The Strategic Pursuit of Moral Credentials

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We demonstrate that when people anticipate acting in a way that could seem immoral, they attempt to establish their moral values ahead of time—that is, they strategically earn moral credentials. The strategic pursuit of moral credentials is intended to encourage favorable attributions for the upcoming morally ambiguous behavior.

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When Doing Good Makes It Okay To Be Bad? New Directions in Licensing Research

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Paper #1: The Strategic Pursuit of Moral Credentials
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Paper #2: Interpersonal Implications of Self-Licensing
Evan Polman, Cornell University, USA
Uzma Khan, Stanford University, USA

Paper #3: Frugal Materialists: Licensing and Experiential versus Materialistic Pursuits
Rachel Ruttan, Cornell University, USA

Paper #4: Hurting the Body...and the Soul: Physical Pain Can Mitigate Moral Pain
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Prior research has demonstrated that virtuous acts, or simply feeling virtuous, can allow people to subsequently transgress and behave in less-than-virtuous ways—a phenomenon commonly referred to as the licensing effect (for review see Merritt, Effron & Monin, 2010). The licensing effect has been demonstrated in a wide array of domains including, consumer choice, moral behavior, political correctness and prosocial behavior (Monin & Miller, 2001; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Sachdeva, Iliev & Medin, 2009; Mazar & Zhong, 2010). For example, participants who first imagined doing something altruistic were more likely to indulge in frivolous purchases later on (Khan & Dhar, 2006) and those who initially had an opportunity to support Barack Obama were more likely to say that a particular job was better suited for Whites (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009). Interestingly, the effect does not require actual behavior and mere intentions of good behavior are enough to subsequently license bad behavior.

While the last decade has witnessed a burgeoning interest in licensing research, so far most studies have focused on demonstrating the main effect. The current session takes the research forward and examines antecedents, consequences and social implications of self-licensing. In the spirit of the conference theme of “building connection” the session includes four complementary papers (all in advanced stages) that each approach the subject from a unique angle and illuminates a new aspect of self-licensing.

The first paper by Merritt et. al. demonstrates that when people anticipate acting in a way that could seem immoral, they attempt to establish their moral values ahead of time—in other words, they strategically earn moral credentials. Authors argue that the strategic pursuit of moral credentials is intended to encourage favorable attributions for the upcoming morally ambiguous behavior. The research represents an important extension to existing work on moral licensing, which has shown that people are more likely to act in morally ambiguous ways when they have previously established their morality (Merritt et al., 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010). The present research demonstrates that people sometimes pursue moral credentials strategically when they are tempted to act in morally questionable ways.

The second paper by Polman and Khan explores interpersonal implications of self-licensing behavior and feelings. Authors show that people who believe they are virtuous lower the standards and demands of virtue for themselves, yet raise the demands for others. For example, individuals who imagined performing community service were less likely to make a donation later on but raised their expectations from others to donate. The findings suggest that good deeds can not only license less-than-virtuous behavior for the self but ironically can induce moral hypocrisy whereby people raise their demands from others.

The third paper by Ruttan examines how the nature of an initial purchase can moderate the licensing effects in subsequent purchase behavior. The authors distinguish between experiential and material purchases and show that an experiential purchase can license greater indulgence subsequently relative to an initial material purchase. For example, Ruttan finds that in a choice between a luxury and a necessity item, individuals who previously purchased an item from a set of experiential products were more likely to choose the luxury item compared to individuals who had initially purchased from a set of material products. The author explains that more positive self-attributions associated with experiential purchases license further indulgence.

The fourth paper by Zhong and Sivanathan builds on neurocultural and social psychology research to predict and show that physical pain can mitigate moral pain. This finding has important implications for the phenomenon of self-licensing as physical pain may compensate for less virtuous behavior and choices, which one would otherwise avoid. Consistent with this implication, participants who held a cold ice-pack while watching a series of photos of malnourished and diseased children were less willing to make a donation compared to those who held an ice-pack at room temperature. The research illustrates the role of embodied cognition in licensing effects.

Together, the papers in the session extend our understanding of the licensing effect beyond the existing literature. Given the fundamental relevance of the topic to consumer, social and political research we expect it to appeal to academics and practitioners across diverse research areas. Thus, the session is likely to foster a fruitful and interdisciplinary dialogue in the spirit of the conference theme of building connection.

The Strategic Pursuit of Moral Credentials

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research on moral credentials (Monin & Miller, 2001; Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2010) has shown that people who have had an opportunity to establish their moral values feel licensed to engage in morally ambiguous behavior. But do people attempt to credential themselves when they expect to need a moral license? The present research examines whether people will strategically pursue moral credentials in anticipation of acting in morally dubious ways. In particular, we argue that people seek to establish their morality in a preemptive attempt to ensure that their future behavior does not appear immoral to others or to themselves – in other words, to manage the attributional ambiguity that may characterize their future behavior (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Dutton & Lennox, 1974; Norton, Vandellos, & Darley, 2004; Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979). One may seek moral credentials not only when one’s intentions are truly nefarious, but also when one worries that one’s intentions could appear so. In either case, we propose that individuals who wish to or expect to act in morally ambiguous ways will seek the “attributional cover”
In this paper, we propose that people who believe that they are virtuous will lower the standards and demands of virtue for themselves, yet raise the bar for others. Our prediction is based on research showing that people manage and tailor judgments of themselves and others in a way that maintains a positive self-image (Jordan & Monin, 2008). For example, people predict that they would donate, cooperate in the prisoner’s dilemma game, and volunteer to charitable causes — however, most people’s actual behaviors fall short of their predictions (Epley and Dunning, 2000). These mistaken beliefs about self-behavior could lead to extreme, harsh, and erroneous judgments of others’ behavior. Direct evidence suggests that people spontaneously think of themselves when they judge others (Balcetis & Dunning, 2005). If people are manipulated to experience a high moral self-worth, then they may predict themselves behaving in ethical ways, and subsequently apply these high standards of their predicted self-behavior to their judgments of others. As a consequence, judgments of others may suffer under the weight of these inflated, overly charitable predictions about the self. In short, we predict that while feelings of virtue will license one’s own transgressions, they will have the opposite effect on judgments of others’ behavior. Three studies support our prediction and the proposed mechanism.

In Study 1, participants were asked to recall either 2 or 10 recent examples of their moral behavior. Based on the logic that it is more difficult to recall 10 examples of recent moral behavior than 2 examples (cf. Schwarz et al., 1991), we predicted that the experienced difficulty associated with recalling 10 examples would undermine participants’ feelings of virtue. Next, participants responded to three moral transgressions (viz. speeding, tax dodging, stealing) by rating how acceptable it would be if others engaged in the described behavior, or alternatively, if they themselves engaged in the described behavior. For example, people who wish to tell a joke that plays on stereotypes about Blacks may first note that “some of my best friends are Black,” or a manager wishing to promote a male employee over an equally-qualified female employee may conspicuously suggest that his company expand its maternity leave benefits. Sometimes, pursuing credentials may allow people to act comfortably on legitimate motives (e.g., to give critical feedback to a student who happens to be a member of a minority group, or hire the most qualified candidate, regardless of race or gender); other times, it may license people to act on more nefarious (e.g., prejudicial) motives.

Although all of our studies targeted participants’ concerns over appearing racially biased, we believe that people will seek moral credentials in other domains in which they fear that their future behavior may appear selfish, unfair, or otherwise immoral. People may even seek credentials in non-moral domains when they wish to engage in potentially discrediting behavior, as when someone establishes his sophistication by conspicuously expressing his love of Shakespeare and fine wine before mentioning his subscription to a celebrity gossip magazine. Future research should investigate the strategic credentials effect in a range of moral and non-moral contexts.

Interpersonal Implications of Self-Licensing

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that past good deeds can liberate people to engage in less-than-virtuous behaviors that they would otherwise avoid (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Monin & Miller, 2001). While the relation between feeling virtuous and engaging in less-than-virtuous behavior is well-known, most of the literature on such licensing effects has focused on self-licensing and has generally ignored how feeling virtuous influences people’s judgments of others and their behavior.

In this paper, we propose that people who believe that they are virtuous will lower the standards and demands of virtue for themselves, yet raise the bar for others. Our prediction is based on research showing that people manage and tailor judgments of themselves and others in a way that maintains a positive self-image (Jordan & Monin, 2008). For example, people predict that they would donate, cooperate in the prisoner’s dilemma game, and volunteer to charitable causes — however, most people’s actual behaviors fall short of their predictions (Epley and Dunning, 2000). These mistaken beliefs about self-behavior could lead to extreme, harsh, and erroneous judgments of others’ behavior. Direct evidence suggests that people spontaneously think of themselves when they judge others (Balcetis & Dunning, 2005). If people are manipulated to experience a high moral self-worth, then they may predict themselves behaving in ethical ways, and subsequently apply these high standards of their predicted self-behavior to their judgments of others. As a consequence, judgments of others may suffer under the weight of these inflated, overly charitable predictions about the self. In short, we predict that while feelings of virtue will license one’s own transgressions, they will have the opposite effect on judgments of others’ behavior. Three studies support our prediction and the proposed mechanism.

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