CHAPTER 48

In Search of Moral Equilibrium

Person, Situation, and Their Interplay in Behavioral Ethics

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To what extent is our unethical behavior a product of dispositional or situational forces?

We argue that unethical behavior should be understood in terms of the dynamic interplay between dispositional factors—such as (1) one's ability and willpower, (2) personality traits, and (3) motivations and identity—and trait-relevant situational factors.

Despite the ever-increasing number of empirical studies in behavioral ethics, our knowledge of how dispositional forces interact with situational forces to influence unethical behavior is largely absent. We posit that individuals may have a different equilibrium point at which they are willing to sacrifice a positive self-concept for their own benefit, and such equilibrium may well be determined as a result of both dispositional and situational factors. We thus propose a model of unethical behavior that incorporates both situational and dispositional forces (see Figure 48.1). In this chapter, we first provide a nuanced definition of unethical behavior and then review the literature supporting the view that individual differences may be a key determinant of our moral equilibrium. We then call for future studies that examine the interplay of dispositional and situational factors in depth.

A review of the literature on unethical behavior indicates that researchers generally maintain that two main sets of factors influence employees' decisions to act unethically: (1) situational forces (related to the context the person is operating in) and (2) dispositional forces (related to the person's personality). Recent advances in behavioral ethics unveiled the psychological tendencies that would lead even good people to cross ethical boundaries (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). One of the notable assumptions in the field of behavioral ethics is that morality is rather dynamic and malleable, instead of being a stable individual difference (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Monin & Jordan, 2009). Empirical studies that support this view are

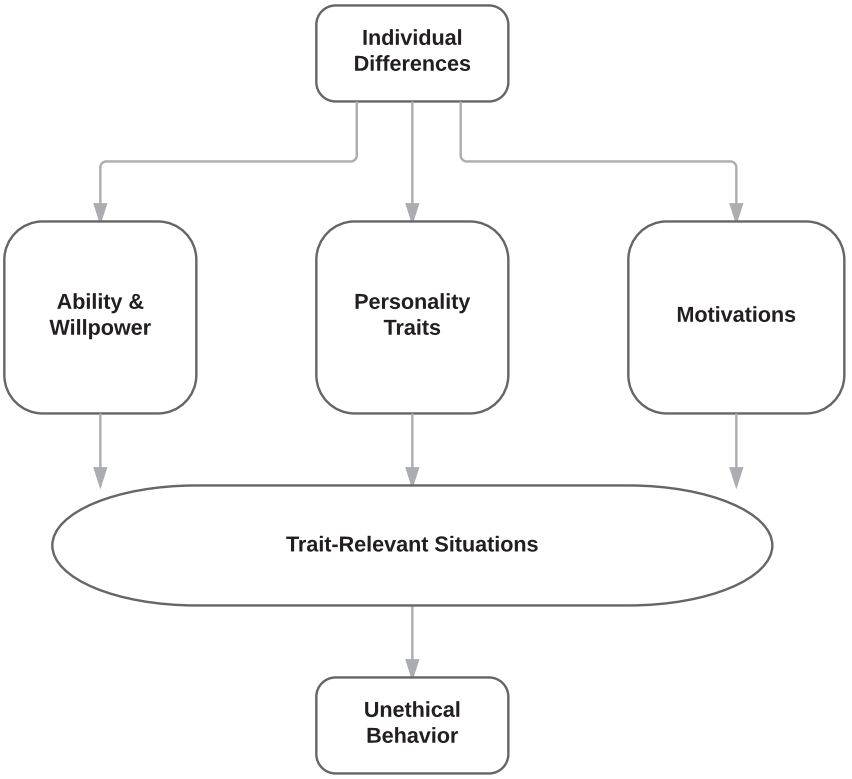

FIGURE 48.1. An interactionist model of unethical behavior.

abundant; when individuals are placed in situations in which they have the opportunity to behave unethically, they are motivated to strike a balance between pursuing self-interest and maintaining a positive self-view (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Mead, Baumeister, & Gino, 2009). Research has since demonstrated that human behavior is malleable rather than fixed across different situations and can change, depending on a wide range of factors, from momentary dips in our ability to resist temptation (Mead et al., 2009) to how tired we are (Killgore, Killgore, Day, & Li, 2007) to the time of day (Kouchaki & Smith, 2013). This body of research propelled a development of a model of ethical decision making by accounting for the capricious nature of human behavior.

The relationship between situational influences and unethical behavior is rooted in social psychological research suggesting that a person's environment can have a significant impact on his or her behavior (Asch, 1955; Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 2007). Consistent with these theoretical bases, scholars have largely focused on environmental factors that could sway one's moral compass. Examples of such studies include ethics training (Delaney & Sockell, 1992); ethical climate, leadership, and culture (Treviño, 1986; Victor & Cullen, 1988); accountability (Pitesa & Thau, 2013); codes of conduct (Brief, Dukerich, Brown, & Brett, 1996; Helin & Sandström, 2007; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2002); reward systems and incentives (Flannery & May, 2000; Hegarty & Sims, 1978; Schweitzer & Croson, 1999; Tenbrunsel, 1998; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990); the nature of the goals driving one's actions (Schweitzer, Ordóñez, & Douma, 2004); and wealth present in one's environment (Gino & Pierce, 2009).

Defining Unethical Behavior

Unethical behavior refers to an action that has harmful effects on others and that is "either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community" (Jones, 1991, p. 367). This definition has been widely endorsed by behavioral ethics scholars, and researchers in this area have largely focused on unethical behaviors such as lying, cheating, and stealing (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

By definition, unethical behaviors are not necessarily selfish acts and not always committed within the agent's conscious awareness. Still, by and large, researchers have focused on motives that emphasize a self-serving or self-oriented motivation for unethical behavior. For example, Gneezy (2005) noted that people tell lies whenever it is beneficial for them, regardless of the lies' effect on the other party. Similarly, Tenbrunsel (1998) showed that monetary incentives increase individuals' willingness to misrepresent information to another party in a social exchange, consistent with Lewicki's (1983) argument that individuals lie to the extent that lying benefits them. This view is consistent with prior work conceptualizing the decision to behave unethically as a product of economic incentives (Allingham & Sandmo, 1972; Holmstrom, 1979).

However, researchers have also identified unethical behaviors that are motivated by interpersonal emotions (such as envy and compassion) and that thus do not necessarily benefit the self; for example, individuals may inflict intentional harm to others or bend the rule to help others (see Gino & Pierce, 2010a, 2010b; Lee & Gino, 2017). In addition, Bazerman and Gino (2012) argued that even those individuals who want to be seen as moral might fail to recognize that there is a moral issue at stake in the decision that they are making. For instance, people failed to recognize their own conflicts of interest that led to unethical behavior (Moore, Tetlock, Tanlu, & Bazerman, 2006) and were unable to notice others' unethical behavior when ethical degradation occurs slowly (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). We therefore use the term *unethical behavior* throughout this chapter to reflect this nuanced understanding of what such behaviors entail.

Bringing the Person Back In[1]

Ethical Behavior as a Matter of Ability and Willpower

The study of the relationship between disposition and unethical behavior is rooted in models of individuals' *cognitive moral development* (Treviño, 1986; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990), which determines how an individual thinks about ethical dilemmas and decides what is right or wrong in any given situation. According to Rest's (1986) four-component model, ethical behavior is a result of four processes—awareness, judgment, motivation/intention, and action. This model is intuitive and compelling and easily adaptable to different theoretical needs.

Rest's model provides a largely context-independent view of moral behavior. Essentially, it understands moral behavior as a learnable skill that will be manifested so long as one has the knowledge about what the correct action is and has developed the appropriate behavioral priorities through one's childhood and education. Though Rest makes some acknowledgment that our social context may affect whether we become aware of the moral import of a given decision (Rest, 1986), the role of social context is essentially tangential in his model. In addition, Rest offers a highly agentic model of moral behavior, by which we mean that the individual actor is credited with the lion's share of control and accountability over his or her ultimate moral choices. This agentic model makes the assumption that failures to behave ethically are due to flaws in an individual's moral awareness, judgment, motivation, or follow-through. Based as it is in Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1969, 1984), a fundamental assumption of Rest's framework is that the key to improving moral behavior is moral education (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest, 1986). This assumption about how moral behavior happens puts a large onus on the individual both to be perfectly aware of the "correct" moral outcome and to have the courage and authority to be able to enact that outcome. Importantly, Rest's model emphasizes the agent's cognitive ability to do the right thing.

Another set of research on self-control highlights the role of an agent's *willpower*

as an antecedent of unethical behavior (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Gino et al., 2011; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). This view starts with an assumption that people behave unethically when they face a dilemma between actions that offer short-term benefits (e.g., monetary payoff) versus long-term benefits (e.g., ethical reputation and social acceptance; see Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007; Sheldon & Fishbach, 2015). Empirical evidence supports this view by showing that one's exertion of self-control depletes one's self-regulation resources, thus increasing unethical behavior in an unrelated domain (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011; Gino et al., 2011; Mead et al., 2009). At a trait level, low self-control is found to be associated with a set of criminal and antisocial behaviors (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Similar to Rest's theory, research on self-control puts much emphasis on an individual's ability to resist ethical temptations.

Ethical Behavior as a Matter of Personality Traits

Whereas the above-mentioned research focuses on one's *ability* to do the right thing, another stream of research points to how one's personality traits may influence ethical behavior.

First, past research on personality traits has found various traits that may predispose a person to unethical behavior. Some personality traits are more directly related to morality than others (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014). We identify two morally relevant traits: the self-importance of *moral identity* (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and *moral disengagement* (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). Moral identity is defined as a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits and is known to be a relatively stable individual difference over time (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity has been shown to be positively correlated with prosocial behavior and reduced unethical behavior (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008). As part of moral character, moral identity (internalizing the importance of possessing moral traits, in particular) also predicted ethical behavior in the workplace (Cohen et al., 2014). On the other hand, moral disengagement describes an individual's propensity to cognitively disengage to allow him- or herself to behave unethically without feeling distress (Bandura, 2002; Moore et al., 2012). Moral disengagement has been found to predict self-reported unethical behavior, decisions to commit fraud, self-serving decisions in the workplace, and other-reported unethical work behaviors (Moore et al., 2012).

Second, we identify two affect-based personality traits that have significant influence on ethical behavior—*trait empathy* (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Tangney, 1991) and *guilt proneness* (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012). Trait empathy has shown to contribute to ethical behavior and to reduce unethical behavior in various studies (Cohen et al., 2014; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 2000; Tangney, 1991). Similarly, guilt proneness has predicted making fewer unethical business decisions, committing fewer delinquent behaviors, and behaving more honestly at work (Cohen et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2014).

Lastly, two traits have been shown to give rise to unethical behavior: *Machiavellianism* (Christie & Geis, 2013; O'Boyle, Forsyth, & Banks, 2012) and *psychopathy* (Hare & Neumann, 2009; O'Boyle et al., 2012). Both traits predicted the likelihood of making unethical decisions at work (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010), as well as paying kickbacks in a marketing simulation (Hegarty & Sims, 1978, 1979). Similarly, psychopathic personality predicted counterproductive behavior at work (O'Boyle et al., 2012), as well as academic cheating (Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006).

Ethical Behavior as a Matter of Identity and Motivation

Previous research has thus far focused on either ability-based or personality-based accounts of morality. We argue that there are *motivational* factors that should be taken into account when examining the individual differences that give a rise to unethical behavior. Further, we propose that these motivational differences are relatively malleable as compared with the factors that we have summarized so far, such that these factors

are likely to interact with situational factors. Here we identify attachment and performance anxiety as such motivational factors.

First, *attachment* can be a powerful social motivation that could result in interpersonal unethical behaviors. The theory of attachment is built around the idea that security-enhancing caregivers ("attachment figures") help a child develop positive self-views and relationships (Bowlby, 1982; Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment security is theorized to direct individuals to be less anxious and defensive and more open and prosocial, which might contribute to a sense of authenticity and honesty. Indeed, dispositional attachment insecurity was correlated with unethical behavior (lying and cheating), and experimentally manipulated attachment security has been shown to reduce the tendency to lie or cheat (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010). In particular, attachment avoidance (i.e., the degree to which people are comfortable with physical and emotional intimacy) predicted more unethical workplace decisions in hypothetical scenarios (Chopik, 2015). This relationship between attachment avoidance and unethical decisions was mediated by emotional exhaustion, which suggests the importance of interpersonal and emotional motivations that underlie unethical behavior.

Second, *performance anxiety* can be another source of motivation that could propel one's unethical behavior. Performance-related anxiety has shown to increase the likelihood of cheating among college students (Berger, Levin, Jacobson, & Millham, 1977), and experimentally manipulated anxiety also increased unethical behavior (Kouchaki & Desai, 2014). In our own research, we measured participants' pre- and postperformance hormone levels (testosterone as a marker for reward and risk seeking and cortisol as a marker for anxiety and stress) and gave them an opportunity to cheat. We found that elevated concentrations of testosterone and cortisol predicted more cheating on a performance test (Lee, Gino, Jin, Rice, & Josephs, 2015). More importantly, we found that the more participants cheated, the greater were the hormonal and emotional rewards of cheating, as indicated by reductions in cortisol and negative affect. This finding is consistent with the view that anxiety evoked by performance-related uncertainty encourages cheating as a means of reducing such aversive states (Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998). In line with this research, Wakeman and Moore (2015) found that individuals are more likely to cheat after their self-views on competence are threatened by performing poorly on the task.

The Interplay between Person and Situation

Following the interactionist views that were put forth by Treviño (1986) and Bandura (1990), we argue that unethical behavior is a function of individual differences, situational factors, and their interactions. Here we draw on the interactionist principle of trait activation (Kenrick & Funder, 1988; Tett & Guterman, 2000) to identify the situational forces that are *relevant* to dispositional forces. That is, the behavioral expression of a trait requires arousal of that trait by trait-relevant situational cues. This view allows the possibility that individuals can behave consistently across different situations through strong dispositions, but strong situations can also cause different people to behave similarly (Beaty, Cleveland, & Murphy, 2001; Mischel, 1973, 1977). We use this situation–trait relevance as a guide to identify a few thematically relevant situational factors that are likely to interact with one's disposition.

The first model of unethical behavior focuses on how an individual's ability and willpower can interact with situations that are cognitively depleting. Consider a team of consultants who had to travel long hours and are severely jet-lagged. Research has shown that sleep deprivation can lead to unethical behavior (Barnes et al., 2011) and that individuals are more ethical in the morning than later in the day (Kouchaki & Smith, 2013). When the team faces a decision of ethical import to be made, would everyone on the team prefer to make an unethical decision? Despite the strength of situation (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), the team members' decision may depend on individuals' cognitive aware-

ness and construal of the situation as carrying moral weights, as well as the ability to resist the temptation. A good example of the Person × Situation interaction in this context demonstrated that the fit between a person's chronotype (i.e., whether one's circadian rhythms are optimized for morning or for evening) and the time of day predicted ethical behavior (Barnes et al., 2011). Similarly, future studies could examine the situations that could render individuals cognitively depleted, such as excessive workload and time constraints, and examine how these relevant situations can lead to more unethical behavior for those who have high or low moral awareness or self-control at the trait level.

The second model focused on various personality traits that are relatively stable, such as moral identity, moral disengagement, trait empathy, guilt proneness, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. One can imagine various situational factors that are relevant to each of these personality traits. But as an example, an ethical norm that allows individuals to easily rationalize their unethical behavior can reinforce the unethical behavior committed by those who have high moral disengagement. Consider an employee–supervisor dyad in which the employee observes the supervisor inflating the expense report and telling the employee that everyone in the company does the same. This incident is likely to increase the employee's tendency to behave unethically (Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011), but this may depend on a person's own propensity to engage in moral disengagement. For example, Bonner, Greenbaum, and Mayer (2016) have shown that the negative relationship between supervisors' moral disengagement and employees' perceptions of ethical leadership is stronger when employees' moral disengagement is low versus high. Future research could thus examine the ethical norms (e.g., norms of accountability, the extent to which performance goals are aligned with ethical goals, or incentives that reinforce the idea of a zero-sum game) could trigger relevant personality traits.

The last model viewed unethical behavior as a function of motivational forces, such as attachment and performance anxiety. For instance, a high-stress work environment (think Wall Street) can reinforce an employee's performance anxiety. Indeed, individuals' thinking about their identity as bank employees led to more cheating, which suggests that business culture may play a significant role in shaping one's moral compass. Similarly, work stressors, such as interpersonal conflicts and organizational constraints, have shown to increase counterproductive work behaviors (Kim, Cohen, & Panter, 2015; Meier & Spector, 2013). Consistent with the view that those individuals who experience high levels of anxiety and attachment avoidance might find their situation particularly stressful (Hazan & Shaver, 1990), a high-stress environment may amplify the workers' need to reduce the performance-related stress by crossing ethical boundaries, particularly for those who already have elevated levels of performance anxiety. Thus future studies could identify the environmental stressors (e.g., pay for performance) that could interact with one's motivational differences.

Conclusion

On a daily basis, we are faced with choices that could advance our own self-interest or demonstrate consistency with our moral compass. Across contexts, from politics and sport to education and business, these choices are often tempting, leading even people who care about morality and being ethical to act unethically. Given the economic and social costs of unethical behavior, it is important to understand the antecedents of these behaviors. In this chapter, we built on insightful research in behavioral ethics and moral psychology to propose an interactive model of person- and situation-based unethical behavior. We first placed morality in the realm of the behavioral ethics literature to define unethical behavior in broad terms. We then provided a review of three different models of individual difference that predict unethical behavior. Finally, we suggested that unethical behavior should be understood in terms of the dynamic interplay between dispositional factors and situational factors and called for more research on this interplay. We hope that by responding to this call, scholars from various fields will identify important insights as to why even

good people do bad things and how they can best ensure that they will follow their moral compass in both challenging and more ordinary ethical situations.

NOTE

1. We did not include a host of demographic antecedents of unethical behavior for two reasons. First, we focus on the individual differences that can be changed or made salient and that are thus relatively malleable. Second, despite some evidence showing that demographic variables influence ethical decisions (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012), studies have found that the effect size tends to be relatively small or not significant as compared with other morally relevant traits (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010).

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