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Current Opinion in Psychology

Review

When honesty checks-out: Willful ignorance and the persistence of unethical environments

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This article examines how willful ignorance among (mostly) honest individuals contributes to the persistence and escalation of unethical behavior within certain environments. When individuals choose to avoid morally relevant information, they disengage from situations that would compel ethical action. This disengagement not only permits dishonesty to continue but also drives selection and sorting processes by which ethically flexible individuals are drawn to and retained in ever-more-corrupt environments. Over time, this dynamic cements systemic corruption and makes it more difficult for honest individuals to intervene. The article presents a conceptual framework outlining these self-reinforcing mechanisms and discusses implications for organizational and societal ethics. The framework clarifies why common countermeasures against dishonesty (entry barriers, shaming, or transparency) often backfire. The described self-reinforcing dynamics (where environments shape who enters, and the entrants then solidify the environment) are often overlooked in experimental psychological research, which focuses on emphasizing random assignment over self-selection, sorting, and endogenous-emergence designs.

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Introduction

The deliberate choice to avoid ethical dilemmas or disregard unwelcome information is critical in shaping environments where selfish behavior thrives [1–3]. These tendencies allow individuals to protect a positive self-image, signal virtue, and, at the same time, pursue self-interest by avoiding decisions that would compel them to act morally or confront uncomfortable truths about their morality [4,5]. An academic might delegate crucial work to research assistants and not look closely at anomalies in the data, allowing her to publish favorable results while later claiming ignorance if any issues are discovered [6]. In a financial advisory firm where consumer deception is tolerated or even encouraged, a responsible financial adviser might choose not to dig into colleagues' misbehavior or, eventually, leave [7]. Similarly, new team members exposed to unethical leader behavior may decide to leave the team to avoid knowing what the leader and his team are doing [8]. Even honest and agentic people may prefer not to know the consequences of their actions if that knowledge would force them to make prohibitively costly moral choices; e.g., whistleblowing, which generally leads to a radical decline in the quality of life of whistleblowers [9].

In addition to these direct effects of willful ignorance on the persistence of dishonest behavior, there is arguably an even more important second-order effect of drawing highly dishonest people into such an environment [10] and allowing them to seek and attain more power, thereby exacerbating systemic corruption [11]. The more power dishonest people have, the less effective are retributive and restorative efforts to curb their unethical behavior [12,13] because these measures require increasingly more and more resources, information, and community coordination to be successful — requirements that are impeded by willful ignorance of (otherwise) honest people.

This article examines the sorting and selection mechanisms by which willful ignorance leads honest individuals to be underrepresented in situations or environments that enable cheating and analyzes the consequences of this selection on the prevalence and persistence of dishonest behavior within these situations or environments. The selection/sorting processes warrant deeper investigation in social psychology because its focus on random experimental assignment often overlooks self-selection and person-situation fit [14]. The total effect of values or moral traits on behaviors such as (dis)honesty, deception, and corruption may be more pronounced when accounting for how these traits influence the likelihood of encountering situations that enable such behaviors [15]. Our second aim in this article is, therefore, to make methodological recommendations for experimental designs that take

Current Opinion in Psychology 2026, **67**:102185

This review comes from a themed issue on Willful Ignorance

Edited by Shaul Salvi, Susann Fiedler, Fiona Tho Pesch and Anna Baumert

For complete overview about the section, refer Willful Ignorance

Available online 22 September 2025

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2025.102185

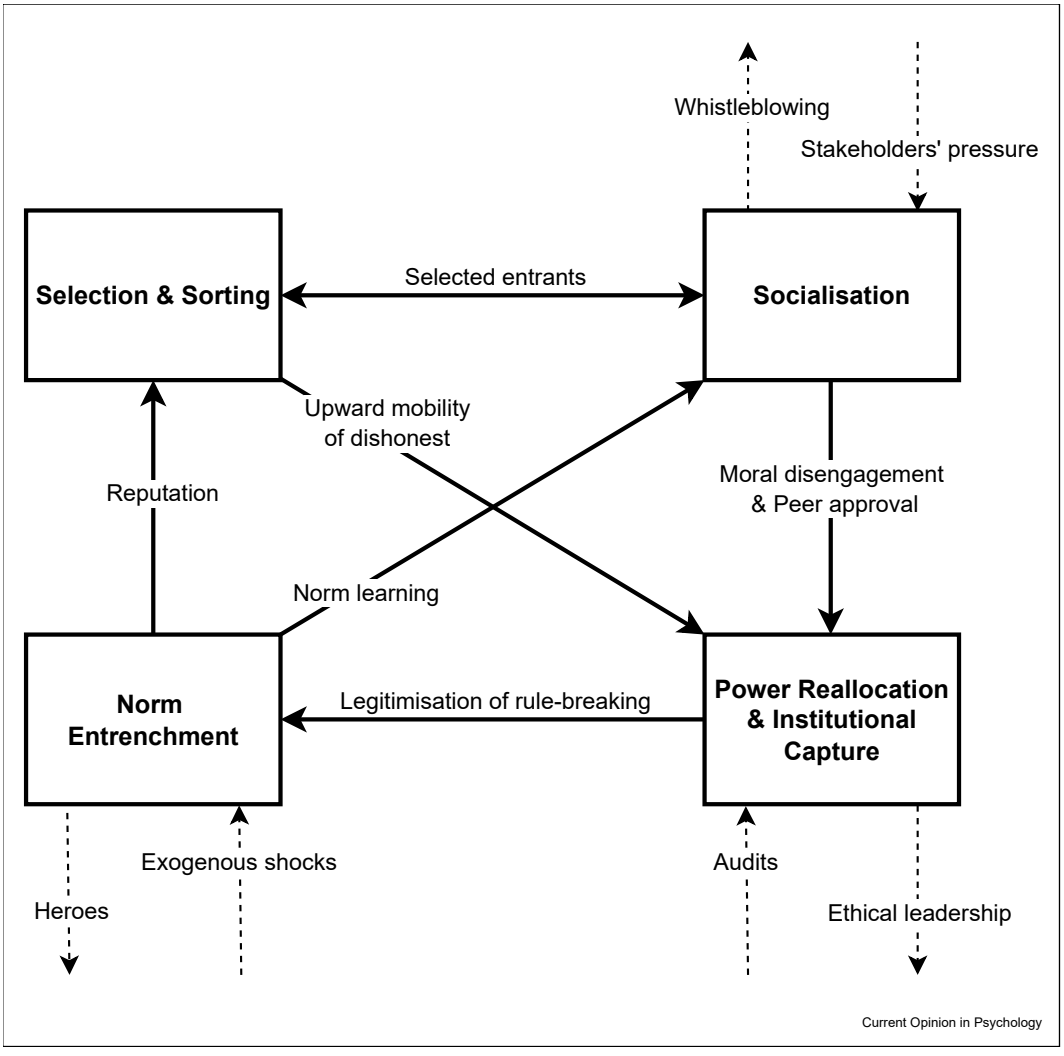
into account selection effects and the effects of marginal individuals when studying group or organizational impacts of willful ignorance.

Our simple framework (see Figure 1) explains how initially mixed settings drift toward systemic corruption: once an environment gains a reputation for rewarding corner-cutting, applicants with a tendency for dishonesty self-select in the environment, while reputation-sensitive candidates either stay away from the environment or demand compensation for the reputational costs (Selection & Sorting). The resulting pool of (self-) selected group members is socialized by established norms and by other like-minded individuals (Socialisation). The select group favors the promotion of ethically flexible employees who are willing to turn a blind eye to corrupt behavior while themselves being motivated to disengage from the consequences of the leader's transgressions (Power Reallocation & Institutional Capture). These leaders rewrite rules and information flows, normalising rule-breaking and further entrenching socially pathological norms until only extraordinary shocks can reset the system (Norm Entrenchment).

Selection & sorting

Environments that openly or tacitly start to reward corner-cutting not only permit unethical actors to operate; they pull them in. Individuals able and willing to exploit unethical opportunities thus become disproportionately represented in these environments [16]. This selection process manifests in two distinct ways. First, applicants with an inclination toward dishonesty are disproportionately drawn to roles in which there are extractable informal rents, even if formal pay is modest. They trade lower official salaries for the prospect of

Figure 1



Feedback loops of organisational corruption: Selection & Sorting, Socialisation, Power Reallocation & Institutional Capture, and Norm Entrenchment; dotted arrows mark potential breakpoints, internally (e.g., whistleblowing, ethical leadership, heroes) or externally triggered (e.g., audits, exogenous shocks).

covert, higher-yield gains, as usual in many countries' public-sector organizations [11,17,18]. Although conscientious citizens also compete for positions in government bodies, licensing authorities, and other regulatory agencies, widespread willful ignorance about the hidden incentives attached to these offices masks the extent to which such vacancies are ultimately captured by individuals prepared to exploit weak oversight for personal enrichment [19].

Second, even though honest or guilt-prone individuals may try to avoid corrupt environments, the transparently immoral work is associated with higher wages [20]. Honest or guilt-prone applicants can thus wind up in unethical organizations when unusually high wages, bonuses, or professional prestige tempt them to look away from early warning signs. Anticipating attractive pay, they may choose not to look for information or ask probing questions about where the finances come from [20,21]. Even otherwise honest individuals who end up in an environment known to reward corner-cutting are thus selected on their willingness to look the other way and their ethical flexibility in view of substantial rewards [22].

Socialisation

The sorting does not end at entry. Newcomers are socialised into the local moral climate through exposure to responses to norm violations [23]. Without ethical leaders, honest employees experience disillusionment and either silence themselves, willfully ignoring the group's problems, or quit; phenomena documented as the selective-attrition effect [24].

The remaining honest people apply a variety of moral self-regulation processes and develop self-serving narratives to justify organizational misconduct (but see [25]), i.e., their values undergo pro-organizational changes, and their identification with the organization grows [26]. Research on collaborative dishonesty shows how dishonest behavior reliably pulls others into collusion and in-group mentality, and the frequency of dishonesty increasingly rises as the behavior is reciprocated [27–29]. Joint cheating could thus become a cooperative norm of a group, leading even prosocial individuals astray.

Through socialisation, group members learn to self-servingly evaluate unethical practice as evidence of proficient job performance rather than deviance [30,31]. At the individual level, canonical mechanisms of moral disengagement (euphemistic relabelling, diffusion of responsibility, etc.) attenuate self-sanctions and preserve a favourable moral self-concept [32,33]. Residual cognitive dissonance is further resolved through dissonance-reduction processes such as redefining the negative broad social externalities as not-so-bad [34] and rationalizing dishonesty as pro-organisational behavior [35]. The unethical acts can also be motivationally misremembered [36,37].

Those willing to exploit grey zones to the maximum enjoy payoffs and peer approval, reinforcing commitment and accelerating their rise to positions of influence [38]. The attrition of the honest individuals compounds the initial attraction mechanism, inflating the proportion and the hierarchical clout of ethically flexible actors.

Power reallocation & institutional capture

The selection of dishonest individuals and those willing to turn a blind eye to dishonesty soon manifests in the upward mobility of ethically flexible employees who reap private gains that accelerate promotion, while employees who refuse to bend the rules exit or stall. The organizational transformation into "a bad barrel" is supported by several group processes [39].

First, experimental evidence shows that once individuals observe norm violations that are rewarded, honest individuals disengage, paving the way for the most opportunistic to assume supervisory or decisive roles [8,40]. Moreover, the ascent of powerful transgressors is actively legitimized by followers. Group or organization members prefer leaders who secure in-group gains even if they violate moral norms, a pattern replicated in studies of both organisational competition and political partisanship [41]. Recent experimental work by Bahník and colleagues [42] showed that participants voted for the candidate who had demonstrably cheated in a prior round when the future spoils of dishonesty were to be shared within the group. Crucially, even honest participants tended to vote for the dishonest performer once collective payoffs were at stake.

Second, individual dishonest skills or tactics are recoded as evidence of task-relevant expertise and leadership [30]. The very act of cheating or deceiving may signal that an individual possesses the persuasive agility presumed essential for some positions or occupations (like investment banking, advertising, and aggressive sales). In Gunia and Levine's study [30], deceivers were not only rated as more capable than truth-tellers, they were systematically selected for those positions, prioritizing the immediate, in-group gains the cheater could deliver and ignoring moral costs borne by outsiders or abstract principles of truthfulness.

As these preferences feed promotion decisions, dishonest leaders increasingly occupy gate-keeping

positions where they can manipulate institutional rules and resources to insulate themselves from scrutiny. The resulting climate amplifies self-selection pressures externally and selective attrition internally, locking the organisation into a high-corruption state.

Norm entrenchment

The cost to the minority of honest individuals to change an environment where corruption prevails becomes prohibitive, and they are more likely to succumb to widespread corruption or focus solely on their work while ignoring the dishonesty of their colleagues and leaders [43]. By choosing to remain ignorant of the extent of the corruption and morally disengaging from its consequences, they may become complicit and indirectly profit from the dishonesty of others [44]. Their motivation could be to appear moral yet still benefit themselves from the environment [45]. However, the honest individuals may still become external commentators, virtuously signaling moral contempt for the environment that allows cheating and people in it.

Attempts to deter dishonesty by imposing higher entry costs, shaming, or enhancing transparency can backfire under the described selection pressures. Raising entry barriers (e.g., tighter certification, higher requirements) can intensify adverse selection: applicants who incur these front-loaded costs subsequently increase the scale or sophistication of cheating to recoup them, especially when oversight remains weak. Higher entry costs thus lead the dishonest to seek compensation for the costs by cheating even more [16,42]. Similarly, shaming campaigns may just homogenise the workforce by driving reputation-sensitive incumbents to depart while leaving hardened opportunists unfazed. Enhanced transparency, often touted as a universal remedy, can inadvertently broadcast descriptive norms of dishonesty, normalising the practice to observers and increasing aggregate cheating [46,47]. Moreover, transparency rewards those possessing superior deceptive competencies, reinforcing the premium for rule-breakers [30].

This state of affairs could be broken by an extraordinary event changing the motivational structure, e.g. crackdown on corruption [48], or social norms, e.g., #MeToo movement [49], a hero or whistleblower [50] which will allow a new equilibrium to be established by the entry of new individuals and/or removal of the most significant transgressors in a given environment.

Discussion and inspirations for future research

Even though the topics of willful ignorance and dishonesty are well-researched, much of the causal evidence in the field of behavioral ethics comes from studies that randomly assign participants to experimental and control conditions. Although behavioral researchers have focused on various identification strategies [51] and heterogeneous effects on different participants in recent years [52,53], little attention has been paid to how individuals get to ethically charged settings in the first place. As our framework shows, there are at least three distinct mechanisms (accidentally, by selection or sorting, and by creating them), and the interpretation of their behavior, as well as the likely effectiveness of any intervention and the role of willful ignorance, depend on which route brought them there [54].

The first route is accidental exposure (i.e., random assignment). Most experimental studies in behavioral ethics assign participants to an "un/ethical leader," "dis/honest colleague," "mis/conduct opportunity," or "information knowing/ignoring" conditions, so they can capture a situational effect and its moderation by personality. Because the opportunity is unearned, dishonest acts are justified by participants post-hoc, typically via self-serving rationalisations, or unscrupulously exploited by truly unethical individuals. On the other hand, willful ignorance cannot be used to retain positive self-concept because participants have no choice over the information they receive. Its impact on moral behavior is therefore underestimated by most experimental studies on dishonesty, unless they specifically allow participants to choose information they want to see [2].

The second route is by situational choices or sorting mechanisms. People can accept or refuse roles that signal moral risk (e.g., working in the tobacco industry); they can seek or avoid environments where it is easy to cheat; and there may be a sorting mechanism that rewards or punishes dishonesty. Here, behaviour will be shaped mostly by dispositional characteristics and anticipatory willful ignorance; the individual motivationally looks away from red flags to secure personal gains.

To study selection empirically, studies should first let participants choose whether to enter a cheating-friendly (information-obscuring, disengagement-enabling environment, etc.) or a neutral environment and then observe their behaviour inside the environment. Houdek et al. [16] illustrate this two-stage experimental architecture: participants could either join a task that allowed misreporting of incentivized predictions or a similar task that made lying impossible. Subsequent cheating rates were compared with a separate control group, which was randomly assigned the task. By inserting an entry-choice stage, researchers can separately estimate selection effects of who chooses the cheating option, and environmental effects, i.e., how much additional dishonesty the context elicits. The design prevents the analytical error of attributing all downstream misconduct to the environment when, in fact, part of it is imported by the very people who choose (not) to be there.

The third route is the creation of the environment. Some individuals choose to invest time and resources in creating or securing positions that enable dishonesty or, conversely, to police it. The motivational residue of such efforts typically deepens moral disengagement among the unscrupulous but strengthens moral commitment among the watchdogs.

Random assignment into an environment cannot reveal how a rule-bending environment arises or how rule-benders attain an important role in the first place. Future work may adopt endogenous-emergence designs in which a high-leverage position (e.g., leader, information gate-keeper, etc.) is obtained through competition, election, or bidding that mimics organisational or group dynamics [55]. The very contest becomes diagnostic: individuals who foresee private gains from (un)ethical conduct of their group are motivated to invest the most effort or resources to secure the seat [44]. This endogenous-emergence design could show how just a few motivated, dishonest individuals may lock their group into unethical group behavior, even though the vast majority of their group members would not want to behave that way.

The same logic extends downward. When supervisors are randomly matched to subordinates in experimental studies, the leader effects are averaged out; an unethical manager might land on a highly principled team and exert little influence. Allowing leaders to choose their subordinates, however, triggers assortative matching that concentrates like-minded rule-benders in homogeneous units. Soraperra et al.'s [56] adviser-market paradigm illustrates the logic: when decision-makers could choose their adviser, contracts gravitated to advisers prepared to suppress inconvenient information (about a negative externality to a charity), and the matched clients then passively benefited from the ignorance they had effectively purchased. On the other hand, decision-makers were less likely to implement their preferred option when they were randomly assigned to advisers. This dynamics mirrors real organisations, where it is often the decisions of one individual, not the average employee, that set the ethical trajectory for everyone else.

Because each of these three routes requires a different mix of personal values, agency, expectation, self-justification, and resulting group dynamics, identical situational cues or interventions can elicit different responses. Interventions that work in a random-assignment paradigm with the general population, e.g., honesty pledges [57], may underperform or backfire when the same "situation" is occupied by actors who actively chose or strived to be there [58].

In sum, integrating sorting, self-selection, and endogenous environment emergence into experimental designs will enhance their external validity, allowing empirical findings on willful ignorance and dishonesty to generalise more faithfully to real-world unethical group climates.

Credit author statement

Both authors contributed equally to the conceptualisation, writing and revision of the paper.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors did not use AI-assisted technologies in the writing process.

Funding

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GA ČR) Grant No. 23-06989S. We are indebted to the organizers and participants of The Future of Behavioral Ethics: Social Perspectives on Dishonesty Workshop (EASP Meeting) for insightful comments and challenging questions.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

5. * Rimbaud and Soldà present a model in which "subjective" belief-dependent actors value what they think others expect of them, and can therefore lower their psychological costs by hunting for information that tells them those expectations are modest. The study shows that people do not merely avoid inconvenient facts; they also cherry-pick flattering facts, so policies that rely on transparency alone may not curb selfish behaviour.

10. * In a field experiment where U.S. freelancers were invited to report COVID-19 deaths, 70 % took a truthful control job, 61 % accepted a job that explicitly asked them to flatten (i.e., falsify) the curve, and 51 % accepted a truthful job that paid half as much, implying that the ethical cost of spreading disinformation is roughly equivalent to a 25 % wage cut. Those who did the disinformation task under-reported deaths by about 53 %, yet spent as much time on the work as control workers, showing real effort.

20. ** The study combines administrative wage data, surveys, and incentivised laboratory labour-market experiments to ask why jobs that are widely viewed as "immoral" (e.g., tobacco, weapons, or deceptive finance) so often pay more. They show that such work commands a persistent wage premium because workers with stronger moral scruples systematically withhold labour or demand higher pay, while those less averse ("immoral types") readily accept lower wages. This self-selection mechanism survives even when refusing the job cannot reduce overall harm and when taking it would let workers mitigate some damage, implying that non-consequentialist motives such as image concerns or "warm-glow" aversion to immoral jobs drive behaviour.

22. ** A meta-analysis on willful ignorance, which shows that the possibility to avoid information about the consequences of one's behavior reduces altruistic behavior and seems to be motivated by the desire to maintain a positive self-image. The sum of evidence also shows that people who choose to receive information about the impact of their behavior on others tend to behave more altruistically, supporting the existence of a sorting effect.

27. * The study examined how leaders' willingness to verify or ignore subordinates' self-reported performance and whether cheating benefited or harmed the leader shaped dishonest behavior and leader–subordinate relations. When leaders rarely verified reports, collaborative cheating (which helped both parties) rose sharply. Leaders who turned a blind eye were judged more moral, trustworthy, competent and psychologically close, and participants later entrusted them with more money in a separate trust game, showing that corrupt collaboration can strengthen in-group bonds. By contrast, when cheating disadvantaged the leader, subordinates cheated less and evaluated checking more leniently. The study reveals that in teams, weak oversight and aligned incentives foster "collaborative corruption" that not only fuels cheating but paradoxically enhances trust and cohesion between coconspirators, suggesting such arrangements may be self-reinforcing without robust external controls.

41. * Huppert and Levine contend that escalating intergroup conflict primes a zero-sum mindset that makes followers value leaders who lie when those lies appear to advance the ingroup over a rival. In that context, deceit signals parochial benevolence and short-run competence, so people knowingly elevate dishonest leaders despite the long-term costs of eroded trust and organizational dysfunction.

44. ** In a laboratory experiment, participants were more likely to vote for candidates who had cheated in a prior round to be able to cheat again when the spoils of future dishonesty were shared with the group and less likely when a third party (a charitable organization) was harmed in the process. Even honest participants tended to vote for the dishonest performer when they were able to benefit from dishonesty.

56. ** Using a laboratory experiment where informed "senders" could either reveal which option would cancel a donation to GiveDirectly or distract with a cute-animal image, the authors study how inconvenient ethical information spreads when receivers can either be randomly matched to senders or choose them based on past behavior. They find that nearly 30% of messages are distractions, about one-third of receivers "shoot the messenger" by selecting uninformative senders, and this demand–supply mix produces assortative matching between information-avoiding receivers and information-suppressing senders. Compared with an individual condition where people choose information directly, social interaction yields more selfish outcomes overall. Greater control over information polarizes behavior: selfish types stay ignorant and give less, while altruistic types seek information and give more.