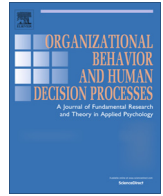




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## Blind loyalty? When group loyalty makes us see evil or engage in it

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## ABSTRACT

Loyalty often drives corruption. Corporate scandals, political machinations, and sports cheating highlight how loyalty's pernicious nature manifests in collusion, conspiracy, cronyism, nepotism, and other forms of cheating. Yet loyalty is also touted as an ethical principle that guides behavior. Drawing on moral psychology and behavioral ethics research, we developed hypotheses about when group loyalty fosters ethical behavior and when it fosters corruption. Across nine studies, we found that individuals primed with loyalty cheated less than those not primed (Study 1A and 1B). Members more loyal to their fraternities (Study 2A) and students more loyal to their study groups (Study 2B) also cheated less than their less loyal counterparts due to greater ethical salience when they pledged their loyalty (Studies 3A and 3B). Importantly, competition moderated these effects: when competition was high, members more loyal to their fraternities (Study 4) or individuals primed with loyalty (Studies 5A and 5B) cheated more.

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*Loyalty is the pledge of truth to oneself and others.*

[Ada Velez-Boardley]

## 1. Introduction

Loyalty often drives corruption, as highlighted by headlines about corporate scandals, political machinations, sports cheating, and gangland killings. In business and politics, loyalty to one's friends and kin manifests in cronyism and nepotism, often at the cost of actual or perceived competence and fairness (Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Padgett & Morris, 2000, 2005; though see Slack, 2001). Such ties demand members' collusion (Balan & Dix, 2009; Porter, 2005) and conspiracy to cover up illegality, be it wiretapping by political administrations (e.g., the Nixon White House) or accounting fraud by the corporate elite (e.g., Crazy Eddie's, Enron, and Worldcom). In sports, loyalty promotes gamesmanship, unsportsmanlike conduct, and outright cheating, as evidenced by widespread doping programs uncovered in professional baseball, cycling, and soccer (e.g., Schneider, 2006; Whitaker, Backhouse, & Long, 2014). And, in the military, police forces, street gangs, and organizations more broadly, loyalty helps foster cultures of crime by demanding members' silence to others' transgressions (Elliston, 1982; Graham & Keeley, 1992; Hacker,

1978; Jones, 2010; Rothwell & Baldwin, 2007; Skolnick, 2002). As this evidence shows, loyalty seems to pervade and corrupt many aspects of our social lives.

Yet this account of loyalty may be overly simplistic. While loyalty to one's group can encourage unethical behavior, the loyal often act unethically mainly for the benefit of their groups. For instance, when finance directors and accountants misrepresent organizations' performance, it is often for the benefits of shareholders or clients (Deis & Giroux, 1992; Mautz & Sharaf, 1961). Similarly, politicians filibuster for their party to prevent opposition legislation from being enacted, and school administrators inflate students' test scores to get bonus money for their schools (Jacob & Levitt, 2003).

Moreover, unethical behavior is not the sole purview of the loyal. People who care about morality often act unethically for the benefit of others (e.g., Gino & Pierce, 2009, 2010; Wiltermuth, 2011) but don't view themselves or their actions as immoral (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Benson, 1985) and tend to discount, rationalize, or justify the unethical actions of other members of their groups (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007).

Surprisingly, little is known about what motivates group members to engage in unethical behavior for the benefit of their groups (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). Prior work has shown that people act unethically if they both identify with their groups and hold strong reciprocity beliefs (Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010); if they have a high need to belong but fear exclusion (Thau, Derfler-Rozin, Pitesa, Mitchell, & Pillutla, 2015); if they are in positions of positive inequity and feel guilty (Gino & Pierce,

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2009); or if they hold utilitarian ethical beliefs and believe that the beneficiaries of their unethical acts hold similar beliefs (Wiltermuth, Bennett, & Pierce, 2013). But little is known about whether, why, and when loyalty to one's group motivates unethical behavior, such as unfair actions (Dungan, Waytz, & Young, 2014).

Consistent with anecdotal evidence suggesting that loyalty plays an important role in corruption, people discount or ignore their immoral actions when it benefits their groups. Yet there is also good reason to believe that loyalty can actually foster ethicality in addition to being detrimental to it. Loyalty is among a broad set of moral values that people embrace (Fiske, 1991; Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). Enshrined in national oaths of allegiance, military mottos, and business cultures, loyalty is often cast as a virtue to aspire to (e.g., Coleman, 2009; Connor, 2007; Reichheld & Teal, 2001; Souryal & McKay, 1996) and as being closely related to other moral values, such as honesty and benevolence (Schwartz, 1992). Loyalty promotes good citizenship behavior, prompting people to voice their concerns (Hirschman, 1970) and help others in their community (Powers, 2000; Rosanas & Velilla, 2003). Cast in this light, loyalty can be seen as a virtue rather than a vice.

Can loyalty foster both ethicality and drive corruption? If so, what conditions determine whether it has positive or negative effects? In the current research, we argue that the answer to this question depends critically on the *loyal imperative*, that is, whether the interests of the group to which the decision maker is a member are clear and conflict with his or her other moral concerns. While existing literature suggests loyalty and related constructs lead to unethical behavior (e.g., Thau et al., 2015; Umphress et al., 2010; Waytz, Young, & Ginges, 2014), we argue that when a group's interests are unclear, loyalty will act as an ethical principle, prompting loyal members to act more ethically by making the ethics of the situation salient. That is, loyalty activates related moral traits and cultural scripts which prompt people to behave ethically. In contrast, when the group's interests are clear and those interests conflict with other moral concerns, then the loyal imperative will drive loyal members to act unethically in the group's best interests (Rosanas & Velilla, 2003; Souryal & McKay, 1996).

In particular, in the present work we consider the effects of competition in helping to clarify group interests while also pitting those interests against other moral concerns. Past research suggests that in simple trust games in the laboratory (Shaw, DeScioli, & Olson, 2012) and in actual political, religious, and ethnic conflict and warfare (e.g., Cohen, Montoya, & Insko, 2006; Waytz et al., 2014), competition drives the loyal to act unethically to protect their groups, regardless of the consequences. We argue that loyalty imbued with competition represents a particularly explosive combination. Competition helps clarify group goals that often conflict with other moral concerns. Loyalty, in turn, drives up the stakes, demanding the loyal win no matter the cost. However, in the absence of competition, group goals are less clear; as a result, the loyal are prompted to act ethically, consistent with their ideal selves. We consider the effects of loyalty and competition on unethical behavior in the context of cheating, a commonly studied form of unethical behavior (e.g., Ayal & Gino, 2011; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009).

The current research contributes to existing research in a number of ways. First, we provide a clear definition of loyalty that allows us to identify its unique effects on ethical behavior independent of the effects of other relational constructs. Second, by examining the effect of loyalty on actual rather than hypothetical ethical behavior, we provide the first concrete evidence that loyalty is indeed used as an ethical principle to guide behavior. Third, we identify when loyalty leads to ethical behavior and when it leads

to unethical behavior, highlighting the role of competition in undermining honesty. Fourth, we specify why loyalty improves honesty: namely, because pledging loyalty makes salient the ethical considerations of cheating in group contexts. Finally, our methodologies (i.e., using random assignment in the laboratory as well as measuring actual loyalties to existing groups) enable us to make causal inferences about the effects of loyalty on ethical behavior and to generalize our findings to real-world contexts where loyalty is either expected explicitly (e.g., in fraternal organizations) or not (e.g., in study groups).

### 1.1. Conceiving loyalty

Researchers have examined numerous constructs related to loyalty that describe different aspects and attributes of interpersonal bonds, including commitment (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1991; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), identification (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), liking (e.g., Rubin, 1973; Seligman, Fazio, & Zanna, 1980), and love (Gottman, 1999; Sternberg, 1986). Yet, the study of loyalty as a construct in and of itself has been relatively ignored by psychologists and organizational scholars alike (Coughlan, 2005). This is surprising because, as we argue, none of these related constructs fully capture the ethical nature of loyalty.

Moral psychologists contend that loyalty is an ethical principle. For example, moral foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004, 2007) argues that loyalty is one of five innately prepared foundations of individual psychology (the others being harm, fairness, hierarchy, and sanctity). Loyalty appears implicitly within the moral code of community, one of "the Big Three [codes] of Morality" that Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997) contend drive human action (the others being autonomy and divinity) and within Fiske et al.'s relational models approach to moral action (Fiske, 1991, 1992, 2004; Fiske & Haslam, 2005; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Nonetheless, most definitions of loyalty do not reference its moral aspect (e.g., Dooley & Fryxell, 1999; Hirschman, 1970; Mele, 2001; Powers, 2000; Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001; although, see Allport, 1933; Coughlan, 2005; and Oldenquist, 1982 for exceptions).

Definitions of loyalty do tend to stress the construct's inherent partiality, whether as an implicit promise or commitment to a target (e.g., Butler, 1991; Forrest, 1995; Oliver, 1999); devotion, allegiance, or an affective attitude toward an object (e.g., Axinn, 1994; Brewer & Brown, 1998; Duska, 1990; Jeurissen, 1997; Ladd, 1968; Powers, 2000; Scott, 1965); or simply membership in a group (e.g., Ewin, 1992; Hirschman, 1970). Therefore, if loyalty is an ethical principle, as moral psychologists contend, then *loyalty is the principle of partiality toward an object (e.g., a group) that gives rise to expectations of behavior on behalf of that object such as sacrifice, trustworthiness, and pro-sociality*. Loyalty therefore describes relationships in which an actor believes s/he should act in the best interests of the target of her/his loyalty because it is the right thing to do.

In this research, we focus on loyalty to people, specifically groups, but acknowledge that people can be loyal to other objects, such as a specific person, one's family or country, the institutions and organizations to which one belongs, as well as religious beliefs and abstract ideals (e.g., Fletcher, 1993; Powers, 2000; Royce, 1908; Schrag, 2001). When the object of loyalty is a person or group, then loyalty is likely to be highly correlated with collectivist constructs related to group membership, such as identification, liking, and commitment toward that person or group. Indeed, these related constructs may be natural antecedents or consequences of loyalty, though in the current work we are agnostic regarding the causal direction. Loyalty, however, imbues these collectivist prosocial motivations with principlism (Batson, 1994, 2010;

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