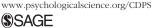# The Double-Edged Sword of Loyalty

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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 people to do unethical things. Here we offer an integrative perspective on loyalty and its outcomes. We suggest that a variety of bottom-up and top-down psychological processes lead individuals to be loyal to people and organizations they have obligations to, and that these processes operate in ways that reduce the cognitive dissonance experienced when loyalties conflict with each other or with other moral principles. In this article, we articulate what loyalty is, describe the typical objects of 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 and when each type of outcome is likely to occur.

Loyal people are commonly thought of 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) than people who are not loyal. 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 people are loyal to someone, they tend to not blow the whistle on that person's legal transgressions (Lee & Holyoak, 2020; Weidman et al., 2020) or expose his or her corruption in the workplace (Kundro & Nurmohamed, in press). People may even lie or cheat if they think it will benefit the people or groups they 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 people loyal, what do people do when an object of their loyalty collides with another object of their loyalty or a moral value, and what determines when and why loyalty leads to positive (vs. negative) outcomes? In this article, we review research from across the social sciences and synthesize findings to provide a nuanced understanding of what loyalty is and explain why research on loyalty tends to yield conflicting results (i.e., loyalty produces both ethical and unethical outcomes). We then explain how our perspective can help to improve collective understanding of how and toward what loyalty manifests itself, what its purpose is, and how it is associated with the good and the bad.

What Is loyalty?

Before diving into the consequences of loyalty, we must first define what loyalty is. Some researchers have defined loyalty behaviorally—people are loyal if they uphold their obligations to an individual, especially in times of need (Shaw et al., 2017). Also, people are loyal if they adhere to a group and its goals, symbols, norms, and beliefs (Brewer & Brown, 1998; James & Cropanzano, 1994) and are committed to putting the group above other groups (Scott, 1965), even when it requires personal sacrifice (Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). These perspectives have focused on partiality toward either an

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individual or a group, even if it comes at a cost to the self (Hildreth et al., 2016). Other researchers 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 a person's character is judged in part according to whether or not he or she is 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 take into account its moralized nature. First, loyalty is a psychological process that influences behavior—that is, a loyal person perceives and thinks about people, groups, and organizations in ways that lead him or her to act on their behalf, even when doing so might come at a personal cost. Loyalty arises because people have a fundamental need to belong, and thus seek out social bonds and connections to fulfill that need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); people are compelled to do what they can to maintain their social bonds. This is true regardless of whether they create those bonds (e.g., joining social groups) or find themselves in them (e.g., family ties; McManus et al., 2020; Weidman et al., 2020). Thus, the psychological need to belong drives individuals to be loyal to relationships and groups that they belong to, and to act on behalf of the other people in those relationships and groups. Although one does not need to incur a cost for acting on behalf of people or groups one is loyal to, there may be situations in which one 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 an individual to behave in ways that advance the agendas of other people, social groups, and organizations, and then that individual engages in post hoc mental procedures that allow him or her to rationalize those actions as the "right thing to do" because of loyalty. Indeed, the way that loyalties get maintained over time is by behaviors being psychologically processed in cognitively consistent ways (cf. Bem, 1972). We propose that these two processes can lead one 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 People Loyal, and Why?

What things are people typically loyal to? They tend to be loyal to at least three general classes of "objects":

other people, social groups, and organizations. People are loyal to their friends, romantic partners, and family members because being loyal is part of the historical definition of close bonds (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000), and those bonds serve people well during times of need (Shaw et al., 2017). These bonds are so important that people tend to avoid turning in close others who have committed some moral and legal transgression (Lee & Holyoak, 2020; Weidman et al., 2020). When people do not uphold their ends of the loyalty bargain with close others, their 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, people 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., 2021; Weidman et al., 2020).

The functions we just described also help to explain why people 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, 1994) and devotion to the group, its leaders, and its goals, even at a personal loss (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 an organization, ensuring that their behavior facilitates the success of the organization's mission. For instance, people who are more loyal to their organizations donate more time and money to those organizations, work extra hours, and stay with their employers 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 toward 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 with those peers (Kundro & Nurmohamed, in press).

As we have 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 is loyal to a university, an academic adviser at that university, and a fraternity. The student's adviser may ask him to do something on the same date

and at the same time that the fraternity asks him to do something. Or the student's loyalty to the fraternity may come into conflict with his values around inclusion and fairness during member recruitment. 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 one's loyalty are congruent both with one's moral values and with each other—such as when one's partner and parents get along, so that family vacations are joyous activities rather than activities in which, for example, the partner feels frustrated for having to spend time with the parents. 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 pitted 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 specific situation, 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 involve things that one is aware of and that one acknowledges drive that loyalty (e.g., Bos & Dijksterhuis, 2011). There are people (e.g., partner), groups (e.g., religious community), and organizations (e.g., employer) that people know they should be loyal to, or that they simply choose to be loyal to, and that conscious awareness drives their behavior toward those objects. These processes may influence people's loyalty by refocusing their attention toward particular objects of loyalty at any given time (cf. Earl & Hall, 2019). For example, people's values and belief systems may lead them to join social groups and organizations toward which they cultivate loyalty. In addition, people's sense of responsibility may make them loyal to friends and family members (Curry et al., 2019). And self-interest can make people fervently loyal to close others such that they are unwilling to report those close others for transgressions that they have committed (Weidman et al., 2020). Similarly, competition can make members of a group so loyal to their group that they may cheat just so that the group will win (Hildreth et al., 2016). Despite these top-down processes shaping what people think they should do in a given situation, there are things that can occur outside of their control or awareness that may lead them to behave differently. These are the bottom-up processes.

Bottom-up processes involve things in the environment that are not necessarily in one's control or conscious awareness (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) but that can shape to whom or what one is loyal when a loyalty conflicts with other loyalties or moral values. For example, the contexts in which people find themselves may shape which objects of loyalty they pay attention to and the strength of their loyalties (Bayer et al., 2020). A promotion at work may make salient certain loyalties, such as loyalty to one's boss and organization. A conflict at work, however, may temporarily change how loyal people feel or wish to be to one of the objects of their loyalty. For example, when one does not receive a promised bonus, one's overall loyalty to the organization may decrease until the bonus is awarded. And the context may change loyalties altogether, such as when two siblings become estranged and their loyalty to one another decreases.

In addition to context, the degree to which one identifies with a group can unconsciously shape how loyal one is to that group and one's willingness to fulfill loyalty obligations to the group (Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). Moreover, at least in the context of the United States, differences in political ideology matter, such that conservatives tend to value loyalty and upholding loyalty obligations more than liberals do (Graham et al., 2009). Group membership can also shape loyalty-based decisions outside of awareness. For instance, people may act on behalf of a group without realizing it merely because of minimal characteristics that they share with the group, such as wearing a T shirt of the same color or sharing the same birthday (Brewer, 1979; Burger et al., 2004). In addition, people may agree with a group's decision without reflection merely because they belong to the group (Janis, 1997).

We suggest that both top-down and bottom-up processes operate to shape an individual's loyalty. Indeed, these processes help explain why loyalty can feel like a genuine heartfelt commitment (e.g., loyalty to one's spouse) and at times feel like an unwelcome obligation (e.g., pressure to act on behalf of one's group). In addition, these processes imply that from any individual's perspective, the nature of his or her loyalty is partially known and partially unknown. That is, although people may know who they are loyal to and why (top-down processes; e.g., loyalty to family), their loyalty and loyalty-based decisions (e.g., when competing loyalties collide) are also shaped by processes outside of their awareness (bottom-up processes; e.g., social identity). So how does loyalty lead to both positive and negative outcomes?

Loyalty can lead to both 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, when loyalties are at odds with each other or loyalty is at odds with other moral principles, people often experience a sense of ease and fluency with judgments and behaviors that are consistent with the salient object of loyalty. This process of behaving or judging in accordance with the object of loyalty on one's mind is similar to the process of resolving other cognitive conflicts (cf. Festinger, 1957). Hildreth et al. (2016) demonstrated just how these processes can bring about different outcomes for loyalty in their article about how loyalty relates to ethical behavior. Specifically, students who were more loyal to their fraternity cheated far less than their peers who were less loyal to their fraternity in a noncompetitive context. However, when these groups were placed in a competitive context in which fraternities were competing against other fraternities, students who were more loyal to their fraternity cheated more than their peers who were less loyal to the fraternity.

These findings suggest that although there are times when the most loyal people in the group are the least likely to cheat because their loyalty cues ethics and promotes ethical behavior, there are other times when their mental representation of what it means to be loyal changes. In the context of competition against out-groups, something different happens in the mind, and the most loyal people 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 its status. Group competition is not the only contextual factor that can alter how people construe loyalty, however. Other situational features can also change mental representations of loyalty and associated behaviors. For example, when employees learn about another employee's unethical behavior, whether or not they turn that employee in depends on 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 cases, they seek 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 more salient.

Conclusion

At any given time, people are loyal to a series of objects that may come into conflict with one another or their loyalty may come into conflict with other moral values.

Both top-down (things people are aware of) and bottom-up (things outside of people's awareness and control) processes operate to shape how individuals will navigate these conflicts and, in turn, whether their resulting behavior will be ethical or unethical. These processes operate to reduce the dissonance that is brought about when an object of loyalty is pitted against another object of loyalty or a moral value.

These top-down and bottom-up processes, when combined, explain why, despite having long been considered an important part of what makes an upstanding and moral person, loyalty has also been implicated 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 have 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 people's lives. We also hope that it will guide future conversations about the costs and benefits of promoting loyalty, as well as motivate researchers to explore ways to reduce loyalty's (often unintended) negative consequences.

Recommended Reading

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Hildreth, J. A. D., Gino, F., & Bazerman, M. (2016). (See References). Documents how and why loyalty can lead to ethical and unethical outcomes.

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Weidman, A. C., Sowden, W. J., Berg, M. K., & Kross, E. (2020). (See References). Explains how close others factor into judgments of punishment and decisions to cover up wrongdoing.

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