

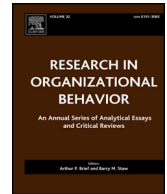


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Moral character: What it is and what it does

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ABSTRACT

Moral character can be conceptualized as an individual's disposition to think, feel, and behave in an ethical versus unethical manner, or as the subset of individual differences relevant to morality. This essay provides an organizing framework for understanding moral character and its relationship to ethical and unethical work behaviors. We present a tripartite model for understanding moral character, with the idea that there are motivational, ability, and identity elements. The motivational element is *consideration of others* – referring to a disposition toward considering the needs and interests of others, and how one's own actions affect other people. The ability element is *self-regulation* – referring to a disposition toward regulating one's behavior effectively, specifically with reference to behaviors that have positive short-term consequences but negative long-term consequences for oneself or others. The identity element is *moral identity*—referring to a disposition toward valuing morality and wanting to view oneself as a moral person. After unpacking what moral character is, we turn our attention to what moral character does, with a focus on how it influences unethical behavior, situation selection, and situation creation. Our research indicates that the impact of moral character on work outcomes is significant and consequential, with important implications for research and practice in organizational behavior.

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Introduction

Imagine the worst possible employee. What personality traits does this person have? Putting intelligence and cognitive abilities aside, you could describe the employee as irresponsible, lazy, deceitful, and self-centered. In other words, a perfect mix of low Conscientiousness and low Honesty–Humility—a combination of traits that psychologists Lee and Ashton (2012 p. 58) refer to as “an employer’s worst nightmare”. This nightmare employee would also have low levels of guilt proneness, meaning that he or she would anticipate little to no negative feelings about acting in selfish and harmful ways (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2013). As a result of having a silent conscience, this person would frequently engage in counterproductive behaviors that harm the organization and the people within it. Finally, in addition to a lack of consideration of others and poor self-regulation abilities, the worst possible employee would be low in moral identity, meaning that being a good person would be irrelevant to – or even in contrast to – his or her self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Simply put, the worst possible employee has low levels of moral character, in addition to any other negative qualities he or she might have regarding skills and abilities.

The goal of this essay is to provide an organizing framework for understanding moral character and its relationship to ethical and unethical work behaviors. If we are successful, this will lead to future research that informs and potentially challenges what we currently know, or think we know, about moral character at this time. The study of character, while no longer in its infancy, is still quite a ways away from mature adulthood. However, given the progress that has been made during the past two decades in the study of personality, behavioral ethics, and moral psychology, we are optimistic for its continued growth and development.

Morality is rooted in social relationships

Morality and ethics are terms used to describe standards of right and wrong conduct. We use these terms interchangeably, while noting that some fields prefer the former (e.g., social/personality psychology), whereas other fields prefer the latter (e.g., organizational behavior/management). Although the question of “what is ethical” has been the subject of much debate and definitional ambiguity within the organizational behavior literature (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Brief, 2012; Tenbrunsel

& Smith-Crowe, 2008), there is now growing consensus among psychologists that what is right versus wrong should be conceptualized as that which regulates social relationships and facilitates group living (Graham et al., 2011; Greene, 2013; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Morality is not about subjugating personal self-interest, but rather about balancing self-interest with the interests of other people (Frimer, Schaefer, & Oakes, 2014; Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, & Riches, 2011).¹ Simply put, morality is embedded in our social relationships and our need to regulate them effectively (Rai & Fiske, 2011).

The moral system contains both prescriptive and proscriptive regulations based on the behavioral activation and inhibition regulatory systems (Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013). That is to say, ethics and morality contain “dos” and “don’ts”, “shoulds” and “should nots”; these guidelines govern our behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Moral motivations come in various forms, some of which are personal (e.g., self-restraint, industriousness), others of which are interpersonal (e.g., not harming, helping), and still others that are at the level of the group or collective (e.g., social order, social justice) (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013).

The different social settings and types of relationships we find ourselves in can make different motivations salient at different times (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Thus, the same moral person will act very differently when group-based moral motives, such as loyalty and communal solidarity, are activated, as compared to when interpersonal moral motives, such as fairness and reciprocity, are activated (cf. Campbell, 1965). Indeed, this is exactly what Cohen, Montoya, and Insko (2006) found in an experiment examining how people with high levels of the moral

¹ In an interesting parallel to how morality is about balancing self-interests with the interests of others, negotiation and conflict management scholars advocate this same strategy for creating value through integrative agreements, based on Pruitt’s dual-concerns model of conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Thus, “best practices” for ethical behavior correspond to best practices for negotiation and conflict management in that both encourage a problem-solving approach that balances strong concerns for others’ interests with strong concerns for one’s own interests (as opposed to exclusive concern for others or one’s self). Although moral character has been found to decrease the likelihood of unethical negotiation behaviors (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011), to our knowledge, there is currently little data available that speak to whether moral character is associated with greater value creation in negotiation. The relationship between moral character and negotiation outcomes is likely more complex than the relationship between moral character and unethical behavior given that value creation hinges on the inherent interdependence between the negotiating parties.

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