Anticipating and Overcoming Unethical Temptation

Oliver J. Sheldon, Rutgers University

Ayelet Fishbach, University of Chicago

Author Note

Oliver J. Sheldon, Rutgers Business School, Rutgers University, 1 Washington Park, Newark, NJ 07102-3027

Ayelet Fishbach, Booth School of Business, The University of Chicago, 5807 South Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637


Address of Correspondence: Oliver J. Sheldon, Rutgers Business School, Rutgers University, 1 Washington Park, Newark, NJ 07102-3027. e-mail: osheldon@business.rutgers.edu
Abstract

This chapter offers a self-control framework for understanding when people anticipate unethical temptation and how they plan to resist such temptation. We propose that ethical behavior is often future oriented: it requires that a person first identify an upcoming situation as an ethical dilemma that poses a self-control conflict, and that the person then plans to exercise self-control to counteract the temptation. We review situational factors involved in identifying upcoming ethical dilemmas – a broad decision frame (i.e., broad bracket), psychological connectedness, and high self-diagnosticity – as well as those that facilitate responding with self-control – advanced warning of temptation and employing various self-control strategies. We then conclude by discussing implications for promoting ethical decisions.
Anticipating and Overcoming Unethical Temptation

While most people care deeply about maintaining a moral self-image, preserving a sense of integrity, and being perceived as ethical by others, people also commonly behave in ways that put these valued goals at risk. From education to sports to politics, bending ethical rules or behaving dishonestly for personal gain is commonplace. While most unethical behavior is relatively minor in scale (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008), its prevalence is nevertheless concerning, for in aggregate, even minor transgressions can cause significant social and economic damage. For instance, widespread academic dishonesty can raise doubts among employers about the value of a college degree (Happel & Jennings, 2008), while rampant tax evasion and corruption can deprive countries of billions of dollars in much needed revenue (Cebula & Feige, 2012).

What explains why people sometimes succumb to ethical temptations (e.g., dishonesty, opportunities to cheat), and at other times resist them? Consistent with a growing body of literature documenting the central role of self-regulation in interpersonal and social functioning (Rawn & Vohs, 2006; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010), we argue that self-control, a future-looking response to anticipated temptation, plays a critical role in promoting ethical behavior. Indeed, ethical dilemmas pose a self-control conflict, presenting decision-makers with a choice between two mutually exclusive courses of action, one of which offers immediate benefits and another of which offers more long-term benefits. In particular, they involve a choice between acting unethically to gain something that advances one’s self-interest in the moment (e.g., money, power, status, a competitive advantage) versus acting ethically to obtain more long-term rewards, such as a moral self-image, ethical reputation, or social acceptance. Accordingly, it makes sense
that factors shown to help people prepare in advance for and navigate self-control conflicts in other domains (e.g., health, finance) would likewise induce them to make more ethical decisions.

In this chapter, we review theory and recent research on counteractive self-control that supports this general argument, offering a self-control analysis of ethical decision-making (Sheldon & Fishbach, 2011, 2015). Specifically, we discuss evidence from recent research, including our own, showing that ethical behavior is future oriented, and requires anticipating a self-control conflict and planning its resolution. That is, we suggest that two general factors contribute to one’s ability to overcome the temptation to behave unethically: identification of impending ethical dilemmas as posing a self-control conflict for one personally and selecting an appropriate self-control strategy to counteract ethical temptations. Broadly speaking, our analysis thus highlights the central importance of how people think about future ethical situations and how they plan for them in determining whether they successfully resist ethical temptations. Following this discussion, we conclude by noting implications for the existing literature on self-control and ethical decision-making.

A Self-Control Analysis of Ethical Decision-Making

People experience a self-control conflict whenever they face a choice between two mutually exclusive courses of action, one offering them immediate benefits and another offering them long-term benefits (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009; Loewenstein, 1996; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). At present, much of the literature on self-control focuses on such intra-psychic problems as they arise within intrapersonal domains, such as health, fitness, finance, or academics. This might include a gym user’s decision about whether to eat a slice of pizza versus a healthy salad after a vigorous workout, or a student’s decision about whether to stay home and prepare for class versus join friends at the bar on a
given evening. However, because people often internalize others’ interests’ as their own long-term interests, they can also face such conflicts in more interpersonal domains, such as when deciding whether to behave selfishly versus collaborate in bargaining encounters (Sheldon & Fishbach, 2011; Achtziger, Alós-Ferrer, & Wagner, 2015) or to retaliate against versus accommodate others in close relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). In these contexts, people sometimes feel tempted to pursue short-term personal economic or emotional payoffs acquired by acting selfishly or vengefully, yet also recognize that this may compromise their ability to gain longer-term benefits for themselves and others associated with cooperation, such as maintaining ongoing relations marked by reciprocity and mutual support (Komorita & Parks, 1995; Schroeder, 1995).

Notably, many ethical dilemmas, particularly those involving a decision about whether to behave honestly, pose a similar type of problem (Monin, Pizzaro, & Beer, 2007). Specifically, such dilemmas typically present decision-makers with a choice between either behaving unethically so to achieve some momentary benefit (i.e., dishonesty for immediate, selfish gain) or behaving ethically (i.e., honestly) so as to achieve a host of longer-term benefits. Such long-term benefits may include cultivating a moral self-image, a sense of integrity, and, to the extent that the decision is public, an ethical reputation and social acceptance. Consistent with this observation, research in the resource depletion literature has shown that short-term impairments in self-control, brought about by the prior exertion of self-control in some unrelated domain (e.g., a cognitively taxing task, operating on little sleep), can lead to increased dishonesty (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011; Christian & Ellis, 2011; Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). Furthermore, work in the
criminology literature has found that low self-control plays a key role in producing criminal, antisocial behavior (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Muraven, Podarsky, & Shmueli, 2006).

Given that ethical dilemmas can pose a self-control conflict, our self-control analysis suggests that two general factors contribute to people’s ability to resist ethical temptations (e.g., the pull of dishonesty) and make ethical decisions in their everyday lives. First, it is critical that an individual identifies the associated ethical dilemma in advance as posing a self-control conflict for him or her personally. After all, it is only to the extent that one identifies an ethical self-control conflict in the first place that one is likely to see any need to exercise self-control, i.e., enact self-control strategies. Second, one must successfully implement self-control to overcome the temptation. This involves selecting and enacting an appropriate self-control strategy for the situation. In this sense, the ethical self-control process is a two-stage process geared toward future events. The person who anticipates future opportunities to engage in a certain tempting behavior must first identify the behavior as potentially problematic (e.g., unethical) and then tune his or her motivational system to counteract the influence of this temptation on behavior.

The resolution of conflict requires the implementation of ethical self-control strategies. These strategies, which may be conscious or unconscious, aim to bring about asymmetric shifts in motivational strength: an increase in one’s motivation to behave ethically and a decrease in one’s motivation to embrace unethical temptation. Overall, self-control is thus a future-oriented response. To overcome ethical temptations, having advance warning of and therefore anticipating the temptation is helpful, as this can facilitate choosing and enacting a self-control strategy best suited for the task at hand.
Below, we elaborate on various factors which research shows can affect whether people identify future ethical dilemmas as posing self-control conflicts for them personally. We then move on to discuss in more detail how people can respond with self-control and hence behave more ethically once they identify a conflict. In Table 1, we summarize the principles governing each stage: identification of conflict and resolution of the conflict.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

**Identifying Ethical Self-Control Dilemmas**

While one might assume that ethical self-control conflicts are self-evident, in fact, they are not always clear-cut. For example, if a person anticipates that a given behavior will only occur once, or that this behavior is socially acceptable, this behavior will not bear negatively on his or her self-concept and therefore, he or she may not identify it as posing a conflict in the first place. That is, this person may not recognize the future behavior as having the potential to jeopardize his or her moral self-image, sense of integrity or ethical reputation. In this case, the individual may realize that the behavior could be considered unethical or even illegal in certain circumstances (e.g., if no one else behaved in this manner), but in the present context, simply view it as an isolated opportunity or as how things are done and hence as moral. For instance, if a job applicant assumes that bluffing in an upcoming negotiation with a potential employer about his or her current salary will be a one-time event, or a student assumes that everyone else in a class is cheating, this person may fail to identify an ethical dilemma (and hence a conflict) in anticipating doing so him or herself.

So what facilitates conflict identification in circumstances where ethical dilemmas are less than clear-cut? In some cases, other actors, such as friends, family members, coworkers, or an organization to which one belongs, will identify future conflicts directly for an individual. For
example, many colleges now require students to sign an honor code before exams to promote the perception that cheating is unethical (Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011), while many companies distribute written ethics standards to employees, with information on behaviors considered unethical, for this very same reason (Tenbrunsel, Smith-Crowe, & Umphress, 2003). At other times, however, such external prompts are absent in a situation and several, more psychological variables influence the likelihood that a given individual identifies a conflict. These include how people mentally bracket ethical choices, their level of psychological connectedness, and how self-diagnostic their behavior happens to be. We turn next to a discussion of this latter set of variables.

**Viewing Ethical Decisions in Broad Brackets**

Research on bracketing suggests that when decision-makers confront a given temptation (ethical or otherwise), they can view it as either a single, isolated opportunity to act, or one of multiple similar temptations they will confront over time (e.g., as an opportunity to cheat on today’s quiz or as 1 of 8 such opportunities they will face over the semester). That is, they can bracket (or frame) the opportunity narrowly or broadly. Whenever the cost of acting on a single temptation is negligible (i.e., a one-time occurrence), framing the opportunity in relation to other, future opportunities to act can help people better identify a self-control conflict in the situation (Rachlin, 2000; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009; Read, Loewenstein, & Rabin, 1999). This is because viewing temptations in a wider frame (or bracket) can push people to consider the aggregate cost or consequences of acting on all such temptations for their long-term interests. For instance, in the ethical domain, one would expect that a committed, loyal spouse tempted to flirt with an attractive coworker would be more likely to resist this temptation when thinking about multiple subsequent opportunities she will likely be tempted to flirt, compared to just the one faced
presently. When viewed through a broad bracket, the potential long-term impact of flirting with this coworker for her sense of integrity is likely to seem more significant (i.e., costly).

Supporting this, prior research has shown that most people cheat “a little bit” when given the opportunity, in part because they view a single instance of cheating as having a negligible impact on their ethical self-concept (Mazar et al., 2008). Offering even more direct evidence of the impact of broad brackets, Sheldon and Fishbach (2015) recently had participants in one study read, evaluate the morality of, and report their intentions across six different everyday work situations, 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). Half were induced to view these situations in a broad bracket (i.e., as interrelated decisions) by reading and responding to all dilemmas at once, on the same screen. The remainder were induced to view the situations in a narrow bracket (i.e., as isolated, unrelated events) by reading and responding to each of the dilemmas on a separate screen (e.g., answering questions on downloading copyrighted materials and then, on the next screen, on calling in sick, and then, on the next screen, on taking work supplies home for personal use). In this paradigm, a broad bracket causes people to consider multiple ethical decisions simultaneously, making it easier to identify that a person who engages in these various unethical actions would be unethical. In contrast, a narrow bracket leads them to consider these same ethical decisions in isolation from each other, making it difficult to recognize that a person who engages in each of these behaviors at different times would be overall unethical. Accordingly, the researchers found that participants who read, evaluated, and made decisions about the six situations in isolation from each other (narrow bracket) reported the situations as less morally relevant, and hence as posing less of an
ethical dilemma (i.e., self-control conflict), than those who read and responded to them all at once (broad bracket). Importantly, participants assigned to the narrow bracket condition also reported greater intentions to behave unethically in such situations. Together, these various findings thus point to the important role that choice bracketing can play in shaping whether or not people identify ethical temptations as posing a self-control conflict for them personally.

**The Role of Psychological Connectedness**

A second key factor that can influence whether people identify an impending ethical dilemma as posing a personal self-control conflict is their level of psychological connectedness. Similar to viewing ethical temptations in broad brackets, one’s level of psychological connectedness shapes whether a person views an ethical decision (e.g., acting on the temptation to lie in a given situation) as related to other, future decisions he or she will make, and hence, as impactful. Psychological connectedness refers to the extent to which an individual views his or her personal identity (e.g., current personality, temperament, values, beliefs, preferences, etc.) as stable over time (Bartels & Rips, 2010). When it comes to acting on temptations (ethical or otherwise), the less stability people see in their own personal identity (i.e., the lower their psychological connectedness), the less likely they are to view actions or things they are currently tempted by as related or connected to things they will find tempting in the future. That is, the less likely they are to experience current temptations as posing a self-control conflict, and the more likely they are to view acting on them as simply isolated violations that do not reflect on the self. This perceived disconnect, in turn, is associated with a preference for immediate over delayed outcomes, presumably because acting on present temptations is non-diagnostic of similar, future decisions one will make. For instance, van Gelder, Hershfield, & Nordgren (2013) found that when young adults (25-30 years old) confronted 40-year old versions of themselves via a mental
or virtual simulation task – a task designed to boost the vividness of (and hence connection to) their future selves – they were less likely to cheat than when they confronted a current version of themselves.

In other research, Sheldon and Fishbach (2015) found similar results, while also providing more direct evidence for the effect of psychological connectedness on conflict identification in an ethical domain. In one of their studies, they manipulated participants’ psychological connectedness by directing half to read a (made-up) research report suggesting that one’s personal identity is far more stable than most people realize (high connectedness) and the remainder, to read a report suggesting one’s personal identity is forever changing and unstable (low connectedness). Participants then completed a series of eight computerized proofreading tasks supposedly assessing their reading comprehension, verbal skills, and attention to detail. For each, they had to assign themselves to a short or long version of a written passage in need of proofreading by privately flipping a coin (labeled SHORT on one side and LONG on the other), ostensibly to ensure random allocation. They learned that short versions of passages, to be assigned if the coin landed SHORT side up, would always contain two spelling or grammatical errors. In contrast, long versions, to be assigned if the coin landed LONG side up, would always contain 10. After each coin flip, participants reported the results and completed the corresponding (short or long) task before moving on to proofread the actual paragraph. This paradigm poses an ethical dilemma: give in to the temptation to assign oneself to short versions of passages (which entailed less work), even when one’s coin flips might not warrant it (the unethical choice), or assign oneself to whatever versions of passages one’s coin flips happened to indicate (the ethical choice). The total number of coin flips reported served as a measure of participants’ ethicality (honesty) in this study. These researchers assumed that if the percentage
of short-task assignments within a given condition was significantly higher than 50%, some participants in the condition were misreporting.

This study revealed that participants induced to feel high (vs. low) psychological connectedness behaved less dishonestly, on average: they were more likely to report being assigned, by coin flip, to 50% short tasks, which is the number of short tasks one would expect based on chance (see Figure 1). Interestingly, this effect of connectedness was only evident when participants anticipated the temptation to cheat in advance (a condition we describe later, in the section entitled ‘Exercising Self-Control in Response to Ethical Temptations’). Notably, participants high in psychological connectedness also subsequently reported feeling more conflicted about choices they had made in the study, suggesting that they were more likely to identify an ethical self-control conflict.

![Figure 1. Effects of psychological connectedness and anticipating the temptation to cheat (temptation prime) on participants' reported total number of “short” coin flips (out of 8). Only high-connectedness participants who were primed with temptation reported receiving the favorable outcome in the task 50% of the time (i.e., were honest) (from Sheldon & Fishbach, 2015).]
The Self-Diagnosticity of Ethical Actions

Finally, a third key factor that can influence whether people identify a decision as an ethical dilemma that poses a personal self-control conflict is the self-diagnosticity of the action in question; that is, the degree to which the act reflects on one’s self-concept. Given that one long-term benefit that people derive from behaving ethically is maintaining a moral self-image, people are more likely to identify an ethical self-control conflict when the act in question is seen as more diagnostic of who they really are (i.e., their “true” self). If one does not view a given act as particularly diagnostic, then one is unlikely to view it as reflecting all that badly on the self.

A variety of recent research in behavioral ethics supports this notion. In one study, for instance, Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2012) found that people follow ethical standards more carefully at the beginning and end of a sequence of actions compared to the middle of a sequence, in part because beginning and end positions are more salient and therefore, appear more diagnostic. Specifically, using a similar coin flip task as described above (in Sheldon & Fishbach, 2015), these researchers found less cheating in the first and last trials of a 10-trial task compared to any position in the middle. This pattern emerged presumably because participants identified their decision to cheat at the beginning and end (vs. middle) as posing a self-control dilemma (see Figure 2).

Similarly, other research has shown that directing people’s attention to the self before exposing them to an ethical dilemma increases ethical behavior, presumably for the same general reason. For instance, signing one’s name at the beginning of a form that one is tasked with completing decreases subsequent dishonest self-reports compared to doing so at the end (Shu, Mazar, Gino, Ariely, & Bazerman, 2012), while in the related domain of charitable giving, signing one’s name when making a pledge increases commitment to subsequent giving compared
to when one’s pledge is anonymous (Koo & Fishbach, 2016). Additionally, one recent study found that when decision-makers are considering whether to cheat, warning them against it by highlighting implications for the self (e.g., that they will be labeled a “cheater”) makes them less likely to cheat compared to when they are simply cautioned against acting, without reference (direct or otherwise) to implications for the self (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013). Taken together, such research suggests that the self-diagnosticity of an ethically questionable action can facilitate conflict identification.

Exercising Self-Control in Response to Ethical Temptations

Assuming one has identified an upcoming situation as posing a self-control conflict, the next step required for overcoming this temptation and resisting the urge to behave unethically is to effectively exercise self-control. That is, one must select and enact a self-control strategy.
likely to sufficiently offset or counteract the influence of that temptation on goal pursuit, thereby helping to resolve the dilemma. While several lines of research have identified preconditions for success at this stage and forms that such strategies can take, including the distinct literatures on mental contrasting (Oettingen, 2012) and implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 2014), here, we focus on recent work on counteractive control theory. According to counteractive control theory, one precondition for success at this stage is having advance warning of the impending temptation. Much like a person preparing to lift a piece of furniture would put more force into doing so if he or she expects the furniture to be heavy, forewarning of impending temptations can prompt people (i.e., help them prepare) to put more force into overcoming these obstacles in goal pursuit (Fishbach & Trope, 2005; Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003). Thus, when someone who values ethicality is told that the temptation to behave dishonestly in a future situation is likely to be strong, he or she is likely to react by exerting more effort to overcome this obstacle to his or her long-term goal of being an ethical person.

To demonstrate this point, Sheldon and Fishbach (2011) explored the process of self-control in social dilemmas (e.g., Prisoner’s Dilemma). Social dilemmas (or mixed-motive interactions, more generally) include two or more parties who face a conflict between the motives to compete and cooperate with each other (Komorita & Parks, 1995; Schelling, 1960). Social dilemmas also pose a self-control conflict: compete in order to secure immediate, selfish benefits (e.g., short-term financial or social gain) versus cooperate so as to secure more long-term benefits both for the self and others (e.g., higher joint gains, a good reputation, ongoing relations marked by trust and reciprocity). Sheldon and Fishbach (2011) had participants choose between cooperation and competition. Before participants did so, half were warned that they would face significant obstacles to success in the impending task (i.e., that doing well would be
difficult), while the remainder were not. When participants were forewarned and thus anticipated barriers to achieving successful outcomes, they were more likely to cooperate, a pattern indicative of counteractive self-control. For example, one study used a 6-round, increasing sum Centipede Game (Bornstein, Kugler, & Ziegelmeyer, 2004; Rosenthal, 1981), in which two players take turns choosing either to take a slightly larger share of an increasing pile of money (corresponding to a competitive move), or to pass the pile to a counterpart (corresponding to a cooperative move). The payoffs in this paradigm are arranged such that if Player 1 passes the pile and Player 2 passes it back, the size of the pile increases for both players. However, if Player 1 passes and Player 2 takes on the next round, Player 1 receives less than if she had taken the pile the round before (Figure 3 displays this payoff structure). In this game, there is a long-term incentive to trust that one's counterpart will not take immediately and to cooperate (pass), but on each round, a player feels tempted to compete (take) in order to secure current earnings.

Participants played this game with an alleged “counterpart” who passed on all rounds, leaving the decision about whether to cooperate or defect to the participant. Supporting a counteractive control prediction, anticipating barriers to success (vs. no warning) increased the number of rounds participants passed before choosing to take the pile.

![Figure 3: The increasing-sum Centipede Game. Graphical presentation of the choice and payoff structure for the 6-round game (from Sheldon & Fishbach, 2011).](image)
With respect to actual strategies that people employ, when people fear that their long-term interests (e.g., their desire to be moral) are threatened by an impending temptation (e.g., an opportunity to satisfy some need through dishonesty), they proactively attempt to increase the motivational strength of behavior supporting their long-term interests and decrease that of the conflicting temptation. While little prior work focuses directly on how people typically accomplish this within the ethical domain, prior research on counteractive control does speak to how they do so in other spheres (e.g., health, academics) – findings that presumably generalize to the domain of ethics. Specifically, the extant literature on counteractive control suggests that to induce such shifts, people rely on one or both of two broad types of strategies: behavioral strategies aimed at changing some feature of the choice situation, or non-behavioral (cognitive) strategies aimed at modifying the psychological meaning of the choice situation. The former can include strategies such as pre-committing to one’s long-term interests by restricting future choice sets, using penalties and rewards to change the relative value of acting on momentary temptations versus long-term interests, or proactively avoiding temptations and increasing one’s proximity to objects or people that facilitate longer-term goals. Non-behavioral strategies can include mentally activating constructs relevant to one’s long-term interests while inhibiting temptation-related constructs, altering the perceived value of acting on temptations versus acting consistent with long-term interests, or changing the processing level at which temptations that conflict with long-term interests are construed. In the remainder of this section, we elaborate on these two general routes, and some of the strategies that exemplify them, in more detail.

**Changing Features of the Ethical Choice Situation**

**Pre-committing to ethical behavior.** When faced with an impending conflict between one’s long-term interests and some momentary temptation, one strategy that people motivated to
exercise self-control sometimes adopt is to restrict the choices available to them in this future situation (Ainslie, 1992; Schelling, 1984, Thaler & Shefrin, 1981). For instance, in the domain of health, people often pre-commit to adhere to their long-term health interests and shield themselves from unhealthy temptation by stocking their pantries with more healthy and less unhealthy food than what they may later wish to consume. When confronting ethical dilemmas, it is likely that people sometimes turn to a similar strategy. For instance, the institution of marriage represents such a pre-commitment device. Those who wish to remain loyal to their romantic partner often make a binding, legal commitment through marriage. As it happens, dissolving a marriage is indeed significantly harder than ending a relationship without marriage.

Penalizing unethical choices and rewarding ethicality. Yet another strategy often employed by those who wish to counteract obstacles to goal pursuit is to alter the relative value of acting on momentary temptations versus long-term interests (Trope & Fishbach, 2000). This can be accomplished either by attaching contingent bonuses to acting in ways consistent with one’s long-term interests or by imposing penalties on oneself for acting on conflicting temptations. For instance, when people wager with friends that they can finish a marathon, promise themselves a trip abroad should they successfully make it through college, or write contracts with others that pre-authorize certain punishments should they deviate from a given goal, they are employing this strategy. When it comes to battling ethical temptations, people may occasionally adopt this same type of strategy. For instance, when writing up prenuptial agreements, couples engaged to be married might stipulate and agree to specific financial consequences (forfeiture of assets) that will result should they at some point divorce on grounds of adultery. They might do this in part as a means of motivating themselves to think twice before cheating in the context of their impending marriage.
Approaching ethical influences and avoiding the unethical. Finally, a third route by which people occasionally seek to modify features of impending conflicts to facilitate self-control is by distancing themselves from relevant temptations and establishing their proximity to objects likely to assist in achieving their long-term interests (Ainslie, 1992; Schelling, 1984, Thaler & Shefrin, 1981). Thus, motivated students may choose to seclude themselves in the library rather than their rooms at home in order to facilitate studying and avoid being distracted by video games or television. Similarly, people commonly keep their distance from those who they believe might exert “bad influence” (e.g., smokers), while maintaining proximity to those they consider helpful for pursuing long-term interests (e.g., health conscious individuals) (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Given the prevalence of this strategy in other domains, it follows that people likely employ it to help them navigate certain ethical self-control conflicts as well. For instance, when choosing advisors, confidants, or role models, the ethical politician or leader might opt for only those individuals viewed as having the utmost integrity, in part to avoid any temptation to engage in morally questionable behavior him or herself.

Modifying the Psychological Meaning of the Ethical Choice Situation

While each of the strategies just discussed involves behaviorally modifying objective features of ethical self-control conflicts to facilitate ethical responding, other common self-control strategies involve purely cognitive operations aimed at modulating one’s mental representations of self-control conflicts. Below, we describe three such strategies, although there are undoubtedly others.

Activating constructs related to ethical goals and inhibiting those related to unethical temptations. One such strategy entails mentally activating thoughts related to long-term interests while inhibiting those related to conflicting temptations (Fishbach, Friedman,
Kruglanski, 2003). Similar to a pre-commitment strategy, this strategy affects the relative availability of different options in the impending choice situation, only at the level of mental representations. Through mentally activating thoughts about long-term interests while inhibiting those about conflicting temptations, the proactive self-regulator increases the relative mental “availability” of behavior consistent with the former and decreases that of temptation-consistent behavior. For instance, one would expect people with the goal of being ethical would activate concepts related to “honesty” (and suppress benefits associated with dishonesty) in situations in which they are tempted to act otherwise. Indeed, Fishbach and colleagues (2003) found that for religious individuals, subliminal presentation of concepts related to temptation (e.g., “drugs,” “temptation”) facilitated the recognition of concepts related to religious beliefs (e.g., “prayer,” “bible”), whereas subliminal presentation of concepts related to religious beliefs suppressed or inhibited recognition of concepts related to religious temptation. This pattern of asymmetric activation (temptations activate goals but goals inhibit temptations), in turn, ultimately increases the likelihood a person will successfully act in accordance with their long-term interests.

**Altering the perceived value of acting in accordance with ethical goals vs. acting on unethical temptations.** Another strategy that people employ to modulate how they represent self-control conflicts parallels that detailed earlier of using contingent bonuses and penalties to alter the actual value of the choice options, only this strategy seeks to alter the perceived (rather than objective) value of such options. Whereas imposing penalties and rewards makes temptation less tempting and goal-congruent actions more appealing, to spur increased personal resistance to impending temptations that conflict with long-term interests, this strategy acts to undermine the perceived value of the former and/or bolster the perceived value of the latter. In the academic domain, for instance, a motivated student might elaborate on what makes studying for an
upcoming exam appealing (i.e., important, helpful, positive) and on what makes partying unappealing (i.e., unimportant, unhelpful, negative) as one strategy for decreasing the perceived value of partying, and hence, their motivation to do it (Myrseth, Fishbach, & Trope, 2009; Fishbach, Zhang & Trope, 2010). When confronting ethical dilemmas that pose a personal self-control conflict, people potentially do the same. That is, they may elaborate on what makes the ethical option worthier and the less ethical option unworthy in an effort to decrease the perceived value of behaving unethically. For example, to maintain their relationship commitment, individuals involved in dating relationships, relative to those who are not, tend to perceive opposite-sex persons as less physically and sexually attractive (Cole, Trope, & Balcetis, 2016; Simpson, Gangestad & Lerma, 1990). In addition, they may perceive their relationship partner as more attractive after considering the attractiveness of single others.

**Changing the processing level at which unethical temptations and ethical goals are construed.** Finally, yet another mental operation that people sometimes draw upon to strategically shift how motivated they are to act on long-term interests, versus conflicting temptations, is to change the processing level at which these two competing motivations are construed. A tempting, glazed donut, for instance, can be viewed in a “cool,” abstract, psychologically distanced way (e.g., as a sugary, round object), or it can be viewed in a “hot,” concrete, psychologically proximal way (e.g., as a tasty, pleasure-inducing, doughy morsel) (Fujita & Han, 2009; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Metcalf & Mischel, 1999). When people view impending temptations in the former manner, it can attenuate their motivational appeal, facilitating the ability to resist them. Conversely, when people view temptations in a hotter, concrete, and more proximal manner – the default manner in which they often view them – it can boost their appeal, making resistance to them more difficult (e.g., Fujita
et al., 2006; Mischel & Baker, 1975). Thus, one strategy that people sometimes employ to resist temptations (e.g., an upcoming opportunity to cheat), ethical or otherwise, is to proactively reconstrue them in a cooler, abstract, and more psychologically-distanced manner. In addition, they reconstrue their goals (e.g., to be honest) in psychological-close manner. Presumably, this helps people act in accordance with their long-term interests and when applicable, behave ethically in such situations.

Conclusions

This chapter argues and presents evidence for the role of self-control in ethical decision-making. As is the case in other spheres (e.g., health, finance), success at self-control in the ethical domain often depends on advance planning. The person who anticipates a future temptation has a better chance of resisting it than a person confronting a temptation in the present and without preparation. Specifically, the person who anticipates future temptation can identify the future situation as posing specific temptations and plan to enact various self-control strategies aimed at canceling out the threat posed by these upcoming temptations.

Broadly speaking, this chapter thus contributes to our understanding of ethical decision-making by generating novel predictions about when people behave unethically. Namely, when conditions are such that people fail to identify impending ethical temptations, i.e., when they are induced to think about such temptations in ways that mask how acting upon them will compromise long-term interests (e.g., bracket them narrowly), they become more likely to behave unethically. In addition, even if people identify the ethical problem, if they do not possess or fail to implement appropriate self-control strategies, unethical decisions become more likely.

The theory and findings reviewed here further contribute to the literature of future-oriented thinking, highlighting the importance of how people think about future ethical situations
and how they plan for them in determining ethical behavior. In doing so, the theory and findings we discuss complement similar findings in the self-regulation literature. Specifically, they are consistent with research on mental contrasting and implementation intentions, which explores strategies for securing goal adherence. Mental contrasting involves mentally contrasting future desired states with the current obstacles that impede reaching the future states, and forming implementation intentions in the context of mental contrasting involves making action plans that focus on surmounting the obstacles (MCII; Oettingen, 2012, 2014; Duckworth, Kirby, A. Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2013; Stadler, Oettingen, & Gollwitzer, 2010; see also this volume). In MCII research, conflict identification can rise from mental contrasting and implementation intentions help to overcome the obstacles once they arise. We note, however, that beyond such similarities, MCII research offers a prescriptive angle; a specific four-step structure that people can use to achieve success in any of their life domains. Our self-control model, in contrast, explores situational variables that facilitate anticipating a problem and planning a resolution (the two stages of self-control). Thus, we do not offer a specific strategy of how to identify ethical dilemmas and solve them, but instead, are interested in when the situation encourages people to do so.

As with any endeavor, the present chapter leaves certain questions unanswered. For instance, our analysis emphasizes the similarities between ethical and other self-control dilemmas, such as eating healthily versus unhealthily and saving versus spending. A remaining question, however, is whether ethical dilemmas also have unique characteristics that distinguish them from self-control problems in other domains. If they do, different or further interventions may at times be helpful for resolving them.
One possibility is that for ethical dilemmas, identification is significantly harder because many, if not most, ethical violations are relatively easy to justify. Identification of ethical dilemmas can be especially difficult when the behavior in question appears to be normative, that is, within the social norm of a given society. For example, when students believe that everyone else cheats, then by cheating they merely maintain an even playing field, and when people believe domestic violence is common, abusing family members may appear “normal” and therefore less of a violation of some ethical principle. Indeed, at times, certain social norms even override the law in enabling unethical behavior. For example, drivers often violate the speed limit because they believe that the social norm (and thus, the ethical decision) on a particular stretch of the road is to over speed.

Lastly, we note that unlike other dilemmas, in ethical self-control dilemmas, there are two types of long-term interests, both of which conflict with ethical temptation: the higher order interests of the individual and the interests of society. For example, a person can cooperate (vs. compete) with others either because she recognizes it is in her best long-term interest to have a good reputation or high self-esteem, or because she recognizes that it is the societal interest to have members of society cooperate with each other. In this way, ethical self-control dilemmas are unique because they are not limited to an intrapsychic conflict; rather, they also include internalized conflict between the interests of the self and societal interests.

Given these and perhaps other unique features of ethical self-control dilemmas, future work might accordingly focus more directly on the unique characteristics of such dilemmas to identify new interventions that contribute of the welfare of individuals and their society. Our hope is that the research discussed in this chapter, and its emphasis on the importance of how
people think about future ethical situations and how they plan for them in determining ethical self-control, will help facilitate this endeavor.
References


