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Editorial overview: Morality and ethics: New directions in the study of morality and ethics

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Introduction

What leads people to sometimes break rules and sometimes follow them? Do some environments encourage people to be honest and others tempt them to cheat? Alternatively, are some people simply born honest? Can sanctioning systems enforce moral norms? Which institutions would best uphold norms that foster ethical behavior? These questions about moral and ethical behavior have occupied thinkers, both within and outside academia, for centuries. In recent years, we have witnessed many theoretical and methodological developments in moral psychology and behavioral ethics [1–3]. Contributions to these fields come from a wide range of disciplines. To name just a few, neuroscientists, biologists, and cognitive psychologists have generated insights about the genetic and physiological aspects underlying moral behavior; social and developmental psychologists have identified situational and personality factors; management and business scholars have examined the business settings in which unethical behavior may emerge; economists have studied the organizational incentives to behave morally; and communication scholars have explored interpersonal communication processes.

This issue of *Current Opinion in Psychology* represents what some of the main contributors to these fields consider to be the state of the art and highlights directions for future research across various domains in the study of morality. Each article surveys the current state of affairs on a specific topic in one of six main themes:

(1) Behavioral ethics: from theory building to policy informing?
(2) Cognitive aspects: do people intend to be unethical?
(3) Moral self-regulation: can self-control shape ethical behavior?
(4) Individual differences: born (un)ethical?
(5) Social and cultural norms: is morality parochial or universal? and
(6) Situational factors: what are the antecedents and consequences of unethical behavior?

Here, we provide an overview of these contributions and suggest that the richness of insights in each of these themes contributes to the field's ability to build theory, robustly test it, and provide valuable recommendations to policymakers.

We note that throughout the issue, as in much of the literature on moral psychology and behavioral ethics, the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' are used interchangeably. To be precise, the words have different derivations. Ethics derive from Greek (ethos, ethikos) and morality from Latin (mores, moralis);

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the two can be differentiated in a way that may be theoretically or practically helpful. According to their different roots, 'ethics' leans toward decisions based on individual character and on individuals' more subjective understanding of right and wrong, whereas 'morals' focuses more on widely shared communal or societal norms about right and wrong. Put another way, ethics is a more individual assessment of values as relatively good or bad, while morality is a community assessment of what is good, right, or just for all. Such distinction may be helpful to future theorizing.

Behavioral ethics: from theory building to policy informing

In the first section of this issue, Tenbrunsel and Chugh provide an overview of the behavioral ethics field, assessing its breadth and depth. They highlight the field's current focus on two themes: Firstly, the extent to which people act intentionally versus unintentionally in unethical ways and second, the role of the self in shaping ethical behavior. The second and third sections of this issue delve into these two lines of work by providing inquiries based on current opinion to questions such as: Do people notice when they behave unethically? If so, do they care? The answers are far from trivial. As Irlenbusch and Villeval emphasize, whereas the long-held benchmark for understanding moral behavior in economics focuses on the costs and benefits associated with (un)ethical behavior [6], accumulating evidence suggests that there is more to morality than incentives.

Reviewing field research in their article, Pierce and Balasubramanian show just how diverse the real-life settings are in which moral and ethical considerations shape people's behavior. Their review also highlights the importance of triangulating and considering multiple research methods and settings to study phenomena that are of theoretical both practical value. Take, for example, the important and rather paradoxical real-life problem Dana and Cain raise in this issue: the fact that advisors tend to give more conservative advice to others than they themselves follow. Since advice giving and receiving is fundamental to human interactions, this gap is worthy of attention. Dana and Cain discuss several possibilities in an attempt to explain why advisers take greater (ethical) risks themselves than they advise others to take. For example, Dana and Cain suggest that 'advisers feel your pain, but not your gain'; that is, the desire to avoid harming others may drive the paradoxical effect of advising versus choosing.

Cognitive aspects: do people intend to be unethical?

A prerequisite to providing advice on an ethical issue or acting upon it is the realization that the issue at hand is of ethical nature. The second section in the current issue showcases contributions suggesting such recognition is far from trivial.

When we punish those who did wrong, whether in court or at home with our kids, a key assumption is that the 'offender' can tell right from wrong. A line of recent work challenges the extent to which people intend to act unethically and identifies ways to make people more aware of how they are behaving. In the second section of this issue, Banaji *et al.* suggest that multiple biases, such as workplace discrimination, can be attributed to people's failure to notice they are treating people with similar abilities differently. Indeed, as proposed in this issue by Cushman, intent plays a key role in constructing what people consider to be (im)moral. Developing this idea further, Sezer *et al.* describe how the selective attention people pay to their surroundings creates ethical blind spots that prevent them from noticing ethical misconducts they may commit, an idea that fits squarely with the work surveyed by Reynolds and Miller. Fiedler and Glöckner

review the cognitive literature underlying the work mentioned above and focus on eye-tracking technology to provide critical insight into the extent to which people intend (versus not) to do wrong. Kouchaki and Gino show that it is not only the lack of attention or awareness that may cause people to cross ethical boundaries but also motivated memory processes that allow them to continue feeling good about themselves after engaging in unethical behaviors. Chance and Norton take the approach that unethical behavior fits into a model of self-deception: People see what they want to see, interpret their actions in a way that makes them both look good to others and feel good, and remember what they want to remember.

The remaining papers in the second section highlight the value of deliberation as a remedy to people's unintentional lies as highlighted by Bereby-Meyer and Shalvi, Van Bavel et al., and Barkan et al. Wojciszke et al. discuss different conditions under which people may lie, as highlighted by Levine. According to these reviews, when people act based on their intuition (system 1 thinking) they are more likely to serve their self-interest; only through deliberation (system 2 thinking) are they able to resist temptation and act ethically. This line of work notwithstanding, deliberation does not assure that people will behave ethically.

Moral self-regulation: can self-control shape ethical behavior?

Section Three of this issue reviews the self-regulatory processes related to people's ability to resist the ethical temptations they often face. Baumeister and Alghamdi provide the initial overview of the role self-control plays in shaping people's ethical conduct. Fishbach and Woolley further suggest that if, and only if, people realize they are facing a tempting situation and exercise self-control are they able to resist temptation; they also highlight when such conditions are likely to emerge. Effron and Conway develop this line of work further, suggesting that after people resist a tempting situation and act morally, they feel they have gained some moral credentials, which they may later spend by behaving unethically, a phenomenon called moral self-licensing. West and Zhong complete the self-regulatory circle by revealing literature suggesting that once an immoral act is committed, people have the need to cleanse themselves, which in turn makes them more likely to re-engage in unethical behavior. An issue further discussed by Wiltermuth et al. regards the consequences of dishonesty, which Ten Brinke et al. suggest may include health problems. Ordóñez and Welsh further highlight that people may be motivated to engage in unethical behavior merely to achieve their goals. This literature fits nicely into the work reviewed by Clark et al., which supports the idea that people seek to maintain moral coherency in their lives and will modify existing beliefs and view of various policies to achieve such coherency.

Beyond attention, awareness, and self-regulation, a key questions facing psychologists and management scholars alike is the extent to which behavior is driven by nature versus nurture. The three closing sections of this issue tap into this very distinction.

Individual differences: born (un)ethical?

Several contributions to this issue emphasize the stable personality traits most likely to be associated with immoral behavior. Skitka et al. provide an overview of how moral conviction — the meta-cognitive belief that a given position is based on one's core moral beliefs and convictions — shapes people's behavior, from their views of others to their likelihood to vote in elections. Baron suggests that it is actively open-minded individuals who display the necessary citizenship required for democracy to prosper. Providing important insights into the correlates of individual differences and both moral and prosocial behavior, Israel et al. survey the genetics of morality. Next, Boegershausen et al. focus on people's moral identity, and Moore demonstrates how people's tendency to morally disengage makes it easier for them to behave immorally. Steinel presents an overview of how social value orientation relates to (dis)honest behavior. Taking us into the workplace, Kim and Cohen then discuss the role of moral character in assuaging deviant behavior.

Social and cultural norms: is morality parochial or universal?

Beyond individual differences, social and cultural norms play a key role in shaping moral behavior. Discussing the social dynamics of breaking rules, Van Kleef et al. provide a novel framework for both the antecedents and consequences of norm-violating behavior. Ellemers and Van der Toorn offer an overview of the key role that groups play in shaping individuals' moral conduct. Halevy et al. develop this topic further by discussing how intergroup conflict may amplify moral tensions. Cramwinckel et al. assess how people react to others' deviant behaviors, potentially nudging them toward a more moral course of action. Kogut and Ritov clarify that not all 'others' are treated equally: we are more helpful and generous toward those we can identify, and whose groups we can identify, than toward those who are unidentified. Turning to how societal norms impact a wide range of behaviors, Sachdeva et al. demonstrate how moral motives underlie people's green consumerism, and Shariff reviews recent work tackling a provocative question: Does religion increase moral behavior?

Situational factors: what are the antecedents and consequences of unethical behavior?

The concluding section in this issue focuses on situational factors promoting unethical behavior and the mechanisms underlying their influence. Yip and Schweitzer provide an overview of settings that promote trust among people that

paradoxically also promote unethical behavior. Bolino and Klotz develop this topic further, showing the paradoxical effects of organizational citizenship behavior and unethical behavior at work. Namely, promoting people to work together and join forces may indeed lead to corrupt outcomes [4]. Lammers *et al.* show how power structures can facilitate (im)moral conduct. Two further contributions assess how immoral behavior can be effectively reduced. Van Dijk and Molenmaker survey what type of sanctions are useful to promote cooperation in social dilemmas and under which circumstances. Dungan *et al.* further reveal the situations in which whistleblowing can be encouraged and its consequences.

Concluding thoughts

The present issue on morality and ethics is rich with diverse contributions from various disciplines, methodological approaches, and views. We believe this diversity allows readers to both assess the state of the art in this exciting field and also have an opportunity to assess what is still missing. Perhaps most striking is the number of approaches, theories, definitions, constructs, and observations, which have not yet merged into one dominant theoretical framework. Richness has both benefits and challenges. For example, important questions still seem unanswered, such as: When do we gather enough insights to construct a parsimonious theory of moral judgment and behavior? Or can existing theories provide the overarching needed structure? Almost all of the contributions to this issue appear to agree on one main theme: morality and ethics are social and interpersonal phenomena. Even when we strive to maintain an honest self-concept, we do so in a social context. Theories focusing on the interpersonal aspects of human behavior (e.g., [5]) seem like a promising starting point to unite this emerging field.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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