

## Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall, David G. Myers, Cindi May, and Gil Einstein

*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

### Feeling Good Before and After Doing Bad

by David G. Myers

[Shalvi, S., Gino, F., Barkan, R., & Ayal, S. \(2015\). Self-serving justifications: Doing wrong and feeling moral. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 24, 125–130.](#)

Imagine a young executive visiting home. To show her father how well she is doing, she takes him to an expensive restaurant. She records the dinner as a travel expense, telling herself, “My Dad always has sage business advice.”

In such ways, note Shaul Shalvi, Francesca Gino, Rachel Barkan, and Shahar Ayal (2015), people will engage in intentional unethical behavior, yet appraise their morality highly. They will do wrong while feeling moral.

Before explaining *how* people justify their indiscretions and transgressions, instructors might invite students, perhaps in small groups, to brainstorm other examples of people “doing wrong while feeling moral” — or of people on opposite sides of a destructive conflict each feeling *their* side is the moral side. Examples might include:

- *telling untruths* — from self-serving exaggerations to face-saving fibs to outright lies.
- *petty thefts* — from taking office supplies home (“I’m underpaid and this won’t be noticed”) to underreporting taxes (“Everyone does it”).
- *cheating* — for a “good” end, such as getting good grades to get into medical school to help people.
- *justifying inequality* — wealthy people are more likely than those in poverty to see people’s fortunes as earned outcomes, thanks to skill and effort, and not as the result of having connections, money, and good luck (Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, & Payne, 2015; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011).
- *myside bias* — from the US Civil War to today’s struggles in the Middle East, both sides in a conflict may presume that God (and righteous morality) is on their side. Even positive thinker Dale Carnegie (1936) recognized the danger of self-justifying morality: “Each nation feels superior to other nations. That breeds patriotism — and wars.”

As an additional class resource, Rachel Barkan (2008) has offered her [Multi-Aspect Scale of Cheating \(MASC\)](#) for class use. The scale's three parts offer examples of commonplace daily lies and of ethical dilemmas and excuses.

Students might next be invited to identify psychological principles that help explain the doing-wrong-while-feeling-moral phenomenon. Familiar examples might include

- *self-serving bias*: People remember, perceive, and justify their actions in self-enhancing ways. One national survey asked, "How would you rate your own morals and values on a scale from 1 to 100 (100 being perfect)?" Fifty percent of people rated themselves 90 or above; 11 percent said 74 or less (Lovett, 1997).
- *bolstering self-esteem*: Self-esteem motivation helps fuel self-serving bias. Seeking self-affirmation, people use various strategies to enhance their self-image (Sedikides, 1993). "The head is an extension of the heart," noted Daniel Batson (2006).
- *self-justifying dissonance reduction*: Doing bad things while thinking oneself moral creates internal dissonance, which can be reduced by justifying one's actions. When we act, we amplify the idea underlying our action, especially when feeling some responsibility. After delivering false electric shocks to a hapless victim, people later disparage the victim.
- *groupthink*: One hallmark of group-influenced fiascoes has been an unquestioned belief in the morality of one's group, supported by rationalizations of the rightness of one's actions and the evil of one's opponent.
- *just-world thinking*: If, as we teach children, good is rewarded and bad is punished, then in this just world, those who succeed must be good and those who suffer must be bad. Just-world thinking enables those who exploit others to see their own good fortune, and others' misfortune, as justly deserved.

From their work in the new field of *behavioral ethics*, Shalvi and his colleagues note that self-serving justifications of skewed ethical behavior may occur either *previolation* or *postviolation*.

Previolation justifications include situations with some *ambiguity* (e.g., experiment participants misreporting which roll of the die had the highest number in order to collect more pay), situations that enable *self-serving helpfulness* (e.g., a partner will also benefit from one's white lie), and situations in which a recent prosocial act gives seeming *moral license* to a transgression.

Postviolation justifications include *cleansing* (physical cleaning or penance to redeem oneself), partial *confessing* (enabling oneself to feel some dignity without bearing the full consequence for a wrongdoing), and *distancing* (putting one's wrongdoing in the past and judging others' immoral behavior more harshly).

There are few more important psychology lessons than the everyday power of self-justification. "For anyone seeking to behave more ethically or encouraging others around them to do so," note Shavli and his coauthors, "acknowledging the power of justifications in shaping our self-serving perceptions is a key. Taming our drive to justify our behavior may be the path to ethical conduct."