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Behavioral ethics: a story of increased breadth and depth

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As the narrative of the behavioral ethics field continues to unfold, we take pause to note the recent research in this domain, highlighting areas of increased depth and increased breadth. Depth is revealed in the growing literatures focused on the role of the self in ethical decision-making and the distinction between intentional and unintentional unethical behavior. Breadth is revealed in work that considers the role others play in our ethical judgments, perceptions and attributions, an emerging bridge between fairness and ethics literatures, and a return to personality-based theories of ethics. We conclude with a call for more macro and interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as greater attention to theory building and ethics education.

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The field of behavioral ethics was 'based on the conviction that there are many domains of research in psychology and behavioral economics that are relevant to business ethics' [1]. Many years passed before the name, behavioral ethics, took hold, and yet the 'field without a name' was prolific. Since then, the pace of research has accelerated, generating multiple literature reviews [2–4,5••]. Our goal is not to replicate those comprehensive examinations but rather to identify a narrative unfolding in the present moment, paying particular attention to the depth and breadth that now defines the field. In doing so, we focus on select and recent articles, analyzing them within the context of the behavioral ethics story that had been told prior to them.

Digging deep: developing depth in the field

Two themes play a dominant role in the behavioral ethics story: a focus on the self and the distinction (and sometimes debate) between intentional and unintentional unethical behavior.

Focus on the self

The role of the self has taken on an increasingly larger role in the study of ethics. Playing a minor role in earlier reviews, the self catapults to a starring role in more recent reviews. Two streams of work characterize the focus on the self.

One stream of work focuses on the self in the context of one's self-view. A recent review summarizes the role of the self in ethics research by noting that 'not everyone needs to feel like a saint; they just want to avoid feeling like a sinner' [6, page 2]. In other words, our ethical behavior is closely tied to how we view ourselves: how we view ourselves shapes our ethical behavior and our ethical behavior shapes how we view ourselves. Work on organizational courage similarly emphasizes the role of identity, and in particular, incongruities between one's self and social identities, and its relation to courageous behavior [7•]. Thus, ethical decision-making is a motivated, reciprocal process, in which the self plays an important part.

This starring role is apparent in mixed-methods work in which ongoing self-evaluations influence one's behaviors related to 'being green' [8]. This work reveals the dynamic process through which one's self-view is evaluated. Self-view is neither static, nor all good or all bad. Doubts play an important role in self-view and one's support for environmental issues can grow or subside based on these doubts. Similarly, the desire for a positive self-view shapes the conditions under which one favors prosocial initiatives over more instrumental initiatives [9].

Self-threat and threat construal are recurring themes in this research. Self-threat is anything that makes it difficult to retain a positive self-view. Anxiety leads to threat perception, which increases self-interested unethical behavior, while threat construal shapes whether an individual is able to break the link between being morally disengaged and behaving unethically [10,11•]. Priming a sense of security (e.g. secure attachment) changes how threat is construed, and thus, serves as an ethical intervention that improves ethical behavior.

Research also shows that financial deprivation leads to more cheating because it shifts one's moral standards; behavior that would have once been a self-threat becomes acceptable, allowing one's self-view to remain intact [12]. Similarly, gradually increasing indiscretions lead to a slippery slope of unethical behavior over time, a finding that aligns with the role of shifting standards in reducing self-threat [13]. And, a fascinating relationship between

creativity and dishonesty suggests that a reconstrual of the situation (e.g. self-threat) is conducive to unethical behavior [14].

New thinking leverages these insights about the self in a broad theory of ethical decision-making and develops a model for how to improve ethical decision-making [15•]. This work brings important concepts from the self-literature — self-threat, self-enhancement, and self-protection — more directly into the ethics context. Another stream of research focuses on one's self-regulatory resources, exploring the effects of factors such as challenging goals, the trajectory of the challenge, social influence, and even caffeine [16,17]. Repeated exposure to violations of moral principles is also linked to the (lack of) availability of regulatory resources, which in turn impacts personal and work domains [18•]. Closer study pinpoints an important nuance in the relationship between depletion and unethical behavior, showing that depletion does not lead to unethical behavior when the behavior does not help satisfy the person's need [19].

Intentional versus unintentional unethical behavior

The study of behavioral ethics has paralleled advances in the behavioral sciences. Specifically, 'dual-process' and System 1 and System 2 models have emerged as more accurate models of human thought than more traditional models, which assumed awareness and intentionality [20]. Today, we are not debating whether unintentional unethical behavior occurs or even whether System 1 or System 2 decisions are better. Rather, researchers are exploring when unintentional unethical behavior occurs and its potential antecedents and consequences [2,3]. A central question lies in the role of automaticity in ethical decision-making with both intuition and reasoning seen as simultaneously needed to make ethical choices [21]. In this work, integrative complexity, which refers to how many dimensions of the decision one considers and the extent to which these dimensions are integrated in one's decision-making, is found to be curvilinearly related to unethical decisions such that a moderate amount of complexity leads to more ethical decisions (as compared to low or high degrees of complexity).

Ethical behavior is also shaped by subconscious priming, reinforcing the dual roles of conscious and unconscious mental processes [17]. Disgust, an emotion often linked to subconscious processing, increases self-interested, unethical behaviors through the promotion of one's own welfare [22]. The degree to which one is operating in an abstract versus concrete mindset is also consequential for how individuals weigh personal versus social gain [23], offering another example of the influence of unconscious mental processes. Along these lines, an exhaustive review of the moral intuition literature teases apart the process versus the content of moral intuition [24•]. Moral intuitions are described as most relevant to situations that have moral relevance but involve uncertainty and social tension, and are considered to have implications for a range of topics such as leadership, corruption, ethics education, and divestiture socialization.

Recent work also brings a neuroscientific perspective to the study of these mental processes, concluding that 'morality is supported not by a single brain circuitry or structure, but by several circuits overlapping with other complex processes' [25•]. This review of the neuroscientific literature contrasts rational, effortful, explicit mental processes with emotional, quick, and intuitive processes, and highlights the debate that still exists about how these processes interact.

Finally, a working paper by Chugh and Kern challenges broad-strokes references to automatic mental processes without greater precision about what specifically is occurring. Using the 'four horsemen of automaticity' — intentionality, awareness, controllability, and efficiency — they highlight that an unintentional unethical behavior can be highly automatic on some dimensions while not being highly automatic on other dimensions [26]. Greater precision about the operation of these processes will deepen our understanding of what it means for unethical behavior to occur 'unintentionally'.

Casting a wide net: enhancing the breadth of the field

The streams of research devoted to the role of the self and the presence or absence of automaticity in unethical behavior have deepened the field of behavioral ethics. In parallel, new characters are making an appearance, including actors other than the self, fairness and justice, and an examination of 'bad and good apple' traits.

'It's not all about me'

Though the role of the self remains dominant, this siloed view is augmented by consideration of the role that others play in ethical judgments, perceptions and attributions. The presence or consideration of others links to both ethical as well as unethical behavior. On the positive side, others can make us more moral. For example, those who are socially connected are more likely to make utilitarian judgments independent of the affect that they feel [27]. A series of papers puts consideration of others as one of the three pillars of moral character [28••,29], arguing that 'morality is rooted in social relations' [28••]. Others may mitigate the impact of resource depletion on unethical behavior if they are instrumental in achieving social consensus on an issue [30]. In addition to the study of the effect others have on behavior, attention has also been directed to 'others' as a dependent variable, revealing a potentially unexpected accuracy in the judgment of others' moral traits [31].