Short Horizons and Tempting Situations: Lack of Continuity to Our Future Selves Leads to Unethical Decision Making and Behavior

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People who feel continuity with their future selves are more likely to behave in ethically responsible ways compared to people who lack such a sense of continuity. We find that individual differences in similarity to one’s future self predict tolerance of unethical business decisions and the propensity to lie and cheat.

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An Integrative Perspective on Moral Judgments: Understanding the Emotional, Cognitive, Sensory, and Genetic Antecedents of Consumers’ Moral Judgments

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Paper #1: All Sins Are Not Equal: The Moderating Role of Transgression Magnitude on the Effect of Disgust on Moral Judgments
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Paper #2: Sense and Sensibility: The Impact of Sensory Input on Moral Judgments
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Paper #3: Short horizons and tempting situations: Lack of continuity in our future selves leads to unethical decision making and behavior
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Paper #4: The Genetic Contribution to Preference Consistency in Moral Judgments
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Understanding moral judgments is critical for society at large as well as businesses given an increasing level of moral uneasiness (Mills 2000) and growing dissonance regarding judgments of right and wrong (or moral versus immoral) among political ideologies as well as religion and culture (Haidt and Joseph 2004). In seeking to understand moral judgments, a growing body of research has started to examine the role of various antecedents to moral judgments. For example, to date, research has examined how moral judgments are influenced by emotions and moral intuitions (Pizarro, Inbar, and Helion 2011; Ugazio, Lamm, and Singer 2012), individual differences such as sensitivity to bodily sensations and disgust (Inbar et al. 2009; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, and Jordan 2008), sensory experiences such as taste and physical cleanliness (Eskine, Kacinik, and Prinz 2011; Inbar et al. 2009), and even hypnotism (Wheatley and Haidt 2005). Nonetheless, the discord surrounding morality and moral judgments in society suggests that there is much yet to be understood.

The goal of this session is to gain better understanding of the various antecedents of consumers’ moral judgments. Each of the four papers examines a different factor and thereby takes an integrative approach to understanding the precursors of the consumer moral judgment process. In doing so, this session draws on several different fields of study, addressing the conference mission of appreciating diversity to the extent that the series of papers offers interdisciplinary insights into moral judgments.

The first paper by Winterich, Morales, and Mittal presents four studies examining nuances of the extensive findings on affective antecedents of the moral judgment process. The authors explore how specific emotions (disgust, happiness, sadness) affect the severity of consumers’ moral judgments. An important insight offered in this paper is the role of transgression magnitude in reversing the effect of emotions on moral judgments with both positively and negatively valenced emotion having similar effects on the severity of moral judgments based on other cognitions associated with the specific emotion.

Moving from the affective antecedents to the sensory determinants of the moral judgment process, the second paper by Nenkov et al. features six studies. The authors show that sensory input (i.e., seeing, touching, smelling, or hearing a product) lowers consumers’ level of construal, which leads to less harsh moral judgments, less sophisticated moral reasoning, and more motivated moral reasoning.

The third paper by Hershfield, Cohen, and Thompson explores the cognitive determinants of moral judgment. In a series of five studies, this paper establishes consumers’ ability to project one’s self into the future as an important determinant of moral decision making. Specifically, whether measured or manipulated, similarity to one’s future self not only decreases the severity of moral judgments, but also increases the likelihood of engaging in immoral behaviors such as lying and cheating.

Finally, after considering nuances of the affective, sensory, and cognitive antecedents of moral judgments, the fourth paper by Mazar et al. employs a large-scale twin study to explore the genetic determinants of the consistency of consumers’ moral judgments. Their findings suggest that genetic structure can predict consistency in moral judgments, but, notably, genetics do not seem to underlie consistency in other judgments such as religious or economic decisions.

This set of papers not only considers a diverse set of antecedents to moral judgments ranging from heritable genetics to situational factors such as sensory inputs, but also offers insights from a total of 16 studies, some of which are field studies and others examining actual immoral behavior in addition to judgments. All four projects included in this session are at a very advanced stage of completion, and the manuscripts for all four of the papers, as well as the cited references, will be available upon request.

By studying various determinants (i.e., emotional, sensory, cognitive, and genetic aspects) of the moral judgment process, which includes the harshness and consistency of moral judgments, the sophistication of moral reasoning, as well as consumers’ (un)ethical conduct, this symposium brings together diverse perspectives on the moral judgment process and is a model of “appreciating diversity” in keeping with the 2012 ACR conference theme. The projects presented in this session span multiple scholarly domains, various methodological approaches, as well as sample characteristics. Data were gathered from multiple countries around the globe (USA, France, Singapore, Sweden) such that diverse populations are represented and findings are not limited to potential cultural differences in moral judgments (Haidt and Joseph 2004). Moreover, the diversity of this session suggests it will be of interest to a wide range of scholars, with the following audiences finding this work to be of particular interest: scholars of moral judgment, researchers examining the nuances of...
specific emotions, academics interested in sensory and genetic influences on consumer behavior, along with scientists interested in understanding influences of future-oriented thinking.

In short, the findings being presented embody a wide range of approaches, and we believe offer an integrative study of the diverse factors that affect the consumer moral judgment process. In doing so, this session not only offers theoretical insights, but also provides important considerations for individuals, business, and society facing increasing levels of moral unrest.

REFERENCES


All Sins Are Not Equal:
The Moderating Role of Transgression Magnitude on the Effect of Disgust on Moral judgments

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
We do not judge all sins equally: most would consider stealing a laser printer to be a more severe transgression (i.e., more wrong) than stealing a few sheets of printer paper. How do people make such judgments and how do they vary based on emotions? Disgust has been found to influence judgments of immoral behaviors (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, and Cohen 2009; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, and Jordan 2008; Wheatley and Haidt 2005), but the mechanism responsible for the impact of disgust on moral judgments is underdeveloped. Interestingly, a careful investigation reveals the positive relationship between disgust and moral judgments may be stronger when the magnitude of the transgression is high whereas the association may be weaker when the transgression is of low magnitude (Schnall et al. 2008; Wheatley and Haidt 2005). Why would this be the case?

We propose disgust and its corresponding cognitive appraisals of rejection (Rozin et al. 2000; Smith and Ellsworth 1985) may influence construal level (Trope and Liberman 2003 2010; Vallacher and Wegner 1987) such that perceived transgression magnitude moderates the association between disgust and moral judgments. Specifically, the abstract construal from disgust motivates people to examine the “why” of the behavior being evaluated. When judging high magnitude transgressions, disgusted individuals consider why one would engage in such a behavior and find it relatively harder to provide justifications for such high magnitude transgressions and judge the transgression more severely. In contrast, disgusted individuals considering why one would engage in low magnitude transgressions are able to think of numerous justifications, resulting in less severe judgments than those not making an evaluation based on “why” (i.e., neutral state). This pattern results in divergent effects of disgust on moral judgments depending on transgression magnitude.

The first study is a 2 (emotion: disgust vs. neutral) x 2 (transgression magnitude: high vs. low) mixed design with emotion manipulated between-subjects and transgression magnitude within-subjects. Disgust was induced with a product evaluation task, and then participants evaluated a subset of high and low magnitude immoral behaviors used in past research (Detert et al. 2008; Eyal et al. 2008; Horberg et al. 2009; Schnall et al. 2008). A pretest confirmed that participants perceived the four high transgression magnitude scenarios to be of higher magnitude than the low transgression magnitude scenarios. Participants judged the wrongness and immorality of each scenario. Repeated-measures analysis revealed a two-way interaction of disgust and transgression magnitude. For the high (low) magnitude transgressions, disgusted participants evaluated the immoral behavior more (less) severely than the neutral participants. Thus, disgust increases the perceived severity of judgments when the behavior is of high magnitude, whereas disgust decreases perceived severity of judgments when the transgression is of low magnitude. A second study replicated this effect when the high and low magnitude immoral financial scenarios were identical except for the monetary value of the immoral behavior (i.e., embezzling $10 million vs. $100).

Next, we examine whether differences in construal level underlies this moderating effect. We propose that in an abstract construal the “why” processing that occurs results in more severe judgments for high magnitude behaviors (Eyal et al. 2008), but for low magnitude behaviors, justifications occur such that behaviors are not immoral in the “big picture.” First, we demonstrate the disgust does indeed elicit an abstract construal. Study 3A elicits disgust through a video clip and finds participants in the disgust condition construed activities more abstractly than those in the neutral condition (Vallacher and Wegner 1989). Study 3B elicited disgust through a writing task and found disgust condition participants created fewer (i.e., broader) categories than those in the neutral condition (Liberman, Sagristano, and Trope 2002; Smith and Trope 2006), again indicating disgust results in a more abstract construal than a neutral state.

Study 4 adds two additional features to the experimental design. First, we examine sadness and happiness in addition to disgust. We include these additional emotional states to demonstrate that the effect of disgust on moral judgments is distinct from other negative emotions (Chapman et al. 2009; Lerner et al. 2004) and the process is driven by construal level since happiness is opposite of disgust in valence, but is characterized by the same abstract construal level (Labroo and Patrick 2009). Thus, the abstract construal resulting from both disgust and happiness should lead to similar effects on moral judgments. We also examine participants’ thoughts regarding their moral judgments to determine the level of abstract processing (Malkoc, Zauberman, and Bettman 2010).

Participants were randomly assigned to one cell in a 4 (emotion: happy, sad, disgusted, neutral) x 2 (transgression magnitude: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Disgust was elicited through a writing task, and then participants evaluated either the four low magnitude or four high magnitude immoral financial behaviors used in study 2. Participants also listed their thoughts when making the evaluations, which were coded for justification of why one would engage in the behavior. The interaction of emotion and transgression magnitude was significant such that for high transgression magnitude behaviors, disgusted and happy participants made more severe moral judgments.
than neutral or sad participants. The opposite pattern occurred for low transgression magnitude behaviors, such that disgust and happiness reduced the perceived severity of low magnitude immoral behaviors relative to neutral and sadness participants. Bootstrapping analysis revealed that justification thoughts mediated the relationship between emotion and transgression magnitude and severity of moral judgments. These results suggest that the effect of disgust on moral judgments is not accounted for by “gut feelings.” Rather, it is the abstract construal associated with the affective state that influences moral judgments, allowing for disgust to both increase and decrease the perceived severity of the behavior depending on the transgression magnitude.

These results provide important insights into the nuances of the relationship between disgust and moral judgments, enhance our understanding of the affect and construal level relationship, and indicate how justifications may reduce the perceived severity of immoral behaviors, which has important societal implications.

REFERENCES


Sense and Sensibility:
The Impact of Sensory Input on Moral Judgments

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior research has not examined how individuals associate their concrete sensory experiences of sound, color, touch, or odor with higher-level abstract concepts such as morality. The purpose of the current research is to explore the effects of sensory input on several aspects of the moral judgment processes. We propose and subsequently show that sensory modality inputs (i.e., seeing, touching, smelling, or hearing a product) lower consumers’ level of construal, which then leads to less harsh moral judgments, less sophisticated moral reasoning, and more motivated moral reasoning.

A product is more directly experienced when consumers can see, feel, hear, or smell it. We argue that products experienced with fewer sensory modality inputs (i.e., products described verbally) will be more closely associated at a more abstract level because they are less directly perceived in terms of the constellation of their sensory properties (Kardes, Cronley, and Kim 2006; Stephan, Liberman, and Trope 2010). No prior research we are aware of has directly tested whether the various modalities of sensory input alone or in combination reduce the level at which objects such as consumer products are mentally construed.

We further predict that sensory input, by reducing mental construal level, would lead individuals who encounter moral dilemmas to mentally represent these dilemmas at a more concrete level, with more specific, contextual details. As such, consumers’ moral judgments would be more likely to reflect context-specific considerations, rather than simply follow general moral principles (e.g., it is wrong to steal).

We explore the effects of sensory input on several aspects of the moral judgment process. First, we show that sensory input reduces the level of moral reasoning, leading consumers to use lower-level moral intuition, which is more automatic, concrete, and context-dependent, as opposed to higher-level moral reasoning, which is more controlled, abstract, and context-independent (Haidt 2001). Second, sensory input is shown to lead consumers to take into consideration the context in which a moral violation occurs, reducing the harshness of their moral judgments (Agerstrom and Bjorklund 2009; Eyal, Liberman, and Trope 2010). Third, sensory input makes consumers more likely to engage in motivated moral reasoning by ignoring or selectively applying general moral principles depending on the context in which a moral transgression occurs (Ditto, Pizarro, and Tannenbaum 2009). We further explore the underlying process and show that the effects of sensory input on the moral judgment process are driven by changes in consumers’ level of mental construal.

We test our predictions in six studies (total n = 918). We conduct three studies that demonstrate the effect of sensory input (visual, haptic, and olfactory) on construal level and three studies that
explore the effects of sensory input (visual, olfactory, and auditory) on the moral judgment process and demonstrate the mediating role of construal level. In all six studies we utilize sandpaper as the focal object, as it provides the opportunity to manipulate all of the sensory modalities except for taste (i.e., vision, audition, olfaction, and touch), but has a generally low level of familiarity among the target population (manipulation checks confirmed generally low levels of category and brand awareness). We avoided products involving taste (i.e., the gustatory sense) due to the interactive effects of olfaction and taste and to avoid potentially strong differences in taste preferences.

Overall, our predicted effects of sensory experiences on morality emerge consistently when: using different measures of construal level used in past literature (Fujita et al. 2006; Semin and Fiedler 1988; Trope and Liberman 2003); manipulating different modalities of sensory input (visual, haptic, olfactory, and auditory); and examining different aspects of the moral judgment process (level of moral reasoning, the harshness of moral judgments, and the likelihood of engaging in motivated moral reasoning).

The current research shows that sensory input affects several aspects of the moral judgment processes by lowering consumers’ mental construal level. In doing so, this research makes several important contributions to the literature. First, it sheds light on the effects of individuals’ sensory experiences on the moral judgment process, contributing to recent literature on embodied cognition, which has largely focused on motor-driven rather than sensory-driven processes (Reimann et al. 2012). Second, it provides evidence for the effects of construal level on moral judgments, adding to recent research that has started to explore this issue (Agerstrom and Bjorklund, 2009; Eyal et al., 2008). Third, it makes important contributions to construal level theory (Trope and Liberman 2003), as it broadens the conceptualization of psychological distance by demonstrating the effect of sensory input on construal level.

REFERENCES


Short Horizons and Tempting Situations: Lack of Continuity to Our Future Selves Leads to Unethical Decision Making and Behavior

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, we suggest that one underlying cause of unethical conduct is a fundamental inability to project one’s self into the future. Our thesis is that feeling disconnected from one’s future self is intimately linked to unethical decision making. Just as sense of shared connection with another person can lead to shared emotional and physiological states (Cwir, Carr, Walton, and Spencer 2011), feeling continuity with the future self may provide better access to that future self’s feelings. If I am about to act in a potentially unethical way, but I can access the feelings that my future self will feel (e.g., guilty, ashamed) – because I maintain a sense of continuity with that self – I will recognize that I will be better off in the long run if I do not act in such a way. On the contrary, if my future self feels like a stranger to me – if I lack continuity with it and I do not have a good sense of how my self will feel in the future – then I might be more tempted to act in an unethical way in the present.

In five studies, we tested this hypothesis by exploring whether perceived continuity with one’s future self is associated with unethical judgments and decision making. Studies 1a and 1b show that individual differences in future self-continuity predict unethical decision making in business contexts (as measured by the Unethical Business Decisions Scale), and rule out potential alternative accounts. Namely, we show that future self-continuity has a distinct effect on unethical decision making independent of relationships other types of selves (e.g., the ideal self, the past self) may have on unethical decision making. Study 2 extends this finding to attitudes toward inappropriate negotiation strategies (using the Self-reported Inappropriate Negotiation Strategies Scale) and establishes the mediating role of consideration of future consequences.

Study 3 extends the first two studies by showing that individual differences in future self-continuity are related to two different types of unethical behavior: lies and false promises. Study 3 was a two-part study. In the first phase, we administered the future self-continuity scale. In the second phase, we invited participants who scored in the upper and lower quartile of the future self-continuity scale to attend a lab session in which we directly examined the relationship between future self-continuity and lying. We administered Cohen, Gunia, Kim-Jun, and Murnighan’s (2009) modified version of Gneezy’s (2005) deception game—a “sender-receiver” decision making task in which participants have a monetary incentive to lie
(see also Cohen et al., 2011). The design of Study 3 also allowed us to assess the relationship between future self-continuity and the propensity to make false promises. By signing up for the voluntary lab session, participants were, in effect, making a promise to attend it. Given that almost no research study has perfect attendance rates, we were able to determine whether participants high in future self-continuity were more likely to attend the lab session, and thus, uphold a promise they had made. Here, we find that individuals who are low in future self-continuity are significantly more likely to lie on the deception game, and also less likely to follow through on their promise to attend the laboratory session.

In Study 4, we sought to replicate and extend the results of Study 3. First, we employed a different behavioral measure of unethical behavior: cheating. Second, although in Study 1b we ruled out one set of alternative explanations for our finding (i.e., different types of relationships between selves), in Study 4 we wanted to control for another alternative explanation. Namely, it is possible the unethical intentions and behaviors we observed in Studies 1-3 were not necessarily a function of continuity with the future self per se, but rather, were a result of a general lack of self-control. Indeed, recent research has shown that individuals whose self-control resources are depleted are more likely to engage in unethical behavior (Barnes et al. 2011; Gino et al. 2011; Mead et al. 2009). To what extent, then, are future self-continuity and self-control distinct constructs, and to what extent does each of these constructs independently explain unethical behavior? To address these questions, in Study 4 we assessed the relationships among self-control, future self-continuity, and the propensity to cheat on a laboratory task. Results indicated a negative correlation between future self-continuity and the propensity to cheat, even when controlling for trait levels of self-control, as well as the other Big 5 personality traits.

Results from Studies 1 through 4 demonstrate a robust significant relationship between low future self-continuity and unethical choices, even when controlling for a host of potentially relevant personality variables. These studies, however, rely on correlational evidence and thus, cannot necessarily speak to the causal relationship between low future self-continuity and unethical behavior. Thus, in Study 5, we examined whether a direct experimental manipulation of future self-continuity would affect subsequent endorsement of unethical behavior (measured by the SINS II scale, as in Study 2). In the experimental condition, we instructed participants to write about how they would remain similar over time—specifically, in ten years' time. We compared their behavior to those in a control condition in which participants wrote about what the world would be like in ten years. Given that both the experimental and control condition involved thinking about the future, this comparison is a stringent test of our hypothesis that feeling similar to one’s future self, rather than just the future per se, leads to disapproval of unethical behavior. In line with our main hypothesis, participants in the experimental condition were significantly less likely to advocate inappropriate negotiation strategies than were participants in the control condition.

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The Genetic Contribution to Preference Consistency in Moral Judgments

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Human behavior is guided not only by self-interest but also by social motivations as manifested in our moral intuitions and capacity for moral reasoning. While morality may be universal, many social and political controversies in which harm is inevitable invoke a conflict between individual rights and the greater good, and it is known that there is heterogeneity in how such tradeoffs are resolved. For example, a focus on the cost-benefit analysis of the ends of an action and the goal to promote the greater good is more likely to result in utilitarian moral judgments. Putting more weight on the means rather than the ends of an action and striving to respect the inherent rights of all individuals is more likely to result in deontological moral judgments. Interestingly, however, individuals do not always show consistent preferences for one goal over the other. That is, they sometimes display inconsistent patterns of moral judgment (or “preference reversals”), and little is known about why some individuals’ ethical convictions appear more stringent than others’.

The prototypical example-pair for a preference reversal in moral judgments are the trolley and footbridge dilemma. In the trolley dilemma, a runaway trolley is headed for five people, who will be killed if it proceeds on its present track. The only way to save them is to hit a switch that will turn the trolley onto an alternate set of tracks where it will kill one person instead. The question in this dilemma is whether it is morally right to sacrifice one person to save five others by hitting the switch. Most people faced with this dilemma say yes, it is morally right. That is, they give a utilitarian answer. In the similar footbridge dilemma, the runaway trolley again threatens to kill five people. In this scenario, however, the only way to save the five people is to push a stranger that is standing on a footbridge onto the tracks below. The stranger will die if this is done, but his body will stop the trolley from reaching the others. The question in this dilemma is whether it is morally right to sacrifice one person to save five others by pushing the stranger. Most people in this dilemma say no, it is not morally right.

The reason for these different outcomes has been suggested to lie in the extent to which a moral dilemma engages automatic emotional processing versus deliberate cognitive processing (Greene et al. 2001). What is not sufficiently understood, however, are the individual differences underlying the degree to which individuals exhibit stable preferences in moral judgments and the sources of that variation. In particular, individuals can either exhibit consistency across the trolley and footbridge dilemmas or appear sensitive to the dif-
ferences in those dilemmas’ emotional content and switch between utilitarian and deontological responses, exhibiting a preference reversal. Based on a classic twin study-design with Swedish twins (the largest twin-registry in the world) this paper shows that almost 40% of the individual differences can be explained by genetic variation. In addition, recent studies suggest that gender, religiosity, and cognitive reflection play a role in explaining individual-level variation in type of moral judgments (Banerjee, Heubner, and Hauser 2010; Paxton, Ungar, and Greene 2011); and indeed we find that women and people low on cognitive reflection are more likely to give consistent responses (Lee, Amir, Ariely 2009). Thus, we also examine whether there is a shared genetic architecture between those factors and the tendency to make consistent moral judgments but find no statistical evidence for that.

The findings reported in this paper contribute to our understanding of individual differences in moral judgments. While the heritable variation of a trait should not be considered rigid across age and environmental conditions, similar to uncovering the forces of more economic behavioral anomalies such as loss aversion or procrastination (Cesarini, Johannesson, Magnusson, and Wallace 2011), the knowledge of the forces that generate perhaps undesirable patterns in the consistency of moral judgments may provide cues for policy on how to reduce them. Furthermore, our findings might motivate the search for reliable biological predictors of these individual differences such as genetic markers or hormone levels. For example, genetic variation in candidate genes that has shown to account for phenotypic variation in related behaviors could be tested for association to the consistency of moral judgments. This, in turn, may shed light on deeper biological processes (e.g., particular hormone regulations and other neurological processes). In addition, our findings about the consistency in moral judgments do not seem to generalize to consistency in any types of judgments. In particular, the survey asked respondents two questions to capture the fungibility of money across different frames. While the monetary outcomes described in the two scenarios are objectively the same, people tend to give inconsistent answers due to psychological accounting (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). Interestingly, we found no significant correlation between the consistency in those monetary judgments and the consistency in the moral judgments. Together our results underline the importance of genetic differences as a source of variation in the stability of preferences in moral judgments.

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