

Compromises of integrity

Editorial

In thinking about the present situation in the United States, if not globally, I am reminded of Dicken's famous lament:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair (Charles Dickens, *Tale of Two Cities*).

These contrasts appear particularly germane for the contemporary scene. Objectively speaking, the economy is flourishing, advances in science, medicine, and technology move a breath-taking pace while, at the same time, conflict and corruption in our highest offices never has been more dramatically on display. As of April 30 2019, our president has lied or made exaggerated claims over 10,000 times;¹ even more recently, our highest ranking law enforcement official, like many within Trump's administration, mischaracterized the findings from the Special Council's investigation into the President's alleged misdeeds. How has this happened? Or rather, putting aside the president's egregious and frankly antisocial behavior, the more interesting and troubling question is how those in his administration, many of whom are accomplished and well-regarded in their fields, continue to act unethically. How do otherwise moral people come to behave immorally?

From a psychological perspective, some provisional answers are readily apparent. Narcissism, the lure of power, as well as opportunities for financial gain certainly is sufficient motives. They ought not to be minimized. Yet, not all of these motives apply. Moreover, reference to these motives seeks explanations solely in the actor's inner life, referencing personality and character alone.

In his assessment of the Watergate scandal, Rangell² described a syndrome called Compromises of Integrity. In *Cs of I*, the individual is not troubled by disparities between his moral beliefs and actions. Values are split or dissociated from actions in such a way that transgressions no longer engender discomfort. For Rangell, immoral action follows from unconscious conflict, from the inability to resist doing what is forbidden or from circumstances in which one believes one's transgressions will not be detected or punished. Such individuals may feel they have no choice to do otherwise, making immoral action appear expedient.

James Comey,³ former director of the FBI, elaborates on this idea:

Accomplished people lacking inner strength can't resist the compromises necessary to survive...It starts with your sitting silent while he lies, both in public and private, making you complicit by your silence. In meetings with him, his assertions about what 'everyone thinks' and what is 'obviously true' wash over you, unchallenged... because he's the president...From the private circle of assent, it moves to public displays of personal fealty...While the entire world is watching, you do what everyone else around the table does — you talk about how amazing the leader is and what an honor it is to be associated with him.

In part, Comey affirms the central role played by *akrasia* or

Volume 10 Issue 3 - 2019

Ronald C Naso

American Board and Academy of Psychoanalysis, USA

Correspondence: Ronald C Naso, American Board and Academy of Psychoanalysis, 2777 Summer Street, Suite 504B, Stamford, CT 06905, USA, Tel 203-325-3661, Fax 203-325-0145, Email rcnphd@gmail.com

Received: May 02, 2019 | **Published:** May 20, 2019

weakness of will. But, like Rangell, he also describes the corrupting influence of charismatic leaders and how they give permission to vulnerable individuals to do what they otherwise and on their own would never do.

Batson offers yet another way to think about this. In his research on moral hypocrisy, he and his coinvestigators found that between 85-90 percent of individuals will violate norms (in this case, cheat to advantage themselves) when they do fear detection, regardless of their standing on measures of moral responsibility. Yes, 85-90 percent! In other words, even individual regarded as possessing exceptional moral integrity are not immune to transgression. Why? Sadly, Batson data suggested it is because conflicts between self-interest and moral standards frequently are resolved in favor of the former. It is moral standards rather than responsibility that are likely to change in order to circumvent cognitive dissonance. In other words, individuals are more likely to rationalize their transgressions and minimize their impact than to refrain from bad behavior. Whether by commission or omission, bad behavior is thus reinforced and perpetuated.

Given Batson's findings, it is most important to consider his recommendations: First, for most people, oversight and accountability are only structures that consistently encourage more responsible behavior, even in otherwise moral people. Oversight makes moral values salient; it keeps the idea of doing the right thing very much in mind. Put another way, transparency among our leaders promotes a culture in which behaving morally is the "least costly way to appear moral".⁴

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References

1. Sullivan Margaret. Fact Checking the President isn't enough. 2019.
2. Rangell L. *The Mind of Watergate: An Exploration of the Compromise of Integrity*. New York: Norton: 1980.
3. Comey James. How Trump Co-opts Leaders like Bill Barr. The New York Times; 2019.
4. Batson D, Kobrynowicz J, Dinnerstein H, et al. In a Different Voice: Unmasking Moral Hypocrisy. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 1997;72(6):1335-1348.