

Feeling Bad and Doing Good: Predicting Unethical Behavior from Guilt Proneness

Taya R. Cohen¹ & Abigail Panter²

¹Carnegie Mellon University

²University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Guilt Proneness

- Guilt proneness is an individual difference reflecting a predisposition to experience negative feelings about personal wrongdoing, even when the wrongdoing is private.
- It is an *emotional trait*--the anticipation of feeling guilty about committing transgressions--rather than a specific emotional state characterized by guilty feelings in a particular moment or generalized guilty feelings that occur without an eliciting event.

Guilt Proneness & Unethical Behavior

- We propose that guilt proneness is a character trait that predicts the likelihood that people will engage in unethical behavior.
- Why should guilt proneness decrease unethical behavior?
 - The anticipation of guilty feelings about private misdeeds indicates that one has internalized moral values.
 - Thus, for guilt-prone individuals public surveillance should not be required to prevent moral transgressions (instead, their conscience should guide them).

Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale

- To test whether guilt proneness predicts unethical behavior, we first created a scale to measure individual differences in guilt proneness.
- **Guilt and Shame Proneness scale (GASP)**
 - 4-item guilt proneness subscale
 - Respondents are asked to imagine that they have committed a transgression that no one knows about, and then indicate the likelihood that they would feel badly about their behavior.

Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011, *JSPS*

The GASP

- *Instructions:* In this questionnaire you will read about situations that people are likely to encounter in day-to-day life, followed by common reactions to those situations. As you read each scenario, try to imagine yourself in that situation. Then indicate the likelihood that you would react in the way described.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Slightly Unlikely	About 50% Likely	Slightly Likely	Likely	Very Likely

Guilt Proneness Items

1. After realizing you have received too much change at a store, you decide to keep it because the salesclerk doesn't notice. What is the likelihood that you would feel uncomfortable about keeping the money?
2. You secretly commit a felony. What is the likelihood that you would feel remorse about breaking the law?
3. At a coworker's housewarming party, you spill red wine on their new cream-colored carpet. You cover the stain with a chair so that nobody notices your mess. What is the likelihood that you would feel that the way you acted was pathetic?
4. You lie to people but they never find out about it. What is the likelihood that you would feel terrible about the lies you told?

Guilt Proneness and Moral Disposition

- Guilt proneness correlates with other moral personality measures (online survey 1515 U.S. adults.
 - **Honesty-Humility**: $r = .50^*$
 - **Empathic Concern**: $r = .46^*$
 - **Perspective Taking**: $r = .37^*$
 - **Moral Identity-Internalization**: $r = .41^*$
 - **Moral Idealism / Relativism (EPQ)**: $r = .35^* / -.24^*$
 - **Consideration of Future Consequences**: $r = .35^*$
 - **Cognitive moral development (DIT N2 score)**: $r = .17^*$
 - **Exploiteness-Entitlement (Narcissism)**: $r = -.35^*$
 - **Machiavellianism (N = 495)**: $r = -.50^*$
 - **Self-control (N = 495)**: $r = .30^*$

* $p < .05$

Cohen, Panter, Turan, & Morse, 2012, www.WECTproject.org

Predicting Deceptive Behavior

- Investigated unethical behavior with an economic decision-making task: deception game (Cohen, Gunia, Kim-Jun, & Murnighan, 2009)
 - Individuals can potentially gain money by deceiving another person.
 - **Participants had to decide whether to lie to another participant to potentially earn \$50 rather than \$25.**
- 79 adults completed the GASP and an online version of the deception game
 - Described as a “decision-making task” in which they would interact with another individual who was also completing the task.
 - For every 100 people who participated in the study, one would be selected at random to receive the money they earned in the task.

Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011, *JSPS*, Study 2

Deception Game

- Sender (you) and Receiver (other person)
- You learn of two payment options

<i>Payment Options</i>	Option A	Option B
You receive:	\$25	\$50
Other person receives:	\$50	\$25

- Other person (not you) must choose payment option.
- Other person’s payment table is blank.
- ***The only info other person has about the payment options is what you choose to provide in a message.***

Message Choice

You (Sender) must choose which message to send to the other person (Receiver)

Message Choices

1. **Message 1:** Option A will earn the Receiver more money than Option B. **(True)**
2. **Message 2:** Option B will earn the Receiver more money than Option A. **(Lie)**
 - *If Receiver believes message, lying allows you (the Sender) to earn \$50 instead of \$25.*



Important Information

- You (the SENDER) have been randomly assigned to **send a message AFTER the RECEIVER chooses whether to follow the recommendation you provide in your message.**
 - At this time, please click Next to find out whether the RECEIVER has decided to follow the recommendation you provide in your message.
- **The RECEIVER has decided to follow the recommendation you provide in your message.** That is, the RECEIVER has decided to choose whichever payment option you identify as giving the RECEIVER more money. The RECEIVER's decision is final and binding.
 - At this time, please think about which message you would like to send. After you have made your decision, select your choice.

Open-Ended Responses

- After selecting the message choice, participants were asked **“Why did you choose this message?”**
 - We verified that all participants understood the procedure and chose the message they intended.
- **Participants who selected the truth indicated that they were concerned with honesty or did not want to lie.**
 - *Example:* “Knowing that the sender made a binding selection, I felt it was important to be honest select the true message.”
- **Participants who lied indicated a self-interested desire to earn money.**
 - *Example:* “I was told that the Receiver was definitely going to choose the option that I recommended. Message 2 gives me, the sender, more money in the end.”

Results

- **Highly guilt-prone adults lied less.**
 - Adults with high scores on guilt proneness were less likely to choose the deceptive message than those with low scores on guilt proneness
 - *Logistic regression of choosing to lie: $B = -.44$, $SE = .20$, odds ratio = .64, $p = .03$*

Negotiation Study

- **Does guilt proneness predict unethical negotiation behavior?**
- 56 MBA students at Northwestern University completed the guilt proneness scale in an online survey.
 - Half the Ps completed it during week 1 and half completed it during week 4.
 - Timing had no effect so we collapsed across this variable.
- In week 5, students were randomly assigned to be an agent for a buyer or a seller in a class exercise involving a real-estate negotiation (“Bullard Houses”; Karp et al., 2008).

Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011, *JSPS*, Study 3

Negotiation Study

- In the Bullard Houses negotiation, there is considerable pressure on students in the role for the buyer’s agent to act unethically (e.g., by lying about who the buyer is or what the buyer intends to do with the property).
- **Analyses focused on unethical behavior exhibited by the buyers as judged by the sellers.**
 - “Yes-No” checklist of whether their counterpart committed 13 unethical negotiation behaviors (e.g., misrepresentation, making false promises, inappropriate information gathering)
 - How honest was the other party in the negotiation? (1 = *not at all honest*, 7 = *very honest*).

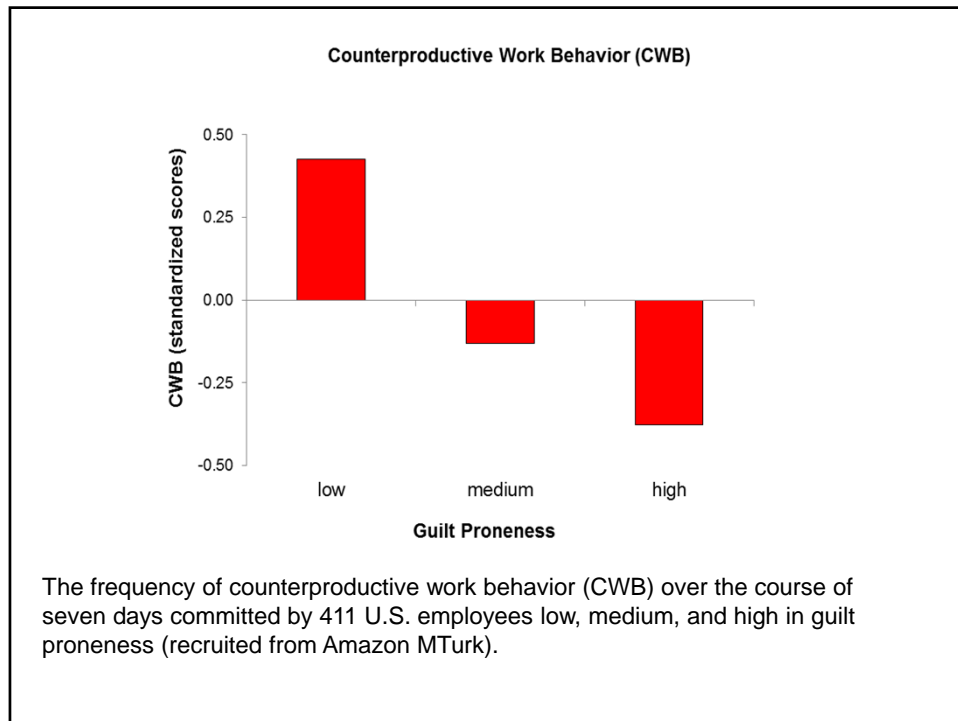
Results

- **Buyers high in guilt proneness committed fewer unethical negotiation behaviors than buyers low in guilt proneness** (as judged by the sellers): $r = -.53, p = .004$
- **High guilt buyers were judged as more honest by the sellers:** $r = .43, p = .03$.
 - *Unlike the prior studies, this study assessed guilt proneness one to four weeks prior to the outcome and focused on behaviors as judged by peers.*

Predicting Unethical Behavior at Work

- Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is volitional behavior that harms or intends to harm organizations or people in organizations (Fox & Spector, 2005)
 - **Includes abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, and withdrawal behaviors.**
- 411 employed adults in the U.S. (recruited from Amazon MTurk)
 - Described job and organization, completed GASP and work-related questionnaires (in a randomized order)
 - Respondents indicated how often they engaged counterproductive behaviors during the past week at work (CWB-C; Spector et al., 2006)
 - Meta-analysis found that self-reports of CWB provide more accurate and valid measurement than co-worker or manager reports (Berry, Carpenter, & Baratt, 2012).

Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012, *Journal of Business Ethics*



Guilt proneness predicted CWB controlling for other known correlates of CWB.

Regression of CWB Scores	β	t	p
Constant		5.53	<.001*
Guilt Proneness	-.21	-5.13	<.001*
Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)	-.10	-2.48	.01*
Age (in years)	-.09	-1.84	.07+
Hours worked during past week	-.02	-.38	.71
Tenure at job (in months)	.03	.65	.52
Job Satisfaction	.09	1.59	.11
Intention to Turnover	.12	2.58	.01*
Interpersonal Conflict	.39	9.05	<.001*
Negative Affect at Work	.22	4.69	<.001*
Positive Affect at Work	.00	-.04	.97

Conclusions

- **Guilt proneness is an important character trait.**
 - People who are high on guilt proneness are less likely to lie for economic gain, act unethically in negotiation, and commit counterproductive behaviors at work.
- The GASP scale has the potential to be an important measurement tool for detecting individuals who are likely to behave unethically.
 - It may be wise for employers to consider guilt proneness when making hiring decisions.

Current Research Questions

- Is guilt proneness an observable trait -- can it be detected by peers and coworkers?
 - Preliminary analyses suggest that it can by well-acquainted peers ($r_{self-peer} = .44$) and coworkers ($r_{self-coworker} = .50$).
- Is guilt proneness more (or less) predictive of unethical behavior than moral reasoning and other moral personality measures?
- **What is character?**
 - We know a lot about personality (e.g., Big Five) but much less about moral disposition.
 - Is there a superordinate "character factor" or is character comprised of many localized traits?

Thank you!

Taya Cohen: tcohen@cmu.edu