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A GOAL ORIENTATION THEORY ON BEHAVIORAL ETHICS

ABSTRACT

In response to the calls to advance the study of behavioral ethics beyond the traditional cognitive perspective, the current paper introduces a goal orientation theory on behavioral ethics.

Specifically, we investigate how learning and avoidance goal orientations influence ethical choices and examine the generalizability of the results in different populations (working adult and future employees) and across different moral outcomes (unethical business practices and unethical decision-making). In addition, we also dissect the mediating process underlying the link between achievement motivation and ethics. Insights gain from the present investigation can add new evidence-based contents to the discourse on behavioral ethics. They can increase the awareness on key motivation factors that is connected to ethical judgments and behaviors, and inspire future studies that examine policies and practices that promote ethicality.

Keywords: Goal orientation, self-regulation, motivation, behavioral ethics, moral choices

Moral and ethical crises in the corporate world, governments, and educational institutions have been well-documented. For instance, Bernard Madoff, once seen as a legendary investor, was sentenced to 150 years in prison for operating the largest Ponzi scheme in history. Luk Van Parijs, an associate professor of biology, was fired by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for fabricating data in papers and federal grant applications. Ethical misconducts were not isolated incidents found among high profile figures. In August 2001, CNN reported that a university student in Mainland China illegally took a college entrance examination for a high school student in Shandong Province. On the other side of the globe, in the United States, as the emphasis on high-stakes testing increases, teachers find themselves cheating, inflating the performance of their students (Jacob & Levitt, 2003). Ethical scandals as such have generated widespread interest in organization contexts.

Research on ethics has flourished in the last decades. Heavily influenced by decision-making theories that emphasize analytic cognitive processes (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, 1986), extant research in this area tends to conceptualize morality as a function of calculated and analytic process and depict moral reasoning from a deliberate and rational “ethical calculus perspective” (e.g., Jones, 1991). Kish-Gephart and colleagues (2010) suggested that the time is ripe for the field to move the study of ethics beyond the ethical calculus perspective and investigate how less deliberate factor, such as goals, influence ethical choices. Similarly, Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006: 964) also pointed out that “... much of our understanding of ethical decision making in organizations has relied on a cognitive perspective” and suggested that “the time seems right” to advance the study of ethics beyond the traditional cognitive perspective. The current research answers these calls to advance the study of behavioral ethics.

Drawing from the self-regulation model of goal orientation (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005),

the proposed research advances theoretical development in behavioral ethics by introducing a goal orientation perspective. The construct of goal orientation, initially developed to understand academic performance, has become one of the dominant approaches in organizational behavior (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005); it has been shown to shape the strategies individuals adopt to pursue their goals in achievement settings, influencing a wide range of organizational outcomes (see Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007 for a review). We posit that individuals' ethical choices are goal driven and diverging strategies can be adopted for goal pursuit. Despite this apparent connection between goal orientation and ethical choices, their relationship have remained unexplored; even less is known about the psychological processes underlying this connection. The proposed research investigates this underexplored area of inquiry. It advances the behavioral ethics literature beyond the traditional cognitive perspective by bridging the self-regulatory account of goal orientation to ethics.

In addition, by exploring ethical decisions in different organizational contexts we investigate the generalizability of the results found among different populations (working adult and future employees) and across different moral outcomes (unethical business practices and unethical decision-making).

To summarize, the current paper advances the study of behavioral ethics by (a) introducing a goal orientation theory of behavioral ethics, (b) examining mediating process underlying achievement motivation and ethics, and (c) investigating generalizability of the effects across different populations and ethical domains. As such, insights gain from the present investigation add new evidence-based contents to the discourse on ethics, increase the awareness on key psychological factors that is connected to ethical judgments and behaviors, and inspire future studies that examine policies and practices that promote ethicality.

A GOAL ORIENTATION ACCOUNT OF BEHAVIORAL ETHICS

Goals are desired end states (outcomes) that motivate decisions or behavioral choices (Kruglanski, 1999). A broader social psychological literature on goal activation and goal pursuit (e.g., Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001) has shown that judgments and behaviors can be shaped by goals with or without the individuals' conscious awareness. For instance, when a goal of attachment was activated, individuals were more likely to self-disclose and seek support to fulfill the need for attachment (Gillath et al., 2006). Similarly, when an interpersonal goal was activated, people are three times more likely to offer help to strangers compared with those whose interpersonal goal was not activated, even though the individuals showed no awareness of the influence of the goal on their behaviors (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). As Kruglanski (1996a: 503) put it, "... motivational influences on the cognitive process are tacit and outside conscious awareness." In addition to specific goals that are activated by the situation, individuals may also differ in their goal orientations.

Study of goal orientation "is fundamentally an examination of choice behavior in achievement contexts. Individuals must choose, either consciously or subconsciously, to engage in certain types of behaviors in achievement situations" (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005: 1105). There are two types of goal individuals pursue in achievement context: Learning goal and performance goal (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Learning (goal) orientation is characterized by the desire to master new knowledge and skills. Individuals who are learning oriented perceive abilities as malleable constructs that can be enhanced through effort. Performance (goal) orientation is characterized by the concern to demonstrate competence and abilities to others. Individuals with performance orientation tend to perceive abilities as a fixed entity that cannot be enhanced through effort (Dweck, 2000). VandeWalle (1997) argued to further partition performance

orientation into prove performance goal and avoidance performance goal. Whereas prove performance goal reflects the desire to demonstrate competence in order to gain favorable judgments from others, avoidance performance goal refers to the motivation to avoid failure and perceived incompetence. Further, goal orientations are connected to means—that is, concrete action plans—that specify how certain goals can be accomplished (Lord & Levy, 1994; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Perceived discrepancies between existing and desired end states can induce action plans that aim at reducing such discrepancies (Kruglanski, 1999). Goals together with their associated means are organized into highly interconnected networks, known as goal systems (Shah, Kruglanski, & Friedman, 2002). Accordingly, learning, prove, and avoidance orientations are goals that are associated with specific means that influence organizational behavior. Research has shown considerable support for the effects of learning and avoidance goals on outcomes, such as task-specific self-efficacy, self-set goal, and learning strategies; however, prove performance goal has shown trivial effects and was “largely unrelated to the [organizational] outcomes examined (Payne et al., 2007, p. 140).” Therefore, the current study focuses on learning goal and avoidance goal.

Learning Goal Orientation

As discussed above, individuals who embrace a learning goal orientation perceive their ability as malleable. They expect that their performance outcomes can be improved through effort (Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Results from a meta-analysis on the studies of goal orientation (Payne et al., 2007) indicate that learning orientation is associated with more positive mastery and coping strategies towards challenges. Compared with individuals who are less learning oriented, those who are more learning oriented tend to focus on exploring and improving their knowledge and skills; they are less concerned about making mistakes and are

more likely to seek feedback to improve their performance (e.g., VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). As Payne and colleagues suggested, individuals with a strong learning goal orientation “tend to be interested in learning for its own sake and often view achievement situations as a challenge” (2007: 132). Thus, they are more likely to set self-regulatory action plans by setting more difficult goal to challenge the self and persisting longer in the face of adversity (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Indeed, the goal orientation literature has shown considerable support for the effects of learning goal on self-regulatory outcomes, such as task-specific self-efficacy, self-set goal, and learning strategies (Payne et al., 2007). Given that strength model of self-regulation (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007) suggested that, similar to how exercise can increase muscle strength, regular self-regulatory exercise can strengthen the ability to exert self-regulation, we expect that individuals who are learning oriented tend to be better at self-regulation in moral dilemmas.

Research suggested that overcoming temptations to engage in unethical choices when opportunity presents itself (e.g., cheating in exams, faking experiences on a resume, misrepresenting product benefits to boost sales, over-reporting paid work hours) relies on self-regulation (e.g., Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011; Gino, Schweitzer, Mean, & Ariely, 2011; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Individuals who were unable to self-regulate tend to engage in unethical behaviors compared to those who were able to exert self-control (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Barnes et al., 2011; Gino et al., 2011; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009; Muraven, Pogarsky, & Shmueli, 2006). For example, Muraven and colleagues (2006) found that self-control was negatively associated with cheating behavior in a problem-solving task. Similarly, Marcus and Schuler (2004) also found that people who were more able to self-regulate were less likely to exhibit counterproductive work behaviors. In an

experiment, Gino and colleagues (2011) demonstrated that when participants were deprived of executive resources, they were more likely to engage in dishonest behaviors (e.g., overreporting performance to obtain additional payment in a problem-solving task). Thus, given that individuals with a learning orientation tend to self-regulate to challenge the self, we predict that stronger learning orientation would be associated with less unethical choices.

Hypothesis 1. Learning goal orientation is negatively associated with unethical choices.

Avoidance Goal Orientation

Individuals who endorse an avoidance goal are motivated to avoid failure. Rather than trying to self-regulate to improve future outcomes, their fear of failure put them into a constant state of anxiety (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 1999; McGregor & Elliot, 2002), depleting resources from self-regulation. Avoidance goal orients individuals to focus on action plans that create excuses or obstacles to explain away potential failures (e.g., Ommundsen, 2004). Research has shown that avoidance goal is associated with various self-handicapping coping strategies (e.g., setting lower goal, less persistence, and less feedback seeking) as well as a strong negative relationship with self-efficacy (Dweck, 2000). Thus, unlike learning goal orientation that motivates individuals to self-regulate and to learn for its own sake, avoidance goal is “grounded in the generalized need to avoid failure or fear of failure” (Payne et al., 2007: 133). According to the self-regulatory model of goal orientation, avoidance goal orientation leads individuals to engage in poor self-regulatory action plans that involve setting lower goals, less feedback seeking, and other dysfunctional failure avoidance action plans (e.g., Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001). Thus, individuals with an avoidance goal orientation are less likely to exercise their self-regulatory muscles regularly and therefore tend to have lower self-regulation. Consistent with this idea, meta-analysis of the goal orientation literature has shown that avoidance goal is

negatively associated with various self-regulatory outcomes, such as lower self-set goal, poorer learning strategies, and less feedback seeking (Payne et al., 2007). Thus, we expect that individuals who are more avoidance orientated would engage in more unethical behaviors.

Hypothesis 2. Avoidance goal is positively associated with unethical choices.

Moral Disengagement as Mediating Mechanism

Bandura (1986) asserts that self-regulatory processes operate to monitor and inhibit unethical behavior; moral disengagement, however, liberates individuals from the self-regulatory process, enabling them to justify unethical choices. Three major groups of moral disengagement mechanisms have been identified (Bandura, 1986; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). The first set of mechanisms (moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison) involves misconstruing reprehensible behavior to increase its acceptability. The second set of mechanisms (displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, and distortion of consequences) involves distorting the causes and effects of harmful actions. The third set of mechanisms (dehumanization and attribution of blame) involves seeing victims of harmful act as lacking human qualities and deserving of derogation. We posit that the first set of moral disengagement mechanisms involving moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison are of particular relevance to goal orientation and ethical choices in organization settings. For example, cheating in a performance test may be morally justified by stating that one cannot afford to fail the test because the result is too important. The cheating behavior can also be justified by using euphemistic language to make the behavior seem more benign or by making advantageous comparison to compare the conduct with even more harmful act, such as calling the cheating behavior as a “strategic move” or stating that “copying friends’ answers” in a test is minor compared with those who pay another person to impersonate them to

take the test. Moral disengagement rids individuals of self-control, liberating the impulses to engage in unethical choices (Duffy, Aquino, Tepper, Reed, & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). Research has shown that moral disengagement is associated with coworker undermining (e.g., spreading rumors; Duffy et al., 2005) and unethical decision making (e.g., stealing, cheating, and plagiarism; Detert et al., 2008).

People regulate their actions and make choices that give them satisfaction (Bandura et al., 1996). Learning goal orients individuals to see challenges as part of the learning process and to enjoy learning for its own sake (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). Individuals high on learning orientation should be less likely to morally disengage, because the moral justification tactics are not instrumental to attaining their goal. With an intact self-regulatory system, it enables individuals to persist in the face of difficulty and to resist unethical impulses. Therefore, learning orientation would suppress moral disengagement, which mediates the relationship between learning orientation and unethical choices. For avoidance oriented individuals, they focus on action plans that help them to avoid failure. Generally, individuals self-regulate to refrain from violating moral standards; however, the fear of failure would lead avoidance individuals to morally disengage by justifying themselves morally in order to deactivate the self-regulatory system to liberate their unethical impulses.

Hypothesis 3. Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between learning orientation and unethical choices.

Hypothesis 4. Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between avoidance orientation and unethical choices.

In short, learning orientation reduces the tendency to morally disengage. It enables individuals to exercise their self-control muscles by setting self-regulatory goals: to explore

knowledge, to set high goal standard, to persist, and to enjoy learning for its own sake (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Such self-regulation in turn enables individuals to persist in the face of difficulty and to resist unethical impulses across situations. For avoidance oriented individuals, however, their constant state of anxiety and fear of failure increases moral disengagement, which weaken their ability to resist temptations. Accordingly, we expect that individuals who are more learning orientated are better able to resist the temptations to make unethical choices, whereas individuals who are more avoidance oriented tend to make more unethical choices.

Insert Figure 1 about here

CURRENT STUDY

The current research examines the effect of learning and avoidance goals as chronic individual characteristics in shaping ethical choices. In the following, we present two studies to investigate the hypothesized relationship between goal orientation, ethics, and the associated mediating process in both field and academic settings. Study 1 examines the relationship between goal orientation and tolerance toward the use of unethical sales strategies in the field among insurance sales agents. Study 2 examines goal orientation, unethical decision making, and the moral disengagement mediating processes. Specifically, we assessed goal orientation of college students during their first semester in college and examined their moral disengagement and unethical decision making in an exit survey, before they graduated from college to join the workforce. Findings from these studies enable us to examine the generalizability of the impact of goal orientation across different populations (working adult and future employees) and across different moral outcomes (unethical sales practices and unethical decision). Finally, we will

discuss the role of situational factors in shaping ethical choices and propose future studies that examine interventions that might promote ethical decisional and behavioral choices.

STUDY 1: UNETHICAL SALES STRATEGIES

Study 1 is a field study, in which we investigated the hypothesized relationship between goal orientation and ethics among insurance agents using a time-lagged design. Specifically, we assessed their goal orientation and their acceptance towards the use of unethical sales strategies. We expected that, consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, learning orientation would be negatively associated with lower tolerance towards unethical sales strategies, whereas avoidance orientation would be positively associated with acceptance towards unethical behaviors.

Methods

Participants. One hundred and seventy-eight insurance agents (59% female) from a Taiwan insurance company took part in this study. The average age of the agents was 36.94. Their average experience in the insurance business was 52.65 months, with 46.40 months company tenure on average. Among the participants, 16% attended middle school, 43% attended high school, and the remaining 41% attended college.

Procedure. The participants completed the survey at two time points. Their goal orientation and demographic information were assessed at time 1. Four weeks later, they completed a measure that assessed their attitude towards using unethical sales strategies at time 2. The measures were administered in Chinese, their native language.

Goal orientations. Participants' learning and avoidance goal orientation was assessed using VandeWalle's (1997) measure at Time 1. Learning orientation was captured by five items measuring individuals' desire to master new skills and to enhance their competence. A sample item is "I often look for opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge." Avoidance

orientation was captured by four items assessing the motivation to avoid demonstration of incompetence at work. A sample item is “Avoiding a show of low ability is more important to me than learning a new skill.” Respondents rated how much they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alphas of the two scales were .88 and .88 respectively.

Unethical sales strategies. An 8-item Unethical Sales Strategies measure was developed through a focus group. In a focus group, insurance agents who did not participate in the main study were asked to identify unethical strategies that sale agents could have used to enhance their sales performance. Such strategies included: (1) kickback commission, (2) fail to inform clients about policy restrictions, (3) fail to disclose important client information to the company, (4) exaggerate negative news about competitors, (5) convince clients to cancel their existing insurance policy for a new policy, (6) delay submitting client payment to the company, (7) compete for colleagues’ clients, and (8) false advertising. Participants in the main study rated on a 7-point scale (1 = Not at all to 7 = Extremely) to indicate how acceptable they found each behavior to be. The Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was .85.

Results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables in this study. Learning orientation is negatively correlated with accepting the use of unethical sales strategies, $r(178) = -.19, p < .01$, whereas avoidance orientation shows a positive correlation with unethical sales strategies, $r(178) = .19, p < .01$. These bivariate correlations provided initial support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Insert Table 1 about here

We conducted multiple regressions to further examine the effects of learning orientation and performance orientation on unethical sales strategies. Consistent with Kish-Gephart et al. (2010), none of the demographic factors, such as sex, level of education, and work experiences, have a significant contribution to unethical choices and including them as controls do not alter the results of the current study substantially. Thus, only the results without controls are presented. They revealed that, learning orientation ($\beta = -.17, p < .05$) and avoidance orientation ($\beta = .17, p < .05$) were significant predictors of unethical sales strategies. Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, the sales agents' learning orientation is associated with lower tolerance toward the use of unethical sales strategies, whereas those who are avoidance oriented are more likely to tolerate unethical behaviors.

STUDY 2: UNETHICAL DECISION MAKING

Studies 1 provides support to hypothesized relationship between goal orientation and ethics among working adults. In Study 2, we further investigate this relationship as well as the mediating mechanism of moral disengagement among potential employees over a three-year period. Specifically, we conducted a time-lagged study among undergraduate business students during their first semester in college and examined their moral disengagement and unethical decision making in an exit survey, before they graduated from college to join the workforce. As stated in Hypotheses 1 and 2, we expect learning goal to be negatively associated with unethical decision making, whereas avoidance goal to show positive associations. More importantly, the extent of moral justification would mediate the relationship between goal orientation and unethical decision making (Hypotheses 3 and 4).

Methods

Participants. Two hundred and twenty-nine (60% female) business undergraduate students from a Hong Kong university took part in this study. The average age of the students was 21.52 at the time of the final survey completion.

Procedure. The participants took part in this study at two time-points. Time 1 of this study was conducted approximately one month into their first semester in college as part of a student intake survey. Their goal orientation was assessed in this survey. They received course requirement credits for their participation. Time 2 of this study was conducted approximately one month before they graduated as part of a college exit survey. Their extent of moral disengagement, unethical decision making, and demographic information were assessed in this survey. The participants received HK\$100 as an incentive for their Time 2 participation. The time lag between the two surveys was approximately two years and eight months.

Goal orientations. Participants' learning and avoidance goal orientation was assessed by adopting VandeWalle's (1997) measure. The participants rated how much they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). The Cronbach's alphas of the two scales were .82 and .74 respectively.

Moral disengagement. A moral disengagement measure was initially developed by Bandura and colleagues (1996, 2001) for children and adolescents population. That measure was later modified by Detert and colleague (2008) to assess adult population. The current study adopted nine items from Detert and colleagues (2008) that captured moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison to assess moral disengagement. These moral disengagement mechanisms involved misconstruing harmful behaviors to appear benign and acceptable. For instance, "sharing test questions is just a way of helping your friends." The scale reliability was .81.

Unethical decision making. The Unethical Decision Making scale was adopted in this study (Detert et al., 2008). Participants were presented with eight ethical dilemmas and were asked to rate from 0 (not at all likely) to 7 (highly likely) how likely they would engage in each behavior described in the scenarios. A sample item is, “Your boss at your summer job asks you to get confidential information about a competitor’s product. You therefore pose as a student doing a research project on the competitor’s company and ask for the information.” As in Detert and colleagues (2008), participants were told that “There are no ‘incorrect’ answers. The survey would be useful only if you provide truthful responses, not those that seem more desirable. All the responses would be kept confidential. The responses are not used to evaluate you or other college students personally in any way.” The reliability of the measure was good in the current study (Cronbach’s alpha = .81).

Results

Table 2 displays the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables in this study. Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2, learning orientation was negatively correlated with unethical decision making, $r(229) = -.19, p < .05$. For avoidance orientation, it was positively correlated with unethical decision making, $r(229) = .25, p < .05$. They were also correlated with moral disengagement, $r(229) = -.16, p < .05$, and $r(229) = .13, p = .06$, respectively. Moral disengagement, in turn, correlate with unethical decision making, $r(229) = .49, p < .05$.

 Insert Table 2 about here

We conducted multiple regressions to examine the effects of learning orientation and avoidance orientation on unethical decision making, and the mediation role of moral

disengagement. As in Study 1, inclusion of demographic variables in the analyses provided similar pattern of results; thus, demographic factors were not considered further. Results are shown in Table 3. We first tested the hypothesized effects of goal orientations on unethical decision making (Model 1). Their effects on moral disengagement were then examined (Model 2). Finally, the mediating effects of moral disengagement were tested (Model 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Model 1 revealed that learning orientation is associated with less unethical decision making ($\beta = -.13, p < .05$), whereas avoidance orientation is associated with more unethical decision making ($\beta = .21, p < .01$), supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. Model 2 showed that learning orientation is associated with less moral disengagement ($\beta = -.14, p < .05$). Although avoidance orientation and moral disengagement are positively associated, the effect is not significant ($\beta = .09, ns$). Model 3 revealed that when moral disengagement was included in the regression of goal orientations on unethical decision making, moral disengagement emerged as a significant predictor of unethical decision making ($\beta = .46, p < .01$) and the learning orientation effect became non-significant ($\beta = -.07, ns$), providing initial support to Hypothesis 3. For avoidance orientation, although its effect was reduced when moral disengagement was included in the regression, its influence on unethical decision making remained significant ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), failing to support Hypothesis 4. The bootstrapping method recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008) was then used to further test for the mediation effect of moral disengagement between learning orientation and unethical decision making. Mediation test for avoidance orientation was not included because it did not affect moral disengagement in the current study; nonetheless,

avoidance orientation was included in the model as control. Further supporting Hypothesis 3, the bootstrapping method revealed the existence of a mediation effect of moral disengagement on the learning goal-ethics link (indirect effect = $-.14$, S.E. = $.07$, 95% CI = $-.289$, $-.003$). These findings illustrate that the effects of learning orientation on unethical decision making are fully mediated by moral disengagement.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In two studies, we investigated the hypothesized relationship between goal orientations and ethics, as well as the mediating effect of moral disengagement among current and future employees. These studies provided convergent evidence to demonstrate that learning orientation is positively associated with ethical decision making and ethical behavior. The findings also reveal the role of moral disengagement in mediating this learning goal-ethics relationship. Interestingly, although avoidance orientation is negatively associated with ethical decision making across studies as hypothesized, its relationship with ethical behavior is inconclusive. Findings of the current study contribute to the study of ethics from a goal perspective. It answers calls to advance the study of behavioral ethics through theoretical development and investigate underexplored area of study (e.g., Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2006). Importantly, it also raises important questions for future research.

Theoretical Contributions

The current study takes a step forward in understanding behavioral ethics from a goal perspective. Being influenced by decision-making theories that emphasize analytic cognitive processes (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, 1986), existing research in this area tends to examine ethics as a deliberate and rational process (e.g., Jones, 1991). The current research answers the calls to advance the study of behavioral ethics beyond the traditional cognitive perspective and to

investigate how less deliberate factor, such as goals, influence ethical choices (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2006).

Our research demonstrates that goal orientation influences ethical choices among both working adult and future employees. Specifically, we found that learning orientation is associated with more ethical choices through moral disengagement. On the one hand, researchers that investigate goal orientation have long recognized the importance of the self-regulatory processes in influencing learning strategies and behaviors in achievement settings (e.g., DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Dweck, 1975, 2000; Blackwell et al., 2007; Payne et al., 2007). On the other hand, behavioral ethics scholars have identified self-regulation as one of the critical factors in shaping ethical choices (e.g., Detert et al., 2008; Duffy et al., 2005; Gino et al., 2011; Marcus & Schuler, 2004). However, no known research has investigated how such important motivational factors as learning orientation influence behavioral ethics. Our studies represent initial steps taken to answer the repeated calls to advance the theoretical development of behavioral ethics (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2006) through the self-regulation model of goal orientation (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005) and introduce goal orientation as an important contributing factor to ethical choices in achievement settings.

People regulate their actions and make choices that give them satisfaction (Bandura et al., 1996). From the goal orientation perspective, learning goal orients individuals to see challenges as part of the learning process and to enjoy learning for its own sake (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). Individuals high on learning orientation, thus, are less likely to morally disengage, because the moral justification tactics are not instrumental to attaining their goal of learning. Their self-regulatory muscles enable them to persist in the face of difficulty and to resist unethical impulses. Therefore, learning orientation is negatively associated with

unethical choices. For avoidance oriented individuals they focus on unethical action plans that help them to avoid failure; such effect is not mediated by moral disengagement, however. One possible reason why moral disengagement does not mediate the effect of avoidance orientation on ethical choices is that individuals who are avoidance oriented are in a constant state of anxiety, which deplete resources from self-regulation. Thus, rather than using moral disengagement to justify unethical choices in order to suppress the self-regulation system, they simply have less resources for self-regulation to begin with, rendering any moral justification processes unnecessary for them to engage in unethical choices. Another possibility is that avoidance oriented individuals also self-regulate, however, they endorse different judgment standard. For them, making unethical choices is simply a matter of regulating the self to do whatever it takes to attain their goal of avoiding failure. Understanding the process through which avoidance orientation influences ethical choices could have important implications for potential interventions. If individuals who are avoidance oriented engaged in more unethical choices due to their heightened state of anxiety and weaker self-regulatory strength, intervention could focus on reducing their concern for failure and helping them to make self-regulatory plans to strengthen the self-regulation muscles. If their unethical choices are made due to their different judgment standards of what is deemed appropriate to help attain their goal, intervention could focus on showing them the alternative means in attaining their goal.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current findings serve as initial steps towards gaining a more complete understanding of factors that influence ethical choices. Like all research, however, we should also recognize their limitations. First, although research has shown that goal orientation can be assessed as chronic individual difference as in the current studies, it can also be induced situationally. In fact,

situational induction of goals has also been shown to influence behaviors (Butler, 1992; Elliot & Harakiewicz, 1996) by increasing the temporary accessibility of the goals (Bargh & Gollwitzer, 1994; Kruglanski, 1996a, 1996b). A natural question would be: How does experimental manipulation of goal orientation influence ethical choices?

The studies presented above focus on examining goal orientation as an individual difference that influences ethical impulse. A major reason for the current focus is that, as Zhong (2011) suggested, deliberate decision making can result in “ethical dangers.” For example, across three experiments, Zhong (2011) found that when deliberate decision making mindset is induced, individuals were more likely to deceive their interaction partners and were less altruistic. Accordingly, situational manipulation of goal orientation (e.g., by highlighting that the task improve their performance or demonstrate their competence—as typically manipulated in previous studies; Butler, 1992; Elliot & Harakiewicz, 1996; Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994) might induce calculated deliberation (e.g., “How much can I learn from this task?” “How well should I perform in this task?” “How many items do I get correct in this round?”). It might dampen or alter the effects of intuition (e.g., Just to learn for the sake of learning). In fact, results from a preliminary study showed that the main effect of chronic learning orientation was weakened when goals were experimentally manipulated. More importantly, chronic learning orientation (but not avoidance orientation) interacted with situational demand of learning and avoidance goal to influence ethical behavior. Apparently, highlighting learning or avoidance goals in an achievement context could be counterproductive by weakening ethical impulse and strengthening calculated deliberation. The finding of this initial experiment is preliminary. Additional research is needed to test the robustness of the results and to dissect the psychological processes through which chronic and situational goal orientations interplay with each other. Furthermore, rather

than asking the question of whether and how certain achievement goal can be made salient in an organizational context to promote ethical choices, a fruitful future direction would be to investigate how lifelong achievement goals could be fostered to promote ethical impulses, and how such ethical reflexes might interact with organizational and task demands (e.g., the need to reach certain sales goal) to influence ethical choices

Second, the current research took a goal perspective to understand the relationship between achievement motivations and ethical choices. Besides examining goal orientations as individual differences and manipulating the salience of goals in a given situation, goals can also be activated unconsciously through priming (see Aarts, Custers, & Marien, 2008; Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh, 2004). Recent research has demonstrated that unconsciously activated goal (e.g., socializing goal) “hijacked” resources from executive control system to advance itself and hindered individuals’ subsequent performance in unrelated tasks that require executive control, such as response inhibition and error detection (Marien, Custers, Hassin, & Aarts, 2012). Given that overcoming temptations to engage in unethical choices relies on self-regulation, individuals are more likely to engage in dishonest behaviors when they are deprived of executive resources to exhibit self-control (e.g., Barnes et al., 2011; Gino et al., 2011); therefore unconscious activation of achievement goal (e.g., to learn or to perform well) might ironically and unintentionally “hijacked” executive control function for goal pursuit (e.g., focusing on learning and doing well on the task), interrupting the normal functioning of the self-regulatory system and reducing individuals’ ability to resist temptations subsequently. Thus, besides asking the question of whether unconscious activation of achievement goals would facilitate or inhibit self-regulation to influence ethical choices, future studies could also further the understanding of behavioral ethics and the goal system network by examining under what conditions would unconscious goal

activation enhance or hinder the attainment of chronic goal that individuals aspire to pursuit.

Third, the current study focuses on achievement motivation and serves as an initial step taken towards understanding ethical impulses from a motivational perspective. As in all other research, this study does not capture a complete range of motivational processes that might influence ethical choices and the interplay among the various processes; however, it serves as a point of departure to advance the study of behavioral ethics from a goal perspective and to understand how motivational forces might shape behaviors. Future research should identify whether there are mechanisms other than achievement motivations that might influence the self-regulation process and ethical choices, such as other-focused motivation. For instance, research on goal-setting (Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988) suggested that for individuals to be engaged and sustain in pursuing a goal, they have to internalize and to be committed to the goal. Future study could explore whether and how learning and self-improvement motivation can be integrated into job design such that individuals are not only motivated to perform well, but also aspired to learn and self-improve in order to foster ethical impulses. Furthermore, research on prosocial motivation (Grant & Berry, 2011) has also demonstrated that such motivation can strengthened the association between intrinsic motivation and performance outcome through evoking other-focused perspective taking processes. Research has shown that activating prosocial motivation could promote moral actions by enabling individuals to empathize with the others (Batson et al., 2003; Pavey, Greitemeyer, & Sparks, 2012); however, other study suggested that individuals are more likely to engage in unethical behavior when they believe that their unethical choices also benefit another person (Wiltermuth, 2011). Future studies could also examine how prosocial motivation, activated consciously and unconsciously, might shape performance and ethical choices in organizational contexts.

Practical Implications

The current research provides important practical implications for organizations. Although learning orientation is an individual characteristic that is relatively stable over time, it can be cultivated through providing performance feedback (Rattan, Good, & Dweck, 2012) and can also become embedded in the organizational culture to influence learning process (Chadwick & Raver, 2012). As such, in order to promote ethical choices, organization could aim at cultivating a learning environment besides highlighting the importance of performance outcomes (e.g., reaching sales quota). In addition, the current study also demonstrates that avoidance orientation hinder making ethical judgment. The desire for individuals to avoid failure by entertaining the possibility of engaging unethical acts to boost their performance might result in negative affect and anxiety (Elliot & Church, 1997; Sideridis, 2005). Therefore, when providing feedback about negative outcomes, in order to promote learning aspiration, rather than discussing about how the negative outcomes could have been avoided, subordinates might benefit from learning-oriented feedback about what they have learned from the outcomes and how the knowledge could help in improving future performance.

Conclusion

Despite the significant impacts of goal orientation on organization outcomes, their relationships with ethical judgments and behaviors have remained underexplored. The current study investigates this underexplored area of inquiry and advances the behavioral ethics literature by revealing the role achievement motivation plays in shaping ethical choices. In addition, the current research also answers the calls to examine the generalizability of the findings of behavioral ethics research among different populations (working adult and future employees) and across different moral outcomes (unethical sales practices and unethical decision).

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Figure 1. A causal model of goal orientation on unethical choice via moral disengagement.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations, Study 1

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2
1. Learning orientation (time 1)	5.85	0.80		
2. Avoidance orientation (time 1)	3.90	1.50	-0.08	
3. Unethical sales strategies (time2)	2.08	0.98	-0.19	0.19

Note: $n = 178$. Correlations with absolute values $> .12$ were significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations, Study 2

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3
1. Learning orientation (time 1)	3.75	0.64			
2. Avoidance orientation (time 1)	3.19	0.70	-0.27		
3. Moral disengagement (time 2)	2.32	0.59	-0.16	0.13	
4. Unethical decision making (time 2)	4.56	1.39	-0.19	0.25	0.49

Note: $n = 229$. Correlations with absolute values $> .14$ were significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3. Results of Regression Analyses, Study 2

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	DV = unethical decision making	DV = moral disengagement	DV = unethical decision making
	β	β	β
Independent variable			
Learning orientation	-0.13 *	-0.14 *	-0.07
Avoidance orientation	0.21 **	0.09	0.17 **
Mediator			
Moral disengagement			0.46 **
R^2	0.08	0.03	0.28
Adjusted R^2	0.07	0.03	0.27
ΔR^2			0.20 **