

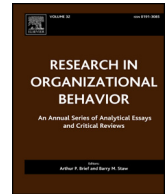


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## Morality rebooted: Exploring simple fixes to our moral bugs

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### ABSTRACT

Ethics research developed partly in response to calls from organizations to understand and solve unethical behavior. We examine two approaches to mitigating unethical behavior: (1) *values-oriented* approaches that broadly appeal to individuals' preferences to be more moral, and (2) *structure-oriented* approaches that redesign specific incentives, tasks, and decisions to reduce temptations to cheat in the environment. This paper explores how these approaches can change behavior. We argue that integrating both approaches while avoiding incompatible strategies can reduce the risk of adverse effects that arise from taking a single approach and leverage the strengths of both approaches.

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Following the corporate scandals at Enron, Halliburton, Worldcom, and several other notable firms, many called on business schools to reorient the moral compass of their students and on government to rethink policies. In response to these calls throughout the last decade, business schools have devoted more classroom time to ethics and policy makers have introduced new regulations. Despite these efforts, more scandals, such as the Madoff, Olympus, and the Libor cases, have surfaced year after year. These events may partially explain the growing interest in ethics research; consequently, the field of behavioral ethics has thrived (Bazerman & Moore, 2012; Brief, 2012; Messick & Bazerman, 1996; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Although we know far more now than we did before about the conditions under which individuals are likely to behave unethically (see Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Monin & Jordan, 2009 for recent reviews), our current understandings are still primarily descriptive. We have not yet identified the main strategies groups and organizations can adopt to implement change and tested their effectiveness empirically (Moore & Gino, 2013). This paper responds to the challenge of advancing our current knowledge of unethical behavior from largely descriptive research to a framework aimed to reduce or even eliminate unethical behavior in organizations.

One of the robust findings of behavioral ethics research is that dishonesty is difficult to change due to three main reasons. First, individuals often engage in unethical behavior without the awareness that they are doing so (Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005). Second, even when people recognize they are acting unethically, they fail to realize that social and situational forces are pushing them to cross ethical boundaries (Moore & Gino, 2013). Thus, morality is both dynamic and malleable (Monin & Jordan, 2009): even if we care about being moral, most of us—under certain social or situational pressures—act unethically. Finally, unethical behaviors are often difficult to detect, especially when observers of the behavior operate under motivated biases (e.g., people fear being harmed if they detect others cheating; see Gino, Moore, & Bazerman, 2009). This paper responds to the difficulty of reducing unethical behavior with a framework that takes into account the behavioral realities that challenge all of us.

Our goal is twofold. First, we identify approaches to mitigating unethical behavior based on empirical evidence from existing research in moral psychology and behavioral ethics. Second, we develop a framework for evaluating different strategies with prescriptive recommendations on how to reduce unethical behaviors. By prescriptive recommendations, we mean actionable knowledge—as opposed to knowledge that explains or describes a phenomenon—that mitigates unethical behavior (Brief &

Dukerich, 1991). We derive our prescriptive recommendations from both descriptive research about the antecedents and consequences of unethical behavior and prescriptive research showing the (in)effectiveness of organizationally relevant interventions.

Drawing on the wealth of research on unethical behavior accumulated over the last decade that explains why individuals act immorally and the conditions that foster dishonesty, we dichotomize ethical fixes into two broad categories: *values-oriented* and *structure-oriented* approaches. Values-oriented approaches shift people's preferences to be moral, whereas structure-oriented approaches seek to design incentives, decisions, and tasks such that the unethical option is less tempting. Based on theory and empirical findings, we propose that adopting both values-oriented and structure-oriented approaches mitigates the risk of adverse effects from one strategy taken from a single approach. We discuss areas for future research and implications for theory, as well as business practice and policy.

### Why do people act unethically?

In this paper, we use Jones' (1991) definition of unethical behaviors as those actions that have harmful effects on others people and are “either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community” (p. 367), comprised of groups, organizations or societies more broadly. Based on this definition, examples of unethical behaviors include—among others—violations of ethical norms or standards (whether legal or not), stealing, lying and cheating (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007; Treviño et al., 2006). We use the term “unethical” to include cheating and acting dishonestly, immorally, and deceptively.

Traditional models in economics on crime suggest that individuals commit wrongful acts when the benefits of wrongdoing outweigh the costs for situations in which they are faced with the decision to act ethically or unethically (Becker, 1978; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Prendergast, 1999). The distinguishing feature of these models is that individuals act out of self-interest and that they consciously choose to act either ethically or unethically, depending on the ratio of benefits to costs.

Although traditional versions of these “rational” models provide a parsimonious framework for understanding individual's unethical actions, they do not focus on social attributes that a decision-maker might value, particularly the degree to which individuals value being honest. For example, whereas standard economic models would expect individuals to cheat to the maximum possible extent if there were no external costs, laboratory studies repeatedly show that most individuals cheat only a little bit—far from the maximum amount (Gino, Ayal, &

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