Removing Individuals' License to Misbehave

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Numerous studies have found evidence of individuals’ moral licensing behaviors - when individuals engage in a good deed, this in turn grants them ‘license’ to engage in self-interested behaviors. This research is the first to develop and test an intervention designed to counteract these counterproductive licensing behaviors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers and corporations are increasingly motivated to engage in and promote prosocial, environmental, and ethical actions. As beneficial as these actions are, they are not always as successful or impactful as they could be, as they sometimes lead to undesired consequences. Recent research suggests that when individuals feel they have done a good deed, this in turn grants them ‘license’ to engage in more self-interested, behaviors which otherwise would have discredited the individual (Jordan, Mullen and Murningham 2011; Khan and Dhar 2006). A number of studies in marketing, psychology, organizational behavior and energy policy have found evidence of such licensing effects (see Miller and Effron 2010; for a review).

It is counterproductive if a good deed is likely to be followed by a selfish or immoral act. Such a regulatory pattern not only threatens people’s moral integrity but also undermines personal welfare and progress, yet we are not aware of any research that examines how to counteract it. Therefore the main goal of this research is to fill this gap and develop and test an intervention aimed at countering the licensing effect. This intervention targets a critical but often overlooked condition for moral licensing to occur: the subjective availability of one’s good deeds, i.e. the ease with which relevant instances come to mind. When an individual is tempted to engage in self-interested behavior, if they have recently engaged in a good deed, then they can use this available deed as a license to misbehave. Thus, I propose that one point of intervention in the licensing process would be to reduce the availability of these recent good deeds, which in turn should counteract the licensing effect.

We argue that one way to reduce the availability of an individual’s good deed is to decrease its accessibility in memory. In this paper we draw on previous research on psychological and choice closure to manipulate availability by inducing closure towards individuals’ good deeds. In line with research on closure, in a pretest we demonstrate that a physical act of closure – having participants enclose a written recall of their good deeds within an envelope (Li et al. 2010) – reduces the accessibility of individuals’ good deeds in memory. Building upon this research, across three experiments we tested whether inducing closure following an initial good deed would remove individuals’ ‘license to misbehave’.

Experiment 1 provided initial support for our hypothesis that closure would counteract individuals’ licensing behavior. Participants were asked to recall either their environment-friendly actions (good deed) or a neutral action. The experimenter then collected all participants’ booklets (no closure condition) or collected envelopes in which participants placed their booklets (closure condition). We then tested participant’s intentions to engage in immoral actions for personal gain. Consistent with licensing, when there was no closure, individuals who had recalled their good deeds expressed significantly higher intentions to engage in immoral behaviors for personal gain compared to those who recalled a neutral action. Critically, in support of our hypothesis that closure would counteract these effects, once individuals engaged in an act of closure, there was no significant difference in the immoral intentions of those who recalled their good deed and those in the control condition. Engaging in an act of closure, following their good deed, brought participants back to a neutral baseline.

Experiments 2 replicated and extended our findings on several dimensions. First, we extended our results by measuring people’s actual behavior (the time and energy they would be willing to expend to help others). Second, we extended the generalizability of our findings by testing the effects of closure on individuals’ subsequent good, prosocial behavior. Third, moral licensing is only one side of the moral regulation coin and we wanted to extend the findings to the other side of the coin: moral compensation. Specifically, research on moral regulation has shown that when individuals engage in bad actions that lower their moral self-concept, they are subsequently more likely to engage in compensatory behavior to re-establish a positive self-concept (Jordan et al. 2011; Zhong, Liljenquist and Cain, 2009). Experiment 2 demonstrated that in addition to removing licensing behaviors, inducing closure following a bad action also removes individuals’ compensation behaviors.

Experiment 3 extends these results further by counteracting licensing in another domain (prosocial actions) and measuring participants’ actual immoral behavior (likelihood of cheating). In addition, it contributed to our understanding of moral licensing by examining a novel moderator of the licensing effect: how special participants’ good deeds are to them. According to our model, the availability of an individual’s good deed, i.e. the ease with which relevant instances come to mind, is a critical component for licensing behavior to occur. If, when an individual is tempted to misbehave their previous actions do not feel relevant (i.e. do not give them the sense of moral license), then they should no longer show the licensing effect. For example, if an action is objectively good (e.g. recycling) but it does not feel subjectively good to the individual (e.g. just feels like a habitual behavior), then it should not be available as a license to misbehave.

Experiment 3 supports this hypothesis by demonstrating that the actor-perceived specialness of a good deed is a significant moderator of the licensing effect.

Given the increasing interest in prosocial, environmental, and ethical actions, it is important that these efforts be as impactful as possible. In order for these efforts to make a significant difference it is critical that individuals do not counteract the progress they make in one domain by subsequently licensing themselves in another. Therefore, understanding the drivers of licensing behaviors and developing and testing interventions aimed at counteracting licensing behaviors is critically important. Our research takes a first step at addressing this issue, by showing that a physical act of closure, enclosing ones good deeds in an envelope, can effectively remove individuals’ license to misbehave. We believe these findings can guide the design of small but powerful interventions to improve everyday behavior and increase societies’ welfare.

REFERENCES


