

# Research shines light on the dark side of ethics: Marketers find a blind spot in human judgment

March 25 2013, by Judy Ashton

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(Phys.org) —When judging the ethics of an action, most people believe themselves to be fair and impartial. Bad is bad, and greater offenses deserve greater punishment. However, according to research conducted at the University of Cincinnati, such judgments can be profoundly biased by one's relationship to the parties involved. This is a bias "blind spot" that people recognize in others, but deny having themselves.

"Fundamentally, the research shows that we are programmed to treat in-group members differently than out-group members, possibly as an evolutionary legacy of survival in the ancestral environment," says UC marketing professor James Kellaris, the James S. Womack/Gemini Professor of Signage in the Carl H. Lindner College of Business. "We tend to go easy on fellow in-[group members](#) and harder on strangers, due to complications of loyalty."

The research "How Group Loyalties Shape Ethical Judgment and Punishment Preferences" by Scott Wright, PhD '12; John Dinsmore, PhD '13; and Kellaris, published in the March issue of *Psychology and Marketing*, examines ethical [judgments](#) and recommended [punishments](#) in the context of group loyalties.

"In general, the more unethical an act is judged to be," Kellaris says, "the harsher the preferred punishment. However, relationships to the [perpetrator](#) and victim qualify this."

The study originated from a PhD seminar on marketing ethics research and examines how group affiliations shape consumers' judgments of ethically controversial marketing conduct. In a series of experiments, participants were asked to judge the actions of an unscrupulous seller. Participants' relationships to the seller and to the targeted victim were manipulated using regional identities to evoke an "us vs. them" mentality.

Beyond forgiving "us" and condemning "them," Kellaris says the research team also found evidence of loyalty to the principle of loyalty itself. "Loyalty seems intuitively good, so people tend to use it as a de facto moral criterion," he says. "As a result, members of an out-group who mistreat other members of that out-group (their own in-group) are viewed more negatively than if they had mistreated a member of our in-group (their out-group), because they betrayed their own." The badness of a transgression is made worse by the stain of disloyalty.

Kellaris says that understanding how people make ethical judgments is important to businesses, because unintentional service failures can be perceived as ethical lapses. "Repairing reputation and relationships begins with understanding how consumers think," he says.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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