A typical organization loses approximately 5% of its revenue each year to fraud, which results in a global loss of 2.9 trillion dollars annually (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, 2010). To address this issue, psychological research on theft has focused on the role of negative emotions in studies suggesting that dishonest individuals are angry, frustrated, hostile, prone to anxiety, and likely to engage in dishonest behaviors as a reaction to injustice (Penney & Spector, 2007). In other words, to expose dishonesty, society should search the ranks of the disgruntled. However, in the present studies, we traced the roots of dishonest behavior to a previously unconsidered source. We argue that positive affect promotes the ability to morally disengage, which, in turn, leads to dishonest behavior. Consequently, the mild feelings of happiness associated with a wide range of prosocial behavior (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009) can also contribute to dishonesty if left unchecked.

It is well known that positive affect increases cognitive flexibility, the ability to redefine and evaluate events and information in different, unusual ways (Isen, 2000). Positive affect broadens categories, which facilitates connections between concepts that might ordinarily be viewed as unrelated (e.g., categorizing wastebaskets as furniture or tractors as vehicles; Isen & Daubman, 1984). Without denying the obvious benefits of cognitive flexibility for problem solving, we considered this process in a very different context by theorizing that the cognitively flexible may also be morally flexible. Dishonest behavior can threaten an individual’s positive moral self-image unless it can be rationalized or reframed (Mazar & Ariely, 2006) through moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). For instance, an individual can recategorize theft as “just borrowing” something, thus paving the way for the commission of a dishonest act (Bandura, 1999; Deter, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008; Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011). Drawing on and extending the research on positive affect and categorization, we argued that people experiencing positive affect are more likely to steal than individuals experiencing neutral affect, particularly when self-awareness is low. Furthermore, moral disengagement fully mediated this effect. Taken together, the results suggest that positive affect paves the way for the commission of dishonest acts by altering how individuals evaluate the moral implications of their own behavior.
Study 1

Method

Participants and design. Eighty participants from a large U.S. university (40% male, 60% female; mean age = 20.26 years) participated in Study 1 for course credit. Each participant was randomly assigned to either a positive-affect or a neutral-affect condition.

Procedure. Participants first completed an autobiographical memory task designed to induce positive or neutral affect (Ashton-James, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chartrand, 2009; Urada & Miller, 2000). In the positive-affect condition, participants recalled a life experience that made them feel positive, uplifted, or happy. Participants in the neutral-affect condition were asked to recall their actions of the current day. Following this task, participants completed a validated and widely used survey of moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008): Using a 7-point scale, participants rated their agreement with 32 statements, such as, “It is ok to tell small lies because they don’t really do any harm” (α = .90). To check the positive-affect manipulation, we asked participants to rate their affect on 7-point scales ranging from happy to sad, pleasant to unpleasant, and good to bad (Ashton-James et al., 2009).

Results

Manipulation check. Participants in the positive-affect condition reported greater positive affect (M = 5.16, SD = 1.19) than did participants in the neutral-affect condition (M = 4.38, SD = 1.20), F(1, 78) = 8.47, p = .005, η² = .10.1 Because of the nature of the prime, participants could have recalled a moral or prosocial behavior, which could have, in turn, licensed dishonest behavior as a result of a moral self-licensing effect. However, coding of the content of the recalled events indicated that only 3 participants recalled a moral or prosocial event, thus reducing this concern (see the Supplemental Material available online).

Moral disengagement. Participants in the positive-affect condition scored higher on moral disengagement (M = 2.92, SD = 0.66) than did participants in the neutral-affect condition (M = 2.52, SD = 0.62), F(1, 78) = 8.00, p = .006, η² = .09.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 supported our hypothesis that positive affect promotes moral disengagement. Moral disengagement, in turn, may cause individuals experiencing positive affect to be more likely than individuals experiencing neutral affect to engage in dishonest behaviors, a possibility that we tested in Study 2. This is not to say, however, that the morally diluting consequences of positive affect are inevitable. Although positive affect may facilitate the ability to blur the lines between moral and immoral behaviors, self-awareness can counter this effect by making behavioral standards salient (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Therefore, in Study 2, we manipulated affect and self-awareness to investigate their interactive effects on dishonest behavior. We also measured the hypothesized mediator, moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008), to replicate the results of Study 1 and to trace the psychological process that links positive affect to dishonesty. We specifically tested our hypothesis that, among participants who are low in self-awareness, moral disengagement will mediate the relationship between positive affect and dishonesty.

Study 2

Method

Participants. Ninety students from a large U.S. university (64% male, 36% female; mean age = 21 years) participated in Study 2 for $5 and an opportunity to earn up to an additional $10.

Procedure. Participants entered the laboratory and were randomly assigned to four conditions based on a 2 (affect: positive vs. neutral) × 2 (self-awareness: high vs. low) factorial design. First, following the procedures used by Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg (2000), we manipulated self-awareness by asking participants to sit at a cubicle with a mirror or a cubicle without a mirror. Participants randomly assigned to sit at the cubicles with the mirrors were in the high-self-awareness condition, whereas the participants seated at the cubicles without the mirrors were in the low-self-awareness condition. Participants then watched a short movie clip designed to induce positive or neutral affect (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). Participants in the positive-affect condition watched a clip of a cartoon duck showering. Participants in the neutral-affect condition watched a clip of a screensaver-like animation of colored sticks (both clips are available from the corresponding author).

Next, participants performed a number-search task (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). Participants received a worksheet with 20 number-search matrices, each with a set of 12 three-digit numbers, and a red pencil to use while completing the task. Participants had 5 min to find two numbers in each matrix that added up to 10 (e.g., 4.78 and 5.22); the time allotted was not sufficient for anyone to solve all 20 matrices. For each correct answer, participants earned $0.50, for a maximum of $10. After 5 min had passed, the researcher collected the red pencil and distributed a report form, a pen, an answer key, and an envelope containing $10. Switching the red pencil and the pen disallowed participants from altering the number of problems solved after the time was up. The participants corrected their own answers, reported the number of problems that they correctly solved on the report form, compensated themselves, and then placed all of their materials in a large box.

No identifying information was apparent on any of the task materials. Therefore, as the participants’ actions appeared untraceable, participants could be dishonest by taking more...
money than they had earned. However, a system of identifying numbers written in invisible ink allowed the researcher to calculate the difference between how much money each individual earned and how much money he or she took, thus allowing for an accurate behavioral measure of dishonesty. Positive differences indicated that participants behaved dishonestly by stealing money that they did not legitimately earn.

Following the number-search task, participants completed a series of surveys that measured their perspectives on behaviors and themselves. They completed a measure of moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008; \( \alpha = .88 \)) and measures to check the affect manipulation (Ashton-James et al., 2009) and the self-awareness manipulation (Fenigstein et al., 1975; \( \alpha = .87 \)). The self-awareness scale asked participants to rate their agreement or disagreement with statements such as “I generally pay attention to my behavior” on a 7-point scale.

**Results**

**Self-awareness manipulation check.** As expected, there was a significant main effect of self-awareness condition, such that individuals in the high-self-awareness condition experienced greater levels of self-awareness (\( M = 5.50, SD = 0.94 \)) than did individuals in the low-self-awareness condition (\( M = 5.11, SD = 0.82 \)), \( F(1, 88) = 4.39, p = .04, \eta^2 = .05 \). There was no main effect of affect condition, \( F(1, 88) = 0.169, p = .68, \eta^2 = .002 \), nor a significant interaction between the affect and self-awareness conditions, \( F(1, 88) = 2.29, p = .08, \eta^2 = .07 \).

**Affect manipulation check.** As expected, individuals in the positive-affect condition reported greater positive affect (\( M = 5.15, SD = 0.86 \)) than did individuals in the neutral-affect condition (\( M = 3.50, SD = 0.51 \)), \( F(1, 88) = 120.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .58 \). There was no main effect of self-awareness condition, \( F(1, 88) = 0.03, p = .85, \eta^2 = .00 \), nor a significant interaction between the affect and self-awareness conditions, \( F(1, 88) = 1.74, p = .19, \eta^2 = .06 \).

**Moral disengagement.** A 2 (affect: positive vs. neutral) \( \times \) 2 (self-awareness: high vs. low) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on moral disengagement showed a significant main effect of self-awareness, such that individuals in the high-self-awareness condition scored lower on the moral-disengagement scale (\( M = 2.41, SD = 0.64 \)) than did individuals in the low-self-awareness condition (\( M = 2.75, SD = 0.45 \)), \( F(1, 88) = 8.64, p = .004, \eta^2 = .09 \). The results also showed a significant main effect of affect condition, such that individuals in the positive-affect condition scored higher on the moral-disengagement measure (\( M = 2.73, SD = 0.63 \)) than did individuals in the neutral-affect condition (\( M = 2.42, SD = 0.63 \)), \( F(1, 88) = 6.56, p = .01, \eta^2 = .07 \), thus replicating the results of Study 1.

As predicted, there was also a significant interaction between the self-awareness and affect conditions, \( F(1, 88) = 4.25, p = .043, \eta^2 = .05 \). In the low-self-awareness condition, participants who experienced positive affect reported greater moral disengagement (\( M = 3.02, SD = 0.45 \)) compared with participants who experienced neutral affect (\( M = 2.48, SD = 0.57 \)), \( t(45) = 3.57, p < .001 \). Conversely, in the high-self-awareness condition, participants who experienced positive affect did not report greater moral disengagement (\( M = 2.37, SD = 0.68 \)) than did participants who experienced neutral affect (\( M = 2.43, SD = 0.49 \)), \( t(41) = 0.33, p = .74 \).

**Dishonesty.** Consistent with prior research (Beamam, Klentz, Diener, & Svanum, 1979; Diener & Wallbom, 1976), results from a 2 (affect: positive vs. neutral) \( \times \) 2 (self-awareness: high vs. low) ANOVA on dishonesty showed a significant main effect of self-awareness, such that individuals in the high-self-awareness condition stole less money (\( M = \$0.16, SD = \$0.44 \)) than did individuals in the low-self-awareness condition (\( M = \$0.98, SD = \$1.11 \)), \( F(1, 88) = 20.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19 \). There was also a significant main effect of affect condition, such that individuals in the positive-affect condition stole more money (\( M = \$0.78, SD = \$1.09 \)) than did individuals in the neutral-affect condition, \( M = \$0.36, SD = \$0.70 \), \( F(1, 88) = 4.47, p = .04, \eta^2 = .05 \).

Consistent with our prediction, results also showed a significant interaction between the self-awareness and affect conditions, \( F(1, 88) = 10.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26 \) (see Fig. 1). In the low-self-awareness condition, participants who experienced positive affect stole significantly more money (\( M = \$1.27, SD = \$1.17 \)) than did participants who experienced neutral affect (\( M = \$0.12, SD = \$0.44 \)), \( t(45) = 2.27, p = .03 \). Conversely, in the high-self-awareness condition, participants who experienced positive affect did not steal significantly more money (\( M = \$0.12, SD = \$0.45 \)) than did participants who experienced neutral affect (\( M = \$0.19, SD = \$0.45 \), \( t(41) = 0.54, p = .59 \)). Additional analyses showed that, even when self-awareness was low, participants who experienced neutral affect did not steal significantly more money (\( M = \$0.55, SD = \$1.17 \)).
by increasing participants’ self-awareness, we removed the
sion of dishonest acts (Gino & Ariely, 2012). However,
This flexibility of categories thereby promotes the commis-
allows the inclusion of a broader range of behaviors as moral.
of positive affect may facilitate moral disengagement, which
steal while at the same time retaining their positive moral
self-image.
Supplemental Material), which suggests that individuals can
increase reputational concerns and cooperative behaviors.
The results make at least three important contributions to
existing research. First, most research on dishonesty, particu-
larly theft, has focused on the role of negative emotions (Pen-
ney & Spector, 2007). However, we showed that positive
affect can also cause dishonest behavior through a different
psychological process; namely, by promoting moral disen-
gagement. Future research might build on these findings by
investigating how positive affect shapes judgments, not just of
oneself, but also of the behavior of a target other. It is possible
that positive affect might broaden what an evaluator considers
to be immoral behavior, thus leading to the somewhat counter-
intuitive prediction that positive affect might make judges
more morally conservative and perhaps even more punitive
(Minson & Monin, 2012). In other words, cognitive flexibility
might give rise to moral hypocrisy by making evaluators
simultaneously harsher on other people and more lenient on
themselves. Similarly, our findings may also have implica-
tions for the literature on moral regulation. If considering past
prosocial deeds increases positive affect, then positive affect
might, in turn, lead to dishonesty, which would explain the
licensing effect (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011).
Second, the consequences of positive affect on dishonesty
may be insidious, as the ability to morally disengage from
the negative implications of their behavior may allow individuals
to steal with impunity. Indeed, our results suggest that although
positive affect promoted theft, there were no discernible
effects on participants’ self-reported moral identity (see the
Supplemental Material), which suggests that individuals can
steal while at the same time retaining their positive moral
self-image.
Finally, although conventional wisdom would suggest that
happy people are less likely than unhappy people to be dishon-
est, our work suggests that anyone who buys into this simplis-
tic cliché might be blindsided by the stealth behind the smile.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Supplemental Material
Additional supporting information may be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data

Note
1. Because conditions that induce positive affect may also increase arousal, we examined levels of affect across conditions in Studies 1 and 2 to ensure that results could be attributed to differences in positive affect rather than to differences in arousal. As expected, participants in all conditions reported equivalent levels of arousal in both studies (see the Supplemental Material available online).

References


