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# Avoiding ethical temptations

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This article offers a self-control framework for understanding when people resist ethical temptations. We propose that two factors contribute to a person's ability to overcome the temptation to engage in unethical behavior: first, the identification of an ethical dilemma and second, the exercise of self-control to overcome temptation. We review factors involved in identifying ethical dilemmas — broad decision frame (bracket), psychological connectedness, and high self-diagnosticsity — and factors that facilitate responding with self-control — advanced warning of temptation and the employment of self-control strategies. We discuss implications for increasing ethical decisions.

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How can we explain why people sometimes succumb to ethical temptations and other times resist them? We argue that self-control plays a critical role in promoting ethical behavior. Therefore, to understand ethical behavior and to explain when people make ethical decisions (and when they may not), it is useful to adopt the lens of a self-control conflict. Accordingly, in the current article, we employ theory and research on counteractive self-control [1<sup>\*\*</sup>,2,3] to explain ethical behavior.

Self-control conflicts involve a tradeoff between two mutually exclusive courses of action, one of which offers immediate benefits and another of which offers long-term benefits [4–10]. When applied to the ethical domain, an ethical self-control dilemma presents a choice between either behaving unethically to achieve momentary benefits (e.g., dishonesty for immediate, selfish gain) or behaving ethically (e.g., honestly) so as to maintain a moral self-image, a sense of integrity and, to the extent that a person's decisions are public, an ethical reputation and social acceptance in the long run [11,12].

Importantly, the self-control conflict is intra-psychic (e.g., saving versus spending, eating healthily versus not). Because people internalize others' interests as their own long-term interests, they face ethical conflicts in interpersonal domains, such as when deciding whether to compete versus collaborate in bargaining encounters [13<sup>\*\*</sup>] or to behave pro-socially versus anti-socially toward close others [14,15].

A self-control analysis suggests that two factors contribute to a person's ability to overcome the temptation to engage in unethical behavior: first, the identification of an ethical dilemma and second, the exercise of self-control to overcome the temptation to behave unethically. That is, individuals need to know both when and how to exercise restraint. With respect to 'when,' individuals will implement self-control only if they have identified an ethical self-control conflict — it is only to the extent that a conflict is identified in the first place that they can exercise self-control. With respect to 'how,' having advanced warning and therefore anticipating the temptation to behave unethically can facilitate self-control.

In turn, self-control strategies involve asymmetric shifts in motivational strength: an increase in motivation to behave ethically and a decrease in motivation to embrace unethical temptation. Such asymmetric shifts may be conscious or not [1<sup>\*\*</sup>,16]. In what follows, we elaborate on the factors involved in identifying ethical conflicts and how people can respond with self-control. We summarize our propositions in [Table 1](#).

### Identifying an ethical dilemma

Ethical self-control conflicts are not always clear-cut. Indeed, if a behavior is framed as being socially acceptable [17], perceived to be the norm [18] or, more generally, is not seen as bearing negatively on the self-concept [19<sup>\*</sup>], people may fail to identify it as posing a self-control conflict in the first place. That is, they may not realize the behavior has the potential to compromise their moral self-image or ethical reputation. In this case, a person may know her actions could be considered unethical or even illegal under certain circumstances, (e.g., if no one else behaved this way), but in the present context she views her actions as ethical. For example, if an employee assumes that everyone uses sick days for vacationing, he or she may fail to identify an ethical dilemma in doing so.

At times, another person or organization directly identifies the conflict for the individual. For example, many colleges require students to read and sign an honor code before an exam in order to promote the perception that

Table 1

## Summary of propositions.

Stage	Principles
Stage 1: conflict identification	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Greater ethical decisions in broader decision frame (bracket).</li> <li>2. Greater ethical decisions in higher psychological connectedness.</li> <li>3. Greater ethical decisions when the behavior reflects on the self (self-diagnostic).</li> </ol>
Stage 2: conflict resolution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Advanced warning of upcoming unethical temptation promotes ethical decisions.</li> <li>2. Self-control strategies increase the motivational strength of behaving ethically and decrease the motivational strength of behaving unethically.</li> </ol>

cheating is unethical [20]. Other times, identification is less apparent, and several variables influence the likelihood of seeing a conflict in the ethical domain. We next describe these variables.

### Broad bracket

Whenever the cost of a single unethical decision is negligible (i.e., a one time occurrence), grouping multiple decisions that involve a temptation together in a broad frame can help people to better identify a self-control conflict [10,21,22]. In the ethical domain, we would expect, for example, that an environmentalist who is tempted to take long hot showers, would be more likely to resist this temptation when she thinks about the multiple showers she will take in her lifetime compared with the one shower she plans to take today. By using a wider frame for this decision, this individual will consider a larger and more significant impact on the environment, which can help her identify the conflict. Some evidence comes from research showing that people may cheat ‘a little bit’ [19\*], as the cost of that one instance of cheating is seen as negligible. However, if they look at all the opportunities they have to cheat, the costs add up and they will be more likely to identify cheating as posing an ethical dilemma.

In other research, Sheldon and Fishbach [12] had participants report their behavior across six different work-related ethical dilemmas (adopted from [23]), each describing an ethically questionable behavior (e.g., downloading copyrighted materials without paying on company time, intentionally pacing work slowly to avoid additional tasks, calling in sick when actually just tired, and taking office supplies home for personal use). Participants who made decisions about these ethical dilemmas in isolation from each other, on separate screens (narrow bracket) reported greater intention to behave unethically than those who first read the entire set of dilemmas before making decisions about each (broad bracket).

### Psychological connectedness

Similar to broad brackets, psychological connectedness plays a role in whether people see a particular ethical decision as related to multiple decisions and hence, as having significant impact. Psychological connectedness

refers to the perceived stability in one’s personal identity, or how similar the current self is to a person’s future self [24]. The less stability people see in their own personal identity, the less likely they are to view things or actions that they currently find tempting as related or connected to things that they will find tempting in the future. In turn, lower connectedness is associated with a preference for immediate versus delayed outcomes, because presumably the decision to give in is unrelated to similar future decisions [25,26]. For example, van Gelder et al. [27\*] find that when confronted with 40-year-old versions of themselves, young adults (ages 20–25) were less likely to cheat than when viewing normal versions of themselves.

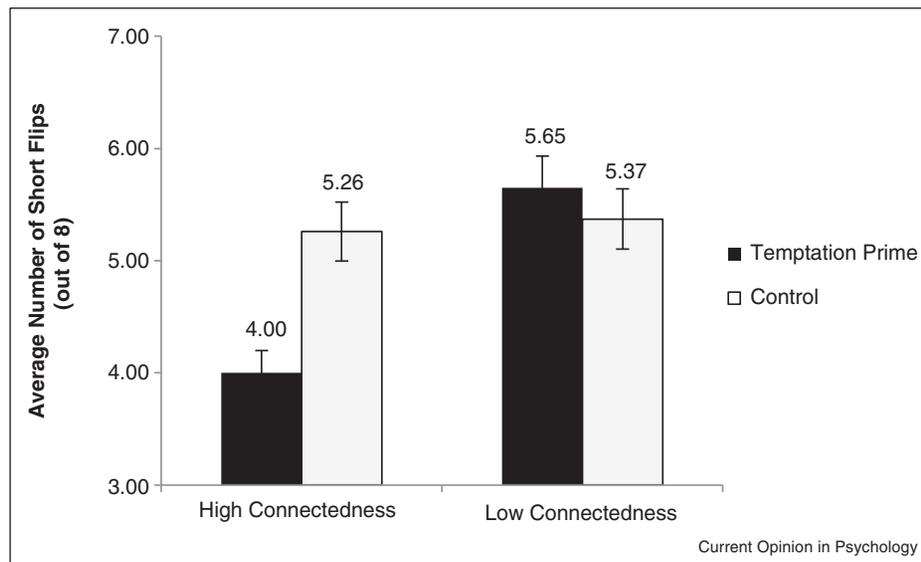
In other research, Sheldon and Fishbach [12] manipulated psychological connectedness [24], before assigning people to complete a series of computer-based proofreading tasks. For each task, participants had to assign themselves to a short or long version of a passage by privately flipping a coin, ostensibly to ensure random allocation. This paradigm poses an ethical dilemma: give in to the temptation to assign oneself to short-versions of tasks (which entailed less work) even when one’s coin flips might not warrant it, or assign oneself to whatever task versions one’s coin flips happened to indicate [28,29\*\*]. These researchers documented that those who felt a strong (versus weak) psychological connection to their future self displayed less dishonestly (i.e., completed less short tasks, see Figure 1), although this was only true when these individuals anticipated the temptation in advance (a condition we describe in the section on ‘Exercising self-control’).

### Self-diagnosticity

Another factor that influences conflict identification is the self-diagnosticity of the action; that is, the degree to which it reflects on one’s self-concept. Because part of the long-term benefits of ethical behavior relate to maintaining a moral self-image, people will more easily identify a conflict when their actions are seen as more diagnostic of who they are.

In support of this notion, Touré-Tillery and Fishbach [29\*\*] find that people follow ethical standards more carefully at the beginning and end of a sequence of actions compared to the middle of a sequence, because beginning and end positions are more salient and therefore, appear

Figure 1



Effects of psychological connectedness and temptation priming on the total number of times participants reported a favorable outcome of a coin flip (i.e., 'short') and assigned themselves to a short task, out of 8 [12].

more diagnostic. For example, using the coin flip task described above, these researchers found less cheating in the first and last trials of a 10-trial task compared to any position in the middle (see Figure 2).

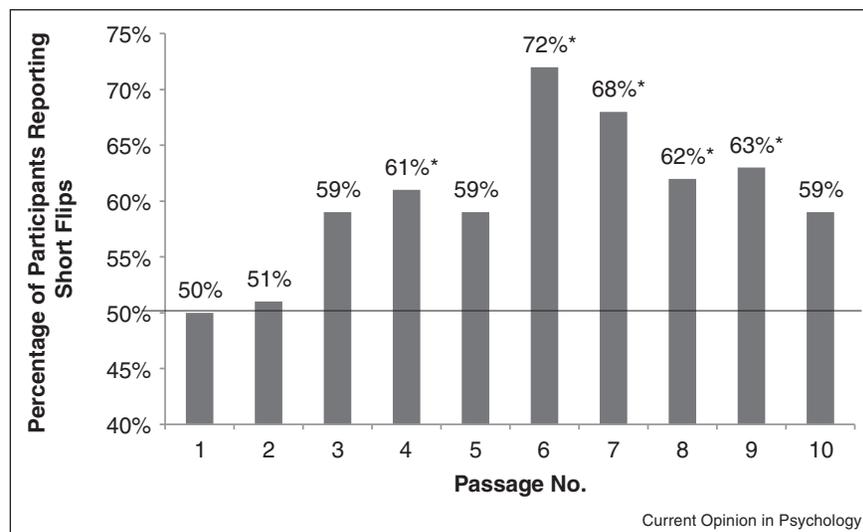
Other studies showed that people believe one's behavior at the beginning and end of the sequence is more diagnostic of their personalities than their behavior in the middle. Similarly, research finds that directing attention to the self increases ethical behavior. For example, signing at the

beginning of a form decreases dishonest self-reports in comparison to signing at the end [30], and in the related domain of charitable giving, signing with one's name increases commitment to subsequent giving compared with anonymous donations [31].

### Exercising self-control

After having identified an ethical temptation, the second step in overcoming this temptation and resisting the urge to behave unethically is to effectively exercise self-control.

Figure 2



Percentages of participants who reported the favorable outcome of the coin flip and assigned themselves to the short proofreading passage, for each of the 10 passages in the sequence. Horizontal line at 50% value indicates chance level. \* $P < .05$  (percentage greater than chance [29\*\*]).

According to research on counteractive control theory, one key to success is an advanced warning about upcoming temptations. Much like a person who prepares to lift a piece of furniture would apply more force if he or she expects the furniture to be heavy, expecting temptation can lead people to put more force into overcoming these obstacles in goal pursuit [2,16]. Thus, a person who has a goal not to cheat and who is told the temptation to cheat in a certain situation would be strong, would react by exerting more effort to overcome this obstacle that is blocking the long-term goal of being an ethical person.

To demonstrate this point, Sheldon and Fishbach [12] studied mixed motive interactions. When interacting with a negotiation partner, negotiators face conflicting interest between acting competitively to pursue immediate benefits and cooperating to pursue long-term outcomes. In their research, they found that when people were forewarned and anticipated coming up against high barriers to succeed, counteractive self-control was activated, enabling negotiators to overcome the temptation to compete and resulting in increased cooperation.

In terms of strategies, when individuals wish to behave ethically, they engage in behaviors that increase the motivational strength of ethical decisions and decrease the motivational strength of unethical decisions. Research on counteractive control further distinguishes between behavioral strategies that change the choice options and non-behavioral strategies that change the psychological meaning of the choice options. For example, people often pre-commit to adhere to their long-term, health interests and forgo unhealthy temptation by buying more healthy food and less unhealthy food than what they would later like to consume. In the ethical domain, people could similarly pre-commit to make certain decisions public rather than private, to ensure that they cannot behave unethically. Alternatively, just like people elaborate on what makes healthy food appealing and unhealthy food less appealing [32], they potentially elaborate on what makes an ethical decision worthier and a less ethical option unworthy, as a strategy to decrease the perceived value of behaving unethically.

To demonstrate such changes to the motivational appeal of unethical versus ethical decisions, consider, for example, the impact of interpersonal closeness on resisting the temptation to compete. Individuals are more likely to overcome the temptation to behave competitively toward another person the closer they feel to that person [33]. Indeed, one reliable way to increase closeness and hence, cooperation, is to have people consume similar foods. For example, strangers assigned to eat similarly were more likely to overcome the temptation to compete, leading to improved outcomes in a collaborative negotiation situation compared with those consuming dissimilarly [34].

This suggests one strategy to boost ethical behavior is to foster one's sense of camaraderie with a counterpart, and we would expect people anticipating a desire to compete to engage in strategies that draw them closer to the other party (e.g., consume similarly).

## Conclusions

Adopting a self-control framework for understanding ethical decision making enabled us to identify necessary conditions for ethical decisions: the identification of ethical temptations and the exercise of self-control to overcome these temptations. This framework contributes to theory on ethical decision making, while helping us generate interventions for enabling people to follow through on their goal of behaving ethically.

Specifically, in terms of theoretical contribution, a self-control framework generates novel predictions for understanding when people behave ethically. Thus, we identified several factors that assist identification of ethical dilemmas and the exercise of self-control in the ethical domain. We further suggested potential manifestations of self-control strategies in the ethical domain, although more work is needed to fully understand how these self-control strategies are often applied to ethical decision making. In addition, this self-control framework has been useful in other streams of self-control research, and led to predictions such as how depleting self-regulatory resources can have negative consequences for ethical decision-making [35–38].

In terms of practical recommendations, the self-control framework has the potential to assist policy makers and educators alike to encourage people to behave more ethically. For example, it suggests taking steps to make identification of ethical dilemmas easier, either by bracketing decisions together (e.g., making several choices simultaneously) or focusing on the self-diagnostics of actions (e.g., by having people sign their name). It further suggests that advanced warning can help people overcome the temptation to behave unethically. For example, reflecting on how it may be hard to overcome a particular temptation may help to recruit additional resources in overcoming this temptation later on. Additionally, this perspective can generate interventions for strategies that people can use to increase ethical decisions, for example, by encouraging them to pre-commit to a particular course of action in advance.

## Conflict of interest

We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us.

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