Double Standards in the Use of Enhancing Products By Self and Others

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We show that the same products are perceived to enable the self but enhance others. This creates an ethical double standard: people believe it is less morally acceptable to enhance traits, and thus less acceptable for others to use such products than it is for themselves to do so.

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Doing Well vs. Doing Good: 
The Interplay of Morality and Performance in Consumer Judgments
Chair: Jonathan Berman, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Paper #1: Redemption through Success: When Good Things Happen to Bad People
Eric Hamerman, Tulane University, USA
Jeffrey R. Parker, Georgia State University, USA

Paper #2: Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Finger: How Moral Decoupling Enables Consumers to Admire and Admonish
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Paper #3: Double Standards in the Use of Enhancing Products by Self and Others
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Paper #4: Actions Speak Less Loud Than Sentiments: A New Model of Moral Judgment
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Moral beliefs are among the strongest beliefs that consumers hold, and are deeply tied to how individuals view themselves. However, in the real world, successful performance is not always associated with morally upstanding behavior. For example, individuals sometimes resort to immoral behavior in order to perform better and achieve success, and successful individuals sometimes behave as if they are exempt from certain moral standards. The present session seeks to examine the complex and fascinating interplay of morality and performance in consumer judgments. Specifically, the four papers presented here examine how consumers make moral judgments about others, and how these judgments influence subsequent purchase decisions and brand evaluations.

Virtually every week, new examples emerge of public figures that have been accused of immoral behaviors, and the first two papers concern the relation between performance and morality when evaluating these cases. First, Hamerman and Parker show that a public figure’s good performance can be as redemptive as an apology for bad behavior. Next, Bhattacharjee, Berman and Reed investigate a new reasoning process that consumers use to support public figures that have transgressed. Similarly, the latter two papers broadly concern moral judgments of performance. Williams and Steffel show that consumers display an ethical double standard in judging their own versus others’ use of products that enhance performance (e.g. sports drinks, medication). Finally, Critcher et al. propose a new model of moral judgment: instead of focusing on the performance of good or bad deeds per se, individuals instead focus on an actor’s moral sentiments. The first three papers are currently in review process, and the fourth will be submitted for review shortly.

Together, these papers highlight various ways in which consumers combine and reconcile dimensions of performance and morality in their judgments. Given the breadth of these issues and the primacy of moral beliefs as a driver of consumer decision making (e.g., Brinkmann 2004; Smith 1990), we expect that the session will be well attended by researchers with interests in brand management, motivated reasoning, social cognition, CSR, and morality and ethics to name a few. However, despite the pervasiveness of moral concerns in consumption contexts, it is striking to note the dearth of sessions dealing with moral judgments at recent ACR conferences. In the spirit of the conference theme of appreciating diversity, we hope that this session can offer a special opportunity to open the field to investigating the moral consumer.

Redemption through Success: When Good Things Happen to Bad People

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Media reports are filled with instances of pop stars, athletes, and corporate executives being linked to immoral or illegal acts. However, these misdeeds seem to be ignored after the transgressors recapture professional success (e.g., by winning a big game). This paper demonstrates that because people infer the morality of others based on their professional performance, success can be as effective as an apology in redeeming one’s reputation. Demonstrating that this is not merely a halo effect, three experiments show that seeing an immoral person achieve professional success is upsetting, which leads to a discounting of the immoral act in a manner consistent with cognitive dissonance. When participants were provided with the tools to cope with threatening information (via self-affirmation) or were no longer threatened by this information (such as when the actor was punished for his or her misdeeds), they ceased to discount the transgression.

Experiments 1A and 1B investigated the influence of professional success on the evaluations that participants made about a real protagonist: Michael Vick, an NFL quarterback who served time in federal prison for running a dog-fighting ring. The good-play scenario described Vick’s on-field success during the 2010 NFL regular season. The poor-play scenario described Vick’s poor play during the 2010 NFL playoffs. Finally, the apology condition simply quoted the apology on his website and made no mention of his on-field performance. Participants indicated their general perceptions of Vick (1 = not trustworthy at all, 7 = extremely trustworthy), how trustworthy they perceived him to be (1 = not trustworthy at all, 7 = extremely trustworthy), and how likely they would be to purchase two products endorsed by Vick (Experiment 1A). The perception and trustworthiness items were combined into a single measure of participants’ evaluations of Vick’s moral character (the same measures were used in experiments 2 and 3).

As predicted, the evaluation of Vick in the apology condition (M = 3.73) did not differ from the good-play condition (M = 3.16). More importantly, evaluations in the apology and good-play conditions were significantly more positive than in the poor-play condition (M = 2.03; p < .05). Participants were also asked to evaluate Vick’s on-field football performance. It is important to note that while perceptions of Vick’s football performance in the apology condition were higher than those in the poor-play condition, they were also lower than those in the good-play condition. Thus, perceptions of Vick’s performance did not map directly onto respondents’ evaluations of Vick as a person. In other words, participants were not simply using Vick’s professional success as a proxy for evaluating him as a person.

Experiment 1B used conditions identical to those in experiment 1. However, experiment 1A allowed participants to enter either: (i) a lottery for Michael Vick jersey, or (ii) a lottery for Kevin Kolb (described as being an “average” NFL quarterback) jersey. As expected,
participants were more likely to enter a lottery for a Michael Vick jersey (vs. a Kevin Kolb jersey) when Vick was successful (29/38 (76%)) versus unsuccessful (18/37 (49%)), p < .05. Further, those participants in the apology condition were just as likely to choose the Vick jersey (22/37 (59%)) as were those in the successful condition (29/38 (76%)), \( \chi^2 (2) < 1 \).

To explore the process behind this finding, two additional experiments were conducted. We hypothesized that the results of experiments 1A and 1B were related to cognitive dissonance. Specifically, because people are upset by the idea of an immoral person achieving professional success (shown in a pretest), we hypothesized that individuals discount the severity of a moral transgression ascribed to someone who subsequently becomes successful, thereby leading to more positive evaluations of this actor. Accordingly, manipulations that either (i) increase participants’ ability to handle such threatening information, or (ii) alleviate the upsetting nature of this apparent conflict should attenuate the documented effect.

In experiment 2, a subset of participants was given the tools to cope with threatening information via self-affirmation. After reaffirming core values, people are better able to handle threatening information without resorting to rationalizations seen in cognitive dissonance (Harris, Mayle, Mabott, & Napper, 2007; Steele & Liu, 1983; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993). Accordingly, completing a self-affirmation exercise should reduce the need to rationalize or discount transgressions committed by successful individuals, reducing the influence of professional success (vs. failure) on evaluations of others. After completing either a self-affirmation or an unrelated control task, participants read a scenario describing a banker who was arrested for drunk driving and subsequently made successful or unsuccessful investments. We found a main effect of success for evaluations of the banker (p < .01), qualified by an interaction between success and self-affirmation (p < .01). As predicted, there was no effect of professional success in the self-affirmation condition (M\(_{\text{Successful}}\) = 3.62 vs. M\(_{\text{Unsuccessful}}\) = 3.69), F < 1, but the attitudes of the participants in the no-affirmation condition were strongly affected by the banker’s level of professional success (M\(_{\text{Successful}}\) = 4.17 vs. M\(_{\text{Unsuccessful}}\) = 2.99), p < .001.

In experiment 3, we expected that punishing the banker would alleviate the threatening nature of his post-transgression success. Punishment ensures that transgressors receive their “just deserts” (Carlsmith, 2002; Darley & Pittman, 2003). Therefore, it should be less upsetting to discover that an immoral person has been successful after learning that he or she has (vs. has not) been punished. Using the same “drunk driving” story from experiment 2, we manipulated the banker’s investment success and whether he was punished for his actions.

As expected, we found a main effect of success on participants’ evaluations of the banker (p < .001), qualified by a significant interaction between success and punishment (p < .01). Participants’ attitudes in the not-punished condition were strongly affected by professional success (M\(_{\text{Successful}}\) = 5.13 vs. M\(_{\text{Unsuccessful}}\) = 2.92), p < .001, while success played no role in the attitudes of those in the punished condition (M\(_{\text{Successful}}\) = 3.84 vs. M\(_{\text{Unsuccessful}}\) = 3.50), F < 1. Moreover, respondents’ evaluation of the seriousness of the act (drunk driving) fully mediated their judgments of the banker’s moral character.

**Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Finger: How Moral Decoupling Enables Consumers to Admire and Admonish**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Bill Clinton, Roman Polanski, Tiger Woods, and Martha Stewart all share something in common: they are public figures whose immoral actions have threatened their professional reputations. How do consumers reason to support public figures who have acted immorally? We propose that when motivated to support a public figure who has transgressed, consumers engage in moral decoupling, a psychological separation process by which they selectively dissociate judgments of morality from judgments of performance.

Though moral beliefs are among the strongest beliefs that people hold, they are particularly subject to motivational biases (Ditto, Pizarro and Tannenbaum 2009). Current research emphasizes moral rationalization processes, by which consumers reconstrue transgressions as less immoral when motivated to do so (e.g., Mazar, Amir and Ariely 2008; Paharia and Deshpande 2009). However, because rationalization requires people to implicitly condone an immoral behavior, and because such judgments are deeply tied to the self (Aquino and Reed 2002), this mechanism may threaten consumers’ moral self-image. We propose that people also engage in moral decoupling, a distinct moral reasoning strategy that enables consumers to support a transgressor while still condemning the transgression. Moral decoupling works by altering an individual’s view of the relevance of moral actions to performance in a given domain. By dissociating performance from morality, an individual can support an immoral actor without being subject to self-reproach for condoning immoral behavior.

Five studies demonstrate that, relative to moral rationalization, moral decoupling is psychologically distinct, easier to justify, and more predictive of consumer support in one real world context.

A pilot study provides initial evidence that moral decoupling is distinct from moral rationalization. After reading a scenario describing an Olympic gold medalist who has physically abused his wife, participants rated their agreement with moral decoupling and moral rationalization items and rated the player on performance and degree of immorality. Regression analysis found that only decoupling significantly positively predicted performance ratings (\( \hat{\beta}_{95} = 7.59, p < .001 \)), while only rationalization significantly reduced judgments of immorality (\( \hat{\beta}_{93} = -3.55, p < .001 \)), suggesting that these constructs are distinct.

In study 1, we sought to gain causal insight by priming specific moral reasoning strategies. Participants wrote statements related to moral decoupling, moral rationalization, or humor (as a control). In an ostensibly different study, they then read about a CEO of a consumer electronics firm who has supported discriminatory hiring policies. Participants primed with a moral decoupling or a moral rationalization reasoning strategy reported being more likely to purchase the company’s products than those in a control condition (F(2, 118) = 9.93, p < .001). More importantly, participants in the moral decoupling condition rated the performance of the CEO higher than the moral rationalization and control conditions (F(2, 118) = 9.87, p < .001), while those in the moral rationalization condition rated the immorality of the CEO’s actions to be less severe than the other two conditions (F(2, 118) = 7.00, p < .001), reinforcing the difference between these psychological pathways.

In study 2, we examined the process of moral decoupling by directly varying the relevance of a transgression to performance. Participants read a scenario in which either a baseball player or a governor was found to have either taken steroids or engaged in tax evasion. As expected, participants were more supportive when transgressions were less relevant (F(1, 83) = 22.2, p < .001). Multiple-step mediation analysis found that relevance directly influenced moral decoupling, which increased performance judgments, leading to greater consumer support (indirect effect = -0.82; 95% C.I. = [-1.25, -0.44]). However, relevance had no effect on the degree of moral
rationalization or the degree of immorality (ts < 1), clarifying our proposed process and better establishing discriminant validity.

Study 3 investigates consumers’ choice of a moral reasoning strategy as well as the implications for the self. Participants read the above scenario involving a baseball player or governor, and selected a supportive statement (reflecting either moral rationalization or moral decoupling) that best reflected their own beliefs. They then wrote an argument justifying their beliefs. Consistent with our previous findings, participants were more likely to select a decoupling (vs. rationalization) statement when the transgression was low (vs. high) in relevance ($\chi^2(1) = 8.20, p = .004$). In addition, a two-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of strategy choice on ease of justification ($F(1, 58) = 7.60, p = .008$): regardless of relevance, participants who chose a moral decoupling felt that their argument was easier to justify than those who selected a moral rationalization argument.

Finally, we looked for field evidence of moral decoupling using a sample of online comments about Tiger Woods before his return to golf in April 2010. From a random subset of 400 comments posted on major news sites, we eliminated those that were irrelevant, retaining 124 comments for analysis. Three coders blind to hypotheses rated the degree to which each comment supported or opposed Tiger Woods. In addition, they rated each comment on the extent of moral rationalization, the extent to which participants separated performance and morality (i.e., moral decoupling). Regression analysis shows that the degree of moral decoupling ($t(120) = 6.18, p < .001$) was a strong significant predictor of expressed support, while the degree of moral rationalization was only marginally significant ($t(120) = -1.84, p = .067$). Further, both the degree of moral decoupling ($t(120) = -3.48, p < .001$) was a strong significant predictors of opposition, while the degree of moral rationalization did not significantly predict expressed opposition ($t(120) = -1.03, p = .30$).

Thus, we outline the existence and nature of a new psychological mechanism—moral decoupling—by which consumers selectively dissociate judgments of morality from judgments of performance in order to support public figures that have transgressed. Doing so allows consumers to admire immoral actors while still admonishing their immoral actions, simultaneously tipping their hats and wagging their fingers.

**Double Standards in the Use of Enhancing Products by Self and Others**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Products can improve their users’ lives in many ways, allowing them access to experiences, traits, and abilities they would not be able to achieve on their own. These types of product benefits raise questions about such products’ ethical use, and how their use is perceived. One factor that may determine perceptions of their ethicity is how the effect of such products is construed, whether they are seen as helping to enable a person to reveal their true abilities or enhance them beyond their true abilities; further, this construal may differ depending on who benefits from them.

We suggest that the same product will have different ethical implications depending on whether oneself or another person is using it. People think their own potential ability is a part of who they are but not a part of others (Williams, Gilovich, and Dunning 2012), and consequently, products that seem to enable the self appear to enhance others. Because people are less comfortable with products and interventions that enhance a consumer’s standing than ones that enable it (Lowery, Chow, and Crosby 2009; Riis, Simmons, and Goodwin 2008), people may see the same product as morally acceptable for the self to use but less so for others.

To establish that people see the same product as enabling themselves but enhancing others, and to show this effect with actual product use, in study 1 we had participants consume Jelly Belly Sport Beans, which work like sports drinks do to improve performance. Participants were supposedly paired with another student on an intellectual task to examine the effects of the beans on performance. They completed a baseline round of the task, consumed the jellybeans, and then completed the second target round. Next, they received feedback about their own or the other participant’s performance in both rounds; the feedback was identical for both, such that the player improved his/her ranking on the task after consuming the jellybeans. When asked to what extent the Sport Beans helped reveal the player’s true abilities (= 0; an enablement interpretation) versus helped them perform above and beyond them (=100; an enhancement interpretation), participants indicated that the Sport Beans were more enhancing of the other participant (M = 22.5; t(147) = 2.22, $p < .05$). This suggests that people do have different interpretations of the effects of the same potentially enhancing product when it is used by the self or another person.

In study 2, we connected this difference to ethical double standards. Participants imagined an interview for a much-wanted job. Ideal candidates were to be easy-going and relaxed, capable of dealing calmly with issues on the job. Participants then imagined that the candidate on this interview believed they had the potential to be the ideal candidate, but were worried that the interview situation would make them appear more tense than they actually are. The candidate took an anti-anxiety medication, Zatex, for the interview, and they got the job. Importantly, half the participants imagined that they were the job candidate, and half imagined that they were the interviewer.

Participants indicated that Zatex helped the candidate’s true abilities show (= 1; versus making them appear to have abilities they don’t actually possess = 7) to a greater extent when they themselves were the candidate (M = 3.5) than when they were interviewing the candidate (M = 4.4; F(1,119) = 11.29, $p = .001$). They also believed that the use of Zatex was more acceptable when they used it (M = 4.4) than another person (M = 3.8; F(1,119) = 6.51, $p = .01$). Participants’ interpretation of the effects of the drug significantly mediated how acceptable its use was perceived to be. Namely, the more enhancing the drug seemed, the less fair its use. And because the drug seemed more enhancing when another person took it than the self, people held double standards for the use of Zatex. Further, how acceptable the use of the drug seemed to be determined how deserving of the job the candidate seemed to be, and whether the candidate should have to disclose that they took Zatex.

Finally, in study 3, we tested some consequences of these interpretations for how participants would choose to regulate the marketplace for such products. Student participants considered a potential new policy at their university that would forbid students from using non-prescribed attention-enhancing drugs like Ritalin or Adderall. This policy was framed as something the participant would need to agree to, or something that students in general (of whom the participant is logically a part) would need to agree to. Participants considering the effects of such a policy on themselves, rather than students in general, were more likely to believe that the drugs enabled (= 1; versus enhanced = 7) their users (M_self = 3.8 vs. M_students = 4.4; F(1,74) = 4.12, $p = .05$). They also believed that the policy was more fair when framed as affecting students (M = 5.1) rather than themselves (M = 3.9; F(1,74) = 4.38, $p < .05$). Participants’ interpretation of the effects predicted how unfair they perceived the policy to be, suggesting that interpretations of a product’s effects influence how consumers think the product should be regulated. Further, the fact that mere framing could lead to these differences suggests that this...
goes beyond a simple self-favoring bias. The consequences for the self were constant between framing conditions; if participants were solely trying to give themselves flexibility to use the product, simply changing their focus from self to a group that still includes the self would be unlikely to bring about the difference in perceived fairness.

Our research thus indicates that who is using a potentially enhancing product, oneself or someone else, can alter how moral a person perceives the use of that product to be. This work suggests that marketers, organizations, and citizens in general should carefully consider who uses such products, who will know, and what that means.

**Actions Speak Less Loud Than Sentiments:**

A New Model of Moral Judgment

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Consumers frequently form moral evaluations of others. They may question whether a celebrity spokesperson is an upstanding role-model, ask themselves whether a company’s executive has solid moral values, or assess the moral character of other consumers. One may think the simple answer to such questions lie in the target’s deeds—after all, “Actions speak louder than words”. In fact, a long tradition in moral psychology has asked what it is that makes an action praiseworthy or blameworthy (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969; Gilligan, 1982; Greene, 2009).

Previous research in social and moral psychology has noted one obvious caveat: People should not get credit for doing the “right thing” for the “wrong reason” (Malle, 2004). Consumers are known to be suspicious of the ulterior motives of others (Fein, 1997). For example, after reflecting on businessmen-philanthropists identified by *Slate* as among the most altruistic people in America, participants became increasingly cynical about the philanthropists’ motives (Critcher & Dunning, 2011). In total, work in this tradition suggests that consumers are quick to decide that good actions do not merit praise.

Instead, we propose that this approach to moral judgment is fundamentally flawed. In assessing others’ moral character, it is not the case that people give others credit for good actions as long as they cannot be explained away by ulterior motives. In fact, we contend that it may not even make sense to talk about certain actions as good or bad at all. Instead, consumers try to make sense of what moral sentiments others experience and judge them positively to the extent that they act consistently with them. As a concrete example, when people praise a consumer for returning an item that was accidentally shoplifted, people do not praise the consumer for the action, but for acting in accordance with a moral sentiment (here, an assumed tinge of guilt the consumer likely experienced when seeing the unpaid-for item). Without the sentiment, praise is not offered.

In the way that moral judgment has typically been studied, these two possibilities—praising others’ for good actions versus for acting on moral sentiment—have not been distinguishable, in large part because of the decontextualized scenarios in which moral judgment effects are examined. This is particularly troubling for consumer behavior researchers who draw on moral psychology perspectives and theory in motivating our research. In this talk, we offer four studies that distinguish between these competing possibilities and find consistent support for our perspective (praise for acting on sentiments) instead of the typical perspective (praise for doing good) or a motives perspective (praise for having good intentions). Our studies show the importance of perceived moral sentiments not as praiseworthy or blameworthy cues in themselves (as motives are), but as part of a sentiment—action chain on which moral evaluation is actually based.

In Studies 1a-1c, participants considered (different) moral dilemmas: the Nazi-baby dilemma, a moral quandary in which a Jewish towns person must decide whether to smother a crying child to death so Nazi soldiers will not find Jewish villagers’ hiding spot; the sick Johnny scenario (Tetlock et al., 2000) in which a hospital director must decide whether to use hospital funds to save the life of a sick seven-year-old or instead update hospital infrastructure; and a novel moral dilemma in which an American military commander must decide whether or not to order a strike on a rural Ukrainian inn where high-level Al Qaeda terrorists as well as innocent civilians are staying. First, participants indicated to what extent the decision-maker was likely experiencing each of two competing moral sentiments (e.g., “finds it morally wrong to let the child die” vs. “realizes many more lives could be saved by diverting the funds elsewhere”). After then learning what the moral agent decided, participants judged his character. In all three studies, analogous mediational models showed that participants praised the moral agent to the extent he was assumed to appreciate the moral sentiment that would lead to the action. This provided initial support for the acting on sentiments perspective.

Our model makes the unique prediction that factors that change the likelihood that a decision-maker will appreciate one moral sentiment or another also change the praise that different actions will receive. Studies 2-4 used the earlier-described dilemmas but varied an action-unrelated feature that we assumed (and empirically confirmed) would change the moral sentiments a target would be assumed to appreciate: a neurological disorder the agent was said to have (Study 2); the time the agent had to make the decision (Study 3); and the arbitrary visual perspective of the agent (Study 4). In each case, these manipulations had the predicted effect: They changed the moral sentiments the target was assumed to appreciate, which changed the praise the agent received for each action. For example, in Study 3, participants assumed that if the Jewish towns person was rushed, he would have an immediate impulse to not kill a child but would not fully appreciate the utilitarian justification for the opposite course of action. Only in this case did people praise the towns person for not smothering the child. In Study 4, even though participants knew that the military commander was aware of who all was in the hotel, participants assumed his moral sentiments would shift depending on whether he happened to see an Al Qaeda operative or an innocent civilian through a window. Thus, even though the decision-maker confronted the same moral dilemma, he was praised for ordering the strike when he could actually see the terrorist, but was praised for instead not ordering the strike when he could actually see the innocent civilian.

Behavioral researchers from consumer, social, and cognitive psychology have spent considerable effort asking what makes behavior morally (im)permissible. The present research suggests that such an approach may be misguided. We instead show the real question to be what moral sentiments people assume others will appreciate. By understanding how (frequently arbitrary) features of a decision-making context shift what sentiments are assumed to be salient to moral decision-makers, we can then predict when and why actions receive moral praise.