The Double-Edged Sword of Loyalty

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Abstract

Loyalty has long been associated with being moral and upstanding, but recent research has begun documenting how loyalty can lead us to do unethical things. Here we offer an integrative perspective that explains when and why loyalty leads to both ethical and unethical outcomes. We suggest that a variety of bottom-up and top-down psychological processes lead us to be loyal to people and organizations we have obligations to, and that these processes operate in ways that reduce the cognitive dissonance that we experience in situations in which our loyalties conflict with other moral principles. In this article, we articulate what loyalty is, describe the typical objects of our loyalty, explain the mental processes involved in navigating loyalty dilemmas, and end by offering an integrative perspective that illuminates why loyalty leads to both ethical and unethical outcomes.

Keywords

Social cognition, Moral psychology, Judgment and decision making, Loyalty, Ethical behavior

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We tend to think of loyal people as morally good people who are better friends (Shaw et al., 2017), romantic partners (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000), employees (Hirschman, 1970), and leaders (Fehr et al., 2015). Despite this positive halo around the loyal, a growing body of research has begun to demonstrate that loyalty can also lead to negative outcomes (e.g., Hildreth et al., 2016; Weidman et al., 2020). For instance, when we are loyal to someone, we tend to not blow the whistle on their legal transgressions (Lee & Holyoak, 2020; Weidman et al., 2020) or expose their corruption in the workplace (Kundro & Nurmohamed, in press). We may even lie or cheat if we think it will benefit the people or groups we are loyal to (Hildreth & Anderson, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2016).

This duality of loyalty's effects—leading to both ethical and unethical outcomes—makes us wonder: what is loyalty, exactly; to whom or what are we loyal, what do we do when an object of our loyalty collides with another object of loyalty or moral value, and what determines when and why loyalty leads to positive (vs. negative) outcomes. In this paper, we reviewed research from across the social sciences and synthesized findings to provide a nuanced understanding of what loyalty is, and explain why research on loyalty tends to find conflicting results (i.e., loyalty produces both ethical and unethical outcomes). We then explain how our perspective helps to improve our collective understanding of how and towards what loyalty manifests, its purpose, and the good and bad associated with it.

What is loyalty?

Before diving into the consequences of loyalty, we must first define what loyalty is. Some have defined loyalty by its *behavioral consequences*—one is loyal if they uphold their obligations to an individual to whom they are loyal, especially in times of need (Shaw et al., 2017). Also, one is loyal if one adheres to a group and its goals, symbols, norms, and beliefs (Brewer & Brown, 1998; James & Cropanzano, 1994), and is committed to putting the group above other groups (Scott, 1965), even when it requires personal sacrifice (Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). Regardless of the object of one's loyalty, these perspectives have focused on being partial towards either an individual or group, even if it comes at a cost to the self (Hildreth et al., 2016). Others have focused less on behaviors per se and instead have argued that loyalty is a fundamental moral value (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Rai & Fiske, 2011), that spans across cultures (e.g., Schwartz, 1992), and is part of a person's moral character (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2014). In this line of thinking, acting out of loyalty is considered the morally right thing to do (Graham et al., 2009), and we judge a person's character in part according to whether or not they are a loyal person (Goodwin et al., 2014).

Taking these perspectives into consideration, our view is that loyalty can be thought of in two ways, that both consider its moralized nature. First, loyalty is a *psychological process that influences behavior*—that is, we begin to perceive and think about people, groups, and organizations in ways that lead us to act on their behalf, even when doing so might come at a cost to ourselves. This is the case because we have a fundamental need to belong, and thus seek out social bonds and connections to fulfill that need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); we are compelled to do what we can to maintain our social bonds. This is true regardless of whether we create them (e.g., joining social groups) or find ourselves in them (e.g., family ties) (McManus et al., 2020; Weidman et al., 2020). Thus, our psychological need to belong drives us to be loyal to relationships and groups that we belong to, and act on behalf of those people and groups. Although we do not need to incur a cost for acting on behalf of people or groups we are loyal

to, there may be situations in which an individual takes on personal costs in the name of loyalty to a person, group, or organization. Second, loyalty is a *behavior that is psychologically processed*. In other words, loyalty sometimes leads us to behave in ways that advance the agendas of people, social groups, and organizations, and then we engage in post-hoc mental procedures that allow us to rationalize those actions as the “right thing to do” because of our loyalty. Indeed, the way that loyalties get maintained over time is by behaviors being psychologically processed in cognitively consistent ways (c.f., Bem, 1972). We propose that these dual processes can lead us to be loyal to almost “anything to which one’s heart can become attached or devoted” (Konvitz, 1973, p. 108).

To Whom or What are We Loyal, and Why?

What things are we typically loyal to? We tend to be loyal to at least three general classes of ‘objects’: other people, social groups, and organizations. We are loyal to our friends, romantic partners, and family members because being loyal is part of our historical definition of close bonds (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009), and those bonds serve us well during times of need (Shaw et al., 2017). These bonds are so important that people tend to avoid turning-in close others when they have committed some moral and legal transgression (Lee & Holyoak, 2020; Weidman et al., 2020). When we do not uphold our ends of the loyalty bargain with close others, our reputations take a hit (Everett et al., 2018; McManus et al., 2020). This reputational function is important. People need to know whether they can rely on others; without those signals, we would not be able to form close and important relationships or promote social cohesion, the kind of cohesion that is necessary to achieve important collective goals (Lewis et al., in press; Weidman et al., 2020).

The functions we just described also help to explain why we are loyal to social groups and organizations. Loyalty to a group typically requires adherence to the rules, norms, beliefs, symbols, and customs of the group (e.g., James & Cropanzano, 1984), and devotion to the group, its leaders, and its goals, even at a personal loss to the self (e.g., Brewer & Brown, 1998; Scott, 1965; Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). Loyalty to a group promotes social cohesion between the members of the group, which helps the group come together to accomplish the goals and tasks set before them. A sense of loyalty can also keep people committed to their organizations, ensuring that their behavior facilitates the success of the organization’s mission. For instance, people who are loyal to their organizations donate more time and money, work extra hours, and stay with their companies longer, even when they have competing outside offers (e.g., Hirschman 1970; Kondratuk et al., 2004). This commitment can benefit organizations and the individuals in them, but it can also come at a cost. For example, loyalty towards an organization tends to prevent employees from blowing the whistle on unethical behavior (Dungan et al., 2019). Moreover, people are more likely to cover-up corruption among their peers when they are loyal to the groups they share (Kundro & Nurmohamed, in press).

As we’ve described, people are loyal to a variety of objects. However, a person’s loyalties can come into conflict with one another (e.g., Kunst et al., 2019), and they can come into conflict with other moral values (e.g., Dungan et al., 2019). Take the example of a college student, who could be loyal to their university (e.g., Cornell University), a related individual (e.g., their college adviser), and even a social group (e.g., their fraternity). The student’s college adviser may ask them to do something on the same date and time that their college fraternity asks them to do something. Or, the student’s loyalty to their college fraternity may come into

conflict with their values around inclusion and fairness during member recruitment season. These conflicts can give rise to important dilemmas, which can result in loyalty leading to ethical or unethical outcomes. How then do people navigate these loyalty conflicts?

Integrated Perspective of Loyalty

Sometimes the objects of our loyalty are congruent with each other—such as when our partners and parents get along, making family vacations joyous activities rather than activities in which one (e.g., partner) feels frustrated for having to spend time with the other (e.g., in-laws)—and with our moral values. Other times, however, these things do come into conflict; for example, loyalty to one's employer can create conflict if that loyalty means spending too much time at work and not enough time with the family (or vice versa). In addition, one's loyalty may be called upon, but pit against a different moral value (e.g., fairness). What do people do when these conflicts occur? That depends on the processes at play in the situation where loyalties are colliding, because acting on behalf of one object of loyalty at the expense of another object of loyalty or moral value is influenced by both top-down and bottom-up psychological processes (e.g., Chaiken & Trope, 1999).

Top-down processes that contribute to one's loyalty consist of things that we are aware of and that we acknowledge drive our loyalty (e.g., Bos & Dijksterhuis, 2011). There are people (e.g., our partners), groups (e.g., our religious community), and organizations (e.g., our employer) that we know we should be loyal to, or that we simply choose to be loyal to, and that conscious awareness drives our behavior towards those objects. These processes may impact an individual's loyalty by refocusing their attention toward particular objects of loyalty at any given time (c.f., Earl & Hall, 2019). For example, our values and belief systems may lead us to join social groups and organizations towards which we cultivate loyalty. In addition, our sense of responsibility may make us loyal to friends and family members (Curry et al., 2019). And, our self-interest can make us fervently loyal to close others such that we are unwilling to report close others for transgressions that they have committed (Weidman et al., 2020). Similarly, competition can make people in groups so loyal to their group that they may cheat just to win (Hildreth et al., 2016). Despite these top-down processes shaping what we think we should do in a given situation, there are things that can occur outside of our control or awareness that may lead us to behave differently, which are the bottom-up processes.

Bottom-up processes consist of things in our environment that are not necessarily in our control or conscious awareness (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), but that can shape to whom or what we are loyal when loyalty conflicts with other loyalties or moral values. For example, the context in which a person finds themselves may shape which objects of loyalty they pay attention to (Bayer et al., 2020). A promotion at work may make salient certain loyalties, such as your loyalty to your boss and organization. A conflict at work, however, may temporarily change the perceived or experienced strength of one's loyalties, such that when a person does not receive a promised promotion their overall loyalty to their organization may decrease until they receive the bonus. And, the context may change loyalties altogether, such as when a sibling becomes estranged and your loyalty to her decreases.

In addition to context, the degree to which someone identifies with a group can unconsciously shape how loyal they are to that group and their willingness to fulfill loyalty obligations (Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). Moreover, at least in the context of the United States, differences like political ideology matters, such that conservatives tend to value loyalty and

upholding loyalty obligations more-so than liberals (Graham et al., 2009). Group membership can also shape our loyalty-based decisions outside of our awareness. For instance, we may act on behalf of a group without realizing it merely because of minimal characteristics that we share with the group, such as wearing the same color t-shirt or sharing the same birthday (Brewer, 1979; Burger et al., 2004). In addition, we may assent with the group's decision without reflection merely because we belong to the group (Janis, 1997). These bottom-up processes operate to shape our loyalty, and largely occur outside of our awareness.

Taken together, we suggest that both top-down and bottom-up processes are operating to shape an individual's loyalty. Indeed, these processes help illuminate why loyalty can feel like a genuine felt commitment (e.g., loyalty to your spouse), but at times can also feel like an unwelcome obligation. In addition, these processes imply that—from any individual's perspective—the nature of our loyalty is partially known, and partially unknown. That is, although we may know who we are loyal to and why (top-down; loyalty to my family), there are processes outside of awareness (bottom-up; social identity) that shape our loyalty and can affect loyalty-based decisions (e.g., who is a person loyal to when competing loyalties collide). So how does loyalty lead to both positive and negative outcomes?

Loyalty can lead to positive and negative outcomes because of the role that top-down and bottom-up processes play in shaping a person's loyalty-based decisions. Specifically, whatever object(s) of loyalty are salient in contexts where loyalties are at odds with each other or loyalty is at odds with other moral principles, people will experience a sense of ease and fluency with judgments and behaviors that are consistent with the salient object(s) of loyalty. Behaving or judging in accordance with the object(s) of loyalty on the mind operates similarly to resolving other cognitive conflicts (c.f., Festinger, 1957). For example, in a study about how loyalty relates to (un)ethical behavior in various contexts, students who were more loyal to their fraternity cheated far less than their peers who were less loyal to their fraternity (Hildreth et al., 2016). However, when these groups were placed in a competitive paradigm where fraternities were competing against other fraternities, people who were more loyal to their fraternity cheated more than their peers who were less loyal to the fraternity (Hildreth et al., 2016).

These findings suggest that although there are times when the most loyal people in the group are less likely to cheat because their loyalty cues ethics and promotes ethical behavior, there are other times that can change their mental representation of what it means to be loyal. In the context of competition against outgroups, something different happens in the mind, and the most loyal people who were previously ethical transform to become the most likely to behave unethically (Hildreth et al., 2016). This seems to occur because during moments of competition group members feel a sense of obligation to do whatever they can to ensure that their group wins and maintains their status. Group competition is not the only contextual factor that can alter how people construe loyalty, however. Other situational features can change mental representations of the construct and associated behaviors as well. For example, when an employee learns about another employee's unethical behavior, whether or not they turn them in depends upon which value is made salient in the context. When loyalty is made salient, they are less likely to turn-in the employee. But, when fairness is made salient they are far more likely to turn in the employee (Dungan et al., 2019). In both examples, the person involved seeks to reduce the dissonance experienced by the colliding values (loyalty vs. honesty, loyalty vs. fairness), but the outcome hinges on which value the immediate context makes most salient.

Conclusion

At any given time, people are loyal to a series of objects that may come into conflict with one another or with other moral values. Within these conflicts, both top-down and bottom-up processes are operating to shape how the individual will navigate the conflict, which will lead to an ethical or unethical outcome. These processes operate in ways to reduce the dissonance that is brought about during conflicts in which an object of loyalty is pit against another object of loyalty or moral value.

This dynamic dual process approach explains why, despite loyalty having long been considered an important part of what makes an upstanding and moral person, loyalty has also been attributed as a cause for a variety of negative outcomes (e.g., cheating scandals like the one involving the Houston Astros in 2017). The perspective we outlined helps to explain these discrepancies—to explain when and why loyalty leads to ethical and unethical outcomes. We hope that this perspective will help researchers and practitioners to better understand seeming contradictions about the role loyalty plays in our lives. We also hope that it will guide future conversations about the costs and benefits of promoting loyalty, as well as motivate ways to reduce the (often unintended) negative consequences that loyalty can bring about.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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