



## Moral firmness



Shaul Shalvi<sup>\*,1</sup>, David Leiser<sup>\*,1</sup>

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

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### ABSTRACT

Firm moral judgment deems dishonest acts as categorically wrong, and considers any self-serving justification for them as further dishonesty. People, however, commonly use self-serving justifications in order to feel honest even as they behave dishonestly, indicating reduced moral firmness. We test variation in moral firmness by comparing a sample of religious and secular female students. Arguably, religious people's upbringing and ongoing exposure to moral admonitions promote a firm moral approach which should translate into firmer moral judgments in adulthood. Results of a moral judgment experiment supported this proposition: Religious students judged lies more harshly than secular students, and were less influenced by the availability of self-serving justifications. A moral behavior experiment provided support to the notion that moral firmness in judgment may translate to moral firmness in behavior: whereas modest amount of lying was found among the secular students, no evidence for lying was observed among the religious student. Overall, we provide strong evidence for firm moral judgment among female religious students, and weaker evidence for firm moral behavior. We discuss the relation between firm moral judgment and behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

People often refrain from lying, even when lying yields personal profit. One reason people avoid lying is their fear of being detected and punished (Becker, 1968). However, even when their anonymity is secured, people restrict how much they lie. This means that to some extent, people are genuinely lie averse (Gneezy, 2005; Lundquist et al., 2009; Fischbacher and Heusi, 2008; Cappelen et al., 2013), and that beyond their desire to appear honest to others, people have an intrinsic desire to be and feeling honest. But do some people hold a firmer moral approach regarding self-serving dishonesty than others? Do people holding such firm moral approach lie less? Put differently, do people who profess deontological views about dishonesty (i.e., lying is always wrong, no matter what self-serving excuses can be cited), lie less than people with more flexible views about dishonesty? These are the questions the current paper addresses.

### 1.1. Moral firmness

In tempting situations, people restrict the amount of their lies allowing them to boost profit unethically while maintaining feeling honest (Mazar et al., 2008; see also Ariely, 2012; Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 2011; Ploner and Regner, 2013). People seem to stretch the truth (Schweitzer and Hsee, 2002), exactly to the extent they manage to justify their lies (Shalvi et al., 2011a, 2012; Gino and Ariely, 2012; Wiltermuth, 2011). Shalvi et al. (2011a) engaged participants in a die rolling task in

\* Corresponding authors at: Department of Psychology, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva 84105, Israel. Tel.: +972 86472049.  
E-mail addresses: [sshalvi@bgu.ac.il](mailto:sshalvi@bgu.ac.il) (S. Shalvi), [dleiser@bgu.ac.il](mailto:dleiser@bgu.ac.il) (D. Leiser).

<sup>1</sup> Both authors contributed equally.

which they were asked to roll anonymously, report the outcome and gain money according to their reports (Fischbacher and Heusi, 2008). They found that participants who were instructed to roll multiple times but report the outcome of the first roll only, lied more than those who were (*ceteris paribus*) instructed to roll only once. The idea is that the high numbers appearing on the non-relevant for pay rolls (second roll, third roll, etc.) makes people feel justified to use these numbers to determine the amount of their lies.

People seem to benefit from having information, even completely private and otherwise irrelevant information, that makes their lies feel justifiable, allowing them to profit dishonestly while feeling honest. Is all people's morality equally flexible? Can we expect some people to hold firmer moral views on dishonesty, and judge any dishonest act as wrong? Will people holding such firm view consider justifiable information irrelevant and judge all lies with equal severity? These questions concern the moral stance.

Assuming such people are found, do people professing firm moral views also lie less? Various factors may contribute to the development of firm moral beliefs. Such factors may include the cultural norms within one's close family, friends or society at large. They may relate to strict upbringing, education or exposure to media sources advocating such approach. This suggests that people from all walks of life may vary on their level of moral firmness in their judgment as well as behavior. The current work is focused on (1) assessing variation in people's moral firmness and (2) its relation to moral behavior. We thus focused on one sub-group likely to hold relatively high moral firmness, namely, religious female Jewish students, from whom lying is forbidden by their religious beliefs. These individuals are raised and socialized under the explicit and frequent treatment of morality and temptation in stern terms such as "*Thou shalt not steal*" (Exodus 20: 12) and "*I hate and detest falsehood, your Torah I love*" (Psalms 119: 163).

The relationship between religious reminders and morality has been studied in recent years. Being exposed to implicit religious reminders such as unscrambling sentences with religiousness-related words led people to demonstrate higher levels of self-control (Rounding et al., 2012), generosity (Shariff and Norenzayan, 2007), and helping behaviors (Pichon et al., 2007). More explicit reminders, such as asking participants to recall the Ten Commandments led people to lie less compared to participants who recalled the last ten books they read (Mazar et al., 2008). Explaining this pattern of behavior, some have argued that exposure to religious reminders make people feel that some divine authority is watching them (Shariff and Norenzayan, 2007; and also Haley and Fessler, 2005; Bateson et al., 2006) and thus feel uncomfortable with behaving immorally or in an asocial way. Others have argued that religious reminders serve as moral cues making it more difficult to lie while maintaining an honest self-concept (Mazar et al., 2008). Recent work (Fischbacher and Utikal, 2011) provided further evidence that religious people, twelve nuns in this case, even lied in a disadvantageous way (over-reported lower numbers in the dice task) when this allowed them to signal to others that they would not steal.

Given that religious reminders are associated with moral behavior and that religious people are raised in settings advocating moral firmness, we expect to find higher firmness in religious people's moral judgment compared to secular people, which may additionally translate to more honest behavior. We test this prediction by comparing samples of students from two different campuses of the same Israeli university – one campus attended solely by religious students and another campus attended by "secular" students. The two groups do not divide into atheists vs. believers. The group we call "religious" lives in a segregated environment, and follow a way of life where religion is very dominant, while their education stressed religious ideals. The "secular" group is more varied, but is united by their being culturally part of the larger society; religion plays a modest role in their lives, if any.

In a moral judgment experiment we test (1) whether religious students hold firmer moral judgments when it comes to assessing self-serving dishonest acts; specifically, we test whether these religious students will be less influenced than the secular ones by a context that may make the unethical behavior more acceptable. (2) We further test whether religious students predict that they would be less tempted to lie compared to secular students and whether this expectation varies as a function of that context. In a moral behavior experiment, we test whether firm moral judgment, expected among religious students, will also translate to resolutely moral behavior, that is, whether religious students will lie less compared to secular students.

## 2. Procedure overview

Participants were all undergraduates attending an Israeli University. We recruited students from two different campuses, the main university campus and a campus attended by a special track followed by religious students. This track is designed for Jewish religious female students, encouraging them to acquire higher education to increase their chances of entering the job market. The unique track was ideal for the purpose of the current study for two main reasons. First, all students were religious Jews, a sub-group we predicted would display higher levels of moral firmness. Second, the students regularly participated in psychological experiments as part of their study requirements. As a result, compared to sampling religious participants in settings in which conducting experiments is unnatural (e.g., in religious higher education institutes or in proximity to a praying place), our sample included students in a natural setting where they were unlikely to feel or behave as representatives of their sub-group (religious Jews). Rather, our sampling method ensured that participants were acting upon their intrinsic moral beliefs.

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