Moral Self-Licensing: When Being Good Frees Us to Be Bad

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Abstract

Past good deeds can liberate individuals to engage in behaviors that are immoral, unethical, or otherwise problematic, behaviors that they would otherwise avoid for fear of feeling or appearing immoral. We review research on this *moral self-licensing* effect in the domains of political correctness, prosocial behavior, and consumer choice. We also discuss remaining theoretical tensions in the literature: Do good deeds reframe bad deeds (moral credentials) or merely balance them out (moral credits)? When does past behavior liberate and when does it constrain? Is self-licensing primarily for others' benefit (self-presentational) or is it also a way for people to reassure themselves that they are moral people? Finally, we propose avenues for future research that could begin to address these unanswered questions.

How do individuals face the ethical uncertainties of social life? When under the threat that their next action might be (or appear to be) morally dubious, individuals can derive confidence from their past moral behavior, such that an impeccable track record increases their propensity to engage in otherwise suspect actions. Such *moral self-licensing* (Monin & Miller, 2001) occurs when past moral behavior makes people more likely to do potentially immoral things without worrying about feeling or appearing immoral. We argue that moral self-licensing occurs because good deeds make people feel secure in their moral self-regard. For example, when people are confident that their past behavior demonstrates compassion, generosity, or a lack of prejudice, they are more likely to act in morally dubious ways without fear of feeling heartless, selfish, or bigoted.

In this article, we review the state of research on moral self-licensing, first by documenting in some detail empirical demonstrations of self-licensing and kindred phenomena, then by analyzing remaining questions about the model, and finally by sketching out directions for future research to cast light on these unresolved issues.

Empirical Demonstrations of Moral Self-Licensing

The phenomenon of moral self-licensing has been documented in various domains and under different headings over the last decade. We start by reviewing some of the research demonstrating self-licensing, at times mentioning work that was not explicitly conducted within this framework but that nonetheless seems to capture the phenomenon. We describe how moral self-licensing has been studied in the contexts of political incorrectness, prosocial behavior, and consumer choice.

Licensing political incorrectness

The anxiety associated with political correctness in the contemporary United States (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998) provides numerous opportunities to observe moral

self-licensing. Modern Americans generally wish to avoid feeling or appearing prejudiced, yet all the same can be tempted to express views that could be construed as prejudiced (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). To illustrate, imagine yourself in a difficult situation: As chief of police in a small town, you must hire a new deputy. You know that the predominately White officers on the force have negative attitudes toward Blacks, and that hostile working conditions recently led a Black officer to resign. Someone asks you whether you think the job is better suited for a Black person, a White person, or equally well suited to people of both races (Monin & Miller, 2001). What do you say? On the one hand, concern about the racially hostile work environment might make you feel that the job is better suited for Whites. On the other hand, concern that this preference could be or appear racist might inhibit you from expressing it, prompting you to choose the ''safer'' answer and say that race should not be a factor. Self-licensing provides one way to resolve this dilemma. If you were able to establish that you were a nonracist person before expressing a preference, you could say that the job is better suited for a White deputy without worrying that you would feel or appear racist.

Monin and Miller (2001) let some participants demonstrate their lack of prejudice before presenting them with this police-force scenario by asking them to play the role of an employer choosing which candidate to hire for an unrelated consulting job. The best-qualified candidate happened to be African-American and the other four were White. Nearly everyone selected the African-American candidate, a choice that presumably made them feel that they had established themselves as nonracists as they went into the second part of the experiment. In the control group, all five candidates were White, so control participants did not get a chance to demonstrate a lack of prejudice. As predicted, participants who had been able to demonstrate their nonprejudiced attitudes in the first hiring decision said that the police job was better suited for a White person than people in the control condition. Analogous results were obtained in the domain of sexism: the opportunity to disagree with blatantly sexist statements or to pick a woman for a consulting job made participants more likely to describe a stereotypically masculine job as better suited for men than for women. It thus appears that the opportunity to obtain a moral license freed participants from the anxiety that goes along with making morally ambiguous decisions.

More recently, Effron, Cameron, and Monin (2009) tested whether voicing support for Barack Obama just before the 2008 election could license people to make ambiguously racist statements. On average, Obama supporters in a baseline condition said that the police force job described earlier was equally well suited for both races; by contrast, those who had an opportunity to express their support for Obama said it was better suited for Whites. Presumably, the act of expressing support for a Black presidential candidate made them feel that they no longer needed to prove their lack of prejudice. Support for this interpretation was obtained in a second study: expressing support for a White democratic presidential candidate (John Kerry) did not produce this licensing effect, nor did identifying Obama as the younger of two presidential candidates without having a chance to endorse him. Neither affirming one's political views nor being primed with a successful Black figure seem to have been sufficient to produce self-licensing.

Research has also shown that individuals strategically seek out opportunities to act morally if they know they might need a moral license for an upcoming dubious action. In one study (Merritt, Fein, & Savitsky, 2009), participants were asked to consider two job applicants, one White and one Black, knowing that 24 hours later they would be asked to choose one to hire. After seeing the candidates, but before reporting their decision, participants indicated whether each of five ambiguous behaviors (e.g., a police

officer stops a Black man whose clothing and hair match the description of a crime suspect; Crosby & Monin, 2009) were racist or not. When the White applicant was more qualified, participants described more of these behaviors as racist, presumably to make themselves feel or appear more racially sensitive in anticipation of choosing the White applicant – a decision that might otherwise raise concerns about appearing racist. In a related study (Bradley, King, & Hebl, 2009), participants who knew that they would have to write an essay opposing affirmative action for Hispanics were more likely to choose to describe an experience with a Hispanic friend (versus an acquaintance) in another task than people who did not anticipate having to write the politically incorrect essay.

In summary, establishing one's lack of prejudice, even with a token gesture like choosing the best-qualified candidate who happens to be a member of a minority group, licenses individuals to express otherwise dubious preferences, such as those that favor Whites over minorities.

Licensing selfishness

In another domain, research has examined how moral self-licensing can disinhibit selfish behavior. Our framework suggests that when individuals have had a chance to establish their kindness, generosity, or compassion, they should worry less about engaging in behaviors that might appear to violate prosocial norms. For example, individuals whose past good deeds are fresh in their mind may feel less compelled to give to charity than individuals without such comforting recollections.

In a study supporting these predictions, Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin (2009) asked participants to write a short story about themselves or someone they knew using nine morally positive trait words (e.g., fair, kind) or nine morally negative trait words (e.g., selfish, mean). At the end of the study, participants were given a chance to donate part of their compensation to charity. Consistent with a self-licensing account, participants assigned to write about themselves using positive traits donated the least out of the four conditions. There was no difference in donation amount between people assigned to use positive versus negative traits to write about someone else, which strongly suggests that the process involves the self and not mere priming with moral words. Furthermore, participants who wrote about themselves using negative traits donated the most of all, as if they were compensating for feeling immoral – a ''moral cleansing'' effect (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006) that represents the flipside of self-licensing.

Jordan, Mullen, and Murnighan (2009) obtained similar results using prosocial intentions as a dependent measure. They asked participants to describe a time in their past when they had acted either morally or immorally, or a control topic. Then, after a filler activity, participants indicated how likely they were to engage in each of several prosocial activities, including giving to charity, donating blood, and volunteering. Participants who recalled a moral action reported less prosocial intentions than the control group, demonstrating self-licensing, while participants who recalled an immoral action reported more prosocial intentions than the control group, demonstrating moral cleansing. In a second study, participants who recalled a past moral action were more likely to cheat on a math task than were people who recalled a past immoral action. Thus, it seems that moral self-licensing can not only decrease prosocial motivation, but also disinhibit morally dubious behavior.

Further support for this proposition was obtained by Mazar and Zhong (in press), who examined the self-licensing effect of environmentally friendly behavior. Participants

selected products from an array that contained either mostly ''green'' items (e.g., an energy–efficient light bulb) or mostly conventional items (e.g., a regular light bulb). Participants who chose from the mostly green array were more likely to purposefully make inaccurate judgments in a subsequent task in order to win money, and to take more of the experimenter's money than they had legitimately won. As in prior work (Effron et al., 2009; Sachdeva et al., 2009), priming alone cannot account for these results: merely viewing the mostly green array without choosing from it did not produce the same effect. Environmentally friendly behavior thus seems to have made participants secure in their morality, licensing them to engage in morally questionable behavior unrelated to the environment.

As described earlier, Sachdeva et al. (2009), Jordan et al. (2009), and Mazar and Zhong (in press) showed that recounting moral stories about the self or engaging in moral behavior has the power to license immoral actions. It turns out that merely imagining helping others can also sometimes do the trick. Khan and Dhar (2006) paid participants $2 for a study in which they imagined performing various activities and then were asked if they would donate any of their payment to a charity. Participants who imagined agreeing to help another student for a few hours donated less at the end of the experiment than people in the control condition who did not get to imagine doing anything generous.

Sometimes selfishness results from not living up to one's own standards. Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, and Strongman (1999) showed that individuals want the credit for moral intentions without having to pay the costs. This suggests that if you let individuals express their exemplary intentions, they may feel licensed not to follow through on them. Tanner and Carlson (2008), for example, found that when people are given a chance to say what they would do in an ''ideal world,'' they subsequently feel licensed to report less outstanding ''real world'' intentions. For example, asking people the probability that they would donate blood in an ideal world led them to make much lower estimates of the probability that they will donate blood in reality, compared to people who were only asked about the real world. Importantly, participants' ''ideal world'' estimates were not significantly different from ''real world'' estimates made by participants who only provided the latter. This suggests that people typically use estimates of their ideal behavior when responding to intention questions, unless they get an explicit chance to say first what they would ideally do.

Thus, one does not even need concrete memories of good deeds for self-licensing; imagining doing good (Khan & Dhar, 2006) or claiming what one would ideally do (Tanner & Carlson, 2008) can be enough to reduce prosocial motivation. These imagined claims allow people to show that they really want to be upstanding citizens, even though they may not always able to follow through on their intentions (White & Plous, 1995). Because people view their own intentions, compared to their behavior, as more diagnostic of their identities (Kruger & Gilovich, 2004), ideal selves can serve to license less-than exemplary behavior.

In summary, thinking about one's past moral behavior or merely expressing one's generous intentions can license people to behave more selfishly than they would otherwise allow themselves to behave.

Licensing questionable consumer choices

Consumer choice represents a third domain in which moral self-licensing is evident. Everyday purchasing decisions are tinged with morality. At the extreme, some utilitarian philosophers argue that it is immoral to spend disposable income on unnecessary things

because that money could go to people in need elsewhere (Singer, 1972). Though proba-
bly few consumers subscribe to such drastic views, buying luxury items or frivolous goods
is nonetheless associated with feelings of guilt and self-indulgence (Dahl, Honea, &
Manchanda, 2003). According to the logic of self-licensing, individuals whose prior
choices establish them as ethical and reasonable spenders (or ethical and reasonable people
in a more general sense) should be more likely to indulge in frivolous purchases later on.

Khan and Dhar (2006) explored this question directly by asking participants to make a
hypothetical choice between purchasing a relative luxury (e.g., designer jeans) or a rela-
tive necessity (e.g., a vacuum cleaner). Participants who had first been asked to imagine
doing something altruistic (e.g., volunteering for charity) chose the luxury item more
often than those who had not. In other words, participants who imagined doing good
deeds were able to establish their morality, and this licensed them to later make more
frivolous choices with less guilt. In support of this view, the effect was mediated by a
boost in peoples' moral self-concepts, as measured by how much they agreed with state-
ments like "I am compassionate" or "I am helpful."

Optimistic expectations of future consumer behavior can license people to make more
self-indulgent choices in the present, as another study by Khan and Dhar (2007, Study 1)
demonstrated. Ostensibly as compensation for an unrelated task, participants chose a free
movie rental from a list containing both "lowbrow" films (e.g., *Ocean's Eleven*) and
"highbrow" films (e.g., *Schindler's List*). Illustrating that this choice had a moral tinge,
a separate group had rated the highbrow movies as more virtuous than the lowbrow
movies. Participants were more likely to pick a lowbrow movie when they expected to
select a second movie from the same list 1 week later, compared to when they thought
they were choosing one movie in isolation (for a similar pattern in the context of online
DVD rental, see Milkman, Rogers, & Bazerman, 2008). Presumably, participants who
expected to choose twice intended to select a highbrow movie the second time, thus
licensing them to choose the lowbrow movie first without feeling unvirtuous, once more
demonstrating the licensing power of good intentions.

Follow-up studies supported this reasoning (Khan & Dhar, 2007, Studies 3 and 4). Par-
ticipants were more likely to choose a snack rated as "sinful" (a chocolate-chip cookie)
over one rated as "virtuous" (low-fat plain yogurt) when they expected to be faced with
the same decision 1 week later. Mediation analysis showed that the expectation of a
future decision increased selection for the sinful snack by reducing guilt.

In summary, one can self-license frivolous consumption by behaving in ways that
establish one's morality. Self-licensing in the consumer behavior domain can be linked to
morality because imagining engaging in prosocial activities seems to license self-indulgent
purchases and because the licensing in these studies is explicitly linked to a reduction of
guilty feelings about the frivolous choices.

Remaining Questions

Although we hope to have shown that the phenomenon of moral licensing is by now
well established in a variety of domains, many important questions about the processes
that lead to licensing remain unanswered. These include: Does licensing work by making
one feel entitled to engage in immoral behavior or by changing the meaning of the
behavior so that it no longer seems immoral? When does past behavior license and when
does it constrain one to stay consistent? Is licensing merely a self-presentational strategy,
and is it an effective self-presentational strategy in the first place? We address each of
these questions in turn.

Do good deeds provide moral credits or moral credentials?

All the demonstrations of moral self-licensing presented thus far share the general feature that performing or imagining good deeds makes individuals more likely to engage in dubious behavior. Further reflection on this phenomenon, however, reveals two possible explanations for the licensing effect, and the various demonstrations of the phenomenon reviewed in the literature fit either version to varying degrees. The main difference lies in whether or not self-licensing changes the meaning of the behavior being licensed.

One version of licensing states that it feels fine to commit bad deeds as long as they are offset by prior good deeds of a similar magnitude (Nisan, 1991). The metaphor is one of a moral bank account: good deeds establish *moral credits* (cf. Hollander, 1958) that can be ''withdrawn'' to ''purchase'' the right to do bad deeds with impunity. According to this model, when people feel licensed, they know that what they are about to do is bad, but they feel that their past behavior has earned them the right to stray some from the shining path while still retaining a positive balance in their moral bank account. To the extent that moral credits bolster one's global sense of self-worth, this model shares features of self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988).

In a second version of licensing, steeped more in the tradition of causal attribution, good deeds change the meaning of subsequent behavior. Rather than making one feel entitled to transgress, good deeds clarify that the subsequent behavior is not a transgression at all. Because in this model one's past track record is an important piece of information casting light on one's present behavior, we call it the *moral credentials* model. Past behavior serves as a lens through which one construes current behavior, and when the motivation for current behavior is ambiguous, it is disambiguated in line with past behavior. For example, if two candidate explanations compete (e.g., firing an African–American employee because of racism versus her incompetence), past behavior can invalidate the morally illegitimate one (I have shown I am not a racist) so that one can act with confidence that the legitimate explanation will prevail.

The various demonstrations of self-licensing reviewed earlier fit these two interpretations to various degrees. For example, Monin and Miller (2001) couched their demonstration of self-licensing of political incorrectness in terms of moral credentials, as did Effron et al. (2009) and Merritt et al. (2009), but as their names imply, Nisan's (1991) moral balance, Jordan et al.'s (2009) moral equilibrium and Sachdeva et al.'s (2009) moral self-regulation models imply a moral credits framework, as does any theory that emphasizes trading off goals (e.g., Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). At this stage, the data presented by proponents of each model fit, for the most part, both interpretations, but future research could distinguish between them by testing the models' divergent predictions. Two examples come to mind. First, in a credit model, licensed and nonlicensed individuals should view the target behavior just as negatively, though they differ in their comfort engaging in it; in a credentials model, licensed individuals would view the target behavior more positively. Second, because the credit model involves ''withdrawal'' from a moral bank account, it predicts that licensed individuals will feel worse about themselves after performing the target behavior and will be licensed to only a limited amount of transgressions; by contrast, because the credentials model involves disambiguating the target behavior in a nonthreatening way, it predicts that licensed individuals can perform the target behavior without hurting their moral self-image and that they could commit any number of subsequent actions as long as they can all be disambiguated by the credentials.

We believe that it would be misguided to try to determine which of the two versions of self-licensing, moral credits or moral credentials, captures the ''true'' process. A more reasonable working hypothesis is that the two versions represent independent pathways to licensing that operate in different situations, although both can operate simultaneously (see Effron & Monin, 2009). For example, prior behavior is most relevant for disambiguating morally dubious behavior when the two behaviors are in the same domain (e.g., both related to racial prejudice). Thus, prior behavior may license a misdeed in the same domain via moral credentials (e.g., Effron et al., 2009; Merritt et al., 2009; Monin & Miller, 2001), but license a misdeed in a different domain via moral credits (e.g., Mazar & Zhong, in press) – an issue that we discuss at greater length in the following paragraphs. It behooves researchers to distinguish between credits and credentials when describing models of self-licensing, to identify the conditions that trigger one process or the other, as well as to determine methodological touchstones that can distinguish one from the other. We have proposed two such touchstones (change in meaning of the licensed behavior and whether a license gets depleted), but they need to be used in published research before their value can be ascertained; furthermore, other touchstones no doubt exist and should be articulated if the distinction between credits and credentials is to be empirically useful.

When does past behavior license and when does it constrain?

As we have described, licensing effects occur when positive behavior disinhibits people from performing negative behavior. In effect, self-licensing involves acting inconsistently. Yet, much psychological research suggests that personal inconsistency is uncomfortable and threatening (e.g., Festinger, 1957), leading people to act in line with their past behavior – for example, the famous foot-in-the-door effect (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) demonstrates that people are more likely to help if they have been induced to help in the past. When does past behavior force individuals to be consistent, and when does it license them to do the opposite? This question remains largely unanswered, but the existing literature suggests two likely moderators: whether the licensing behavior is framed as evidence of commitment or sufficient progress, and whether the licensed behavior is a blatant violation or merely suspicious.

Framing the initial behavior as evidence of commitment versus sufficient progress. Outside of the moral domain, research on motivation highlights the importance of framing in determining the impact of initial goal pursuit (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005, Study 3): When individuals are led to view initial goal pursuit (such as studying hard) as a sign of their commitment to the goal (to ace a test), they show consistency (and study more); but when they are prompted to view initial goal pursuit as progress toward the goal, they act licensed (and switch to other goals, like socializing). Thus, the same initial behavior (studying hard) can have divergent consequence depending on how it is framed.

Social labeling may be one way to frame goal pursuit as commitment, thus prompting consistency in future behavior. Consider a classic study by Miller, Brickman, and Bolen (1975) that tested different tactics to increase neatness among fifth graders. The group of children who were told repeatedly that they *were* tidy (i.e., given a label) littered less than the group told that they *should* be neat and tidy. It appears that the labeling made children feel committed to neatness rather than licensed to litter. Along similar lines, several studies have found that labeling people as ''helpful'' after they agree to a small request increases their likelihood of acting consistently by agreeing to a subsequent, large request

– that is, labeling magnifies the foot-in-the-door effect (see Burger, 1999). Positive labels constrain future behavior because people may be reluctant to fall short of the expectations these labels convey; labels also may imply that one's initial behavior was internally motivated, which could lead individuals to infer that they are committed to the goal and therefore act consistently.

Chronic individual differences in goal commitment may also affect whether one views one's behavior as representing goal progress or commitment, with important implications for licensing. Findings from Effron et al. (2009, Study 3) support this possibility. Participants (all of whom were Democrats) were given a chance to express their support for either Obama (licensing condition) or Kerry (control condition), and then were asked to state how they would divide a pot of money between an organization serving a White community and one serving a Black community. Participants with higher scores on the Modern Racism Scale (MRS, a measure of prejudice; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981), whose commitment to egalitarian goals was presumably weaker, showed the licensing effect: they allocated more funds to the White organization after expressing support for Obama. In contrast, participants with lower MRS scores, whose commitment to egalitarian goals was presumably stronger, showed a marginal consistency effect: they allocated more funds to the Black organization after expressing support for Obama. In light of the present discussion, endorsing Obama may have reminded low-MRS (highly committed) participants of their commitment to an egalitarian society, prompting consistency, whereas it may have made high-MRS (poorly-committed) participants feel that they had done their egalitarian good deed for the day, prompting licensing.

Blatant transgressions versus ambiguous behavior. A second likely moderator of licensing versus consistency is the moral ambiguity of the target behavior. According to the moral credentials model, good deeds license subsequent behavior by changing its meaning; licensing should therefore be more effective for ambiguous behaviors that only potentially represent transgressions (e.g., may or may not be racist) than for blatant transgressions that are not readily reinterpreted in a favorable light. Although ambiguity may not be essential for licensing to occur (the moral credits model describes how more blatant transgressions could be licensed), we suspect that ambiguity greatly reduces concerns about acting inconsistently.

To our knowledge, no data that directly addresses this hypothesis have been reported, but it is noteworthy that many of the studies we have reviewed involve the licensing of ambiguous behavior rather than blatant transgressions: in the hiring tasks used by Monin and Miller (2001) and Effron et al. (2009), it was ambiguous whether describing the job as better for Whites or men than for Blacks or women indicated prejudice or merely concern about workplace hostility (a more legitimate motive); in Effron et al.'s (2009) Study 3, participants decided how to allocate funds between an organization serving Whites and one serving Blacks after being told the latter had recently received a large donation, giving participants a legitimate reason to favor Whites. We believe that licensing is especially likely in such ambiguous situations.

Directions for future research. We have identified the framing of the licensing behavior and the ambiguity of the licensed behavior as two likely moderators determining whether prior behavior leads to consistency or licensing. Future research should establish more conclusively the role of these variables and offer others that may answer this important question.

Is licensing a self-presentational strategy?

A third important issue is whether licensing is a self-presentational strategy, which breaks down into two questions: First, is licensing solely intended to avoid negative evaluation from others – in other words, is it *merely* a self-presentational strategy? Second, does actors' past behavior actually make observers more willing to excuse the actors' present transgressions – in other words, is licensing an *effective* self-presentational strategy? We take each question in turn.

Is licensing merely a self-presentational strategy? Research suggests that licensing is not merely a self-presentational strategy – instead, it seems to reassure the self that subsequent behavior is legitimate. Monin and Miller (2001, Study 3) showed that licensing occurred even when the audience who observed the morally dubious behavior knew nothing of the prior, licensing behavior, suggesting that self-image played a role in the phenomenon. Khan and Dhar (2006) present more direct evidence by showing that individuals who imagined doing something altruistic rated themselves higher on items such as ''I am compassionate'' or ''I am helpful,'' and that this change in self-perception mediated whether participants then felt licensed to prefer a frivolous product.

  Thus, the extant research suggests that licensing is not merely a self-presentational strategy: it happens even when audiences do not know about previous behavior (Monin & Miller, 2001), and it is in some cases mediated by changes in self-ratings (Khan & Dhar, 2006). However, the public/private distinction may be deceptively simplistic, as licensing may work in private by affecting how one *imagines* that others would respond *if* they knew about one's behavior (see Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). Future research could try to investigate more subtle ways in which public versus private situations may moderate licensing.

Is licensing an effective self-presentational strategy? The research discussed so far has focused on how people license themselves based on prior behaviors that establish their morality. We described how the phenomenon can occur in private, and it seems like it can be fueled by self-concerns alone. But when people do license themselves through public behavior, does it have the desired effect on observers? Do others recognize the license and excuse the dubious behavior? The evidence suggests that they do – but only under certain conditions.

  In one study (Nisan & Horenczyk, 1990), Israeli seventh graders read vignettes about other children thinking about doing something bad (e.g., shoplifting). Some children were described as generally well behaved, while others were described as generally poorly behaved. Participants preferred to allow the ''good'' children to commit transgressions than the ''bad'' children. While this study demonstrates that observers' reactions to transgressions depend on the transgressor's prior behavior, it fell short of demonstrating that good deeds make observers license bad ones. Such a demonstration would require comparing the well-behaved target to a neutral target – and in fact, participants were not significantly more likely to permit a ''good'' child to transgress than a child whose prior behavior had been a mix of positive and negative.

  A study by Krumm and Corning's (2008) provides some evidence of observers' willingness to license actors, but only for observers who are members of the actor's ingroup. Participants read about targets who behaved ambiguously toward gays and lesbians (e.g., by denying a bank loan to a gay couple). The behavior in each vignette could be interpreted either as discriminatory or nondiscriminatory. Heterosexual participants judged

vignettes preceded by licensing behavior (e.g., attending a gay rights parade) as less discriminatory than other vignettes not preceded by licensing behavior. This effect was attenuated, however, among homosexual participants, as if members of the group against whom the potential prejudice would be directed remained wary of the targets. Unfortunately, this study was somewhat limited by the fact that participants read different vignettes in the licensed and unlicensed conditions.

More recently, Czopp (2009) obtained similar results but kept the target behavior constant across conditions. This study examined Black and White participants' reactions to a White target who made a potentially offensive claim about African–Americans, varying whether he preceded his statement with the disclaimer, ''I'm not racist or anything, but …''. When this preamble was added, White participants thought the speaker was marginally less racist, but Black participants thought he was significantly more racist. Consistent with Krumm and Corning's (2008) findings, it seems as though members of the group targeted by the potentially prejudiced statement were less willing to license it than members of the nontargeted group.

The fact that African–Americans reacted negatively to licensing attempts in Czopp (2009) illustrates that prior claims of morality can backfire and make later transgressions appear worse (see also El-Alayli, Myers, Petersen, & Lystad, 2008). Engaging in morally questionable behavior after attempting to establish one's morality is a risky business. Doing so involves acting inconsistently with prior behavior, and observers dislike those who act inconsistently (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971), often accusing them of hypocrisy (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005). People take pleasure in the punishment of hypocrites who have committed the same transgression for which they have condemned others (Powell & Smith, 2009). Observers may thus be reluctant to license a transgression when preceding moral behavior makes it appear hypocritical. It is therefore important to determine when prior behavior will license actors in the eyes of observers, and when it will backfire and prevent licensing.

Effron and Monin (2009) recently examined the circumstances under which perceived hypocrisy undermines licensing in the eyes of observers. They posited that two factors would be relevant: whether the behavior to be licensed blatantly or ambiguously represented a transgression, and whether it was in the same domain as prior good deeds or in a different one. Actors are likely to seem hypocritical when they say one thing but do another (Barden et al., 2005); thus, a blatant transgression in the same domain as prior good deeds (e.g., a racist hiring decision after working to increase the hiring of minorities) is likely to seem much worse than a blatant transgression in a different domain (e.g., sexual harassment after increasing minority hiring). Furthermore, ambiguous behavior is less susceptible to seeming hypocritical because (as the moral credentials version of licensing specifies), good deeds can make it look as if it is not immoral at all. This reasoning implies that blatant transgressions will only be licensed by good deeds in a different domain, while ambiguous behavior will be licensed by good deeds regardless of domain.

Results of the Effron and Monin (2009) study supported these predictions. Participants read about a corporate executive's morally suspect behavior (e.g., promoting five White employees, but passing over two Black employees) that was either clarified as a blatant transgression (e.g., he suggests that African–Americans make poor managers) or remained ambiguous (e.g., he claims that employee competence, not race, had influenced his decision). Participants who learned that the executive had a morally admirable track record showed a licensing effect, expressing less condemnation of his morally suspect behavior than participants who had not learned about his track record – unless the target behavior was a blatant transgression *and* in the same domain as the track record

(e.g., fighting to increase minority recruitment). In that condition, participants' perceptions of hypocrisy suppressed the licensing effect. These results demonstrate that in the eyes of observers, the same actions that can establish one's lack of prejudice and license suspicious behavior can appear hypocritical and inhibit licensing when behavior represents a blatant transgression.

These results resonate with one of the solutions we proposed earlier for the licensing/consistency puzzle: if good deeds license only ambiguous behavior in observers' eyes, it makes sense that good deeds would make actors feel licensed to act in morally ambiguous ways but inhibit them from committing blatant transgressions. The fact that blatant transgressions only seemed hypocritical when they were in the same domain as good deeds suggests that domain similarity may be another important moderator to consider when predicting whether actors feel licensed or constrained by prior behavior.

Effron and Monin's (2009) results also speak to our characterization of moral credentials and moral credits as independent pathways to licensing. As we suggested earlier, past good deeds are highly relevant to interpreting whether ambiguous behavior in the same domain represents a moral violation or not. Good deeds should thus license same-domain, morally ambiguous behavior by providing moral credentials. Consistent with this idea, we found that the licensing effect in the same-domain/ambiguous condition was fully mediated by participants' construal of the ambiguous behavior (e.g., whether or not the promotion decision represented racial discrimination). In contrast, past good deeds are less relevant for interpreting whether behavior in a *different* domain represents a violation or not. Good deeds are thus unlikely to license different-domain transgressions via moral credentials, but licensing could occur via moral credits (i.e., by making bad deeds seem permissible, but not any less bad). Consistent with this idea, we found that the licensing effect observed in the different-domain conditions was *not* mediated by construal. In these conditions, participants seemed willing to excuse behaviors that they acknowledged were moral violations. Observers will therefore license an actor's behavior when his prior good deeds make his behavior appear like less of a transgression (credentials), or earn him the right to transgress (credits).

In summary, observers, like actors, are sometimes willing to license morally dubious behaviors based on an actor's prior moral behavior. The research reviewed also suggests two boundary conditions: observers seem reluctant to license dubious behavior that targets their own group or blatant transgressions that seem hypocritical. Licensing may thus be an effective self-presentation strategy – but it remains to be seen if it is as effective as actors seem to think it is. There may be situations in which actors overestimate observers' willingness to license them. For example, actors may not anticipate how group membership affects observers' willingness to license, or self-serving biases may lead actors to construe their own behavior as open to favorable interpretations, while observers perceive it as a blatant transgression.

Concluding Thoughts

In this review, we have brought together several different lines of research in an attempt to better understand the psychology of moral self-licensing. As we have seen, behaviors that establish one's morality can disinhibit people to act in morally dubious ways. We have focused on licensing in the moral domain because the motivation to feel and appear moral is widely shared (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Monin, 2007), but licensing effects can be observed in a wide variety of other domains that have personal value for individuals. Moral self-licensing can thus be located within a broader class of phenomena in which personal

characteristics and behavior can either give people license to act on their motivations or constrain them from doing so (see Miller & Effron, 2009; Miller, Effron, & Zak, 2009). In this sense, research on moral licensing is continuous with early social psychological analysis of behavior as resulting from the tension between motivating and inhibitory forces (Lewin, 1958). In order to understand why people act in morally questionable ways, it is necessary not only to ask what increases temptation (i.e., motivating forces), but also what removes social and psychological barriers (i.e., inhibitory forces) to moral violations.

Although much of the research we have reviewed highlights the dark side of moral self-licensing, we wish to suggest that moral self-licensing may sometimes have more desirable consequences. First, as we discussed in the section on political incorrectness, moral self-licensing can alleviate anxiety about saying something offensive; thus, self-licensing could be a valuable strategy to facilitate open conversations about sensitive topics (e.g., affirmative action). Second, freeing people from concerns about appearing or feeling immoral may liberate them to make unpalatable but necessary trade-offs (cf. Tetlock et al., 2000) and avoid crippling indecision. For example, a medical team with limited resources may be forced to decide which one of two equally sick patients to treat. Likewise, the owner of a struggling business may be reluctant to downsize her workforce, even if not doing so would drive the business to bankruptcy and leave *all* employees without a job. People are often called upon to make such difficult trade-offs, and could easily remain in a state of indecisive paralysis without a moral license. Finally, most moral behavior comes at a high cost in terms of time, energy, and money and conflicts with more self-interested desires – even ones necessary for an individual's well-being (e.g., investing in close relationships) or otherwise beneficial to society (e.g., producing great art). A moral license could conceivably allow people to pursue other culturally appropriate self-actualization goals (e.g., reducing charitable donations in order to fund one's education), where they might otherwise be constantly troubled by the knowledge that they are not doing all they can to right the world's wrongs. Such continual pursuit of morality would likely hamper one's growth in other life domains.

In these ways, future research that advances our understanding of moral licensing may not only suggest methods to avoid facilitating politically incorrect, selfish, or frivolous choices, but also holds the promise of helping to design settings that foster candid, decisive, and self-actualizing behavior to serve the greater good.

Acknowledgements

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