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Donelson R. Forsyth

University of Richmond, dforsyth@richmond.edu

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Predicting immoral behavior

By Donelson R. Forsyth

The link between moral values and moral behavior has long intrigued social psychologists. As early as 1928 Hartshorne and May, in their *Studies in the Nature of Character*, reported some surprising inconsistencies among moral values and moral actions. These researchers developed 33 ways to measure deceit—in areas such as cheating, lying, and stealing—and administered these tests to hundreds of children. Although some of the children behaved immorally more consistently than others, in many cases the situation, and not the personality characteristics of the children, determined who would yield to temptation.

When Hartshorne and May extended their studies by searching for other aspects of the children's moral outlooks that would better predict their actions, their efforts proved fruitless. Measures of their moral values, knowledge, and judgments about moral dilemmas were only slightly related to actual conduct. Despite the counterintuitive nature of the Hartshorne and May findings,

People who say they are the most morally upright may be the most likely to fall prey to temptation.

subsequent researchers frequently have reaffirmed the disparity between moral thought and moral action.

Moral behavior remains an unpredictable puzzle for psychological researchers; however, some success has been achieved recently by taking individuals' personal moral philosophies into consideration. Writing in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1980, Forsyth argued that individual variations in approaches to moral judgment and behavior may be conceptualized in terms of two basic dimensions: relativism and idealism. First, while some personal moral codes emphasize the importance of universal ethical rules like "Thou shalt not lie," others maintain a posture of relativism that skeptically rejects universal principles. Second, while a fundamental concern for the welfare of others lies

at the heart of some individuals' moral codes, others' codes do not emphasize such humanitarian ideals. Individuals following the former code assume that we should avoid harming others, while the latter assume harm will sometimes be necessary to produce good.

Rather than classify individuals as either relativistic or idealistic, Forsyth recommends a fourfold classification based on both dimensions. Individuals who are highly relativistic and highly idealistic are called situationists. They feel that people should strive to produce the best consequences possible, but they realize that moral rules cannot be applied to all situations. This ethical outlook is labeled situationism because its adherents prescribe close inspection of the situation in reaching a contextually appropriate moral evaluation.

Absolutists, like situationists, are also idealistic; they approve of actions that yield many positive, desirable consequences. However, unlike situationists, absolutists are not relativistic. They feel that some ethical absolutes are so important that they must be included in any code of ethics.

The remaining two personal moralities are low in terms of idealism. Subjectivists reject moral rules (high relativism), and they are less idealistic about the possibility of achieving humanitarian goals. This ideology is labeled subjectivism because its adherents describe their moral decisions as subjective, individualistic judgments that cannot be made on the basis of more objective information, such as universal moral absolutes or the extent to which the action harms others. Exceptionists are low in both relativism and idealism; they believe that moral rules should guide behavior, but that actions yielding some negative consequences should not necessarily be condemned. Hence, they are willing to make exceptions to their moral principles.

Do these differences in ethical ideologies predict differences in moral judgment and moral behavior? Concerning moral judgments, several studies suggest that absolutists are particularly harsh when judging other people. In Forsyth's forthcoming study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, representatives from all four ideologies were asked to provide moral evaluations of individuals who, by either violating or conforming to a moral principle (such as "tell the truth," "do not steal," or "keep your promises"), produced positive or negative consequences for innocent others. As predicted, the idealistic absolutists and situationists tended to condemn more strongly those individuals who caused extremely negative consequences; the relativistic subjectivists and situationists were more lenient than the idealistic absolutists when judging individuals who violated a moral norm.

In a similar study, conducted with William R. Pope of Mary Washington College and reported in 1984 in the same journal, representatives from all four ideologies evaluated the morality of 16 ethically controversial psychological studies. Again, absolutists tended to be more negative than all other

individuals, apparently because they focused on the potential harm for subjects created by researchers. Evidence also indicates that the absolutists—particularly males—endorsed more conservative attitudes on contemporary moral issues than did the relativists. More than respondents within each of the other ethical categories, male absolutists felt that test-tube creation is immoral, that mercy killing should not be tolerated, and that marijuana use, homosexuality, and abortion are "wrong." Situationist males tend

to be the most liberal, particularly with regard to euthanasia.

Turning to behavior, researchers have attempted—with mixed results—to link these four ethical ideologies to moral action. In the first of two studies conducted with Rick E. Berger of the Psychophysical Research Laboratories in Princeton, 33 students enrolled in courses at Virginia Commonwealth University were given a bogus test of social sensitivity in a laboratory setting. As described in the *Journal of Social Psychology* in 1982, the experimenter motivated subjects by claiming that the test measured social skill, competence, and ability to make and keep friends. The researcher also offhandedly ridiculed a previous test subject by saying, "The last person only got four right out of 12. See, look at all the mistakes. I am sure you can do much better than that." After these words of encouragement, the experimenter returned the scoring key to the workbasket near the subject, explained he had some phone calls to make in another office, and left the subject alone in the locked room for 15 minutes.

The multiple-choice social sensitivity test actually had no correct answers. Three alternatives followed each question, but all three were equally appropriate. And although subjects were not observed while taking the test, checking test scores detected cheating. If subjects answered too many questions correctly (for instance six of the 12 possible), then they almost certainly cheated. Thirty-six percent did obtain such scores, but the cheaters included subjects from all four moral



categories. As is so often the case, moral values did not predict moral behavior.

A second attempt to test resistance to moral temptation was carried out using an accomplice. Claiming that the study was an attempt to examine dyadic analytic ability—the ability to solve difficult cognitive tasks in two-person groups—the experimenter asked sets of two subjects to work on a series of 12-letter anagrams. While working in a locked room, one of the subjects (actually a confederate of the research team) pretended to break his pencil. Searching for a sharpener, he “discovered” the answer key in some papers on the experimenter’s desk. Later in the session, when it appeared that the dyad could not solve the questions on the test, the confederate took several answers from the key, and then urged the subject to do likewise. Eighty-three percent complied by cheating, but again ethical ideology failed to predict who would succumb to the temptation.

Before concluding that moral values fail as predictors of moral behavior, researchers conducted a third study manipulating several aspects of the behavioral setting. As an interactionist approach to social behavior suggests, features of the social setting may possibly enhance—or reduce—the causal impact of values on behavior. For example, because absolutists and exceptionists emphasize the importance of moral rules, individuals who subscribe to these two types of personal moral philosophies may be more reluctant to engage in immoral behavior when moral rules

are made salient by situational factors. Similarly, since the idealistic ideologies, situationism and absolutism, stress the need to achieve positive, humanitarian consequences, individuals who accept these ideals might be more likely to engage in immoral action if such actions are the means to help others.

The final study, conducted with Judith Nye, a graduate student in the experimental program of

give negative feedback to the test-taker suggesting that he had a very low I.Q. and would probably not finish college. In making this request, the experimenter emphasized that the information was simply a form of feedback (nonsalient moral norm) or that the information was a lie (salient moral norm). In addition, one-half of the subjects were told that they would receive a bonus of three dollars by giving the information (either lie or feedback), while the remaining subjects were told that the information would probably lead to a boomerang effect that would improve the test-taker’s grades over the next few weeks. If subjects agreed to misinform the videotaped individual about his I.Q. score, they were classified as nontruthful; those who refused were classified as truthful.

As anticipated, the two situational variables—the salience of moral norms and the consequences of action—had a strong impact on moral action. While only 50 percent of the subjects lied when they were offered three dollars and were told that they would be lying rather than giving feedback, this percentage in-

creased to 76.2 percent in the other three conditions. In addition, personal idealism influenced moral behavior, but in a surprising fashion. Although high idealists espouse a philosophy that condemns harming others, they were more likely to lie than the low idealists. Fully 91.66 percent of the situationists and absolutists (high idealists) agreed to tell the lie, while only 70.83 percent of the subjectivists and exceptionists



VCU’s Department of Psychology, focused on lying rather than cheating. After assessing ethical ideology in an unrelated context, 112 subjects who could be classified as either situationists, absolutists, subjectivists, or exceptionists were shown a videotape of a male taking an intelligence test. Subjects, however, were led to believe that they were watching a closed-circuit television monitor, and that the test was being administered in the adjoining room. After rating the stimulus person, subjects were asked to

(low idealists) complied with the experimenter's request. In fact, situationists and absolutists usually lied no matter what the consequences or salience of moral norms. Exceptionists, in contrast, were less likely to lie if offered money to lie and subjectivists were less likely to lie if they stood to gain from the lie and the action was labeled a lie. This third experiment verified a tendency noted in the first two studies. After cheating or lying, absolutists tended to rate themselves more negatively than individuals in the other three ethical ideologies.

Before drawing conclusions from these findings, one should note that the subjects in all three of these experiments were debriefed immediately after their sessions. Although the first few minutes of this interview probed for suspiciousness about the procedures, the bulk of the session concentrated on reassuring subjects that their behaviors said nothing about their moral character. Subjects were told about previous studies demonstrating the relatively large impact of situational factors on behavior, and their own reluctance to proceed with the experiment was noted. When subjects cheated or agreed to lie, their actions were likened to a mild social infraction, as when an individual watching a large group of people cross the street against the flashing "Don't Walk" sign decides to cross as well. All subjects expressed retrospective approval of the research, and a number of participants requested copies of the conclusions.

Ethical concerns for subjects aside, these findings should be interpreted with caution. Although they increase the ability to predict who will behave immorally, they also testify to the large impact of situational factors on moral action. The findings seem to support the commonsense notion that people who espouse lofty moral values may tend to behave

immorally. Although both situationists and absolutists strongly endorse such beliefs as "One should never psychologically or physically harm another person" and "It is never necessary to sacrifice the welfare of others," both groups were willing to tell a total stranger that his I.Q. was so low that he needed to drop out of college.

While these findings are not too damaging for situationists since these individuals believe that lying is permissible in some settings, absolutists staunchly maintain that lying violates fundamental moral principles, and they are quite harsh when judging others who have broken this moral absolute. Yet they were more likely to succumb to the temptation to lie. Although additional research is needed to explore further the moral thought of absolutists, the current research attests to a "hypocrisy effect" that may be obscuring the link between moral values and moral behaviors; people who say they are the most morally upright may be most likely to fall prey to temptation. ☺

Reference list available upon request from VCU Publications.

Dr. Donelson R. Forsyth is an associate professor of psychology at the university.

Illustration by Scott Sawyer