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Why Indiscretions Appear Youthful

By BENEDICT CAREY

She had every reason to start stealing, or so it seemed at the time. A young daughter at home. Sickly, dependent in-laws. No savings or decent income. She and her husband could barely make the rent, and here she was working at a large department store that was raking in the cash. Who would miss a few items here and there, a jacket, some cosmetics?

It was easy, too. Fake a purchase, slip the thing into a bag and walk out at the end of the day with something extra: a small donation to a worthy charity, the struggling American family.

“I knew it was wrong and I knew I would probably get caught,” said the thief, a woman in the Los Angeles area, who recently recounted her 1980s spree (anonymously, for obvious reasons) to researchers studying moral choices. She added, “After that, I really made up my mind that I was going to get my life together and get on track.”

In recent years psychologists have exposed the many ways that people subconsciously maintain and massage their moral self-image. They rate themselves as morally superior to the next person; overestimate the likelihood that they will act virtuously in the future; see their own good intentions as praiseworthy while dismissing others’ as inconsequential. And they soften their moral principles when doing a truly dirty job, like carrying out orders to exploit uninformed customers.

Now, scientists are beginning to learn how memory assists and even amplifies this righteous self-messaging. In piecing together a life story, the mind nudges moral lapses back in time and shunts good deeds forward, these new studies suggest — creating, in effect, a doctored autobiography. Recognizing this tendency in oneself, psychologists say, can both reduce the risk of lapsing into middle-aged sanctimony and increase moral vigilance for when it matters most: the present.

“We can’t make up the past, but the brain has difficulty placing events in time, and we’re able to shift elements around,” said Anne E. Wilson, a social psychologist at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. “The result is that we can create a personal history that, if not perfect, makes us feel we’re getting better and better.”

In a new paper in the journal *Emotion*, which included the tale of the department store thief, neuroscientists at Caltech provide perhaps the richest documentation of this effect to date. They recruited 100 people, ages 40 to 60, to participate in what was described as a memory study. In response to dozens of prompts — “Please talk about a time when you did something that made you feel guilty,” for instance — they poured out memories.

The researchers transcribed the recorded tales and created a database of 758 “moral memories” by singling out those that had clear moral content, whether positive or negative. One person confessed to poaching a pad of Post-it notes from an

employer, another to stealing books while growing up poor in Mexico. A third admitted cheating on her husband with the neighbor. A former drug addict recalled holding a knife to a man's throat in a robbery. ("I just remember that rush — it gave me a sense of great power.")

The database provides a detailed catalog of bad and good behavior, as well as a rough guide to what people consider most shameful. The most common bad acts were also some of the most regretted: stealing, followed by cheating (whether on a romantic partner or on a test) and lying.

To complete the study, the participants returned weeks later and rated each of their own tales on a variety of scales, including the emotions they felt at the time and the estimated date when the episode happened. After correcting for age at the time of memories (in other words, trying to take account of the lunacy of youth) the researchers identified a clear pattern: people dated their memories of moral failings about 10 years earlier, on average, than their memories of good deeds, according to Jessica R. Escobedo, co-author of the paper with Ralph Adolphs.

"The main finding is that if I ask you to tell me about a positive moral memory, you'll tell me something recent," Dr. Escobedo said. "If I ask you to tell me about bad moral memory, you're going to give me something from much further in the past."

Dr. Adolphs and Dr. Escobedo, now at Charles Drew University in Los Angeles, argue that to talk about moral lapses at all, people first needed time to reimagine themselves as having evolved — as being a different person from the one who fleeced his customers, lied to her spouse or snatched a few purses over at the senior center.

"People honestly view their past in a morally critical light, but at the same time they tend to emphasize that they have been improving," the authors concluded.

Other researchers note that many unpleasant events feel more distant than they actually are, not just morally charged ones. Students who did poorly on an exam sense the experience as further in the past than tests on which they did well, and took at about the same time. The same goes for memories of high school among young adults: those who hated their time in those locker-lined hallways feel further from their teenage selves than those who enjoyed it.

But the mind seems particularly prone to backdating when it comes to cruel, greedy or cowardly acts — the physical evidence people weigh against stand-up deeds to judge whether they are as good as their parents told them they were. In a 2001 paper titled "From Chump to Champ," Dr. Wilson and Michael Ross of the University of Waterloo demonstrated in a series of experiments that young adults described their teenage selves in far more negative terms than they did their current selves, often skewering their past judgment.

Future selves may score the best reviews of all, said David Dunning, a social psychologist at Cornell. "People seem to situate themselves in time differently than they do others," Dr. Dunning wrote in an e-mail. "Ask students what's important for

gaining an accurate impression of them and they emphasize more their unwritten future potential than they do when asked the same question about another person. We presume that future potential is more rosy than the past is.”

The psychologically buoying effect of such ascending-toward-heaven autobiographies is obvious. But redemption is also a thematic staple of the life stories that content American adults tell about themselves, said Dan McAdams, a psychologist at Northwestern and the author of “The Redemptive Self.” Such stories “are so much a part of the culture we grow up with as Americans that they seem ‘natural,’ ” Dr. McAdams said by e-mail. “But is this how people narrate their lives in all other societies?”

Probably not — at least not the happy ending, he said. But people from any society on earth would certainly recognize the first chapters, the moral stumbles, whether backdated or not.

“The weirdest thing about reading about all these bad moral choices,” Dr. Escobedo said, “is that it makes you kind of feel good about yourself. Just seeing how everyone makes mistakes and regrets not doing what was morally right: It makes you feel more attached to humanity.”