



Always looking for a moral identity: The moral licensing effect in men convicted of domestic violence



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ABSTRACT

People who act in accord with moral standards enjoy a strong moral self-concept, but people with a strong moral concept do not always behave morally: sometimes they exhibit consistent behaviors and sometimes compensatory behaviors. Through two studies, this paper shows that people who do wrong enjoy a stronger moral self-concept and regulate their moral behavior accordingly. Specifically, men in court-mandated psychological treatment for having employed violence against their partners manage to preserve a very positive moral self-concept. They also exhibit moral self-regulation: when prompted to consider their high moral self-concepts, they recalled performing significantly more prosocial behaviors in the previous year (consistency effect), and immediately following this, they relaxed their future intentions to act in prosocial manners over the next year (licensing effect). This novel connection between intimate partner violence and moral regulation allows us to observe the dark side of feeling too moral in a sensitive sample.

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1. Introduction

Being morally virtuous constitutes an important aspect of maintaining a positive identity (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Monin & Jordan, 2009), and having a positive identity is, in turn, functional and desired by everyone (Baumeister, 1998; Greenwald, 1980). Moral identity drives different moral behaviors that ultimately allow people to live together under a series of common rules (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984, 2004). However, reality continuously obstructs human coherence, and we find ourselves dealing with the need to rescue our moral identities in the face of our morally dubious actions.

This study focuses on the gap between moral self-concept and moral behavior in a real social context. Specifically, it aims to explore the discrepancies between them in men convicted of domestic violence. The rationale is the following: because of its functional value these men strive to preserve and enhance a global positive moral self-conception, and because of the existing discrepancies they need subtle regulatory mechanisms: under certain circumstances they would be motivated to act consistently with their strong moral self-concept, and in others, they would

accumulate enough credentials to exhibit a moral licensing effect. This approach may allow us to connect results from two traditional separate fields, that is, moral psychology and intimate partner violence (IPV) and improve the psychological interventions dealing with this specific kind of violence.

1.1. The gap between moral self-concept and moral behavior

Moral and immoral behaviors are not the opposite ends of a single scale; rather, they are two distinct dimensions (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). Moral and immoral behaviors refer to a wide range of behaviors that are judged according to generally accepted moral norms that are established by human groups (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Violence in any form violates the norms and is therefore labeled immoral, and strongly regulated.

Historically, three main approaches have been used to explain moral behavior. The first was based exclusively on moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984) (i.e., the cognitive understanding of what right and wrong are). Later, moral self-concept or moral identity was added in an attempt to bridge the moral judgment-action gap (Blasi, 1980, 2004; Stake, 1994). Aquino and Reed (2002) defined moral identity as a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits and suggested that, to the extent that an individual adopts and/or aspires to moral traits, that individual is driven to act in a way that is consistent with these traits (Aquino et al., 2009).

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According to this view, moral identity works as a self-regulatory mechanism that motivates moral action (Blasi, 1984) and is driven by the need for consistency (i.e., the need for the individual to be true to himself or herself). The key question of this approach would be “How moral am I?” The newest social psychological approach to the moral self-concept accounts for the context in which the behavior takes place (Jordan & Monin, 2008; Monin & Jordan, 2009). According to it, one’s moral self-concept is understood as dynamic, influenced by subtle situational cues, and a part of a global sense of self-worth that individuals are strongly motivated to preserve. In this moral domain, people may preserve this sense by actually behaving in moral manners or by cognitively biasing their construal of the world to favor self-flattering information and dismissing or disparaging those who pose a threat. The question here would be “How moral do I need to be at the moment in order to preserve my moral identity?”

Despite the improvements that have been made in the prediction of moral behavior, many complex questions still surround moral behavior, and research has grown around concepts such as moral hypocrisy, moral cleansing and moral compensation. Moral hypocrisy reflects the efforts to appear moral to one’s self or others while avoiding the costs associated with actually being moral (Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). Moral cleansing suggests that acting immorally pushes people to engage in actions that figuratively cleanse themselves and reassert their moral selves (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000), and moral compensation shows that feeling relatively less moral increases the motivation to act prosocially, whereas feeling relatively moral reduces the motivation to act prosocially (Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). This latter possibility is specifically known as the moral licensing effect. Research on this concept indicates that when individuals feel that they are sufficiently moral in a given domain, their motivation to be moral in other domains decreases (Merritt et al., 2012; Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva et al., 2009). People can secure their moral identity and acquire moral license to be immoral in different manners (Barkan et al., 2012) for example, choosing to overlook information that could call their morality into question (Shu & Gino, 2012; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011), observing other similar people’s moral behavior and identifying with their credentials (Kouchaki, 2011), highlighting immoral actions that were not performed and feeling moral, or distorting one’s past to make the choices not made seem immoral (Efron, Miller, & Monin, 2012). Obviously, people can also act morally (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011), although this is only one option.

Research has also shown the conditions that cause people to exhibit consistency effects or compensatory effects (Conway & Peetz, 2012). To this respect, it has been shown that thinking of concrete moral actions leads to compensatory behaviors (donating less money to charity after thinking about moral actions than after thinking about immoral actions), but thinking about the more abstract moral identity leads to consistent behaviors (donating less money after considering immoral aspects of the identity than after considering prosocial and helpful aspects of the identity).

1.2. Overview of the studies and objectives

In an attempt to better understand human behavior regarding morality in ecological situations, this paper analyzes the moral self-concept and the moral behavior of men convicted of domestic violence. According to our social system these men have acted in manners that directly conflict with positive moral identities but do not exhibit the expected need to change and even go so far as to trivialize their responsibility and justify their violent behaviors (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011; Smith, 2007; Stanley, Fell, Miller,

Thomson, & Watson, 2012). In Study 1, we assume that preserving a positive moral self-concept is important for everybody, and although never shown, also for people judicially compelled to receive psychological treatment for their violent behavior. So, we evaluate the moral self-concept of men convicted of domestic violence using two different measures and compare these scores to those from another sample of male psychologists who did not have criminal records and were working to prevent all violence. Study 2 was guided by previous research into the conditions that cause people to exhibit consistency effects or compensatory effects (Conway & Peetz, 2012). So, we test whether men who have used violence against their partners exhibited consistency effects by recalling more prosocial behaviors performed in the last year after the salience of their high moral self-concept was increased. Immediately following this, we tested whether recalling more past prosocial behaviors led them to exhibit a moral licensing effect (i.e., to relax their future moral goals). This pattern can be interpreted in terms of moral self-regulation, where people need to balance moral self-conceptions against the costs inherent in prosocial behavior (Sachdeva et al., 2009; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006).

1.2.1. Study 1

The preservation of the moral self-concept, which constitutes an essential objective (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Greenwald, 1980), requires that neither moral behavior nor its perception be static. People adjust, balance or regulate both accordingly (Mazar et al., 2008; Monin & Jordan, 2009; Nisan & Horenczyk, 1990). Following this idea and the creative ways used to secure the moral identity (Efron et al., 2012), there is no reason to think that men convicted of domestic violence fail to preserve their moral self-concept. As generally suggested by Nisan and Horenczyk (1990), they wouldn’t need proof of being saints, only of not being sinners. Although the first hypothesis is novel in that no previous explorations of the importance of being a moral person have been performed among men convicted of domestic violence, there is some empirical evidence that suggests that this importance could be high or very high. Recently, Jordan and colleagues concluded that internal moral identity is always high regardless of whether participants recall past moral or immoral behaviors (Jordan et al., 2011). Additionally, research on moral compensation has shown that the inflation of one’s moral self-regard compensates for threats to self-concept (Jordan & Monin, 2008). Thus, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1. Men convicted of domestic violence will present a significantly higher moral self-concept than male psychologists who actively work against any type of violence.

Although our two samples are already quite different regarding their sensitivities and the use of violence, we took measures of their self-reported past prosocial behavior to discard a behavioral compensation that may explain the hypothesized high moral self-concept in men convicted of domestic violence. To this respect it would be possible that, aware of their wrong behavior against the partner, they undertake other prosocial behaviors to compensate the immoral one. Thus, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H2. Men convicted of domestic violence will score significantly lower in different past prosocial behaviors than the comparison sample.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 232 males who had been convicted of

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