Moral Dynamics in Consumer Behavior: the Moderating Effect of Ethical Frameworks

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In recent years, the dynamics of moral behavior has received much attention, including in marketing and consumer behavior literature. Two contrasting phenomena, moral consistency and moral balancing, are documented in independent research streams. In one case, behaving ethically increases the likelihood to do again later on. In the other case, it decreases that likelihood. We try to reconcile both findings and suggest that the moral framework that an individual uses to evaluate one’s ethical behavior (i.e., consequentialism versus deontology) may moderate whether an initial ethical act increases or decreases the likelihood of behaving ethically in a subsequent occasion.

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The results showed a significant main effect of self-esteem ($M_{high}=21.64$, $M_{low}=17.62$, $F(1,154)=5.222, p<.02$), and a marginally significant effect of gender ($M_{male}=32.080$, $M_{female}=36.060$, $F(1,154)=3.57, p<.061$). The results also revealed marginally significant interaction between self-esteem and rejection ($F(1,155)=3.656, p<.058$), self-esteem and gender ($F(1,153)=3.606, p<.060$), and a marginally significant three way interaction ($F(1,155)=3.635, p<.059$). Further simple effect analysis revealed no interaction effect for men ($p>.9$), but a significant interaction for women ($F(1,80)=6.055, p<.016$). As expected with women, high self-esteem were willing to pay a higher price for the appliance, whereas low self-esteem women showed no significant difference in the amount of money they were willing to pay.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The present research contributes to the literature by demonstrating the interactive effects of gender and self-esteem on consumer spending behavior. Future research in this area can examine other product categories in addition to examining the effects of rejection on people’s risky behavior (e.g.: investing in the stock market). Furthermore it is important to compare the effects of rejection with exclusion and inclusion as well as comparing different types of rejection (e.g.: interpersonal vs. romantic) and the subsequent influence on consumer behavior.

**REFERENCES**


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The ethical dimension of consumption has gained prominence in the light of the ecological and economical crisis we currently suffer. In recent years, the dynamics of moral behavior has received much attention, including in marketing and consumer behavior literature (e.g., Khan & Dhar, 2006; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). Moral balancing (Nisan, 1991), refers to the observation that engaging in a moral behavior at one point in time reduces the likelihood of doing so in a subsequent situation (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009; Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). For example, after committing to helping a foreign student, participants in a study donated less money to charity (Khan & Dhar, 2006). Other studies, however, demonstrate the opposite phenomenon, something we can refer to as moral consistency. For example, in a study by Gino, Norton, and Ariely (in press), participants who wore counterfeit sunglasses were more likely to cheat on a number of tasks, compared to participants who wore branded sunglasses. These examples show that previous behavior may have opposite effects on current decisions. In the current paper, we investigate whether the ethical frameworks or mindsets one uses – thinking of moral behavior in terms of consequences versus in terms of rules or principles – moderates whether initial behavior will lead to moral balancing or moral consistency.

Two prominent frameworks in (Western) moral philosophy are deontological and consequentialist ethics. We predict that an outcome-based mindset (i.e., consequentialism) favors a moral balancing effect. Thinking in terms of outcomes allows the individual to make tradeoffs involving the moral self, which may demand acting in the interest of others, and immediate self-interest, and make flexible computations regarding the current status of the moral self. After choosing an ethical course of action which benefitted mostly others, the individual feels licensed to compensate and benefit the self. On the other hand, we expect that rule-based thinking (i.e., deontology) will favor a moral consistency effect. In general, rules are less flexible to be traded off with selfish benefits (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Inconsistency regarding following (ethical) rules would threaten an individual’s personal integrity (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, we predict that individuals, when in a rule-based mindset, are more likely to behave morally consistent.
To test this hypothesis, we asked our participants to remember an episode in the past in which they did an (un)ethical thing. By defining ethics in terms of consequences or rules we brought them in a consequential or deontological mindset. We then observed whether participants subsequently behaved consistent with the act they recollected from their past, or whether they showed a balancing effect. We manipulated Ethical Framework (deontological versus consequential) and Valence of an initial act (positive or negative). To do so, we asked half of our participants to remember an episode in the past where they did something ethical, and we asked the others to think about something unethical they did. Half of the individuals in each group were instructed to think about a behavior that was unethical “because it benefitted/hurt other people” (i.e., the Consequential condition). The others thought about a behavior that was unethical “because you did (not) do your duty to follow an ethical norm or principle” (i.e., the deontological condition).

As a dependent measure, we used a modified Prisoner’s Dilemma Game (PDG; Smeesters, Warlop, Van Avermaet, Corneille, & Yzerbyt, 2003). We performed a two-way ANOVA with Moral Framework (deontological versus consequential) and Valence of the recollected behavior (positive or negative) as between-subject factors and number of coins given in the PDG as the dependent variable using. We did not find a main effect of Moral Framework or Valence, but we did find a significant interaction effect of both factors ($F(1, 87) = 9.53$, $p < 0.01$). When participants were successfully instructed to be in a consequentialist mindset, they gave more coins in the PDG if they recalled a moment in the past in which they behaved unethically ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.71$) than those who recollected an ethical act ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.97$; $F(1, 87) = 5.05$, $p < 0.03$). In other words, those participants who were in an outcome-based mindset showed a moral balancing effect. When participants were brought into a deontological mindset, they gave more coins in the PDG if they had recollected an ethical act ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.52$) than when the recalled an unethical act ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.24$; $F(1, 87) = 4.48$, $p < 0.04$). In other words, these participants showed a moral consistency effect. For participants who were asked to remember an ethical act in the past, those who were in a consequentialist mindset gave less yellow coins than those in a deontological mindset ($F(1, 87) = 3.89$, $p = 0.05$). For participants who were asked to remember an unethical act in the past, those who were in a consequentialist mindset gave more yellow coins than those in a deontological mindset ($F(1, 87) = 5.72$, $p < 0.01$).

The study supported our hypothesis that a consequentialist, outcome-based mindset leads to moral balancing and a deontological, rule-based thinking mindset leads to moral consistency. This finding provides an interesting suggestion to explain the inconsistent findings in the recent literature on moral dynamics. Many of these articles indeed employ a rather consequential definition of ethical behavior, and therefore may present a somewhat distorted view on the moral dynamics of everyday life. In some cases an individual’s behavior might be preceded by rule-based reasoning about how to interpret their previous behavior.

REFERENCES

**Status-relevant cues and conspicuous consumption – the moderating role of prenatal androgen exposure**

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Consumer psychologists have suggested that individual differences exist between people regarding their need to display status (Stenstrom et al., 2010), and some of them seem to be grounded in biological mechanisms (Miller et al., 2007; Griskevicius et al., 2007). We investigated how status-relevant experiences influence an individual’s need to display status. We contrasted two types of status-relevant experiences. Both provoke the activation of a status goal, but in one case the goal is related to a dominant status was achieved (i.e., football supporters vicariously experiencing a victory of their preferred team; Bernhart et al., 1998), and in another such a goal remained unsatisfied (i.e., individuals on their way to the beach). We also tested the moderating effect of exposure to prenatal androgens on the response to these experiences. In previous studies, Digit Ratio (i.e., the ratio of the length of the index finger (2D) compared to the ring finger (4D); DR) has been negatively related to the prenatal level of testosterone (Manning, 2002; Hönekopp et al., 2007). Low DR is associated with more com-