



The motivation and inhibition of breaking the rules: Personal values structures predict unethicality



Gilad Feldman^{a,*}, Melody Manchi Chao^b, Jiing-Lih Farh^b, Anat Bardi^c

^a Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 603 East Daniel St., Champaign, IL 61820, United States

^b Department of Management, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

^c Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway University of London, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 May 2015

Revised 16 September 2015

Accepted 24 September 2015

Available online 9 October 2015

Keywords:

Personal values

Basic motivations

Unethicality

Unethical behavior

Values circumplex

ABSTRACT

We theorized and tested the relationship of personal value systems with unethical attitudes and behavior. Results from three studies using 16 diverse multi-national samples ($N = 107,087$) demonstrated the complexity of motivations underlying unethicality. Across contexts and cultures, for attitudes (Study 1 meta-analysis) and behaviors in the lab (Study 2) and in real-life (Study 3), we consistently found that the values theory circumplex structure predicted the inhibition and motivation of unethicality. Unethicality was positively associated with self-enhancement values and negatively associated with self-transcendence and conservation values. However, self-transcendence and conservation values were associated with the inhibition of different types of unethicality. The relationship of openness-to-change values with unethicality was generally positive but the effect size varied depending on context.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

What drives people to act unethically? What drives people to inhibit unethicality? Recent ethics scandals in business and academia have highlighted the importance of understanding the motivations underlying unethical behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Pulfrey & Butera, 2013; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). A common reaction to these scandals is that such behavior is due to failing moral standards caused by lack of values, calling societies and organizations to promote values that would reduce such behavior (e.g., Zahra, Priem, & Rasheed, 2005). Yet, despite this intuition that values would serve a critical role in motivating ethical decision making and behavior, there are important theoretical gaps in the understanding of how personal values are associated with ethics and whether some values are more desirable in inhibiting unethicality than others, and under what circumstances.

The current investigation addresses these concerns by examining the motivational basis of unethicality using the theory of personal values (Schwartz, 1992) – long term desirable goals that reflect what is important to people in their lives. Values are especially relevant for morality and ethics as they guide one's identity

and help shape one's self in reference to others (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). The values theory highlights a universally recognized circumplex structure of inter-related values on two orthogonal bipolar dimensions – self-enhancement versus self-transcendence and openness-to-change versus conservation (explained in detail below; Schwartz, 2011). The values circumplex structure enables the understanding of motivational tensions underlying unethical attitudes and behavior. Using this theory, we examine the underlying long-term motivations associated with unethicality and suggest that personal values and their overarching circumplex structure are meaningfully related to and predictive of unethicality. Previous literature examining the relationship between personal values and unethicality has mostly focused on the relationship between individual values categories (e.g., achievement or self-enhancement) and under specific contexts (specific cultures or domains) resulting in mixed findings and inconsistent results (discussed below). We aim to extend previous literature by theorizing how the personal values circumplex structure, which encompasses universally recognized personal values and highlights the tensions between them, can serve as a theoretical basis for understanding the motivational tensions driving and inhibiting unethicality. Although ethics are generally considered contextual and culturally bound (Cullen, Parboteeah, & Hoegl, 2004; Haidt, 2001, 2008; Sverdlik, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2012), we further aim to demonstrate that the universal structure of personal values predicts unethicality across demographics and cultures, suggesting

* Corresponding author. Current affiliation: Maastricht University, Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience.

E-mail addresses: giladfel@gmail.com (G. Feldman), mchao@ust.hk (M.M. Chao), mmfarh@ust.hk (J.-L. Farh), Anat.Bardi@rhul.ac.uk (A. Bardi).

that cultural differences in the endorsement of values can explain cultural differences in ethicality.

We conducted three studies to examine the predictive powers of the personal values structure for unethicity, offering the following contributions: First, we examine the values – unethicity link for both unethicity attitudes (Study 1) and actual unethical behavior (Study 2), with a first demonstration of the relationship in naturalistic behavior on Facebook (Study 3). Second, rather than focusing on a single value category, we examine values structures as a whole, showing a consistent theoretically driven sinusoidal relationship between values in the circumplex structure and unethicity. Finally, although ethical norms and morality are often regarded as complex notions that are dependent on personal views, culture, and context, we demonstrate effects that extend across unethicity measures, sample characteristics, and cultures, and are therefore strikingly generalizable.

1.1. Unethicity

By *unethicity* we refer to both the intentions to engage, the attitudes toward, and the actual participation in behaviors that violate widely accepted social ethical norms (Rest & Barnett, 1986). Such behaviors may include lying (dishonesty), deceit, cheating, stealing, sabotage, and bribery as active behaviors, as well as behaviors that may appear less active such as concealment of others' misconduct and violation of laws or prevalent moral codes through inaction.

There has been growing interest in research examining determinants of unethicity with hundreds of studies in the last two decades, yet recent comprehensive reviews (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño et al., 2006) and meta-analyses (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Pan & Sparks, 2012) have revealed several important conceptual and empirical gaps in the literature. Kish-Gephart et al. (2010) reviewed 30 years of behavioral ethics and highlighted several important directions, calling for an overarching organizing theory that would help gain a better understanding of the underlying motivations that drive or inhibit unethical behavior and calling for studies with diverse methodology across samples. Treviño et al. (2006) recognized an over-emphasis of cognitive aspects over motivational drives in behavioral ethics research and have called for further research that would combine theory development with methodological rigor into this relatively neglected area of study.

1.2. Personal values

To address calls in the ethics literature we examine the role of basic motivations – personal values. Personal values are abstract long-term motivational goals reflecting desirable guiding principles and beliefs of what the person considers important in life (e.g., status, fairness; Schwartz, 1992). Values are considered central to the self, stable, enduring, universal, and transsituational (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990). The most widely used theory of personal values (Schwartz, 1992) groups personal values into ten categories of universal meaning that show consistent structure of relationships along two bi-polar dimensions on a two-dimensional circular model – self enhancement (power, achievement, and sometimes hedonism) versus self-transcendence (benevolence, universalism) and openness to change (self-direction, stimulation, and sometimes hedonism) versus conservation (tradition, security, conformity). The relationship between different values follows a universally consistent circumplex pattern where values that share a motivation, and are therefore more likely to be closer in level of importance, appear closer on the circumplex (see Fig. 1). Values appearing opposite to each other on the circumplex reflect tension between two opposing

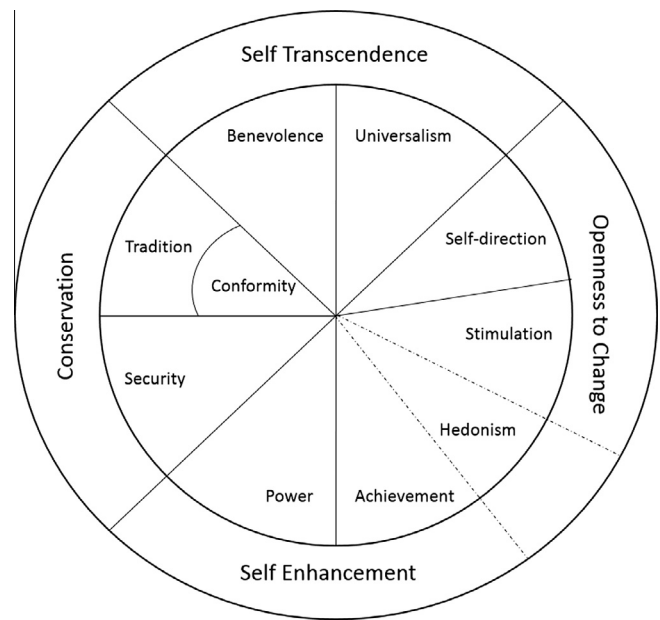


Fig. 1. The theoretical structure of personal values.

motivations. This theoretical conceptualization of values regards values as a system rather than as disconnected singular values (Schwartz, 1992, 1996) and has found consistent empirical support across over 75 countries around the world (Schwartz, 2011).

Personal values are transsituational and relatively stable motivational constructs and therefore differ from specific and more contextual goals (Maio, 2010). Values are considered inherently desirable representations of social cognitions that are generally accessible and quite easily articulated or discussed (for a discussion of the differences between personal values, attitudes, goals, needs, and traits, see Maio, 2010; Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002). The importance of one's values to the self suggests that values should be reflected in behavior and choices made in life (Lewin, 1951). Although values are abstract concepts, there is ample evidence that personal values play a significant role in people's attitudes, decision making processes, and everyday life behaviors. This suggests that people who endorse certain values have stronger motivations to act on these values and thus tend to pursue behaviors that express these values (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Roccas & Sagiv, 2010).

1.3. Personal values and unethicity

Values are especially important in the cases of morality and ethics and their related behaviors as they are an internalization of social outlook which guides one's identity and shapes one's self in reference to others (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). Values form the basis for what constitutes legitimate behavior leading to the formation of moral perceptions and attitudes that may drive decisions to act or constrain action. Values are often ideals which people use to morally justify their actions to the self or articulate their moral beliefs, identity, and reasoning to their surroundings (Hitlin, 2011). Moreover, values and moral principles are both abstract guides of desirable and positive long term goals that transcend specific circumstances (Sverdlik et al., 2012).

Until recently, studies examining the relationship between specific values and unethicity have shown very mixed findings and limited support (see [supplementary materials](#) for a summary of studies). For example, the link between achievement values and unethicity has been shown as both positive (Pulfrey & Butera, 2013; Watson, Berkley, & Papamarcos, 2009) and negative

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7326652>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7326652>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)