

Looking at the 'Dark Side' of Creativity



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An English examination at Dongguan Technology Institute in Guangdong province, China, in 2007. Students were given different test versions in an effort to prevent cheating.

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This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

Not all cheaters are creative. But apparently enough creative people cheat to interest researchers like Francesca Gino. Professor Gino is a behavioral economist at the Harvard Business School in Massachusetts. Behavioral economists use ideas from psychology to study how people make economic choices.

FRANCESCA GINO: "Interestingly, there are actually a lot of examples in the literature, novels, movies, comic books about this idea of the evil genius, but really no empirical evidence for this relationship."

BATMAN (ADAM WEST): "He's terrorized Gotham City, he's baffled the police department and he's held us up to public ridicule."

Fans of old TV shows might recognize Batman and Robin, struggling to catch one of those evil geniuses -- the Joker.

BATMAN: "Gloating on his own success, he may be planning some super crime and stumble on his own pride."

ROBIN (BURT WARD): "And how do we go about stopping him?"

BATMAN: "Just go about our normal routine and let the venomous viper trap himself."

ROBIN: "And when he does."

BATMAN: "Snap!"

ROBIN: "Caught in a bat trap!"

BATMAN: "Right."

Professor Gino was less interested in catching cheaters than understanding them. She tested volunteers to see how creative they were. Then she tested them in situations involving small amounts of money, where they could earn extra by cheating.

For example, they took a test and had to copy their answers onto another paper. But on that other paper the correct answers were already lightly marked, supposedly by mistake. The test-takers knew they would earn more for correct answers. They were led to believe they could cheat without getting caught.

The results showed that the more creative people were more likely to cheat. By comparison, people who were more intelligent but less creative were not more likely to cheat. Professor Gino says creative people are better at creating excuses to justify their actions to themselves.

FRANCESCA GINO: "What we find is that that creativity leads people to be more morally flexible, so they are much more able to come up with justification for the behavior that they're about to engage in and as a result, they are more likely to cheat."

She says workplaces that value creativity also create openings for that moral flexibility. Original thinkers may be less likely to follow all the rules.

FRANCESCA GINO: "We think that creativity really helps people resolve this conflict between something that is more longer term --which is the idea of being good and moral -- and then something that is more short term, and is the idea of advancing your own self-interest. And that does not necessarily mean getting

money out of cheating, but it could also be getting other types of pleasures or utilities."

The study shows the "dark side" of creativity, she says.

FRANCESCA GINO: "So it's not that we are trying to say that people shouldn't be creative, we are trying to say that they should be creative but they should be thinking about the fact that their creativity can be used for the wrong reasons."

Her research with Dan Ariely at Duke University appears in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report. I'm Christopher Cruise.

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