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Exploring Unethical Behavior in Group and Individual Contexts*



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The behavioral inhibition system (BIS) activates in the presence of potential threats or response conflict. To minimize negative outcomes, the BIS inhibits impulses and induces deliberate and cautious thinking. Conversely, past research shows when people feel safe from harm (e.g., anonymous, powerful), the BIS is less active so people are less inhibited and act more reflexively (McNaughton & Gray, 2000).

Unethical behavior often involves acting on initial impulses to pursue self-interest at the expense of others. These unethical or objectionable behaviors occur when people feel safe from harm and are disinhibited, and thus are more likely under conditions of anonymity or power. It is important to explore other contexts where unethical behavior might ensue because these actions can be illegal, immoral, and harmful to others. The purpose of our research was to explore whether group contexts facilitate unethical tendencies. Past research shows that people feel safer in groups because they are less identifiable and can diffuse responsibility by spreading blame among fellow group members if outcomes become negative (Park & Hinsz, 2006). Also, when individuals make decisions in groups they often reach consensus and feel validated and certain on how to act. If people feel more certain and safer in groups they should be less inhibited. Thus, we hypothesize people will be more willing to act more unethically when with others compared to when alone.

To test this prediction we conducted a survey study. Eighty-eight undergraduates from Grand Valley State University participated in the study. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in unethical scenarios and rate how willing they were to engage in the unethical behaviors that were described. We used willingness to behave unethically as a measure of BIS activation since these behaviors are often in the pursuit of self-interest and are typically inhibited to avoid looking bad in front of others. Willingness to behave unethically would indicate less BIS activity. Half of the scenarios involved acting unethically alone, while the other half involved acting unethically with others. This difference in social context was not brought to

participants' attention and the scenarios were in random order.

To test the hypothesis, a paired-sample t-test compared the average composite scores for group and individual contexts. In support of the hypothesis, results show when participants imagined themselves in groups they were more willing to behave unethically compared to when imagining themselves alone. This occurred even though there was no difference in how unethical the scenarios were rated.

This research has important implications as it provides insight into how our behavior changes due to social context. In our individualistic society we would like to think we behave consistently across situations, when in reality we have evidence to suggest the contrary. This research expands our knowledge and increases our awareness of factors that promote unethical behaviors.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.