Examining the link between one’s Consideration of Future Consequences and Potential Ethical Threshold

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship between Consideration of Future Consequences (CFC), a construct first introduced by Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger & Edwards (1994) and Potential Ethical Threshold (PET), a concept which was designed to reflect an individual’s ethical behavior in the face of situational pressures (Comer & Vega, 2008). Although there has been a resurgence of interest in time perspectives in general (e.g., Andre, Vianen, Peetsma and Oort; 2018) and CFC more specifically (e.g., Joireman & King, 2016), to my knowledge, CFC has not been linked directly to ethical behavior, the type of which is reflected in one's PET. The results support a positive link between CFC and PET. Individuals with higher CFC have a higher ethical threshold. In other words, they are less susceptible to situational pressures to choose an unethical path, particularly when it involves a tradeoff in personal losses as a result. Implications and limitations are discussed, and suggestions for future research are presented.

Keywords: consideration of future consequences, potential ethical threshold, future time perspective, ethical behavior, ethical decision-making

1. Introduction
Imagine the number of organizations that may have survived, as well as the costs savings to those organizations, if only their top executives and employees had chosen to focus on long-term consequences, rather than short-term gains and incentives associated with ethically risky decisions and actions. Analogously, we can ask the same about the sexual misconduct scandals of late. Would these extensive violations have occurred if the abusers had focused on the future possibilities of loss of career, and even serious criminal charges and
incarceration, rather than their immediate personal gratification?

One’s Consideration of Future Consequences (CFC), a construct first introduced by Strathman et al., (1994), represents a relatively stable individual difference in the degree to which people focus more on future rather than immediate consequences, (i.e., one’s willingness to make tradeoffs in benefits from one versus the other). Therefore, one’s CFC distinguishes between an individuals who at the lower extreme, are more focused on immediate outcomes of their behaviors or actions and do not consider what might transpire in the future as a result (Strathman, et al., 1994). At the other extreme (high CFC) are those who are willing to forgo immediate benefits for the sake of long-term consequences. Past research has found CFC as negatively correlated with aggressive or risky driving behaviors (Moore & Dahlen, 2008; Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997) and positively with fiscal responsibility (Joireman, Sprott & Spanganberg, 2005) and preventative health behaviors (Orbell, Perugini & Rakow, 2004). For a brief, but thorough summary of the correlates of CFC found in earlier research, see Toepoel (2010). More recently, high CFC has been found to be antecedent to transformational leadership behaviors (Zhang, Wang, Pearce, 2014) as well organizational citizenship behaviors, while low CFC has been linked to specific delinquent and counterproductive work behaviors (Cohen, Panter, Turner Morse & Kim, 2014).

Although there is solid intuitive and theoretical support for a significant association between the two, very few studies have addressed the relevance of CFC within the domain of ethical actions and behavior. In a recent review (Joireman & King, 2016) of the outcomes associated with CFC in prior research, only three studies were referenced within the general context of ethical behavior. In one (Robbins, 2012), CFC was found to be significantly correlated to ethical orientations (i.e., EPQ) and well as perceptions of the relative importance of ethics and social responsibility in business (PRESOR). In addition, perceived similarity to one’s future self, a related, yet distinct single item measure, was significantly linked to unethical actions such as lies, false promises and cheating (Hershfield, Cohen & Thompson, 2012). Moreover, the relationship between future self-continuity and one’s disapproval of unethical negotiation strategies, was mediated by CFC, suggesting the focus should be on an analysis of the direct correlation between the two. Subsequently, Cohen, et al. (2014) not only established CFC as an important component of moral character, but also found that moral character predicted self-reported delinquent behaviors (e.g., lying, cheating, stealing).

However, it appears that CFC has not been analyzed as a predictor of ethical decision making involving difficult choices when faced with a realistic dilemma. This omission is surprising given many ethical scenarios are classic dilemmas involving conflicts between short and long term consequences of one’s decision, the type that would be expected to be susceptible to the influence of CFC. Fortuitously, Comer & Vega (2005, 2008) developed an
instrument to measure one’s Personal Ethical Threshold (PET), which reflects susceptibility to unethical behavior under varying levels of inducements and consequences. This study should add value to this growing stream of research by analyzing whether individuals who are higher in CFC will respond more ethically in situations of varying situational pressures and moral intensity (as measured by the PET).

2. Research Methods

The sample consisted of 439 students enrolled in an online Principles of Management course at a southeastern university in the United States. Subjects completed the two measures online within their course management system. Although the participants’ names were recorded (in order to provide the extra credit incentive), they were assured that their responses would never be evaluated, analyzed or even reviewed individually and only reported in aggregate.

Consideration of Future Consequences was measured using the 12-item scale (shown in the appendix) that has been used in at least 125 publications (Joireman & King, 2016) and after extensive evaluation, has been established as having “robust validity and reliability” (Zhang, et al., 2014, p. 331). Although acknowledging some debate, Joireman & King (2016), conclude in a review of the measure, that the two-factor solution provides a better fit than one.

Furthermore, there is substantial support for measuring the two factors as sub-scales, one which includes the items that focus on the short term (CFC –Immediate or CFC-I) and the other consisting of the CFC-Future (CFC-F) items (as indicated in the appendix). These subscales have received support as distinct predictors (e.g., Joireman, Balliet, Sprott, Spangenberg & Schulpz, 2008) with unique relationships among other variables (e.g., Rappange, Werner & Van Exel, 2009).

The subjects’ ethical behavior was measured with the PET instrument that again, was developed by Comer and Vega (2008). The ten scenarios, based on real incidents (Comer & Vega, 2011) present half (PET – S) in which the behavioral options vary in situational pressure (personal cost) with the moral intensity (consequences for others) remaining constant and the remaining five vice versa (PET – M). An example of each type is presented in the appendix. An analysis of the two separately, as well as one’s overall PET, should be useful for discerning whether ethical behavior in both types of situations might be predicted by CFC, or if they are distinct with regard to their relationships.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics for all the variables and subscales are presented in Table 1, while the correlations among all the variables are presented in Table 2. The most interesting findings relevant to the purpose of this study are the correlations between CFC (and the CFC subscales) and PET (and the PET subscales). As shown in Table 2, one’s consideration of personal consequences is positively associated with one’s personal ethical threshold. This link
appears to be mainly attributable to the correlation between CFC and one’s threshold in situations in which the personal costs are varied and significant. In other words, CFC is not as relevant a predictor of one’s threshold when faced with choices that significantly affect others. These findings generalize to both subscales of CFC as well.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CFC</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>42.37</td>
<td>7.025</td>
<td>49.353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFC - I</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>23.64</td>
<td>4.962</td>
<td>24.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFC - F</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>18.74</td>
<td>3.024</td>
<td>9.145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>25.76</td>
<td>4.122</td>
<td>16.988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET - M</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>11.19</td>
<td>2.513</td>
<td>6.313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET - S</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>14.57</td>
<td>2.822</td>
<td>7.963</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Correlation Matrix (Pearson Correlation Coefficients)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PET</th>
<th>PET-M</th>
<th>PET-S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CFC</td>
<td>.138**</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.166**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.409</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFC-I</td>
<td>.125**</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.163**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.651</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFC-F</td>
<td>.115*</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.117*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.240</td>
<td>.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.741**</td>
<td>.801**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET-M</td>
<td>.741**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.191**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET-S</td>
<td>.801**</td>
<td>.191**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>439</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level**

* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
4. Discussion

The results of this study lend support for the relationship between one’s consideration of future consequences and personal ethical threshold. Measuring ethical behavior with realistic scenarios that present difficult choices and dilemmas further solidifies this connection. After an extensive review of the CFC literature, Joireman & King (2016) call for more behavioral dependent measures, as well as more studies that analyze how CFC might vary as a function of the situation. The scenarios in the PET measure present behavioral options that vary by situational pressure and moral intensity (Comer & Vega, 2011). This study focuses on behavioral outcomes, as well as how the effects of CFC are influenced by the situation.

The results of this study also have implications for ethics education and training. Past studies (Toepoel, 2010) suggest that education can have an effect on CFC. It has been suggested (Moore & Dahlen, 2008) that training aggressive drivers to consider the potential consequences of their behavior might be helpful. In the same vein, ethicists might benefit from the use of this technique in training or mentoring others. Furthermore, the PET instrument has been used to help students identify circumstances and situations that could mitigate their moral behavior (Comer & Vega, 2008). This same strategy might be beneficial with individuals (e.g., employees, managers) in other contexts (e.g. organizations).

Support for a link between CFC and ethical behavior could have important employee selection implications (Robbins, 2012). Measures of CFC and PET could be used, along with other types of integrity tools, as a means of preventing unethical behavior in organizations. Valuable information is likely to be gained by measuring “how vulnerable the individual is to situational factors in his or her organization, i.e., how little or how much in the way of these contingencies it takes for organization members to cross their proverbial line, acting in a way they consider unethical”(Comer & Vega, 2008, p. 129). The PET instrument certainly reflects behaviorally based questions, which have been supported as more valid and reliable than many other methods used in interviews. Of course, any use of these measures would need to be preceded by validation and testing in order to rule out any adverse impact.

Of course, limitations must be recognized in this study because of its cross-sectional and correlational nature. However, common method variance should be mitigated by the distinct survey designs and formats. As shown in the appendix, CFC was measured with a Likert type scale while PET was measured by behavioral choices to thorough and detailed ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, the surveys were not combined, but rather labeled and offered separately as Part 1 (the CFC) and Part 2 (PET). In addition, they were available for completion over a period of several days, therefore the subjects did not necessarily complete them in succession. Nevertheless, future research should address the link between CFC and PET using a longitudinal design to provide more support for a cause and effect relationship.
It would be interesting for future research to look at CFC as it possibly relates to the misconduct uncovered in the #MeToo movement. It certainly seems plausible that this variable plays a significant role since CFC has already been linked with the more general traits of impulsivity (Joireman, Anderson & Strathman, 2003) and self-control (Ein-Gar, Goldenberg, & Sagiv, 2012). After an extensive ten year longitudinal study, Toepoel (2010) found that CFC, although relatively stable in the short term, is a changeable construct over the years and she called on future research to focus on what causes it to change. Likewise, Joireman & King (2016) have called for a closer evaluation of the potential dynamic nature of the construct. Drastic events in one’s life may possibly influence the changeability of the construct (Toepoel, 2010). Certainly the severe consequences for those who have been exposed of sexual misconduct might be a classic example of the type of occurrence that would alter one’s CFC, albeit unfortunately too late for many. However, the pervasive cultural change in tolerance for these actions might actually lead others to place more consideration on the long-term consequences associated with their unethical actions.

References


Appendix: CFC Scale*

For each of the statements below, please indicate whether or not the statement is characteristic of you. If the statement is extremely uncharacteristic of you (not at all like you) please type a "1" to the left of the question; if the statement is extremely characteristic of you (very much like you) please type "5" next to the question. And, of course, use the numbers in the middle if you fall between the extremes. Please keep the following scale in mind as you rate each of the statements below.

1. I consider how things might be in the future, and try to influence those things with my day to day behavior.
2. Often I engage in a particular behavior in order to achieve outcomes that may not result for many years.
3. I only act to satisfy immediate concerns, figuring the future will take care of itself.
4. My behavior is only influenced by the immediate (i.e., a matter of days or weeks) outcomes of my actions.
5. My convenience is a big factor in the decisions I make or the actions I take.
6. I am willing to sacrifice my immediate happiness or well-being in order to achieve future outcomes.
7. I think it is important to take warnings about negative outcomes seriously even if the negative outcome will not occur for many years.
8. I think it is more important to perform a behavior with important distant consequences than a behavior with less-important immediate consequences.
9. I generally ignore warnings about possible future problems because I think the problems will be resolved before they reach crisis level.
10. I think that sacrificing now is usually unnecessary since future outcomes can be dealt with at a later time.
11. I only act to satisfy immediate concerns, figuring that I will take care of future problems that may occur at a later date.
12. Since my day to day work has specific outcomes, it is more important to me than behavior that has distant outcomes.

*CFC–I items (reverse-scored) are represented by items 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, and 12. CFC–F items are represented by the remaining five (1, 2, 6, 7 & 8).
**Sample PET Items**

Sample questions from the PET instrument – the first of which the options vary in terms of moral intensity (effects on others) and the second of which the options vary in terms of situational pressures (personal gains or costs).

5. You are a salesperson at a small fitness club for women. You found out just last week that the gym’s owners have been losing money for some time and have decided to close within the next few weeks. The members have no clue; in fact, the locker room has just been renovated. You’ve been instructed to continue signing up any new members and renewing current memberships, in order to conceal the imminent closing and to generate cash. You do not want to alienate the owners, who are well connected and have already arranged for you to get a job at a larger club. On the other hand, you know it is not right to deceive people and sell them worthless memberships. Under what conditions would you tell the truth to someone asking to purchase a new or renewed membership?

I would tell the truth to someone who asked to purchase________________________.

1 ___ an annual membership for $750
2 ___ a six-month membership for $400
3 ___ a three-month membership for $250
4 ___ a one-month membership for $100

6. You are completing your MBA while working full time. During the past few weeks, you have been consumed by a complex and highly involving group project at work, which is in the home stretch. You are exhausted from the 60+ hours per week you have been working. While driving home from work, you suddenly remember that a 20-page research paper on the work-life balance challenges of part-time students is due tomorrow evening for your human resources class. Unless you earn at least a B in this course you will not qualify for your company’s tuition remission program – and will have to pay a few thousand dollars for the course out of your own pocket. The professor has an unyielding policy against granting extensions, and you know that even if you stayed up all night to do your own research on the internet, you would be submitting a paper that would fall short of your best work. You won’t have the time you’d like to devote to this paper unless you call in sick and take tomorrow off from work, but you know that bailing out on your colleagues would be wrong.

Would you call in sick and take a day off from work tomorrow, even though the other members of your project group would have to work much harder in your absence, so that you could have the whole day to prepare a decent paper?

1 ___ Yes. I’d call in sick, even if the paper were worth only 10% of my course grade.
2 ___ Yes. I’d call in sick, but only if the paper were worth 25% of my course grade.
3 ___ Yes. I’d call in sick, but only if the paper were worth 40% of my course grade.
4 ___ No. No matter how much the paper were worth, I would go to work.