Have Your Cake and Make Her Eat It Too: Sabotaging Others While Maintaining Moral Self-Integrity

S. Christian Wheeler, Stanford University, USA
Stephanie Lin, Stanford University, USA
Szu-chi Huang, Stanford University, USA

We show that people are motivated to sabotage close others when they experience self-threat, but act on this motivation primarily when they feel that sabotage is morally justifiable. Furthermore, we find that people who are threatened in one domain (e.g. academia) may sabotage close others in another (e.g. dieting).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine that friends Katie and Julie have decided to go on a diet together. Julie starts making rapid progress, but Katie has had trouble sticking to her diet and has not lost much weight. One afternoon, Katie sees Julie’s favorite cake in the window of a bakery on the way over to Julie’s house. Does she get Julie a slice of cake or not? On the one hand, Katie can’t help but to compare herself to Julie, and would love to take her down a notch in her dieting success. On the other, she would feel like a bad friend, or worse, a bad person, if she were to sabotage Katie’s diet. What does she do?

One way people fulfill their desires for self-enhancement is by seeing themselves as superior to others, and even sabotaging close others (Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Tesser, 1988). However, research from moral identity (e.g. Blasi, 2004; Aquino & Reed, 2002), moral self-regulation (Jordan, Mullen and Murnighan, 2011) and self and identity (e.g. Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper & Bourrette, 2003; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Tafadore & Swann, 2001) suggests that people also want to feel like good, moral people. We are interested in how these motivations to self-enhance through downward social comparison may conflict with the motivation to maintain the moral self-concept. In the context of sabotaging others, these two motivations may come hand-in-hand; hindering a friend’s performance is tempting, but comes with a moral cost as well.

As people especially likely to take solace in and seek out downward social comparison when self-esteem is threatened (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981 for review), we propose that sabotage may only occur if people first experience self-threat, leading to increased motivation to outperform others. Given self-threat, we expect that people will only sabotage others to the extent that they can maintain their moral self-integrity (Mazar, Amir & Ariely, 2008).

In Study 1, participants were told that they had been outperformed on an exam by their friend (threat) or that they outperformed their friend (control). They were then told that they were studying with their friend for the final exam, and the friend went home for the night. Participants were either told that the friend went home to sleep (morally ambiguous) or eat (morally unambiguous). They were told that they then discovered information that might show up on the exam, and asked how likely they would be to call their friend. Those who were threatened were less likely to call, but only if they had a convenient moral excuse: claiming that they did not want to wake the friend, interaction t(188) = 1.95, p = .052.

In study 2, female participants were told that they were dieting with a (female) friend, and that the friend had lost more weight than they had (threat), they had lost more weight than the friend (control 1) or that they and their friend had lost equal weight (control 2). They were then told that they were taking a class with a friend, and discovered information that had a 1-100% chance (randomly generated) of appearing on the final exam, and asked how likely they would be to call their friend. Threatened participants were less likely than the control 1 and control 2 to call their friend, but only when the chance of harm was relatively low (<55.5% and <64.1%, respectively), interaction F(2,222) = 3.42, p = .034.

Studies 1 and 2 revealed self-deceptive means of sabotage, in which people justify their behavior to themselves as “not too immoral.” In study 3, we hypothesized that people would engage in self-aware sabotage when they were unjustly outperformed by their friend in order to restore “fair” social comparison (e.g. “because she didn’t deserve it”). We manipulated perceived equity; (female) participants were told they were outperformed by a (female) friend on an exam, and that the friend either worked hard (fair) or did not work hard (unfair). They were then told that the friend was on a diet and succeeding at her goals, and that she asked the participant to pick her up some dinner on the way over to her house. Participants were presented a choice of seven entrée options that ranged from 450 calories to 1570 calories. Participants who felt that their friend unfairly outperformed them got their friend a higher calorie entree on average t(77) = -2.15, p = .034. Furthermore, this seemed to be driven by the “sneaky” choice of the oriental chicken salad that appears healthy but is actually 1390 calories; this suggests that even when people feel that their sabotage behavior is justified, they still hope to be viewed as moral.

While most self-evaluation research focuses on evaluation on one aspect of the self at a time (e.g. academic self), ours examines how people manage two conflicting self-evaluation motivations. We find that people can “have their cake and eat it too”—that is, sabotage their friends and still feel good about themselves. We also found that people engage in cross-domain sabotage; to our knowledge, it has not been previously shown that feeling threatened in one domain can lead to sabotaging in another.

In addition to theoretical contributions, these studies also have practical implications on joint goal pursuit. Through the advent of programs such as Weight Watchers’ “Together is Better,” people are increasingly working together to achieve goals such as losing weight. Furthermore, with the “gamefication” of goals, people can now compete with friends through mobile applications in their exercise, weight loss, financial saving, and career goals, to name a few. These applications may also be opening the door to subtle, self-deceptive forms of sabotage, such as keeping information from others, or underreporting one’s own efforts to encourage others to work less. Future research should examine intervention techniques, such as focusing people on their moral value systems. This could be implemented by organizations that encourage joint goal pursuit to assure cooperative and motivating behaviors rather than subversive ones.

REFERENCES

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