

Title: The Unethical Perspective-Taker

Abstract:

Perspective taking is often the foundation of cooperation and moral diligence. We explore two ways in which perspective-takers become unethical. First, we demonstrate that taking the perspective of another individual who engages in dishonest behavior leads people to behave less ethically themselves because taking the perspective of a scoundrel leads to greater moral disengagement. We establish a general process of vicariousness: perspective-taking produced both vicarious generosity and selfishness depending on the behavior of the person one feels psychologically connected to. Second, we show that in competitive contexts, perspective taking inflames already-aroused competitive impulses and leads people to protect themselves from the potentially insidious actions of their competitors. Overall, we suggest that perspective taking functions as a relational amplifier. In cooperative contexts, it creates the foundation for prosocial impulses, but in competitive contexts, it triggers hypercompetition, leading people to prophylactically engage in unethical behavior to prevent themselves from being exploited. In the context of competition, perspective taking can pervert the age-old axiom “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” into “do unto others as you think they will try to do unto you.”