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**Taking the High Road: Self-Concept Maintenance and Ethical Decision-Making**

***Motivation:***

While it is clear that the ethical choices of individuals have a huge impact on society, relatively little is known about what causes people to act more or less ethically. Research on ethical decision-making has explored some effects of individual differences (Rest, 1986) as well as situational factors (Trevino and Youngblood, 1990; Ashkanasy, Windsor, and Trevino, 2006), but there is still much to be learned about the inner workings of the decision-making processes of individuals faced with ethical dilemmas. In this research, we will study the role of an individual's self-concept in ethical decision-making.

The decision to behave unethically brings with it different types of costs. In addition to the more obvious cost related to the risk of getting caught, there is a psychic cost related to one's self-concept – the perception that one has acted unethically may well have a detrimental effect on one's self-concept. Past research has shown that for individuals to consider the second type of cost, they must first be aware that it is an "ethical" decision they are making. This awareness can be affected by characteristics of the decision itself (Jones, 1991) or by environmental cues, such as sanctioning systems, which can signal to an individual whether or not his decision is primarily an ethical one (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 1999).

Research has demonstrated a strong relationship between ethicality and self-concept. There is evidence that self-concept is a motivating force in ethical decision-making situations. For instance, people often deny the ethical nature of a decision in order to protect their self-concept (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004; Batson et al., 1999). Additionally, Aquino and Becker find that neutralization strategies such as denying a lie or denigrating the victim can help people maintain their self-image in spite of having behaved dishonestly (2005). Mazar, Amir, and Ariely suggest that people allow themselves some leeway when it comes to unethical behavior (manuscript under review). They show that infractions that are perceived as adequately minor do not appear have any impact on one's



self-concept. This literature opens up exciting questions about how ethical self-concept relates to unethical behavior.

In this research we want to explore the effect of self-concept on ethical decision-making. In particular, we are interested in how the current assessment of one's ethicality influences subsequent ethical choices. We hypothesize that when an individual has a particularly high view of his or her ethicality, this will cause the individual to want to maintain this state and thus increase the ethicality of subsequent ethical decision-making. We also hypothesize that the opposite holds as well, that lowering one's opinion of one's ethicality would reduce the psychic cost of a subsequent unethical act (since the individual is in low ethical standing regardless), and thus would increase its incidence.


### *Proposed Studies:*

We plan to run studies where different ethical states are induced – a “high” ethical self-concept, a “low” ethical self-concept, and a control condition involving no change to ethical self-concept. (We are currently in the process of testing different manipulations to produce particular “ethical self-concepts.”) In our first study, we will test whether these different ethical self-concepts have the predicted effects on responses to questions concerning ethical issues. We expect individuals induced to have a high ethical self-concept to respond more ethically than individuals induced to have a low ethical self-concept. In our second study, we intend to use a lab task, which we developed to detect cheating, to test whether these manipulations impact actual unethical behavior.

### *Summary:*

This program of research investigates the influence of self-concept on ethical decision-making. We predict that when that one is reluctant to engage in even very minor ethical offenses when one feels particularly ethical, and that one is most likely to commit ethical offenses when one has a low ethical self-concept. This work will enrich our understanding of the susceptibility of ethical decision-making to different self-perceptions. It will also provide prescriptions regarding methods of promoting ethical behavior in the workplace, for instance, by giving individuals opportunities to enhance their ethical self-concept by offering the option to do pro bono work or by organizing company-sponsored charity events.

Advisor Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



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