

THE EFFECTS OF ETHICAL IDEOLOGY
ON MORAL BEHAVIOR*¹

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SUMMARY

The relationship between ethical ideology and moral behavior was investigated in two studies by tempting American college students (19 males and 61 females) to cheat on a test administered in a laboratory setting. Overall, students who adopted different ethical ideologies, as assessed by the 2 (relativistic *vs* nonrelativistic moral outlook) by 2 (idealistic *vs* pragmatic values) classification scheme of the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) behaved similarly. However, questionnaire ratings indicated (a) self-devaluation was most pronounced among absolutists (nonrelativistic and idealistic); (b) exceptionists (nonrelativistic and pragmatic) reported increased happiness the more they cheated; (c) situationists' (relativistic and idealistic) self-ratings were not clearly related to the morality of their actions; and (d) subjectivists (relativistic and pragmatic) showed signs of fear of detection. Combined with previous data, these findings suggest variations in ethical ideology may predict individual differences in moral judgment, but not individual differences in moral behavior.

A. INTRODUCTION

Individual differences in ethical ideologies have been shown to vary as a function of (a) rejection of universal moral rules in favor of relativism and (b) idealism in the evaluation of actions and consequences (1). These two dimensions—when dichotomized and crossed in a 2 × 2 typology—yield four distinct ethical perspectives which have been labelled situationism, subjectivism, absolutism, and exceptionism. Situationists tend to reject

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moral rules, advocating individualistic analysis of each act in each situation. Absolutists reject emphasis on the consequences of actions in favor of natural laws, appealing to absolute, inviolate moral principles. Subjectivists base their judgments on personal values rather than universal moral principles. Exceptionists allow moral absolutes to guide their judgments but remain pragmatically open to exceptions.

Although Forsyth (1) has found that individuals within each of these four categories differ significantly when formulating moral judgments, the relationship between ethical ideology and moral behavior remains unexplored. To study this question, two separate experiments were conducted in which representatives of each ethical ideology were tempted to cheat on a laboratory exercise. On the basis of previous research indicating absolutists are the most strict and unyielding in their moral judgments, it was hypothesized that this group, more than any other ethical ideology, would be less likely to violate moral norms which condemn cheating.

B. STUDY ONE

1. *Method*

Nine male and 24 female undergraduate college students who had one of the four ethical ideologies measured by the Ethics Position Questionnaire (1) were asked to complete a measure of social sensitivity in a laboratory setting. To motivate *Ss* to achieve a good score, the *E* explained that the test was a valid measure of social skill, competence, and ability to make and keep friends. Also, the *E* offhandedly ridiculed a previous *S* who had done poorly: "They only got four right out of 12 . . . See, look at all the mistakes. I am sure you can do much better than that." The *E* then returned the scoring key to the work basket near the *S*. Participants were given 15 minutes to work on the test in a locked room—and could cheat if they desired. After the test *Ss* completed a questionnaire measure of self-evaluation and then were carefully debriefed.

2. *Results*

Because the test items could be answered correctly only by chance guessing, a high score (say, six out of the total 12) was unlikely without cheating. Although 36% of the *Ss* attained a score of six or more correct, no ethical category was either over- or underrepresented ($\chi^2 < 1.0$); hence ethical ideology did not appear to be related to moral and immoral behavior. Analysis of the correlations between *Ss*' responses to the questionnaire

and overall test score (scores could range from 0 correct to 12 correct), however, revealed significant differences between the ethical positions. For absolutists ($n = 7$), cheating was negatively correlated with happiness ($r = -.79, p < .05$), strength ($r = -.87, p < .05$), goodness ($r = -.66, p < .10$), and satisfaction ($r = -.63, p < .10$). For subjectivists ($n = 14$), cheating was negatively correlated with goodness ($r = -.61, p < .05$), not worrying ($r = -.75, p < .05$), calm ($r = -.63, p < .05$), and being at ease ($r = -.60, p < .05$). Furthermore, while no correlations were significant for situationists ($n = 7$), positive correlations between cheating and happiness and satisfaction approached significance for the exceptionists ($n = 7, r_s = .61$ and $.57$, respectively).

C. STUDY TWO

1. *Methods*

Given the failure to find differences in Study One, a second paradigm was developed which made use of a *C* who prompted *Ss* to cheat. Ten male and 37 female undergraduate psychology college students arrived for the research in two-person groups and were asked to complete a test of analytic ability. The *E* stressed the importance of the dyad achieving a high score on the test. One *S*, however, was actually a *C* who cheated on the test (an insoluble series of anagrams) by looking at the answer key. After cheating, the *C* then attempted to prompt the *S* to cheat by stressing the importance of the *S*'s score in order for the dyad "to look good" for the *E*. After this prompting, the *E* returned, administered a questionnaire similar to that used in Study One, and fully debriefed each *S*.

2. *Results*

Of the 47 *Ss* studied, 39 (83%) followed the *C*'s lead and cheated on the test by looking at the answer key. However, no ethical ideology was over- or underrepresented among those *Ss* who cheated ($\chi^2 < 1.0$). Once more, the findings suggest that factors other than ethical ideology best predicted moral and immoral behavior. However, a MANOVA performed on the 15 self-rating items completed by the 39 individuals who cheated revealed a significant main effect of ethical ideology— $F(45, 63) = 1.57, p < .05$ —which was univariately significant on the following items: weak-strong, negative-positive, not likeable-likeable, and dirty-clean. The means fell in a similar pattern for each of these items, with absolutists, relative to the other ideologies, rating themselves more negatively. For example, on the

negative-positive item the means for exceptionists, subjectivists, situationists, and absolutists were (in order) 3.25, 3.88, 3.45, and 2.50.

D. DISCUSSION

While previous research involving the Ethics Position Questionnaire suggests that the taxonomy of ethical ideologies is a fairly accurate predictor of moral judgments, the current investigation suggests that ideology may not be related to behavior. In both of the present studies the representatives from the various ideologies acted equally morally (or immorally) suggesting that—at least in the situations and individuals examined in these studies—ideology may not be predictive of actual moral behavior. In both studies, however, absolutists tended to devalue themselves after cheating, while in Study One subjectivists reported greater anxiety the more they had cheated. These findings suggest that ideology may predict intrapersonal changes which follow the performance of immoral behaviors, including guilt, self-devaluations, and anxiety.

REFERENCE

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SUPPLEMENTARY DATA TABLES FOR EXPERIMENTS ONE AND TWO

Table 1: Correlations Between Amount Cheated and Self-Ratings (Experiment One)

Self-Rating Item	Overall	Except- ionists	Subjecti- vists	Situa- tionists	Absolu- tionists
	<u>r</u>	(7)	(14)	(7)	(7)
Sad-Happy	-.07	.61	-.48	.64	-.79**
Weak-Strong	-.39**	.00	-.29	-.51	-.87**
Bad-Good	-.30*	.09	-.61**	-.46	-.66*
Dissatisfied-Satisfied	-.08	.57	-.26	.16	-.63
Worried-Not Worried	-.23	.00	-.75**	-.10	.03
Nervous-Calm	-.13	.41	-.63**	-.39	.03
Upset-At Ease	-.21	.40	-.60**	-.46	-.09

Note: Higher scores on self-rating items indicate more positive self-evaluations. Cell ns are given in parentheses.

** $p < .05$ * $p < .10$

Table 2: Self-Rating Means for the Four Ideologies (Experiment Two)

Item	Exceptionists	Subjectivists	Situationists	Absolutists
	(8)	(8)	(11)	(12)
Weak-Strong***	3.75 ^a	3.75 ^a	2.91 ^b	2.91 ^b
Negative-Positive**	3.25 ^{ab}	3.88 ^a	3.45 ^a	2.5 ^b
Not Likeable-Likeable*	4.38 ^{ab}	4.50 ^a	4.00 ^{ab}	3.58 ^b
Dirty-Clean*	4.63 ^a	4.63 ^a	4.18 ^{ab}	3.75 ^b

Note: Higher scores indicate more positive self evaluations. Cell ns are given in parentheses.

*** Main effect of ethical ideology significant at the $p < .01$ level.

** Main effect of ethical ideology significant at the $p < .05$ level.

* Main effect of ethical ideology significant at the $p < .10$ level.