

**BECOMING AS ETHICAL AS WE THINK WE ARE:
THE ETHICAL LEARNER AT WORK**

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ABSTRACT

We offer a model for improving ethical behavior in organizations. Integrating research about ethical decision-making with research about the self, we argue that self-threat is a pervasive obstacle to improving ethical behavior, particularly in work environments. To this end, we introduce the concept of ethical learners. Ethical learners possess a central moral identity (they care about being ethical), psychological literacy (an awareness that a gap exists between intended and actual ethical behavior), and a growth mindset (the belief that purposeful effort can improve ethical behavior). We also describe an important team-level condition for translating ethical learning into improvements in ethical behavior: psychological safety (the belief that the team is a safe place for learning from failure). Our model of ethical learners provides both individuals and organizations with a new approach to improving ethical behavior.

Key words: ethics, morality, learning, self-threat, mindset, moral identity, psychological safety

“I don’t divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures, those who make it or those who don’t. I divide the world into learners and non-learners.”

-Benjamin R. Barber

Despite the headline ethical failures that might convince us otherwise, many people care about being ethical (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Higgins, 1987; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Nisan, 1991). And, not only do people care about being ethical, they also believe that they are ethical (Tenbrunsel, 1998). Still, despite caring about ethicality and believing in their own ethicality, ample evidence suggests that there is a significant gap between how people view their own ethicality and how ethically people actually behave (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). This gap between one’s self-view and actual behavior is systematic, predictable, and often outside of awareness (Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008).

Even for those for whom ethicality is important, this gap can be significant. Most of us believe that we are more ethical than the majority of our peers, which is an untenable belief for at least some of us (Tenbrunsel, 1998). We tend to mispredict our future behavior, overestimating the likelihood that we would behave in socially desirable ways (Epley & Dunning, 2000). We overclaim credit for group work (Caruso, Epley, & Bazerman, 2006). We hold others to high moral standards while falling short of those standards in our own behavior (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). We hold implicit biases that directly contradict our self-reported intentions about equality (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Nosek et al., 2007). In short, we stubbornly hold on to an ethical self-view, even though our actual behavior may sometimes contradict this self-view. This paper focuses on closing this gap between our self-view and our actual behavior through ethical learning.

To this end, we propose a model for facilitating the emergence of ethical learners in organizations. We define ethical learners as those possessing three qualities. First, ethical learners place great importance on being ethical (known as having a central moral identity, Aquino & Reed, 2002). Second, ethical learners understand and accept that a gap exists between how we see ourselves and our actual ethical behavior, because of the small ethical lapses to which we are all prone (an understanding that we refer to as “psychological literacy”). Third, ethical learners, having acknowledged the realities of their ethical lapses, believe that effort will enable them to behave and become more ethical (known as having a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) in ethics). In this paper, we will argue that with these three qualities of a central moral identity, psychological literacy, and a growth mindset, individuals are ethical learners. Furthermore, we will use the organization as the context for our model of ethical learning, in which psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) is the critical condition needed for ethical learners to actually improve their ethical behavior.

SELF-THREAT AND THE GAP

How can we help people act as ethical learners? Our goal in this section of the paper is to demonstrate how self-threat¹ is a formidable obstacle to acknowledging and closing the gap and therefore, to ethical learning. By establishing the relevance of self-threat, we lay the foundation for our ethical learner model which focuses on the reduction of self-threat, both at the individual and team levels.

Self-View and Self-Threat

A fundamental tenet of the self literature is that we are not neutral or indifferent with regard to our self-view; rather, we care deeply about our self-concept and self-esteem – known collectively as our self-view (Sedikides, 2012) – so much so that self-esteem boosts are valued

more than eating a favorite food, engaging in a favorite sexual activity, drinking alcohol, receiving a paycheck, or seeing a best friend (Bushman, Moeller, & Crocker, 2011). We are motivated to both protect and enhance our self-view (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

A self-threat challenges this self-view (Baumeister et al., 1996; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Leary, Terry, Allen, & Tate, 2009). Because most people have a strong desire to see themselves and be seen by others as ethical (Higgins, 1987; Mazar et al., 2008; Nisan, 1991), any challenge to this ethical self-view is a threat. For example, self-threat can be an actual or feared failure experience -- such as when I do something unethical -- or even when I am tempted to do something unethical (and the real or imagined experience of committing this unethical act contradicts and therefore, challenges my self-view of being ethical). Self-threat can be a perceived or real devaluation of one's self-view; this occurs when I think, either accurately or inaccurately, that others no longer view me as ethical. Or, self-threat might be an internally-felt doubt, such as when I wonder if I am as ethical as others or when a moral exemplar behaves far more ethically than I am, again challenging my self-view.

Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection Processes

Whether real or perceived, self-threats instantiate strivings to counteract the threat through a variety of behavioral and cognitive mechanisms (Sedikides, 2012) which are collectively known as self-protection. Even in the absence of self-threat, self-enhancement processes are continually ensuring that one's self-view is sustained on an ongoing basis (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

These self-protection and self-enhancement processes are well-aligned with sociometer theory (Leary, 1999), which proposes that people have a psychological gauge for sensing the degree to which they are being accepted or rejected by others, and adjusting their behaviors

accordingly. Haidt (2012) summons sociometer theory in the re-telling of the story of Plato's brother, Glaucon, who posed the following thought experiment to Socrates: can a just man with a reputation of being unethical be as happy as an unjust man with an ethical reputation? Again, our self-view and our efforts to protect it from self-threat are tethered to the views of others. Given the strong desire to see oneself as ethical and the strong desire to be seen by others as ethical, an unethical self-view is a self-threat.

A distinction between primary and secondary control (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982) is relevant to the articulating of how self-protection and self-enhancement sustain one's self-view. Primary control refers to an individual taking action and in the context of the self, it refers to taking actions that objectively enhance or protect the individual's self-view. Secondary control refers to the psychological mechanisms which individuals have at their mental (often unconscious) disposal. The self-protective and self-enhancement processes that sustain and bolster one's self-view through secondary control are not necessarily consciously enacted or deliberately moderated, but are fluid and automatic (Chugh et al., 2005).

Primary control and secondary control are both oriented towards the self, but sustain the self-view through different means (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). The distinction between primary control and secondary control might be summarized as the difference between "being ethical" and "feeling ethical", respectively. For example, a consultant can self-protect and self-enhance an ethical self-view through a primary control strategy of alerting a client to the fact that they have overpaid for a service; this is "being ethical" and "feeling ethical". Or, a consultant can self-protect and self-enhance an ethical self-view through a secondary control strategy of quietly accepting the overpayment under the reasoning that the client benefited from a great deal

of unbilled time and may have intended the additional payment, making the cashing of the check an appropriate act; this is “feeling ethical”. In summary, the self-enhancement and self-protection of the self-view may occur through ethical behavior, but the ethical self-view can be enhanced and protected even in the absence of ethical behavior.

The Emergence of the Self in Ethics Research

The impact of self-view and self-threat on ethical behavior has been made more evident through several recent perspectives on ethical decision-making: moral credentials (Monin & Miller, 2001), egocentric ethics (Epley & Caruso, 2004); bounded ethicality (Chugh, et al., 2005); the “moral individual” (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007); self-concept maintenance (Mazar et al., 2008); dynamic moral self (Monin & Jordan, 2009); moral self-regulation (Zhong, Liljenquist, & Cain, 2009); compensatory ethics (Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2010); the temporal want vs. should self perspective (Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010) and moral self-completion theory (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011). In each of these perspectives, self-threat varies from situation to situation and time to time and ethical behavior fluctuates around the degree of self-threat. For example, one interpretation of the dynamic moral self model (Monin & Jordan, 2009) is that when the self-threat of feeling unethical is high due to a recent ethical lapse, an individual reduces this self-threat through a more ethical act in the present. Similarly, the other perspectives rely on self-view and self-threat (though sometimes using alternate terminology) in explaining variations in ethical behavior. Together, these perspectives on ethical decision-making have placed self-view and self-threat in a central role.

The Emergence of Automaticity in Ethics Research.

The limitations of the conscious mind and the power of the unconscious mind – the “illusion of conscious will” (Wegner, 2002) and the “unbearable automaticity of being” (Bargh

& Chartrand, 1999) – have become evident in virtually every cognitive process studied by psychologists (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Wegner & Bargh, 1998). Within the study of ethics, unconscious and/or automatic processes have also emerged as an important aspect of both our ethical lapses (Chugh et al., 2005; Dane & Pratt, 2007; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Reynolds, 2006; Reynolds, Leavitt, & DeCelles, 2010; Sonenshein, 2007) as well as our moral judgments of others (Haidt, 2011). Bounded ethicality (Chugh et al., 2005) is the ethical manifestation of those unconscious and automatic processes which contributes to the gap between our self-view and our behavior.

The ethics literature is rife with evidence of psychological mechanisms that are likely to emerge automatically. For example, moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986) is a process by which individuals engage in unethical behavior without the guilt and shame such behavior might bring by diminishing the impact of their actions on the victim or blaming the victim; it is likely that moral disengagement relies on automaticity. Mechanisms like moral disengagement, in its automatic form, allow for a dizzying array of ethical consequences (not at all limited to moral hypocrisy (Valdesolo, & DeSteno, 2008), the ethical framing effect (Kern & Chugh, 2009), the ethical effects of non-secure attachment (Chugh, Kern, Zhu, & Lee, in press), motivated forgetting (Shu & Gino, 2012; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011), moral mandate effects (Mullen & Skitka, 2006), vicarious moral licensing (Kouchaki, 2011), vicarious dishonesty (Gino & Galinsky, 2012), moral credits (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010), moral credentials (Monin & Miller, 2001), moral self-licensing (Merritt et al., 2010; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009), moral cleansing (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006), justified ethicality (Shalvi, Dana, Handgraaf, & De Dreu, 2011), and the rejection of moral rebels (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008)), to name just a very few. In all of these examples, it is likely that

even individuals motivated to be ethical will likely be unaware of their gap between their self-view and their actual behavior. Thus, it is unlikely that these individuals will be naturally led to acknowledge and close the gap.

To summarize, we have described the relevance of self-threat to the gap that lies between an individual's self-view and actual ethical behavior. Through automatic self-enhancement and self-protection, individuals are able to hold an ethical self-view of themselves, despite this gap. But, as long as the gap persists, and especially as long as the gap persists outside of an individual's awareness, it is unlikely that ethical behavior will improve. For this to happen, individuals must not only hold an ethical self-view, but must also be ethical learners.

THE ETHICAL LEARNER

Argyris described the individual who is highly successful, and thus, having failed very little, the individual has not learned how to learn from failure (Argyris, 1977; Argyris, 1991; Argyris & Schön, 1999). This “myopia of failure” leads individuals to generalize their success, and exaggerate its likelihood (Levinthal & March, 1993). Should failure occur, the individual “become(s) defensive, screen(s) out criticism, and put(s) the ‘blame’ on anyone and everyone but themselves. In short, their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment when they need it most.” (Argyris, 1991: p. 1).

Learning shutting down at precisely the moment that we need it most – when translated into the language of self-threat – means real, potential, or perceived failure (particularly for those not accustomed to failure) is a self-threat leading to the automatic enactment of self-protective processes which have the unfortunate byproduct of shutting down learning. We can place this pattern into the ethics context. Most of us believe we are more ethical than others (Baumhart, 1968; Messick & Bazerman, 1996; Tenbrunsel, 1998) and thus, we consider ourselves to be

ethically successful people. Because of our bounded ethicality, we have unconsciously created a long track record of ethical success. Should we experience a small ethical lapse, we enact the automatic, self-protecting and self-enhancing secondary processes necessary to ensure that the lapse is minimized and any necessary adjustments in our subsequent behavior bring our self-view back into equilibrium. Again, our ability to learn – to be ethical learners – shuts down precisely at the moment when we need it most. The potential learning utility of a small ethical lapse is lost. In contrast, we propose that the small ethical lapse is a useful opportunity for ethical learning.

In our model, ethical learners have three qualities: a central moral identity, psychological literacy, and a growth mindset about ethics. Our model of the ethical learner appears in Figure 1 and illustrates that each of these qualities is necessary but not independently sufficient for ethical learning. All three qualities, together, are necessary for ethical learning to occur. Our model of ethical learning is designed to address the challenges of self-threat. First, individuals strive to protect an ethical self-view, in which any ethical lapse is a self-threat. We will address this by reframing moral identity. Second, many people have the lay assumption that the gap does not exist in their own behavior, and thus, that they are not prone to the ethical lapses and automatic psychological processes of bounded ethicality. We will address this through the advancement of psychological literacy. Third, when individuals assume that their ethicality is a fixed trait, an ethical lapse is a potential self-threat. We will address this through the adoption of a growth mindset. We next present each of these qualities in more detail, followed by a discussion of how the three qualities relate to each other.

Moral Identity

We began this paper by describing a gap between an individual's ethical self-view and his or her actual behavior. This gap would not exist, of course, if the individual did not have the desire for an ethical self-view in the first place. This desire for an ethical self-view is equivalent to what researchers describe as moral identity, which is our first component in the ethical learner model. In fact, the emergence of moral identity in ethics research aligns well with the emergence of the self in ethics research that we described earlier in this paper.

Moral identity refers to an individual's self-concept and the extent to which it is organized around moral traits (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 2004; Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008) and it is one of the many social identities that an individual might hold. Individuals who hold a more central (versus peripheral) moral identity are more likely to engage in what they consider to be moral behavior (Erikson, 1964). This consistency arises because actions that are inconsistent with one's self-view can generate emotional distress and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Blasi, 1999).

Moral identity has been shown to motivate more ethical behavior (Barclay, Whiteside, & Aquino, 2013; Damon, 1984; Damon & Hart, 1992; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). However, this relationship between moral identity and behavior may be nuanced. For example, Reynolds and Ceranic (2007) find that individuals with more central moral identities show a pattern of extreme behaviors (either unethical or ethical) when social consensus about right or wrong is low. We will also argue that the effects of moral identity are not straightforward. That is, a more central moral identity may also have the potential to generate less ethical behavior, while the individual continues to maintain an ethical self-view. An indication of this nuance can be found in the identity literature, in which identity threats lead to individuals engaging in coping responses that

may prevent the threat from having impact (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Petriglieri, 2011). Similarly, we will propose that threats (ethical lapses) to an individual's moral identity (ethical self-view) will lead the individual to engage strategies of protecting himself or herself from information which contradicts his or her ethical self-view. We delineate this proposed unintended effect of moral identity below.

We know that all individuals, even those with central moral identities, are prone to the everyday ethical lapses of bounded ethicality (Chugh et al., 2005), so the important question is what happens when individuals with central moral identities engage in an ethical lapse? Our earlier distinction between being ethical and feeling ethical becomes relevant as individuals with a more central moral identity place a high premium on feeling ethical (that is, an ethical self-view). Because self-enhancement and self-protection allow individuals to maintain an ethical self-view, and because secondary control strategies can substitute for primary control strategies, we propose that those with more central moral identities are motivated to feel ethical, which may or may not require being ethical.

Thus, the situation in which an individual experiences his or her own ethical lapse is a tremendous self-threat for individuals with more central moral identities. This self-threat must be reduced, and secondary control strategies are likely to be engaged to restore the ethical self-view. The unintended result of this process is the gap between self-view and actual behavior grows but remains out of sight for the individual. That is, the individual with the central moral identity feels ethical despite behaving less ethically. Being ethical is subordinated to feeling ethical. Because of this perverse sequence of psychological processes, individuals with central moral identities face unique challenges in reducing their gaps between self-view and actual behavior.

A relatively central moral identity is the pre-existing condition of our model; that is, our model of ethical learners is most applicable to individuals with a more central moral identity. We focus our model of ethical learning on individuals motivated to be (or at least, feel) ethical. After all, individuals who lack a relatively central moral identity are unlikely to be ethical learners, because they are less motivated to maintain an ethical self-view. But, we also claim that our model of ethical learners is not simply most applicable to those with a more central moral identity. This model is also most needed by them.

We have also highlighted that the desire for an ethical self-view is not the same as improving one's ethical behavior. Ironically, even individuals with a central moral identity might also not be ethical learners, and may in fact, be in particular need of the ethical learner model. According to our model, it is the combination of central moral identity with the other two qualities of ethical learners that is essential. We next describe another quality of ethical learners: psychological literacy.

Psychological Literacy

We define psychological literacy as the understanding that the gap exists, often outside of our own awareness. This literacy is especially powerful because psychology is a discipline that carries an unusual burden. It appears accessible and knowable via lay beliefs and intuitions to all those who inhabit its realm (all humans) while simultaneously being an area of scientific study whose findings often contradict lay beliefs and intuitions. As a result, most of us are regularly using flawed operating instructions in our daily activities. Psychological literacy refers to a more accurate set of operating instructions, grounded in the clear findings of psychological science. The application of common lay beliefs to everyday living characterizes the absence of psychological literacy.

In the domain of ethics, a prevalent lay belief lies in the conviction that we do not have a gap between our intended and actual ethical behavior. When I am psychologically literate, I can see the gap and thus, I know that I am not as ethical as I think I am, as often as I think I am, and despite all that, I know that I still have a fundamental and automatic tendency to enhance and protect my self-view as an ethical person. When I can see the gap, I know that feeling ethical is even more important to me than being ethical, and I know that I am not always aware of how powerful this need is in my thinking and behavior. Said simply, psychological literacy is the awareness of the gap's existence.

While psychological literacy is far from prevalent today, it is very conceivable that this could change. Precedents exist in other domains in which society has undergone a fundamental shift from lay beliefs to basic literacy. Basic literacy about an effect should not be confused with a sophisticated or nuanced fluency about the mechanisms underlying the effects. For example, awareness about the risks of smoking has contributed to less smoking, yet few of us understand the actual rationale for why tobacco is harmful to our health (National Cancer Institute, 2008; Peto, et al., 2000). Similarly, we propose that psychological literacy can emerge and lead to changes in behavior. One need simply accept that normal psychological functioning leads to a gap, but need not understand the mechanisms that cause the gap and its underlying processes. I need not understand the scientific mechanics of the gap, in order to accept the gap as a fact.

Thus far, we have proposed that moral identity and psychological literacy are two necessary, but not sufficient, qualities of an ethical learner. In the next section, we present the final quality of an ethical learner: growth mindset. We begin by describing mindset and its relationship to self-threat.

Growth Mindset

The relevance of mindset to our work about ethics and self-threat is revealed beautifully through a piece of historical academic trivia. Early scholarly work by Carol Dweck and colleagues did not originally refer to “mindsets”, a term which was only introduced and used extensively years later (e.g. Dweck, 2006). Rather, some earlier work refers to “self-theories” to describe people’s beliefs about themselves (Dweck, 2000). Whether referred to as a self-theory or mindset, both terms refer to the belief an individual has about whether performance in a specific domain can be improved with effort and engagement (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). In a fixed mindset, one views performance as non-malleable and one’s abilities to be finite and fixed; one focuses on how one will be judged (not only by others but also self-judged). In a growth mindset, one views improvement as possible and believes that one’s current abilities are a starting point for improvement fueled by effort; one focuses on how one can improve.

In the context of ethics, an individual with a fixed mindset believes that “character” is set and immutable. Because a fixed mindset suggests that one only has a certain level of morality and because a central moral identity suggests that individuals value an ethical self-view, then it is essential to the individual with a more fixed mindset that this self-view be highly ethical. Anything that challenges this self-view is a self-threat. When the self-threats of temptation or ethical failure occur, the only possible response is to generate psychological cover via secondary control mechanisms such as moral disengagement – which might reframe the temptation or ethical failure as being morally acceptable or someone else’s fault – rather than to gather information about one’s own ethicality and to learn from it. In a fixed mindset, a gap does not exist, which is a psychologically non-literate belief.

In the fixed mindset, self-threat poses a dichotomous question: is my moral self-view right or wrong ... yes or no? However, in the growth mindset, self-threat poses a non-

dichotomous question: how can I update and improve upon my self-view ... in what ways is my self-view right or wrong? In terms of ethicality, the question shifts from “am I ethical?” to “what can I learn from this?” and “how can I behave more ethically over time?”.

Mindset shapes what an individual perceives as a self-threat and the individual’s response to the self-threat. Overall, fixed mindsets are psychological minefields of self-threat. In a fixed mindset, the worst possible scenario is to try and fail, because failure is viewed as diagnostic of one’s finite ability and thus, leaves no possibility of rescuing one’s self-view. Failure, and even effort, in and of itself, is a self-threat. Thus, in a fixed mindset, one expects perfection quickly, whereas in a growth mindset, one expects learning over time. Furthermore, in a fixed mindset, people are also less accurate at estimating their own abilities (Dweck, 2006; Ehrlinger, 2008) while people with a growth mindset are more accurate in estimating their own performance as well as self-assessing their performance relative to their peers (Ehrlinger, 2008). This difference in self-assessment can be traced to a difference in how individuals allocate their attention to feedback and past performance. Negative feedback acts as a particularly dangerous self-threat to those in fixed mindsets and thus, is avoided. This is accomplished when individuals with fixed mindsets rely on data from less challenging performance situations when self-assessing their abilities, which results in overconfident self-assessments, whereas those with growth mindsets pay attention to data points from both more and less challenging situations (Ehrlinger, 2008).

In the ethics domain, this difference in accuracy and response to self-threat has important implications for an individual’s psychological literacy about the gap. An individual who makes overconfident self-assessments of his or her ethicality based on a narrow sub-set of observations will underestimate the gap. In essence, through this motivated allocation of attention, people with a fixed mindset corner themselves into a context with little chance of ethical learning, one

which lacks negative feedback and is devoid of the challenging situations that are useful for learning (Ehrlinger, 2008). In contrast, an individual with psychological literacy accepts the reality that a gap likely exists and an individual with a growth mindset is less likely to view the gap as a self-threat.

A particularly pernicious aspect of the fixed mindset is the tendency to equate high effort with low ability and vice versa (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Leggett & Dweck, 1986). Perhaps some people possess a superior character which generates almost effortless resistance to temptation and upholding of one's virtues and values. There is little evidence of such individuals, but even their existence does not pose a challenge to our argument as it is faulty and dangerous logic to conclude that just because this rare person can be highly ethical with minimal effort, the rest of us should not expect to exert effort. Unfortunately, that is exactly the conclusion that emerges from a fixed mindset. This conclusion leads us to the psychologically non-literate belief the gap does not exist, or can be reduced without effort. Thus, individuals with a fixed mindset in ethics are not only incorrect in their beliefs, but more likely to self-enhance and self-protect so that their ethical failures do not pose a self-threat; these individuals are more likely to withhold effort from ethical learning, and thus, are highly prone to ethical lapses.

Ethical Learners and Self-Threat

Each of the three components of our ethical learner model affects self-threat independently and reinforces each other collectively. That is, each quality is necessary, but not sufficient, for ethical learning to occur; all three qualities working in conjunction will lead to ethical learning. A central moral identity provides the motivation for an ethical self-view. But central moral identity does not provide the motivation for an individual to be an ethical learner.

In fact, to those with a central moral identity, the gap is a self-threat, and thus, moral identity can both increase and decrease self-threat. In cases where self-threat is increased, psychological literacy becomes useful. Psychological literacy reduces the self-threat associated with the gap. Without fundamental psychological literacy, the individual is prone to the lay beliefs that constitute a fixed mindset. Under these conditions, ethical learning would be associated with an unethical self-view; presumably, ethical people do not have a need for ethical learning. This dangerous lay belief sets up a false choice for the individual, as the need for an ethical self-view will obscure the self-threat of a gap, regardless of one's actual behavior. However, with psychological literacy, the individual need not choose between a self-view of being either ethical or unethical, and thus, the possibility of a growth mindset about ethics emerges. In a growth mindset, the effort required to be ethical is not a self-threat and thus, we are liberated from the necessity of a self-view in which we are always ethical, with no effort required and no lapses. Together, moral identity, psychological literacy, and a growth mindset reduce self-threat and thus, allow people to become ethical learners.

Thus far, we have argued that moral identity, psychological literacy and a growth mindset are essential individual-level components to ethical learning. But how does this learning translate to actual ethical behavior in an organizational context? We move to this question next and for this, a team and organization-level perspective is critical. We first consider the attributes of organizations that pose particular challenges for ethical behavior and then introduce the team-level construct of psychological safety into our model.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN ORGANIZATIONS

In our proposed model of ethical learning, the reduction of self-threat within the individual allows him or her to see the gap between self-view and actual behavior. However, seeing the gap is not the same as reducing the gap; in other words, ethical learning is not necessarily the same as an improvement in ethical behavior. Particularly in organizations characterized by competing interests, interdependence, and uncertainty (Phillips & Margolis, 1999) - where individuals routinely engage in sensemaking with ethical implications (Sonenshein, 2007; Sonenshein, 2009) - organizational actors are particularly vulnerable to self-threat, and thus, we will argue that it is more challenging to translate ethical learning into improvements in ethical behavior. We will end this section by proposing that psychological safety is needed to address the challenges of organizational life in order for the ethical learner to see actual improvements in his or her ethical behavior.

The Challenges of Organizational Life

Organizations are “moral microcosms” (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001) in which multiple complex processes can generate unethical behavior (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Jackal, 1988). Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Treviño (2010) use meta-analytic methods to make a convincing argument for the necessity of integrating individual (bad apple), moral issue (bad case), and organizational (bad barrel) variables in the study of ethical decision-making. In this spirit, while ethical learning can be facilitated at the individual level, ethical learning in individuals can not be studied solely at the individual level, nor can ethical learning in organizations be studied solely at the organizational level. As examples, factors such as ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1988) are shaped at the organizational level and influence individual

ethical decision-making. Stakeholder culture describes how managers address the tensions between their own interests and the often competing interests of other organizational actors (Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007). Thus, in order to understand ethical decision-making in organizations, we must incorporate a non-individual level of analysis in examining the role of self-threat.

Organizations are ethically relevant in a number of ways (for a review of behavioral ethics in organizations, see Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) with self-threat playing active roles in ethical decision-making. Corruption can spread efficiently through moral emotions in organizations via self-directed moral emotions, creating “collective corruption” (Smith-Crowe and Warren, in press). Groupthink (Janis, 1972; Janis, 1982) describes unproductive levels of conformity and harmony at the expense of sound decision-making in groups, which may be due to the heightened self-threat that individuals feel about voicing concerns or contrary views. Group norms exert influence on individual ethical behavior (Greenberg, 1997; Litzky, Eddleston, & Kidder, 2006) and norm violations are, thus, a powerful source of self-threat in an organization. Responsibility is diffused when individuals perceive that others might also take responsibility, reducing the probability of individuals intervening in situations when they might otherwise in part due to the self-threat of potential embarrassment of not being the best equipped to assist (Darley & Latané, 1968). Groups lie more than individuals when lying will clearly maximize economic outcomes, suggesting that individuals in groups face a self-threat perhaps due to competing interests at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Cohen, Gunia, Kim-Jun, & Murnighan, 2005). Finally, the ubiquity of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980) in organizations is a persistent self-threat. In sum, there is much evidence that groups generate self-threats to the individual.

This heightened self-threat makes ethical learning in organizations particularly challenging, even for ethical learners. An ethical learner does not want a gap (due to central moral identity), does believe that a gap exists (due to psychological literacy), and does try to reduce the gap (due to a growth mindset). But if this ethical learner is interdependent with others who do not share these qualities, he or she will have strong incentives to protect his or her ethical self-view, especially in the eyes of others, and to deny the existence of a gap. Operationally, this means that the individual will not reveal ethical lapses, engage others in developing approaches to reducing ethical lapses, or share their strategies of learning from ethical lapses. The ethical learner will not be able to translate the learning into actual improvements in ethical behavior.

The Ethical Implications of these Challenges

We begin by describing two ethical implications of the challenges of organizational life. Both of these implications highlight the self-threats that face the ethical learner. First, what is and is not ethical is often ambiguous. Second, failures – especially ethical failures – are stigmatized. As a result, efforts to improve ethical behavior at the team and organizational levels are less likely to occur.

What is (un)ethical is ambiguous. Work is an ethically-charged domain. Expense reports are padded, inventory is borrowed, supplies are carried home, budgets are finessed, sales are inflated, negotiations are misleading, hiring is biased, advice is ignored, quality is short-cutted, inspections are delayed, audits are friendly, information is leaked, statistics are refined, executive directives are followed, friends are alerted, favors are exchanged, gifts are accepted, and competitors are monitored. While these types of situations are ubiquitously enmeshed in organizational life and are not necessarily characterized as ethical issues (Sonenshein, 2009; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), what is more or less ethical in these situations is not self-

evident nor is it necessarily viewed the same across individuals (Ford & Richardson, 1994; Lewicki & Robinson, 1998; Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008). In an interdependent organization with competing interests amongst multiple stakeholders, right and wrong is not always obvious, and this “pervasive ambiguity” has implications for ethical learning (Sonenshein, 2007; Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008).

For the individual with a more central moral identity, even when ethicality is ambiguous, the need for a clearly ethical self-view remains steadfast. Thus, unless the situation results in the public drama of a headline ethical failure, individual workers typically seek to minimize self-threat and wrestle with these situations quietly and privately. Given the need for an ethical self-view, there is continued need to self-protect and self-enhance in order to ensure the ethical self-view is sustained despite the ethically-charged and ambiguous work environment.

As a result, small ethical lapses occur, and recur, without acknowledgement of or learning from the lapse, by either the individual or those around them. Rather, self-threat is minimized which in turn, minimizes the need for ethical learning. At best, the opportunity to learn from the incident and improve in the future is lost. At worst, the repetition and escalation of ethical lapses leads to situations where yesterday’s small, occasional ethical lapse has the potential to become less small and less occasional and perhaps even become tomorrow’s headline ethical failure. It is clear that work is a domain filled with ethical decision-making, but it is less clear if it is a domain that encourages ethical learning.

Failure is stigmatized. Organizations strive for success and effectiveness, not failure. Similarly, organizational learning “oversamples successes and undersamples failures” (Levinthal & March, 1993: p. 110). This bias towards success is not surprising, but it creates a stereotype

around failure that is stigmatizing. When presented with a spectrum of reasons for failure, ranging from the most blameworthy to the most praiseworthy, executives estimated that 2-5% of the failures in their organization are due to blameworthy causes, but that 70-90% of failures are treated as if they emerged from blameworthy causes (Edmondson, 2012).

In other words, most failures are treated the same, as bad failures. This assumption about failures all being the same ignores the benefits of failure. “Smart failures” (Seiken, 2013) allow organizations to grow, improve, and innovate (Weick, 1993). Some failures can serve as early warning signals to help organizations avoid disastrous failures down the road. Organizations which can see and respond to these warning signs will learn from and recover from these failures.

Similarly, ethical failures are not all the same. For example, everyday “ordinary” ethical lapses are generally lower in moral intensity (Jones, 1991) (less impact on others), in contrast to the high moral intensity of headline failures. For example, I might expense a dinner that I had with an old friend visiting town who reached out to reconnect socially, but who showed great interest in engaging my firm’s services during our dinner conversation. My behavior is ethically ambiguous and if judged to be an ethical failure, it is not a catastrophically large ethical failure. But it could be the type of small ethical lapse that could lead to much larger, much more serious problems, in which I systematically use corporate funds for personal benefit. Larger headline failures can begin with small ethical failures (Gino & Bazerman, 2009), and thus, these small failures are critical moments for both learning and intervention. The goal is to reduce the probability of small failures escalating into headline failures. Halting this escalation requires the highlighting of and learning from small ethical failures rather than the overlooking and diminishing of them.

In the context of an ethical failure, an individual may see his or her lapse (the gap) but feel that others will negatively view his or her acceptance of the blame for this lapse (self-threat), and thus, they do not publicly discuss the potential lapse. Being a failure and being unethical are both stigmatized identities in which a person is “tainted” (Major & O’Brien, 2005), and these self-threats are sufficient to ensure that individuals keep their questions about ambiguous ethical situations to themselves.

However, research on blame suggests that we overestimate the likelihood that others will react negatively when we accept the blame for a failure. In fact, while people tend to infrequently take the blame for a failure, when they do so, others view this in a positive light and as a positive sign of the individual’s character (Gunia, 2011). It is possible that even the ethical learner, who has reduced self-threat at the individual level, overestimates the self-threat inherent at the team or organizational levels, and thus is unlikely to look for opportunities to learn and grow.

Thus, once again, we see how self-threat poses a challenge to the ethical learner. The ethical learner will struggle if he or she is trying to improve his or her ethical behavior in an organization where being an ethical learner is the equivalent of holding an unethical self-view. The self-threats that specifically emerge within organizations are significant barriers to converting ethical learning into improved ethical behavior, and therefore, a reduction of self-threat at the organization and team levels is necessary. Specifically, we next propose that psychological safety is the condition necessary for ethical learners to display actual improvements in their ethical behavior.

Psychological Safety

Many of the challenges which we have just described relate to the perceived risks related to speaking up, asking for help, admitting mistakes, proposing an idea, taking blame, confessing uncertainty about right versus wrong, and/or confessing inability, all of which are examples of interpersonal risk-taking. Psychological safety refers to the shared beliefs that a team is safe for these types of interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). In a psychologically safe team, self-threat is reduced at the team level and thus, individuals are more willing to disclose and discuss failure. For example, psychological safety was originally studied in hospitals where human errors (such as confusing two different medications which were labeled similarly) were less likely to be reported under conditions of low psychological safety, and thus, the opportunity to prevent the same error from recurring was lost; when psychological safety was higher, more errors were reported, allowing for safety to improve in the long term (Edmondson, 1999). The self-threat associated with admitting failure was reduced through psychological safety in order for the learning and improvement to occur.

Similarly, the self-threat of being an ethical learner can be reduced at the team level through greater psychological safety, thus facilitating more ethical behavior. In a psychologically safe team, individuals feel that ethically ambiguous situations can be discussed, that ethical lapses can prompt reflection and change, that blameworthiness is not inevitable, and that blame is not a fatal self-threat if it accompanies learning. These ethical learners, whose self-threat is reduced through psychological safety, can improve their ethical behavior.

Increasing psychological safety should not be confused with a lowering of ethical standards. Acknowledgment of the reality of small ethical failures is not the same as endorsing

the failure or lowering standards. In fact, it sends the message that expectations are high and thus, failure is possible, but progress must continually be made. This approach is aspirational, forsaking the blind eye to the small ethical lapses which will inevitably occur due to the gap, and positioning each individual as an ethical learner.

Additional ethical benefits of psychological safety. In addition to reducing self-threat related to one's ethical self-view, psychological safety offers an additional benefit, relating back to growth and fixed mindsets. Mindsets can vary by domain (Dweck, 2006). Earlier in this paper, we focused on mindset in the ethics domain, but individuals can also have more or less growth-oriented mindsets in performance domains in which high performance is rewarded and low performance is punished. For example, I may have more of a growth mindset in public speaking ("I'm still working on my projection and eye contact") and more of a fixed mindset about my math skills ("I am a numbers whiz").

A fixed mindset in a performance domain carries important implications for ethics as the need to perform can generate self-threat. When individuals in a fixed mindset fear or experience failure, the subsequent response is to repair one's self-view in the domain and one path for doing so includes cheating (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Therefore, the unintended benefit of psychological safety lies in the increased likelihood of psychologically safe individuals exploring alternate strategies to high performance when fearing or experiencing failure. That is, instead of cheating, the psychologically safe individual (particularly those with growth mindsets in the performance domain) will be more likely to admit their difficulties to others and ask for help, rather than take performance shortcuts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we propose a novel approach to improving ethical behavior in organizations through ethical learning in individuals. We propose the concept of an ethical learner, a person who is actively engaged in improving their ethical behavior over time. Because self-threat is a key obstacle to ethical learning, our model focuses on the purposeful reduction of self-threat.

Ethical learners have three necessary but not independently sufficient qualities. First, to be an ethical learner, the individual must place moral identity at his or her center (which has the ironic potential to increase self-threat). Second, the ethical learner must be psychologically literate by acknowledging the gap between intended and actual ethical behavior, and by understanding the ubiquity of such a gap, self-threat is reduced. Third, the ethical learner will have a growth mindset about ethics in which the gap represents the potential for improvement, rather than a self-threat. When an ethical learner with these three qualities is working in an environment characterized by psychological safety, self-threat will be reduced at the team level and his or her ethical behavior is likely to improve. By helping those who believe themselves to be ethical to become ethical learners, our model helps people become as ethical as they think they are.

Theoretical Contributions

Our paper makes several unique contributions to management theory. First, we introduce the concept of ethical learners. Ethical learners possess a central moral identity (they care about being ethical), psychological literacy (an awareness that a gap exists between intended and actual ethical behavior), and a growth mindset (the belief that purposeful effort can improve ethical

behavior). We also describe how an ethical learner can translate this learning into more ethical behavior in a psychologically safe workplace.

Second, our work highlights the importance of the critical theoretical link between self-threat and ethical behavior. We integrate several existing but unrelated constructs using this theoretical link (moral identity, mindset, and psychological safety), as well as introducing a new construct (psychological literacy). This link teases out potentially automatic and unintended self-threat at both individual and organizational levels. Our model ties together the relationship between self-threat and ethics with the relationship between automaticity and ethics and the relationship between learning and ethics in ways that are new to our field.

Third, we leverage descriptive, empirical research about the gap between intended and actual ethical behavior to develop a theoretically-motivated prescriptive model of how to generate ethical learning and improvements in ethical behavior. While excellent ethics research has been produced at unprecedented rates in recent years (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), most of this work is descriptive in nature. By generating a prescriptive model that offers a path towards a positive outcome (ethical learning, improved ethical behavior), we respond directly to the opportunity for researchers to integrate the scientific study of positive outcomes with the study of business ethics (Sonenshein, 2005). Also, by generating a prescriptive model of how to improve ethical behavior that is grounded in “psychological pragmatism” (Margolis, 1998), we respond directly to an acknowledged need for researchers to provide more direction to individuals and organizations who want to improve their ethical behavior but do not know how to do so (Bazerman, 2005).

Fourth, we bridge both individual- and team-level perspectives. By spanning multiple levels, our work helps organizations understand the individual organizational actor, while

developing team-level or organizational-level solutions. Thus, we can construe ethical learning as a collective process, in addition to being an individual process; so that organizations can facilitate learning in ways that are unique from individual-level learning.

Fifth, our model of ethical learning supports and perhaps expands on classic descriptive theories of moral development. In Kohlberg's moral development model (1969), individuals grow in the criteria and processes they use in ethical decision-making. The expectation is that people can grow and develop in the ethics domain, which is consistent with a growth mindset in ethics and aligns with our model. However, our model differs in several important ways from Kohlberg's work. Kohlberg focused on the person's internal development while we introduce the moderating role of psychological safety, thus bridging individual- and non-individual-level perspectives, in alignment with Treviño's interactionist model (1986), in which a descriptor of one's learning (one's stage of moral development; (Kohlberg, 1969)) is affected by individual and situational variables to determine ethical behavior. In addition, Kohlberg's model did not focus on actual ethical behavior, but rather, on the reasons behind a person's decision (e.g. norms versus an internal sense of right and wrong). Finally, Kohlberg's model suggests a final stage of moral development (Stage 6), at which point an individual is presumably in a fixed mindset. In our model, a growth mindset suggests continued growth in the individual, without a specific endpoint, so the growth mindset is an ongoing feature of an ethical learner.

Lastly, our model of ethical learning also deepens our understanding of moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Dweck and Leggett (1988) describe how those with a fixed mindset about ethics are concerned with documenting their morality to themselves and others whereas those with a growth mindset about ethics are concerned with "developing and exercising that quality" (p. 265). A growth mindset aligns conceptually with the internalization sub-scale of

moral identity, which focuses on presenting one's moral qualities to oneself. A fixed mindset aligns more with the symbolization subscale of moral identity, which focuses on presenting one's moral qualities to others (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Practical Implications

Many people care about ethicality but few of us display behavior consistent with our self-view. Thus, this gap is a practical problem in which our day-to-day behavior is not what we wish it to be. We believe this model of ethical learning has the potential to dramatically change ethical behavior in organizations. The ethical learning model offers individuals and organizations an approach to helping us close this gap.

Within organizations, each component of our model falls directly under the scope of influence of the senior leadership of most organizations. We propose that the approach that many organizations take towards teaching and the enforcement of ethics (e.g. compliance) may benefit from a new emphasis on leveraging moral identity, building psychological literacy, generating a growth mindset, and facilitating psychological safety. While the instituting of compliance and ethics programs have been found to correlate with a variety of improved ethics-oriented measures (Basran, 2012; Ethics Resource Center, 2011; McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 1996), these results are not unambiguous (Badaracco & Webb, 1995) nor is it clear how these programs affect ethical behavior over the longer term.

In fact, it is possible that programs that are not grounded in psychological literacy, and thus ignore the ethical lapses to which everyone is prone, may actually foster an unintended fixed mindset about ethics. This fixed mindset will generate self-threat when an ethical lapse occurs, and thus, we worry that such programs may lead to short-term compliance via primary control

activities (being ethical) on clearly defined issues but also might lead to greater use of some secondary control activities (feeling ethical but not being ethical) over time, thus cultivating the conditions for an eventual headline failure. More specifically, an ethics program might simultaneously prevent immediate headline failures but actually facilitate small ethical lapses, primarily due to the lack of a psychological literacy that makes this pattern obvious. As a result, we are concerned that compliance programs that are not grounded in psychological literacy will heighten self-threat, and thus, be self-defeating. Our concern echoes the possibility of unintended consequences of ethics programs that has been raised by others (Killingsworth, 2012; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999; Treviño & Weaver, 2003) and runs parallel to our concern that individuals with more central moral identities face a surprising risk of behaving less ethically over time, perhaps leading to eventual headline failures for some.

Using the ethical learning approach, organizations can consider how to reduce self-threat throughout the “rock” (formal elements) and “sand” (informal elements) of their ethical infrastructures (Tenbrunsel, Smith-Crowe, & Umphress, 2003). That is, the formal elements of an organization include what many compliance programs include: rules, regulations, sanctions, and communications, much of which may convey a fixed mindset. Similarly, the informal elements of an organization, such as its culture, are opportunities to shift the dialogue about what is valued and what is stigmatized from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.

Another practical parallel between individuals and organizations lies in the fact that just as the gap exists for individuals, it also exists for organizations. That is, just as bounded ethicality suggests that all individuals will have some ethical lapses, it suggests that all organizations will have ethical lapses. Thus, organizations and their leaders need to expect that some unintended ethical failure will occur; these are “predictable surprises” (Bazerman &

Watkins, 2004). For both organizations and individuals, smaller ethical failures are easier to learn from, as they do not attract the public attention that high moral intensity, headline public failures are likely to attract. Once headline ethical failures occur, ethical learning becomes secondary to necessary public relations and legal protections. So, the time for ethical learning is before small ethical failures become headline failures, and given that small ethical failures are inevitable, organizations can plan accordingly for such occurrences.

Our model also challenges the heavy reliance that some organizations place on integrity tests within selection processes. These tests, which come in a variety of forms (Barrett, 2003), are designed to help organizations screen out individuals based on the assumption that qualities like honesty, dependability, and trustworthiness are predictive of who is more likely to behave dishonestly on the job. While these methods may be useful for screening out extreme instances of deliberate unethical behavior, our knowledge of ethical decision-making suggests a large portion of an applicant pool will “pass” such a test. Yet, these individuals will remain highly susceptible to self-threat and the related inconsistencies in their ethical behavior. They will not be ethical learners, but the tests will give both the individuals and organizations a false sense of ethical security.

Our work also has important implications for ethics courses in business and other professional schools. A perpetual debate continues regarding whether, how and when ethics should be taught to adults. We propose that teaching ethics is different, and less productive, than teaching ethical learning. When teaching ethics, the emphasis might be on making his or her moral identity more central, for example. But, when teaching ethical learning, the target audience is those with a relatively central moral identity. These individuals have the greatest potential to improve their ethical behavior, and will benefit tremendously from greater

psychological literacy (specifically, about the gap) and a growth mindset (a belief that the gap can be addressed). And, many of these individuals will lead teams and organizations, with tremendous impact on the degree of psychological safety. In this way, professional schools can play a critical role in shaping the trajectory of ethical learning in organizations.

Future Directions

A rich set of future directions emerges from this model. Our model of ethical learning highlights the role of self-threat in ethical decision-making, and in doing so, opens the door to connecting the moral emotions of guilt and shame to ethical learning. Self-threat and stigma emerge from the organizational environment, and thus, a fruitful area for future work would apply an affective lens to the ethical learner model. Moral emotions, such as guilt and shame, have been studied in the context of ethical behavior (e.g. Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012; Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011; Eisenberg, 2000; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007) and this work could be extended to connect to moral identity, psychological literacy, growth mindset, and psychological safety. Distinguishing between the differential self-threats of guilt and shame may provide theoretical guidance on how to best reduce the self-threat in order for ethical learning to emerge. Additionally, moral emotions can facilitate the spread of collective corruption in organizations through emotional contagion (Smith-Crowe & Warren, in press), raising the possibility that ethical learning might also be spread through emotional contagion.

Another line of work might center on how to best implement this model. Psychological literacy is a new construct that we have introduced and thus, is ripe for future research. One line of research might focus on how psychological literacy can be measured, taught, learned and sustained. What are the performance effects of only some members of a team being

psychologically literate? Can a team leader instill psychological literacy? Can psychological literacy be reinforced by group culture? How do we define and measure the psychological literacy of an organization?

Future work might also more fully examine headline failures and the longitudinal relationship between small lapses and large failures. Importantly, much of the empirical ethics research in psychology focuses on small ethical lapses. The measurement of ethical behavior over time and of ethical learning will be critical to this work, and will enable us to study the relative impact of traditional ethics training programs versus the ethical learning model we offer here. In keeping with Reynolds' (2006) call for greater attention to "seemingly inconsequential violations (before they become) moral catastrophes" (p. 241), our model highlights the opportunity to study the relationship between the small lapse and the large failure.

Researchers might also focus on finding organizationally relevant interventions or conditions to minimize self-threat, outside of those in our model, and on demonstrating the benefits of psychological safety on ethical behavior in teams and organizations. Interesting work has shown that a mere fifteen minutes of mindfulness training, designed to help individuals generate the distance needed to view their own thoughts impartially, reduced cheating behavior on a subsequent performance task (Ruedy & Schweitzer, 2010). This type of training is not grounded in developing psychological literacy but has the same advantage of reducing self-threat. Another factor outside of our model is sleep, which has been shown to affect ethical behavior (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011). How might self-threat be heightened by sleep deprivation and how does this affect ethical learning via a greater fixed mindset perhaps? The linkages between these additional variables and the reduction of self-threat would be useful to explore.

Conclusion

Currently, the conditions of typical organizations are those in which employees are uniquely unlikely to be ethical learners, and thus, unethical behavior will not only occur, but may recur. However, these conditions have the potential to be shaped such that ethical behavior is facilitated by the organizational context rather than inhibited by it. Individuals in organizations face a minefield of ethical self-threat, thus setting these individuals up for exactly the opposite conditions required for ethical learning. The result is extreme self-threat to the individual's ethical self-view. Thus, the small ethical lapse is not recognized as an ethical lapse and the process of learning from the ethical lapse ends before it begins. Ethical lapses, although empirically inevitable, remain unacknowledged by ourselves or others because doing so is a formidable self-threat. The self-threat of being an ethical learner is high, making ethical learning less likely to occur.

Our goal in this paper was to leverage the tremendous insights from research on the self and research on ethics in service of a new approach of improving ethical behavior. The descriptive research upon which we base our model is robustly convincing and if we accept these behavioral foundations of ethical behavior, we must consider a different approach to improving ethical behavior. Our model is prescriptive and we are hopeful that future research will highlight its practicality. Ethical behavior can be improved and we are beginning to understand how to make it happen. It begins with ethical learning.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Self-threat (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999) and ego threat (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) are often used to describe similar concepts. For parsimony, we use the term self-threat but make reference to research about both self- and ego-threat.

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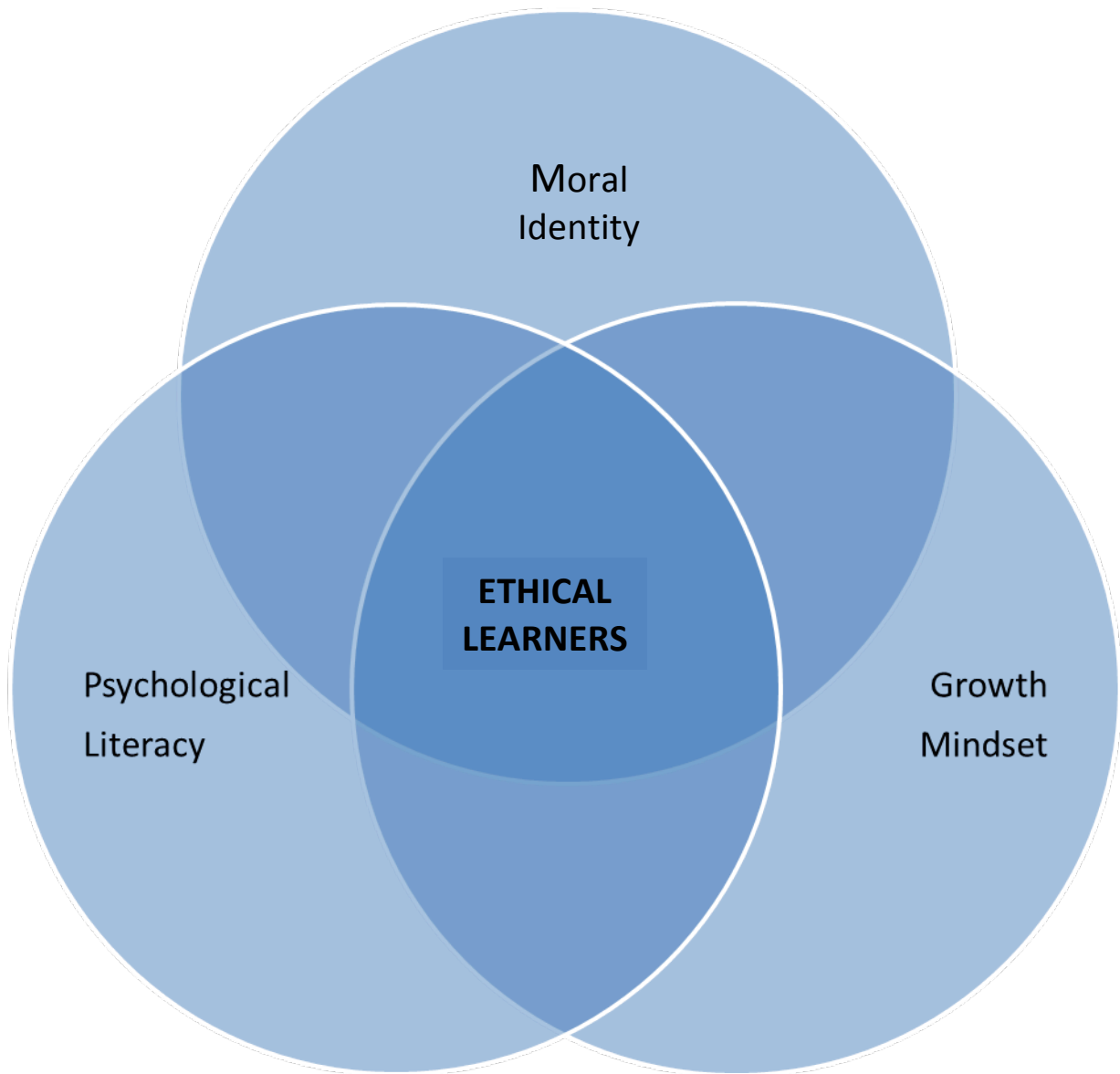
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FIGURE 1

The ethical learner model



END NOTES

ⁱ Self-threat (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999) and ego threat (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) are often used to describe similar concepts. For parsimony, we use the term self-threat but make reference to research about both self- and ego-threat.