



Three principles to REVISE people's unethical behavior

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Three principles to *REVISE* people's unethical behavior

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Abstract

Dishonesty and unethical behavior are widespread in the public and private sectors, and cause immense annual losses. For instance, estimates of US annual losses indicate \$1 trillion paid in bribes, \$270 billion lost due to unreported income, as well as \$42 billion lost in retail due to shoplifting and employee theft. In this article we draw on insights from the growing fields of moral psychology and behavioral ethics to present a 3-principle framework we call REVISE. This framework classifies forces that affect dishonesty into three main categories and then redirects those forces to encourage moral behavior. The first principle, Reminding, emphasizes the effectiveness of subtle cues that increase the salience of morality, and decreases people's ability to justify dishonesty. The second principle, Visibility, aims to restrict anonymity, prompt peer monitoring and elicit responsible norms. The third principle, Self-Engagement, increases people's motivation to maintain a positive self-perception as a moral person and helps bridge the gap between moral values and actual behavior. Combined, the REVISE framework can guide the design of policy interventions to defeat dishonesty.



Three principles to *REVISE* people's unethical behavior

“Estimates show that the cost of corruption equals more than 5% of global GDP (US\$ 2.6 trillion, WorldEconomic Forum) with over US\$ 1 trillion paid in bribes each year (World Bank). It is not only a question of ethics; we simply cannot afford such waste.”

OECD-2014

Dishonesty has reached epidemic proportions in both the public and private sectors. From bribery and large scale frauds to shoplifting and wardrobing, the immediate financial costs are worrying but the threat to society is even more serious because seemingly isolated violations chip away trust, encourage negative social norms, and increase the prevalence and spread of other unethical behaviors (Ariely, 2012; Kirchler, Hoelzl, & Wahl, 2008; Welsh et al., 2015).

The standard economic approach to curbing dishonesty relies on enforcement and deterrence (Becker, 1968). For instance, research examining tax compliance has demonstrated that increasing punishments, and especially increasing the likelihood of being caught, are effective interventions (Andreoni, Erard & Feinstein, 1998; Kirchler, 2007). However, the solution of enforcement to defeat tax evasion, corruption, employee theft and other manifestations of dishonesty is costly and limited. Even if we could station a police officer on every other street corner it would be virtually impossible to monitor all the actions of all the people all the time. Furthermore, instead of encouraging people to be honest, enforcement teaches them to avoid punishment or to become better cheaters. In fact, external punishments can crowd out internal motivation and further separate people from their moral compass (Ariely, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000, Tayler, 2006).

The Internal Ethical Conflict

Insights from the growing field of moral psychology and behavioral ethics show that people care about morality. One robust finding is that most people make an effort to resist temptation and try to behave honestly (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Investigations of misconduct in the real world and in laboratory experiments show that people tend to curb their own dishonesty. Even when the chances of detection are minimal, or under conditions of complete anonymity, most people limit their cheating to an extent far below the maximum possible (Gino, Ayal & Ariely 2009; Gneezy, 2005; Mazar, Amir & Ariely, 2008).

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5 According to the psychological model of dishonesty, people are caught between a rock
6 and a hard place; that is, between the temptation to profit from unethical behavior and the desire
7 to maintain a positive moral image of themselves. This internal conflict – termed *ethical*
8 *dissonance* – creates severe psychological tension and threatens people’s self-concept and moral
9 identity (Ayal & Gino, 2011; Barkan et al., 2012). Unfortunately, research shows us that people
10 employ various self-serving justifications to reduce ethical dissonance, and manage to do wrong
11 and feel moral at the same time (Shalvi et al., 2015).
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19 While the picture we portray above seems depressing, there is a silver lining. In a
20 nutshell, understanding the factors that facilitate wrongdoing can help us to design policies and
21 interventions that work against them, stress high moral standards, and tip the scale of people’s
22 internal conflict toward ethical behavior (Beshears & Gino, 2015).
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28 **The REVISE Framework**

29 We formulated REVISE, a 3-principle framework that can guide intervention and policy:
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- 31 • **Reminding** emphasizes the effectiveness of subtle cues that increase the salience
32 of morality, and decrease the ability to justify dishonesty.
- 33 • **Visibility** refers to social monitoring cues, and aims to restrict anonymity, prompt
34 peer monitoring, and elicit responsible norms.
- 35 • **Self-Engagement** increases the motivation to maintain a positive self-image and
36 generates personal commitment to act morally.
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44 **Reminding**

45 Empirical evidence shows that people take advantage of grey areas to justify their
46 dishonest behavior (Shalvi et al., 2015). The first principle, *Reminding*, eliminates ambiguity and
47 introduces subtle cues that make people’s own moral standards salient. For instance, in a typical
48 lab experiment, we pay participants according to their performance on a relatively simple task. In
49 one group we monitor and verify participants’ performance. In the second group participants can
50 shred any evidence of their real performance and simply tell us how much money they earned.
51 Participants in this group are assured that we cannot identify or punish them for cheating.
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3 Typically, many participants in the second group cheat by inflating their actual performance. To
4 test the effect of Reminding, we asked participants in this group to recall the 10 Commandments
5 immediately prior to doing the task. This simple reminder eliminated cheating (Ariely, 2012;
6 Mazar et al., 2008).
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11 The design of effective moral reminders should take two important points into
12 consideration. First, reminders should be salient, utilizing principles of right and wrong, specific
13 examples of moral Do's and Don'ts, and even known slogans. For instance, placing signs with
14 the Ellen Show motto "Be Kind to One Another" next to handicapped parking spaces is likely to
15 encourage ethical parking behavior. Second, to maintain salience and avoid adaptation, we need
16 to change and re-actualize reminders every now and then.
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24 **Visibility**

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26 Classic research in social psychology has demonstrated that anonymity releases people
27 from their moral shackles (Milgram, 1973; Zimbardo, 2000). The second component of the
28 REVISE framework emphasizes *Visibility* that encourages ethical behavior through social
29 monitoring cues.
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35 The effectiveness of Visibility has been demonstrated in laboratory experiments and field
36 studies. In the lab, participants in a slightly dimmed room cheated more than participants in a
37 well-lit room (Zhong, Bohns & Gino, 2010). In fact, people are so sensitive to the presence of
38 others that even seeing a picture of eyes can alter their behavior for the better. One study showed
39 that when a picture of eyes was displayed above an honesty jar, honor payments for coffee and
40 tea were nearly three times more frequent than when a picture of flowers was displayed above
41 the jar (Bateson et al., 2006).
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49 In addition to its more direct effect, Visibility also shapes social norms. In this respect,
50 Visibility can be a two-way street and either encourage good behavior or facilitate bad behavior.
51 Whether observing someone committing a wrongdoing will be condemned ("I am a better
52 person") or serve as justification for similar behavior ("everybody does it") depends in part on
53 the way people relate to the wrongdoer. If the person who violates ethical standards is an in-
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3 group member or a respected figure, people will easily follow this person's lead. However, if the
4 person is an out-group member, or someone with a bad reputation, people will tend to distance
5 themselves by exhibiting the opposite worthy behavior. Hence when designing visible
6 environments to enhance social monitoring, we should pay special attention to both the social
7 cues and the actors who display them (Cialdini, 1993; Erat & Gnezy, 2012; Gino et al., 2009).
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13 **Self-Engagement**

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15 People state that being moral is central to their self-concept and they really care about
16 honesty in their interactions with others (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Haidt, 2007; Tayler, 2006).
17 One problem is that people tend to think about their morality in abstract and ideal terms, but
18 violate ethical standards in concrete and seemingly isolated actions. The principle of Self-
19 Engagement increases awareness by establishing a direct relationship between people's concrete
20 transgressions and their general perceptions of their morality. Engaging the moral-self can help
21 people resist the temptation of unethical behavior and commit to ethical standards.
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30 In a field study that exemplifies the effectiveness of this principle, researchers
31 collaborated with an automobile insurance company that hoped to encourage people to report the
32 true mileage on their cars. Of course, higher mileage leads to a higher premium; therefore people
33 save money by lying and under-reporting. In this study, customers were asked to sign a statement
34 declaring they were telling the truth. Importantly, the researchers randomly assigned customers
35 to a 'regular' statement where their signature was placed at the bottom of the page (*after*
36 reporting the car mileage), or a 'Self-Engagement' statement, where their signature was placed at
37 the top of the page (*before* reporting the car mileage). This subtle difference had an impressive
38 effect: when people signed their names at the top of the page they reported more mileage (Shu et
39 al., 2012).
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49 Shaping better moral habits with the principle of Self-Engagement encourages people to
50 resist everyday temptations and stick to their own highest values. We should educate people
51 about tempting situations, and teach them to realize the psychological toll of ethical dissonance.
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Policy Implications

The fields of moral psychology and behavioral ethics have grown rapidly in the last two decades, and have documented a variety of factors that enable (even good) people to do wrong. The REVISE framework organizes these factors into three main categories and identifies interventions to encourage moral behavior. Table 1 summarizes the framework and presents examples applying REVISE principles to policy in different content areas. *Reminding* mitigates grey areas that blur the ethical code, *Visibility* mitigates anonymity and the slippery slope of social norms, and the gap between moral values and actual behavior can be reconciled by encouraging *Self-Engagement*.

Dishonesty has never been compulsory and it should not be accepted as an inevitable fact of life. We can revise behavior and encourage ethicality by designing supportive environments that minimize temptations and define clear boundaries between right and wrong (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Sunstein, 2014). Successful public policies should raise moral barriers by reminding people of their own ethical code, encouraging social monitoring and responsible norms, increasing self-awareness and prompting moral commitment.

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Table 1. Applying REVISE to define general problems, solutions, and specific recommendation for policy

Problem	Solution	Examples of Policy Recommendations
<p>Ambiguity of rules and laws allows people to circumvent them with self-serving justifications.</p>	<i>Reminding</i>	<p><u>Tax compliance:</u> Provide moral reminders in different sections of the tax return. Some cues can specify the victims and damage caused by unreported income. Other cues can highlight the moral uses of tax money.</p>
	<p>Present cues at critical points (e.g., right before the temptation) and re-actualize them every now and then.</p>	<p><u>Compliance with handicapped parking:</u> Provide moral reminders next to handicapped parking spaces, such as the Ellen Show motto “Be Kind to One Another” to encourage ethical parking behavior.</p>
<p>Anonymity and lack of peer monitoring diffuses moral responsibility.</p>	<i>Visibility</i>	<p><u>Tax compliance:</u> Develop mobile Apps to computerize tax forms, personalize the reporting process, and create identified correspondence (e.g. filling in home and work addresses automatically, name of employer, spouse, children etc.).</p>
	<p>Include procedures that increase people's perceived sense of being seen by relevant others (e.g., peers/clients/supervisors).</p>	<p><u>Shoplifting:</u> Place mirrors close to cashier and at exit doors, to enhance people’s perception of ‘being watched’ as they wait in line to pay, and as they leave the store.</p>
<p>Disparity between people's abstract perception of their moral image and their actual behavior allows them to do wrong but feel they are moral.</p>	<i>Self-Engagement</i>	<p><u>Tax Compliance:</u> Run surveys prior to ‘tax time’ asking people general questions about their morality, their parents' moral values, followed by specific questions about cheating on taxes.</p>
	<p>Generate and obtain self-commitment to act morally prior to behavior.</p>	<p>Change reporting forms by requiring people to start the procedure by signing an honor code and committing to true reporting.</p>
		<p><u>Bribery:</u> Members of important law-making committees should have officials sign for and pin Ethical Commitment buttons on their lapels or wear Integrity bracelets on their wrists.</p>