



Prospective moral licensing: Does anticipating doing good later allow you to be bad now?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Anticipating engaging in a moral behavior allows people to behave immorally now.
- People who anticipate performing a future moral action display more racial bias.
- Prospective moral licensing occurred for both ambiguous and overt prejudice.
- Prospective moral licensing is likely due to moral credits accumulating.
- Prejudice can be licensed by moral behavior in a different domain.

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ABSTRACT

Moral licensing, whereby behaving morally allows a person to subsequently behave immorally, has been demonstrated in numerous experiments. The current research examined the effects of prospective moral licensing: how planning to perform a future moral behavior affects the morality of current behavior. Across four studies we explored whether anticipating engaging in a moral behavior in the future (e.g., taking part in a fundraiser or donating blood) leads people to make a racially biased decision (Studies 1 and 2) or espouse racially biased attitudes (Studies 3 and 4) in the present. Participants who anticipated performing a moral action in the future displayed more racial bias than control participants. Additionally, prospective moral licensing occurred for both ambiguously and overtly prejudiced acts suggesting that prospective licensing is due to moral credits accumulating rather than moral credentials being established. These results demonstrate that anticipating a future moral act licenses people to behave immorally now and indicate that perceptions of morality encompass a wide variety of concepts, including past as well as anticipated future behavior.

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Introduction

Imagine the following scenario: George is a middle-aged, White manager in the human resources department at a mid-sized company. While at work, George sees a poster advertising a canned food drive next week for a local food bank, and he decides that he will bring in some cans when the drive begins. George heads to his office and is faced with hiring a new employee. He must choose between two qualified candidates: one Black, one White. Does planning to do good next week (i.e., bringing in canned goods next week for the food drive) make it more likely that George will respond with racial bias in this hiring decision and favor the White candidate over the Black candidate today?

The above scenario illustrates the idea that was explored in this paper: prospective moral self-licensing. Does planning to act morally in the future allow one to act immorally in the present? For example, if you plan on donating to a food drive next week, are you more likely to express an ingroup racial preference now? Across four studies we demonstrate that when people plan to engage in moral behavior in the future, it makes them more likely to respond in a morally questionable way in the present.

Moral licensing

Being moral is important to a person's identity (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002). When making morally relevant decisions, people may survey their previous behavior. If they can point to past moral behavior, it can make them less concerned about engaging in behavior that is morally dubious because they are confident in their overall morality. Monin and Miller (2001) first demonstrated this moral self-licensing by showing that participants were more likely to make morally ambiguous

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decisions (e.g., say a job was better suited for a White candidate) after first performing a nonprejudiced behavior (e.g., selecting a minority candidate for a different job). Monin and Miller argued that engaging in nonprejudiced behavior provides people with a feeling of secure moral self-worth, which allows for the subsequent honest expression of their prejudiced attitudes. This effect has since been demonstrated across many studies and behaviors. For example, supporting a Black political candidate licenses White people to exhibit a subsequent preference for Whites over Blacks, particularly among more racially prejudiced White people (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009). Simply choosing to buy green products (Mazar & Zhong, 2010) can license people to later cheat and steal.

In addition to moral behaviors licensing subsequent immoral actions, licensing effects can occur without an individual actually engaging in moral behavior at the time of the licensing. Thinking about past moral behavior (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011) or writing about oneself as a moral person (Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009) can decrease the likelihood of subsequently performing charitable acts. Having a friend who is a minority group member (Bradley-Geist, King, Skorinko, Hebl, & McKenna, 2010), expressing support for gay rights or espousing nonprejudiced beliefs (Krumm & Corning, 2008) can all license morally dubious behavior. A few studies have even demonstrated that imagining performing a moral act can license future unethical behavior (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2010).

The robust nature of the moral licensing effect led us to hypothesize that people may license themselves to engage in morally ambiguous behavior after merely planning to engage in future moral behavior. That is, people may not have to actually engage in a moral behavior or recall or imagine themselves engaging in a moral behavior, it may be enough just to expect that they will engage in moral behavior at a later point. Consistent with our prediction, Khan and Dhar (2007) showed that when people think they can choose a more virtuous item later (e.g., a highbrow movie or healthy snack), they are more likely to choose a frivolous item in the present (e.g., a lowbrow movie or cookie). We suspect that people will similarly license themselves to engage in immoral behavior when they expect that they will be able to demonstrate their morality at a later point. Khan and Dhar (2006) demonstrated that participants felt licensed even by making costless, hypothetical decisions about future moral behavior. Although it is possible that people frequently imagine these hypothetical moral situations, we suspect that it is more likely that people, presented with a future opportunity, actually plan to do good later. By showing that people can gain morally licensing from actions that they anticipate they *will* do, rather than actions that they *could* do, we more closely capture how moral licensing for future events would occur in the real world.

Providing some insight into why such prospective moral licensing may occur, research examining goal pursuit has demonstrated that when people expect to engage in goal-relevant behavior in the future (e.g., being healthy), they are more likely to act counter to their goal in the present if they perceive their expectation of future goal-relevant behavior as indicating goal progress as opposed to goal commitment (Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007). If people perceive that their prospective moral behavior represents progress toward their goal of being a moral person, then it may lead to moral licensing in the near term.

The current research

The current research examined the effects of prospective moral self-licensing: how planning to perform a future moral behavior affects the morality of current behavior. Across four studies we explored whether anticipating engaging in a moral behavior in the future (e.g., taking part in a fundraiser or donating blood) leads people to make a racially biased decision (Studies 1 and 2) or espouse racially biased attitudes (Studies 3 and 4) in the present. In our first two studies we examined whether people would be more likely to respond with racial bias on a hiring task after first planning to engage in a moral activity in the future

as compared to no future moral behavior planned. In the first study, participants committed to taking part in a charity event and then decided whether a White or Black candidate would be better suited for a position (Monin & Miller, 2001). In the second study, we explored whether prospective moral licensing would occur when participants did not commit but merely indicated that they anticipated taking part in the charity event prior to making the hiring decision.

In Studies 3 and 4, we tested the boundary conditions of prospective moral licensing. Specifically, we examined whether anticipating engaging in future moral behavior would license unambiguously racially biased behavior. This methodological approach may also provide important insight into the processes involved in prospective moral licensing. Moral licensing can occur when people's behavior either establishes their moral credentials or provides moral credits (see Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010 for review). When people's behavior establishes their moral credentials, it bolsters their perception that they are good and moral people, which allow them to interpret future behavior with a positive bias that presumes morality. Such moral credentials aid the reinterpretation of ambiguous behavior but would not aid in interpreting unambiguously immoral behavior in a positive light. Therefore, if prospective moral licensing has its effect by establishing moral credentials, we would not anticipate that prospective moral licensing would extend to overtly prejudiced behavior.

In contrast, when people engage in moral behavior it can provide them with moral credits, a moral currency, that can be spent at a later date by engaging in immoral behavior. Moral credits do not require reinterpreting behavior and can lead to the licensing of overtly immoral as well as more ambiguously immoral behavior. Thus, if prospective moral licensing establishes moral credits, we would expect to see its effects on overt as well as subtle behavior. In Study 3, participants responded to a series of items regarding their attitudes toward Black people that varied in how subtle or overt they were. In Study 4, participants completed items measuring their endorsement of overtly negative stereotypes of Black people. Examining if people were willing to express overt prejudice may provide insight into the processes involved in prospective moral licensing.

Finally, in previous studies looking at moral licensing of prejudiced responses (Bradley-Geist et al., 2010; Effron, Miller, & Monin, 2012; Effron et al., 2009; Kouchaki, 2011; Merritt et al., 2012; Monin & Miller, 2001), the individuals were licensed by engaging in nonprejudiced acts, keeping both behaviors within the domain of prejudice. We examined whether planning a moral act *not related* to prejudice would license someone to express prejudice. That is, does engaging in moral behavior unrelated to prejudice license racially prejudiced behavior?

Study 1

Study 1 was designed as an initial test of prospective moral licensing. Participants were asked to agree to a future moral behavior, participating in a fund raiser later in the semester, and then were given the chance to make a potentially biased decision about a Black candidate on a hiring task. We purposely selected a fundraising event that was somewhat unusual (a Skip-A-Meal fundraiser) to increase the likelihood that participants had never previously engaged in such an event. The goal was to avoid having participants recall past moral behavior or have a clear image of what the event would be like, so that they would only focus on the future moral act. We predicted that agreeing to take part in the future fundraiser would license our participants to make a racially biased decision in the present (say a job was better for a White than Black candidate).

Method

Participants

Participants were 106 non-Black undergraduate students at a large public university in the southern United States. Participants were

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