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Journal of Consumer Psychology 24, 3 (2014) 299 – 306

Research Article

Money, moral transgressions, and blame

Wenwen Xie [a], Boya Yu [a], Xinyue Zhou [b,*], Constantine Sedikides [c], Kathleen D. Vohs [d]

[a] Department of Psychology, Sun Yat-Sen University, China
[b] Lingnan (University) College, Sun Yat-Sen University, China
[c] Centre for Research on Self and Identity, School of Psychology, University of Southampton, UK
[d] Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, USA

Received 2 November 2012; received in revised form 29 November 2013; accepted 5 December 2013
Available online 12 December 2013

Abstract

Two experiments tested participants' attributions for others' immoral behaviors when conducted for more versus less money. We hypothesized and found that observers would blame wrongdoers more when seeing a transgression enacted for little rather than a lot of money, and that this would be evident in observers' hand-washing behavior. Experiment 1 used a cognitive dissonance paradigm. Participants (N = 160) observed a confederate lie in exchange for either a relatively large or a small monetary payment. Participants blamed the liar more in the small (versus large) money condition. Participants (N = 184) in Experiment 2 saw images of someone knocking over another to obtain a small, medium, or large monetary sum. In the small (versus large) money condition, participants blamed the perpetrator (money) more. Hence, participants assigned less blame to moral wrong-doers, if the latter enacted their deed to obtain relatively large sums of money. Small amounts of money accentuate the immorality of others' transgressions.

Keywords: Money; Morality; Cognitive dissonance; Attribution; Blame; Contagion

Introduction

Money can make people behave in a foolish, unsavory way: Take and make risky bets, tattoo permanent advertising on their foreheads, prostitute themselves, and start wars—not to mention the garden-variety impieties of cheating, lying, and stealing. Yet with many such actions, there may be a tacit, if reluctant, understanding by observers that, when "big money" is at stake, people are tempted to commit odd, unlawful, or immoral acts. While acknowledging that money has varied effects – including positive and neutral (Belk & Wallendorf, 1990; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Guo et al., 2012; Lea & Webley, 2006; Mishkin, 1992; Smith, 1776/1977; Yang et al., 2013; Zhou & Gao, 2008; Zhou, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2009) – its connotations with intemperance, illegality, and immorality raise the questions of when observers would judge others' illicit actions under the auspices of money as immoral or perhaps simply as less moral, and whether evidence for this judgment would be manifested in observers' hand-washing behavior. We predicted that the amount of money at stake would be a key factor.

Money can justify moral transgression

Individuals long have considered money to be a dangerously powerful force in their and others' lives (Lea & Webley, 2006). Under desperate circumstances, some will seemingly do anything for money, such as selling their bodily organs or their children (Lea & Webley, 2006). As Lea and Webley (2006, p. 197) noted, "The evidence of labor market history is that there is no job that absolutely no one could be induced to do, if sufficient money was offered… In the right circumstances, money has the capacity to overwhelm all other motivators."

* Corresponding author at: Lingnan (University) College, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou 510275, China.
E-mail address: zhouxyue@mail.sysu.edu.cn (X. Zhou).

1057-7408/$ -see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2013.12.002

Hence, the motive to obtain money can override even basic motives such as the desire to behave in line with moral standards.

Given its motivational power, money may constitute a justification for one's moral transgressions. The literature hints at this notion. Thompson, Harred, and Burks (2003) concluded that topless dancers in the United States use payment for their services as a way to neutralize the moral dissonance that they presumably experience. In a similar vein, Prasad (1999) argued that clients use money to distance themselves morally and emotionally from prostitutes.

Classic studies in psychology are also relevant. One such study asked participants to lie to another person and present a dull task as interesting. Some participants were paid $20 for this moral transgression, others were paid $1, and still others (control group) were not asked to lie (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Participants who received $20 (compared to those who received $1) seemingly used money as a justification for their lies, in that they did not change their attitude toward the task and instead found the task as boring as those in the control group. We interpret this finding as suggesting that, if there is enough of a monetary incentive to commit a moral transgression, then the smaller the ethical dissonance (Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2012) will be—perhaps because the immoral act had been adequately justified.

We used a similar paradigm as this classic dissonance study, but focused not on attitudes about the task but rather on attitudes about the actor. We hypothesized that lying about a boring task for a relatively small (vs. large) sum of money will change observers' attitudes, as they will consider the liar more immoral.

Money is salient

Individuals spontaneously make inferences about potential causes of events (Heider, 1958). They can attribute outcomes to internal or external causes, meaning that they assign the cause of a behavior to either an actor's disposition (e.g., personality, attitudes) or the situation in which the behavior was embedded. We propose that individuals not only use obtaining money to justify their own moral transgressions, but they also see obtaining money as a way to justify others' transgressions.

What factors do observers take into account when they attempt to figure out the causes of an event? Much of the time they focus on others, and particularly on others' traits, chronic attitudes, or motives (Storms, 1973; Taylor & Fiske, 1975). Underestimating the role of situational factors often has a big effect on the outcome (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). That is, in making attributions, observers may assign causal weight to that which is most salient (Roese & Vohs, 2012).

As an object of desire, money is difficult to ignore, and especially so when it comes in large amounts (Gino & Pierce, 2009). The mere salience of money increases self-sufficiency (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006) and can encourage unethical behavior (Gino & Pierce, 2009; Yang et al., 2013). Thus, even though observers are inclined to attribute others' behavior to internal causes, we propose that, in the case of a relatively large monetary sum (which constitutes a salient cue), participants will attribute others' behavior to the influence of money.

Consider, again, the classic cognitive dissonance study discussed above (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), in which participants were paid varying amounts to lie about a dull task. Would observers consider money to be more of a driving force of the actor's behavior when the wrongdoing is committed for a larger or a smaller monetary reward? We propose that observers would perceive the desire to obtain larger, as opposed to smaller, amounts of money as such a pull on the actor's behavior that the person would not be viewed as morally corrupt. Therefore Experiment 1 tests the hypothesis that observers will infer more intrinsic motivation when viewing an immoral behavior enacted for a small versus large monetary amount.

We tested this hypothesis by having participants wash their hands after viewing an immoral act. Research on contamination shows that objects can transfer their immoral essence through physical contact. Given our reasoning on how money can make others become symbolically filthy when only a pittance of it is enough to produce immoral behaviors, we predicted that observers would feel rather contaminated from coming into contact with the actor—or even representations of the actor (here, in the form of a photograph). Specifically, the contamination effect will be larger when an immoral act has been committed for a small (vs. large) sum of money, which will manifest in a greater desire for physical cleansing. This proposal constitutes the main contribution of our research.

Contamination by negative stimuli leads to emotional responses and motivations to distance oneself from tainted people or objects (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997; Paharia, Vohs, & Deshpandé, 2013; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). For example, companions of people with abominations of the body stigma or tribal stigma are also regarded as discredited (Pryor, Reeder, & Monroe, 2012). Money earned through unethical channels (e.g., profit earned through illegal operation) is perceived as less desirable and valuable than money earned through neutral channels (e.g., earnings of a business without any accompanying negative information). Products considered contaminated through physical contact with disgusting goods also elicit consumers' disgust and lower their product evaluation (Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007). Feelings of disgust drive consumers to respond unfavorably to products that have been touched by others (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006). Tainted objects threaten individuals' moral self-image (Stellar & Willer, 2014). Indirect or implicit ascription of immorality can take the form of physical distancing (Lee & Schwarz, 2011), such as washing one's hands, as a symbolic attempt for moral cleanliness. What is more, motor modality involved in a transgression figures prominently in the embodiment of moral purity (Lee & Schwarz, 2010).

Recent findings highlight the parallels between physical and moral contamination in which moral transgressions are akin to being physically filthy. Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) found that participants who recalled an immoral behavior were more likely to choose an antiseptic wipe rather than a pencil as a free gift, suggesting a desire to sanitize themselves. They also found that even the mere act of rewriting an immoral story about another person increased participants' desires to cleanse. Converging