to the transgressor's moral character in the creative condition instead of the morality of the act itself (cf. Uhlmann et al., 2015). As recent research on person-centered approaches to moral judgment has shown, character judgments can diverge from judgments of the unethicality of acts (Pizzaro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Uhlmann & Zhu, 2014; Uhlmann, Zhu, & Tannenbaum, 2013; Uhlmann et al., 2015). For example, people may view beating up one's girlfriend as more unethical than beating up one's girlfriend's cat but less indicative of poor moral character than beating up one's girlfriend's cat (Tannenbaum et al., 2011). To determine if a shift in focus accounts for the differences observed, we also asked participants in this experiment to rate the moral character of the actor. We anticipated that moral character evaluations would parallel moral judgments of the transgressions.

##### 5.1. Method

###### 5.1.1. Participants

We collected data from 300 participants from Amazon's MTurk.com to participate in the study. We screened out people who either completed the survey twice or completed a survey of the lead author's that used the same basic scenario. We also excluded the results of 23 participants who failed an attention

check question that read, “Please indicate how immoral the secondary character in the vignette was. If you are reading this, please choose the second option from the left.” This left us with 268 participants in the sample (48.1% Female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.34$ ,  $SD = 11.01$ ).<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1.2. Procedure

The study design was a 2 (Creativity: low creativity vs. high creativity)  $\times$  2 (Deliberation: low deliberation vs. high deliberation) between-subjects design. We also measured perceived harm to see if it interacted with creativity to predict moral judgments. Participants read a vignette in which a character creates a malware program that allows him to extract information from people’s concerns. The vignette consists of three paragraphs. In the first paragraph, we manipulated how creative the character’s malware program was. The second paragraph read, “While the programing code provided Paulina with information that was useful for marketing purposes, it did not actually make victims pay any fees. No victims had to pay the fake traffic fees.” In the third paragraph, we manipulated how much the transgressor deliberated about whether to transgress before doing so. Participants then answered a number of questions about the vignette.

### 5.1.3. Creativity manipulation

We manipulated creativity as in Study 2.

### 5.1.4. Deliberation manipulation

We randomly assigned participants to the low-deliberation or high-deliberation condition. In the low-deliberation condition, participants read “Paulina sent out the code on a whim. She sent it out without thinking about the potential negative consequences that sending it out might create for other people or for her.” In the high-deliberation condition, participants read, “Paulina sent out the code after careful deliberation. She sent it out after thinking about the potential negative consequences that sending it out might create for other people or for her.”

### 5.1.5. Dependent measures

We measured creativity ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), harmfulness ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ), severity of punishment ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), and unethicality ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) as in Study 2. Participants also used a nine-point scale (1 = Definitely not; 5 = Might or Might Not; 9 = Definitely Yes) to answer the question: “Does Paulina have poor moral character?” We presented these measures in a randomized order.

Participants then used nine-point scales (1 = Not at All to 9 = Very Much) to indicate how “premeditated,” “calculated,” “intentional,” and “deliberate” ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ) and how “effortful” and “lazy” (reverse-coded) ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ) the transgression was. We measured likelihood of emulation as we did in Study 2 ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

We wanted to examine whether participants are consciously aware that creativity may mitigate judgments of unethicality. We therefore asked participants who originally viewed the less-creative transgression to “imagine that the software created was not a run-of-the-mill software program. Instead, it was a highly ingenious program that was unique in that it contained accurate speeding data, including street names, speed limits, and actual driving speeds.” We asked those participants who originally viewed the creative transgression to “imagine that the software created was not a creative software program. Instead, it was a run-of-the-mill program that did not contain accurate speeding data or actual driving speeds.” Participants then rated the morality of the behavior and the moral character of the person using the questions used earlier. We then asked participants, “Do you think

Paulina’s actions would be less unethical if the program she created were creative instead of non-creative?” and “Do you think creativity makes unethical behavior less unethical?” Participants responded using a seven-point scale (1 = Definitely Not to 9 = Definitely Yes) ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

Finally, participants used a nine-point scale (1 = Very, very low mental effort, 9 = Very, very high mental effort) to denote how much cognitive load they were under (i.e., “Please indicate the perceived amount of mental effort that this questionnaire is requiring of you”) (Paas, 1992). We included this measure so that we could examine if participants under cognitive load were particularly susceptible to the effects of creativity on moral judgment, as might be the case if the effect is unconscious (Quirin, Kazén, & Kuhl, 2009; Ratliff, Smith, & Nosek, 2008; Uhlmann et al., 2012). Participants then provided their age and gender.

## 5.2. Results

### 5.2.1. Treatment of data

Six of the remaining participants used a 1–10 scale for the unethical rating instead of the 1–100 scale that we asked them to use. We present results exclusive of these six participants and note that all analyses that were significant exclusive of these participants were also significant inclusive of these participants (and vice versa).

### 5.3. Manipulation checks

Table 3 reports means by condition, and Table 4 reports correlations. We conducted two 2 (Creativity: low creativity vs. high creativity)  $\times$  2 (Deliberation: low deliberation vs. high deliberation) ANOVA analyses as manipulation checks. When perceived creativity was the dependent variable, participants perceived the behavior in the high-creativity condition as more creative ( $M = 7.26$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) than the behavior in the low-creativity condition ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ ),  $F(1, 237) = 160.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 1.64$ . No other main effects or interactions were significant. When deliberation was the dependent variable, participants saw the behavior in the high-deliberation condition as more deliberate ( $M = 8.01$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) than the behavior in the low-deliberation condition ( $M = 6.98$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ),  $F(1, 237) = 20.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.61$ . No other main effects or interactions were significant. Neither of our manipulations affected how much harm participants perceived the transgression to cause or how much effort participants perceived transgressors to have exerted to perform the transgression.

### 5.3.1. Main analyses

**5.3.1.1. Perceived unethicality.** We first conducted a regression analysis in which we regressed perceived ethicality on creativity condition, deliberation condition, perceived harm, and the interactions of the terms. We used effects coding to allow us to interpret coefficients as main effects. There was a main effect of creativity condition, such that participants viewed the behavior in the high-creativity condition to be less unethical ( $M = 68.57$ ,  $SD = 25.96$ ) than the behavior in the low-creativity condition ( $M = 78.33$ ,  $SD = 20.38$ ),  $\beta = -0.198$ ,  $t = 3.836$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The main effect of perceived harm was also significant  $\beta = 0.598$ ,  $t = 11.367$ ,  $p < 0.000$ , while the main effect of deliberation was not significant ( $M_{\text{high deliberation}} = 70.96$ ,  $SD = 26.39$  vs.  $M_{\text{low deliberation}} = 75.15$ ,  $SD = 21.23$ ),  $\beta = -0.022$ ,  $t = -0.431$ ,  $p = 0.667$ . Neither the Creative Condition  $\times$  Deliberation Condition interaction ( $\beta = -0.043$ ,  $t = -0.824$ ,  $p = 0.411$ ), the Creative Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm interaction ( $\beta = 0.045$ ,  $t = 0.830$ ,  $p = 0.408$ ), nor the Deliberation Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm interaction ( $\beta = -0.015$ ,  $t = -0.282$ ,  $p = 0.778$ ) was significant.

<sup>1</sup> All results that were significant after removing these participants were also significant when their data was included in the analyses.

**Table 3**  
Study 3 means.

	Low Creativity & Low Premeditation N = 57		Low Creativity & High Premeditation N = 55		High Creativity & Low Premeditation N = 64		High Creativity & High Premeditation N = 69		Total N = 245	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Unethicality	79.30	18.87	77.31	21.97	71.46	22.64	65.89	28.60	73.03	24.02
Moral Character	5.49	1.17	5.51	1.33	5.00	1.13	4.86	1.43	5.19	1.30
Severity of Punishment	7.20	1.33	7.34	1.48	6.81	1.74	6.53	2.51	6.94	1.88
Likelihood of Emulation	1.93	1.65	2.14	1.78	2.15	1.76	2.83	2.32	2.29	1.94
Creativity	4.30	2.42	3.59	2.14	7.27	1.63	7.26	1.78	5.75	2.59
Harmfulness	6.26	1.63	5.89	1.94	6.15	1.89	5.90	2.22	6.05	1.93
Deliberation	6.87	2.05	8.05	1.40	7.09	1.94	7.99	1.32	7.51	1.77
Effortfulness	4.65	0.96	4.85	0.64	4.74	1.11	4.81	0.91	4.76	0.93
Endorse Creativity-Unethicality Link	2.26	1.47	1.86	1.23	2.28	1.40	2.41	1.48	2.22	1.41
Mental Effort	5.19	2.07	5.04	2.09	5.31	1.75	5.45	2.13	5.26	2.01
Age	37.23	13.97	32.89	8.62	33.91	10.30	33.99	10.53	34.47	11.05
Male	0.44	0.50	0.64	0.49	0.52	0.50	0.46	0.50	0.51	0.50

**Table 4**  
Study 3 correlations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1 Creative Cond.														
2 Deliberation Cond.	0.03													
3 Unethicality	-0.20**	-0.09												
4 Moral Character	-0.22**	-0.03	0.62**											
5 Severity of Punishment	-0.16*	-0.03	0.63**	0.61**										
6 Likelihood of Emulation	0.12	0.12	-0.43**	-0.40**	-0.37**									
7 Creativity	0.64**	-0.05	-0.12	-0.15*	-0.10	0.10								
8 Harmfulness	-0.02	-0.08	0.59**	0.48**	0.65**	-0.32**	0.01							
9 Deliberation	0.03	0.29*	0.24**	0.27*	0.19*	-0.25**	0.11	0.22**						
10 Effortfulness	0.02	0.07	0.12	0.13*	0.21**	0.09	0.03	0.23**	0.16*					
11 Endorse Creat.-Uneth. Link	0.10	-0.04	-0.33**	-0.28**	-0.17**	0.50**	0.03	-0.17**	-0.32**	0.11				
12 Mental Effort	0.07	0.00	-0.02	-0.02	0.01	0.08	-0.02	-0.05	-0.15*	0.05	0.22**			
13 Age	-0.05	-0.09	0.21**	0.09	0.16*	-0.24**	0.03	0.21**	0.18*	0.00	-0.14*	0.05		
14 Male	-0.05	0.06	-0.24**	-0.13*	-0.16*	0.25**	0.01	-0.20**	-0.12	-0.01	0.12	0.00	-0.11	
Mean			73	5.19	6.94	2.29	5.75	6.05	7.51	4.76	2.22	5.26	34.5	0.49
Standard Deviation			24	1.3	1.88	1.94	2.59	1.93	1.77	0.93	1.41	2.01	11	0.5

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5.3.1.2. *Perceived poorness of moral character.* We repeated the analyses described above with perceived poorness of moral character, which correlated highly ( $r = 0.61$ ) with unethicality ratings of the acts, as the dependent variable. There was a main effect of creativity condition, such that participants viewed the moral character of the transgressor in the low-creativity condition to be poorer ( $M = 5.50, SD = 1.25$ ) than the moral character of the transgressor in the high-creativity condition ( $M = 4.92, SD = 1.29$ ),  $\beta = -0.219, t = -3.861, p < 0.001$ . The main effect of perceived harm was significant ( $\beta = 0.481, t = 8.339, p < 0.001$ ), while the main effect of deliberation was not significant ( $M_{high\ deliberation} = 5.15, SD = 1.42$  vs.  $M_{low\ deliberation} = 5.23, SD = 1.17$ ),  $\beta = 0.266, t = 0.052, p = 0.790$ . Neither the Creative Condition  $\times$  Deliberation Condition interaction ( $\beta = -0.037, t = -0.654, p = 0.514$ ), the Creative Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm interaction ( $\beta = 0.019, t = 0.327, p = 0.744$ ), nor the Deliberation Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm interaction ( $\beta = 0.025, t = 0.420, p = 0.675$ ) was significant. As such, the pattern of results for poorness of moral character were very much in line with the pattern of results for moral judgments of the acts.

5.3.1.3. *Recommended punishment severity.* We repeated the analyses described above with severity of recommended punishment as the dependent variable. There was a main effect of creativity, such that participants advocated punishing the behavior in the high-creativity condition less severely ( $M = 6.67, SD = 2.17$ ) than the behavior in the low-creativity condition ( $M = 7.27, SD = 1.40$ ),

$\beta = -0.149, t = -3.111, p = 0.002$ . The main effect of perceived harm was significant ( $\beta = 0.640, t = 13.083, p < 0.001$ ), but the main effect of deliberation condition was not significant ( $M_{high\ deliberation} = 7.75, SD = 2.14$  vs.  $M_{low\ deliberation} = 6.89, SD = 1.57$ ),  $\beta = -0.019, t = 0.401, p = 0.689$ . Neither the Creative Condition  $\times$  Deliberation Condition ( $\beta = -0.053, t = -1.148, p = 0.252$ ) nor the Deliberation Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm interaction ( $\beta = 0.039, t = 0.809, p = 0.419$ ) was significant. However, the Creative Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm was significant,  $\beta = 0.176, t = 3.635, p < 0.001$ . Simple slopes analysis revealed that being in the creative condition had a significant negative effect on punishment when participants perceived the transgression to cause relatively little harm ( $\beta = -0.338, t = -4.867, p < 0.001$ ) but no significant effect when participants perceived the transgression to cause relatively great harm,  $\beta = 0.018, t = 0.269, p = 0.788$ .

We used Hayes' (2012) PROCESS Model 8 to test whether the degree of harm caused by the transgression moderated whether judgments of reduced unethicality of the transgression mediated the link between creativity and more severe punishment. The bootstrap estimate of the index of moderated mediation was not significant, as the 95% confidence level for the index included zero (Index = 0.0151, SE = 0.0199, LLCI = -0.0200, ULCI: 0.0587). The conditional indirect effect of creativity on punishment severity was mediated by perceptions of decreased unethicality at low levels of perceived harm (i.e., one SD below mean) ( $B = -0.0797, Boot SE = 0.0355, LLCI = -0.1595, ULCI = -0.0193$ ) and at low levels

of perceived harm (i.e., one SD above mean),  $B = -0.0493$ , Boot  $SE = 0.0213$ ,  $LLCI = -0.0991$ ,  $ULCI = -0.0141$ . Thus, perceived harm did not moderate the mediation through judgments of reduced unethicity. However, perceived harm moderated the main effect of creativity on severity of punishment. The relationship was negative and significant at low levels of perceived harm ( $B = -0.2477$ , Boot  $SE = 0.0634$ ,  $t = -3.9048$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ ,  $LLCI = -0.3727$ ,  $ULCI = -0.1227$ ) but non-significant at high levels of perceived harm,  $B = 0.0763$ , Boot  $SE = 0.0623$ ,  $t = -1.2566$ ,  $p = 0.2102$ ,  $LLCI = -0.0445$ ,  $ULCI = 0.2011$ . These results were consistent with [Hypothesis 7](#). In a separate analysis, we also found that moral character ratings mediated the link between creativity and less severe punishment.

**5.3.1.4. Social contagiousness.** We used similar regression analyses to test [Hypothesis 9](#), which stipulated that people would be more likely to emulate creative transgressions than they would be to emulate less-creative transgressions when those transgressions caused little harm but not when they caused great harm. Participants were, on a marginally significant basis, more likely to indicate that they would emulate transgressions in the high-creativity condition ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 2.29$ ) than in the low-creativity conditions ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ),  $\beta = 0.106$ ,  $t = 1.753$ ,  $p = 0.081$ . They were not significantly more likely to indicate that they would emulate transgressions in the high-deliberation condition ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) than in the low-deliberation conditions ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $\beta = 0.087$ ,  $t = 1.438$ ,  $p = 0.152$ . Perceived harm negatively predicted self-reported likelihood of emulation,  $\beta = -0.304$ ,  $t = -4.930$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Neither the Creative Condition  $\times$  Deliberation Condition interaction ( $\beta = 0.047$ ,  $t = 0.789$ ,  $p = 0.431$ ) nor the Deliberation Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm interaction ( $\beta = -0.091$ ,  $t = -0.756$ ,  $p = 0.450$ ) was significant. However, the Creative Condition  $\times$  Perceived Harm was significant,  $\beta = -0.160$ ,  $t = -2.553$ ,  $p = 0.011$ . Simple slopes analysis revealed that being in the creative condition had a significant positive effect on emulation when participants perceived the transgression to cause relatively little harm ( $\beta = 0.270$ ,  $t = 3.189$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) but no significant effect when participants perceived the transgression to cause relatively great harm,  $\beta = -0.031$ ,  $t = -0.367$ ,  $p = 0.714$ .

We used Hayes' (2012) PROCESS Model 8 to test whether the degree of harm caused by the transgression moderated whether judgments of reduced unethicity of the transgression mediated the link between creativity and emulation. The bootstrap estimate of the index of moderated mediation was not significant, as the 95% confidence level for the index included zero (Index = 0.0149,  $SE = 0.0201$ ,  $LLCI = -0.0609$ ,  $ULCI = 0.0211$ ). The conditional indirect effect of creativity on punishment severity was mediated by perceptions of decreased unethicity at low levels of perceived harm (i.e., one SD below mean) ( $B = 0.0788$ , Boot  $SE = 0.0367$ ,  $LLCI = 0.0219$ ,  $ULCI = 0.1724$ ) and at high levels of perceived harm (i.e., one SD above mean),  $B = 0.0488$ , Boot  $SE = 0.0237$ ,  $LLCI = 0.0130$ ,  $ULCI = 0.1076$ . Thus, perceived harm did not moderate the mediation through judgments of reduced unethicity. However, perceived harm moderated the main effect of creativity on likelihood of emulation. The relationship was positive and significant at low levels of perceived harm ( $B = 0.1748$ , Boot  $SE = 0.0803$ ,  $t = 2.178$ ,  $p = 0.0304$ ,  $LLCI = 0.0167$ ,  $ULCI = 0.3329$ ) but non-significant at high levels of perceived harm,  $B = 0.0788$ , Boot  $SE = 0.0788$ ,  $t = -1.2303$ ,  $p = 0.2198$ ,  $LLCI = -0.2523$ ,  $ULCI = 0.0588$ . These results were consistent with [Hypothesis 10](#). In a separate analysis, we also found that moral character ratings also mediated the link between creativity and heightened likelihood of emulation.

**5.3.1.5. Awareness of creativity's influence.** We compared people's ratings of the unethicity of the creative version of the transgres-

sion with their ratings of the unethicity of the less-creative version of the transgression. Participants rated the creative version of the transgression to be somewhat less unethical ( $M = 71.00$ ,  $SD = 25.69$ ) than they found the non-creative version to be ( $M = 74.51$ ,  $SD = 22.90$ ),  $t(156) = 1.758$ ,  $p = 0.081$ ,  $d = -0.144$ . They also rated the moral character of the transgressor in the creative version to be less unethical better ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) than that of the transgressor in the non-creative version ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $t(156) = -2.333$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ,  $d = -0.143$ . These effects were not stronger than the effects that existed using separate evaluation. When we asked people how much creativity reduces the unethicity of transgressions, they indicated strong disagreement ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), such that their responses were significantly below the midpoint of the scale,  $t(244) = 19.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . We also tested whether participants' cognitive load predicted unethicity ratings, punishment, or likelihood of emulation or interacted with any other key variables to predict those measures. However, we found no evidence to suggest that it did.

## 5.4. Discussion

Study 3 results revealed a main effect of creativity on perceived unethicity and on judgments of moral character. Perceived harm moderated the relationships between creativity and less severe punishments and between creativity and heightened social contagion. The main effects of creativity on perceived unethicity contrast with the results of Study 2, in which harm moderated the effect of creativity. The decision to measure rather than manipulate harm may account for the insignificant Creativity  $\times$  Perceived Harm interaction term. Moreover, the vignette that we used may explain the lack of moderation by deliberation. Although we found significant between-condition differences on deliberation, creating malware requires a fair degree of deliberation, and the mean ratings of deliberation in both conditions were quite high. Greater variation in perceived deliberation and perceived harm may have allowed for better tests of moderation. We address this concern in Studies 4 and 5.

Correlations between moral character judgments and judgments of the unethicity of the act were very high. Moreover, moral character trait ratings mediated the links between creativity and less severe punishment and between creativity and heightened emulation, just as the unethicity of the act mediated these relationships. Given these findings, we do not have any evidence to support the conclusion that people focus on moral character when they observe highly creative transgressions and the unethicity of the acts when they observe less-creative transgressions. We think instead that people who learn one positive attribute about an act and one negative attribute about the same act are likely to make more positive general judgments of the act than are people who learn only of the negative attribute.

Our results indicate that participants do not agree in principle that creativity in transgressions make those transgressions less unethical. However, when witnessing a highly creative and a less-creative version of transgression, they do tend to judge the creative transgression to be somewhat less unethical. A disconnect therefore exists between what participants believe is the case in the abstract and how they make judgments based on seeing creative aspects of a transgression.

## 6. Study 4: Recalling a past transgression

In the previous three studies, we showed that people judge others less harshly for creative forms of unethical behavior than for less-creative forms of unethical behavior. In Study 4, we examine whether people also judge themselves more leniently



for creative transgressions than for less-creative transgressions. We did so by asking participants to recall a previous instance in their lives in which they either “broke or bypassed rules” or “creatively broke or bypassed rules.” We use this technique to establish stimulus generalizability. We suggest that people not only find creativity in the theft scenario to attenuate how unethical the behavior is perceived to be, but also find creativity to attenuate how unethical the behavior is perceived to be across many types of morally questionable behaviors.

## 6.1. Method

### 6.1.1. Participants

One hundred thirty-two individuals ( $M_{age} = 29.55$ ,  $SD = 8.23$ ; 57% male) recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk participated in this study in exchange for \$1.

### 6.1.2. Procedure

We randomly assigned participants to either the creative-cheating or traditional-cheating condition. Participants in each condition recalled a bad thing they had done in their past and wrote about it for 5–10 min.

Participants in the *traditional-cheating* condition read:

*Please describe below one bad thing that you have done in the past where you broke or bypassed rules—either social, stated in some form, or even legal. Other people engaging in this type of task frequently write about instances where they acted selfishly at the expense of someone else, took advantage of a situation and were dishonest, or situations where they were untruthful or disloyal. Please provide details about the situation and your feelings so that a person reading this essay would have a clear sense of what happened.*

Participants in the creative-cheating condition read the same text with the adjective “creatively” inserted before the phrase “broke or bypassed rules.”

Participants first indicated how much they believed the behavior they wrote about was unethical, immoral, and wrong ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ) on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = extremely). They then indicated the extent to which the behavior they engaged in was creative, innovative, and original ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) on a similar scale (1 = not at all to 7 = extremely). Finally, participants provided their age and gender.

We also had three coders who were blind to condition rate participants’ reported behavior (1: not at all, 7: very much) on how creative the behavior was (intra-class correlation (ICC) = 0.629) and how harmful, damaging, and hurtful ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ; ICC = 0.74) the behavior was. They also rated the degree of deliberation by rating how premeditated, intentional, and calculated the behavior ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ; ICC = 0.70) was. The coders also rated how much intelligence the behavior entailed (ICC = 0.63), how effortful the behavior seemed to be (ICC) = 0.59), and how effective the behavior was (ICC = 0.49). The coders also designated whether the behavior involved breaking a moral rule (ICC = 0.601).

## 6.2. Results

### 6.2.1. Manipulation checks

Three coders who were blind to condition rated participants’ reported behavior to be more creative in the creative-cheating condition ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) than in the traditional-cheating condition ( $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ),  $t(113.9) = 2.875$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ,  $d = 0.50$ . Mirroring these results, participants reported lower retrospective higher creativity for the behavior they recalled and wrote about in the creative-cheating condition ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) than in

the traditional-cheating condition ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ),  $t(130) = 5.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.88$ .

### 6.2.2. Perceived unethicality of the behavior

Table 5 displays means and correlations between key variables. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants reported lower retrospective perceived unethicality for the behavior they recalled and wrote about in the creative-cheating condition ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) than in the traditional-cheating condition ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $t(130) = 2.27$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ,  $d = 0.39$ . We then regressed perceived unethicality on the variable designating the creative condition, controlling for gender of the participant and coder-rated laziness, competence, planning required, intelligence, and effectiveness. As Table 6 shows, the effect of condition on perceived unethicality was negative and marginally significant.

We then regressed participants’ ratings of unethicality of the behaviors on the coders’ ratings of the creativity, degree of deliberation, degree of harm for each behavior while controlling for participants’ gender. Table 5 displays that we did not find a main effect of creativity on ratings of unethicality. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the Creativity  $\times$  Harm interaction positively predicted unethicality ratings on a marginally significant basis. The Creativity  $\times$  Deliberation interaction negatively predicted unethicality ratings on a marginally significant basis.

We conducted a simple slopes analysis to understand the Creativity  $\times$  Harm interaction, which is displayed in Fig. 2. The simple slope of the regression of unethicality ratings onto creativity ratings did not reach significance at one standard deviation below the mean on harm ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $t(124) = -1.587$ ,  $p = 0.115$ ) or at one standard deviation above the mean on harm,  $\beta = 0.241$ ,  $t(124) = 1.274$ ,  $p = 0.205$ . We then conducted a simple slopes analysis to understand the Creativity  $\times$  Deliberation interaction, which is displayed in Fig. 3. The simple slope of the regression of unethicality ratings onto creativity ratings did not reach significance at one standard deviation below the mean on deliberation ( $\beta = 0.182$ ,  $t(124) = -1.114$ ,  $p = 0.267$ ) or at one standard deviation above the mean on deliberation,  $\beta = -0.194$ ,  $t(124) = -1.543$ ,  $p = 0.125$ .

### 6.2.3. Ensuring behaviors broke moral rules

It is possible that the bad behaviors that participants described in Study 3 violated amoral social rules but not moral rules. To address this concern, we had three raters (ICC = 0.601) indicate whether each transgression involved breaking a moral rule. We found that 80.8% ( $SD = 0.396$ ) of rule violations in the control condition and 81.3% ( $SD = 0.393$ ) of rule violations in the creative cheating condition were identified by at least two of the three raters as involving breaking moral rules. These percentages did not significantly differ,  $B = 0.012$ ,  $SE = 0.222$ ,  $Wald = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.957$ ,  $Exp(B) = 1.012$ .

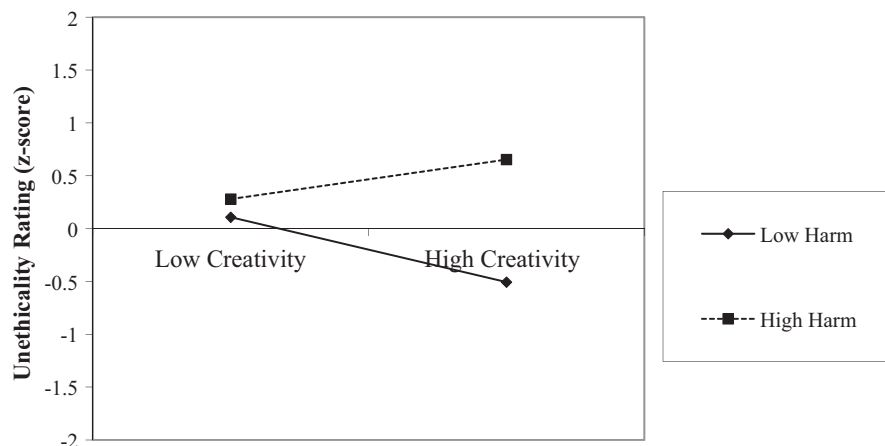
We then retested Hypothesis 1 using only those bad behaviors that at least two of the three raters indicated as breaking a moral rule. Participants again reported lower retrospective perceived unethicality for the behavior they recalled and wrote about in the creative-cheating condition ( $M = 4.718$ ,  $SD = 1.727$ ) as compared to the traditional-cheating condition ( $M = 5.485$ ,  $SD = 1.414$ ),  $t(105) = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ,  $d = 0.486$ . We then regressed perceived unethicality on the dummy variable designating the creative condition, controlling for coder-rated laziness, competence, planning required, intelligence, effectiveness, and gender. The effect of condition on perceived unethicality was negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.405$ ,  $t(99) = -2.181$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ), indicating that creativity correlated with attenuated judgments of the unethicality of behaviors.

**Table 5**  
Correlations and means of key variables in Experiment 4.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	Unethicality Index									
2	Creativity Condition	−0.20 <sup>+</sup>								
3	Laziness	0.21 <sup>+</sup>	−0.15							
4	Competence	−0.28 <sup>**</sup>	0.25 <sup>**</sup>	−0.53 <sup>**</sup>						
5	How Planned	−0.04	0.24 <sup>**</sup>	−0.5 <sup>**</sup>	0.75 <sup>**</sup>					
6	Effectiveness	−0.19 <sup>+</sup>	0.18 <sup>+</sup>	−0.15	0.59 <sup>**</sup>	0.55 <sup>**</sup>				
7	Intelligence Required	−0.24 <sup>**</sup>	0.24 <sup>**</sup>	−0.48 <sup>**</sup>	0.85 <sup>**</sup>	0.72 <sup>**</sup>	0.63 <sup>**</sup>			
8	Male	−0.08	−0.02	0.02	−0.10	−0.07	−0.11	−0.03		
9	Age	0.10	−0.03	0.14	−0.08	−0.12	−0.11	−0.16	0.09	
	N	132	132	132	132	132	132	132	132	
	Mean	4.85	0.48	3.96	3.51	3.74	4.90	3.68	1.43	29.55
	Std. Deviation	1.68	0.50	1.33	1.01	1.26	1.34	1.22	0.50	8.23

**Table 6**  
Regressing unethicality ratings on gender and key coder-generated attributes in Study 4.

Dependent variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	$\beta$	t	Sig.	$\beta$	t	Sig.	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Constant	0.22	0.84	0.41	0.30	1.16	0.25	0.48	1.79	0.08
Creativity	0.00	0.04	0.97	−0.09	−0.77	0.44	−0.01	−0.05	0.96
Harmfulness				0.33	3.85	0.00	0.33	3.95	0.00
Premeditation				0.11	0.93	0.35	0.11	0.94	0.35
Creativity $\times$ Harm							0.25	1.88	0.06
Creativity $\times$ Premeditation							−0.19	−2.11	0.04
Harm $\times$ Premeditation							−0.19	−1.66	0.10
Male	−0.16	−0.88	0.38	−0.21	−1.23	0.22	−0.23	−1.38	0.17

**Fig. 2.** Unethicality ratings by creativity and harm.

### 6.3. Discussion

People viewed their own past bad behavior to be less unethical when their behavior was creative than when it was not particularly creative. The study therefore shows that the creativity involved in bad behaviors correlates not only with the severity of interpersonal judgments but also with judgments about the self.

## 7. Study 5: Recalling moral transgressions

We designed Study 4 to test whether people view their immoral behavior to be less unethical/immoral when it involves more creativity than when it involves less creativity. In Study 5, we also had participants, rather than independent raters, rate the degree of harm and deliberation.

**Participants.** We recruited 303 participants ( $M_{age} = 33.15$ ,  $SD = 11.02$ ; 59.0% male) from MTurk.com to participate in the study.

**Procedure.** All participants read the following prompt:

*Please describe below one unethical behavior that you have committed in the past where you creatively broke a moral rule. Please provide details about the situation and your feelings so that a person reading this essay would have a clear sense of what happened*

We administered all measures used in Study 4 to participants in Study 5. The creativity ( $\alpha = 0.864$ ) and unethicality ( $\alpha = 0.895$ ) indices showed acceptable reliability. Participants also used a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = extremely) to indicate the extent to which the behavior they engaged in was premeditated, intentional, and calculated,  $\alpha = 0.805$ . Moreover, participants used the same seven-point scale to indicate the extent to which the behav-

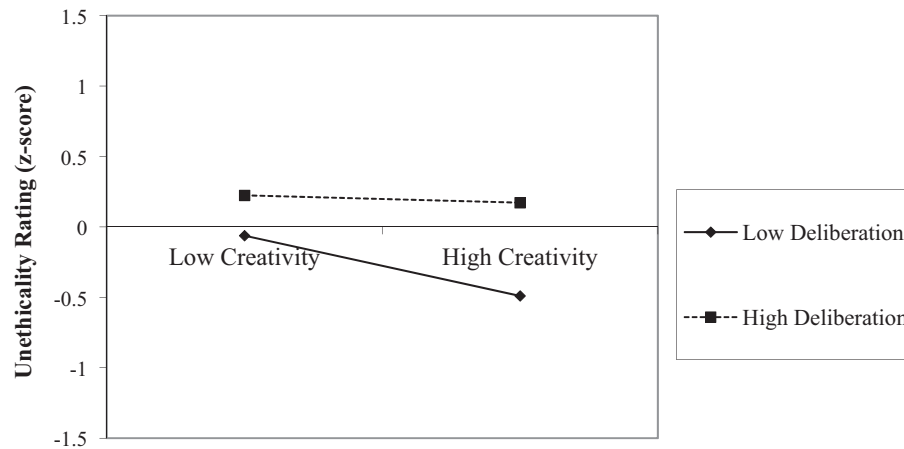


Fig. 3. Unethicality ratings by creativity and premeditation.

ior they engaged in was hurtful, harmful, and damaging ( $\alpha = 0.915$ ). We collected these measures to determine if the mitigating effect of creativity on judgments of unethicality are stronger after controlling for the degree of premeditation and the extent of the harm. We also collected measures to test whether creativity would interact with the extent of deliberation or the extent of harm to predict moral judgment.

## 7.1. Results

### 7.1.1. Treatment of data

We excluded the results of 13 participants who did not recall an incident in which they committed an unethical behavior. The answers given in these cases did not include any behaviors that could potentially be construed as immoral behaviors; the excluded responses included “Does anybody ever read this?” “Easy talks is enjoy” and “I can’t recall a time when I have creatively broken a moral rule.”

### 7.1.2. Perceived unethicality of the behavior

Table 7 reports correlations and means for key variables in Study 5. Table 8 reports three regressions demonstrating the relationship between creativity and the perceived unethicality of the transgressions. We controlled for gender in all models, as gender significantly predicted unethical ratings. As Model 1 shows, participant-rated creativity negatively predicted their ratings of the immorality of their behaviors, consistent with Hypothesis 1. Model 2 demonstrates that the displayed relationship between creativity and unethicality ratings stands once we control for the degree of deliberation and extent of harm. Model 3 demonstrates that creativity significantly interacts with the degree of deliberation but not the amount of harm to predict participant-generated unethicality ratings. This result supports Hypothesis 3 but not Hypothesis 2. We conducted a simple slopes analysis to understand this interaction. The simple slope of the regression of unethicality ratings onto creativity ratings when transgressions involved little deliberation (i.e.,  $-1$  SD below the mean) was significant ( $\beta = -0.202$ ,  $t(280) = -2.807$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). In contrast, this simple slope was not significant when transgressions were highly premeditated (i.e.,  $+1$  SD below the mean),  $\beta = -0.033$ ,  $t(280) = -0.464$ ,  $p = 0.643$ . Thus, creativity mitigated moral judgment at low levels of deliberation but not at high levels of deliberation.

## 7.2. Discussion

Study 5 demonstrated that people see their own violations of moral rules to be less unethical when those violations are creative

than when they are not creative. The experiment further revealed that the creativity of the violation mitigated moral judgment when the violation involved low amounts of deliberation but did not mitigate moral judgment when the violation involve high amounts of deliberation. This finding suggests that people who cheat in creative ways may not protect themselves from moral judgment if their actions also signal that they have extensively deliberated about the potential consequences of their transgressions. These results contrast with the results of Study 3, which featured two similar behaviors that both involved high degrees of deliberation. We believe that the greater variation in stimuli in this study better allowed us to detect whether creativity interacts with deliberation about consequences to predict responses to transgressions.

We predicted that creativity would have stronger mitigating effects on moral self-censure when a violation created little harm for others than when it created significant harm for others. Counter to our predictions, the degree of harm caused by the moral rule violation did not moderate the effect of creativity on unethicality ratings. The finding that participants’ ratings showed a main effect of creativity on reduced unethicality ratings that was not moderated by harm may reflect the common tendency for people to minimize cognitively the damage that their transgressions create so that they can see themselves as moral people. When independent raters coded the degree of harm in Study 4, and such pressures to see oneself as moral are removed, the familiar creativity  $\times$  harm interaction emerged. As such, the effect of creativity on others’ judgments of one’s morality may be more sensitive to the amount of harm involved than is the effect of creativity on one’s own judgments of one’s own morality.

It possible that participants in the traditional-cheating condition in Studies 3 and 4, relative to those in the creative-cheating condition, recalled transgressions that would have been rated as more severe because of their consequences or maliciousness. We address this possibility in Studies 1, 2, 3, and 6 by using similar transgressions in each of the conditions.

## 8. Study 6: Is creative unethical behavior contagious?

In Study 6, we investigate whether a creative form of unethical behavior that causes comparably little harm can produce more emulation than a less creative form of unethical behavior that cause the same amount of harm for others. We also investigate whether behaving dishonestly in a creative fashion creates less guilt and takes less of a toll on self-esteem than behaving dishonestly in a less-creative fashion. We tested our hypotheses by asking participants to work as a group on a series of trivia questions. In each group, a confederate suggested and performed a creative

**Table 7**  
Correlations and means of key variables in Experiment 5.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Unethicality Index					
2	Creativity Index	–0.08				
3	Harmfulness Index	0.54**	–0.14*			
4	Premeditation Index	0.24**	0.34**	0.11		
5	Male	0.14*	0.17**	0.07	0.10	
6	Age	0.04	0.04	–0.02	0.06	–0.15*
	N	290	290	288	288	290
	Mean	5.15	3.79	3.55	5.32	0.59
	Std. Deviation	1.48	1.52	1.84	1.50	0.49
						290
						33.32
						11.19

**Table 8**  
Regressing unethicality ratings on key variables in Study 5.

Dependent variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	$\beta$	t	Sig.	$\beta$	t	Sig.	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Constant	–0.19	–2.06	0.00	–0.12	–1.60	0.11	–0.14	–1.82	0.07
Creativity	–0.12	–1.96	0.05	–0.11	–2.09	0.04	–0.12	–2.18	0.03
Harmfulness				0.49	9.81	0.00	0.49	9.64	0.00
Premeditation				0.21	4.10	0.00	0.23	4.20	0.00
Creativity $\times$ Harm							0.06	1.13	0.26
Creativity $\times$ Premeditation							0.09	1.82	0.07
Harm $\times$ Premeditation							–0.04	–0.75	0.46
Male	0.33	2.76	0.01	0.22	2.18	0.03	0.22	2.24	0.03

method of cheating, a less creative method of cheating, or no method of cheating. We then investigated whether participants adopted that behavior.

## 8.1. Method

### 8.1.1. Participants

Two-hundred sixteen MBA students (52.3% male;  $M_{age} = 27.53$ ,  $SD = 2.79$ ) from a university in the Southeastern United States were recruited to participate in the study in exchange for \$10 and the opportunity to earn up to an additional \$10 based on their performance during the group task.

### 8.1.2. Procedure

We recruited students to participate in a study that ostensibly addressed how people can most effectively absorb large amounts of information in short periods of time. Groups consisted of three participants and one confederate.

We instructed participants that they would be taking part in a study on how groups can study and learn together. The experimenter told them that they would have time to study some material as a group and then would be quizzed on the material. They would have four rounds of quizzing. During each round, a different member of the group would be the “quizmaster.” The quizmaster would have five minutes to teach the other three participants as much information from her information sheet as possible. The experimenter explained to the chosen participant that she/he would receive a bonus whose size would depend on how well the other participants in the room retained information about the topic. Specifically, the quizmaster learned that her/his bonus depended upon the other participants' scores on a multiple-choice test. The participants answering the quiz would also get a bonus for their correct answers. After the five minutes, the quizmaster for the round administered a quiz by reading prepared multiple-choice questions written on notecards, while the remaining group members tried to answer the questions individually on paper. The confederate was always chosen “randomly” to be the quizmaster for Round 1.

### 8.1.3. Creativity manipulation

During the study session, the confederate followed one of three scripts. In the no-cheating-modeled condition, the confederate studied with the group but did not offer any suggestions or guidance for how to perform the task. In the other two conditions (less-creative cheating and creative cheating), the confederate suggested a method for cheating during the initial study session. For the less-creative-cheating condition, the confederate suggested that the participant acting as quizmaster should smile after reading the correct answer. For instance, any time the correct answer was Choice A, the participant administering the quiz would smile after reading Choice A. In the creative-cheating condition, the confederate suggested that the participant administering the quiz should hold the notecard differently depending upon which answer was correct. Any time the correct answer was Choice A, the participant administering the quiz would hold the notecard in the upper left-hand corner. Whenever the correct answer was Choice B, the participant would hold the notecard in the lower left-hand corner, etc. The confederate engaged in the cheating system that she/he had proposed. Cheating was only recorded if the participant's hand position or facial expression changed to indicate the correct answer. For instance, in the creative-cheating condition, if the correct choice was B, and the participant always held the notecard in the lower left-hand corner, no cheating would be coded. If the participant engaged in any cheating behavior (i.e., obviously cheated on at least one question), the confederate would record the session as cheating. If the intention of the confederate's behavior was unclear, the behavior was not coded as cheating.

### 8.1.4. Emulation of cheating behavior

After the initial round, the three participants each had the opportunity to act as the quizmaster. During the participants' quizmaster sessions, the confederate noted if the participants adopted the cheating method during their turns as quizmaster, which served as our primary dependent variable.

### 8.1.5. Other dependent variables

After the quiz sessions, participants completed a series of surveys. For the first set of surveys, they were told they would be rat-



ing one of their fellow group members on a series of attributes and how that person contributed to their group learning. Participants actually always rated the confederate. Participants rated the confederate on attributes such as creativity (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-Mcintyre, 2003;  $\alpha = 0.77$ ), honesty (e.g. “ethical,” “honest,” “moral person”;  $\alpha = 0.86$ ), cleverness (“clever,” “quick-witted,” “inventive”;  $\alpha = 0.55$ ), and some filler items (“good teacher,” “financially responsible”) on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). We also included additional filler items to disguise the focus of the study and its hypotheses from the participants. See Appendix A for the survey measures used in Study 6.

In the next group of surveys, participants were told they would be answering questions about themselves. They completed a three-item measure of state self-esteem (Barkan et al., 2012; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ). Specifically, participants rated their agreement on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with the following statements: “Right now, I feel good about myself,” “Right now, I like the way I look,” and “Right now, I feel I am a person of worth.” Participants also completed a three-item measure of guilt (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013;  $\alpha = 0.80$ ). For the guilt measure, participants indicated the extent to which they felt remorse, guilt, and regret on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent).

## 8.2. Results

### 8.2.1. Manipulation check

We used a separate sample of 101 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.8$ ,  $SD_{\text{Age}} = 17.8$ ; 36% female), recruited from Mturk.com, to confirm that people judged the method of cheating in the creative condition (i.e., signaling the answer by holding the notecards in different corners) to be more creative, innovative, and original (1: not at all, 7: very) ( $\alpha = 0.931$ ) than the method of cheating in the less-creative-cheating condition. We excluded one participant for taking the survey twice using different IDs. We used a within-subjects design and counterbalanced the order in which the methods of cheating were described. As expected, people judged the method of cheating in the creative condition to be more creative ( $M = 4.761$ ,  $SD = 1.308$ ) than the method of cheating in the less-creative-cheating condition ( $M = 4.364$ ,  $SD = 1.516$ );  $t(98) = 2.801$ ,  $p = 0.006$ .

### 8.2.2. Treatment of nested data

We found significant interdependence of data within groups on our primary dependent measure of cheating within groups ( $ICC = 0.795$ ,  $F(215, 430) = 4.870$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). We therefore use the mixed-models analysis technique recommended by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) to control for interdependence of data within groups. We used dummy variables in these analyses to represent the no-cheating-modeled condition and the less-creative-cheating condition. Setting the value of the no-cheating-modeled (less-creative cheating) condition dummy variable at one when the participant was in the focal condition and zero in other conditions allowed us to interpret each dummy variable’s coefficient as the impact of being in that condition relative to being in the baseline creative-cheating condition.

### 8.2.3. Contagion of cheating

We coded as 0 instances in which participants did not cheat as the quizmaster and as 1 instances in which participants did cheat. Participants in the creative-cheating condition cheated at a greater rate ( $M = 0.62$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) than participants in the no-cheating-modeled condition ( $M = 0.12$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ );  $F(1, 69) = 45.221$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 1.02$ ) and participants in the less-creative cheating condition ( $M = 0.40$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 5.98$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ,  $d = 0.45$ . While only one out of 72 participants (1.4%) cheated in the no-

cheating-modeled condition, and 29 of the 72 participants (40.3%) cheated in the less-creative cheating condition, 45 of the 72 participants (62.5%) in the creative-cheating condition cheated. As a robustness check, we then coded each group for the number of times participants cheated as the quizmaster (minimum of 0 and a maximum of 3). Again, condition had a significant effect on the number of times the group cheated as the quizmaster,  $F(2, 69) = 23.17$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . Groups in the creative-cheating condition cheated at a greater rate ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than did groups in the no-cheating-modeled condition ( $M = 0.04$ ,  $SD = 0.20$ ),  $t(69) = -6.73$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $d = 2.08$ ) and less-creative ( $M = 1.21$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ),  $t(69) = -2.45$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ,  $d = 0.58$ ) conditions.

### 8.3. Ratings of confederate

As expected, participants in the creative-cheating condition rated the confederate as more creative ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than did participants in the less-creative-cheating condition ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ;  $F(1, 69) = 30.352$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.95$ ) and participants in the less-creative-cheating condition, ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 9.784$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $d = 0.57$ . Similarly, participants in the creative-cheating condition rated the confederate as more clever ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) than did participants in the no-cheating-modeled condition ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ;  $F(1, 69) = 26.127$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.89$ ) or the less-creative-cheating condition ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 38.227$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 1.07$ . Participants in the creative-cheating condition rated the confederate as significantly less ethical ( $M = 5.57$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than did participants in the no-cheating-modeled condition ( $M = 6.06$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ;  $F(1, 69) = 6.095$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ,  $d = 0.58$ ), but more ethical than did participants in the less-creative cheating condition, ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 37.801$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 1.07$ .

We analyzed whether ratings of the confederate’s ethicality mediated the effect of the creative-cheating condition on the likelihood of cheating relative to the less-creative-cheating condition. However, we found no evidence of mediation and therefore did not find support for Hypothesis 10 in this experiment.

#### 8.3.1. Guilt

Supporting Hypothesis 12, participants in the creative-cheating condition reported feeling less guilt ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) than did participants in the less-creative-cheating condition ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 5.575$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ,  $d = 0.45$ . They did not report feeling significantly more guilt than did participants in the no-cheating-modeled condition ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 2.133$ ,  $p = 0.149$ ,  $d = 0.28$ .

#### 8.3.2. Self-esteem

Supporting Hypothesis 13, participants in the creative-cheating condition reported feeling more self-esteem ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than did participants in the less-creative-cheating condition ( $M = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ;  $F(1, 69) = 4.703$ ,  $p = 0.034$ ,  $d = 0.34$ ) and less self-esteem than did participants in the no-cheating-modeled condition ( $M = 6.13$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ),  $F(1, 69) = 10.755$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $d = 0.61$ .

## 8.4. Discussion

Participants who witnessed the confederate cheating in a creative manner were more likely to emulate that behavior than were those who witnessed the confederate cheating in a less-creative manner or those who did not witness the confederate cheating. Participants judged the cheating confederate to be more creative, more ethical, and cleverer in the creative-cheating condition than in less-creative-cheating condition. However, such ratings of the confederate did not statistically mediate the effect of condition on likelihood of cheating. Participants in the creative-cheating con-

dition reported experiencing less guilt about the cheating and were able to engage in the unethical behaviors with less compunction than participants in the less-creative condition did.

## 9. General discussion

Across six studies, people judged creative forms of unethical behavior that caused relatively little harm for other people more leniently than they judged less creative forms of unethical behavior that caused the same amount of harm for other people. As a result, they levied less severe punishments on unethical actors who displayed creativity in their unethical behavior. Suggesting that creativity can heighten the social contagiousness of unethical behavior, people also emulated creative unethical behavior more often than they emulated less-creative unethical behavior.

Creativity in unethical actions attenuated moral censure and heightened social contagiousness because it altered unethicality judgments via a halo effect (Thorndike, 1920). People's relatively positive judgments of unethical actors' creativity carried over to affect their judgment of the unethicality of those actors' transgressions. Owing to these relatively positive feelings toward the creative unethical actor, people became more likely to emulate creative forms of unethical behavior than they were to emulate uncreative forms of unethical behavior.

### 9.1. Theoretical contributions

The present research contributes to the collective understanding of the antecedents of unethical behavior, the literature on person perception, and extant research on creativity in several ways. First, our findings demonstrate that positive evaluations of people's competence can enhance how positively people judge an actor's warmth and morality to be even in those instances in which the competence is displayed through performing a behavior that most people would condemn as immoral and a negative indication of the actor's warmth and morality. These are the first findings to show that the skill exhibited in acting immorally can reduce how immoral one is perceived to be. Previous research has demonstrated the primacy of morality-related concerns in person perceptions (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2014). These findings may suggest that whatever benefit an actor derives from behaving unethically in a highly creative and therefore competent way would be negated by virtue of the fact that the actor is behaving unethically. However, our findings suggest that the competence people display in behaving unethically can affect how they are judged.

Relatedly, our research contributes to the literature on moral judgment. Past research shows that factors such as the consequences of unethical behavior and the intentionality of the action affect moral judgment (e.g., Jones, 1991). Our research indicates that the competence displayed in unethical behaviors can also affect how unethical the actions are perceived to be. This suggests that how people frame unethical behavior, in terms of how skillfully the actions were committed, has implications for how harshly these behaviors are punished. Thus, if people highlight creative aspects of their behavior when facing the possibility of punishment for their actions (e.g., during a hearing of their case in court), they may be punished less severely for them. This finding is consistent with past research conducted over the past two decades suggesting that subtle factors that people may not intellectually associate with more or less moral behavior can nonetheless affect how people judge the morality of behavior.

Our research also illuminates a previously unidentified factor that influences how socially contagious unethical behavior is likely to be. Past research has focused on how the social characteristics of

the actor behaving unethically affect the likelihood of social contagion. For example, Gino et al. (2009) showed that seeing in-group members behaving unethically increases the odds that people will behave unethically themselves, whereas seeing out-group members behaving unethically actually decreases the odds that people will behave unethically. Our work demonstrates that characteristics of the behavior can also alter how likely unethical behavior is to spread.

In showing that creativity enhances the likelihood that unethical behaviors will become socially contagious, the work also adds to the growing body of research demonstrating the downsides of creativity. The work complements other work documenting how creativity can increase the odds that an individual will behave unethically (e.g., Gino & Ariely, 2012; Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014) by showing that one actor's creativity may also have an effect on other actors' likelihoods of behaving unethically.

Finally, the work may have implications for those interested in how people maintain positive self-views while engaging in cheating. Scholars have posited that people keep their unethical behavior in check because cheating too frequently or on too large of a scale may threaten their self-view as a good, moral person (e.g., Mazar et al., 2008). This idea has spawned work on moral credentialing, moral compensation, and moral licensing. While previous work has shown that the desire to see oneself as clever can drive actors to behave unethically (Chance, Norton, Gino, & Ariely, 2011; Edelman & Larkin, 2015; Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011; Wiltermuth, Newman, & Raj, 2015), the present research is unique in showing that the skillfulness with which people behave unethically may allow them to be less concerned about how their potentially unethical behavior impacts their self-views. Because the actions are seen as less unethical when performed creatively, those actions may constitute less of a threat to people's moral self-regard.

### 9.2. Limitations and directions for future research

Our work is a first step in examining how the creativity of unethical behavior affects how people view that behavior and whether people emulate it. This research leaves many questions unexplored and is not without limitations. One limitation is that the harm created in our studies befalls relatively anonymous victims. It is possible that ethical norm violations that create greater and/or more concentrated harm on identifiable individuals would not be viewed as being any less unethical when the norm violations are performed in a creative fashion than they are when performed in a less creative fashion. It is even possible that such unethical behaviors will seem even more unethical when performed creatively, especially if the heightened creativity is taken to imply a greater intent to harm others. Future research should therefore examine how the creativity of an act interacts with the intensity of harm to predict people's reactions to the unethical behavior. Similarly, future research should also examine if creativity interacts with the degree of social consensus around the moral issue to predict people's reactions to the unethical behavior.

It would also be worth examining whether creativity reduces the perceived unethicality of actions from the perspective of the victim of the unethical act. We examined primarily the perspectives of third parties who neither benefit from nor are harmed by the transgressions. Victims may focus on harm and intent, and their judgments of unethical behaviors may therefore be less sensitive to the creativity of the transgressions.

A third limitation of our work is that we relied on hypothetical punishments. Future work could productively examine if the creativity displayed in a transgression affects punishments in the real world. Archival analysis of court records or records from other organizations that also mete out punishment would do much to

further our understanding of how creativity influences judgment and punishment.

## 10. Conclusion

This paper provides initial evidence that the level of creativity displayed in unethical behavior influences how people react to that behavior. Across six laboratory studies employing different forms of unethical behavior, we found that people judge creative forms of unethical behavior more leniently than they do less-creative forms of unethical behavior. The halo effect created by displays of creativity within the behavior led people to be more likely to emulate creative, as compared to less-creative, forms of unethical behavior. Our results are important for those interested in determining how to monitor and combat the incidence of unethical behavior in society.

## Appendix A

### A.1. Survey items for Experiment 6

#### Creative Identity

- “A” often thinks about being creative.
- “A” does not have any clear concept of themselves as a creative person. (reverse-coded)
- To be a creative person is an important part of “A’s” identity.

#### Honesty

- “A” is honest.
- “A” is a moral person.
- “A” is an ethical person.

#### Cleverness

- “A” is clever.
- “A” is inventive.
- “A” is quick-witted.

#### Additional questions

- “A” is a good leader.
- “A” is trustworthy.
- “A” is a good friend.
- “A” is funny.
- “A” is friendly.
- “A” is smart.
- “A” is a financially responsible person.
- “A” is an independent person.
- “A” is intelligent.
- “A” is a kind person.
- “A” is athletic.
- “A” is a good teacher.
- “A” gives good advice.

#### Guilt of participant

Below are a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each word and indicate to what extent you feel this way RIGHT NOW, that is, at the present moment.

- Remorseful
- Guilty
- Regretful

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