



## The threat of moral refusers for one's self-concept and the protective function of physical cleansing



Florien M. Cramwinckel <sup>a,\*</sup>, Eric van Dijk <sup>b</sup>, Daan Scheepers <sup>b</sup>, Kees van den Bos <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Utrecht University, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Leiden University, Institute of Psychology, Leiden Institute for Brain and Cognition, The Netherlands

### HIGHLIGHTS

- People respond negatively to others who take a moral stance (i.e., *moral refusers*).
- Participants tasted a sausage while a confederate refused on moral or non-moral grounds.
- Negativity was expressed in self- and refuser-evaluations and physiological threat.
- Physical cleansing prevented negative self- and refuser-directed responses.
- Consequences of moral threat were most pronounced for those with strong moral identity.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 3 August 2012

Revised 1 July 2013

Available online 27 July 2013

#### Keywords:

Moral refuser

Morality

Moral threat

Physical cleansing

Psychophysiological measures

### ABSTRACT

We investigated how people respond to moral threats and the consequences this has for one's moral self-concept. In two experiments, participants first tasted a sausage and were then confronted with a bogus participant who had refused to taste the sausage because of moral or non-moral reasons. People disliked the moral refuser more than the non-moral refuser. The self-threatening effect of having one's morals questioned was also reflected in specific patterns of cardiovascular responses and negatively affected participants' self-evaluations. We further show that the negative effects of a moral threat can be prevented by a simple intervention of physical cleansing: Participants who had cleansed their hands before being confronted with a moral refuser did not show the negative effects on self- and refuser evaluations. Importantly, the protective effects of physical cleansing were most pronounced for people with a strong moral identity. Taken together, these results underline the importance of one's self-concept when confronted with a moral refuser, and introduce an effective intervention to prevent these negative consequences.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### Introduction

Morality is one of the most important dimensions of self-definition. People learn already at a young age that just and moral behaviors are desirable and admirable (Lerner, 1980). Being moral is often so important to people that they go to great lengths to preserve their image as moral beings. In fact, this can lead people to derogate others who pose a threat to the moral self. As a result, a confrontation with a *moral refuser* (someone who, out of moral concern, refuses to go along with a certain behavior) can have severe consequences for the way people evaluate themselves and this other person. For example, Minson and Monin (2012) demonstrated that when non-vegetarians were asked to think about how vegetarians would evaluate them, they responded by negatively evaluating vegetarians. In the current research, we aim to provide

further support for the idea that being confronted with a moral refuser has negative consequences for how you evaluate yourself and the moral refuser.

More specifically, with two experiments we aim to better understand the negative consequences of a confrontation with a moral refuser and to provide a possible intervention to prevent these consequences. Hereby, we extend the current knowledge in three ways. First, we provide converging evidence that being confronted with a moral refuser is indeed threatening, and that this threat can be discerned at the cardiovascular level (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; see also Blascovich & Mendes, 2010). Second, we demonstrate how a relatively simple intervention, physical cleansing, can prevent the negative self- and other-directed consequences of a confrontation with a moral refuser. Third, we show the important role that one's moral self-concept plays in dealing with moral refusers. That is, we demonstrate that especially people whose self-concept is centered around morality, (i.e., those with a strong moral identity), benefit from physical cleansing when being confronted with a moral refuser.

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Social Psychology, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS Utrecht, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: [F.M.Cramwinckel@uu.nl](mailto:F.M.Cramwinckel@uu.nl) (F.M. Cramwinckel).

## Dealing with Moral Threat

According to the moral self-regulation theory (Zhong, Liljenquist, & Cain, 2009), people strive for a positive moral balance, that is, people want to view themselves as good and moral individuals (Sherman & Cohen, 2002, 2006). Morality is therefore a very important aspect of one's self-concept (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Pronin, 2008). Besides being one of the most central aspects of the self-concept, morality is also fundamentally different from non-moral aspects of the self-concept (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Moral statements are different from personal preferences partly because moral convictions are, or could be, universal (Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003). This implies that moral statements tend to apply to everyone, and not only to the person who makes a statement about certain acts to be moral or immoral. This makes a confrontation with a moral refuser especially threatening, because the refuser's moral stance may imply that the behavior you engaged in was not as moral as you would like it to be.

People can deal with this moral threat in several ways. One possible way is to change their perception of the person or event that threatens their moral balance, for example by derogating the source of the threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2002, 2006). This has been demonstrated in previous research (e.g., Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). For example, Monin et al. (2008) asked participants to choose the most likely suspect for a crime from a set of possible subjects. Later, participants were confronted with another participant who had refused to do the same task because it ostensibly was racist. Afterwards, the participants evaluated this moral refuser. People reacted to moral refusers by derogating them and apparently felt threatened by the implicit stain on their own morality.

We performed two experiments that built directly upon the work of Monin et al. (2008). In both experiments, participants first ate a sausage and were then confronted with another participant who had refused to eat a sausage, based on moral grounds (the moral refuser condition) or non-moral grounds (the non-moral refuser condition). In the experiments we provide further empirical support to the notion that, in accordance with previous research (e.g., Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin, 2007; Monin et al., 2008) being confronted with a moral refuser leads to a negative evaluation of the refuser, and has a negative impact on one's self-concept.

To obtain converging evidence that moral refusers elicit threat, in Experiment 1 we included cardiovascular indices of threat and challenge motivational states on the basis of the biopsychosocial model (BPSM; Blascovich, 2008; Blascovich & Mendes, 2010; Blascovich, Mendes, Tomaka, Salomon, & Seery, 2003; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996). The BPSM applies specifically to *motivated performance situations* such as giving a speech for a moral refuser. A core characteristic of a motivated performance situation is that such a situation is self-evaluative, i.e., an individual must believe that he/she will be evaluated, by others or by his/herself, on a domain that is important for the self, such as morality. Importantly, the same situation (e.g., giving a speech) can be challenging for some people, but threatening for other people, depending on how they evaluate themselves and the situation (Blascovich & Mendes, 2010).

According to the BPSM, people display a motivational state of threat when the demands of the motivated performance situation outweigh the resources the person brings into the situation to deal with these demands. By contrast, a motivational state of challenge emerges when personal resources outweigh situational demands. Because it is important for people to be and appear moral (e.g., Pronin, 2008; Zhong et al., 2009), we argue that giving a speech to a moral refuser is more likely to lead to threat than to challenge. The confrontation with a moral refuser may lead people to realize that they have done something immoral (eating meat), which may make them feel not well equipped to portray themselves as moral, and thus to perform well in the speech-task. This confrontation with a moral refuser therefore creates a situation where the situational demands (giving a speech to a moral

refuser) outweigh one's personal resources (such as the belief that one can convince others that one is, in fact, a moral person), and thus would constitute a motivational state of threat, rather than challenge.

Apart from providing converging evidence that moral refusers elicit threat, it should be noted that the use of cardiovascular indices to capture threat has some additional advantages above traditional methodology (e.g., self-report measures). That is, the cardiovascular indices described by the BPSM (which will be described in more detail in the Method section of Experiment 1) can provide online, continuous, and unobtrusive measures of threat, and its motivational counterpart, challenge. These cardiovascular indices can also pick-up motivational processes a person is not aware of, and are also non-susceptible to self-presentation concerns, that could normally play a role in these types of settings that concern areas of the self that are important to people (e.g., morality).

Besides using physiological measures, we also extend previous research by including a non-moral refuser comparison group in our research designs. By doing so, we are also able to rule out an alternative explanation for the rejection of moral refusers that has not been addressed in previous research, namely that that people simply reject others who behave differently from them, regardless of the rationale for this deviant behavior. Previous research typically compared people's reactions to moral refusers (who refused out of moral concern) and compliant others (who went along with the task e.g., Monin et al., 2008). Although it has been presumed that people derogated the moral refusers because they were *moral* refusers, it is also possible that people reacted negatively to them because they were *refusers*. We aim to provide more empirical evidence for the process that underlies the negative consequences of being confronted with a moral refuser, by disentangling the effects of moral refusal and the effects of refusal alone.

## Physical cleansing

Physical cleansing is literally cleansing (parts of) one's body, such as one's hands. Physical cleansing provides an intriguing means to protect one's threatened morality (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). There are two ways in which physical cleansing can help to prevent the negative consequences of a confrontation with a moral refuser. First, physical cleansing can create a moral buffer. That is, people link complex ideas and topics to easier concepts that are present in the physical world (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010). In doing so, morality is often linked to physical cleanliness. This is, for example, clear in language: People have to "come clean" and have "a clean conscience." Importantly, not only do people think about abstract topics in physical terms, these physical metaphors such as cleanliness can also influence people's judgments about, and behaviors related to, the abstract topic. This metaphoric transfer (Landau et al., 2010) implies that when people's physical sense of cleanliness is altered, their moral judgments and behaviors are also influenced. This would mean that if you literally feel clean (e.g., after cleaning your hands), you would also feel more moral. Empirical research provides support for this idea: Zhong, Strejcek, and Sivanathan (2010) demonstrated that when participants imagined being clean, they also felt more moral, which also translated into their moral judgment and decision-making.

The second reason why physical cleansing can prevent the negative consequences after a confrontation with a moral refuser is the "clean-slate" logic, put forth by Lee and Schwarz (2010, 2011). According to these authors, physical cleansing not only creates a moral buffer but also removes the physical and psychological residues of past actions. For example, if one would clean one's hands after eating a greasy sausage, this act of cleansing would not only remove the physical residues of eating the sausage (e.g., grease and smell) but also the psychological residues of eating the sausage (such as feeling guilty after eating meat in a moral confrontation). Physical cleansing can thus be used to sever the link with one's past behavior.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10468545>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10468545>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)