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## How relative concerns affect unethical behaviors

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**Abstract:** We analyze positional concerns in the unethical domain. We introduce an original distinction between ‘selective’ positionality –where individuals prefer behaving unethically but to a lesser extent than peers – and ‘ego’ positionality –where they prefer behaving unethically but to a higher extent than peers, regardless of the absolute level. We also report the results of an exploratory survey in Algeria that exploits the counterintuitive insight that people are better at predicting others’ behaviors than their own behaviors. We increase the finding’s generalizability by conducting the same survey among a similar sample in France. Our findings are twofold: first, the majority of participants attributes to others preferences for ethical (i.e., where everyone is honest) and unethical egalitarian (where all are similarly dishonest) situations. Second, a non-negligible proportion of respondents attributes to the average individual preferences for either selective or ego-positionality in unethical behaviors.

**Key-words:** ethics; position; behavior; survey; Algeria; France.

**JEL numbers:** D0; D1.

## **How relative concerns affect unethical behaviors**

### **1. Introduction**

The importance of positional concerns –that is, individuals’ preference to have more of a given good than others, rather than having more in an absolute sense– is well established in various domains and has been largely documented in the economic and management literature (see Barbara et al., 2017 for a recent overview). Nevertheless, very little is known about how relevant such relative standings are when people are faced with choices regarding an unethical behavior. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that many unethical decisions are directly influenced by social comparison, such as drinking, speed and hacking contests. In the latter case, some hackers can even be more motivated by bragging rights and status concerns than monetary benefits (Wible, 2003).

We extend the relative concerns to the domain of unethical behaviors, such as cheating and lying. In organizational contexts, the effects of social comparison on unethical behaviors (e.g., overstating expenses to get higher reimbursements) can seem less intuitive. Although the literature is relatively silent on these likely effects, we argue that positional considerations can substantially influence dishonesty-related decisions. Positional concerns can, in addition to more conventional factors (e.g., expected benefit, sanction likelihood), reinforce or weaken the likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviors. Moreover, we introduce an original distinction between ‘selective’ positionality –where individuals prefer behaving unethically but to a lesser extent than other individuals in their reference group – and ‘ego’ positionality – where they prefer behaving unethically but to a higher extent than peers. If these arguments hold, revealing the extent of unethical behaviors, thought to be a way of fighting corruption, may actually provide a standard for emulation of unethical behaviors instead. This issue can usefully inform decision makers in various organizations and behavioral architects on whether

and how positional concerns can be used to better understand and even reduce unethical behaviors.

Furthermore, in order to test our conceptual insights, we designed an exploratory survey. Unlike most previous empirical studies which used samples from developed countries, we conducted our study in a developing and understudied country, namely, Algeria (North-Africa).<sup>1</sup> On one hand, some scholars (e.g., Heinrich et al., 2010; George et al., 2016) advocate for considering non-WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) samples which can significantly enrich the study of human nature. On the other hand, Algeria has been repeatedly ranked among highly corrupted countries, with unethical practices affecting all layers of the society (Jolly, 2001; Cheriet, 2013; Boyer, 2017). The situation has been described as a “social cancer” (Benyoucef, 2012; see also, Jolly, 2001) and as “institutionalized practices” (Cheriet, 2013). For instance, the nationwide 2016 baccalaureate exams have been cancelled and re-performed because of an unprecedented massive cheating where many test items were available on social networks before the exams. Nevertheless, one may raise concerns about the theorizing that is only tested with such a one survey-based study with Algerian participants, which can question the generalizability of findings. In order to reduce this criticism, we achieved a similar survey in a developed country, namely France.

The remainder of our paper is organized as follows. The next section overviews the literature devoted to relative standings. Section 3 focuses more specifically on positional concerns in the unethical domain. Section 4 introduces a distinction between selective positionality and

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<sup>1</sup> To make justice to this issue, some studies on positional concerns used non-WEIRD samples such as Solnick et al. (2007), Carlsson and Qin (2010), Bekir et al., (2011, 2015), Akay et al. (2014) and Barbara et al. (2017).

ego-positionality and provides supporting anecdotal evidence. Section 5 describes an exploratory survey about the relevance of both forms of positionality. We highlight some policy and managerial implications. Section 6 concludes.

## **2. Overview of the literature about positional concerns**

For a long time, leading economists, such as Adam Smith, Thorstein Veblen, James Duesenberry and John Maynard Keynes have emphasized the importance of relative preferences in the economic realm. For example, Veblen (1899) developed the concept of conspicuous consumption which captures individuals' willingness to engage in expenditures in order to gain social esteem. More recently, Hirsch (1976) and Frank (1985a, 1985b) provided further theorization and the number of empirical studies has grown as well (e.g., Solnick and Hemenway, 1998; Alpizar et al., 2005; Carlsson et al., 2007). The existing studies are mainly devoted to goods (e.g., income, leisure) and, to a much lesser extent, to prosocial behaviors, such as environmental friendliness (Grolleau et al., 2012a; Salhi et al., 2012) and generosity (Frey and Neckermann, 2008; Ariely et al., 2009; Neckermann and Frey, 2013). Interestingly, some scholars (e.g., Solnick and Hemenway, 2005; Wouters et al., 2015) also examined whether positional concerns matter regarding bads, such as illness and being berated by a supervisor. The main findings of this increasing literature are that positional concerns matter (Solnick and Hemenway, 1998; 2005), matter much more for some domains than it does for others (Solnick and Hemenway, 1998; 2005) and matter more when choosing for one's child than when choosing for oneself (Solnick and Hemenway, 1998; Johansson et al., 2002).

Moreover, the concept of positional concerns has been used to explain why people are willing to invest resources in order to be above (or not to be below) others and solve some vexing

puzzles. For instance, Clark et al (2008) argue that individuals' concerns about relative income are likely to explain the well-known Easterlin paradox (Easterlin, 1995), that is, why happiness remained constant overtime despite an income growth and a positive relationship between happiness and income. In another domain, Abel (1990) similarly contends that positional preferences might explain the so-called equity premium puzzle (Mehra and Prescott, 1985), corresponding to the anomalously higher historical real returns of stocks over (risk-free) government bonds, implying an unreasonably high level of risk aversion among investors (Abel, 1990). According to Graf et al. (2012), even managers might sacrifice profits in order to improve their relative competitive standing, a behavior referred to as competitive irrationality. Moreover, analyzing the adoption of socially desirable innovations, Salhi et al. (2012) argue that profitable innovations can remain non-adopted if they destroy status in a given reference group. In Africa, several behaviors have been also explained by the pursuit of status. Bekir et al. (2011) documented that Tunisians adopt deceptive status seeking strategies, in order to keep ahead of/up with the Joneses. A similar example relates to the so-called SAPE community in Congo (Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People) (Dubruelh, 2010). Similarly, status concerns can explain why a number of Namibians and South Africans spend extravagant amounts of money in funerals (Lhuillery, 2007; see also Case et al., 2013).

### **3. Positional concerns in unethical behaviors**

Rather than just assuming a self-interested individual who considers behaving (un)ethically as the result of a cost-benefit calculus (Becker, 1968; see also Mazar et al., 2008 for an alternative view), several works have argued that unethical behaviors are also influenced by others' behaviors. The management literature proposes several mechanisms through which peer effects may influence individual unethical behaviors such as evolving social norms, social learning and herd behavior or congestion effects in the law enforcement (e.g., Carrell et

al., 2008 and references therein; Gino et al., 2009). Without negating the above mentioned mechanisms, we introduce the insight that preferences for unethical behaviors may be shaped by the comparison with the behaviors of comparable others or peers.

This discussion echoes the social comparison theory in social psychology. McAdams (1992) argued that the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is very relevant to better understand relative preferences. Comparisons with others play an important role in social life, because they provide meaning and self-relevant knowledge. Festinger (1954) emphasized that individuals do not generally compare themselves with the rest of the world but with ‘similar’ others either in general or for the attributes being compared.

Social comparison is notably, but not exclusively, motivated by self-evaluation purposes (getting accurate information by comparing oneself with relevant others) and self-enhancement purposes (feeling better about the self through comparison with someone who is worse off) (McAdams, 1992; Miller et al., 2015). Even in the case of self-evaluation purposes, there are emotional risks because the individual can discover his/her rank along some scale is lower than expected. Nevertheless, people can use coping mechanisms such as interpreting information about themselves in a distorted but reassuring manner to support a positive self-image (McAdams, 1992).

An extension of the social comparison suggests that uncontrolled feelings of relative deprivation (due to unfavorable comparisons of peers enjoying desired benefits as a result of unethical behaviors) can lead observers to adopt unethical behaviors (Tyson, 1990). A failure to pay attention to the social dimension of ethical decision making can lead to flawed predictions (see an example about how social norms help predict the ethical and unethical

decisions of journalists in Lee et al., 2016). Social comparison processes can help individuals to cope with the ambiguity frequently associated with ethical decision making, especially in organizational settings such as the workplace (Novicevic et al., 2008). A robust result from research on social comparison is that upward (downward) comparisons are likely to lead to negative (positive) feelings (Wood, 1989). Taken together, these arguments suggest that social comparisons can lead individuals to engage in unethical behaviors to restore a kind of ‘fairness’ or protect themselves against a self-esteem loss (Miller et al., 2015).

#### **4. Introducing and delineating selective positionality *versus* ego-positionality**

Unlike the already studied positional goods, positionality in unethical behaviors may take two distinct forms. The first one that we term ‘selective’ positionality corresponds to the situation where individuals have preferences for behaving less unethically than comparable others. To substantiate this definition, let us take the example of individuals who would commit \$0 fraud on their own, might commit \$5k in fraud if everyone else is doing \$10k, or \$10k if everyone else was doing \$20k. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that people do compare themselves to others to justify or rationalize their unethical behaviors. Given that most individuals think they are far more ethical than comparable others, Tyson (1990 and references therein) argues that “they might rationalize unethical behavior as being necessary to compete evenly with others who are far less principled”. An interesting and yet famous example is reported by Cox (2015) of U.S. political commentator Dinesh D’Souza who compared his rap sheet to the one of former U.S. president Bill Clinton in these terms: “If you put my rap sheet alongside the Clinton rap sheet, I think that would be almost a *prima facie* case that they have gotten away with far more than I have”. Regarding other criminals surrounding him in the confinement center, he further stated that “they all acknowledged their guilt but argued that they were the small fry. They believe that the real criminals are not only part of the system, they are running



the system, and, in fact, that they are the system”. In the same vein, Holan (2015) indicated that if “all politicians lie, some lie more than others”. This kind of comparison is gaining importance as supported by the comparison of lies between the US presidents Trump and Obama (Leonhardt et al., 2017).

According to Anand et al. (2004), the “selective social comparison” assumes that it is acceptable to compare a given behavior not with a kind of universal standard but to behaviors of relevant others. The previous authors explain that people select a reference group that allows them to minimize their unethical behavior by stating that “others are worse”. For instance, the former champion cyclist Lance Armstrong indicated that if he had to do the *Tour de France* over again, he would still dope since “everyone else in cycling was doping too” (ESPN, 2013). He even stated: “I knew what my competitors were doing. We [the U.S. Postal Service team] were doing less”. In a similar vein, employees who exaggerated their expense accounts may compare themselves with other similar colleagues and conclude that they are better than peers who inflated their expense statements more. This social-based strategy allows people to engage in immoral behaviors and reap subsequent benefits without threatening too much their moral self-image (Mazar et al., 2008). At the same time, they can justify and rationalize their unethical behavior not only because they do not cheat to the maximum extent possible (Fischbacher and Föllmi-Heusi, 2013) but, in our case, because they cheat less than peers.

It is, however, worthy to notice that the previous argument assumes that people feel guilty about acting unethically (Bhide and Stevenson, 1990; Mazar et al., 2008) and thus justify their actions by emphasizing that others are worse. Nevertheless, as shown by Ruedy et al. (2013), in addition to potential material rewards, acting unethically can also trigger positive feelings

which the authors refer to as “cheater’s high” phenomenon. The authors argue that immoral behavior causes individuals to experience psychological benefits, such as overcoming challenges, outsmarting others or the system and getting status in some communities. One may also argue that acting unethically is a way to gain respect. Similarly, to the Tasmanian devil and honey badgers reputed to be fearless and bad, an individual may think that the power is when others think he/she is bad. Based on such a tenet, we contend that individuals may also be motivated to ‘outperform’ others in unethical or immoral actions. We thus consider a second form of positionality which we term ‘ego’ positionality, corresponding to the preference for a situation where individuals behave more unethically than others of their reference groups, regardless of the absolute lower. For instance, a person who would commit \$5k fraud on their own, might commit \$10k in fraud if everyone else is doing \$5k, or \$20k if everyone else was doing \$10k.

Although less common than selective positionality, several examples suggest that individuals might have preferences for being considered the worst. In various settings, adopting questionable behaviors more than peers can confer status benefits. An old and disregarded example is the *succès de scandale*, where artists (but also firms or organizations) adopt strategically transgressive behaviors that cause public outrage, at a level exceeding their peers or predecessors, in order to gain popularity and status in a given community (Grolleau et al., Forthcoming). Similarly, it has been documented that some individuals engaged in driving fast games or drinking games seek to outperform others, especially to gain status in a given community (Bird and Tapp, 2008; Weaver et al., 2013). It is also considered that hackers and gangsters (but also hooligans and terrorists) do what they do partly for social recognition and to gain status within their community (Jordan and Taylor, 1998; Venhaus, 2010). For instance, several pirates commit offences, go above and beyond in order to ‘make a name for

themselves' in a given community (e.g., Bon, 2010). At the company level, individuals in some subgroups can be attracted by the status conferred by outperforming their peers in unethical behaviors, e.g., by laundering more money or designing clever schemes to evade tax. During the 2005 riots in France and subsequent years, several French officials called the government to stop the publication of the number of burned cars because troublemakers in rival towns have started to compete over which town could produce the most charred autos (Crumley, 2013).

### **5. Selective versus ego-positionality: An exploratory survey**

*“Self-knowledge comes from knowing other men” (Goethe)*

In order to explore the relevance of both forms of positional concerns in the unethical domain, we designed a survey instrument. Our pen and pencil survey was administered to a sample of students on various campus of the Algiers (Algeria) metropolitan area in April and May, 2016, on a voluntary basis.<sup>2</sup> We got 190 valid responses from students who accepted to fill the questionnaire. Twelve questionnaires were not retained in the sample because they were incomplete. Respondents have the following characteristics: about 40% of them are male. The average age is 21 years. Around 80% of participants earn less than DZD 50,000/month (U.S.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, using a sample of employees can reinforce the validity of the results. Surveying students on employee-related behaviors can, indeed, seem surprising at first glance. Nevertheless, we contend that many students apply and occupy part-time jobs, achieve paid internships and can therefore provide realistic insights. Even if some scholars question the external validity of findings drawn from obtained from student, Druckman and Kam (2011) argue that this criticism is frequently misplaced. They stated “that student subjects are not an inherent problem to experimental research; moreover, a case can be made that the burden of proof of student subjects being a problem should lie with critics rather than experimenters.”

\$455). As mentioned in the introduction, we also achieved a second study in France, among a sample of 91 students enrolled in a private university in Lyon. The survey instrument and administration mode were identical to the original Algerian study, except monetary amounts that were adapted to be realistic in a French context and socio-demographic variables that were not gathered.

### *5.1. Survey design*

Following the major part of previous works devoted to positional concerns, our study uses a survey *à la* Solnick and Hemenway (1998, 2005) and Quattrone and Tversky (1988), based on a set of well-designed hypothetical scenarios. Even if they can also lead researchers to overestimate the proportion of choices that are perceived as socially desirable, Bekir et al. (2015, see also Rubinstein, 2013) argued that hypothetical surveys are a powerful tool to generate interesting qualitative insights at a low cost. Rather than opposing incentivized experiments and surveys, we argue that these two methods are complementary (Bekir et al., 2015). Moreover, hypothetical surveys have been successfully used to generate path breaking advances such as the paradox of Allais, the prospect theory and mental accounting theory (Thaler, 2015).

Let us briefly address two common concerns that come to mind when oneself uses such a survey rather than an incentivized experiment. First, the lack of monetary incentives is frequently criticized. We concur with several authors (e.g., Thaler, 1987; Camerer and Hogarth, 1999; Rubinstein, 2013) that findings with incentivized experiments can be similar, especially if the research aims at a better understanding of some specific preferences. We also concur with Rubinstein (2001, p. 626) that “paying subjects will change the distribution of responses, however, assuming that we only want to confirm the existence of a plausible

pattern of reasoning it seems unlikely that whether or not we pay the subjects will effect results more than an infinite number of other factors (such as, gender, age, profession, time of day, mood, etc.)”.

A second concern is related to the use of a non-laboratory setting which is alleged to reduce control, even if this criticism is questionable (Rubinstein, 2013). Given the wide range of real-world situations considered in our research, we argue that an anonymous survey context can liberate individuals to reveal more accurately their preferences. Surveyed individuals were not asked questions about their own preferences but rather those of an average individual, namely an average employee in a given company or organization. Indeed, there is convincing evidence (e.g., Epley and Dunning, 2000; Epley and Dunning, 2006; Balcetis et al., 2008) that individuals have overly positive views of themselves but more accurate impressions of their peers. Epley and Dunning (2000) and Grolleau et al. (2012b) showed that generally respondents do not want to give a bad image of them and thus might underestimate unethical and socially undesirable options and overestimate options perceived as more morally acceptable. In line with the findings of Balcetis and Dunning (2013), asking individuals to predict others' behaviors is likely to produce relatively more accurate results about the relevance of positional concerns in a given context (Balcetis and Dunning, 2013).

Formally, the scenarios were related to six unethical behaviors that an average employee can be confronted to: overcharging travelling expenses, over-claiming worked hours, lying, not keeping promises, bearing an accident risk and bribery. The used scenarios and values were partly inspired by previous surveys in the ethical domain and adapted to appear as realistic as possible in the Algerian context. In order to improve the questionnaire and increase its readability, we pre-tested it among some students and colleagues who were not solicited in the

end-survey. For each behavior, individuals were asked to pick among four options (ethical, unethically-egalitarian, selective positionality, and ego-positionality) the one that the average employee would prefer (see Appendix 1 for the survey instrument). For instance, the scenario regarding overcharging travelling expenses was formulated as follows:

*Assume that employees have found a way to overcharge travelling expenses in order to get higher reimbursement from their company. What would an average employee prefer?*

*A. The average employee overcharges DZD 10000, his/her colleagues overcharge DZD 10000*

*B. The average employee overcharges DZD 5000, his/her colleagues overcharge DZD 2500*

*C. The average employee overcharges DZD 10000, his/her colleagues overcharge DZD 15000*

*D. The average employee does not overcharge, his/her colleagues do not overcharge*

Here, option A corresponds to an unethically-egalitarian situation, where all individuals behave unethically but in an identical way. Following Celse (2012), this option was introduced to avoid confusing people motivated by inequity-aversion (Fehr and Schmidt, 1999) and those motivated by positional concerns (Solnick and Hemenway, 1998). On the opposite, option D corresponds to the most ethical situation, that is, where no one cheats. In other words, option D can be considered as the honesty benchmark.<sup>3</sup> Options B and C allow us to capture ‘ego’ and ‘selective’ positionality, respectively. In B, the average individual overcharges less in absolute terms than what he/she does in C, but more than his/her colleagues (selective positionality). In C, the average individual overcharges more than other

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<sup>3</sup> Another reference point can be the situation that maximizes the monetary payoff of a self-interested individual, that could be A or C in our example.

colleagues (ego-positionality). Noteworthy, the order of the four options and questions has been varied in order to avoid a potential status quo bias.

The scenarios about overcharging travelling expenses and over-claiming worked hours are of particular interest for us since they explicitly involve a monetary dimension and an ethical one. Indeed, the option where the surveyed individual is ego positional (*B* in the example above) also corresponds to the situation where he/she is positional on the monetary dimension. We also introduce the risk of accident (clearly a bad) as a way to measure whether some people think that an average individual can have positional preferences on this dimension, which implies a higher risk of accidents for him/her in absolute terms, but a lower one when compared to the accident risk of peers. Unlike the five other examined items, this scenario relates to a domain where the unethical option does not imply a ‘deliberate’ action, which provides a consistent basis with previous contributions including bads in their survey instruments (e.g., Solnick and Hemenway, 1998; Grolleau et al., 2012b).

## *5.2. Results and discussion*

In the following, we present and discuss the results regarding the percentage of individuals choosing selective positionality, ego-positionality, unethically-egalitarian, and ethical or honest options. The results obtained from the original Algerian sample are presented in Table 1. The main findings obtained from the French sample are reported in Table 2. Interestingly, individuals’ responses are very similar across samples, even if some differences can be found on individual scenarios. Although we prefer to not over-interpret the comparison, we contend that the additional survey in France has enhanced the relevance and generalizability of our initial study.

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 around here]

The main findings are twofold. *First*, aggregate answers (last line of Table 1) show that 65% of surveyed Algerian individuals assume that the average individual prefers “ethical” (39%) and “unethically-egalitarian” (26%) situations, where everyone is honest and those where everyone is dishonest the same way, respectively. Reassuringly, most respondents attribute to the average employee ethical preferences. Interestingly, a similar trend is observed among French participants (last line of Table 2), since a majority of them picked ethical (41%) and unethically-egalitarian (31%) options. In addition, although some significant differences are observed for some scenarios, there is no significant difference between aggregate responses from both samples.

The above findings are consistent to some extent with the argument that a significant proportion of people wants to be honest even if it does not pay (Bhide and Stevenson, 1990). They also suggest that employees can be nudged away from opportunistically unethical behavior by tapping into their intrinsic motivation to be honest actors. For both samples, the percentage of surveyed individuals expressing ethical preferences is significantly higher than the percentage of respondents attributing to the average employee unethically-egalitarian ones. At the same time, the preferences for egalitarian outcomes or norm conformism seem to extend to (un)ethical domains. This finding can be explained by the strong egalitarian preferences present in the Algerian and French societies. In Algeria, a strong emphasis is put on social mimicry, even regarding socially reprehensible behaviors.

Moreover, the result above is consistent with the finding of Gino and Pierce (2010; see also Schweitzer and Gibson, 2008) suggesting that dishonesty can be used and rationalized or



justified as a means to restore equity. Thanks to several experiments, Gino and Pierce (2010) showed that perceived wealth inequity leads individuals to cross ethical boundaries. They also found that people tend to discount the wrongness of crossing ethical boundaries to hurt or help others when the action restores equity. In short, people can decide to behave dishonestly without threatening their moral condemnation because the victim (i.e., an Algerian or French company) is perceived as responsible of some inequity and unfairness and deserves to be victimized (Anand et al., 2004).

*Second*, a non-negligible proportion of surveyed individuals in the two samples attribute to the average employee preferences for either form of positionality. The aggregate answers show that 35% of Algerian (respectively, 27% of French) individuals choose the positional states. Regarding selective positionality, the proportions vary between 13% and 25% in the Algerian sample, and between 8% and 14% among French participants. Noteworthy, on an aggregate level, the proportion of individuals choosing selective positionality is significantly higher for Algerians (18%), compared to their French counterparts (10%). This result can be due to a dual situation in Algeria where many individuals consider unethical behaviors as an “obliged passage” to progress in the society and also seek to maintain a positive self-image, by behaving less unethically than peers. Regarding ego-positionality, the proportions vary between 12% and 26% in the Algerian sample, and between 3% and 24% in the French one. However, on an aggregate level, the proportion of participants choosing ego-positionality is not statistically different across samples.

An interesting point relates to overcharging travelling expenses and over-claiming worked hours, both implying a monetary gain, for which the proportion of individuals who picked the ego-positionality option, which also corresponds to being positional in monetary terms *ceteris*

*paribus*, is significantly higher than the proportion of those who choose the selective positionality option. In addition, this figure holds for the two samples, increasing its generalizability. In other words, some people prefer to be more dishonest than others, given that this situation makes them relatively wealthier (see Piff et al., 2012). However, regarding the four other scenarios, the distribution of selective and ego-positionality varies across samples. While the proportion of Algerians choosing selective positionality has been found to be systematically higher than the proportion of those choosing ego-positionality, things are more balanced in the French sample.

In addition to the two aforementioned main findings, another ‘by-product’ result can be highlighted, notably that positional concerns matter differently according to the domains considered, which is consistent with the previous studies on positional concerns (e.g., Solnick and Hemenway, 1998, 2005).<sup>4</sup> Regarding selective positionality, lying is the dishonest behavior that exhibits the highest proportion of individuals attributing positional preferences to an average employee. This result holds for both samples, although the absolute values (25% versus 14%) are significantly different. On the opposite side, the dishonest behaviors for which selective positionality is the lowest are different across samples (over-claiming worked

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<sup>4</sup> In the Algerian study, we also examined the effect of socio-demographic characteristics (not gathered in the French study) on the probability to choose positional and unethically-egalitarian options over the ethical option (used as a reference) but the results were weak. Controlling for individuals’ age, gender, income and education level in a multinomial logistic regression (not reported but available from authors upon request), we found that the considered variables are not significant in general. Although these findings should not be over-interpreted since the model is probably underspecified, they are similar to most of the previous literature stating that socio-demographic characteristics are poor predictors of positional choices (Barbara et al., 2017 and references therein), except on very specific domains such as physical attractiveness (see e.g., Solnick and Hemenway, 1998).

hours in Algeria; accident risk in France). Regarding ego-positionality, the scenarios associated with the extreme values in the Algerian sample are over-claiming worked hours (26%) and bribery (12%). Among French participants, however, extreme values correspond to not keeping promises (24%) and accident risk (3%). A natural extension relates to factors that can explain variations across domains, such as visibility issues and monetary consequences.

Noteworthy, for the risk of accidents, which constitutes as stressed before a typical bad without involving a deliberate wrongdoing, the percentage of positional answers, regardless of whether they correspond to ego- or selective positionality, is the second lowest among Algerians (31%) and the lowest among French (10%). This result is consistent with previous studies including some bads (e.g., Solnick and Hemenway, 1998, 2005). One may argue, however, that respondents who do not select the lowest risk level for everyone including themselves (option D) may have exotic preferences. Although this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, we computed responses to the other scenarios considering only the subsample of those who answered the standard utilitarian option regarding the risk of accidents. The results are quite similar to those reported in Tables 1 and 2, although the proportions of ethical choices turn to be slightly higher, which is to some extent predictable since only individuals choosing the lowest risk level for everyone are considered.

### *5.3. Implications*

Some important implications can be drawn from the preference for equality or norm conformism in (un)ethical domains but we caution the reader not to over-interpret them, given that the empirical evidence obtained is tentative and does not cover all the dimensions raised. On one side, informing people about the high proportion of peers behaving honestly can drive them to behave similarly. This lever has been successfully employed to increase the number

of people paying their taxes on time (Cabinet Office, 2012). On the other side, informing directly or indirectly people that a high proportion of peers behave dishonestly is likely to be counterproductive by driving the concerned individuals to behave similarly. Indeed, the situation provides the potential wrongdoer with the needed rationalization to behave badly, that is ‘everyone is doing it’. Cialdini (2003) showed that erected signs informing visitors of the Petrified Forest National Park (Arizona) that many were stealing small pieces of wood involuntarily increased the theft rate in comparison to the control situation. In short, even if trying to mobilize action against socially disapproved conduct by describing it as regrettably frequent (e.g., piracy, littering) is understandable, it is misguided because it inadvertently suggests a counterproductive descriptive norm in the minds of the concerned people (Cialdini et al., 2006; see also Farrow et al., 2017). Rather than diffusing information, people’s tendency to conform to peers’ behaviors can provide a basis to withhold some information or at least not to publicize or make these behaviors too visible.

Moreover, concerns for fairness can increase the likelihood of unethical behaviors if they are perceived as ways to correct some deficiencies (Schweitzer and Gibson, 2008). The fairness restoring effects can make behaviors that will otherwise appear unethical more acceptable and help offenders to rationalize their acts. A natural implication for managers or other decision makers is to avoid raising fairness concerns or publicizing bad norms among other people such as employees or consumers or to propose them ethical ways to address legitimate equity concerns.

Furthermore, the above finding regarding both forms of positionality also suggests several implications. Status seeking is not a one-dimensional issue and characterizing individuals in this multidimensional space is a crucial challenge, beyond the scope of our contribution. For

instance, without purporting to be exhaustive, an individual can be interested in money-related positionality or/and ego versus selective positionality. Moreover, these dimensions can interact synergistically or antagonistically and lead to unexpected tradeoffs. Spillover effects are very likely in social settings and complicate the situation for those in charge of managing positional tensions. A better understanding of multidimensional positional concerns can help designing an adequate management and behavioral architecture that actively channel the status-seeking energy in directions aligned with socially desirable goals, such as shifting the source of social status among disadvantaged youth away from violence towards sports. Let us consider the case of an individual who is predominantly driven by the desire to outperform others in an unethical challenge. It can be useful to inform him/her that relevant others behave less badly than what he/she thinks to make him/her improving his/her relative standing without behaving worse in absolute terms. Another strategy can be to prevent the comparison, e.g., by suppressing the social information underpinning these status races. Simultaneously, it can be fruitful to find original ways to turn the drive for status into a powerful motivator serving the community/group interests (Loch et al., 2001; Grolleau et al., 2012c).

## **6. Conclusion**

We introduced positional considerations in the analysis of unethical behaviors. Using several examples, we also distinguished two forms of positionality in the unethical realm: a ‘selective’ positionality –where individuals prefer behaving worse in absolute terms but not as poorly as others – and ‘ego’ positionality –where they may prefer behaving worse than others. Moreover, thanks to an exploratory survey, we provided insightful results regarding the presence and importance of positional concerns in Algeria and France in the domain of unethical behaviors.

On one hand, we found that most respondents attribute to the average individual preferences for ethical or honest and unethically-egalitarian options. The good news is that decision makers and behavioral architects can tap into the desire to be honest and the desire to be like others when most relevant others are perceived as behaving honestly. While the preference for the ethical option is reassuring to some extent, the second option in importance implies that individuals prefer adopting an unethical behavior when others do the same.

This finding suggests that behaving badly is more acceptable for the individual when he/she knows that others behave badly too and/or he/she seeks to restore fairness. A natural implication of our results is related to the risk of publicizing unethical or dishonest behaviors as common can involuntarily provide a comparison basis (descriptive social norms) upon which an individual can excuse and rationalize his/her wrongdoing. Unfortunately, the well-intentioned practice of exposing unethical practices can backfire and makes people more likely to engage in the undesirable behavior. Even if it is speculative, our findings can indicate that some corruption or other unethical-related rankings reflecting a reality at a given time can inadvertently reinforce the behaviors they seek to deter and lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Moreover, increasing the visibility of unfair situations can lead people to adopt more unethical behavior in order to restore fairness.

On the other hand, we found that non-negligible proportions of surveyed individuals attributed to an average employee the two types of positionality, despite some differences for individual scenarios. A natural extension will be to identify individual and situational factors that predict individual's preferences for selective versus ego-positionality. Moreover, given the importance of relative concerns in the subjective well-being literature (Easterlin, 1995), it would make sense to investigate the choice (i.e., participants are asked to choose the situation

they prefer) *versus* satisfaction (i.e., participants are asked to select the situation that makes them happier) distinction introduced by Tversky and Griffin (2000). In other words, further research is needed to examine whether positional concerns matter similarly in the unethical realm when people are asked to choose the situation they prefer *versus* the situation that will make them happier.

Our study emphasizes the multidimensional nature of positionality issues. Rather than just advocating for the suppression of positional concerns, we suggest that an adequate management can channel the status-seeking energy in directions aligned with socially desirable goals. This opens the room for further research to characterize individuals in this multidimensional space. Last but not least, although we partially checked the generalizability of our findings by conducting the same survey among a sample of Algerian individuals and a similar one among another sample in a developed country (France), a field incentive compatible experiment with real employees and in various social settings would constitute natural and promising extensions to check the cross-cultural robustness of our findings.

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**Table 1: Percentage of positional, unethically-egalitarian, and ethical choices by type of unethical behavior (N=190)**

<b>Unethical behavior</b>	<b>Ego-positionality (EP)</b>	<b>Selective positionality (SP)</b>	<b>Unethically-egalitarian (UE)</b>	<b>Ethical (E)</b>
Over-claiming travelling expenses	22	15	33	30
Over-claiming worked hours	26	13	34	27
Lying	13	25	23	39
Keeping promises	16	23	23	38
Accident risk	13	18	18	51
Bribery	12	16	24	48
<i>Global</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>39</i>

**Table 2: Percentage of positional, unethically-egalitarian, and ethical choices by type of unethical behavior obtained from a similar survey in France (N=91)**

<b>Unethical behavior</b>	<b>Ego-positionality</b>	<b>Selective positionality</b>	<b>Unethically- egalitarian</b>	<b>Ethical</b>
Over-claiming travelling expenses	21 (22)	8 (15)*	53 (33)***	18 (30)**
Over-claiming worked hours	23 (26)	14 (13)	40 (34)	23 (27)
Lying	13 (13)	14 (25)**	29 (23)	44 (39)
Keeping promises	24 (16)***	8 (23)***	16 (23)*	52 (38)**
Accident risk	3 (13)***	7 (18)**	21 (18)	69 (51)***
Bribery	23 (12)**	10 (16)*	29 (24)	38 (48)*
<i>Global</i>	<i>18 (17)</i>	<i>10 (18)**</i>	<i>31 (26)</i>	<i>41 (39)</i>

For comparison, we report between brackets the results of the Algerian sample. \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate whether the difference between the two samples is statistically significant at the 10%, 5%, and 1%, respectively.

**Appendix 1: Survey instrument (Translated from French – Not to be published – For refereeing purposes only)**

[Only for readers: *For ease of exposition, we indicate for each question what choice corresponds to selective positionality (SP), ego-positionality (EP), unethically-egalitarian (UE), and ethical option (E)*]

Anonymous survey. There is no right or wrong answer. Only your true opinion matters.

In the following questions, we ask you to predict the preferences of an average employee in a given company. The situations described below are identical, except with regards to the discussed dimension. In addition, also suppose that for each situation, there is no economic or social sanction whatever the choice of the considered employees. Moreover, the word ‘colleagues’ corresponds to the employees who are exactly similar to the average employee (same position, wage, curriculum vitae and experience).

1. Assume that employees have found a way to overcharge travelling expenses in order to get higher reimbursement from their company. What would an average employee prefer?

- A. The average employee overcharges DZD 10000; his/her colleagues overcharge DZD 10000  UE
- B. The average employee overcharges DZD 5000; his/her colleagues overcharge DZD 2500  EP
- C. The average employee overcharges DZD 10000; his/her colleagues overcharge DZD 15000  SP
- D. The average employee does not overcharge; his/her colleagues do not overcharge  E

2. Assume that employees have found a way to over-claim worked hours and thus get a higher wage. What would an average employee prefer?

- A. The average employee over-claims 5h/month; his/her colleagues over-claim 3h/month  EP
- B. The average employee over-claims 10h/month; his/her colleagues over-claim 10h/month  UE
- C. The average employee over-claims 10h/month; his/her colleagues over-claim 15h/month  SP
- D. The average employee does not over-claim; his/her colleagues do not over-claim  E

3. Regarding the number of lies/week, what would an average employee prefer?

- A. The average employee lies 3 times/week; his/her colleagues lie 3 times/week  UE
- B. The average employee lies 2 times/week; his/her colleagues lie 1 time/week  EP
- C. The average employee lies 0 time/week; his/her colleagues lie 0 times/week  E
- D. The average employee lies 3 times/week; his/her colleagues lie 5 times/week  SP

4. Assume that employees keep more or less their promises (for example, regarding their subordinates). What would an average employee prefer?

- A. The average employee keeps promises 5 times/10; his/her colleagues keep promises 3 times/10  SP
- B. The average employee keeps promises 5 times/10; his/her colleagues keep promises 5 times/10  UE
- C. The average employee keeps promises 7 times/10; his/her colleagues keep promises 9 times/10  EP
- D. The average employee keeps promises 10 times/10; his/her colleagues keep promises 10 times/10  E

5. Assume that the considered job is associated with accident risks. What would an average employee prefer?

- A. The risk of accident for the average employee is 6%; that for his/her colleagues 8%  SP
- B. The risk of accident for the average employee is 5%; that for his/her colleagues 3%  EP
- C. The risk of accident for the average employee is 5%; that for his/her colleagues 5%  UE
- D. The risk of accident for the average employee is 1%; that for his/her colleagues 1%  E

6. Assume that bribery is possible. What would an average employee prefer?

- A. The average employee accepts 2 bribes/month; his/her colleagues accept 1 bribe/month  EP
- B. The average employee accepts 3 bribes/month; his/her colleagues accept 3 bribes/month  UE
- C. The average employee accepts 0 bribe/month; his/her colleagues accept 0 bribe/month  E
- D. The average employee accepts 3 bribes/month; his/her colleagues accept 5 bribes/month  SP

Please, indicate the following information:

1. Age : _____ years old	4. Monthly net income (in DZD): a) < 50 000 <input type="checkbox"/> b) Between 50 000 and 100 000 <input type="checkbox"/> c) > 100 000 <input type="checkbox"/>
2. Education level : _____	
3. Gender : M. <input type="checkbox"/> F. <input type="checkbox"/>	

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_