

Self-Enhancing in Perceptions of Behaving Unethically

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Business schools stress the importance of organizations' achieving a public image of ethical practices and culture. Customers want and need to believe that businesses will treat them fairly and honestly. If customers perceive that an organization treats them fairly, they are more likely to be satisfied with its products and services and return for future patronage. When "quality" products turn out to be of low quality, customers feel cheated and perceptions of business ethics suffer ("The Best Corporate Citizens," 1996).

Employees, another constituency served by organizations, also need to feel that they are treated honestly and ethically (Folger, 1998; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Organizational loyalty and commitment may rest on perceptions of a business's ethics and would be evidenced in employee turnover processes such as those described in the Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and McGlino (1978) model of employee turnover. Conversely, organizations need to have workers with a strong work ethic, commitment to the job, and ethical standards that prevent them from stealing or cheating the company (Bowen, 1982; Steers & Rhodes, 1978, 1980). The same is true for other constituencies such as suppliers and vendors. People tend to not want to do business with those who practice

ABSTRACT. Students' perceptions of their own and other students' ethics were compared. Eighty-seven business majors (43 in accounting and 44 in marketing) returned responses to a questionnaire asking for their perceptions of the likelihood that they and others would engage in unethical behavior, given varying probabilities of their being caught and penalized. Respondents perceived themselves as less likely to engage in unethical behavior than the average person across all scenarios. Results indicated significantly higher levels of self-enhancement bias (SEB) for marketing majors; this difference was moderated by risk. As risk increased, group differences of SEB diminished. These results suggest that SEB may serve as an indicator of engagement in unethical behavior.

unscrupulous business ethics (Narver & Slater, 1990).

Self-Enhancement Bias

Jones and Nisbett (1971) concluded that people tend to attribute their behavior to situational factors and attribute other people's behavior to dispositional causes. This extension of the fundamental attribution error is known as the actor-observer effect. They further suggested that this effect is partially due to differential salience of information available to actors and observers. Many subsequent studies have shown similar

patterns (Alicke, Klotze, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Brown, 1986; Endo, 1995; Krueger, 1998a; Sinha & Krueger, 1998).

For example, Brown (1986) found self-enhancement bias (SEB) in social judgements of self and others. Participants rated a series of positive and negative traits according to how well the traits described themselves and others. Positive attributes were rated as more descriptive of self, whereas negative attributes were less descriptive of self. Alicke et al. (1995) also reported that people evaluate themselves more favorably than others. They demonstrated a positive leniency bias when people compared themselves with someone whom they did not necessarily know, such as the "average student" (labeled a "nonindividuated target"). Alicke et al. labeled this the *better than average* effect. Similarly, Endo's (1995) findings indicated SEB when individuals compared themselves with most other people, but not when they compared themselves with specific, referent others.

Interestingly, Krueger (1998a) also showed an enhancement bias in descriptions of self and others. Krueger demonstrated that most people exhibit SEB and expect others to self-enhance also, but will refrain from self-enhancing when instructed to estimate social

norms. These results suggest that self-enhancement is a bias individuals can “access” or consciously influence, at least to some degree.

Finally, Sinha and Krueger (1998) developed an idiographic index of self-evaluation bias and compared it with two difference-score measures of self-enhancement. Difference-score indices of self-enhancement measured the degree to which people rated (a) themselves more or less favorably than others and (b) themselves more or less favorably than they were rated by others. These difference score measures were defined as reflecting a common rater paradigm (CRP) and common target paradigm (CTP), respectively. The idiographic index was the correlation between the respondents’ ratings of how well certain traits described them and their ratings of how desirable the traits are. Unlike the CRP and CTP indices, the idiographic bias index does not confound distorted evaluation of others with distorted evaluation of self. Hence, an advantage of this index is that it does not depend on ratings of others or ratings by others.

Although most people assume that others agree with them on most issues (the false consensus effect), McFarland and Miller (1990) identified specific issues on which people inaccurately felt that they held a minority position. The false uniqueness effect is defined as systematic under estimation of “self–other” similarity. There are times when a deviant perception from the norm implies superiority. Hence, false uniqueness effects are understandable in these situations in which self-esteem is preserved or enhanced.

Goethals (1986) conducted a series of studies demonstrating this point. In one study, students indicated whether they would be willing to donate blood. Then they were asked to estimate the percentage of other students who would volunteer to donate. Those who volunteered to donate comprised the majority; however, they predicted that only a minority of others would donate. Goethals suggested that volunteer students’ perceptions were motivated by a desire to enhance their self-esteem. SEB likely plays a role in many instances

of false uniqueness (Miller & McFarland, 1991).

School and Business Ethics

Interestingly, the “ethical” choice may or may not coincide with self-enhancement. Research supporting SEB effects suggests that SEB can occur in situations involving ethics perceptions. For example, Goethals’s (1986) study may have involved perceptions of ethics because donating blood is the “right” or “ethical” thing to do.

Alternatively, in explaining perceptions of unethical behavior based on attribution theory, Buckley, Harvey, and Wiese (1997) argued that people might be influenced to engage in cheating behavior because they believe that everyone else does it. Individuals who believe that they are ethical and that unethical behavior is common conclude that everyone else is unethical. (Thus, those individuals demonstrate SEB by enhancing their perceptions of their own ethical standards relative to others’.) This perception of widespread unethical behavior may lead people to engage in unethical behavior in order to “compete” on even ground even though they know that their actions are morally wrong.

There may, however, be some limits to the tendency to engage in this type of unethical behavior. These limits may be associated with the level of risk of being caught. Buckley, Wiese, and Harvey (1998) examined influences on unethical behavior in school and business settings. They found that the probability of being caught and penalized effectively predicted the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior. The findings were in the expected direction: The higher the chances of being caught, the lower the indication of engaging in the unethical behavior. Results suggested that male students who scored high in hostility and aggression reported a higher propensity to engage in unethical behavior. These findings converge with the previous literature and permit the following assumption:

Assumption 1: Perceptions of self and others’ unethical behavior will exhibit self-enhancement bias (SEB).

People will tend to be positively biased in their self-perceptions.

Self-Enhancement Bias Operationally Defined

SEB has been defined as the tendency to describe oneself more positively than the social norm. Krueger (1998a) specifically described SEB as an ego-centric pattern of discrepancies between self-ratings and relevant social norms. For the present study, however, we operationally defined SEB as it pertains to unethical behavior as a positive difference between the perceived probability of the self’s and average “other” people’s engagement in unethical behavior, in the same situation. In other words, SEB is the degree to which a given individual perceives him- or herself as more ethical than the average person in the same situation. The “situation” characteristic of most interest in ethical decision contexts is the perceived risk level of being caught and penalized.

Krueger (1998a) demonstrated that SEB could be influenced by decision context. In the present study, we extend Krueger’s research to ethical decision contexts by posing the following question: Does the amount of SEB vary by level of probability of being caught and penalized? The three-part rationale behind this question was as follows: (a) The likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior decreases as likelihood of being caught and punished increases, (b) the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior is positively related to SEB, and (c) SEB is negatively related to likelihood of being caught and punished.

Hypothesis 1: SEB decreases as probability of being caught and penalized increases.

Extending Buckley et al.’s (1998) findings involving hostility and aggression, in this study we also examined select individual difference characteristics. Personality variables have recently re-entered the arena of viable, criterion-valid selection systems (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Further, self-selection and socialization into college majors may play a role in subsequent levels of SEB observed in ethical decisions.

Personality and Self-Selection

Personality differences in narcissism may play a role in the likelihood of exhibiting SEB. In a study of accuracy and bias in self-perception, John and Robbins (1994) used a common target paradigm (CTP) comparing self-evaluations with peer evaluations. They found narcissism (excessive admiration of oneself) strongly associated with individual differences in SEB. Similarly, Gosling, John, Craik, and Robbins (1998) compared self-reported acts with observer codings in a study examining behavioral self-awareness. They found SEB in self-reports to be particularly prevalent for narcissistic individuals.

Individual differences in personality may also be relevant in predicting integrity. For example, Ones, Viswesvaran, and Schmidt (1996) reported substantial correlation between integrity tests and the three dimensions of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability. Results also indicated that each of these dimensions independently contribute to predictability of integrity test scores.

Personality may influence choice of career as well (Eberhardt & Muchinsky, 1984). Students in the present study had self-selected into a business major, presumably on the basis of their personal motivation to do so.

Assumption 2: Self-selection occurs with choice of business major.

In our study, we considered whether individuals' selection of major depends on their ethical frameworks and attitudes. Machiavellianism has been described as the use of cunning, dishonest methods of deceit to achieve a desired outcome (i.e., power or control). In a study examining Machiavellianism among various college majors, McLean and Jones (1992) found that business students in general (compared with non-business majors) and marketing students specifically (compared with other business majors) scored higher in Machiavellianism. Unethical behavior can be considered similar to Machiavellianism, because both behaviors involve the use of deceit and other dubious means for attainment of ends. Other terms relating to Machiavellianism are

immorality, despotism, treachery, and craftiness. Thus, SEB, as it pertains to unethical behavior, may also vary according to college business major (e.g., in marketing versus accounting majors).

Hypothesis 2: Average SEB is greater for marketing majors than for accounting majors.

Risk and Accountability: A Model of Social Contingency

In the present study, we considered whether likelihood of being caught and penalized covaries with levels of accountability. We expected the risk of being caught and penalized to increase as the chance of individuals' being held responsible for their actions increased. The social contingency model of accountability may explain the relationship between SEB in unethical behavior and the risk of being caught and penalized. The model is based on the assumption that accountability on the part of the observer can reduce judgmental bias (Tetlock & Lerner, 1999). Tetlock and Boettger (1989) demonstrated this principle by manipulating levels of accountability among participants who were making predictions from either diagnostic information alone or diagnostic information along with additional data. Findings showed that subjects who were accountable for their judgements were motivated to use a wide range of information in making their predictions.

Additionally, Tetlock (1985) tested whether accountability reduces or eliminates fundamental attribution error. He manipulated accountability by pressuring participants to justify to others their personal causal interpretations of a target's behavior. Findings suggested that accountability eliminated fundamental attribution error by affecting how participants initially encoded and analyzed stimulus information. Thus, if accountability increases with risk of being caught and penalized, attribution error and SEB may decrease.

A key difference between accounting and marketing majors may lie in the levels of "accountability" inherent in those areas. The accounting field has certain

industry standards that maintain accountability (e.g., the Generally Accepted Accounting Principles), but no such standards exist in the marketing field. However, SEB differences between marketing and accounting majors will likely depend on the probability of being caught and penalized. We predicted that the difference in SEB between majors would diminish as the likelihood of being caught approached 100%. We expected that students would be more likely to view themselves as more similar to the average person in ethical behavior as their risk of being caught increased, regardless of major.

Hypothesis 3: SEB differences between accounting and marketing majors are moderated by levels of probability of being caught and penalized.

Method

Participants

We solicited respondents from a large, undergraduate business class at a large midwestern U.S. university. We collected data over three separate semesters to increase sample size and control for history effects. Students participated in our investigation during regular class hours and received extra credit. We distributed a 90-item questionnaire, and administrators emphasized anonymity to encourage accurate responses. A total of 382 questionnaires were returned, though 15 were unusable because of missing data. Of 367 usable responses, 87 were either from accounting or marketing majors and made up the sample analyzed here. Forty-nine percent (43) were accounting majors, and 50% (44) were marketing majors; 65.5% were women (57 females and 30 males), and 5.75% (5) were international students.

Procedure

Measures. We asked participants to complete a questionnaire asking respondents for their perceptions of the likelihood of their own and others' engagement in unethical behaviors, given varying degrees of being caught and penalized. Using brief vignettes, we

FIGURE 1. A Typical Response Option Matrix for Each Vignette in the Questionnaire

100											
90											
80											
70	◆										
60		◆									
50											
40			◆								
30				◆							
20											
10					◆	◆					
0							◆	◆	◆	◆	◆
%	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100

Note. For each level of probability of being caught and penalized, respondents indicated the perceived probability of engaging in unethical behavior.

asked respondents to imagine themselves and the “average person” in a situation involving the possibility of unethical behavior (such as cheating on a test at school). Within each vignette, the likelihood of being caught and punished was manipulated from 0% to 100% (in 10% increments). Respondents indicated the perceived likelihood (from 0%–100% in 10% increments) that they or others would engage in the unethical behavior. In Figure 1, we provide an example of a single vignette’s response option matrix. Subsequent questions asked for respondents’ perceptions of self and others. For example, the following is an example of a question targeting individual respondents’ self-perceptions:

1. If the chance of being caught and penalized is _____, the probability that YOU would engage in unethical behavior (cheat) in school would be _____.

2. If the chance of being caught and

penalized is _____, the probability that THE AVERAGE UNIVERSITY STUDENT would engage in unethical behavior (cheat) in school would be _____.

3. If the chance of being caught and penalized is _____, the probability that YOU would engage in unethical behavior (cheat) in business would be _____.

4. If the chance of being caught and penalized is _____, the probability that THE AVERAGE BUSINESSPERSON would engage in unethical behavior (cheat) in business would be _____.

We varied vignette characteristics systematically to maximize generalizability of results. Characteristics included setting (school vs. business), amount of gain (low vs. high) to be achieved through cheating, and the gain’s scope (personal, organizational, or societal).

Design. We used a common rater paradigm (CRP) approach to measure SEB

TABLE 1. Mean Self-Enhancement Bias (SEB) as a Function of Probability of Being Caught and Penalized (N = 87)

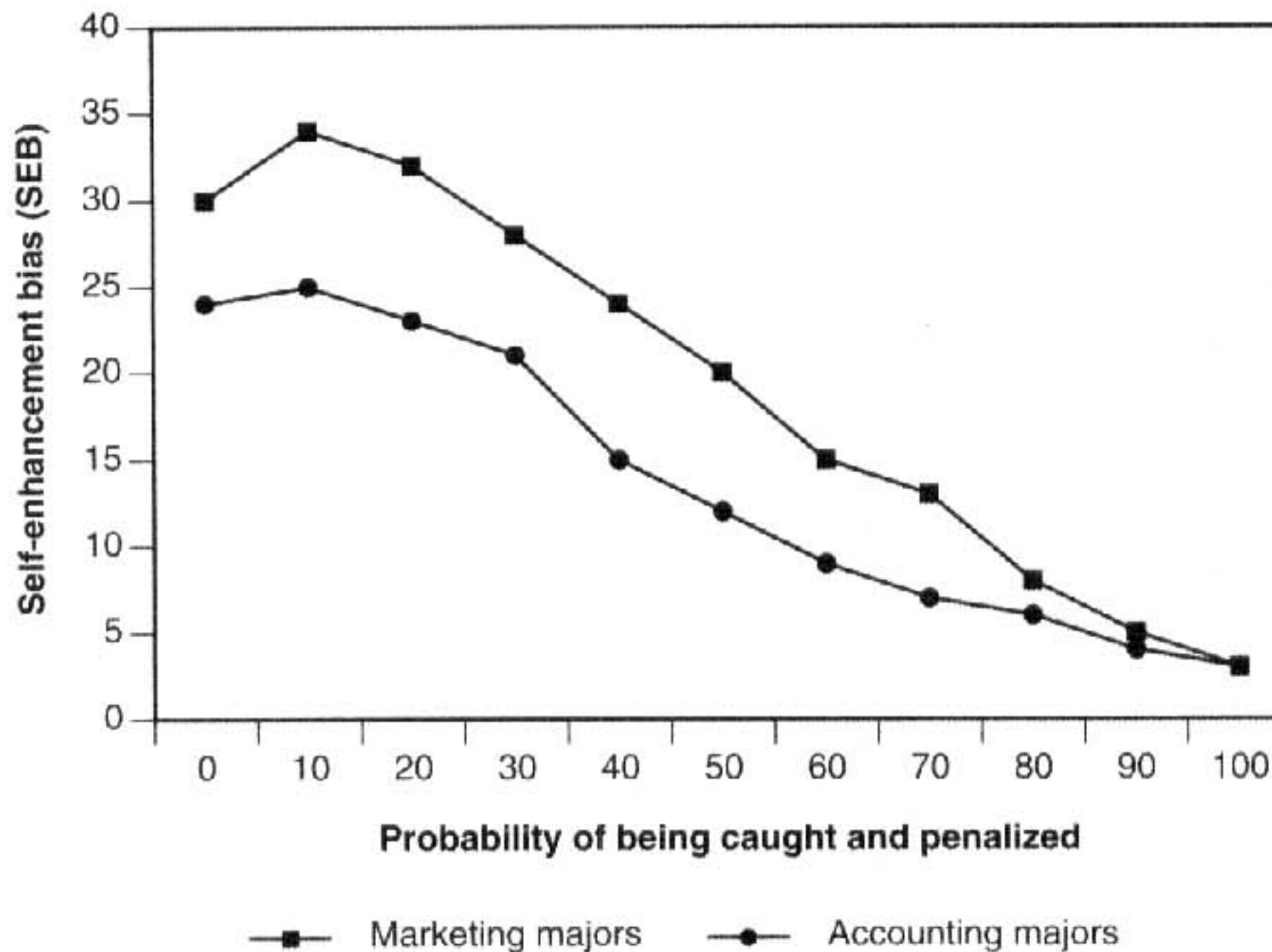
Probability of being caught/penalized (%)	SEB (%)	
	M	SD
0	27.36	21.84
10	29.92	20.09
20	27.59	19.26
30	24.29	18.50
40	19.72	16.37
50	15.66	14.47
60	12.48	12.21
70	9.72	10.34
80	7.01	7.89
90	4.39	5.75
100	2.24	4.21

(Sinha & Krueger, 1998). In the CRP approach, we used the difference between self and “other” (average person) ratings for each level of probability of being caught and punished to measure SEB. We then aggregated SEB ratings across the various scenarios (e.g., high personal gain or low personal gain) for an overall measure of SEB. This aggregation of the vignette characteristics was necessary because of the relatively small sample size, which prevented an examination of these between-factors effects. However, the variation in vignette characteristics enhanced external validity and generalizability of the results. Thus, the study was a repeated measures design with 11 levels of the within factor (chance of being caught and penalized) and two levels of the between factor (type of self-reported business major).

Analyses and Results

In Table 1, we report mean SEBs and standard deviations for the 11 levels of probability of being caught and penalized. With the exception of mean SEB at 0%, the means demonstrate a monotonic decreasing trend. Mean SEB increased between 0% and 10% chances of being caught and then proceeded downward as chance of being caught and penalized increased. SEB means and standard deviations for accounting and marketing majors were $M = 13.44$, $SD = 13.32$, and $M = 19.35$, $SD = 14.12$, respectively.

FIGURE 2. Mean SEB as a Function of Business Major by Probability of Being Caught and Penalized



A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the within-subject effect across the 11 levels of probability of being caught and penalized yielded a significant main effect, $F(10, 850) = 108.35, p < .0001, MSE = 79.85$. This effect size was estimated at $\omega^2 = .925$, a large effect. This supports Hypothesis 1: SEB decreases as probability of being caught and penalized increases. Because of possible floor effects driving this main effect, we conducted a follow-up analysis using the Friedman test, a nonparametric two-way ANOVA by ranks (Conover, 1971), which also yielded a significant result $T(10) = 23.9, p < .01$. Therefore, we can conclude that there was a tendency for SEB to change as risk levels shifted.

In addition, a repeated measures ANOVA yielded a significant between-subjects main effect in a comparison of means for accounting and marketing majors, $F(1, 85) = 5.08, p = .027, MSE = 1648.435$. This effect was estimated at $\omega^2 = .045$, a small effect size according to Cohen's (1977) criteria of fixed effect sizes. Because of the directional nature of Hypothesis 2 and the fact that the effect was in the predicted direction, we conducted a one-tailed test of mean differences, $t(85) = 2.254, p = .0135$. This

supports Hypothesis 2: SEB is greater for marketing majors than for accounting majors.

Finally, we observed a significant interaction effect between type of business major and levels of probability of being caught and punished, $F(10, 850) = 2.55, p = .005, MSE = 79.85$. The interaction effect size was estimated at $\omega^2 = .15$. This supports Hypothesis 3: SEB differences between accounting and marketing majors are moderated by levels of probability of being caught and punished. In Figure 2, we illustrate this interaction: As level of risk increased, SEB diminished at different rates for each major.

Discussion

Results suggested a generally decreasing monotonic trend of mean SEB as levels of perceived risk increased. Students exhibited less enhanced perceptions of their own ethical behavior as the chance of being caught and punished increased. This finding supports Hypothesis 1. The same decreasing monotonic trend existed for the standard deviations, although this was likely due to a simple floor effect (see Table 1). Buckley et al.

(1998) reported that the probability of being caught and penalized predicted the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior. This effect was replicated in our SEB results reported earlier: The higher the chances of being caught and penalized, the lower the amount of reported SEB. If we consider the restriction in range of perceived probability of engaging in unethical behavior as risk levels increase, this similarity is understandable. The limited range of probabilities of engaging in unethical behavior exhibited as chance of being caught and penalized approached 100% effectively restricted the range of possible SEB (a floor effect). However, follow-up analysis of this main effect through the Friedman test, a nonparametric two-way ANOVA by ranks (Conover, 1971), yielded a significant result ($p < .01$). We can conclude that there was a tendency for SEB to differ according to risk levels. Thus, the decrease in SEB as risk increased could result from the students' feeling that they would behave more like average people when their chances of getting caught and punished neared 100%.

In Figure 2, we illustrate the single exception to this trend. SEB was smaller for both groups at the 0% chance of being caught and punished, jumped upward at the 10% chance, and then proceeded downward as the chance of being caught and penalized increased. When there was no perceived risk, students seemed to believe that they might engage in unethical behavior as frequently as the average person might, that is, they exhibited less SEB. However, the slightest chance of being caught and penalized caused students to indicate that they would not engage in unethical behavior as frequently as most people would. Thus, SEB appeared to be greatest at the smallest nonzero probability of being caught and penalized (10%). This is a novel finding relative to past research and suggests that people may have less biased, more realistic self-perceptions under relatively extreme situational circumstances (i.e., zero probability of being caught and punished). Alternatively, the results hold interesting possible implications for individuals who nonetheless exhibit SEB when there is zero probability of

being caught—if most individuals exhibit less SEB under such conditions, those who continue to exhibit SEB may be especially deceitful (to themselves or others). Future researchers should examine whether SEB exhibited under such conditions is predictive of organizational outcomes of interest (e.g., criminal, citizenship, and other direct and indirect measures of ethical behaviors).

Personality variables may account for choice of career path or self-selection into college major (Assumption 3). In addition, personality variables such as narcissism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism have been correlated with either scores on integrity tests or SEB (Gosling et al., 1998; John & Robbins, 1994; Ones et al., 1996). Similarly, McLean and Jones (1992) reported that marketing students scored higher in Machiavellianism than other business students did. In the present study we posit that individual differences in personality contribute to self-selection into college business majors; therefore, group (i.e., accounting vs. marketing majors) differences in personality may predict SEB differences. The significant difference shown in SEB between accounting and business majors supported Hypothesis 2. The SEB difference between academic majors has a number of interesting implications. In comparing accounting and marketing majors, one should not paint one group in a particularly bad ethical light. Rather, such a comparison demonstrates that there are fundamental differences in SEB depending on self-selected initial career path. Individuals pursuing marketing majors may be more motivated to enhance product sales, whereas those in accounting are subject to legal fiduciary responsibilities in ensuring the accuracy of standard financial documents. Alternatively, SEB differences may reflect differences in career “climate” or environment, independent of incumbent individual differences.

In addition to a significant difference in SEB between marketing and accounting majors, we found a significant interaction effect between academic major and likelihood of being caught and penalized. In Figure 2, we illustrated this moderator effect: Group SEB differences diminished as risk levels

increased, supporting Hypothesis 3. The social contingency model of accountability holds that accountability on the part of the observer reduces judgment biases such as SEB (Tetlock & Boettger, 1989; Tetlock & Lerner, 1999). Further, past researchers have found that increased levels of accountability eliminated occurrence of fundamental attribution error (Tetlock, 1985), a hallmark of SEB. It was assumed that attenuation of overattribution due to increased accountability is common across both types of majors. Nonetheless, findings confirmed the study’s three hypotheses: (a) SEB exhibited in ethical decision contexts decreases as probability of being caught and penalized increases, (b) differences in average amount of SEB exist between accounting and marketing majors, and (c) SEB differences between majors diminish as the chances of being caught and punished increase.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Can SEB serve as an indicator of integrity? Terris and Jones (1982) reported that typical employee thieves attributed more theft to others, indicating an overattribution in unethical behavior. Increased SEB exhibited by students may predict propensity to engage in unethical behavior, especially under extreme conditions such as when there is zero likelihood of being caught. In future research, measures of SEB (as it pertains to ethical behavior) should be examined as possible predictors of theft and other aberrant organizational behavior.

Individual differences in SEB as it pertains to unethical behavior also might be useful in predicting outcomes of interest. Counterproductive behaviors associated with organizational delinquency (i.e., insubordination, absenteeism, bogus worker compensation claims, etc.) constitute costly unethical behaviors (Cascio, 2000). Hosmer (1996) argued that increasing global competition and advancing technological complexity is causing companies to be more dependent and trusting of workers, managers, stakeholders, and other business associates. Ethics of managers particularly may influence

subordinates’ behaviors, trust, and commitment (and vice versa). Using a CTP, Morgan (1993) measured self–others’ ratings of managerial ethics and found managers’ self-ratings to be more favorable. He also found that coworker perceptions of ethics were related to perceptions of leadership. A reliable predictor of ethical behavior would be useful in making personnel selection decisions in such an environment.

Finally, ethical SEB measures may be useful in diagnosing when worker empowerment practices should or should not be used. Pfeffer, Cialdini, Hanna, and Knopoff (1998) found evidence of SEB in tendencies of managers to evaluate work products more highly when they were more personally involved in its production. Evidence of high SEB may conceivably lead to a reluctance to empower otherwise competent workers.

In sum, use of SEB measures as an indirect assessment of personal integrity holds promise for personnel selection, given possible relationships of SEB (as it pertains to unethical behavior) with organizational outcomes. Future criterion validity research incorporating SEB measures in assessment of overt integrity tests should confirm whether SEB in ethics predicts propensity to engage in unethical behavior.

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