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# Self-Serving Justifications: Doing Wrong and Feeling Moral

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**Abstract**

Unethical behavior by "ordinary" people poses significant societal and personal challenges. We present a novel framework centered on the role of self-serving justification to build upon and advance the rapidly expanding research on intentional unethical behavior of people who value their morality highly. We propose that self-serving justifications emerging before and after people engage in intentional ethical violations mitigate the threat to the moral self, enabling them to do wrong while feeling moral. Pre-violation justifications lessen the anticipated threat to the moral self by redefining questionable behaviors as excusable. Post-violation justifications alleviate the experienced threat to the moral self through compensations that balance or lessen violations. We highlight the psychological mechanisms that prompt people to do wrong and feel moral, and suggest future research directions regarding the temporal dimension of self-serving justifications of ethical misconduct.

**Keywords**

dishonesty, morality, justifications, ethics, temporal

Cheating, fraud, deception, and other forms of unethical behavior rank among the greatest personal and societal challenges of our time. While the media commonly highlight the most sensational cases (e.g., British Petroleum's failure to take proper safety precautions in advance of the 2010 oil spill, or Lance Armstrong's doping), less attention is paid to the more prevalent, mundane unethical behaviors committed by "ordinary" people who value their morality highly but cut corners when faced with an opportunity to gain from dishonest behavior.

Early ethics research focused on defining worthy behavior, prescribing ethical guidelines, and stressing how people should behave. Recently, the fields of social and cognitive psychology, behavioral economics, and management have shifted direction and endorsed a more descriptive approach, focusing on how individuals actually behave when facing temptations to behave unethically (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). Within this growing field of *behavioral ethics*, two main approaches have emerged. The first focuses on unintentional unethical acts committed by people when their attention drifts away from the violation they are committing and fails to monitor their acts (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). The second, which we build on here, focuses on intentional unethical acts committed when people knowingly bend ethical rules, mostly to serve themselves or their group's interests (Gibson & Murnighan, 2009; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Schweitzer, Ordóñez, & Douma, 2004; Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011).

We present a novel framework summarizing and extending the growing research on the antecedents and consequences of intentional unethical behavior. We define self-serving justifications as the process of providing reasons for questionable behaviors and making them appear less unethical. The core proposition is that justifications attenuate the threat to one's moral self when one acts unethically and thus determine the magnitude of unethical behavior. Importantly, we differentiate between

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justifications taking place either before or after an ethical violation is committed: Pre-violation justifications lessen the anticipated threat to one's moral self by defining questionable behaviors as excusable; in contrast, post-violation justifications lessen the experienced threat to the moral self by compensating for the committed violation.

## Intentional Wrongdoing: Economic Benefits Versus Psychological Costs

Ethical behavior is broadly defined as acts that are "both legal and morally acceptable to the larger society" (Jones, 1991, p. 367).[1] The traditional economic approach to intentional ethical violations assumes that people balance the benefits (e.g., monetary rewards) and costs (e.g., potential punishment) of unethical actions (Becker, 1968). Moving beyond this external cost-benefit analysis, a growing body of evidence shows people exhibit some level of aversion to behaving unethically even when their unethical behavior will never be revealed (Fischbacher & Föllmi-Heusi, 2013; Gino et al., 2009; Gneezy, 2005; Hilbig & Hessler, 2013; Lewis et al., 2012; Lundquist, Ellingson, Gribbe, & Johannesson, 2009). For instance, even when lies cannot be detected, people limit their use (Shalvi et al., 2011). Empirical evidence showing that people's unethical behavior is inconsistent with a cost-benefit analysis comes from two types of studies: experiments that involve procedures that make cheating appear undetectable and that are based on the assumption that participants typically trust completely in what they are told about the experiment, and experiments that actually guarantee participants' anonymity.

People avoid lying "too much" because they experience a threat to their self-concept when they behave immorally (e.g., Mazar et al., 2008; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2013). Research in this line lends credence to a central premise in social psychology—that people strive to maintain a positive self-image both privately and publicly (Allport, 1955; Rosenberg, 1979). People behave immorally only to a certain extent so that they can profit from their misconduct but still feel moral. Here, we propose that justifications help people deal with the anticipated or experienced gap between their desire to profit by behaving immorally and their view of themselves as moral. Self-serving justifications attenuate the psychological costs attached to acting immorally both before and after people violate ethical rules. That is, self-serving justifications enable people to bridge two opposing desires: to profit from acting immorally and to see themselves as moral.

The basic idea that people use justifications to reduce their *experienced* internal conflicts was introduced by cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). We advance this approach in two ways. First, although cognitive dissonance theory stresses people's desire to reduce inconsistencies created by holding contrasting beliefs (or acting in ways that contradict their beliefs), it does not speak to deviations from accepted norms. Ethical dissonance results from the experienced conflict between "right" and "wrong" behaviors (Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2012). Second, our framework distinguishes between *anticipated* and *experienced* dissonance to recognize different justification processes that emerge *before* and *after* an ethical violation is committed.

As shown in Figure 1, temptation may lead to a moral violation—namely, a deviation from socially accepted principles or rules. One's moral self-concept is threatened at two points in time: before committing a moral violation (when ethical dissonance is anticipated) and afterward (when ethical dissonance is experienced). Self-serving justifications provide effective ways to attenuate or even eliminate the threat to one's moral self-concept. First, pre-violation justifications enable people to excuse misbehaviors they are about to commit as less immoral and thus reduce anticipated ethical dissonance. Second, post-violation justifications compensate for violations that people have already committed and lessen the experience of ethical dissonance.

## Pre-Violation Justification Route: "This Is a Gray Area"

Consider a man visiting his hometown on business. To show his father he is doing well, he takes him to a fancy restaurant. Should he list the bill as a travel expense? Pre-violation justifications may help this person excuse this behavior as less immoral. He may tell himself, "The rules in such situations are not clear. After all, my father always has good business advice." In this manner, he frames the rules in the situation as ambiguous, avoids a moral dilemma, acts as he wishes, and does not feel bad about it. Research has identified several pre-violation justifications. Here, we focus on three: ambiguity, prosocial nature of the act, and moral licensing.

### *Ambiguity*

Situations in which the norms or rules are ambiguous are ripe for pre-violation justifications (Schweitzer & Hsee, 2002). In one experiment, participants privately rolled a die and reported the outcome to determine their pay (with higher numbers earning more money). As shown in Figure 2, only participants saw the outcomes of their rolls, a fact that eliminated the option of being caught and made cheating easy (Shalvi et al., 2011; based on

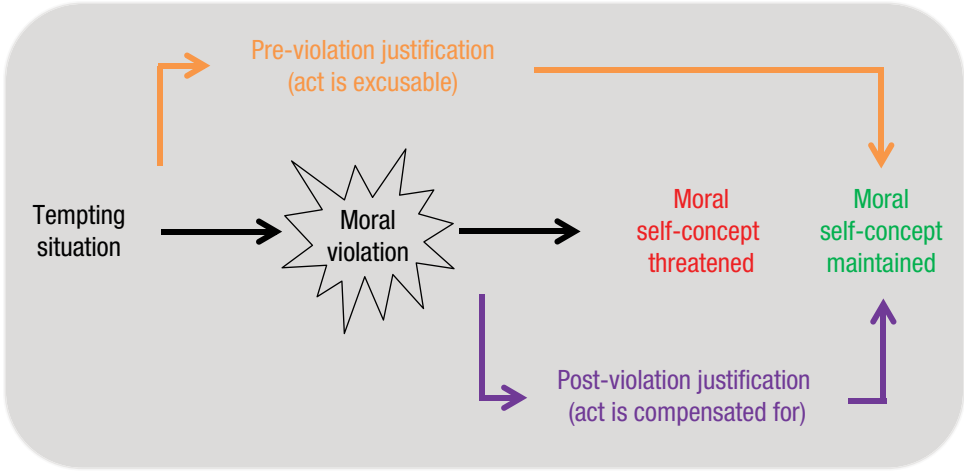


**Fig. 1.** A schematic illustration showing how justifications provide two routes to do wrong but feel moral. When faced with a tempting situation, people can violate moral rules while maintaining their moral self-concept using pre- or post-violation justifications. Pre-violation justifications (orange route) excuse misbehaviors and thus reduce the threat to the self-concept beforehand. Post-violation justifications (purple route) compensate for violations that were committed, thus enabling the person to reduce the psychological costs associated with wrongdoing and maintain a moral self-concept after the fact.

Fischbacher & Föllmi-Heusi, 2013). Interestingly, when participants rolled the die three times, they reported higher numbers for the first (paid) roll then when they rolled the die only once. Why? Rolling the die once required lying by inventing a number that had not been observed, but adding two irrelevant rolls allowed people to report a high number they subsequently observed. Inventing facts is a clear moral violation, but shuffling facts is more ambiguous and easier to justify (Shalvi et al., 2011; Shalvi, Eldar, & Bereby-Meyer, 2012; Shalvi & Leiser, 2013). Interestingly, creative people (and people primed to think creatively) do not rely on the extra rolls to craft their lies: They lie to a high degree regardless of the number of rolls they observe. It seems creative people are more flexible in inventing facts, which allows them to use ambiguity in a self-serving manner even when they observe only one roll (Gino & Ariely, 2012).

## *Self-serving altruism*

Lies causing no harm to a concrete victim but benefiting concrete others also serve as pre-violation justifications. People perceive lies as justified when they benefit both the self and another person (Erat & Gneezy, 2012). Interestingly, altruistic justifications can even turn lies that carry costs to organizations or society at large into a legitimate course of action serving a greater good. When a private roll of a die determines the payoff for a

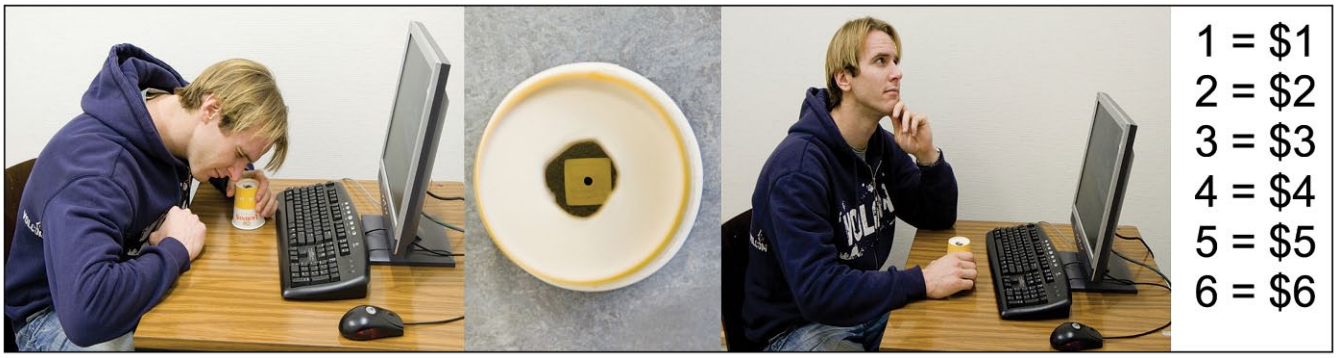


**Fig. 2.** Die-under-cup task. Participants roll a die under a cup, report the outcome, and receive payment according to the number they report. As participants are the only ones who see the rolls, they can cheat to increase payoffs. Reprinted from "Justified Ethicality: Observing Desired Counterfactuals Modifies Ethical Perceptions and Behavior," by S. Shalvi, J. Dana, M. J. J. Handgraaf, and C. K. De Dreu, 2011, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 115*, p. 184. Copyright 2011 by Elsevier. Reprinted with permission.

participant and a partner, the participant rolling the die becomes more willing to lie about the outcome to benefit the group (Conrads, Irlenbusch, Rilke, & Walkowitz, 2013). As the number of beneficiaries and the strength of one's bonds to them increase, altruistic cheating does as well (and experienced guilt decreases; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; Shu & Gino, 2012). Recent evidence revealed that one biological modulator of such other-serving dishonesty is oxytocin, a social-bonding hormone (Shalvi & De Dreu, 2014).

### *Moral licensing*

Another way that people justify their misbehaviors before engaging in them is by considering their recent prosocial actions and engaging in moral licensing (Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva et al., 2009). Moral licensing operates like a moral balance scale. Once people collect enough moral credentials in one situation, they feel entitled to act immorally in a subsequent situation. Thus, paradoxically, prosocial behavior can serve as a pre-violation justification, shielding one from feeling bad about violating moral rules.

## Post-Violation Justification Route: "The Violation Was Atoned For"

People can also experience ethical dissonance after rather than before committing an unethical act. In this case, they seek to minimize such dissonance by engaging in post-violation justifications (Ayal & Gino, 2011; Barkan et al., 2012). Going back to the earlier example, if the man visiting his hometown decides to submit dinner with his father as a travel expense, he may then experience ethical dissonance because of a conflict between his moral violation and his desire to behave morally. Post-violation justifications may help this person compensate and not feel guilty for the violation. He may tell himself, "The panhandler sitting outside the restaurant would not have gotten my $5 if I had stayed home for dinner." The man would thus reduce ethical dissonance and compensate for his questionable act (declaring a social dinner as business related) by doing a subsequent good deed (giving money to someone in need). Research has identified several psychological mechanisms people use as post-violation justifications. Here, we focus on three: cleansing, confessing, and distancing.

### *Cleansing*

Cleansing can take a physical or a symbolic form (Monin & Miller, 2001; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). In one study, participants preferred a free gift of an antiseptic wipe over a pencil after they recalled an immoral act they had committed. Wiping their hands reduced their sense of guilt (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). Physical cleansing may also involve pain (e.g., religious fasting): After violating moral rules, participants showed a greater tendency to self-inflict mild electric shocks to redeem themselves, though no restitution followed (Wallington, 1973).

### *Confessing*

Confession helps people turn over a new leaf in their moral ledger. Ayal & Gino (2011) found that recalling bad deeds and asking for forgiveness from a higher entity led participants to behave more honestly than those who did not ask for forgiveness. Recent work suggests that even when they are genuinely regretful, people opt for partial rather than full confessions (i.e., acknowledging only part of their ethical violations). Partial confessions allow people to feel moral for having the dignity to admit to some wrongdoing, without having to bear the consequences of the full violation (Pe'er, Acquisti, & Shalvi, 2014).

### *Distancing*

People sometimes justify their immoral acts after the fact by pointing to others' immoral deeds. Recent research indicates that when people cannot deny, confess, or compensate for their wrongdoings, they distance themselves from these transgressions, use stricter ethical criteria, and judge other people's immoral behavior more harshly (Barkan et al., 2012). Distancing the self from evil and demonizing others allows people to view themselves as "ultra-moral" and lessens the tension elicited by a "one-time" slip.

## Future Directions

The field of ethical behavior is growing rapidly and has integrated research from psychology and neighboring fields, such as economics and management. Here, we have presented a novel framework centered on the role of self-serving justification, which we hope will inspire future research. We highlight several promising paths. First, people may vary in the extent of their reliance on justifications. For example, people differ in the extent to which they care about morality and in their ability to withstand threats to their self-concept. A key personality difference is thus moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999)—namely, the extent to which individuals detach themselves from their misconduct. Our framework implies that people higher in moral disengagement will be more likely to engage in both pre- and post-violation justifications.

Second, people vary in the extent to which they are concerned with past versus future events—that is,

whether they adopt a past versus a future orientation (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008). For example, people in primarily Protestant countries tend to be more future oriented and engage in more elaborate planning compared with people in primarily Catholic countries, who tend to "live in the moment" (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008). An intriguing hypothesis derived from the current model is that people with a future orientation may be more likely to engage in pre-violation justifications for their misconduct, whereas people with a past orientation may be more likely to engage in post-violation justifications. Future work is needed to test this possibility.

A third direction for future research concerns the effectiveness of justifications over time. Research conducted to date has not established whether immoral acts committed with pre- or post-violation justifications require ongoing maintenance to prevent the threat to self from reemerging or, alternatively, whether being able to justify an immoral act liberates people from future guilty feelings. Studying the temporal maintenance and temporal erosion of self-serving justifications is thus an especially promising path to explore. For example, if justifications erode over time, the threat to the self will resurface. In this case, people may need to engage in cleansing rituals (or other post-justification processes) time and time again to maintain their moral balance. For instance, they may engage in compulsive washing ceremonies, adopt routinized confessions, or frequently donate money to quiet their guilty conscience.

Finally, from a more applied perspective, a main challenge in the behavioral ethics field is to craft appropriate interventions and educational schemes aimed at increasing ethical behavior. The current framework suggests that interventions should be designed with careful attention to people's pre- or post-violation type of reasoning. Interventions that increase the salience of a specific ethical code have been shown to be effective (Mazar et al., 2008; Shu, Mazar, Gino, Ariely, & Bazerman, 2012). Ethical salience intensifies the threat to the self and decreases the power of justifications. Pre-violation justifications may be sensitive to interventions that eliminate ambiguity. Such interventions require organizations to minimize their "gray" areas (clarify the ethical code, specify rules, and provide concrete examples of misconduct). Whereas pre-violation justifications can be nipped in the bud, post-violation justifications may be harnessed to guide future ethical behavior. Thus, research could test the effectiveness of interventions that substitute post-violation justifications with candid and long-lasting repentance.

## Conclusion

Immoral behavior is widespread. Here, we have outlined a framework of self-serving justifications emerging before and after moral violations that enable people to do wrong and feel moral. By distinguishing between pre- and post-violation justifications, our framework contributes to the behavioral ethics literature and may additionally inform interventions aimed at increasing ethical conduct. For anyone seeking to behave more ethically or encouraging others around them to do so, acknowledging the power of justifications in shaping self-serving perceptions is a key. Taming our drive to justify our behavior may be the path to ethical conduct.

### Recommended Reading

Ariely, D. (2012). *The honest truth about dishonesty: How we lie to everyone—especially ourselves*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. An accessible and fun book on the behavioral economic approach to dishonesty.

Barkan, R., Ayal, S., Gino, F., & Ariely, D. (2012). (See References). An article that discusses how post-violation justifications shape dishonesty in more detail than the current article.

Bazerman, M. H., & Tenbrunsel, A. E. (2011). (See References). An insightful book on people's failure to notice their own ethical wrongdoings that provides solutions to secure a place for ethics at work, institutions, and daily life.

Schweitzer, M. E., & Hsee, C. K. (2002). (See References). One of the first articles to demonstrate how justifications shape unethical behavior.

Shalvi, S., Dana, J., Handgraaf, M. J. J., & De Dreu, C. K. W. (2011). (See References). An article that discusses how pre-violation justifications shape dishonesty in more detail than the current article.

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### Note

1. We use the terms "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably.

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