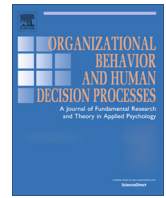




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Ethical ends: Effect of abstract mindsets in ethical decisions for the greater social good



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ABSTRACT

We explore the impact of construal level on decisions involving conflicts between multiple ethical principles. Whereas abstract mindsets are associated with a focus on ethical issues and superordinate concerns, concrete mindsets are associated with financial self-interest. With abstract mindsets, we find that people abide by rather than violate ethical principles when only the self would benefit (single principle) but they violate ethical principles when doing so is a conduit for a greater social good (multiple principles). With concrete mindsets, people violate ethical principles for personal gain with less concern for the impact on the greater social good. Specifically, with abstract mindsets, people were dishonest to secure larger donations (Study 1) and dishonest to make larger (smaller) donations to charities that supported (threatened) the greater social good (Study 2a, Study 2b) whereas with concrete mindsets, people focused more on dishonesty for personal gain (Study 1, Study 2a, Study 2b).

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Introduction

Ethical decision-making continues to capture the attention of academics and mainstream media alike. Regular reports, from theft and employee misconduct to elaborate Ponzi-schemes and Enron-like financial statement frauds, highlight the abundance of dishonest behaviors that occur when people face ethical decisions. Oftentimes, these unethical behaviors are undertaken to increase personal gain, but at times, unethical behaviors occur for the sake of the greater good.

There are many instances when unethical behaviors in one domain are done to support a greater good in another domain, rather than for personal gain alone. In essence, these are situations when doing something “wrong” enables people to do something “right.” Consider, for example, burglars who stole 1000 documents from a Pennsylvania FBI office in 1971. Peace activists wanting to reveal “massive illegal surveillance and intimidation,” by J. Edgar Hoover broke into the FBI office, stole files, and released them to the public (Isikoff, 2014). Here the burglary is clearly a dishonest act but exposing surveillance and intimidation is perceived as a greater

good. Stated differently, in this situation, dishonesty is a small price paid for the greater good. One can describe such exposé as a charitable act because the burglars did not reveal their identities for more than 42 years; they did not gain any financial or fame-related benefits from the act of writing books. However, the exposé did curb some of the government’s antidemocratic practices. In another case of decisions where unethical behaviors directly benefit a greater good, computer hackers recently stole credit card numbers that could have been used for selfish purposes, such as shopping sprees, but instead were used to make large donations to various charities (Vinograd, 2011). In other words, one ethical principle (stealing is bad) was violated in order to directly support another ethical principle (donating is good) that benefits a greater purpose.

When faced with situations in which violating an ethical principle can support a greater good or oneself, one must decide on which ends to focus and whether the ends are justified by the means. Rather than debating whether one should focus on the greater good or on oneself, in the current research, we consider when individuals will focus on one aspect or the other. Consistent with past work (e.g., Amit & Greene, 2012; Bartels, 2008; Broeders, van den Bos, Müller, & Ham, 2011; Toure-Tillery & Fishbach, 2012) suggesting that such decisions are not necessarily dispositionally constant but instead may be situationally triggered, we suggest that abstract versus concrete mindsets influence whether one will focus on benefits to a greater social good or benefits to oneself.

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Specifically, we assess the proposition that construal level theory can inform our understanding of when one will focus on outcomes that support a greater social good or on outcomes that support oneself and the influence this has on honesty. To do so, we consider situations that involve a single ethical principle and situations that involve a conflict between multiple ethical principles in order to assess the impact of construal level on which principle will be prioritized. In other words, we assess the role of abstract and concrete mindsets on whether people will focus on remaining honest, being dishonest to support a greater social good, or being dishonest to help oneself.

Research on construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) shows that people's judgments and decisions differ based on whether an abstract, high-level or concrete, low-level mindset is enacted. Past research demonstrates that an abstract mindset leads people to abide by ethical principles (Agerström & Björklund, 2009; Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). However, since an abstract mindset also focuses one on the superordinate ends (Liberman & Trope, 1998), we suggest that activating an abstract mindset will lead to different behaviors based on the impact on a greater social good. Specifically, we anticipate that by activating an abstract mindset, people will not behave dishonestly for personal gain alone, but we do anticipate that they will be dishonest when doing so provides more support for a greater social good whereas with a concrete mindset, people will consistently emphasize the subordinate focus of helping oneself. We suggest that this occurs because with an abstract mindset, people focus on the superordinate ends or greater social good inferred from the situation and prioritize it over the principle of honesty.

This manuscript is organized as follows. First, we review literature on ethical decisions where violating one ethical principle simultaneously supports a different ethical principle that emphasizes a greater social good. Then, we provide an overview of construal level theory and its ability to provide insights into situations where one ethical decision is present and where there is a conflict between two ethical principles. Next, we present three studies based on the principles of honesty and supporting a greater social good. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical applications of this research.

Theoretical overview

Ethical decision-making is a regular part of life. Oftentimes, these decisions involve a single ethical principle such as to steal or not to steal from one's employer. At other times, two ethical principles are intertwined such that a decision to adhere to or violate one ethical principle simultaneously affects a second ethical principle such as to steal or not to steal in order to do more or less to help those in need.² When the situation involves a single ethical principle, there is no conflict. However, when the situation involves a conflict between two ethical principles, then one principle will take priority over the other.

While a conflict may exist between two ethical principles, the situation may not constitute an ethical dilemma in the traditional sense. Unlike the contexts addressed in the current research, moral dilemmas are defined as "situations in which no moral choice is without undesirable moral consequences" (Ditto & Liu, 2012, p. 55). Classic examples include the trolley problem (Foot, 1967)

and footbridge problem (Thomson, 1985) in which one must decide whether to kill one person in order for several others to live and the Heinz dilemma (Kohlberg, 1969) where a husband must decide whether to steal expensive medication in order to keep his wife alive. Moral dilemmas such as these pit deontological and consequentialist perspectives against each other, forcing people to decide whether one presumably unethical act (taking one life or stealing) can be justified if it results in what most people would consider greater ethical ends (saving multiple lives or curing one's dying spouse). While traditional dilemmas such as these are important, we explore a different type of conflict.

The current research explores situations where "undesirable moral consequences" (Ditto & Liu, 2012, p. 55) are not required. We lift this restriction. That is, while with traditional dilemmas, something negative must occur (e.g., one or many must die; stealing is required or a loved one will die), in the current research ethical principles do not have to be violated to help a greater social good but, violating an ethical principle does allow one to do even more for the greater social good. In other words, the conflict that exists between two ethical principles is self-imposed rather than being imposed solely by the situation. People are freed up to abide by both ethical principles but since there is a conflict (i.e., abide by both principles or violate one principle to do even more good) they must decide which one takes priority and that will ultimately influence behaviors.

Within such conflicts, the beneficiary may also differ such as violating a principle for personal gain alone or for the sake of another. A white lie may be told not for one's own gain but to help another person financially (Erat & Gneezy, 2012; Gneezy, 2005) or principles of fairness may be violated by unequally distributing resources in order to help a person to whom empathy is felt (Batson, Batson, et al., 1995; Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). Beyond an individual beneficiary, ethical principles may also be violated for the sake of more abstract notions such as fairness. Recent work, for instance, has found that by manipulating wealth-based inequity experimentally (e.g., wealthy graders/poor problem solvers), people will behave dishonestly in an attempt to do more to restore equality (Gino & Pierce, 2009, 2010). The participants did not have to violate any ethical principles. They could have remained honest and done a little to restore equality (i.e., moderate earnings for both poor and wealthy solvers) but instead they violated the principle of honesty in order to do even more toward restoring financial equality (i.e., dishonest to give more (less) money to poor (wealthy) problem solvers).

Pertinent to the current work, situational factors may also influence the extent to which one deems there to be value in protecting a greater organizational good. In a recent conceptual paper, Umphress and Bingham (2011) posit that identification with an organization and a desire to reciprocate an employers' considerate treatment are situational factors that influence whether employees violate ethical principles to do more to help an abstract, greater organizational good. Violating these principles can take many forms from placing deceptive information into a bid in order to obtain a contract (Vardi & Wiener, 1996) to lying about one's identity in order to gather competitive information. Flight attendants have even acknowledged lying to customers when they believed that it would help protect the airline's image (Scott, 2003). This deceit was said to have taken place over concerns for the detriment that could occur to the greater organizational good if the company's reputation was severely damaged (e.g., falling shareholder value, co-worker job loss), rather than concerns directly regarding personal gain.

Across these scenarios, a common theme emerges; specifically, when there is only one ethical principle at play, people must decide whether to abide by or violate the principle but when two ethical principles present a conflict, people negotiate between potential

² In the current research, we conceptualize unethical behaviors as those that violate hypernorms or widely held standards and principles of ethical behaviors based on social norms or laws (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Thus, a behavior that violates hypernorms is classified as unethical, even if the consequences of the action support another ethical principle. We classify dishonesty, for instance, as unethical, regardless of whether it benefits or harms either the self or another entity. That is, while the outcome may have ethical or beneficial overtones, the behavior itself is unethical if it violates hypernorms.

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