

Factors affecting Prosocial and Antisocial Decision-Making and Behavior in College Students

Gloria Leventhal¹, Ph.D.

Abstract

Prosocial and antisocial scenarios were presented to 25 male and 72 female undergraduates, who rated likelihood of engaging in described behavior and perceived “goodness/badness”. Results indicated a) Females more likely to act in prosocial manner for self-benefit; males more likely to act when there was risk; b) Females less likely to act in antisocial manner for others; males more likely to act for benefit of others, less likely to act for self; c) Females rated prosocial self-benefit behavior “most good”; males rated risky prosocial behavior “most good.” d) Differences were found for likelihood of behavior and morality rating for lying, stealing, and cheating. In examining the significant relationship between likelihood and “good/bad”, a) Prosocial behavior: perceived “goodness” accounted for 33% of the variance in likelihood of acting for self-gain, 12% of the variance where there was risk;. b) Antisocial behavior: perceived “badness” accounted for 14% of the variance in likelihood of acting for others, 7% of the variance for oneself, 6% of the variance to help self/hurt others. Further research is needed to quantify a measure of the perceived moral value of different behavior for different populations, as well as to examine the critical factors involved in prosocial and antisocial decision-making and behavior.

Keywords: ethical and unethical decision-making; ethical and unethical behavior, judging right and wrong

1. Introduction

It has been theorized that moral and ethical behavior is based upon the development of a moral self (moral identity) and accepted societal norms. Moral identity operates as a self-regulatory process which defines “right and wrong”. When individuals behave in a manner that follows their moral standards, there is positive affect – i.e. feelings of self-satisfaction and heightened self-worth (Bandura, 1986). Moral disengagement, the deactivation of this self-regulatory moral compass, leads to unethical decisions and behavior. Through moral disengagement, individuals free themselves from feelings of guilt that would occur when their behavior violates some internal moral standard. They, therefore, are more likely to make unethical decisions (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008). Similarly, Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal (2015) proposed the concept of ‘Self-Serving Justifications’ -providing reasons for questionable behaviors to make them appear less unethical. People tend to weigh the benefit of wrongdoing with the cost to their psychological health, before committing an unethical act. Too much wrongdoing can result in a threat to self-concept; while following ethical guidelines might not be as beneficial as behaving unethically.

Studies have shown that unethical behavior, such as school-related cheating, may not necessarily lead to negative affect. Ruedy, Gino, Moore, and Schweitzer (2013) found that attaining a goal, even through unethical behavior, led to positive affect. “People continue to lie and cheat because these immediate rewards are more compelling than the potential costs he or she might incur later” (p. 534). Moreover, Leventhal (2015) found that college students admit they would act unethically, especially in situations where there was self-gain, without any negative affect. They viewed cheating and dishonesty as low-risk, harmless, and potentially beneficial, and that, “everyone does it!”

The purpose of the present study was two-fold: First, to develop a morality scale for this population of college students in terms of how “right and wrong” they view certain behavior, and to examine variables that affect college students’ likelihood of prosocial and antisocial decisions and behavior.

¹ Psychology Department, William Paterson University, Wayne, N.J. 07470 E-mail: leventhalg@wpunj.edu

2. Method

2.1 **Participants:** 25 male and 72 female college students who volunteered, with informed consent, to take part in a study on decision-making.

2.2 **Material:** Twenty-four “ethically-charged” scenarios were devised based on real life experiences. (See Appendix A). Prosocial scenarios: a) Progain [PG] - e.g. returning a found item for a reward –i.e. where there was potential for extrinsic self-gain; b) Proneut [PN]- e.g. simply donating a small amount of money to a cause; and c) Prorisk [PR]- e.g. donating a kidney- i.e. where there is a possible risk. Antisocial scenarios: a) Antiself [AS] - e.g. cheating on an exam –i.e. for self-benefit; b) Antiother [AO] - e.g. lying to keep a friend out of trouble –i.e. for the benefit of others; c) (AntiSO) [ASO], e.g. stealing from a friend- i.e. where the individual benefits, while others are harmed.

2.3 **Procedure:** Participants were asked to read each scenario, and, on a scale from 1 – 9, rate how likely is it that “you would engage in the behavior described in the scenario (1= definitely would not; 2= highly unlikely; 3= unlikely; 4=somewhat unlikely; 5=don’t know; 6=somewhat likely; 7= likely; 8 = highly likely; 9=definitely would). If you have been in a similar situation, and you behaved that way, choose 9, if you did not behave that way, choose 1. Please respond with how likely you would or did behave in similar situations, not how you think you should behave. Remember, all responses are anonymous and confidential.” To examine their perceived judgment of “rightness” or “wrongness” of the specific behavior, they were asked: “Regardless of how you answered about the likelihood of making a particular response, rate the actor’s behavior for how “right or wrong” (“good or bad”) you think the behavior is, from 1 – 7: (1=very bad; 2= bad; 3= somewhat bad; 4= neither good nor bad; 5= somewhat good; 6= good; 7= very good). You may decide that it would be unlikely that you would behave as the actor does in the scenario, even though you consider the behavior to be good. Or conversely, you may decide that it would be likely that you would behave as the actor does in the scenario, even though you consider the behavior to be bad.” The “morality” measure of the behavior was second, so as not to bias the “likelihood” response. Demographic variables - gender, age, race, religion, socio-economic class, political leaning, and type of parental discipline were also examined.

3. Results and Discussion

Likelihood of Behavior: [Note “not sure”= 5] A two factor ANOVA on Sex X Prosocial found a significant Prosocial effect ($F(2,190)=43.37, p<.001, \eta^2=.313$). Progain > Prorisk = Proneut. Participants were most likely to behave in a prosocial manner, if there was self-gain. There was a significant Sex X Prosocial interaction ($F(2,190)=6.58, p=.002, \eta^2=.065$). Females were more likely to act in a prosocial manner when there was self-benefit (e.g. getting a reward for returning a found item); males were more likely to act in a prosocial manner when there was some risk (e.g. intervening to help out a potential victim). (See Table1).

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Likelihood of Prosocial behavior

	SEX	M	SD
gain	MALE	6.79	1.30
	FEMALE	7.33	1.34
	Total	7.19	1.34
risk	MALE	6.15	1.40
	FEMALE	5.41	1.35
	Total	5.60	1.39
neut	MALE	5.50	1.51
	FEMALE	5.52	1.58
	Total	5.52	1.55

A two factor ANOVA on Sex X Antisocial found a significant Antisocial effect ($F(2,190) = 55.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .369$): AntiSO < Antiself = Antiother. Participants were least likely to act in an antisocial manner for self-gain, when others were harmed. There was a significant Sex X Antisocial interaction ($F(2,190) = 6.68, p = .002, \eta^2 = .066$) Females were less likely to behave in an antisocial manner for others than for herself; males were more likely to behave in an antisocial manner for the benefit of others (Mean = 5.10), and less likely to behave in an antisocial manner for the benefit of himself (Mean=4.56) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Likelihood of Antisocial behavior

	Sex	M	SD
self	MALE	4.56	1.21
	FEMALE	4.44	1.43
	Total	4.47	1.37
other	MALE	5.10	1.58
	FEMALE	4.21	1.38
	Total	4.44	1.48
s/o	MALE	3.54	1.54
	FEMALE	3.41	1.35
	Total	3.45	1.40

Morality Rating: [Note “no opinion” = 4]. A two factor ANOVA on Sex X Prosocial found a significant Prosocial effect ($F(2,190) = 4.79, p = .009, \eta^2 = .048$). Prorisk > Progain = Proneut. Prorisk behavior was rated “most good”. There was a significant Sex X Prosocial interaction ($F(2,190) = 10.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .097$). Females rated prosocial behavior where there was self-gain, as “most good”; males rated prosocial behavior where there was some risk, as “most good.”(See Table 3)

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations for Morality rating of Prosocial behavior

	SEX	M	SD
gain	MALE	6.79	1.30
	FEMALE	7.33	1.34
	Total	7.19	1.34
risk	MALE	6.15	1.40
	FEMALE	5.41	1.35
	Total	5.60	1.39
neut	MALE	5.50	1.51
	FEMALE	5.52	1.58
	Total	5.52	1.55

A two factor ANOVA on Sex X Antisocial found a significant Antisocial effect ($F(2,190) = 40.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$). AntiSO < Antiself < Antiother. There was no significant Sex x Antisocial interaction.. (See Table 4).

Table 4: Means and Standard Deviations for Morality rating of Antisocial behavior

	Sex	M	SD
self	MALE	3.01	1.02
	FEMALE	2.98	1.28
	Total	2.99	1.21
other	MALE	3.50	1.05
	FEMALE	3.39	1.09
	Total	3.42	1.08
s/o	MALE	2.63	1.23
	FEMALE	2.64	1.48

Differences were found for Likelihood of Behavior and Morality Rating for antisocial behaviors of (a) lying for self or other, (b)stealing for self or other, and (c) cheating for self, friend, or other.

(a) Lying scenarios: Self (#11) vs Other (#4)

Likelihood of Behavior: There was a significant Sex X Lie interaction ($F(1,95)=20.00$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .018$). Females were more likely to lie to help themselves, rather than to help others; males were more likely to lie for others, and less likely to lie for themselves (See Table 5)

Table 5 Means and Standard Deviations for Likelihood of “Lying”.

	Sex	M	SD
self	MALE	4.88	2.37
	FEMALE	6.06	2.41
	Total	5.75	2.45
other	MALE	6.40	2.18
	FEMALE	5.22	2.45
	Total	5.53	2.43

Morality Rating: There were no significant Sex X Lie effects

(b) Stealing scenarios: Self (#5) vs Other (#14)

Likelihood of Behavior : There was a significant Steal effect:($F(1,95)=78.00$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 =.45$). All participants were more likely to steal for others ($M=5.04$, $SD=2.53$), and less likely to steal for themselves ($M=2.29$, $SD=1.95$).

Morality Rating: There was a significant Steal effect:($F(1,95)=58.60$., $p<.001$, $\eta^2 =.38$).Participants rated stealing for others “good” ($M=4.71$, $SD=1.63$), and stealing for self “bad” ($M=2.44$, $SD=2.02$).

(c) Cheating scenarios: Self (#17) vs Friend (#1) vs Other (#22)

Likelihood of Behavior: There was a significant Cheating effect ($F(2,190)=18.62$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 =.16$). Participants were most likely to cheat for themselves ($M=6.35$, $SD=2.11$) than for a friend ($M=5.27$, $SD=2.41$), and less likely to let a stranger cheat off of them ($M=3.86$, $SD=2.96$); and a significant Sex effect ($F(1,95)=4.03$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2 =.04$) . Overall Males ($M=5.76$, $SD=2.21$) were more likely to cheat than Females ($M=4.45$, $SD=2.55$).

Morality Rating: There was a significant Cheating effect ($F(2,190)=5.49$, $p<.005$, $\eta^2 =.06$). Participants rated cheating to help a friend more “bad” ($M=3.09$, $SD=1.48$) than cheating to help a stranger ($M=3.52$, $SD=1.80$) or cheating for themselves ($M=3.96$, $SD=1.54$).

As might be expected, there were significant positive relationships between morality rating and likelihood of behavior. Participants were more likely to behave in a manner that they rated “good”, and less likely to behave in a manner that they rated “bad”. Specifically, in examining Prosocial behavior, there was a relatively larger effect size for Progain ($r^2 = .33$), Proneut ($r^2= .25$), and Prorisk ($r^2= .12$). That is, for Prosocial behavior, perceived “goodness” of the behavior accounted for: 33% of the variance in likelihood of acting in a prosocial manner where there was self-gain, 25% of the variance in likelihood of acting in a prosocial neutral manner, and 12% of the variance in the likelihood of acting in a prosocial manner where there was some risk. For Antisocial behavior, there was a relatively small effect size for AntiSO ($r^2=.06$), Antiself ($r^2= .07$), and Antiother ($r^2=.14$). That is, for Antisocial behavior, perceived “badness” of the behavior accounted for 14% of the variance in likelihood of acting in an antisocial manner, where others gain, and only 7% of the variance in likelihood of acting in an antisocial manner to help self, and 6% of the variance in acting in an antisocial manner that helps self/hurts others. This finding suggests that “good/bad” did not seem to have a significant effect in the likelihood of behaving in an antisocial manner. There were no discernable demographic effects. Further research is needed to quantify a measure of the perceived moral value of different behavior for today’s college population, as well as other populations. Do different groups have different views on moral vs. immoral behavior? Moreover, if not a function of moral rating, it is imperative to identify and examine the critical factors involved in an individual’s prosocial and antisocial decision-making and behavior. (See Bandura, et. al., 1996; Detert, et. al., 2008; Lincoln & Homes, 2010; Rest, 1986, for reviews).

4. References

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6. Appendix: Morality scenarios

- 1) Your friend, with whom you study, needs to get a good grade on an exam to pass the course. He seems to be having problems taking the test, so you let him see and copy your answers. [AO]
 - 2) You return an "I-phone" that you have found to the owner, who has offered a monetary reward for the return of the phone. [PG]
 - 3) You send a \$ contribution to the ASPCA, after seeing an ad about homeless and abused dogs and cats, on TV. [PN]
 - 4) You lie to an authority figure, like a policeman or a professor, to help a friend get out of trouble. [AO]
 - 5) You find that you need some cash right away. So you take a small amount of money from parents/friend without first getting permission. [ASO]
 - 6) You've waited in line to buy a cup of coffee and muffin. The clerk gives you change for a \$20 bill, rather than for the \$10 you just gave him. You say nothing. [ASO]
 - 7) While parking your car, you accidentally brush against another car. You examine the car and see that there is some minor damage to the other car. You move your car away, and do not leave a note on the damaged car with your name and phone number. [AS]
 - 8) You witness the above incidence, and write down the license plate number of the car to leave on the damaged car windshield. [PN]
 - 9) A hurricane injures hundreds of people and destroys property in New Jersey. You volunteer to go help in whatever way you can. [PN]
 - 10) You read about a child with leukemia who desperately needs a bone marrow transplant. You go, to be tested to see if you are a match. [PR]
 - 11) You lie to an authority figure (e.g. parents, professor) to avoid being punished for something you did wrong. [AS]
 - 12) You cheat on a person with whom you are in a relationship. [ASO]
 - 13) You donate blood during the local blood drive, which is offering free tickets to a sold-out event that you really want to see. [PG]
 - 14) You take some food stuff from a super market to give to a homeless woman. [AO]
 - 15) You sign the back of your driver's license to indicate that you give consent to be an organ donor. [PR]
 - 16) You anonymously use social media to attack someone who you feel wronged you or a friend. [AO]
 - 17) You are preparing for the final exam in a class where the professor uses the same exam in all his sections. You arrange to meet-up with a student who has previously taken the exam to find out about the questions on the test. [AS]
 - 18) You witness a crime and intervene to defend and aid the victim. [PR]
 - 19) A major corporation sends you a refund check twice as large as what you are owed. You think that there is no way the company would realize their error, so you keep the money. [AS]
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- 20) You see a car barreling down on someone in the street. You race over to try and push the person out of harm's way. [PR]
- 21) You volunteer to give one of your kidneys to a person that you match, who needs a kidney transplant. [PR]
- 22) A student in your class, who you don't know, seems to be trying to look at your test paper. You let him see your answers. [AO]
- 23) You find yourself at an event where a bomb goes off. (As in what happened at the Boston marathon), you run towards where the bomb exploded to see if you can do anything to help. [PR]
- 24) An organization to which you belong and support, (like a fraternity/sorority, team, club, etc.), are asking for donations. You announce your pledge of a \$ donation. [PN]

{[AO] AntiOther;[AS] AntiSelf; [ASO] AntiSelf/Other;[PG] ProGain;[PN] ProNeutral; [PR] ProRisk}
