

We Aren't as Ethical as We Think We Are, Research Says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Ever since Enron, it seems more academics have been trying to understand and rectify unethical behavior. Research in a forthcoming paper might help organizations better understand thinking patterns in the workplace.

"The Ethical Mirage: A Temporal Explanation as to Why We Aren't as Ethical as We Think We Are", which will be published later this year in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, examines the psychological processes of individuals and how they deceive themselves into thinking they are ethical people.

"Companies typically don't do bad things because they have bad people," said Kristina A. Diekmann, Ph.D., University of Utah professor of management and one of the four authors of the paper. "When people imagine or predict what they would do in certain situations," she explained, "they think about what they should do, however, when it comes to actually making decisions, people tend to focus on what they want to do."

For example, individuals know they should behave ethically when negotiating with a client, but during the actual [negotiation](#) with that client, their desire to close a deal may cause them to make misleading statements and later justify doing so to others.

"They are not conditioned to think of the ethical consequences at the time of the decision," Diekmann said. "What is particularly problematic

is that when people deceive themselves into thinking they are ethical but don't act accordingly, it encourages the continuation of [negative behavior](#) ."

Efforts have focused on how to correct organizations through formal systems, such as [ethics](#) codes and training, however little or no attention has been paid to the individual faced with the [ethical dilemma](#). "The Ethical Mirage" focuses on individual perceptions and produces recommendations on how to change unethical behavior within organizations.

Organizations can do a number of things to help break the cycle of unethical behavior, such as putting certain procedures in place to reduce the likelihood that even the most ethical [people](#) won't do bad things. Diekmann's current work focuses on delineating specific recommendations for such policies and procedures.

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