

When we do something that we find morally problematic
We feel more moral if we do it competently

BEING GOOD AT BEING BAD

Social scientists already know that moral decision-making isn't just a matter of rational thinking. When people make moral judgments their emotions, cognitive biases, and intuitions also come into play, and these can sometimes conflict with rationality.

We have recently uncovered evidence of a specific cognitive bias that can interfere with moral decision-making:

Conflation of Competence and Morality

In a series of experiments we found that when people do something that they think is immoral they feel more moral if they do the immoral thing competently than if they do it badly. Scary!

But you wouldn't do that...would you?

Imagine...

You come from a family of engravers who are famous for their artistry and expertise. And you have now reached the age where you are expected to prove that you have also mastered these skills.

To prove this, your family requires that you successfully forge and cash a cheque. You think cheque fraud is immoral, and you don't want to do this. But you also don't want to be disloyal to your family.

So now you find yourself in a foreign country walking up to a bank teller and handing him a counterfeit cheque that you have created. Your heart is pounding. Will he be able to tell that the cheque is fake?

Well, this could go one of two ways...

Option 1: Competent Counterfeiter

- ◆ Creating a counterfeit cheque requires high levels of skill. Most people just can't do it.
- ◆ But you have shown great talent and your forged cheque really is a work of art. Your attention to detail is phenomenal.
- ◆ The cashier doesn't suspect a thing. He takes your cheque and hands you your cash. You walk out of the bank knowing that the money in your pocket is there because you are very good at what you do.

So, how do you feel? How Skillful, Capable, Virtuous, and Principled? How Incompetent, Incapable, Dishonourable, and Unethical?

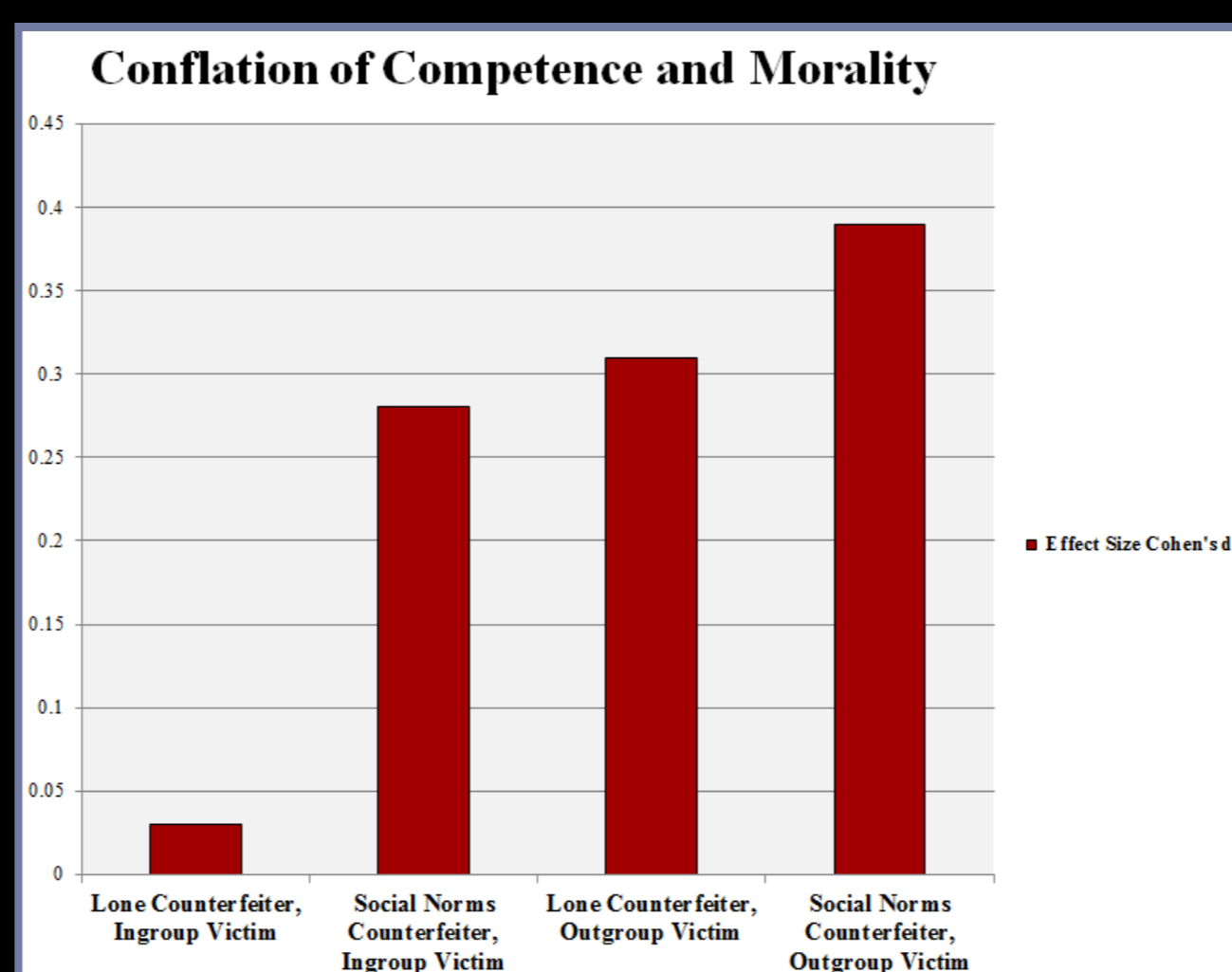
Option 2: Incompetent Counterfeiter

- ◆ Creating a counterfeit cheque requires high levels of skill. Most people just can't do it.
- ◆ And unfortunately, neither can you.
- ◆ Your "skills" are pathetic and your cheque, frankly, is an embarrassment. But luckily for you, the cashier is distracted. Even though the cheque is awful, the cashier doesn't notice, and hands you your cash.

So, how do you feel? How Skillful, Capable, Virtuous, and Principled? How Incompetent, Incapable, Dishonourable, and Unethical?

We ran 6 experiments with 1,194 participants

- People consistently felt more moral when imagining themselves as a competent, rather than an incompetent, counterfeiter.
- This was stronger when they were complying with social norms (such as family pressure) or when their victim was from an outgroup (such as a cashier in a foreign country). →
- People conflated competence and morality when judging the morality of their ingroup, but **NOT** when judging an outgroup.



This cognitive bias can allow us to fool ourselves that what we, or our ingroup, are doing is more moral than we would otherwise think.

Now that really is scary.

A cognitive bias that can make us think we're morally "good" just because we're "good at"