Slacking in the Middle: Relaxing Personal Standards in the Course of Goal Pursuit

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We demonstrate that people are more likely to relax their ethical, performance and religious standards in the middle of pursuing a goal than at the beginning and at the end, because actions at the beginning/end (vs. middle) are stronger signals of an individual’s standards.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Recycling–A License to Waste?”
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In the past few decades, conservation and environment protection have taken increasing significance in shaping public policy, corporate and marketing strategy, and individual consumer behavior. With more consumers expressing their environmental concerns through product choice (Laroche, Bergeron, & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001), companies are incentivized to integrate environmental and social issues into the production, packaging, and marketing of their products.

Of special interest is the recycling sector that involves manufacturing and marketing products using reusable content such as fiber, glass, and metal, preserving limited raw materials and reducing landfill wastes. The recycling industry has witnessed an impressive growth and has become a significant force of the economy: utilizing data from 1997 to 1999, the U.S. Recycling Economic Information Study reported that the recycling and reuse industry consists of approximately 56,000 establishments that employ over 1.1 million people, generate an annual payroll of nearly $37 billion, and gross over $236 billion in annual revenues. More and more products are advertised and marketed with the universal recycling symbol, highlighting their ecological friendliness.

In this paper, however, we propose a counterintuitive prediction that recycling products may actually increase the net use of raw materials. We argue that consumers feel licensed to use more of a product when they know that the product is made, in part or totally, of recycled materials. In addition, consumers do not typically engage in rational calculations on the percentage of recycled material to set limits on how much more of the recycled product they could consume compared to a comparable conventional product that will not result in a net increase of the use of raw materials. For example, if a brand of paper is made of 50% recycled material and 50% raw material, consuming 2 sheets of the recycled paper will result in the same amount of raw materials used as consuming 1 sheet of paper that is made of conventional (i.e. raw) material. If knowing that the paper is made of recycled materials licensed people to consume 3 sheets when they could have just used 1, this will result in a 50% increase of the use of raw materials. This is consistent with research in other domains showing that sampling healthy food (as opposed to tasty food) makes people hungrier afterwards and actually consumes more food later (Finkelstein & Fishbach, in press). We test this prediction in a controlled experiment.

Eighty-four undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: recycled paper vs. conventional paper with packaging vs. conventional paper without packaging. Participants were told that they were going to engage in an origami contest. They saw step-by-step instructions of a somewhat complex origami on the computer screen and were told that their goal was to successfully complete the origami as quickly as possible. Participants had 5 minutes to practice before the actual contest. They were told to grab as many sheets of paper from a nearby desk as they want for the practice. In the recycling paper condition, the stack of paper was wrapped in a paper package with the universal recycling symbol as well as a label indicating that the paper is made of 30% recycled content; in the conventional paper with packaging condition, the stack of paper was wrapped in a paper package without the symbol and any mentioning of recycled material; finally, in the conventional paper without packaging, the stack of paper was not wrapped in any packaging. In actuality, the same paper (conventional) was used in all 3 conditions. The sheets of papers used by participants in the practice session were recorded and used as dependent variable.

The result supported our prediction; participants in the recycled paper condition used about 22% more raw materials than those in the control conditions. This finding highlights the importance of a fuller understanding of consumer psychology in purchasing and consuming products made of recycled materials. Although people may prefer to buy recycled products, they may feel licensed to use more than needed, resulting in more waste than if they buy and consume conventional products.

“When Psychological Closeness Creates Distance from One’s Moral Compass”
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Does feeling psychologically close to another person who acts unethically make one behave more or less dishonestly? Suppose you find out that a peer who shares your birth date is inflating her expense report or cheating on her taxes. How would you react to these dishonest behaviors? You might suppose that you would view them critically, judge the behaviors as harshly as an objective observer, and distance yourself from the individual with tainted morality. In this paper, we make the opposite prediction: We propose that if a person is psychologically connected to someone who engages in selfish or dishonest behavior, she may become vicariously motivated to justify that person’s actions and thus more likely to behave unethically herself. We propose that even the subtlest of psychological connections, such as sharing the same birthday, can influence the likelihood that an individual will cross ethical boundaries.

Research has shown that people feel connected to others not only when they share a common group membership, but also when they share much subtler similarities. For example, people experience a sense of psychological closeness to another person when they share common attributes, such as a similar name or the same birthday.

As people grow closer, even when this closeness is just psychological, the line between self and other becomes blurred, leading to increased self–other overlap. This clouding of self and other is very common in close relationships and friendships, and can result from people’s cognitive orientation or mindsets. For instance, people who construe the self as interdependent define themselves in terms of their groups’ attributes (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Similarly, individuals who dispositionally tend to take the perspective of others, or who are asked to do so, psychologically take on the characteristics of others (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2008).

Even when subtle, these psychological connections create numerous vicarious possibilities. When people feel connected to others, they notice and experience others’ emotions (Hatfield et al., 1994), including joy, embarrassment, and pain. More recently, Gunia, Sivanathan, and Galinsky (2009) found that a psychological connection between two decision makers leads the second decision maker
to escalate commitment by investing further in a failing program orchestrated by the initial decision maker, even in the face of direct financial costs to the second decision maker. These findings suggest that psychological closeness blurs self-others boundaries, and thus can lead individuals to experience and behave more consistently with others’ internal states.

In this paper, we examine the effects of feelings of psychological closeness on one’s own ethical behavior. We suggest that a psychological connection to another individual who engages in selfish or dishonest behavior, however subtle, creates distance from one’s own moral compass. We argue that, because of the psychological connection, one becomes vicariously motivated to justify the other person’s selfish or unethical actions and to judge these actions as less morally problematic. We predict this should lead individuals who have formed a psychological connection with a wrongdoer to behave selfishly themselves—for example, by keeping more money for themselves when asked to share a fixed amount with others—or even dishonestly.

We observed a consistent pattern of results across five studies in which we measured people’s intentions to behave selfishly or dishonestly, as well as their real behavior. Our results show that taking the perspective of a psychologically close person who behaved selfishly led people to report being more likely to behave selfishly themselves (Experiments 1 and 4), and that feelings of embarrassments mediated this effect (Experiment 4). Psychologically closeness also led to higher levels of dishonesty (Experiment 2), in which we considered real, unethical behavior. We found that when participants shared attributes with a confederate who cheated, they were more likely to behave dishonestly by inflating their task performance and thus earned undeserved money. The same findings were replicated in a follow-up study in which we manipulated psychological closeness by activating an interdependent mindset through priming (Experiment 3). The results of Experiment 3 also show that people with an interdependent mindset view the selfish behavior of others as less unethical or wrong. Taken together, these studies provide convincing evidence that even subtle forms of psychological closeness lead individuals to vicariously justify the actions of the person they feel connected to and thus to be more likely to behave less ethically themselves.

Experiment 5 introduces the presence of out-group observers as an important moderator of the impact of psychological closeness. The results show that individuals respond differently to the selfish actions of a person to whom they feel psychologically close, depending on whether out-group observers are present or absent. When only in-group observers are present, feeling psychologically close to the wrongdoer increases one’s own likelihood of acting selfishly. But when out-group observers are present, the opposite pattern occurs.

“Taking Advantage of Future Forgiveness?— Licensing vs. Consistency Effects in the Context of Ethical Decision Making”
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To many, the concept of confession is inextricably tied to the notion of forgiveness, which has recently become a topic of study for psychologists. This increased interest stems from the recognition that forgiveness represents an important response to a fundamental human challenge: how to maintain relations with others after harming them or being harmed by them (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005). Similarly, confession allows individuals to restore their relationship with God in the case of the Catholic Church and open a new leaf in their moral account.

While prior work provides useful insights into the determinants and consequences of forgiving, it remains silent on the influence that expectations of forgiveness might have on individual behavior before and after making a confession. In this paper, we focus on a specific type of behavior: dishonesty, and test whether and how expected and received forgiveness through confession influences the likelihood to engage in dishonest behavior. Furthermore, we compare people’s predictions to their real behaviors and explore the accuracy of their intuitions.

Prior research suggests that moral behaviors are figured into an implicit calculation of self-perception such that ethical behaviors boost one’s moral self-image and transgressions dampen it (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2009). Given that people typically care about morality and want to maintain a positive self-image but behaving morally often comes at a cost, people tend to be strongly motivated to engage in ethical behaviors if their moral self is threatened by a recent transgression; they are least likely to scrutinize the moral implications of their behaviors and to regulate their behaviors right after they experienced a boost from a good deed. For example, Carlsmith and Gross (1969) found individuals more likely to comply to help-requests after they violated moral rules.

Along similar lines, as individuals face ethical dilemmas, they can fall prey to the temptation to behave dishonestly, perhaps especially when they know their behavior will be forgiven and their moral violations “erased.” That is, an expected future confession with its element of forgiveness might act as a moral offset that individuals can put into their current mental moral tap, and thus allows them to transgress even before the confession takes place without hurting their moral self-concept. This implies that an expected future forgiveness can license preceding unethical behaviors. Furthermore, dishonest behavior might be higher before than after an expected confession.

On the other hand, research on the consistency effect has found that drawing consumers’ attention to moral standards could reduce dishonest behavior. For example, in studies conducted by Mazar, Amir & Ariely (2008) signing an honor code or recalling the Ten Commandments increased the saliency of one’s own standards for honesty such that it subsequently increased honest behavior consistent with these standards. In line with this research, consumers will avoid dishonest behavior after receiving forgiveness and after the mentioning of a future confession. That is, the expectation of a confession might increase attention to morality and therefore result in behavior consistent with one’s moral standards (i.e. decrease unethical behavior before and after the confession).

The predictions of the licensing and consistency effects were juxtaposed across three studies. In the first two studies we examined individuals’ intuitive beliefs about the effects of both expected and received forgiveness on other people’s likelihood to cheat. Study 1 showed that participants’ adopted a cynical view of others, expecting strategic moral calculation. That is, participants predicted others to be more likely to cheat before rather than after an expected future confession. Study 2 extended the findings to test the influence of temporal distance. Similarly to the results of Study 1, participants predicted the likelihood of others to cheat to increase the closer a future confession, to drop right after the confession, and to increase again the further in the past the confession would be. Thus, participants predicted licensing before confession and consistency after confession with diminishing effectiveness of the latter over time.

Finally, Study 3 tested the effect of an expected confession on one’s own dishonest behavior in a task in which participants had opportunities to cheat in order to earn more money. Interestingly,
while we did find participants’ dishonest behavior to decrease after (vs. before) an expected confession and to slowly increase again with distance from the confession (similar to the prediction results from Study 1 and 2), participants’ dishonest behavior before the expected confession was lower than in a control condition where participants’ did not know about the future confession.

Taken together, our findings suggest that individuals are much more concerned about their moral self-image and less strategic as their cynical view of humanity might suggest. We found that an expected confession does not license unethical behavior in the period leading to it, but rather produce beneficial effects on honest behavior. Thus, expecting forgiveness seems to act as a reminder of one’s ethical standards leading consumers to act in consistency with these standards.

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Goals often require the completion of a sequence of actions, such as students finishing a series of assignments to pass a class, or consumers with frequent buyer cards that require the purchase of a number of items to get a reward (e.g. free coffee). In the course of pursuing such goals, people decide how closely to follow their personal standards for each action, based on whether the benefits of relaxing these standards outweigh the costs. One such cost is the negative impact on self-image, as relaxing standards can signal to oneself that one has low standards. Indeed, people learn about themselves from their actions (Brehm and Festinger 1957; Koo and Fishbach 2008). Therefore, even when external costs are low, self-image concerns get in the way of relaxing standards. In the context of unethical behavior, Mazar et al. (2008) showed that one way people resolve this internal conflict is by cheating “just a little bit”: enough to benefit, but not enough to incur the costs to self-image. These findings are evidence that people behave in ways that allow them to present themselves to themselves in a positive light, and that actions serve as signals to the self.

We suggest that actions in the course of goal pursuit have differing signaling values for the self, and that relaxing standards on actions with low signaling value would minimize negative consequences on self-image. Previous research demonstrated significant order effects in sequences of information and events, with beginning and end being particularly important (Anderson 1965). Within this perspective, we propose that actions at the beginning and end of goal pursuit are stronger signals to the self of the true nature of the self than actions in the middle. Therefore, people protect their self-image by giving themselves a good first and last impression of themselves. Accordingly, we predict that people will be more likely to relax their standards in the middle of a sequence of goal-related actions than at the beginning/end.

Six studies confirmed our hypothesis in the contexts of ethical, performance and religious standards. In study 1, participants completed a word recognition task privately, and had the opportunity to cheat at the beginning/middle/end of the task, by claiming to know the meaning of a fake word. We found that a greater number of participants claimed to know a fake word (dishonest answer) when it appeared in the middle (vs. beginning/end) of the sequence. In study 2, we replicated this pattern using a less ambiguous form of dishonesty. In private, participants flipped a coin 10 times to assign themselves randomly to a series of 10 long vs. short proofreading tasks. We found that they were more likely to (falsely) report the favorable outcome of the coin flip (assigning themselves to the short passage) for tasks in the middle than for those at beginning/end. In study 3, we replicated our findings in a more social context, where participants interacted with the experimenter throughout the task. They had the opportunity to take advantage of the experimenter’s “forgetfulness” and get undeserved credit for a task that they did not do. We found that more participants accepted the undeserved credit for a task in the middle (vs. beginning/end) of the 7-task sequence. In study 4, we extended our findings to performance standards. Participants completed a shape-cutting task at their own pace. We found that out of the six shapes in the task, they cut the first/last shapes better than the middle ones. Study 5 was designed to examine underlying mechanisms by testing the idea that first/last (vs. middle) actions are stronger signals to the self. In the context of unethical behavior, we found that participants judged another person more harshly for cheating at the beginning/end (vs. middle) of goal pursuit. Because the mechanisms for judging the self mirror those for judging others, these findings suggest that people would think of themselves as more dishonest for cheating at the beginning/end (vs. middle) of a sequence of goal-related actions, because actions at the beginning/end (vs. middle) are stronger signals to the self of one’s standards.

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