

Do-gooder or Ne'er-do-well? Behavioral Science Explains Patterns of Moral Behavior

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Does good behavior lead to more good behavior? Or do we try to balance our good and bad deeds? The answer depends on our ethical mindset, according to new research published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Psychological scientist Gert Cornelissen of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra and colleagues found that people who have an “ends justify the means” mindset are more likely to balance their good and bad deeds, while those who believe that what is right and wrong is a matter of principle are more likely to be consistent in their behavior, even if that behavior is bad.

Existing research is mixed when it comes to explaining how previous behavior affects our current moral conduct.

Some researchers find evidence for moral balancing, suggesting that we hover around a moral setpoint. Going over that setpoint by doing a good deed gives us license to engage in more self-interested, immoral, or antisocial behavior. When our moral self-image falls below that setpoint, however, we feel ill at ease and try to compensate by engaging in positive behavior.

Other researchers have argued for behavioral consistency, suggesting that engaging in an ethical or unethical act leads to more of the same behavior.

Cornelissen and colleagues explored what facilitates either phenomenon in a series of three studies.

The results from all three studies showed that participants’ dominant ethical mindset, in combination with their previous behavior, influenced their behavior in the lab.

When given a pot of money to divide, people with an outcome-based mindset allocated fewer coins to their partners after recalling recent ethical behavior. They were also more likely to cheat when given the opportunity to self-report the number of test items they answered correctly. These results suggest that they felt licensed to engage in “bad” behavior after thinking about their good deeds.

People who had a rule-based mindset, on the other hand, gave more coins to their partner and were less likely to cheat after recalling an ethical act, indicating that they were trying to be consistent with their previous behavior.

The relationship seems to be driven, at least in part, by the fact that people with an outcome-based mindset are attending to their moral self-image, or the discrepancy between the self they perceive and the self they aspire to be.

The theoretical framework explored in these studies — integrating ethical mindsets and moral dynamics — helps to reconcile seemingly conflicting strands of research.

Cornelissen and colleagues believe that this research deals with a fundamental mechanism that could help us to understand patterns of moral behavior for people in any kind of role, such as consumers, managers, employees, neighbors, or citizens.

It may also help to explain cases in which individuals are consistently unethical.

“In the current studies, we showed that a rule-based mindset can lead to a consistent pattern of unethical behavior, in which violating a rule becomes the norm. Such a pattern resembles the slippery slope of moral decision making,” write Cornelissen and colleagues.

According to the researchers, additional research may help us better understand the mechanisms that underlie this behavior and find ways to prevent individuals from descending down the slippery slope.

In addition to Cornelissen, co-authors on the research include Michael R. Bashshur of Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University; Julian Rode of the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ; and Marc Le Menestrel of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

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