That’s Not How I Remember It: Willfully Ignorant Memory For Ethical Product Attribute Information

Rebecca Naylor, The Ohio State University, USA
Julie R. Irwin, The University of Texas at Austin, USA
Kristine Ehrich, University of San Diego, USA

Across three studies we demonstrate that consumers respond to information that a product performs poorly on an ethical attribute by using willfully ignorant memory, a self-protection mechanism in which they are more likely to misremember poor performance on an ethical attribute than positive performance on an ethical attribute.

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Harming, Stealing, Lying, and Cheating: Exploring the Antecedents and Consequences of Unethical Consumption Behavior

Chair: Rebecca Walker Naylor, The Ohio State University
Peter McGraw, University of Colorado, Boulder

Paper #1: That’s Not How I Remember It: Willfully Ignorant Memory for Ethical Product Attribute Information
Rebecca Naylor, The Ohio State University, USA
Julie R. Irwin, The University of Texas at Austin, USA
Kristine Ehrich, University of San Diego, USA

Paper #2: “I Couldn’t Help It”: The Role of Perceived Personal Control and Social Norms in Unethical Consumer Behavior
Jennifer Jordan, University of Groningen, The Netherlands
Bob Fennis, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Paper #3: Money in the Present or Time in the Future?: How Switching Focus Makes People Honest
Francesca Gino, Harvard Business School, USA
Cassie Mogilner, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Hyun Young Park, New York University, USA
Tom Meyvis, New York University, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW
Consumers arguably want to be seen as (and to see themselves) as moral actors. Yet, consumers engage in unethical behaviors, including buying products that harm the environment, stealing, lying, and cheating. The overarching theme for this session is to explore both the antecedents and consequences of these types of unethical behaviors on the part of consumers.

In the first paper, Naylor, Irwin, and Ehrich propose that willfully ignorant memory plays an important role in why consumers buy products with poor performance on ethical attributes (e.g., products that harm the environment). They show that, in order to protect themselves from emotionally-laden tradeoffs between ethical attributes and other desirable product attributes (e.g., price and quality), consumers misremember negative ethical attribute information at a greater rate than they do positive ethical attribute information. In the second paper, Jordan and Fennis examine a variety of unethical behaviors, including plagiarizing, cheating, stealing, buying stolen goods, and lying. They show that consumers are particularly likely to engage in these behaviors when they feel a lack of personal control and are exposed to information indicating that engaging in these unethical behaviors is the norm. In the third paper, Gino and Mogilner explore how a difference in short-term versus long-term focus influences the decision to behave unethically. They show that priming money leads individuals to focus on the present, thereby increasing the likelihood of cheating on a task, while priming time leads them to focus on the future, thereby decreasing the likelihood of cheating. Thus, the first three papers focus primarily on exploring why consumers engage in unethical behaviors. The fourth paper focuses instead on the consequences of unethical behaviors. Specifically, Park and Meyvis examine the impact of the specific emotions that stem from moral violations on subsequent spending decisions (e.g., donating to charities, spending on the self vs. others, etc.).

In keeping with the conference theme of building connections, each author agrees to link the antecedents of unethical behavior to its consequences (and, in the case of Park and Meyvis, the converse). Moreover, there are several common themes across pairs of papers in the session in addition to the broader theme of understanding the antecedents and consequences of unethical behaviors. Specifically, both papers 1 and 3 explore the short-term rewards of unethical behavior; participants in paper 1 employ willfully ignorant memory because it allows them to avoid the negative emotions that come with ethical attribute tradeoffs in the short-run, while participants in paper 3 who are primed with money focus on the benefits to ethically questionable behavior in the present, not the potential long-term costs of the behavior. Papers 2 and 3 both suggest ways in which consumers can be encouraged to engage in more ethical behavior, through the use of social norms in paper 2 and by priming time (vs. money) in paper 3. Papers 3 and 4 both contribute to our understanding of the psychological meanings of money, and papers 1 and 4 both address the emotional impact of morally questionable behavior. Presenters will point out these connections during the session. Three of the papers have at least three studies completed. The authors of Paper 2 anticipate having at least one additional study completed by the time the paper would be presented.

We anticipate a wide audience for this session because it will not only contribute to the literature on moral decision making and (un)ethical consumer behavior, but will also have broad appeal to a diverse group of conference attendees, including researchers with an interest in ethical behavior, decision making, memory, social norms, the psychological effects of money, and affect.

That’s Not How I Remember It: Willfully Ignorant Memory for Ethical Product Attribute Information

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Many consumers report that they care about ethical issues and are willing to pay more for ethically produced goods (Trudel and Cotte 2008). However, products with positive ethical attributes (i.e., sustainable products) are, in many product categories, not market leaders (Porges 2007), and products that have poor performance on ethical attributes continue to sell well. For example, despite the damage to the environment from logging old-growth rainforests, consumers continue to buy cabinets, furniture, and other products made from rainforest wood (Rainforest Relief 2011). Further illustrating the problem, although a recent survey by GfK Roper Consulting found that 62% of Americans believe that environmental pollution poses a serious risk (Neff 2010), a recent Mintel study found that only 36% of Americans regularly buy green products (Mintel 2009). Taken together, findings like these indicate that, in the domain of ethically produced goods, there appears to be a gap between consumers’ explicitly stated attitudes and their purchasing behavior (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt 2010).

Past research has addressed the causes of this gap by asking why consumers might be reluctant to buy sustainable products. Ehrich and Irwin (2005) showed that consumers, particularly those who care about the ethical issue in question, do not seek ethical attribute information at the rate they would have used the information if it were readily available. This willful ignorance is driven by a desire to avoid the negative emotions that stem from discovering that an otherwise desirable product performs poorly on an ethical attribute. Avoiding the information is a self-protection mechanism. Our primary research question expands the notion of willful ignorance: We...
explore what happens if consumers are not allowed to remain willfully ignorant, that is, when they are not allowed to ignore ethical attributes. The primary purpose of our studies, therefore, is to test whether consumers who know that a product is unethical will engage in subsequent types of self-protection mechanisms to deal with this negative information.

We propose that consumers will engage in what we call willfully ignorant memory, incorrectly recalling poor performance on an ethical attribute (i.e., that furniture is made from non-sustainable rainforest wood) at a higher rate than they do positive performance on an ethical attribute (i.e., that furniture is made from sustainable tree farm wood). Because ethical attributes are linked to protected values (Baron and Spranca 1997), particularly for consumers who care deeply about these issues, it is easier to forget that a product performs poorly on an ethical attribute than to have to make difficult and emotion-laden tradeoffs between ethical attributes and other product attributes that the consumer finds desirable. We test our hypotheses across three studies involving hypothetical brands of desks (adapted from the stimuli used by Ehrlich and Irwin 2005). The desks differed on three attributes: wood source, quality/workmanship, and price, where wood source is the ethical attribute. All three studies share a similar basic procedure; after being given an opportunity to store the information about the six desks in memory, participants were then asked to recall all of the information they could about the desks (i.e., to retrieve this information from memory) after a distracter task or tasks. In Study 1 we show that consumers are more likely to misremember (either recalling the information incorrectly or failing to recall any information about the attribute) that a desk is made from rainforest wood than that it is made from tree farm wood. Further, this pattern of forgetting is unique to ethical attributes (vs. attributes without ethical implications) and is especially likely to occur for those who care about the ethical issue in question (i.e., protection of the rainforests). Study 2 expands this basic methodology by testing memory at both storage and retrieval; in this study we demonstrate that willfully ignorant memory occurs both when ethical attribute information is stored in memory and when it is retrieved from memory. Finally, in Study 3, we use a mood manipulation immediately before retrieval to demonstrate that a consumer’s mood interacts with how much they care about the ethical issue to influence willfully ignorant memory: participants who care a great deal about the ethical issue in question who are in a negative (vs. neutral) mood are more likely to misremember poor (vs. positive) performance on an ethical attribute.

Theoretically, our results show a new and strikingly non-normative reaction to ethical attributes: the people who care the most about the underlying ethical issue are less likely to accurately remember ethical attribute information. These results add to our growing knowledge of how consumers react to ethical attributes and our understanding of why purchases may show a discrepancy between ethical attitudes and behaviors. The malleability of memory protects consumers from having to make difficult decisions and, perhaps, even to persuade themselves that they are more moral decision makers than they actually are. If memories are not accurate, then consumers are not likely to remember that they have not purchased highly ethical items in the past and may not accurately remember the ethical attributes of their current possessions.

**“I Couldn’t Help It”: The Role of Perceived Personal Control and Social Norms in Unethical Consumer Behavior**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Recent research (Fennis and Aarts 2010) demonstrates that a lack of personal control, conceptualized as the experience of reduced self-agency or authorship, leads individuals to become more susceptible to various forms of (proximate) social influence. The current investigation extends this research into the domain of moral judgment and behavior by examining how consumers lacking personal control are influenced by social norms in their environment and how this influence affects their tendency to engage in (un)ethical judgment and behavior. We predict that a lack of perceived control will lead to unethical behavior, but not unconditionally. Instead, we argue that impaired perceived control promotes unethical behavior only when such unethical behavior is considered a descriptive norm in the consumer’s environment (i.e., the behavior is perceived to be supported by a majority of like-minded consumers). Paradoxically, we also propose that experiencing impaired personal control does not produce a reduction in unethical behavior when supported by ethical descriptive norms. This is because of the proposed mechanism of the control to unethical behavior relationship: social responsibility. As others have demonstrated (e.g., Festinger 1956; Cialdini 2001), individuals are most likely to look to their social environment for cues on how to think and act when the appropriate behavior is ambiguous (ethical situations are normally ones where the correct behavior is ambiguous, Jordan 2009). First, we propose that consumers who lack perceived control are more likely to look to the social world for cues on how to think and act (Fennis and Aarts 2010), and that such an outward search reduces their feelings of self-responsibility for the resulting behavior when they can find social norms that support such behavior. And second, we propose that such a search will only affect an increased engagement in unethical behavior (but not ethical behavior) because it provides a license to act immorally (consumers are more likely to engage in immoral behavior if they do not feel personally responsible for it, Jones 1991); consumers need no license to engage in moral behavior. Hence, there appears to be a clear asymmetry in the impact of social contexts on unethical behavior. In sum, we propose that perceived personal control will be the driving force behind the impact of normative social cues on (un)ethical consumer judgment and behavior.

Using a 2 (perceived personal control: low, high) x 3 (immoral social norm, moral social norm, no norm) between-participants design, we examine the personal control to unethical behavior relationship in a context of immoral versus moral social norms communicated in a series of target behaviors. Participants were sixty students at a university in The Netherlands. They believed that they were participating in two separate studies: Study 1 examined personal situations and Study 2 examined the types of activities that students participated in. We manipulated the experience of personal control by adapting a procedure previously developed by Whitson and Galinsky (2008), which first asked participants to recall a situation where they either were in complete control or completely lacked control. Then, in “Study 2,” we asked them to report how much they planned to engage in a variety of activities in the next six months (1 = not at all; 7 = definitely). Five of these activities were unethical in nature (plagiarize, cheat, steal small items, buy an item you know is stolen, and lie to get out of an obligation) and five were ethically-neutral (go on a foreign holiday, dine at a new restaurant, write a hand-written letter, attend a concert, and make an unusual recipe). Both the unethical and neutral activities were selected because of their mundane, albeit