

Behavioral ethics: a story of increased breadth and depth

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As the narrative of the behavioral ethics field continues to unfold, we take pause to note the recent research in this domain, highlighting areas of increased depth and increased breadth. Depth is revealed in the growing literatures focused on the role of the self in ethical decision-making and the distinction between intentional and unintentional unethical behavior. Breadth is revealed in work that considers the role others play in our ethical judgments, perceptions and attributions, an emerging bridge between fairness and ethics literatures, and a return to personality-based theories of ethics. We conclude with a call for more macro and interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as greater attention to theory building and ethics education.

Addresses

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The field of behavioral ethics was ‘based on the conviction that there are many domains of research in psychology and behavioral economics that are relevant to business ethics’ [1]. Many years passed before the name, behavioral ethics, took hold, and yet the ‘field without a name’ was prolific. Since then, the pace of research has accelerated, generating multiple literature reviews [2–4,5**]. Our goal is not to replicate those comprehensive examinations but rather to identify a narrative unfolding in the present moment, paying particular attention to the depth and breadth that now defines the field. In doing so, we focus on select and recent articles, analyzing them within the context of the behavioral ethics story that had been told prior to them.

Digging deep: developing depth in the field

Two themes play a dominant role in the behavioral ethics story: a focus on the self and the distinction (and sometimes debate) between intentional and unintentional unethical behavior.

Focus on the self

The role of the self has taken on an increasingly larger role in the study of ethics. Playing a minor role in earlier reviews, the self catapults to a starring role in more recent reviews. Two streams of work characterize the focus on the self.

One stream of work focuses on the self in the context of one’s self-view. A recent review summarizes the role of the self in ethics research by noting that ‘not everyone needs to feel like a saint; they just want to avoid feeling like a sinner’ [6, page 2]. In other words, our ethical behavior is closely tied to how we view ourselves: how we view ourselves shapes our ethical behavior and our ethical behavior shapes how we view ourselves. Work on organizational courage similarly emphasizes the role of identity, and in particular, incongruities between one’s self and social identities, and its relation to courageous behavior [7*]. Thus, ethical decision-making is a motivated, reciprocal process, in which the self plays an important part.

This starring role is apparent in mixed-methods work in which ongoing self-evaluations influence one’s behaviors related to ‘being green’ [8]. This work reveals the dynamic process through which one’s self-view is evaluated. Self-view is neither static, nor all good or all bad. Doubts play an important role in self-view and one’s support for environmental issues can grow or subside based on these doubts. Similarly, the desire for a positive self-view shapes the conditions under which one favors prosocial initiatives over more instrumental initiatives [9].

Self-threat and threat construal are recurring themes in this research. Self-threat is anything that makes it difficult to retain a positive self-view. Anxiety leads to threat perception, which increases self-interested unethical behavior, while threat construal shapes whether an individual is able to break the link between being morally disengaged and behaving unethically [10,11*]. Priming a sense of security (e.g. secure attachment) changes how threat is construed, and thus, serves as an ethical intervention that improves ethical behavior.

Research also shows that financial deprivation leads to more cheating because it shifts one’s moral standards; behavior that would have once been a self-threat becomes acceptable, allowing one’s self-view to remain intact [12]. Similarly, gradually increasing indiscretions lead to a slippery slope of unethical behavior over time, a finding that aligns with the role of shifting standards in reducing self-threat [13]. And, a fascinating relationship between

creativity and dishonesty suggests that a reconstrual of the situation (e.g. self-threat) is conducive to unethical behavior [14].

New thinking leverages these insights about the self in a broad theory of ethical decision-making and develops a model for how to improve ethical decision-making [15]. This work brings important concepts from the self-literature — self-threat, self-enhancement, and self-protection — more directly into the ethics context. Another stream of research focuses on one's self-regulatory resources, exploring the effects of factors such as challenging goals, the trajectory of the challenge, social influence, and even caffeine [16,17]. Repeated exposure to violations of moral principles is also linked to the (lack of) availability of regulatory resources, which in turn impacts personal and work domains [18]. Closer study pinpoints an important nuance in the relationship between depletion and unethical behavior, showing that depletion does not lead to unethical behavior when the behavior does not help satisfy the person's need [19].

Intentional versus unintentional unethical behavior

The study of behavioral ethics has paralleled advances in the behavioral sciences. Specifically, 'dual-process' and System 1 and System 2 models have emerged as more accurate models of human thought than more traditional models, which assumed awareness and intentionality [20]. Today, we are not debating whether unintentional unethical behavior occurs or even whether System 1 or System 2 decisions are better. Rather, researchers are exploring when unintentional unethical behavior occurs and its potential antecedents and consequences [2,3]. A central question lies in the role of automaticity in ethical decision-making with both intuition and reasoning seen as simultaneously needed to make ethical choices [21]. In this work, integrative complexity, which refers to how many dimensions of the decision one considers and the extent to which these dimensions are integrated in one's decision-making, is found to be curvilinearly related to unethical decisions such that a moderate amount of complexity leads to more ethical decisions (as compared to low or high degrees of complexity).

Ethical behavior is also shaped by subconscious priming, reinforcing the dual roles of conscious and unconscious mental processes [17]. Disgust, an emotion often linked to subconscious processing, increases self-interested, unethical behaviors through the promotion of one's own welfare [22]. The degree to which one is operating in an abstract versus concrete mindset is also consequential for how individuals weigh personal versus social gain [23], offering another example of the influence of unconscious mental processes. Along these lines, an exhaustive review of the moral intuition literature teases apart the process versus the content of moral intuition [24]. Moral

intuitions are described as most relevant to situations that have moral relevance but involve uncertainty and social tension, and are considered to have implications for a range of topics such as leadership, corruption, ethics education, and divestiture socialization.

Recent work also brings a neuroscientific perspective to the study of these mental processes, concluding that 'morality is supported not by a single brain circuitry or structure, but by several circuits overlapping with other complex processes' [25]. This review of the neuroscientific literature contrasts rational, effortful, explicit mental processes with emotional, quick, and intuitive processes, and highlights the debate that still exists about how these processes interact.

Finally, a working paper by Chugh and Kern challenges broad-strokes references to automatic mental processes without greater precision about what specifically is occurring. Using the 'four horsemen of automaticity' — intentionality, awareness, controllability, and efficiency — they highlight that an unintentional unethical behavior can be highly automatic on some dimensions while not being highly automatic on other dimensions [26]. Greater precision about the operation of these processes will deepen our understanding of what it means for unethical behavior to occur 'unintentionally'.

Casting a wide net: enhancing the breadth of the field

The streams of research devoted to the role of the self and the presence or absence of automaticity in unethical behavior have deepened the field of behavioral ethics. In parallel, new characters are making an appearance, including actors other than the self, fairness and justice, and an examination of 'bad and good apple' traits.

'It's not all about me'

Though the role of the self remains dominant, this siloed view is augmented by consideration of the role that others play in ethical judgments, perceptions and attributions. The presence or consideration of others links to both ethical as well as unethical behavior. On the positive side, others can make us more moral. For example, those who are socially connected are more likely to make utilitarian judgments independent of the affect that they feel [27]. A series of papers puts consideration of others as one of the three pillars of moral character [28,29], arguing that 'morality is rooted in social relations' [28]. Others may mitigate the impact of resource depletion on unethical behavior if they are instrumental in achieving social consensus on an issue [30]. In addition to the study of the effect others have on behavior, attention has also been directed to 'others' as a dependent variable, revealing a potentially unexpected accuracy in the judgment of others' moral traits [31].

The behavioral ethics narrative is also made richer by the introduction of constructs that move beyond the self to consider the group or organizational level. For example, recent work argues for the study of collective empathy in organizational philanthropy decisions [32]. Other research offers a new construct, moral identification (belongingness with an organization that has ethical traits), finding that it is associated with decreased unethical behavior, increased attraction and increased retention [33]. Recent work also introduces and tests the duty orientation construct, defined as an 'individual's volition orientation to loyally serve and faithfully support other members of the group, to strive and sacrifice to accomplish the tasks and missions of the group and to honor its codes and principles' and find that it mediates the relationship between ethical and transformational leadership and outcomes [34, page 220]. The organization, through the provision of salient situational cues that remind participants of the importance of morality, has also been identified as instrumental in reducing unethical behavior in physiologically deprived individuals [19]. Recognizing the importance of both individual and group level constructs, new work proposes that behavior is best understood by *Homo duplex*, which emphasizes that individuals live at two levels, one focusing on the emotions and goals of the individual and the other, higher level, focusing on emotions and goals that connect individuals to groups [35].

Understanding unethical behavior in a more socialized context, however, also reveals that others can be linked with undesirable behavior. Low wages themselves are not enough to promote dishonesty but rather it is only when the higher wages of others is made salient that cheating occurs [36]. Others' unethical behavior can also wreak havoc, with the unethical behavior of customers creating resource depletion, work-family tensions, peer conflict and job neglect for the targeted employee [18*]. Medical ethics research revealed that, in end-of-life decisions, nurses were more likely than doctors to experience negative outcomes — including burnout, cynical relationships and depersonalization — in part because they were not involved with others in the decision making process [37]. An inclusion of others as a dependent variable also introduces the notion of 'group-serving dishonesty', or behavior designed to benefit the group. Elevated oxytocin led to greater dishonesty that benefitted the group (even if no reciprocity was expected) but did not influence self-serving dishonesty, a finding used to support the case for neurobiological causes of unethical behavior [38].

Fairness and ethics: a reluctant but progressing union

Our inclusion of the role that others play in unethical behavior was prompted in part by a significantly stronger integration between the justice field and behavioral ethics, an integration that responded to the acknowledgment that 'scholars studying organizational justice have been slow to incorporate insights from behavioral ethics

research, despite the fields' conceptual affinities' [39] and a recognition that 'fairness and ethics are inevitably entwined' [40]. One justice scholar proposes that the distinction between the two is a difference in focus, with organizational justice focusing on the impact of others' behaviors and attitudes on an individual and behavioral ethics focusing on the viewpoint of the actor [41]. This distinction highlights why integration with the justice literature has increased the extent to which the social context is considered in the behavioral ethics field. A significant portion of this research has maintained the tradition in the justice literature of focusing on reactions to others' actions, such as the research on abusive supervision. This research has drawn on the group model of justice [42,43], finding that abusive supervision negatively affects individual task performance and helping behavior because it creates negative social relationships not only between the leader and follower but also among the follower's peers [44]. It has further been found that abused employees often retaliate, which is particularly likely when their self-capacity is low and their supervisor's ability to reward/punish is likewise low, which in turn only serves to escalate the abusive behavior directed toward them [45]. Others have extended abusive supervision to the team level through the introduction of abusive supervision climate [46*]. Moving beyond abusive supervision, in a novel investigation of the perceptions of unjust or unethical behavior, scholars found that witnessing an unethical act in an organization followed by an exemplary organizational recovery effort led to more positive perceptions of the organization by employees than if the failure had not occurred [47]. Other research has examined the antecedents to justice-related variables, thereby potentially expanding the nomological net. This research, for example, has found that 'cold' cognitive motives were more strongly associated with adherence to justice when the supervisor did not possess much discretion. However, when the supervisor did have more discretion, 'hot' affective motives were associated with justice adherence [48]. With its attention to the reactions to behavior, the justice literature holds promise in addressing the criticism that behavioral ethics has ignored the aftermath or consequences of unethical behavior [2,4].

The return of the Bad Apple

The 'Bad Barrel', or the focus on the situation as a root cause of unethical behavior, has been an ongoing protagonist in the story of unethical behavior. However, the 'Bad Apple', or focus on the person as a root case, is making a reappearance. Drawing on trait-based theory, new work introduces the construct of moral character and argues for the need to consider its three dimensions in the examination of unethical behavior: motivation (i.e., consideration of others), ability (i.e., conscientiousness, self-control and consideration of future consequences) and identity (i.e., wanting to be seen as moral) [28*]. Though the authors acknowledge that ability includes self-regulatory

capacities, they also argue that self-regulation is a necessary but not sufficient dimension to consider. Likewise, while they agree that situations can have an impact on behavior, they assert that it is important to consider the root cause of that effect (i.e., how did the situation impact motivation?).

Fascinating recent work uses political ideologies as an individual measure of CEO values, demonstrating that liberal (vs. conservative) CEOs are more likely to engage in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) particularly when they have more power, with findings also suggesting their CSR engagement is less dependent on recent financial performance [49]. Liberal CEOs also are more likely to see the formation of activist groups (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) in their organizations [50]. Other research has examined traits to evaluate and qualify previously established findings. New research argues that the ‘morning effect,’ whereby people are more ethical in the morning, is further qualified by one’s chronotype, with the morning effect observed only for morning larks but an ‘evening effect’, in which more ethical behavior is observed later in the day, observed for night owls [51,52]. Additional research investigated a well-established trait, moral disengagement, and contrary to previous findings, found no explanatory evidence of the construct; however, moral knowledge was found to be a key driver in moral behavior in ethical decisions [53].

Summary

If the behavioral ethics story were up for an award, it would likely fall into the finalist category. The depth and breadth that currently characterize the field is encouraging. The field has responded to past calls from previous reviews, including appeals to incorporate the role of subconscious thinking, the outcomes of unethical behavior, group and firm level variables, neurobiological approaches and the ‘ethical side’ of unethical behavior in the form of variables such as OCBs, pro-organizational behavior, and organizational courage [2]. The field is also to be praised for embracing qualitative methodologies such as in the study of the Chief Compliance Officer Role, and narratives as used in the study of organizational courage [7,54]. Research has also recognized that the type of dilemma, such as ‘right-right’ versus ‘right-wrong’, easy or hard, infrequent or frequent, is indeed a boundary condition and needs to be explicitly addressed [23,28**].

Although we believe the field would be a finalist, more work is needed before it wins the award. Calls for macro perspectives still need more attention, as does integration across business disciplines and non-business disciplines and ethics education. As noted, there has been some work on the ‘ethical’ side of the field, but most of this has been centered on variables that are related to, but not direct measurements of, ethical behavior. Not addressed in much depth, for example, is why people do not cheat

or lie in a given situation. In other words, we need to understand not only what facilitates unethical behavior but also what facilitates ethical behavior. Perhaps most concerning is the growth in empirical findings and the corresponding paucity of theoretical development. Although the field has grown somewhat theoretically, particularly with regards to theories related to the self, attention should be paid to the balance of ‘neat findings’ and the theoretical foundations upon which they stand.

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