

2013

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Recommended Citation

Forsyth, Donelson R., and Ernest H. O'Boyle, Jr. "Ethics Position Theory and Unethical Work Behavior." In *Handbook of Unethical Work Behavior: Implications for Individual Well-Being*, edited by Robert A. Giacalone and Mark D. Promislo, 221-36. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2013.

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ETHICS POSITION THEORY AND UNETHICAL WORK BEHAVIOR

DONELSON R. FORSYTH AND ERNEST H. O'BOYLE JR.

No one can dispute the negative impact of unethical work behavior on productivity and profit. The Center for Retail Research's study of retailers in forty-two countries estimated the loss due to shoplifting, fraud, and employee theft to be \$107.3 billion in 2010, which is more than 1 percent of all retail sales in those countries (Mannes, 2010). A 2010 workplace survey conducted by the International Labour Office identified worldwide increases in workplace violence, which can include bullying, mobbing, threats, sexual assault, and homicide, with an estimated cost to employers in the billions (Chappell and Di Martino, 2006). Harris and Ogbonna's (2002) study of workers in the hospitality industry found that 85 percent regularly engaged in some form of sabotage against their employer and customers, in part to retaliate for mistreatment by other coworkers.

But unethical work behaviors harm more than just the bottom line, for they yield a range of negative psychological and interpersonal consequences for both those who act immorally and those who are party to or targets of those actions. Giacalone and Promislo (2010), in their trauma model of the impact of unethical behavior on well-being, suggest that the well-being and adjustment of victims, witnesses, associates, and even the perpetrators themselves are undermined when moral turpitude intrudes into the workplace. In many cases individuals commit unethical actions because they succumb to pressures that they should resist—social pressure, stress, anger, or financial exigencies—and in consequence they experience debilitating anxiety, remorse, sadness, depression, and vulnerability when they reflect on their actions (Canter and Ioannou, 2004). Those who are bullied, discriminated against, and treated unjustly by others in the workplace display a range of negative reactions to these untoward actions, including lowered self-esteem, demoralization, depression, job-induced stress, insomnia, and general mental health problems (Hansen, Hogh, and Persson, 2011). Others, even if not directly victimized, may experience considerable distress when they find themselves bystanders to the contemptible actions of others or even unwitting collaborators who are drawn into the sordid experience (Vartia, 2001). Giacalone and Promislo (2010) suggest that the vicarious reactions of friends, associates, and family of those who are victimized by others can be as negative as the original target's reaction.

This chapter explores these psychological and interpersonal consequences of unethical work behavior, but focuses on who reacts most negatively to such indiscretions and why. We base our analysis on ethics positions theory (EPT), which suggests that people's reactions in morally toned situations can be traced to variations in their intuitive, personal moral philosophies (Forsyth, 1980). After summarizing the theory and its basic assumptions, we examine the relationship between these variations in moral philosophies and well-being, focusing on the way people respond, psychologically and emotionally, when they act in morally evaluable ways. We then shift the analysis up to the group level to consider the impact of diversity in moral outlook on the workplace relationships, for when individuals who adopt differing moral philosophies must work together, the result may be moral anomie, interpersonal

conflict, and distrust. We then conclude by considering some managerial and leadership implications of the ethics position theory perspective for promoting workplace adjustment and well-being.

ETHICS POSITION THEORY

An individual's personal philosophy about fairness, justice, and ethics will likely contain a number of unique, idiosyncratic elements produced by a lifetime of experience in confronting and resolving moral issues. Ethics position theory assumes that these unique, idiographic characteristics are sustained by two nomothetic regularities that appear consistently across most people's moral values and beliefs (Forsyth, 1980, 1992). First, most individuals take a position with regard to the usefulness of moral absolutes as guides to action and judgment. At one end of the continuum, highly relativistic individuals are so skeptical about the possibility of formulating universal moral principles that they eschew moral rules or principles when deciding between what is right and what is wrong. Other people, in contrast, make use of principles that define morality. They believe that moral principles, such as "Tell the truth to others" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," provide a clear yardstick for judging and guiding actions. Second, most people explicitly consider the relative importance of minimizing harmful, injurious consequences, but they vary from idealistic to the completely pragmatic. Those who are more idealistic stress the welfare of others more than those who are more pragmatic, for they assume that people should avoid harming others and reject the idea that harm will sometimes be necessary to produce good.

These two dimensions, relativism and idealism, parallel the distinction between moral theories based on principles (deontological models) and models that stress the consequences of actions (teleological models) in moral philosophy. These dimensions are also consistent with psychological analyses of morality, such as the work of Piaget (1953), Kohlberg (1983), and Gilligan (1982). Kohlberg (1983), for example, maintained that morally mature individuals tend to rely on principles when thinking about ethics, but that they also accept the sanctity of human life as a core value. Similarly Gilligan's (1982, p. 65) analyses of sex differences in moral thought suggest that women tend to accept an ethic of care that requires finding "a way of solving conflicts so that no one will be hurt" (concern for positive consequences) whereas men tend to stress the rational application of principles.

EPT, rather than assuming individuals are either rule-oriented or consequence-oriented, argues that individuals can range from high to low in their emphasis on principles and in their emphasis on consequences. The model thus identifies the four ethics positions or ideologies summarized in Table 15.1: absolutism, situationism, exceptionism, and subjectivism.

Absolutists

Absolutists are idealistic and principled: they believe that one should strive to produce positive consequences (high idealism) but at the same time maintain strict adherence to general moral principles (low relativism). They condemn actions that harm people, particularly if these actions are inconsistent with fundamental moral absolutes. Such an outlook is, in general, deontological, for it prescribes adherence to duty and exceptionless universal moral rules.

Situationists

Situationists are idealistic contextualists; they feel that people should strive to produce positive consequences and avoid negative consequences, but they also believe that morality so depends on the particulars of a given situation that cross-situational rules concerning morality cannot be

Table 15.1

Four Ethics Positions

		Relativism	
		Low	High
Idealism	High	Absolutists: Principled idealists who believe people should act in ways that are consistent with moral rules, for doing so will in most cases yield the best outcomes for all concerned.	Situationists: Idealistic contextualists who urge acting in ways that will secure the best possible consequences for all concerned even if doing so will violate traditional rules that define what is right and what is wrong.
	Low	Exceptionists: Principled pragmatists who endorse moral rules as guides for action, but do not believe that following rules will necessarily generate the best consequences for all concerned.	Subjectivists: Pragmatic relativists who base their ethical choices on personal considerations, such as individualized values, moral emotions, or idiosyncratic moral philosophy.

Source: Adapted from Forsyth (1980).

formulated (high relativism). Situationism corresponds to skeptical philosophies of ethics such as situation ethics or value pluralism.

Exceptionists

Exceptionists are principled realists; they rely on moral principles as guidelines for action (low relativism) but they do not believe that harm can always be avoided or that innocent people can always be protected (low idealism). In consequence, they are utilitarian in that they pragmatically admit that judgments should be made by balancing the positive consequences of an action against the negative consequences of an action.

Subjectivists

Subjectivists are realistic contextualists; they reject moral rules (high relativism) but they are not particularly optimistic about the possibility of achieving positive outcomes for everyone concerned (low idealism). Because such individuals describe their moral decisions as subjective, individualistic judgments that cannot be made on the basis of moral absolutes or the extent to which the action benefits others, their viewpoint parallels an egoistic moral philosophy. This position maintains that no moral judgments can be considered valid except in reference to one's own behavior. Some subjectivists may conclude that all people should act to promote their own self-interest, rather than focus on producing positive outcomes for others in general.

PERSONAL ETHICS AND WELL-BEING

Nearly all perspectives on psychological development suggest that moral socialization provides the foundation for the healthy, happy adult. Plato, for example, wrote that virtue is "the health

and beauty and well-being of the soul," and those who fail morally will likely end up unhappy, unfulfilled, and physically unwell (Plato, 1973, p. 136). In psychoanalytic theory, the individual's personality and eventual adjustment as an adult hinges upon the development of a moral outlook or conscience. In the clinical realm, psychological health is often defined as the ability to discriminate between right and wrong, to avoid infractions of societal rules and principles, and to become capable of fairly judging the behaviors of others. Positive psychologists, such as Peterson and Seligman (2004), suggest that virtues and character strengths are the markers of psychological well-being, just as the symptoms identified in the diagnostic handbook of psychiatric disorders are the markers of dysfunction.

The strength of the relationship between morality and well-being may depend, however, on the individual's personal moral philosophy. Ethics position theory describes four basic approaches to morality, which are distinguished by acceptance of moral principles (relativism) and concern for helping, or at least not harming, others (idealism), but do these variations have consequences for individuals' subjective well-being, happiness, or self-appraisals in ethical contexts? Does, for example, the absolutist's emphasis on principles and making choices that consider others' outcomes ensure that they act with moral integrity even in challenging, morally turbulent situations? Does the exceptionist, in contrast, experience little shame when acting in ways that harm others, so long as the action is consistent with standard practices? Do individual differences in idealism and relativism moderate the relationship between moral quality of one's actions and the psychological and interpersonal consequences of those actions?

Ethics and Moral Integrity

Peterson and Seligman, in their analysis of the character strengths that people need to reach their highest potential, include integrity, which they define as "moral probity and self-unity" (2004, p. 250). Of the four moral types described by EPT, which type is likely to display moral integrity? Do the situationists live up to their emphasis on achieving positive consequences even if they must act against commonly accepted standards of right and wrong? Do the absolutists, who believe that it is wrong to lie, that moral imperatives guide action, and that one must act to protect the dignity and welfare of others, act on these principles at all times? Do the exceptionists and subjectivists, with their emphasis on pragmatic acceptance of expediency, tend to make choices that others condemn as immoral?

The evidence pertaining to the unique moral integrity of any one of these four types is checked, at best. A number of investigators have found differences in each moral position's intention to act ethically (e.g., Singhapakdi et al., 2000) and attitudes about specific types of immoral actions (e.g., Etter, Cramer, and Finn, 2006; Rawwas, Al-Khatib, and Vitell, 2004), but individuals who endorse any one of the types have yet to emerge as consistently more morally commendable than the others. Forsyth and Berger (1982), for example, tested students from all four categories by tempting them to cheat on a test of social intelligence. Many did (36 percent), but the cheaters included subjects from all four moral categories. In their second study, they tested resistance to moral temptation by using an accomplice who himself cheated before urging other students to do likewise. Eighty-three percent complied by cheating, but again ethical ideology failed to predict who would succumb to the temptation. Henle, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz (2005) report that idealistic individuals were less likely to engage in various forms of interpersonal deviance at work (e.g., acting rudely) and that situationists were less likely to engage in organizational deviance (e.g., employee theft) compared to exceptionists and absolutists, but that subjectivists were the most likely to admit to organizational deviance. Douglas and Wier (2000) and Greenfield,

Norman, and Wier (2008) found that idealism was negatively related to questionable budgetary practices (e.g., slack creation behavior and earnings management accounting), but relativism was positively correlated with such practices. However, ethics ideology was unrelated to willingness to get involved in a prosocial protest against animal rights abuses (Nickell and Herzog, 1996).

These findings highlight the importance of considering the nature of the situation before making predictions about individual differences in moral conduct. Absolutists and exceptionists stress the importance of moral rules, so they should be less likely to act in ways that are widely recognized as immoral. They should lie, steal, or cheat less frequently. But if they are not aware that their actions will violate moral rules, or the press of the situation is so great that they are not able to consider their personal values before they act, then the relationship between their ethics position and their actions will be nil. As Schwartz explains, "if a person construes a decision he faces to be a moral choice, relevant moral norms he holds are likely to be activated and to affect his behavior. When he fails to perceive that a moral decision is at stake, however, particular moral norms are unlikely to be activated" (1968, p. 355). Conversely, since the idealistic ideologies—situationism and absolutism—stress the need to achieve positive, humanitarian consequences, then individuals who accept these ideals might be tempted to engage in immoral action if such actions are the means to help others—especially if they are relativistic (the situationists).

Forsyth and Nye (1990) tested this "person X situation" approach by tempting their subjects to tell a lie to another person. For some subjects this false information was described only as feedback, but in other conditions it was explicitly labeled a lie. In addition, half of the subjects were told that they would receive a bonus of \$3 for giving the information (either lie or feedback), but others were told the person who would be told the lie would benefit from getting the information. 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 \$3 and were told that they would be lying rather than giving feedback, this proportion averaged 76.2 percent across the other three conditions. In addition, idealism influenced moral behavior. Although high idealists espouse a philosophy that condemns harming others, they were more likely to lie than the low idealists: 78.6 percent of the situationists and absolutists (high idealists) agreed to tell the lie, while only 62.5 percent of the subjectivists and exceptionists (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 study supports the commonsense notion that people who espouse lofty moral values may tend to behave the most immorally. Although both situationists and absolutists 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 a hurtful lie. 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 are quite harsh when judging others who have broken this moral absolute. Yet, when they themselves were tempted to lie, they were more likely to succumb. These findings attest 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.

This inconsistency between moral intentions and moral actions may also be due, in part, to the tension between absolutists' concern for principles and their concern for securing benefits for others. Many of the absolutists and situationists, when asked why they agreed to lie, said that they did as they were told to help the experimenter. They did not consider their behavior to be an antisocial

act that harmed another person, but rather a prosocial act that helped someone. Moreover, the impact of high idealists' moral values on their moral actions may have been overwhelmed by the powerful social situation in which they found themselves. A number of theorists now believe that individuals with different personalities seek out, create, or evoke different interpersonal situations (Diener, Larsen, and Emmons, 1984). Applied to moral choices, individuals who are idealistic may generally avoid situations that will force them to choose between failing to meet a commitment and harming another person. When forced into this ordinarily avoided situation, the high idealists responded by following the orders of the experimenter.

Ethics and Self-Flagellation

Nietzsche notwithstanding, most philosophers have maintained that acting morally is a sure path to happiness (Wienand, 2009). There is, however, another way in which morality and well-being are linked, and that is by the emotional and psychological reactions people experience as a result of acting morally or immorally. This connection between morality and a sense of well-being may be relatively unsubstantial, or altogether absent, for some people. The cynical Machiavellian who puts expediency before principle, the narcissist who feels entitled to far more than a fair share, and the psychopath who is devoid of concern for other people and moral principles are likely not plagued by feelings of guilt or remorse when they act immorally, nor do they swell with happiness when they act in ways that earn them moral praise (O'Boyle et al., forthcoming). Most people, however, experience guilt over their moral failings, and if these feelings become pronounced, they may lead to a range of problems in psychological and social adjustment.

Ethics position may not be a strong predictor of who will behave morally and who will not, but it does predict who is more likely to suffer negative psychological reactions following an indiscretion. Klass, after reviewing a number of previous studies of individuals' feelings of guilt, shame, and self-esteem after breaking moral norms, concludes that "the same overt action seems to make some people feel better and others feel worse, and for still others, has no effects" (1978, p. 766). EPT accounts for these divergences by suggesting that individuals who emphasize obedience to moral norms (low relativists) but nonetheless find themselves acting contrary to a salient moral norm should display more negative post-transgression reactions than relativists. In contrast, idealistic individuals who achieve positive consequences for others should display more positive affective reactions following their transgression.

Forsyth and Berger (1982) partially confirmed these predictions in their studies of academic cheating. Students worked on extremely difficult anagrams, but they could copy the solutions to the problems from the master key, which was left behind by the examiner. After they completed the test, respondents rated themselves on a series of adjective pairs, including sad/happy, upset/at ease, weak/strong, and nervous/calm. Only the absolutists' self-ratings were consistently correlated with these self-evaluations, for the more they cheated, the more negatively they evaluated themselves. Subjectivists also rated themselves more negatively when they cheated, but their ratings reflected anxiety over being found out (e.g., nervous/calm) more so than self-condemnation. In a second study, Forsyth and Berger (1982) found that absolutists who were prodded into cheating on a test rated themselves as more negative, weak, unlikable, and dirty than individuals in all the other individual moral philosophy categories. Forsyth and Nye (1990) documented a similar reaction in absolutists in their study of lying. They found that when subjects were paid to lie, the representatives of the various ethical types responded similarly in terms of self-rated morality and anxiety. When no money changed hands, absolutists rated themselves as less moral, honest, friendly, good, and so on, particularly compared to situationists.

Ethics and Self-Approbation

Just as individuals who differ in ethics position respond differently when they act immorally, they also respond differently when they act in morally commendable ways.

Forsyth (1993) examined the relationship between ethics positions, moral action, and emotions to answer a centuries-old philosophical issue: Do honorable intentions make an action praiseworthy or is the best action one that generates the greatest good for the greatest number? Immanuel Kant (1785/1973, p. 63) argued that the answer lies in the inherent goodness of one's intentions, for a "good will is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition, that is, it is good in itself." Other ethicists—notably, consequentialists—maintained that few actions can be judged a priori, for an action that generates the greatest good for the greatest number of people is far more praiseworthy than an action that matches accepted canons of morality but yields little in the way of positive consequences.

To examine the impact of consequences on moral emotions Forsyth arranged for individuals who differed in ethics positions to work on tasks that would yield a monetary payoff if completed successfully. Egoistically motivated participants were told they could keep whatever money they earned. Others, in contrast, were charitably motivated: they were told that their earnings would be donated to a charity. After the task was completed, subjects were given bogus information about their level of performance. If successful, those who were working for themselves received their pay, but if they were working for a charity, their pay was donated to a worthy cause. Those given failure feedback were told that they did not meet the minimum standards needed for payment. After receiving their feedback they rated their affect, their level of morality, and their self-esteem.

Overall, subjects' self-ratings were more positive when they succeeded rather than failed. Differences due to individual moral philosophy, however, were obtained after failure.

Absolutists put intentions before consequences. Although they reported feeling more upset in comparison to other subjects, absolutists felt the most positive about their own morality when they were working for a charity rather than themselves. Working for a good cause was sufficient to garner moral approbation, irrespective of the overall success or failure of the effort. Their virtue lay in their volition, rather than its successful fruition.

Situationists did not rate themselves as positively when working for a charity, but otherwise they responded similarly to the absolutists. All subjects reported more positive self-esteem when they succeeded rather than failed, but this asymmetry was particularly pronounced for the high idealists. Absolutists' and situationists' thoughts were also more negative in content when they failed rather than succeeded, reflecting their greater concern for achieving positive outcomes. Low idealists did not show such a negative preoccupation after failure. The idealists, when working for a charity, were also more likely to report thoughts pertaining to the charity—either remorse over failing it or happiness over helping it—and when working for their own benefit they reported more self-reflective thoughts. Low idealists rarely mentioned the charity and reported few self-reflective thoughts.

Exceptionists, however, responded unexpectedly. Like subjects in all ethical categories, their global self-ratings, including overall affect, attractiveness, and self-esteem, were influenced more by performance than motive: When they succeeded they rated themselves more positively than when they failed. Exceptionists, however, reported feeling distressed when laboring for a charity rather than themselves, and they also felt more morally virtuous when working for themselves rather than the charity. Exceptionists also reported more positive thoughts in the self-motivated conditions rather than the charitable conditions. At least two explanations can be offered for their

reactions. First, these individuals may have felt anxiety about failing to live up to the demands of working for a good cause and failing. Second, they may be less supportive of charitable actions, in general, or the specific charity that would be receiving their donation (a state-sponsored fund).

Ethics and Well-Being

Because people judge themselves in moral terms, unethical actions are, in general, antithetical to well-being and happiness. Very few studies, however, have directly assessed the causal chain leading from moral misstep to posttransgression self-condemnation to reduction in well-being, so the link between variations in ethics position and well-being is an uncertain one. Kernes and Kinnier (2005) found that the professional psychologists they studied tended to be either absolutists or situationists, but they found no significant relationship between idealism, relativism, and their measures of happiness, life-satisfaction, and well-being. Forsyth, Iyer, and Haidt (2012), in contrast, reported a significant correlation between relativism and levels of well-being, anxiety, and depression. Exceptionists claimed the highest levels of well-being, followed by absolutists, subjectivists, and situationists.

These findings with regard to the high level of well-being reported by exceptionists are consistent with cross-cultural differences in overall happiness. Forsyth, O'Boyle, and McDaniel (2008), using meta-analytic methods, identified patterned variations in EPT across countries, with an exceptionist ethic more common in Western countries, subjectivism and situationism in Eastern countries, and absolutism and situationism in Middle Eastern countries. These patterns were systematically related to variations in levels of happiness, as indexed by the Marks et al. (2006) ratings of global happiness levels. Happiness scores were highest in the countries where more of the citizens reportedly endorsed an exceptionistic ethic (e.g., Canada, Austria, Belgium), but lowest in countries whose mean idealism and relativism scores suggested an absolutist ethic (e.g., Egypt, South Africa, Poland). The two clusters of relativistic countries fell intermediate; see (Figure 15.1).

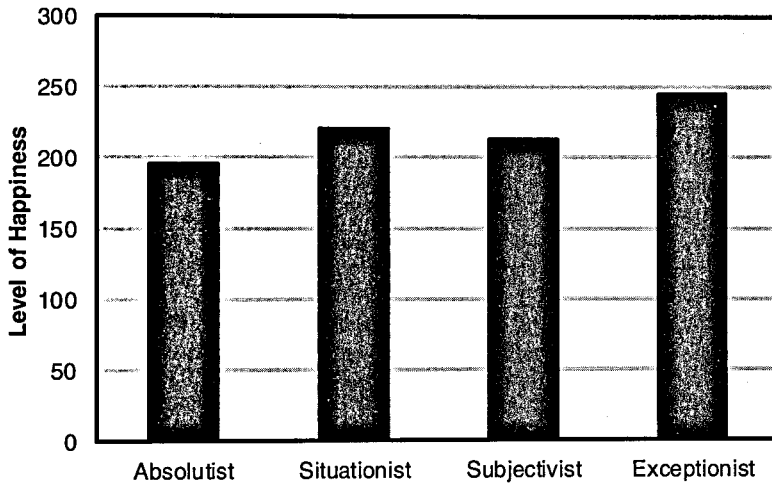
COLLECTIVE ETHICS AND WELL-BEING

Moral behavior tends to be social behavior, for it occurs in an interpersonal context. In the preceding sections we examined the relationships among individuals' morally evaluable actions, their ethics position, and their well-being, but well-being is as much a group-level process as an individual-level one (O'Boyle, Forsyth, and O'Boyle, 2011). When one works with others who conduct themselves in morally commendable ways in challenging circumstances, job and life satisfaction are amplified, but even the observation of morally offensive actions in the workplace is likely to lower satisfaction and increase stress (Ferguson and Barry, 2011). Here we consider the possibility that differences in ethics positions, within an organizational setting, can contribute to conflict, moral misunderstandings, and declines in social welfare (Keyes, 1998).

Well-Being and Moral Diversity

Evolutionary models of morality suggest that norms that define what is right and wrong serve an indispensable function in collective enterprises (e.g., Ridley, 1996). Moral norms are a fundamental element of social structure; they are the "cement of society" (Elster, 1989, p. 251). They simplify behavioral choices, provide direction and motivation, organize social interactions, and make other people's responses predictable and meaningful. Unlike common social norms, which

Figure 15.1 Differences in Mean Levels of Happiness in Twenty-Four Countries with Varying Ethics Positions



describe degree of consensus on relatively inconsequential aspects of social life, moral norms define which behaviors are praiseworthy, laudable, and aspirational, and which ones are corrupt, contemptible, and shameful. Each person in society is restrained to a degree by moral norms, but each person also benefits from the order that norms provide.

In many cases people agree about right and wrong. It is wrong to embezzle from an employer; to knowingly sell faulty products that cause severe injury to uninformed consumers; to fire employees because of their race, or creed, or color; and to misrepresent the value of the company's stock to shareholders. This consensus is lost, however, when the discussion turns to less clear-cut issues and when individuals differ in their ethics position: what is considered morally contemptible by an absolutist may be viewed as the expedient, and appropriate, choice by the exceptionist. At the bivariate level, the model predicts that absolutists and exceptionists (low relativists) will more strongly condemn actions that break rules, whereas absolutists and situationists (high idealists) will respond more negatively to actions that yield negative consequences. At the multivariate level, the model maintains that absolutists' emphasis on conformity to moral principles and sensitivity to negative consequences will prompt them to respond the most negatively to rule violations that harm others, whereas subjectivists will be the most lenient in their appraisals of such actions.

Researchers have confirmed that, in general, absolutists are the most likely to consider an issue to be a moral one, and that they also tend to be harsher when judging those who have violated moral norms. Forsyth (1980), for example, reported relationships between the ethics positions and a number of contemporary moral issues, particularly for men. More than respondents within each of the other ethical categories, male absolutists felt that cloning was immoral, that mercy killing should not be tolerated, and that marijuana use, homosexuality, and abortion were wrong. Singh and Forsyth (1989) reported this same negativity in their study of sexuality. The significant interaction of idealism and relativism on ratings of the morality of premarital sex, extramarital sex, and homosexuality occurred because evaluators became more negative as their individual moral philosophies became more idealistic and less relativistic. Forsyth (1981) found that absolutists judged those who produced negative consequences as less moral than did exceptionist judges, provided the individuals in question were somewhat responsible for their actions. Individuals who

adopt differing ethics positions also tend to diverge in their judgments of the ethics of psychological research. Absolutists tend to be more heavily influenced by the perceived costs of research and the potential for harm, and this emphasis led them to evaluate research more negatively than those who adopted other ethical ideologies (Forsyth, 1985). Idealists, in general, are more likely to consider an action that yields negative consequences for others to be one that must be evaluated on moral grounds, whereas less idealistic individuals do not consider the act one that requires moral scrutiny (Bowes-Sperry and Powell, 1999; Singhapakdi, Vitell, and Kraft, 1996).

These differences in the moral thought and evaluation may lead to dysfunctional processes in the workplace. Although variation in opinions on political issues, sports, or even business strategies may be common in most work settings, differences with regard to ethical issues are more discomfiting. Most individuals take moral consensus for granted, and thus expect that other people will agree with their moral conclusions. Evidence suggests, however, that an absolutist and a subjectivist, when working together, may reach very different conclusions when judging the same action or individual. Such disagreements about what is morally right and what is morally wrong create a fundamental, unsettling, paradox: "in making a moral reproach one must first act as if the other's behavior were objectively a violation; yet the proof of the correctness of the particular application of the norm is social consensus" (Sabini and Silver, 1982, p. 46).

Moral Fit

Workplaces, perhaps to deal with moral ambiguities, tend to establish their own moral norms and use these norms to govern the judgment of right and wrong and the consequences of violating the norms. But because moral norms are socially constructed, behaviors that are judged to be acceptable or even praiseworthy in one setting may be only tolerated or even condemned in another (Feldman, 1984). Furthermore, larger organizations likely possess multiple sets of moral norms that vary widely depending on location. Thus, when individuals join an organization, they enter a morally ambiguous workplace where ethical position can conflict with the established moral norms. Diversity may enhance organizational performance, but *moral* diversity can create ethical schisms within the group, leaving some members feeling isolated and ostracized, and trigger increases in counternormative work behavior (CWB) such as sabotage, malicious gossip, and theft (Liao, Joshi, and Chuang, 2004).

Moral Misfits and Moral Conformity

Upon entering an organization, individuals seek out others who share similar views, interests, and backgrounds. This process integrates the person into the organization, promotes identity and cohesion, and reduces conflict. Fitting in by accepting norms that define what is right and wrong differs substantially, however, from adopting the group's standards pertaining to more mundane activities, such as dress, punctuality, and work habits—particularly for those who take their moral principles more seriously and personally. Low relativists (absolutists and exceptionists), for example, may feel their moral outlook is challenged when working in a firm of mostly situationists and subjectivists, and they may exhibit withdrawal behaviors as this dissimilarity causes them to feel disconnected from the organization (Wheeler et al., 2007).

Norms are very powerful shapers of behavior, and no EPT is impervious to their influence, but EPT groups likely differ in their ability to rationalize conformity to norms inconsistent with their own moral philosophy. For example, those high in idealism may adjust to the moral norms of an organization by assuming that these norms promote, in general, positive outcomes for those

inside and outside of the organization. Thus, even if the rules are not unusual ones or ones that differ from one's personal standards, they may nonetheless be considered acceptable since they yield positive consequences. Relativism, in contrast, suggests a more mercurial moral outlook and so may lead to one of two outcomes: more moral deviance or a relatively unperturbed shift in morality to match the organization's views.

When examining the moral misfit and the interaction of idealism and relativism, absolutists are perhaps the most interesting as their individual moral philosophy would suggest that in the face of moral diversity they would be likely to conform to the organizational norms and therefore also be more likely to become moral misfits. However, if absolutists can reconcile their beliefs with the moral norms of the organization, then these individuals may be able to embrace the organization's norms, and even become advocates. Absolutists can embrace moral norms so long as they promote positive outcomes and are considered situationally robust, and organizational norms that are widely shared may meet this requirement (Van Kenhove, Vermeir, and Verniers, 2001).

Moral Misfit and Conflict

Differences in moral outlook will likely also create conflict within the workplace, and that conflict will likely be more personal rather than procedural. Morrill's (1995) study of high-level corporate executives, for example, found that many of the most intense conflicts in the organizations he studied occurred because disputants questioned each other's moral values. Unfortunately, whereas workgroups can often successfully manage task-related conflicts, when problems stem from personal conflicts, including differences in values and moral outlook, attempts at conflict management tend to exacerbate the group conflict more than mollify it (e.g., De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). Klein et al. (2011) found that conflict increased when members of a work team differed in their emphasis on traditional moral principles, particularly when their leader adopted a relationship- rather than task-oriented management style.

Conflicts rooted in moral disparities may be particularly likely when absolutists must cope with the moral flexibilities of relativists. Absolutists, with their belief in moral rules and idealistic outcomes, are more attuned to the violation of these rules by themselves or coworkers. Relativists, in contrast, should be more likely to overlook differences in moral appraisals, since their ethical philosophy explicitly eschews certitude in moral pronouncements. Absolutists, then, are more likely to display a range of negative psychological and physical reactions, including burnout, stress, negative emotions, and absenteeism (Robbins, Ford, and Tetrick, 2012). Also, drawing from the organizational retribution literature (e.g., Skarlicki and Folger, 1997; Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, and Walker, 2008), when an absolutist observes that rule violations go unpunished because the moral norms of the organization tolerate it, they may seek vengeance or retribution. Ironically, if the conflict becomes so intense that it generates counterproductive work behaviors such as bullying, spreading rumors, and speaking derogatively about the organization, absolutists are more likely than all other ethical types to experience stress and the loss of well-being.

Moral Misfit and Well-Being

Just as a lack of moral integrity may lower overall well-being, a lack of connectedness to coworkers, inability to conform to organizational norms that define what is right and what is wrong, and engagement in CWB may also undermine happiness, life-satisfaction, and well-being deficits. A lack of fit results in lowered job satisfaction and increased strain (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson, 2005), and moral misfit is perhaps more poignant than other forms of misfit due to

the implications of having a different set of morals from coworkers. Whereas other nonnormative behavior may be viewed by others as the action of an eccentric, moral deviance is judged harshly—particularly by absolutists. Violation of descriptive social norms may result in mild social ridicule or reduced inclusion, but violation of injunctive norms results in far more serious social consequences that may, in time, reduce well-being. The individual and group distrust each other and this hampers organizational effectiveness (Kramer, 1999; McAllister, 1995) and reduces well-being (Ward and Meyer, 2009). There is some evidence that an individual zealot does have the power to alter norms either through persuasion (Mobilia, 2003) or through the introduction of external forces such as whistle-blowing (Dozier and Miceli, 1985), but norms typically overcome individual dissent and the individual either conforms reluctantly or leaves the organization. In either case, well-being is likely to suffer.

IMPLICATIONS

Ethics position theory, with its roots in personality theory and social psychology, assumes that morality is both a personal and an interpersonal process. The theory suggests that people differ in their moral outlooks, with some stressing the importance of principles and others suggesting that the most moral action is the one that causes the least harm to others. These variations have implications for understanding how people act in morally challenging situations and their reactions to others' morally questionable actions, but they may also be linked in fundamental ways to health, happiness, and well-being. Plato (1973) was certain that moral virtue is healthy whereas wickedness brings disease and grief, but virtue lies in the eye—and the ethics position—of the beholder.

Well-being is, however, determined not only by one's personal ethics position but also by social context. The lone absolutist teamed with exceptionists, the situationist working for a company that pledges corporate philanthropy but privately gives little back to the community, the subjectivist who must pledge allegiance to a corporate credo, and the exceptionist who passes up risky, but potentially quite lucrative, ventures must find ways to cope with life in a morally diverse workplace. As the concept of moral fit suggests, it is not enough to be virtuous, but one must be virtuous in ways that are defined as morally correct in the given situation (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Lee-Davis, 2007).

Researchers and practitioners alike can benefit from an integrated perspective of immoral behavior in the workplace. EPT suggests that one's personal moral philosophy affects moral thought, emotion, action, and judgments of others' actions, but the complex of associations linking ethics position and well-being remains uninvestigated. Whereas absolutists are more likely to lay claim to virtues such as honesty, compassion, and duty, more research is needed to determine if and when these principles translate into well-being. Given that strong moral convictions provide only partial protection against moral temptations combined with absolutists' tendency toward self-flagellation, virtuousness in the principled sense may lead to unhappiness rather than well-being. Idealism, too, may also be negatively associated with happiness, given that in an uncertain world harm can rarely be avoided entirely. As a result, those who are virtuous, but expediently so, may be the happiest of all.

More research is also needed to examine the social side of morality. It is not yet known how individuals respond when they discover that their moral judgments are unshared by others in the group, when they join an organization that expresses values that conflict with their own, when they are confronted by someone in the workplace who challenges their moral beliefs, and when they witness actions that run counter to their personal moral code. The extant literature tends to

be myopic in that it views the consequences of moral judgments and behaviors from a single source and direction. For example, studies of workplace deviance (Robinson and Bennett, 1995) rarely recognize the perpetrator's perspective, abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000) is primarily indexed through reports by the victim, and workplace incivility (Andersson and Pearson, 1999) is often used to capture bystanders' perception of immoral behavior within the organization. The well-being of all three (perpetrator, target, and bystander) is affected by immoral behavior, and the ripple effects of immorality require closer study.

EPT's most fundamental implication for improving work conditions is based on its most central assumption: that people differ in their thoughts, actions, and feelings about moral matters. These differences, because they are linked to variations in ethics positions, may be inevitable, but the negative consequences of moral disunity need not be. Employees, managers, and leaders, recognizing that variation in moral outlook is normal, should not assume that their own moral outlook (a) is the only legitimate position to take on the issue or (b) will be widely shared by others. EPT suggests that morality often requires the close consideration of principles and consequences when making decisions, but the perspective remains a descriptive approach to ethics rather than a prescriptive one. Kohlberg (1983), for example, deliberately accepted a deontological model as the most mature approach to making moral judgments, and ranked other views as inferior. EPT, in contrast, merely describes individual differences in moral thought, and does not argue that any one philosophy is more morally advanced than another. Absolutists, given their emphasis on principles, are more likely to assume that their moral decisions are ethically righteous, particularly as compared to the more relativistic positions, but all individuals must resist false consensus: assuming that their moral perspective is widely shared with others.

This diversity in moral outlook also suggests that groups and organizations may need to put into place programs that clarify the collective's ethics orientation so as to reach shared understanding of issues with moral undertones or complications. If a company expects its employees to adhere closely to a code of ethics, then considerable normative work will be needed to make certain that employees understand the link between moral codes, moral judgments, and moral actions. Clearly, codifying ethics will prove more difficult in organizations with substantial numbers of relativists, as well in those organizations that are located in areas of the world where relativistic views dominate more rule-based approaches to ethics. Evidence suggests that companies that operate in countries whose residents tend to be more relativistic generally adopt codes of ethics that are less principle-focused than companies that operate in countries that stress adherence to rules and principles (Forsyth and O'Boyle, 2011). However, because morality is ultimately a social process, the relative importance of the many factors that influence moral judgments can and should be enumerated, clarified, and weighed through informed discussion.

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