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BELIEF VS. BEHAVIOR

Social Psychology Tools Help Measure & Predict

Written by Hui Chen

What might corporate executives and seminary students have in common? Bear with me for a moment. In 1973, two social psychologists, John Darley and Daniel Batson, decided to conduct an experiment at Princeton Theological Seminary. They wanted to see how the seminary students, who were studying to prepare for service in Christian ministry, would behave when they encountered someone in need.



Darley and Batson ingeniously rooted their experiment in one of Jesus' most well-known parables: the Good Samaritan. In response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of a traveler who was robbed, beaten, and left by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite, representatives of the religious establishment, avoided the man. It was a Samaritan, a people despised by the Jewish population, who helped the injured man. Would the seminary students behave as the priests and Levites, or as the Good Samaritan? What factors would influence their behavior?

The seminary students were first asked to complete a questionnaire about their religious attitudes and motivations, then told to prepare a talk. Half the students were asked to talk about simply what it means to be a minister; the other half were specifically asked to incorporate the Good Samaritan story in their talk. After a few minutes, the students were asked to move to another building to give the talk. This request to move came with varying levels of urgency: "no hurry," "please go right over," "you are late!" On their way to the other building, the seminarians encountered a man slumped over a doorway, head down, eyes closed, who coughed when the students walked by.

So, how did they do?

Less than half of the students offered help to the man in need.

Pressure in the Moment

It turns out neither the students' religious motivation nor the topic of their talk made much of a difference in their inclination to help. Some literally stepped over the slumped man in order to deliver

the talk on the Good Samaritan. What did matter, however, was how much of a hurry they were in: in a low-hurry situation, 63% helped; in a medium-hurry situation, 45% did; in a high-hurry situation, only 10%. Practicing what one preaches turned out to have less to do with what's being preached than with the pressure one feels in the moment.

What does this have to do with corporate compliance and business executives?

Those in compliance often speak of "tone from the top" (talk) and corporate culture (attitudes and motivations). What we don't know is whether we can actually practice what we preach. What if we learn, as Dearly and Batson did with the seminarians, that neither talk nor motivation mattered as much as the stress of the moment – for example, the urgency and pressure to make a sale? If that turns out to be the case, it would require us to rethink our approach.

One of the greatest challenges in ethics and compliance surveys is self-reporting bias: most of us think of ourselves as ethical people who would "do the right thing." However, what we think we might do in a situation and what we actually do when we find ourselves in that situation can be very different. In one of the most famous psychological experiments, Stanley Milgram asked participants to deliver an increasingly strong series of electric shocks to a person in another room, with the hypothesis that only a fringe minority would administer a shock they were told was lethal. The hypothesis was infamously wrong. A full 65% of participants were willing to deliver the maximum shock when instructed, despite pleas and struggles heard from the other room. I wonder how many of these participants would have predicted their own behavior had they been surveyed beforehand?

Countering Bias in Measurement

There are, however, some social psychology tools that can help reduce the self-reporting and self-perception biases that we encounter in measuring ethics and compliance.

Many of us are familiar with the Myers Briggs personality test: Introversi/Extroversion; Thinking/Feeling; Sensing/Intuition; Judging/Perceiving. The test does not ask: "Are you an introvert?" Instead, the test asks dozens of questions such as whether you would choose a book

over a social event, or what is your idea of unwinding after a tough day. Seemingly similar questions are asked over and over again, in slight variations, compelling the test takers to make choices repeatedly. The results are then tallied, analyzed, and organized into personality types.

Similar types of scenario-based tests have been designed to assess moral foundations and cultural orientations. Moral Foundation Vignettes (MFV) score test-takers on fundamental moral values such as fairness by asking them to choose their responses to scenarios such as when you see someone skip to the head of the line or a professor giving someone a bad grade simply for disliking the person. Cultural orientation tests measure individual and groups behavior orientation, such as individualism vs. collectivism, by asking questions such as which factor is most important to you when you buy a piece of artwork for the office (e.g. you like it, your colleagues will like it, your superior will approve, or it's good investment).

What all these tests have in common is that instead of asking you to characterize yourself, they ask you to make choices that reflect your orientation. In doing so, it reduces the inaccuracies that come from self-reporting bias.

Compare that with the typical corporate ethical culture surveys, where responders are asked questions such as "Do you trust your senior management?" "Do you believe your company is honest?" "Are you confident you can make the right deci-

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sion in an ethical dilemma?" These questions are more similar to asking people: "Are you an introvert? Do you believe in fairness? Are you an individualist?"

"Self-reporting bias can be further reduced by the use of other tools from social psychology. Implicit reaction time ("IRT") tests uses participants' reaction time to stimulate to measure their responses to stimuli, and have been used commercially to test consumer reactions to products and brands. Finally, eye tracking and brain wave tracking, where participants' response to stimuli images are monitored through eye movements and brain activities, are also tools being put to increasing use from assessing depression to predicting pedophilia. I imagine it would be much harder to fake these tests than to deny one's own psychology.

I believe there is much potential for the use of social psychology tools and research methodologies in enhancing how we measure ethics and compliance efforts: what actually influences behavior, how to ask survey questions, and how to identify inclinations for misbehavior through ways other than self-reporting. This work needs to be conducted by social psychologists trained in research design and statistical analysis. Only when we put our beliefs to empirical testing can we really know if they actually are true!

Author Biography

Hui Chen was the exclusive consultant to the white-collar crime federal prosecutors in the U.S. Department of Justice's Fraud Section, reviewing corporate ethics & compliance programs of companies in areas such as anti-fraud, anti-bribery/kickback, healthcare, quality control, manipulation of financial markets, process safety, and environmental protection. She currently consults with companies as well as regulatory and enforcement authorities around the world, advising them on corporate compliance programs. Prior to being retained by the Department of Justice, Hui served as a senior compliance leader in industries such as technology (Microsoft), pharmaceutical (Pfizer), and financial services (Standard Chartered Bank).