

Understanding ordinary unethical behavior: why people who value morality act immorally

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Cheating, deception, organizational misconduct, and many other forms of unethical behavior are among the greatest challenges in today's society. As regularly highlighted by the media, extreme cases and costly scams are common. Yet, even more frequent and pervasive are cases of 'ordinary' unethical behavior — unethical actions committed by people who value and care about morality but behave unethically when faced with an opportunity to cheat. In this article, I review the recent literature in behavioral ethics and moral psychology on ordinary unethical behavior.

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Cheating, deception, organizational misconduct, and many other forms of unethical behavior are among the greatest challenges in today's society. As regularly highlighted by the media, extreme cases and costly scams (e.g., Enron, Bernard Madoff) are common. Yet, even more frequent and pervasive are cases of 'ordinary' unethical behavior — unethical actions committed by people who value about morality but behave unethically when faced with an opportunity to cheat. A growing body of research in behavioral ethics and moral psychology shows that even good people (i.e., people who care about being moral) can and often do bad things [1,2^{••}].¹ Examples include cheating on taxes, deceiving in interpersonal relationships, overstating performance and contributions to teamwork, inflating business expense reports, and lying in negotiations.

When considered cumulatively, ordinary unethical behavior causes considerable societal damage. For instance, employee theft causes U.S. companies to lose approximately \$52 billion per year [4]. This empirical evidence is striking in light of social–psychological research that, for decades, has robustly shown that people typically value honesty, believe strongly in their own morality, and strive to maintain a positive self-image as moral individuals [5,6].

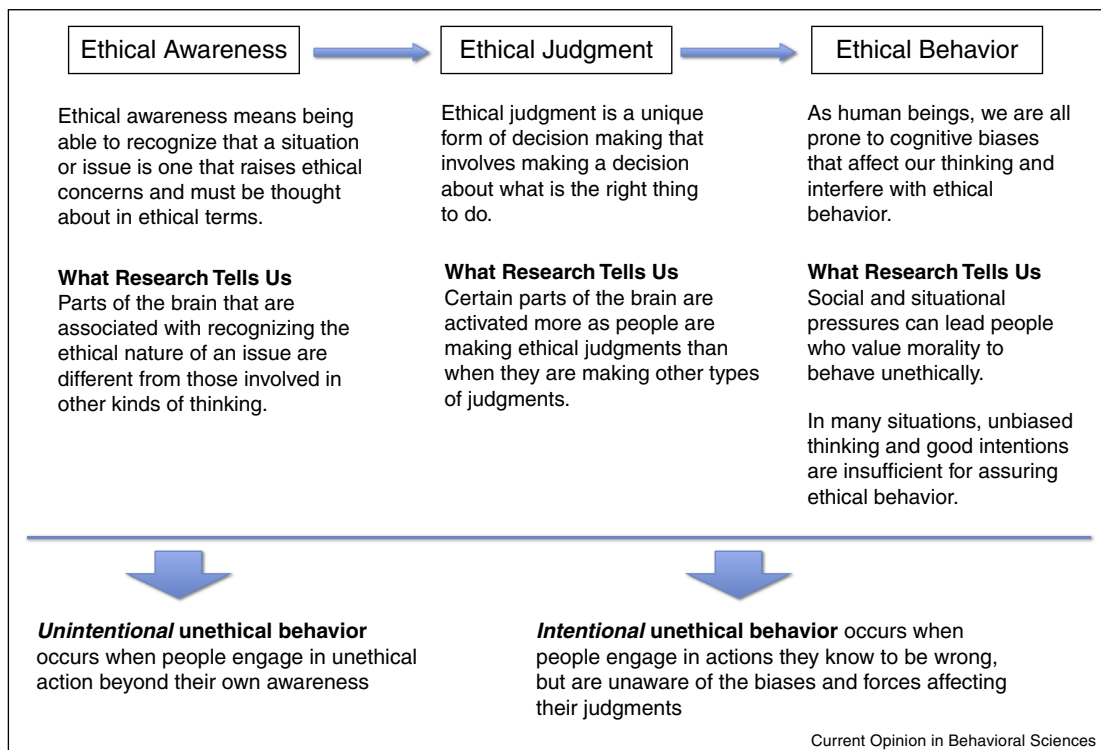
The gap between individuals' actual dishonest behavior and their desire to maintain a positive moral self-image has captured the attention of scholars across fields. In management, work on this topic began with Brief [7] and Treviño [8]. Since the 1960s, scholars have studied the determinants of ethical and unethical behavior, beginning with the assumption that even people who value morality sometimes do bad things [9].

In both psychology and behavioral ethics, many scholars have studied the factors that lead people astray in the ethics domain. Two main streams of research can be identified. The first stream of research consists in work that examines predictable situational and social forces that lead individuals to behave unethically. This body of research generally focuses on behaviors that people know to be wrong, but that they engage in because they are unaware of the forces that are leading them to cross ethical boundaries (*intentional* unethical behavior). The second stream of research is about bounded ethicality, people's tendency to engage in unethical action without even knowing that they are doing so (*unintentional* unethical behavior). **Figure 1** summarizes the main steps involved in ethical decision making and shows at what point in the process intentional and unintentional unethical behaviors can occur.

Though different in many ways, these streams of behavioral ethics research share two empirically supported assumptions [1]. The first one is that morality is dynamic and malleable [10^{••}], rather than being a stable trait that characterizes individuals. That is, individuals do not behave consistently across different situations, even when they strongly value morality or when they see being an ethical person as central to their self-concept. The second assumption is that most of the unethical behavior we observe in society is the result of the actions of

¹ A commonly-accepted definition of unethical behavior is the following: acts that have harmful effects on others and are 'either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community' ([3^{••}]: 367). Importantly, throughout this paper, I use the terms (un)ethical and (im)moral interchangeably.

Figure 1



The steps involved in ethical decision making [40].

numerous individuals who, although they value morality and want to be seen as ethical people, regularly fail to resist the temptation to act dishonestly or even fail to recognize that there is a moral issue at stake in the decision they are making.

Intentional dishonesty: ethicality is predictable

Studies on intentional unethical behavior have identified a series of situational and social forces that lead people to behave unethically. The first few demonstrations of this phenomenon come from well-known experiments by Milgram and Zimbardo. For instance, in Milgram's famous experiment [11^{*}], an experimental assistant (an accomplice) asked each study participant to play the role of a teacher and administer 'electric shocks' to another participant, 'the learner' (who, in actuality, was a confederate or experimental assistant), each time the learner made a mistake on a word-learning exercise. After each mistake, the participant was asked to administer a shock of higher voltage, which began to result in apparent audibly increasing distress from the learner. Over 60 percent of the study participants 'shocked' their participant through to the highest voltage level, which they could see was marked clearly as potentially dangerous [11^{*}]. However, only a few people predicted they would behave in

this way when asked to imagine the situation and predict their actions. These results demonstrate that the situation in which an authority demands obedience rather than a person's character causes one to harm an innocent person. The Stanford Prison Experiment Zimbardo conducted was equally shocking in the results it produced [12^{*}]. Stanford undergraduate students were randomly assigned to be either guards or prisoners in a mock prison setting for a two-week experiment. After less than a week, the experiment was stopped abruptly because the 'guards' were engaging in sadism and brutality, and the 'prisoners' were suffering from depression and extreme stress. Normal Stanford students who participated in it had been transformed due to the situation they had been put in (serving as guards in a prison).

Building on this early work, research has examined what people do when they are placed in situations in which they have the opportunity to behave unethically — for instance, by lying about their performance on a task [13^{**}]. Mazar *et al.* [13^{**}] propose that people balance two competing motivations when deciding whether to act unethically: the desire to gain some sort of personal reward (e.g., a larger monetary payoff), and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept. Using tasks where people can lie by inflating their performance for greater

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