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THOUGHT LEADERS

How Your Hiring Process Could Predict Unethical Behavior

Carnegie Mellon professor Taya Cohen explains the connection between moral character and workplace performance.

by [Laura W. Geller](#)



Photo courtesy of the Tepper School of Business

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How do you really get to know another person? More specifically, how do you know what type of employee that person will be? To help answer this question, many firms have incorporated personality tests into their applicant screening or employee training and

development processes over the last several decades. According to a [2015 analysis](#) by the Society for Human Resource Management, such assessments — of which there are thousands — combine to create an industry with annual sales of US\$500 million.

But as Taya Cohen explains it, one of the critical problems with many personality tests is that they overlook moral character. Cohen, an associate professor of organizational behavior and theory and the Carnegie Bosch Junior Faculty Chair at Carnegie Mellon's Tepper School of Business, argues that this should be a concern — because moral character is the aspect of personality that can best predict ethical behavior. Moral character encompasses several traits that influence people's conduct and interpersonal interactions: Someone who is guilt-prone, for example, is more likely to demonstrate empathy, to be a team player, and to learn from his or her mistakes.

In the small window during which employers and job candidates become acquainted, a significant amount of information is exchanged. Some of it is visible and obvious, some of it is hidden from view; some of it is critical, some of it is noise. Cohen, who earned a Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, looks for ways to help companies sort through the data to reveal how people are likely to perform on the job. And that's something the personality test your company is using today could be missing or, worse yet, getting wrong.

S+B: The concept of *moral character* is central to your research. Can you define moral character, and how it can shape job performance?

COHEN: Moral character is a broad dimension of personality that captures a person's tendency to think, feel, and behave in ethical ways. It subsumes a number of more specific traits. For example, guilt proneness is an important moral character trait. People who have high levels of guilt proneness have a strong conscience — they feel guilty when they make mistakes or let others down. Moreover, they can anticipate this [feeling] and take proactive steps to avoid behaving badly in the first place. In my work, I have demonstrated that employees with high levels of guilt proneness have better job performance.

There are implications here for leaders, too. I like this quote by the psychologists Robert Hogan and Robert Kaiser: "Who we are determines how we lead." Leaders who are more guilt-prone are seen by their subordinates as more effective. One of the reasons guilt proneness is such an important character trait, and the reason it is associated with more effective leadership, is its link to a sense of personal responsibility: "I wouldn't want to let

people down, and I'm personally responsible for doing the right thing, for helping my team, for not free riding on others' contributions."

S+B: Guilt proneness was the theme of an earlier body of your work. Can you talk more about that?

COHEN: In 2011, my colleagues and I developed the [Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale](#). A person answers questions about different hypothetical scenarios in which they have done something wrong, indicating how likely it is that they would respond in the way described, from very unlikely (1) to very likely (7). The scale measures their tendency to anticipate that they would feel guilty or ashamed. If you imagine you did something wrong, to what extent would you feel bad about your behavior? This is guilt proneness. To what extent would you feel like a terrible person? This is shame proneness. The difference between feeling bad about your behavior and feeling that way about yourself more generally is important, because it can lead to different behaviors.

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I discussed some of the behaviors associated with guilt earlier. Guilt tends to be a healthier response than shame, and it's linked more closely to moral behavior. Shame is a much less healthy emotion. If you feel ashamed of yourself, it tends to lead to anger, avoidance, or even depression and anxiety in some cases. This is because these feelings are not focused on your behavior; they are focused on who you

are as a person. Shame tends to lead to more self-centered responses, which lead to less moral behavior.

S+B: How has your thinking about how to assess people's moral character evolved?

COHEN: People are able to talk about themselves when asked survey questions [as in the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale], especially in settings where there's no incentive to misrepresent oneself to others. But you can imagine that in organizations, especially when we think of a hiring context or other high-stakes contexts, people might be motivated to hide certain aspects of themselves. As a result, there's a need to find more indirect ways to assess a person's character.

That is where some [new research](#) I'm working on with a former doctoral student, Yeonjeong Kim, comes in. We are accumulating evidence showing that moral character can be accurately judged from open-ended behavioral interview questions. Our work in this area is informed by a theoretical framework Yeonjeong has developed called the hidden information, distribution, and evaluation model, or HIDE model for short.

At its highest level, this model separates perception into two rating sources: the self and the judge. In other words, there's some information that I know about myself and am able to accurately describe, and there's some information that other people might know about me that they're able to accurately share. But then there's also information that I — or other people — might be unaware of or be motivated to conceal. This model helps us think about how to piece together all of this visible and invisible information about a person, to get an accurate picture of who that person is.

S+B: Can you give us a couple of examples of these interview questions?

COHEN: Yeonjeong and I, along with Abigail Panter of the University of North Carolina, have come up with two interview prompts that we think are particularly helpful for revealing a person's character. These questions are modeled after questions that interviewers might already be using. Our contribution is to show that these questions can be used to accurately gauge respondents' moral character.

One interview prompt is what we call the mistake question: "Please tell us about a time when you made a mistake at work. How did you feel when this occurred? What did you do? What, if anything, did you learn from this experience?" This series of questions is good at tapping into a person's conscientiousness, which is one of the primary traits that integrity tests attempt to capture. People who are high in conscientiousness work hard toward their goals and they don't want to let themselves and other people down. People low in conscientiousness often do sloppy work and can come off as lazy or irresponsible because they lack the industriousness that highly conscientious employees have. Accordingly, in organizations, conscientiousness tends to be a very positive trait that helps people avoid unethical behaviors and perform better at their job overall.

Another prompt is what we call the dilemma question: "Please describe an experience in which you were faced with a difficult dilemma at your job, a situation where you found it hard to decide what to do. What factors did you consider? What did you do? What, if anything, did you learn from this experience?"

This series of questions is good at revealing guilt proneness. As we've discussed, people with high levels of guilt proneness have a very strong sense of interpersonal responsibility and they are very empathic. They think about other people when they make decisions and are very cognizant of the impact their actions have on others — leading them to act in more moral ways. And the opposite is true: Those who think narrowly about themselves and their own self-interests, and who don't consider the interests of others, tend to be more selfish, more Machiavellian. They tend to have lower levels of guilt proneness, and lower levels of moral character more generally.

S+B: What if people are disingenuous when participating in these assessments, telling the “judges” what they think will make them look good?

COHEN: Interview questions and surveys are not immune to faking. But interestingly, even when people try to fake their responses to look good, they often reveal subtle cues about their true character.

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For example, one interview question that we've tested in our work is a standard question about how a person's current or former employer would describe him or her. And people usually say very positive things: “My employer would say I have the following good qualities.”

What's been revealed by our research is that even though people say positive things in response to that question, people who are low in moral character often come across as

boastful and self-centered. Whereas those with high moral character may also answer the question in a positive way, but come across as more considerate of others, more modest or humble. Information about a person's moral character “leaks out” in response to certain types of behavioral interview questions. And the more a person tries to make himself or herself look good, the more information about character leaks out. We are still investigating the nature of the cues that are revealed in interviewees' responses, exploring whether it is the content of what they say or the manner in which they say it that is more revealing.

S+B: What are the implications of your research on the use of personality tests in corporate hiring practices?

COHEN: Organizations already use a lot of integrity testing and personality assessments. And I think we're moving further in that direction as more data about employees becomes available. Of the many assessments out there, some are very good, and others less so. No assessment measure is perfect. And if no assessment is perfect, then there are bound to be mistakes: people who take some kind of personality assessment that says they're not suited for a job, but in reality they are. Or maybe it looks like they're not the most ethical person, even though they are, but for whatever reason, the test missed that.

At the same time, if we're not using some kind of standardized instrument, what are we doing instead? And is that better or worse? If we don't use some kind of standardized test, often we use our gut impression. I would argue that such impressions are often susceptible to many sorts of biases. For example, we tend to like people who are similar to us, and we might assume if they're similar to us, they must be good people. The less standardized the evaluation method, the more it's likely that stereotypes and biases will creep in.

Biases and subjectivity can certainly creep into our evaluations of interviewees, even when we do use standardized interview questions and evaluation rubrics. However, the potential for problems is mitigated when there is more structure in the interview process, such as when the same assessment method is used for all candidates, rather than idiosyncratic protocols for different candidates.

From the manager's perspective, if you understand an employee — who they are, aspects of their personality, their character — then you can use information about their personality to optimize their performance by developing individualized plans of action or individualized ways of helping them be successful. For example, if you're doing some kind of intervention in an organization, can you use these measures to check whether the intervention is having the desired effect? These are areas where we're going to see a lot of developments in the near future as we continue down the path of big data and people analytics.

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