An Inductive Study of Perceived Susceptibility to Unethical Behavior

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Abstract

Well-publicized ethics scandals and research on ethical behavior provide evidence that just as everyone is capable of making mistakes, the vast majority of individuals are capable of making unethical decisions. Despite this evidence though, the vast majority of people tend to think of themselves as very ethical people. However, there is often a gap between how ethical people are compared to how ethical they perceive themselves to be. While individuals differ in the level of trust they place in themselves to make ethical decisions in the workplace, we tend to view ourselves as more ethical than we really are. While research to date has largely focused on reasons why we fail to live up to our highest ethical ideals, we believe that it is important to examine those situations where we are aware of our capacity to engage in unethical behavior. We define this awareness of our potential to enact unethical behavior, perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior. Because little attention has been paid to this construct, we conducted an inductive research study to develop a model of behaviors and outcomes associated with perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior. We report the experiences and outcomes of individuals who have experienced this perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior. We examined the perceptions people have of themselves and the actions they take as a result of experiencing perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior. We developed a construct to define what makes individuals susceptible to making unethical decisions in the workplace. We discuss the implications of perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior for creating a greater openness for individuals to discuss ethical temptations, to be more open to interventions for promoting ethical behavior, and actions taken to reduce their level of perceived susceptibility for making unethical decisions.

Ethical Behavior in Organizations

Ethics research continues to conclude that people are not as ethical as they think they are (Trennusl & Messick, 2004).

Continued ethics scandals highlight the need for further research on ethics management to be conducted (e.g. Eron & Wells Fargo).

More companies and researchers are looking for evidence-based practices to put into place (Trevino, et al., 2006)

According to Sekerka (2009), ethics programs in organizations must go beyond the teaching of requirements and standards; they must also help employees learn how to effectively recognize and respond to common ethical problems experienced in the workplace.

Ethics Training

Nearly 75% of companies provide ethics training (Sekerka, 2009).

Struggles related to conducting ethics training

– Costs
– Backlash
– Wrong kinds of ethics training being put into place (Sekerka, 2009)
– Compliance-based versus values-based (Sekerka, 2009)
– Individual ethical autonomy

Ethics interventions need to account for all kinds of employees.

Perceived Susceptibility to Unethical Behavior

We define perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior as an experience when you recognize that you are capable (or likely) to engage in unethical behavior that goes against your highest ethical standards (e.g., potential to fall prey to moral temptation).

The experience of recognizing that you are capable of engaging in unethical behavior.

Research Questions

1. How do individuals experience perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior?
2. What are the outcomes of experiencing perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior?

Method

Since perceived susceptibility to unethical behavior is a new construct, we conducted a qualitative research study to better understand it.

Sample Question

1. Please describe an experience when you recognized that you were capable (or likely) to engage in unethical behavior, which went against your highest ethical standards. It doesn't matter whether you actually engaged in this unethical behavior or not. We are interested in learning about the experience of recognizing that you were capable of engaging in unethical behavior, not types of unethical behavior that you may or may not have engaged in.

   • Examples include being able to picture yourself or feeling capable of stealing, cheating, lying, or engaging in some other type of unethical behavior.

Survey Results

A total of 200 individuals employed full-time (employed for 40 or more hours a week) completed surveys for this study. A pool of willing participants maintained by Qualtrics was used.

- The sample was predominantly female (53%), Caucasian (86%), and an average age of 44.8 years old.
- The sample had an average of 21.73 years of work experience and the vast majority of participants had supervisory experience (86%).

Ethical Temptation Defined

Temptations are impulses to behave in a way that prioritize less important goals over more important goals (e.g., watching television vs. exercising to achieve improved physical health), that lead to later regret (Leroy et al., 2012; Magen & Gross, 2007). Ethical temptations are those impulses to behave in ways that prioritize non-ethical desires over ethical values.

Types

- Stealing – mentioned by 47% of the participants
  - “Oh man anybody could steal this car.” (Participant 25)
- Lying – mentioned by 40% of the participants
  - “I was tempted by a coworker to be dishonest about a mistake that was made by our team.” (Participant 31)
- Cheating – mentioned by 7% of the participants
  - “I could have gone for immediate satisfaction, knowing that my girlfriend would never know, or I could have remained faithful to her...” (Participant 33)

Opportunity

Recognition that there is the chance or desire to participate in unethical behavior.

- “I was constantly in a position to steal money from a cash register on one of my jobs.” (Participant 28)
- “I was very anxious and wanted to do it but at the same time didn't want to.” (Participant 30)

Human Nature

Expressed belief that being tempted is part of the human experience.

- “It just proves I'm as human as anyone else.” (Participant 34)
- “We’re human, not perfect.” (Participant 36)
- “I believe we are all susceptible and knowing that I am/was makes me more wary of when the temptation arises again.” (Participant 39)
- “Humans going to be humans.” (Participant 40)

Time and Reflection

Having the time to stop and reflect often prevented individuals from taking part in unethical behavior.

- “After much thought, I had to pull out.” (Participant 32)
- “If I give in to that temptation, it always causes me to wonder why I am in the role I am, if I don't have respect for the company/manager that I work for and what the ultimate factor is in why I succumb.” (Participant 39)

Consequences

Unethical temptation was often resisted due to a fear of the consequences.

- “I didn't go through with for fear of repercussions.” (Participant 28)
- “I would have ended [up] getting fired.” (Participant 29)
- “I could have lost my job, people wouldn't trust me, I wouldn't have liked having to live with it.” (Participant 28)

Implications for Training

Do you believe ethics training is helpful (or would be helpful) for you personally?

YES
- Training can lead to a greater level of self-awareness
  - “I think it would provide us with insight into ourselves. Not a single person has not had at least an ethical thought...” (Participant 39)
- Training can lead to a greater control of behavior
  - “I think it is helpful. It gives us a reminder about right and wrong and guidance to behave ourselves in any setting.” (Participant 27)
  - “It will help me know how to handle such unethical behavior.” (Participant 29)

NO
- Believe themselves to be an ethical person already
  - “I feel that I'm pretty ethical and trustworthy.” (Participant 26)
  - “I believe I am a very ethical person, and I have always tried my best to do the right thing.” (Participant 33)
- Right and wrong is individually defined
  - “I know right from wrong and do not need someone else to tell me.” (Participant 34)
  - “I've never had any type of ethical training and am very ethical. I don't think it's necessary.” (Participant 36)