

Crimes and misdemeanors: Is there a slippery slope?

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Vito Corleone, the mobster at the center of *The Godfather* saga, begins his career as a petty criminal. A Sicilian immigrant trying to raise a family in a New York City tenement, he agrees to help out a friend, Peter Clemenza, by stashing some guns. Soon after, he joins Clemenza in burglarizing a fancy apartment, and comes home with a nice rug. One burglary leads to another, and they eventually come to the attention of the local mob boss, Don Fanucci, who wants his cut of their loot. Rather than comply, Corleone follows Fanucci home and murders him in his apartment. It's the first of many murders that he will commit or order in his long life of crime.

This is what criminologists and ethicists call the “slippery slope.” But the slippery slope is a psychological puzzle, and the evidence for it is mixed. Some people are like Vito Corleone: A fairly minor ethical lapse can trigger an immoral cascade, leading to a second, and a third, unethical decision, each more serious than the one before. But for others, it appears that the opposite is true: One act of misconduct triggers an ethical reversal, leading to good deeds to make up for the lapse.

So why do some slide down the immoral slope while others right themselves? This is the question that psychological scientist Shu Zhang of Columbia Business School wanted to explore in the lab. She and her Columbia colleagues wondered if certain people are more susceptible to the slippery slope, under what circumstances, and why.

Zhang had the idea that the way people regulate their own actions in general—their regulatory style—might be a crucial determinant of one's ethical career. Specifically, she hypothesized that people who are conservative and cautious by nature—those focused on the prevention of loss and harm—will be more likely to repeat previous actions, simply because it's the status quo. Even a single unethical decision can quickly establish the status quo, which such people are motivated to maintain through subsequent actions. By contrast, people who are more focused on change and improvement—such people are more likely to break from past actions, including unethical actions. Here's an example of how Zhang tested this idea.

She recruited volunteers to perform two tasks—a general knowledge quiz and an anagram task. Based on their performance, they could stand to win \$100, and the knowledge quiz was rigged so that they could choose to cheat. It was a passive kind of cheating—accepting a higher score that they knew to be inaccurate. Then, they were inconspicuously monitored while completing the anagram task—to see who cheated in a more blatant way.

Zhang also assessed the volunteers as either cautious, prevention oriented, or focused on change. The idea was that those focused on maintaining the status quo would be more likely to follow one act of cheating with another. And that's what they found: Volunteers with a strong prevention focus were more likely to follow one act of cheating with another. Notably, they were not more likely to cheat in the first place, supporting the idea that a cautious style only perpetuates an already established ethical

stance.

Zhang and colleagues ran five experiments, all variations on this one, which they describe in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. In every case—but only for prevention focused people—an initial unethical decision became the status quo, motivating a repeat of that decision. Sometimes this involved overstating personal performance. Other times, it involved disclosing or hiding information. In still other situations, the choice was to donate (or not) to a good cause. It didn't matter what kind of ethical breach was involved—whether it was a sin of omission or a sin of commission. Indeed, initial cheating of one sort was more likely to be followed by equally unethical breaches of a completely different, and unrelated, kind. All of these ethical breaches come up in medical, legal, financial and environmental realms every day.

So a cautious nature can perpetuate unethical decisions, but it can also sustain ethical decisions. What matters is the choice made at that initial ethical crossroad—and how it is handled. This could have some practical implications. The threat of punishment, for example, could theoretically cause transgressors to become more focused on avoiding harm, which could paradoxically perpetuate past wrongs. A more effective alternative to punishment might be to “reset” the status quo by supporting violators and encouraging them to make up for an act of misconduct.

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