Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior

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This paper examines the root of unethical dicisions by identifying the psychological forces that promote self-deception. Self-deception allows one to behave self-interestedly while, at the same time, falsely believing that one's moral principles were upheld. The end result of this internal con game is that the ethical aspects of the decision "fade" into the background, the moral implications obscured. In this paper we identify four enablers of self-deception, including language euphemisms, the slippery slope of decision-making, errors in perceptual causation, and constraints induced by representations of the self. We argue that current solutions to unethical behaviors in organizations, such as ethics training, do not consider the important role of these enablers and hence will be constrained in their potential, producing only limited effectiveness. Amendments to these solutions, which do consider the powerful role of self-deception in unethical decisions, are offered.

KEY WORDS: ethics; decision making; self-deception; ethics training.

> *"To see the self as deceiving itself has seemed the only way to explain what might otherwise be incomprehensible: a person's failure to acknowledge what is too obvious to miss"*
>
> (Bok, 1989, p. 60)

While there has been a rush to explain and remedy the unethical corporate practices that now seem commonplace, one of the newest entrants—the psychological processes behind unethical decision making—appears to be the most promising. In 1966, Messick and Tenbrunsel argued for the integration of psychology

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and behavioral economics into the field of business ethics. Such integration, they assert, would allow for the normatively based questions of "ought" to be considered alongside the equally important questions of "how." Dienhart *et al.* (2001) compiled a series of papers, entitled *The Next Phase of Business Ethics: Integrating Psychology and Ethics*, which illustrate the range of phenomena that define the intersection of these areas. We argue that the process of self-deception is at the root of this juncture of disciplines. Self-deception causes the moral implications of a decision to fade, allowing individuals to behave incomprehensibly and, at the same time, not realize that they are doing so.

The promise of the psychological perspective is not reflected in the current solution of choice for unethical behavior, namely "ethics training." Corporations and business schools have been urged to deliver such instruction and training with the hope that executives in turn will make more moral decisions. More than half of organizations provide training to their employees (Joseph, 2003). Business ethics programs have grown at a rapid rate in the best business schools in the country and in the latest ratings of business schools, the category of ethics is explicitly used as an evaluative dimension.

While the intention is good, we wonder whether it will achieve the desired end product, namely a reduction in unethical behavior. Could scandals such as Enron, Worldcom, and Adelphia have been avoided if their executives had received more ethics training? We argue that the answer to this question is no. Ethics training has been argued to be short-lived (Richards, 1999) and codes of conduct, usually part of the educational process, have in some cases produced no discernible difference in behavior (Badaracco and Webb, 1995). According to a recent survey, more than half of the MBA graduates did not feel that the ethics training they received in business schools was very useful in addressing the ethical issues they face in the workplace (Business Week Online, 2003).

We argue that one of the reasons for such potential ineffectiveness is the narrow focus of such training. Typical instruction includes an overview of ethical theory, discussion of ethical principles, and applications of such principles using a case-based method. Such instruction assumes that by highlighting and emphasizing the moral components of decisions, executives will be more likely to choose the moral path. Missing from this paradigm, however, is the failure to acknowledge the innate psychological tendency for individuals to engage in self-deception. Individuals do not "see" the moral components of an ethical decision, not so much because they are morally uneducated, but because psychological processes *fade* the "ethics" from an ethical dilemma.

We introduce the term "ethical fading" to define the process by which the moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications. If we are correct, educating individuals on moral principles is only useful when individuals perceive that the decision has ethical coloration, but useless when ethical fading has occurred or may occur. Our argument echoes Messick and Bazerman (1996) who argue that the assumption that executive ethics is based

on explicit tradeoffs between ethics and profits is misplaced; rather, they argue, unethical behavior is due to the "psychological tendencies that create unethical behavior." Efforts to improve ethical decision making, then, may be better directed toward understanding these psychological tendencies.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework in which to enhance this understanding. We first provide a brief overview of self-deception, which we argue to be at the root of ethical fading. We then identify and describe four reasons why such deception is perpetuated, including the role of language euphemisms, the slippery slope of decision making, errors in perceptual causation, and constraints induced by representations of the self. We link this discussion to the concept of decision frames, which we argue act as catalysts for ethical fading. We argue that self-deception and decision frames are part of the sequence linking environmental cues to unethical behavior, with environmental cues acting as prompts for self-deception, which in turn decreases the likelihood that an ethical frame is adopted, thus increasing unethical behavior. We conclude with implications for increasing ethical behavior in organizations.

THE ART OF SELF-DECEPTION

Self-deception is defined as being unaware of the processes that lead us to form our opinions and judgments (Messick and Bazerman, 1996). Such deception involves avoidance of the truth, the lies that we tell to, and the secrets we keep from, ourselves (Bok, 1989). This practice is common, normal, and accepted as constant and pervasive in individuals' lives. We are creative narrators of stories that tend to allow us to do what we want and that justify what we have done. We believe our stories and thus believe that we are objective about ourselves.

We argue that self-deception is instrumental in the process of ethical fading. An ethical decision often involves a tradeoff between self-interest and moral principles. By avoiding or disguising the moral implications of a decision, individuals can behave in a self-interested manner and still hold the conviction that they are ethical persons. Ignorance and false beliefs about oneself can create errors in judgments concerning moral responsibility and in estimates of the amount of harm that is caused, as well as obscure means to reverse an immoral decision (Bok, 1989). Self-deceit is thus seen as standing in the way of morality. Indeed, it has been asserted that if individuals could rid themselves of such self-deceit, then they would be more capable of making moral decisions and leading nobler lives (Bok, 1989).

The importance of self-deception in unethical decision making is clear, despite the fact that it is unclear whether such deception is the result of a conscious act or an unconscious process. Self-deception is paradoxical in this sense, for to deceive oneself somehow implies that one must know that something needs to be hidden or kept secret (Bok, 1989, p. 61). Psychoanalysis has offered the concept of the

split-selves as one mechanism that may help explain this paradox (Demos, 1960; Fingarette, 1969; Freud, 1957; Haight, 1980). The question of whether it is a process of which we are aware or one which exists below the surface, however, remains a debated point.

What is evident is that we need to acknowledge the pervasiveness of self-deception and its role in unethical decision making. As Messick and Bazerman (1996) state, "if we can accept the fact that the human mind has an infinite, creative capacity to trick itself, we can guard against irrational, unethical decisions." Understanding the mechanisms by which self-deception is exacerbated, the "enablers" if you will, becomes the necessary next step. In the following discussion, we identify four such enablers: language euphemisms, the slippery slope of decision making, biased perceptual causation, and the constrained representation of our self.

Language Euphemisms

Language euphemisms are the "disguised" stories we tell ourselves about our unethical actions. These stories are an edited version of the "real" story, devoid of all ethical implications. Through renaming actions we take and relabeling decisions we make, we turn what may be unacceptable into socially approved behaviors. Euphemistic language can make harmful conduct respectable and, as such, is an "injurious" weapon (Bandura, 1999).

There is a rich library of illustrations of this tendency, in business and well as other professions. We engage in "aggressive" accounting practices, not illegal ones. There may be some "externalities" associated with a strategy, not harmful to others or the environment. We have "collateral damage" in military campaigns, not civilian deaths. Some of these illustrate the tendency to replace morally repugnant language with more abstract and neutral terms. In other cases the goal is to connote something more or less benign, depending on what is in our best self-interest. So in the Middle East, the barrier that is being erected by Israel is referred to as a "fence" by the Israelis and as a "wall" by the Palestinians. A wall connotes that those inside are in a sort of "ghetto" which would be repugnant to the Israelis, and a "fence" connotes neighborliness, which the Palestinians see as completely misleading. The fact is that it is very easy to find the words to color a story in such a way that it becomes appealing to the narrator and consistent with the narrator's morality.

The accounting term "pro forma" falls into this same category. Until recently, companies used to report earnings on a pro-forma basis, which acted "as if" certain ordinary expenses did not really exist. The use of this term enabled corporate executives to make companies look better than they really were while in actuality, these "make your own accounting rules" facilitated deceptive and misleading presentations (Weil, 2003).

Messick (1999a) provides a vivid illustration of language euphemisms in the tobacco industry. To fight the growing body of research that indicated that tobacco was addictive, the industry fought to redefine the concept of addiction. While medical definitions of addition include multiple indications—including increased tolerance of a drug, withdrawal issues, brain mechanisms, and intoxicating qualities—the tobacco industry focused only on the intoxication criteria to conclude that smoking cigarettes was not addictive. The industry also re-labeled the debate from health to civil rights using terms such as "accommodation" (a term used to describe the process by which smokers and nonsmokers could coexist without government intervention); in doing so, they attempted to refocus attention away from risky health issues and toward civil rights issues, where the tobacco manufacturers stood on firmer ground. Using these and other strategies, the tobacco industry perfected "the strategy of blowing smoke at the claims" (Messick, 1999a, p. 82).

Business schools have likewise been blamed for the creation of euphemisms that help to disguise unethical actions. Business schools have been accused of using "cold language," which affects the way business students think (Browning, 2003). Terms such as "transaction costs, profit maximization, and rationalization" are argued to be devoid of the human and potential ethical dimensions of decisions. A case in point is the term "right sizing"—the favored terms for layoffs—which focuses attention toward the economic benefits and away from the human costs of putting people out of work.

Albert Speer, a member of Hitler's government and his innermost circle of advisors, provides another compelling example of the role of language euphemisms and their connection to self-deception (Speer, 1970). Speer played an integral part in the design of the munitions factories and was certainly knowledgeable of the treatment of the prisoner employees. However, by relabeling himself as an "architect" or "administrator," he admits that he was able to convince himself that worrying about political, and in the end, human issues, was not his job.

Social scientists have also uncovered the powerful role of language in the decision-making process. In a study of cooperation rates in ultimatum versus prisoner dilemma games, Larrick and Blount (1997) demonstrated that the differences in cooperation rates between social dilemmas and ultimatum bargaining games could be explained by the words used to describe these games. When faced with choices of "accepting" or "rejecting" offers, individuals were less likely to cooperate than when the choice was described as "claiming" part of a shared resource, even though outcomes were identical. Similarly, Pillutla and Chen (1999) found that when a social dilemma was described using economic language there was less cooperation than when the same dilemma (in payoff terms) was described using noneconomic words.

Language euphemisms themselves are not dangerous. We need metaphors to help us simplify the complexity of our world. What is dangerous is when these

metaphors hide the moral or ethical implications of our decisions. Metaphors such as "pro forma," "creative accounting," and "right sizing" can be so commonplace that we no longer see the questionable behavior that they were designed to disguise. Perhaps worse, the metaphors can be dangerously transformed from descriptions to explanations. In doing so, unethical behavior becomes justifiable through a process of deception, in which we transform morally wrong behavior into socially acceptable actions. When this occurs, we avoid the complexity inherent in ethical dilemmas and short-circuit our decision-making processes (Bok, 1989). The ethical pigments of our action have faded.

The Slippery Slope of Decision Making

The so-called "slippery slope" of decision making, the second enabler of self-deception, consists of at least two separate psychological mechanisms. The first of these is a psychological numbing that comes from repetition. This process is aptly described by Bok (1989, p. 69) in her influential book on concealment:

> A related form of rejecting knowledge is what is known as "psychic numbing." It comes much closer to what is often called self-deception, yet it can be a reflex response to overwhelming pain or fear. Recall an intensely painful experience, and notice that it is impossible to recapture the sheer physical sense of that pain. In the same way, the initial impact of suffering may wear off with repeated exposure, leaving us incapable of responding to what at first aroused sharp reactions.

In this sense, repeated exposures to ethical dilemmas may produce a form of ethical numbing in which self-reproof is diminished through repeated exposures (Bandura, 1999). When this occurs, we may be less likely to see the "ethical" in the dilemma, and hence engage in more unreflective and potentially more unethical behavior.

The second component of the slippery slope problem is what we call the "induction" mechanism. Induction in mathematics is as follows. If a statement is true for $N = 1$, and if the statement for $N + 1$ is true assuming the truth of N, then the statement is true for all N. The way this works in organizations is similar. If what we were doing in the past is OK and our current practice is almost identical, then it too must be OK. This mechanism uses the past practices of an organization as a benchmark for evaluating new practices. If the past practices were ethical and acceptable, then practices that are similar and not too different are also acceptable. If each step away from ethical and acceptable practices is sufficiently small, small enough not to appear qualitatively different, then a series of these small steps can lead to a journey of unethical and illegal activities. This process of induction is very much like the process of routinization described by Kelman and Hamilton (1989). Routinization means that when a practice has become routine, it is ordinary, mundane, and acceptable. Any ethical coloration is lost.

An excellent illustration of this process is offered by Maremont (1996) with the criminal prosecution of Bernard Bradstreet, Co-CEO of Kurzweil Applied

Intelligence, Inc., a manufacturer of high-tech voice recognition computers. Bradstreet was described by friends as a "straight arrow," a man of impeccable moral stature. But in an effort to make the kind of financial record for Kurzweil that would allow the company to go public, Bradstreet, according to sources sited by Maremont, allowed sales reps to post sales that were not actually signed a few days in advance to meet financial targets. The goods would be shipped to a warehouse while the final terms of the deal were worked out. These few innocuous days stretched into weeks and as this happened, the certainty that the sale would be made also dropped. Eventually, some salesmen were forging customers' signatures on contracts (believing that the sales would eventually happen). When auditors came to examine the books and wrote to the alleged customers, bogus responses "confirming" the sales were also forged. Thus a completely false impression of Kurzweil's financial health was created through deception and fraud. At trial, Mr Bradstreet defended his actions as appropriate.

The story of Mr. Bradstreet and Kurzweil is but one of many that could be told to illustrate the dangerous consequences of the slippery slope. It follows the old adage that "one lie perpetuates many more." Part of this is due to our inability to see the incremental steps we take down the road of unethical behavior, due to the self-deception that occurs along the way.

Errors in Perceptual Causation

What our language and baby steps cannot filter out, our errors in why things occur can. Causation is complex and humans are self-interested and fallible. The end result: misconstrued judgments about moral responsibility.

There are three reasons why individual perceptions of causes can go awry—a focus on individuals rather than systems, self-interested motives in the assignment of blame, and a blurred moral responsibility involving acts of omission (Messick and Bazerman, 1996). First, individuals tend to focus on a person rather than a system in assessing and remedying problematic situations. Individual fallibilities are often more apparent than the complex errors that mark technology and systems. Because of our assumption that systems are "error proof," we overlook environmental causes of unethical behavior, in turn reducing the probability that the system will be improved. Tenbrunsel and Messick (1999) found for example, that the presence of a monitoring system designed to decrease undesirable behavior actually produced an increase. The tendency to look at human causes might lead one to conclude that employees are to be trusted even less, further focusing attention on improving the monitoring system. Their results, however, suggest that it may be the system that is the real culprit. Our proclivity to focus only on the person may thus lead us to overlook other, more likely causes, which reduces the likelihood that the frequency of unethical behavior will be diminished.

Causal explanations are also in danger of inaccuracy because of the self-interested motives that may influence assignment of blame. In an investigation of perceived causation of events when two factors—the "target" and the "contributing factor"—conjoin to produce an event, McGill and Tenbrunsel (2000) found that causal ratings of the target factor were influenced in part by the mutability of the contributing factor, defined as the degree to which the contributing factor could be imagined to be different. More specifically, they found that when the contributing factor was perceived to be immutable, causal attention was directed to the target factor. Using the above example concerning system versus human error, if systems are seen as immutable in comparison to humans, then humans will be focused on as targets of blame. The end result is an overemphasis on certain factors (the factors perceived to be more "mutable") and an underemphasis on others (the factors perceived to be "immutable"). Medical mistakes, for example, are argued to result less from human error, as is commonly believed, and more from unrealistic *system* expectations that human operators are flawless (Cowley *et al*. 1995). McGill and Tenbrunsel (2000) argue that these findings have more general implications for the assignment of blame. Since causal explanations are influenced by mutability, the assignment of blame is thus dependent on which factors are perceived to be mutable or immutable. Such judgments of mutability may reflect not only objective assessments of which factors can change but may also be influenced by the motivation of the perceiver. If the perceiver has a self-interested motive to deflect blame, the perceived mutability of alternative factors may increase. In other words, self-interest may mean that I see other factors as more variable than they really are, and hence erroneously deflect blame from myself that should rightfully be assigned to me.

Acts of omission are a third reason as to why perceptions of causes are in error. Whereas lies of commission are direct misstatements of the truth, lies of omission are acts of deception that occur because someone withholds information that deceives the target. A failure to take an action, i.e., disclose the truth, makes it more difficult to ascertain responsibility, not only for others but also for oneself. Consider the situation in which you are selling a car. Is it your responsibility to inform the buyer that the car has had several unexplained malfunctions or is it the buyer's responsibility to ask? Phrases or euphemisms such as "buyer beware" reveal the answer: moral responsibility shifts from the agent to the target under situations characterized by acts of omissions. Ritov and Baron's (1990) work provides empirical support for this intuitive motion, demonstrating that acts of omission are viewed as more acceptable than acts of commission. Acts of omission, then, because they blur the assignment of responsibility, can create self-biased perceptions of causes, shifting blame from self to others. In such circumstances, it is highly likely that individuals' propensity to engage in unethical behavior increases, because shifting responsibility to others allows one to divorce oneself from the moral implications of their actions.

Errors in perceptual causation allow us to distance ourselves from the ethical issues at hand. We erroneously believe that we cannot fix the problem, because

it is a people and not a system issue. We also falsely believe that it is someone else's problem, either because they are to blame or because the responsibility is someone else's, not ours. While different from hiding the ethical implications of our own actions, this form of self-deception removes the ethical decision from our backyard, thus watering down the ethical demands of the situation.

The Constrained Representation of Our Self

The final point that we want to make about enablers of self-deception is the obvious but often overlooked fact that we do not get to choose how we see the world. We experience the world through our own sensory organs, not those of others. We see others and they see us, which places us in a different space vis-à-vis our social surroundings than other people. This is a logical, not an empirical, fact. Because what we experience will always be different from what is experienced by others, we know both more and less than they do. Even when we try to put ourselves into the place of others, the best we can do is to try to imagine what the other would experience *from our own perspective.* So from this perspective, it is an act of self-deception to believe that one knows something about an "objective" truth.

John Barth (1958, pp. 86–87) reflects this fact in his novel, *The End of the Road,* when his character, a quack Doctor, states the following: "In life there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story. *Hamlet* could be told from Polonius's point of view and called the *Tragedy of Polonius, Lord Chamberlain of Denmark.* He did not think he was a minor character in anything, I daresay. Or suppose you're an usher in a wedding. From the groom's point of view he's the major character; the others play supporting parts, even the bride. From your point of view, though, the wedding is a minor episode in the *very* interesting history of your life and the bride and groom both are minor figures. What you've done is chose to *play the part* of a minor character: it can be pleasant for you to *pretend to be* less important than you know you are, as Odysseus does when he disguises as a swineherd." Our views of the world are thus biased, constrained by who we are. Any thoughts that we have an objective comprehension are a form of self-deception. The inability to have a truly objective perception of the world means that we cannot accurately evaluate the effect our behavior has on others, the ability of which is central to many prominent ethical theories.

SELF-DECEPTION AND DECISION FRAMES

What is the fallout of self-deception? How is it linked to unethical behavior? We argue that self-deception leads to coding, or framing, of decisions that either

eliminate negative ethical characterizations or distort them into positive ones. Self-deception helps to disguise violations of our ethical principles. If we do not see that our actions are unethical, then we can behave in a self-interested but ultimately unethical manner. In other words, we don't code the decision as an ethical one; rather, we see it as ethically colorless. The decision is categorized in other terms, perhaps as a business, economic, personal, or legal decision. Such categorization in turn allows behavior that others would judge as unethical.

Recent theorizing suggests that individuals' construal of the situation does influence unethical behavior. Extending March's (1995) ideas, Messick (1999b) focused on the stages of decision making. One of these stages involves judgments of appropriateness. In this stage, individuals decide what type of situation it is with which they are faced. For example, individuals may construe the situation to be a competitive one in which self-interest should dominate; alternatively, they may perceive the situation to be cooperative, one in which joint gain and mutual satisfaction are the primary objectives. More pertinent to the discussion at hand, individuals may perceive that the situation is an ethical dilemma, with the objective to consider the ethical principles at stake, or that the situation is a business problem, one in which organizational goals are of the utmost importance. Judgments of appropriateness are important because they influence behavior. If one believes that what is called for in a situation is a "temporary" posting of a sale before the actual sale is made, then that is the "right" thing to do. One's intent is positive and admirable.

Analysis of the impact of surveillance systems on cooperative behavior provides support for this idea. In an investigation of cooperative behavior in social dilemmas, Tenbrunsel and Messick (1999) examined the effects of a surveillance system that monitored whether individuals cooperated or defected. They proposed that cooperative behavior would actually decrease when a weak surveillance system was put into place as compared to the identical situation in which no surveillance system was present. Finding support for this hypothesis, they investigated the impact that decision frames would play in explaining this pattern of results. Their results are consistent with the ideas advanced by March (1995) and Messick (1999b), namely that the presence of a surveillance system significantly changed the construal of the decision situation. When there was no surveillance system in place, the majority of individuals perceived that the situation was best characterized as an ethical decision but when a surveillance system was present, the majority of individuals perceived that the situation could be best described as a business decision. On the basis of these results, a model was introduced to describe the impact of a surveillance system on behavior. The model offered two effects: a signaling effect and a processing effect. External cues, such as a surveillance system, serve as a signal that impacts the construal of the situation (i.e., an ethical frame versus a business frame). The cognitive processing that follows is then unique to each frame. In an ethical frame, for example, the processing is fairly automatic, with individuals primed to do the "right thing." The processing in a business frame is

argued to be more complex, depending, for example, on assessments of the chances of being detected and the strength of the sanction. Their results demonstrated the connection between decision frame and behavior, with cooperation significantly higher when an ethical frame had been adopted.

There is a close correlation between self-deception and the notion of decision frames described above. More specifically, we believe that self-deception is one of the underlying mechanisms that helps explains the relationship between environmental cues (such as a surveillance system) and the construal of the situation. Self-deception acts as an ethical bleach, removing the ethical colors from the decision. Whether it is through processes that re-label the behavior in terms that are devoid of ethical consideration, incremental steps which hide ethical implications of our decisions, biases in perceived causation that erroneously reduce moral responsibility, or constraints that are induced by our mental representations of our self, such deception influences the type of decision with which we believe we are faced. The more self-deception there is, the less salient are the ethical dimensions of the situation. The less salient the ethical dimensions, the less likely it is that an ethical decision frame will be adopted and hence the more likely it is that individuals will behave unethically.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN ORGANIZATIONS

We have proposed that self-deception is at the core of ethical fading and, through influencing the decision frame that is adopted, is a dominant perpetrator in unethical behavior. Efforts designed to reduce unethical behavior are therefore best directed on the sequence leading up the unethical action. Our discussion can be reconstrued in fairly simplistic terms that help identify the relevant stages: environmental prompts (or cues) trigger self-deception mechanisms which influence the decision frame that is adopted which in turn impacts behavior. In ethical decisions, there are situational cues that may initially suggest an ethical dilemma. The dominant influence of self-interest triggers self-deception, which decreases the likelihood that an ethical frame will be adopted, leading to unethical behavior.

The above sequence identifies several trigger points that contribute to unethical behavior: environmental or contextual cues, self-deception, and decision frames. To date, ethics training has focused on normative education, which could reasonably be argued to promote an ethical frame. Such training, however, comes late in the game and fails to recognize the other variables in the sequence of events; consequently, it may only be partially effective. Self-deception processes, in competition with such training, may override the ethics frame induced by ethics education and promote an economic or business frame. This is not to suggest that such training is useless but rather to highlight that it represents only a piece of the puzzle. To encourage ethical behavior in organizations, the other pieces must also be addressed.

Starting at the left side of the equation, one set of variables that leads to unethical behavior are the environmental or contextual cues that exist in an organization. Organizations should thus identify the structural, institutional, and systematic factors that promote unethical behavior. Work by Tenbrunsel *et al.* (2003) may be useful in this regard. Introducing the term "ethical infrastructure," they argue that organizations can effectively decrease unethical behavior only by making sure that all organizational elements—including the formal and informal systems of communication, surveillance, and sanctioning mechanisms, and the organizational climates pertaining to ethics, justice, and respect—are in line with each other. Traditional ethical fixes focus on the more visible formal systems (codes of conduct, ethics departments, ombudsmen), which while important, are relatively weak in comparison to the more hidden, and more difficult to correct, informal systems and accompanying organizational climates. Implementing weak systems or focusing on only a few elements, for example the surveillance function, while ignoring other more embedded elements sends a mixed signal to employees. As uncertainty is linked to opportunistic actions (Fandt and Ferris, 1990) and unethical behavior (Tenbrunsel, 1995), organizations can reduce uncertainty by sending strong, consistent messages about ethical principles at all levels of the organization's ethical infrastructure.

The next variable in the equation is the process of self-deception. Admittedly, self-deception is hard to correct. Recognizing self-deception is difficult (Bok, 1989) and correcting the ingrained mechanisms that accompany it, even more so. The first step is to recognize its pervasive and universal presence, for "to deny this reality is to practice self-deception" (Messick and Bazerman, 1996, p. 22). We must condition ourselves to be aware of the enablers of self-deception; furthermore, we must be more critical of our judgments and our motives driving both our actions and our judgments of others' behaviors (Messick and Bazerman, 1996). Given the connection between justification and unethical behavior (Bok, 1978; Lewicki and Litterer, 1985; Tenbrunsel, 1995), we must also question the justifications that we concoct to rationalize our actions. By confronting the tendency toward self-deception head on, we will be more likely to reduce its prevalence than if we ignore it and act as if it did not exist. To do otherwise only reinforces this potentially destructive force.

Focusing on decision frames represents another avenue for increasing ethical behavior in organizations. Certainly, educating individuals on ethical principles may increase the likelihood that individuals see the decision as one that contains ethical dimensions. It is also important to gain a deeper understanding of the cues that prompt the adoption of one frame over another. Such cues can be quite subtle (Messick, 1999b), consisting of linguistic (Larrick and Blount, 1997; Messick, 1999b) or personal variables. Perhaps the only way to truly understand their subtlety is to directly investigate decision frames both within as well as between organizations. Different organizations and different departments within an organi-

zation may vary in their perception of the same decision, with some organizations or departments more likely to view the decision as an ethical one than others. Such an observation would be quite useful as it would point to the elements of the ethical infrastructure that induce business and economic frames, hence identifying promising sources of change.

CONCLUSION

"We struggle along with such thick layers of bias and rationalization, compartmentalization and denial, that our choices suffer immeasurably" (Bok, 1989, p. 71). The layers of self-deception are thick and the processes are ingrained. To accept this fact, but do nothing about it, will leave us color blind in our vision of the ethical landscape. Muting the forces behind ethical fading will take much more time than some of the solutions that have been previously offered but the effort will be well spent, producing long-lasting and more permanent results. As with most embedded problems, the first step—recognizing and accepting the problem—is often the most difficult. The next step is to more clearly understand the processes that cause ethical fading. We hope this paper provides a roadmap for the ensuing journey.

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