Finding Balance on the Moral Scale: the Effect of Forgiveness on Dishonest Behavior

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Consumers face ethical choices on a daily basis. In some cases, they know that if they succumb to dishonest behavior, forgiveness may be available to them. Do the expectation of being forgiven and forgiveness itself influence an individual’s likelihood to engage in unethical behavior? This paper addresses this question by examining the effects of confession on individuals’ dishonest behavior. Across three studies, we find that when individuals expect to be forgiven for their unethical acts, they are more likely to behave dishonestly before rather than right after a confession. However, the positive effect of confession was short and diminished with time.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Recent studies in the marketing literature have started exploring how consumers face purchase decision that entail tension between behaving honestly or ethically and maximizing one’s own self-interests. This research has shown that consumers often resolve this tension through a creative interpretation of ambiguity around dishonest behaviors. Specifically, they behave dishonestly enough to profit from their unethical but honestly enough to maintain a positive self-concept and balance their own ethical scale (for example, Mazar, Amir & Ariely, 2008). Building on this prior work, the papers in the current symposium will address two main questions (1) how do people evaluate products that are ethically tainted and how does using such products affect their behavior; and (2) what mechanisms help consumers maintain a balance between their moral self and their use of unethically made products and unethical actions? That is, how might consumers go about cleansing themselves from the guilt of their previous immoral behaviors?

The first two papers explore factors impacting the likelihood that ethically questionable behavior will occur during consumption or during purchase decisions. Gino and Norton examine the influence of wearing and using counterfeit products on both one’s own dishonest behavior and on one’s perceptions of others’ dishonest behavior. Cavanaugh and Fitzsimons’ work, instead, explores how people choose products when information about the unethical manufacturing practices of such products is available to them. In the third paper, Ayal and Ariely examine the effects of confession and forgiveness on one’s dishonesty acts and its role as a mechanism for turning over a new leaf. Finally, Inbar, Pizarro and Gilovich report findings showing that individuals with feelings of guilt seek to metaphorically “balance the scales” through self-induced physical punishment.

We believe the session will draw the attention of a diverse audience, including scholars interested in deceptive advertising, corporate social responsibility, and dark side marketing behaviors, as well as scholars interested more generally in the influence of emotions on consumer behavior. In addition, this symposium will make an important contribution to consumer research by highlighting when and why consumers might regularly cross ethical boundaries, even without being aware of it.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The Counterfeit Self: The Deceptive Costs of Faking It”
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Michael Norton, Harvard Business School, USA

As with their other consumption decisions—the products people buy to adorn themselves or decorate their homes and offices (Berkowitz & LePage, 1967), we suggest that counterfeit products create a particular kind of conflict: Though the wearer intends them to signal positive traits, wearing counterfeits can in fact send a negative signal to the self. Indeed, given the well-documented effects of primes on behavior, such that the mere presence of objects can influence behavior (Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008; Berkowitz & LePage, 1967), we suggest that the negative impact of wearing counterfeit products is likely to occur despite their owners’ desire to use them for positive signaling.

We tested these predictions in four experiments. We first show that wearing purportedly counterfeit sunglasses causes people to cheat more on tests when given the opportunity—both when they believe they have an inherent preference for counterfeit products (Experiment 1A) and when they were randomly assigned to wear counterfeits (Experiment 1B). Indeed, the impact of counterfeits extends even beyond the individual, causing individuals not just to behave unethically but also to see the behavior of others as more unethical as well (Experiment 2). Finally, we investigate the mechanism underlying these effects, showing that wearing counterfeits causes people to feel unethical, and these feelings of inauthenticity—their counterfeit self-drive unethical behavior (Experiment 3).

While people adopt counterfeit products because they are trying to improve their self-image, our studies show that counterfeiters have the ironic consequence of harming self-image via inauthenticity, inducing a “counterfeit self.” Why then do people buy counterfeit products? One view, of course, is that the benefits of counterfeiters simply outweigh these costs, and that people are making a calculated tradeoff between the two. We suspected that people may not be making this tradeoff, however, but rather may simply overlook the possible negative consequences of adopting counterfeits. Indeed, when we asked a separate set of students (N=86; M_age=22, SD=2.20) to predict the impact of counterfeits, they were unaware of the consequences for ethical behavior. We gave these students the average performance on the matrix task of our study participants, and asked them to predict the self-reported performance in three experimental conditions: Counterfeit sunglasses, authentic sunglasses, and a control condition. The students correctly predicted that, overall, participants across conditions would cheat (M_real=9.62, M_fake=9.59, M_control=9.34; F[3,255]=43.67, p<.001). However, they did not anticipate that...
 cheating would vary across the three described conditions (F[2,170]<1, \text{p} rep=.56; F<.72 across all comparisons). This difference between people’s predictions about the impact of counterfeits and their actual behavior in our experiments suggests that the influence of wearing counterfeits is deceptive, in that they have an unexpected influence on individuals’ ethicality.

The obvious differences between laboratory settings and real-world contexts aside, our results have worrisome implications for the many consumers who buy counterfeit goods. Given the economic and social relevance of the counterfeiting epidemic, future research on the psychology of counterfeits and their potential moral costs seems warranted. Indeed, given that cost savings is a primary motivation for the purchase of counterfeits (Eisenb & Schuchert-Guler, 2006), individuals who buy counterfeits for themselves or gift them to others may believe that they are simply getting similar products for less money, but in fact may be paying a price in terms of their long-term morality. Perhaps most troublingly, our results from Experiment 2 demonstrate that the negative impact of counterfeits accrue not just to the buyer, but extend more broadly to the social environment, suggesting that overlooking the negative impact of counterfeits may have far-reaching negative consequences.

“Mirror… Mirror on the Wall, Whose the Greenest Giver of Them All?*: Understanding When and Why Men and Women Gift Ethically-Made Products”
Lisa Cavanaugh, University of Southern California, USA
Gavan Fitzsimons, Duke University, USA

While most people claim they care about ethical issues and view themselves as honest individuals, it is likely that, in the past, they have chosen to purchase unethically produced products (e.g., products produced through child labor, unsafe working conditions, or environmental degradation). Companies making these products are often the subject of scrutiny as suggested by the large literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR). To date, very little is known about the role that consumers play in propagating a system that implicates harm (Deviney et al., 2007), and, more specifically, little is known about what drives consumers’ demand for products that are produced in less socially responsible ways.

The present research addresses this gap and asks the following questions: 1) when and why do consumers buy unethically made products for themselves or for others? and 2) how do their choices for unethically vs. ethically made products vary based on the relationship they have with the person they are buying the product for?

In our first study we were interested in understanding how people choose products that will be gifted to a romantic partner when price and ethicality in the way the product was produced are in conflict with each other or not. The study employs a 2 (media exposure: yes vs. no) x 2 (respondent’s gender: male vs. female) x 2 (pair type: conflict vs. no conflict) between-subject factorial design. Our media exposure manipulation consisted of participants watching a 4-minute video clip from NBC’s Today Show about opportunities to buy ethically responsible products for Valentine’s Day prior to making their choices (media exposure condition) or not watching such a clip (no media condition).

Our pair type manipulation consisted of participants choosing between different pairs of products whose features varied on two different desirable attributes. As a gift giver, we argue, people are likely to be motivated to choose a product that looks expensive so that they can signal they really care about the other person (gift recipient). Indeed, prior research has demonstrated that people commonly associate price with product quality—i.e., they often infer quality from price based on the belief that the two factors are positively correlated (Monroe, 1973; Monroe & Petroshius, 1981; Ordonez, 1998). Thus, we assume product quality (as signaled by product cost) is a desirable attribute of products that gift givers take into account when making their purchase decisions. A second attribute we are interested in is whether the product is ethically produced or not. We assume that, as a gift giver, people consider products that are ethically produced as more desirable than products that are unethically produced (e.g., products manufactured using child labor). This assumption is supported by survey evidence showing that a large number of consumers incorporate ethical considerations into their product purchase decisions (e.g., Cone 2009; Crane, 2001; Strong, 1996; Rogers, 1998). We manipulated whether there was conflict between these two desirable product attributes (price and ethicality) or no conflict when participants selected one of the two products included in each pair.

We used two pairs of products, which varied on the same dimensions of price and ethicality for both women and men. The first pair consisted of an inexpensive product which was ethically produced, and an expensive product which was unethically produced (pair involving conflict between two desirable product dimensions, namely price and ethicality). The second pair consisted of an expensive product which was ethically produced, and an inexpensive product which was unethically produced (pair not involving conflict). We used chocolate as a product category for men (gifting their chocolate to their partner), and greeting cards as a product category for women (gifting the card to their partner). We chose these products (chocolates and cards) because these are the types of products that are regularly purchased for romantic partners by these two genders around Valentine’s Day.

In the study, participants were asked to choose one of the two products in their assigned pair as a Valentine Day gift for their romantic partner. Only participants who were currently in a relationship could participate in the study. The study was conducted during the week prior to Valentine’s Day, and 5% of the participants (randomly chosen) received the actual product of their choice during the study to give as a gift to their partner.

Studies 2-5 push these findings to demonstrate when and how consumers’ decisions change based on the venue in which the gift is given (e.g., public vs. private), the type of product (e.g., durable vs. non-durable), and the type of relationship with the recipient (e.g., romantic partner, friend, colleague). Together the study results suggest that there are important differences in the way men and women weigh ethical considerations in their product purchase decisions and use products to signal their commitment to relationships in different ways. The results also demonstrate that, under certain circumstances, making an ethical standard salient can reduce the desire to buy attractive products that have been unethically produced (e.g., produced through the use of child labor).

We argue and find that asymmetries exist between the genders in their motivations to buy green gifts for different significant others in their lives. Compared to men, women are more likely to choose the unethical / cheap option as a gift for their romantic partner. However, they are willing to choose the ethical/expensive option for a female friend when the ethical cue is durable or explicit. Specifically, the probability of choosing a green gift depends largely on the giver’s perception of its signal value to the recipient (i.e., it is more about what the green gift signals about the giver than the receiver). We find that women derive more meaning when choosing green gifts for other women than when choosing green gifts for men.
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Consumers face ethical choices on a daily basis. In some cases, they know that if they succumb to dishonest behavior, forgiveness may be available to them. Do the expectation of being forgiven and forgiveness itself influence an individual’s likelihood to engage in unethical behavior? The current paper aims to test the psychological mechanisms underlying forgiveness and their implications to dishonest behavior of consumers. In particular, three studies explore whether the likelihood of dishonest behavior varied before and after simulation of confession, and if so, how the effect of this confession is influenced by temporal distance.

Generally, expectations of receiving forgiveness might influence the likelihood that consumers will engage in dishonest behavior in two main ways. The first concerns the saliency of ethicality at the moment a particular behavior is considered. Previous research has found that drawing consumers’ attention to moral standards could reduce dishonest behavior (Mazar, Amir & Ariely, 2008). These results suggest that when unethical behavior is made salient, consumers may pay greater attention to the importance of ethical behavior and moral standards. Thus, the saliency account predicts that consumers will avoid dishonest behavior after receiving forgiveness. Furthermore, it suggests that any type of self-reflection on one’s own sins should decrease the level of dishonesty.

The second way in which forgiveness might influence dishonesty is captured by consumers’ reactions to their current self-moral image, or their concerns for moral-balancing. According to this explanation, consumers resolve the tension between honesty and economic interests through a creative interpretation of ambiguous dishonest behaviors: they behave dishonestly enough to profit, but honestly enough to maintain a positive self-concept (Baumeister 1998; Gino, Ayal & Ariely, 2009; Mazar & Ariely, 2006). Thus, this account predicts that expected forgiveness allows consumers to protect their moral self-image from damage, so that they can maximize their profits by increasing the level of dishonest behavior.

The predictions of these two mechanisms were tested in three studies. The first two studies use hypothetical scenarios to examine individuals’ intuitive beliefs about the effects of both expected and received forgiveness. In Study 1, we used a scenario describing a woman (Laura) who faced a strong temptation to engage in unethical behavior either before or after an important event. We manipulated two independent variables: The first manipulation concerned the nature of the event that Laura is scheduled to attend (confession vs. control). The second manipulation concerned the timing of the potential dishonest behavior in regard to the event.

The results show that participants’ sensitivity to the timing manipulation was obtained only in the confession condition but not in the control condition. In particular, people expect dishonest behaviors to be more likely before rather than after confession. These results are consistent with the predictions of the concern-for-moral-balancing account. Study 2 used the same Laura’s scenario to examine if this effect can be replicated within participants and test the influence of time distance. Similarly to the results of Study 1, the lowest likelihood to act in a dishonest manner was obtained a short time after the confession. In addition, in line with the saliency account this positive effect of confession was eliminated and even reversed with time distance.

Finally, a third study tested for the effect of confession on one’s own sins in a laboratory setting where we could directly measure dishonest behavior. The study employed a computerized perceptual task, in which participants placed in situations that induced conflict between honesty and maximizing one’s self-interests and we observed their number of dishonest responses. The perceptual task was divided into two phases, and we introduced our manipulation (i.e., different types of introspective writing tasks) between these phases. Half of the participants who were assigned to the confession condition, were asked to describe one bad thing that they have done, and then to close their eyes and ask “God” or any other entity for forgiveness about that event. The other half who were assigned to the control condition, were asked to describe typical evening activities such as how they make dinner.

As expected, the two groups did not differ in their behavior in phase 1, and both groups exhibited very similar level of dishonesty behavior with moderate increase within that phase. However, the main difference between the two groups occurred after our manipulation. The level of dishonesty behaviors in phase 2 was significantly lower in the confession condition than in the control condition. That is, participants in the confession condition reduced their level of dishonest behavior as a result of the writing task, but participants in the control condition continued in their tendency to cheat more as a function of time. Taken together, our findings suggest that reflection on one’s own sins might produce beneficial effects on honest behavior (at least for a certain extent of time) only when consumers do not expect to receive forgiveness. Thus, it appears that societies should be open to granting sequential forgiveness, while remaining silent about their capacity to do so.

References

“Morality and Masochism: Feeling Guilt Leads to Physical Self-Punishment”
Yoel Inbar, Harvard University, USA
David Pizarro, Cornell University, USA
Tom Gilovich, Cornell University, USA

Past research has demonstrated that people deal with feelings of guilt and immorality in numerous ways: For example, studies have shown that guilt and immoral thoughts can motivate subsequent prosocial behavior and lead people to make amends in order to repair a relationship (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton, 1994). Another important way in which people seem to deal with feeling guilty is through metaphorical actions, such as physical cleansing in order to “wash away” misdeeds (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). In the current research, we investigated whether individuals with feelings of guilt seek to metaphorically “balance the scales” through self-inflicted physical punishment. Physical self-punishment has been a common theme in purification rituals (e.g., self-flagellation) across many religious traditions throughout history, so we predicted that participants who felt guilty would be more likely to desire to purify themselves by engaging in self-punishment.

Study 1
Forty-six participants (25 female) wrote about a time that they felt guilty or sad, or about a neutral event. They then took part in an...
ostensibly unrelated task in which they administered electric shocks to themselves. The task was comprised of six trials; shocks always started at 30 volts, and on subsequent trials participants decided whether to increase or decrease the voltage up to a maximum of 80 volts.

Five participants expressed suspicion of our hypotheses and were removed from the analysis. Shock voltages from the remaining participants were subjected to a repeated-measures analysis of variance with condition as a between-subjects factor, and gender as a covariate. This analysis revealed the expected main effect of condition, $F(3, 37)=3.29$, $p<.05$: participants in the guilt condition gave themselves more powerful shocks ($M=53.5V$) than did those in the sadness condition ($M=43.7V$) or the neutral condition ($M=43.1V$). Follow-up contrasts showed that the guilt condition differed significantly from the neutral condition, $F(1, 37)=5.81$, $p=.02$; and from the sadness condition, $F(1, 37)=3.29$, $p=.05$. The latter conditions did not differ significantly from each other, $F(1, 37)=.20$, ns.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was intended primarily as a replication of Study 1. Twenty-seven undergraduates (19 male) wrote about a time that they did something unethical, or, in the control condition, wrote about the last time they went grocery shopping. They then followed the same six-trial shock procedure used in Study 1. We predicted that participants in the unethical condition would choose to increase the shock level more rapidly than participants in the control condition, leading to a condition x trial interaction for voltage level.

Three participants expressed suspicion of our hypotheses and were removed from the analysis. Shock voltages from the remaining participants were subjected to a repeated-measures analysis of variance with condition as a between-subjects factor, and gender as a covariate. This analysis showed the expected condition x trial interaction, $F(4, 18)=2.93$, $p=.05$: Shock voltages were nearly identical between conditions on Trial 2 ($M_{\text{unethical}}=38.2$, $M_{\text{control}}=35.4$) but participants in the unethical condition increased the voltage more quickly, leading to a 10-point difference between conditions on the last trial ($M_{\text{unethical}}=63.5$, $M_{\text{control}}=53.5$).

We also assessed the effect of shock voltage on participants’ feelings of guilt. At the end of the study, participants were asked how much they felt guilt, regret, and shame ($\alpha=.90$). Participants in the shock condition scored marginally higher on this guilt index ($M_{\text{shock}}=1.70$, $M_{\text{control}}=.38$, $t(22)=1.31$, $p=.06$), but the more shock participants in the guilt condition administered, the less guilty they felt at the end of the study, $r(11)=-.66$, $p=.03$. There was no relationship between shock voltage and guilt in the control condition, $r(13)=-.15$, ns.

**Discussion**

Participants who wrote about a time that they felt guilty (Study 1) or about a time that they did something unethical (Study 2) administered more intense shocks to themselves, and increased the level of shock more quickly, than did participants who wrote about a time that they felt sad or about a neutral event. This study adds to the extant research concerning the ways in which people deal with guilt by showing that people react to guilty feelings by engaging in symbolic atonement through physical self-punishment.

This suggests that under some circumstances (i.e. when they are feeling guilty), consumers might show a preference for physically unpleasant or uncomfortable experiences.

**References**
