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From Proscriptions to Prescriptions: A Call for Including Prosocial Behavior in Behavioral  
Ethics

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*Note.* I would like to thank Rob Folger who greatly influenced my thinking in this area. I also appreciate Marshall Schminke's constructive feedback on a prior version of this chapter. Direct correspondence to David M. Mayer, University of Michigan, Department of Management and Organizations, Ross School of Business, 701 Tappan St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109, Phone: 734-936-1262, Email: [dmmayer@umich.edu](mailto:dmmayer@umich.edu).

### Abstract

I argue that research on behavioral ethics has emphasized *proscriptions* (things one *should not* do) but has largely ignored *prescriptions* (things one *should* do). The primary goal of this chapter is to highlight a number of avenues for future research to integrate prescriptions, described in this chapter as prosocial behavior, into the literature on behavioral ethics. In addition, I highlight how this scientific research could inform the management of ethics in organizations.

## From Proscriptions to Prescriptions: A Call for Including Prosocial Behavior in Behavioral Ethics

How do most behavioral ethics articles begin? They generally note the growing interest in ethics in organizations due to the number of corporate indiscretions and scandals discussed in the media in recent years. Indeed, in a review of the field of behavioral ethics, Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006, p. 951) commence in the following way: “High impact scandals in organizations from businesses to athletic teams and religious organizations have generated widespread interest in ethical and unethical behavior in organizations.” Although few would doubt that such scandals have promoted interest in behavioral ethics, I argue that by focusing almost exclusively on unethical behaviors the field has inadvertently become narrower than perhaps it ought to be.

Indeed, the majority of work in the field of behavioral ethics has focused on *proscriptions*, defined as behaviors one *should not* engage in. For example, proscriptions involve lying, stealing, cheating, and harming someone else. Kant (1797/1991) refers to such behaviors as “perfect duties” (Trafimow, Bromgard, Finlay, & Ketelaar, 2005; Trafimow & Trafimow, 1999) because they are behaviors that should never be demonstrated. In contrast, there is considerably less research on *prescriptions*, defined as behaviors one *should* engage in. Examples of prescriptions include donating money to charity, helping someone in need, and whistle-blowing. Kant describes such behaviors as “imperfect duties” because although most would view it as desirable that people engage in these behaviors, they are not necessarily required all of the time.

As the field of behavioral ethics takes shape, it is important to consider ways for the domain to continue to grow and flourish. In this chapter I make the case that one way to help the field to continue to blossom is to add to our focus on proscriptions (i.e., unethical behavior) by also delving into the world of prescriptions (i.e., prosocial behavior). This idea has been expressed by other behavioral ethics scholars who encouraged future research to focus on “positive behaviors” as well (Treviño et al., 2005, p. 974). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a number of suggestions for how behavioral ethics research can be integrated with the literature on prosocial behavior. The hope is that these ideas will stimulate research that will help the field of behavioral ethics to expand. In addition, I highlight some practical managerial implications of this integration.

### *Integrating Prosocial Behavior into Behavioral Ethics*

In what follows, I briefly describe a number of possible directions for integrating prosocial behavior into the behavioral ethics literature. The suggestions I provide do not represent a comprehensive list of topics, but rather a brief taste that I hope will whet the appetite of scholars interested in taking a prosocial approach to the study of behavioral ethics.

#### I. How can the whistle-blowing domain be expanded?

A discussion of the integration of behavioral ethics and prosocial behavior should begin with perhaps the only topic that has already begun to do this—whistle-blowing (Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Near & Miceli, 1985). Whistle-blowing is defined as, “the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers to persons or

organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). Whistle-blowing represents the quintessential example of how behavioral ethics and prosocial behavior can be integrated. Although we have learned a lot about the antecedents and consequences of whistle-blowing over the past couple of decades (see Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005 for a meta-analytic review), many questions still remain unanswered.

Whistle-blowing is typically described in terms of reporting an unethical act to someone outside the organization, such as the media. Some research examines internal reporting, which involves reporting unethical behavior to organizational authorities (Treviño & Victor, 1992). However, in addition to whistle-blowing, research has traditionally failed to consider other prosocial or constructive responses to unethical behavior in organizations. Examples could include a direct conversation with the wrongdoer, standing up for someone else in a polite way, or providing emotional support to someone in need. Interestingly, these types of constructive responses to others’ unethical behavior are simply not examined in our literature. It is easy to find a measure of deviance or more destructive responses to unethical behavior. However, there is a dearth of measures aimed at examining constructive responses to others’ unethical behavior. It is important to understand such constructive responses because they likely lead to the best outcome for the whistle-blower, victim, and the organization.

Another relevant issue with respect to whistle-blowing is whether the harm is done to oneself or to a third party. A growing body of work in the organizational justice literature on the deontic model of justice (Folger, 1994, 1998, 2001) highlights that people often respond to others’ unjust treatment. It would be interesting to see if there are different antecedents of whistle-blowing reactions to one’s own mistreatment as compared to witnessing another being

treated unethically. What drives a person to blow the whistle or to have a constructive response to someone else being treated in an unethical manner? This is an important avenue for future research on whistle-blowing.

Finally, organizational structures such as ethics hotlines provide an opportunity for individuals who have witnessed unethical behavior to “safely” report the behavior. It would be interesting if organizations had a hotline that encouraged stories of heroism and courage. Perhaps providing an outlet to discuss prosocial behaviors could encourage future prosocial acts as well as promote pride and a sense of identification with the company.

In general, the whistle-blowing literature sits nicely at the crossroads of ethics and prosocial behavior. However, I argue that much more can be done to further wed these areas. Such advances could involve expanding the domain to additional prosocial or constructive responses to unethical behavior, examining how reactions may differ to one’s own vs. someone else’s unethical treatment, and celebrating prosocial acts that take place in the organization. By taking a prosocial lens a host of new questions related to whistle-blowing emerge.

II. Are there distinct moral disengagement mechanisms for why people fail to engage in prosocial behaviors?

One of the most important and influential behavioral ethics theories is moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1999, 2002). Moral disengagement presumes that individuals are normally able to self-regulate their own moral behavior. Because humans seek to behave in ways that are consistent with internalized moral standards, individuals administer self-sanctions for engaging in unethical acts. For example, we may feel guilty if we deceive someone

else. However, sometimes our moral functioning is set askew, and we are unable to regulate our moral behavior. Bandura refers to this as moral disengagement and describes a number of mechanisms that lead to failure in ethical self-regulation

These mechanisms fall into three broad categories. The first category refers to cognitively restructuring the unethical behavior to seem less harmful. Mechanisms in this category include *moral justification* (i.e., framing unethical behavior as serving a greater good), *euphemistic labeling* (i.e., using language to make harmful acts appear more benign), and *advantageous comparison* (i.e., comparing one's act to a more egregious act). The second category concerns obscuring the moral agency of the transgressor. A *displacement of responsibility* (i.e., blaming authority figures for one's own behavior) and *diffusion of responsibility* (i.e., spreading responsibility for one's own unethical behavior across a number of individuals) are the two main mechanisms in this category. The third category involves minimizing the distress caused to the victim. These mechanisms include *distortion of consequences* (i.e., reducing the seriousness of the offense), *dehumanization* (i.e., considering the victim undeserving of appropriate treatment), and *attribution of blame* (i.e., blaming the victim as deserving of the inhumane treatment). These eight mechanisms help explain how moral functioning may fail and unethical behavior may occur (Moore, Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2009).

Although research on moral disengagement has gained much traction in recent years (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008), the research has typically been used to explain unethical behavior and has failed to consider a lack of prosocial behavior as an outcome. Interestingly, Bandura notes that moral agency can take two forms: (1) *inhibitive* (i.e., power to refrain from inhumane behavior) and (2) *proactive* (i.e., power to be



humane). Curiously, research on moral disengagement, and the mechanisms themselves, tend to focus more on why someone engages in unethical behavior, as opposed to understanding why someone does not “do good” (i.e., engage in prosocial behavior). Although this distinction may be subtle, it is an important one. It begs the question: What would the moral disengagement mechanisms look like if they focused on why people sometimes fail to act in a prosocial manner? It is possible that a host of additional moral disengagement mechanisms exist to help explain why individuals fail to “do good” as opposed to doing unethical things.

One possible mechanism could include doubt that one’s prosocial act will do any good. For example, if I give money to a homeless person I could assume that s/he will just use the money to buy alcohol. Or, if I donate money to a charity perhaps I believe only a small percentage of my money goes to help the people in need. In some cases, these may be accurate statements, but they are also useful justifications for not engaging in prosocial behavior.

A second mechanism is that another individual does not actually want your assistance. As an example, maybe you think your prosocial efforts would be viewed as pity and you personally would never like to be pitied. Or, you feel that helping would be viewed as paternalistic by the person in need and thus you believe the person would not want help. Thus, one reason people may not be prosocial is because of a belief that the other individual does not want your help.

A third mechanism is that we are helpful in one domain so that we are not responsible for helping in another domain. For example, if we are prosocial in terms of helping a spouse, child, or close friend, this may release the burden of being prosocial to other people or entities. If individuals have a prosocial identity because of their treatment of one set of individuals, they may feel less of an obligation to be of aid to others in need. This mechanism is consistent with

theory and research on *moral credentialing*, a phenomenon whereby people are more likely to behave unethically (i.e., in a prejudiced manner) if their prior behavior establishes that they are in fact ethical (Monin & Miller, 2001). For example, in a series of three experiments, individuals who voted for Barack Obama were more likely to believe a job description better suited White applicants than Black applicants and were more likely to give money to an organization that serves Whites at the expense of an organization that serves Blacks (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009). Thus, believing one is ethical by behaving in a moral way in one domain can have the counterintuitive effect of making an individual less likely to behave in an unethical manner subsequently.

A fourth mechanism may involve questioning whether one is certain that unethical behavior took place. As an example, an employee in organization may overhear what appears to be sexual harassment but may question whether that is indeed what is going on. Alternatively, an employee may hear from another employee that the harassment took place but because s/he is not certain s/he decides not to report the behavior to organizational authorities. Thus, this mechanism concerns discounting knowledge about the veracity of unethical behavior.

A fifth mechanism is convincing oneself that reporting unethical behavior will be futile, could lead to some negative repercussions, and thus it is not worth speaking up about wrongdoing. Indeed, the whistle-blowing literature highlights that a belief that reporting will be futile (i.e., nothing will be done about it) and a fear of retaliation are the strongest predictors of failing to blow the whistle (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Near & Miceli, 1985; Treviño et al., 2006). Further, employees may rationalize not reporting unethical behavior by embracing a belief that their reporting will not be kept confidential. Although these concerns

may be realistic and legitimate, they are also useful tools for deciding not to speak up in defense of a mistreated colleague and/or an unethical policy or procedure enacted by management.

These five proposed moral disengagement mechanisms focusing on why people fail to act in a prosocial manner are not meant to be an exhaustive list. Rather, they are presented here to illustrate some examples of how the mechanisms of moral disengagement may look different (or perhaps be expanded) if the goal is to understand why people fail to do good, as opposed to act in an unethical manner. Highlighting a comprehensive set of prosocial-related moral disengagement mechanisms is a promising area for future theory and research as it helps build on Bandura's desire to develop a theory not only about why people do bad things but also why they fail to do good at times.

III. Are unethical and prosocial behavior separate ends of the same continuum or are they distinct constructs?

Another interesting conceptual (and empirical) issue relates to the relationship between unethical and prosocial behavior. Scholars have yet to clearly articulate whether unethical and prosocial behavior are separate ends of the same continuum or whether both unethical and prosocial behavior should be thought of as being on their own continua. Some scholars have broached this topic although a definitive conclusion has yet to be reached. For example, Warren (2003) highlights a distinction between constructive and destructive deviance suggesting that acting outside norms can be either prosocial or unethical. Similarly, Umphress and Bingham (2009) introduce the concept of prosocial unethical behavior, again suggesting that unethical behavior can occur with a prosocial motivation in mind. In addition, Greenbaum and Folger

(2009) make the case that unethical leader behavior is qualitatively different from ethical leader behavior, implying that unethical and ethical behavior should be considered as separate continua.

It would be beneficial to develop a detailed framework for how unethical and prosocial behavior fit together. A number of questions still need to be addressed. Should unethical and ethical behavior be thought of as two distinct constructs? Are ethical behavior and prosocial behavior one in the same? Can behaviors be prosocial and unethical at the same time? These are questions that would be useful to address conceptually as well as empirically.

IV. Are the typical antecedents (e.g., personal, organizational) of unethical behavior the same for prosocial behavior or are they different?

Typically, behavioral ethics research does not examine both unethical and prosocial behavior in the same study (Treviño et al., 2005). The research that examines both generally does not differentiate between the antecedents (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). The antecedents of unethical and prosocial behavior typically include personal characteristics (e.g., personality, values, moral development, identity) and organizational characteristics (e.g., leadership, climate, culture, norms, peers). It would be interesting to examine whether there are different antecedents of unethical and prosocial behavior. For example, is unethical leadership more predictive of unethical follower behavior, whereas ethical leadership is more strongly related to prosocial behavior? Is ethical climate more strongly associated with unethical behavior and norms for citizenship more strongly related to prosocial behavior? It is important for both conceptual and practical reasons to tease apart whether these two types of behaviors have different precipitating variables.

- V. Are the processes linking personal and organizational variables to unethical behavior the same for prosocial behavior or are they different?

A related idea involves the mechanisms that link personal and organizational variables to unethical and prosocial behavior. It is commonplace to use a number of theories interchangeably to explain the effects of personal and organizational characteristics on unethical and prosocial behavior. These theories include social exchange (Blau, 1964), social identity (Tajfel, 1978), and social information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), among others. However, scholars generally do not delineate whether the mechanisms differ when unethical or prosocial behavior are the outcomes of interest. In an effort to explore how unethical and prosocial behavior are similar and distinct, it is important to examine whether the mechanisms that link antecedents to such behaviors are driven by different mechanisms.

- VI. Are automatic, affective reactions or deep-level processing more likely to influence unethical and prosocial behavior?

Traditionally, models of ethical decision-making have focused on rational effortful processing. For example, Rest's (1986) four steps of ethical decision making include moral awareness, judgment, motivation, and ultimately behavior. However, recent theorizing in the behavioral ethics domain suggests many reactions are automatic and affective in nature (Haidt, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007). This new perspective integrating affect into behavioral ethics is interesting and provides a nice contrast to more rational models of ethical decision making. However, the vast majority of theory and empirical research has focused on reactions to unethical behavior—as opposed to reactions to prosocial behavior. Further, most affective

reactions such as guilt, shame, or disgust tend to be reactions to one's own or others' unethical behavior.

One important question is whether prosocial behaviors tend to be motivated by deep processing whereas unethical behavior is motivated by more immediate affective reactions. For example, the decision regarding whether to blow the whistle or not usually involves serious consideration. Given the risks associated with whistle-blowing it is perhaps not surprising that people have tended to provide a detailed rationale for not blowing the whistle (Viswesvaran & Mesmer-Magnus, 2005). In contrast, seeing a commercial of someone in need may evoke a reaction of compassion and may stimulate prosocial behavior. So, the question remains: Is unethical behavior more likely driven by automatic affective reactions and prosocial behavior driven by deeper-level processing?

Another potentially interesting way to integrate emotions into behavioral ethics is to examine affective reactions to prosocial behavior. Whereas unethical behaviors may promote feelings of disgust, contempt, or shame, it is possible that prosocial behavior could promote more positive moral emotions (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2006). Examples of positive energizing moral emotions believed to stem from prosocial acts include awe, elevation, and admiration (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Research on these positive moral emotions could be a fruitful area of future work.

VII. Are perceptions of an organization's ethicality driven more by prosocial or unethical behavior?

When key stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, shareholders, etc.) evaluate an organization in terms of ethics, is the focus more on not engaging in unethical behavior or actually engaging in prosocial behavior? This is an important question that has yet to be examined in the behavioral ethics literature. Is it enough for an organization to do no wrong or must it also do some good? For example, if an applicant is interested in a company because he views the organization as ethical is that perception influenced more by an absence of any ethical and legal violations or because the company is socially responsible and donates money to important causes? Is it necessary for an organization to both not do anything unethical and also engage in prosocial behavior to be viewed as ethical? Understanding how unethical and prosocial behavior jointly influence perceptions of an organization's ethicality is a potentially interesting area of future inquiry.

#### VIII. How can virtues be further integrated into the behavioral ethics literature?

One domain of ethics that is related to prescriptions involves organizational virtues. For example, Solomon (1992, 1999, 2000, 2004) developed a virtue-based theory of business ethics. The crux of this theory is that in order to excel in terms of moral behavior, organizations must have certain virtues. Recently, some behavioral ethics scholars have sought to integrate the literature on organizational virtues. Kaptein (2008) recently developed a measure of ethical culture based on Solomon's virtue-based theory. This measure assesses a number of different virtues such as clarity, congruency, feasibility, supportability, transparency, discussability, and sanctionability. The virtues highlight prosocial ways the organization should behave (as opposed to unethical behaviors they should not engage in). Similarly, Cameron, Bright, and Caza (2004)

introduced the concept of organizational virtuousness highlighting ways organizations can do good.

These examples help illustrate how the integration of virtues and behavioral ethics is possible and fruitful. Future research should empirically examine which of these virtues are most strongly related to positive perceptions of organizations. In addition, future work can examine how virtues influence prosocial behaviors in organizations and specify which virtues matter most.

### *Practical Managerial Implications*

The ideas expressed in this chapter have a number of practical implications for organizations to not only reduce the level of unethical behavior but to increase the amount of prosocial behavior. Given that prosocial behavior has been linked to many valuable outcomes at the individual and organizational level, it is critical to understand how to promote prosocial behavior in organizations (Podsakoff, Blume, Whiting, & Podsakoff, 2009).

One important tactic for increasing prosocial acts is to develop an organizational ethical environment that encourages doing good. For example, consistent with prescriptions from Treviño and Nelson (1999), organizations can create an ethical climate by considering prosocial personality at the recruitment and selection phase, and to reinforce the importance of being prosocial through orientation and training programs and through reward and punishment systems. Further, structures should be in place to ensure that employees are held accountable and responsible for being prosocial. Finally, the importance of doing good—whether it be helping a



coworker or serving a customer—can be emphasized when making decisions. Thus, the ethical climate of an organization plays a large role in encouraging prosocial behavior.

In addition to the ethical climate, ethical leaders are also critical in encouraging prosocial behavior (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders serve as role models for employees in terms of appropriate ways to behave. Ethical leaders who emphasize the importance of doing good, of being a helpful colleague, and considering the effects of one's actions on key stakeholders, can encourage prosocial behavior in organizations.

The ethical climate and ethical leadership can help promote positive or constructive responses to unethical behavior. For example, when an organization has an ethical climate and leadership that supports doing the right thing, it will be easier for employees to speak up (i.e., whistle blow) and report such misconduct to the proper organizational authorities. In addition, employees may feel comfortable having direct conversations with their coworkers or supervisors to address the inappropriate conduct in a constructive manner before it becomes a bigger problem.

If an organization wants to promote the value of doing good or acting in a heroic or courageous manner, structures can be put into place to help achieve this objective. For example, instead of an ethics hotline to report wrongdoing, a hotline could be established to report prosocial behavior as well. This information could then be relayed back to organizational members. This process helps management communicate to employees that the organization values virtuous behavior.

Another implication for management that can be taken from this chapter is that mission statements and organizational policies for proper conduct should focus not only on not doing bad things but also promoting prosocial behavior. For example, a mission statement can emphasize prosocial characteristics it values from employees. It should be noted that a mission statement alone is unlikely to have a strong influence on behavior but shaping a climate around a mission statement by reinforcing it can be beneficial. Further, codes of conduct can emphasize not only what behaviors employees should not engage in but also detailing prosocial behaviors that are encouraged and valued.

In addition to the implications for developing an ethical organizational environment, this chapter has implications for how an organization is seen by various stakeholders. For example, in order to recruit the most talented applicants, organizations may need to be seen as not only failing to do unethical behavior but also as socially responsible—doing good for the local community, for example. Individuals like to be associated with organizations that instill pride and for many people a company that has a positive impact on society is important. Also, other stakeholders such as customers and shareholders are increasingly interested in the effect organizations have on larger society. Thus, in an effort to be thought of as an ethical company that stakeholders are attracted to, often times it is important to engage in prosocial behavior that promotes the greater good as opposed to only failing to be caught up in a scandal.

### *Conclusions*

The field of behavioral ethics is in the relatively early stages of development and has clearly attracted considerable interest from scholars for both theoretical and practical reasons. Although the field of behavioral ethics has traditionally been a study of *proscriptions*, examining

unethical behavior that occurs in organizations, in this chapter I argue that including *prescriptions*, a focus on prosocial behavior, should help broaden this domain.

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