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Effects of Making Moral Decisions on Moral Hypocrisy

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The effect of making a moral decision on ratings of moral and immoral behaviors was investigated to see if there were differences based on whether the participant made a moral or immoral decision prior to completing the questionnaire. It was hypothesized that those participants who made an immoral decision prior to completing the questionnaire would create cognitive dissonance within themselves and thus rate the behaviors of others differently than those who made a moral decision. Experiment 1 resulted in significant results for one of four scenarios, suggesting that participants who made an immoral decision prior to rating an immoral behavior would rate that immoral behavior as a worse behavior. Experiment 2 refined the experimental design, but yielded no significant results.

Decisions of opposing moralities engulf the everyday lives of human beings. Decisions, such as whether to drive through a red light at an intersection, are made with split second timing. On one hand, the moral decision to be made here would be to stop because that is the law and also the safe thing to do. On the other hand, the immoral decision would be to go through the red light and break the law and add a little danger to the afternoon. However, even though it is wrong to drive through a traffic signal telling drivers to stop, how often do people ignore that advice? Maybe that particular driver usually stops when the traffic signals instruct; however on this particular afternoon, the driver did not. Unfortunately, on this particular afternoon a police officer was at that very same intersection. When the police officer pulled the driver over , the driver explained to the police officer that usually he or she stops; however, on this particular occasion it appeared as though the driver behind the person was not going to stop, so the person did not stop in order to avoid an accident. If this driver had acted by the letter of the law, the cost could have been an accident. Avoiding the accident could also be viewed as a moral decision due to the fact that causing an accident would have tied up traffic for hours and inconvenienced many innocent people.

Those who consider themselves to be moral may not always act morally. Batson and colleagues have researched this question extensively. Batson and Thompson (2001) suggest that some people want to avoid the costs of being moral while still appearing to be moral to the outside world. According to Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson (1997), moral hypocrisy is a two-step process. The first step is seeing choice as an opportunity to maintain one's moral principles. The second step is to maximize personal gain and minimize costs while still being able to appear moral. Furthermore, one must avoid the cost of being moral while maintaining the appearance of morality to oneself. Two strategies are employed by most people to deceive themselves into thinking their immoral behavior is in fact moral: to perceive their behavior as moral or to avoid comparing their behavior to moral standards (Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999).

These two strategies create cognitive dissonance for the person who is moral but acts immorally in a particular situation. Cognitive dissonance occurs when inconsistent thoughts create psychological tension (McKimmie, Terry, Hogg, Manstead, Spears, & Doosje, 2003). In most cases, people are motivated to relieve this tension.

In the current study, participants made a moral decision whether or not to complete an assigned packet. The packet included a questionnaire regarding moral attitudes. Participants who make an immoral decision would create tension within themselves. In order to relieve that cognitive dissonance, it was hypothesized that the participants would rate the immoral behaviors of others as more immoral and the moral behaviors of others as more moral in various scenarios than those participants who did not make an immoral decision.

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Experiment 1

Method

Participants. Participants included students at a northeastern public university who were completing the research participation requirement for their Introduction to Psychology class. Twenty-two participants were included in this research. Ten of the participants were male and 12 were female. The data from 4 participants were not included in the analysis because of failure to follow instructions.

Materials

Participants retrieved a large manila envelope and a group assignment envelope from a box in the psychology department. The manila envelope contained directions on how to complete the study, the informed consent, the participation credit sheet and an envelope the participant could use to separately return the informed consent and research participation credit sheet. The manila envelope also included Packet A and Packet B. Packet A consisted of a cover sheet labeling it Packet A and the questionnaire. Packet B consisted of a cover sheet labeling it Packet B, a blank sheet of paper, the questionnaire and then two more blanks sheets of paper. Both packets contained the same questionnaire. The questionnaire asked participants to rate the behavior in each of four scenarios on a 10-point Likert scale, one being the least moral and 10 being the most moral (see Appendix A). The blank sheets of paper added to Packet B were added to make that packet look more time consuming. The packets were stapled in the top left corner and sealed with stickers on both sides and the bottom.

On the outside of the packet there was a bright red half sheet of paper instructing the participants to be sure that they also picked up a group assignment envelope. That envelope contained a slip a paper assigning the participant to a group. All of the group assignments were to Group Two.

Design and Procedure

After the participant retrieved both the manila envelope and a group assignment envelope, they completed the study at their convenience and returned the completed materials to the designated place. After signing the informed consent and research participation sheet, the participant was directed to take out Packet A or Packet B, depending on which packet they chose to complete. The instructions indicated that participants in Group One should complete Packet A and participants in Group Two should complete Packet B. The instructions informed the participant that Packet A would take 5 minutes or less to complete and that Packet B would take approximately 35 minutes to complete. The participants were instructed to select their packet and to open only that packet. The participants were placed into groups based on which packet they chose to complete. Because all participants were assigned to Group Two and thus should have filled out Packet B, the participants who filled out Packet A were defined as having made an immoral decision and assigned to the immoral group. The participants who completed Packet B were defined as having made a moral decision because they completed the packet they were assigned to the moral group. The data from those participants who did not follow the instructions, opened and/or filled out both packets were not included.

After the participants had opened the packet they selected, they were instructed to complete the questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaire, the participant was instructed to put the envelope with the informed consent and the research participation credit sheet along with both packets back in the packet and return it to the appropriate return box in the psychology department.

Scoring

Total Score. A total score was calculated from each participant's questionnaire, providing a score for each participant that included the rating of all the scenarios, both moral and immoral behaviors. The ratings from the moral scenarios, scenarios one and three, were added to obtain the total score. The rating from the immoral scenarios, scenarios two and four, were reversed before being added to the total score. For example, a rating of two on an immoral scenario would be added to the total score as nine.

Each Scenario Individually. The rating for each of the four scenarios was recorded from each participant's questionnaire.

Results

Total Score. A t-test for independent groups was executed, which found no significant difference between the total rating of all four scenarios of the moral group (M = 35.88, SD = 3.357) and the immoral group (M = 36.80, SD = 2.440), $t(16) = -0.678$, $p > 0.05$ (two-tailed).

Each Scenario Individually. Individual analyses of scenarios 1, 2 and 3 yielded no significant difference in ratings of the moral group and the immoral group. However, the difference between the ratings on scenario 4 of the moral group and the immoral group was found to be significant.

Table 1
Mean Ratings of Individual Scenarios by Moral and Immoral Group

	Moral Group		Immoral Group	
Scenario	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	9.00	2.449	8.90	1.287
2	1.75	0.886	1.50	0.527
3	9.00	1.309	8.70	1.337
4	2.38	1.188	1.30	0.675

Discussion

In Experiment 1, a significant difference was found between the immoral group's rating on the behavior in scenario 4 and the moral group's rating of the same behaviors, which supports the hypothesis. In scenario 4, participants in the immoral group rated the behavior, an immoral behavior, as lower or more immoral than the participants in the moral group. The fourth scenario appears to be more realistic than the other three scenarios. Maybe the participants could have more readily placed themselves in this scenario. It could be possible that being able to identify more closely with this scenario provides a better outlet to relieve the cognitive dissonance they created within themselves by making the immoral decision. Thus, the immoral group participants rated the behavior described in scenario four significantly worse in an attempt to relieve the psychological tension by making themselves feel more moral. In this situation, the participants avoided the cost of being moral because they chose to complete the less time-consuming questionnaire, but then made themselves feel moral by rating an immoral behavior significantly worse.

However, all other comparisons yielded nonsignificant differences. The lack of significant differences was most likely due to one or a combination of several factors. Two main factors were the complexity of the directions and the measure used to collect the moral ratings. Some of the participants returned their packets with unusable data, which appears to be a function of the complexity involved in completing the packet.These participants opened and/or completed both packets. This could imply that the participant knew that both questionnaires were identical before completing the study and thus negated the basis of their moral decision prior to completing the questionnaire. Also the participant could have easily looked inside both packets without completely opening them, thus gaining the knowledge that the questionnaires were the same. If this occurred, it is possible that not all of the participants in the moral group actually acted morally when making their decision of which packet to complete. It is also possible that the questionnaire used to measure the participants' ratings of the moral and immoral behaviors depicted in the four scenarios was not an appropriate tool. The scenarios were not pre-tested before conducting the study.

Experiment 2 was designed to improve some of these flaws of Experiment 1. The directions in Experiment 2 were clarified. Prior to handing out the questionnaire, ten scenarios were pretested, both with the moral behavior rating scale and also a believability scale. The six best scenarios were selected for the questionnaire. To prevent the peeking that may have occurred in Experiment 1, Packet A and Packet B were placed in completely sealed envelopes.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants

Participants included students at the same northeastern public university who were completing the research participation requirement for their Introduction to Psychology class. Fifty-eight participants were included in this research. Thirty participants were female, while 28 participants were male. Forty-nine students were less than 20 years of age and 9 participants were over 20 years. Forty-six participants were Caucasian, 5 participants were African-American, 2 participants were Asian, 3 participants were Hispanic, and 2 participants had other ethnic backgrounds.

Materials

The materials for Experiment 2 were very similar to those for Experiment 1. There were just a few changes made to the packets that attempted to improve the design. Packet A and Packet B were placed in completely sealed envelopes to hinder the suspected peeking that occurred in Experiment 1. All manila envelopes consisted of a cover sheet with the instructions for completing the questionnaire and a description of the scale the participant would use to rate the behaviors in the questionnaire, a sheet requesting biographic information about gender, age and ethnicity, and two Packets marked A and B containing the questionnaire itself. The difference between Packet A and Packet B was that the six scenarios were all on one page in Packet A and in Packet B, the scenarios were each on a separate page to make Packet B appear to be more time consuming (see Appendix B). The questionnaire consisted of six scenarios and asked the participant to rate the behavior in each scenario on a 7-point Likert scale, one being the most immoral and seven being the most moral.

Design and Procedure

The participants who chose to participate in this study received a packet and a group assignment envelope from their Introduction to Psychology professor. Of the 75 packets that were handed out, 62 were returned and four of these had to be discarded because participants did not follow directions, leaving 58 packets with useable data. After the participant received the packet and group assignment, the participant could complete the study at his or her own convenience as long as it was returned to the designated return box in the psychology department by the designated deadline.

The directions included in the packet for Experiment 2 were essentially the same, and all participants were assigned to Group Two.

Scoring

Biographic Information. Biographic information such as age, gender and ethnicity were reported by each participant.

Total Score. A total score was calculated from each participant's questionnaire by adding the ratings on all six behaviors.

Each Scenario Individually. The rating for each of the six scenarios was recorded from each participant's questionnaire.

Results

Biographic Information. An analysis of the biographic data resulted in no significant difference among groups so none of these variables were considered in subsequent analyses.

Total Score. A *t*-test for independent groups was executed, but found no significant difference between the total rating of all six scenarios of the moral group (M = 20.00, SD = 3.608) and the immoral group (M = 20.00, SD = 4.986), t (56) = 1.000, $p > 0.05$ (two-tailed).

Each Scenario Individually: Individual analyses of the six scenarios yielded no significant differences in the ratings of the moral group and the immoral group.

Table 2
Mean Ratings of Individual Scenarios by Moral and Immoral Group

	Moral Group		Immoral Group	
Scenario	Mean (n = 50)	Standard Deviation	Mean (n = 8)	Standard Deviation
1	6.34	0.895	6.00	1.069
2	1.70	1.035	1.63	0.916
3	1.82	1.119	1.63	1.408
4	1.34	0.823	1.75	1.389
5	6.68	0.551	7.00	0.000
6	2.12	1.547	2.00	1.414

Discussion

Given that Experiment 2 did not produce significant results, perhaps too many improvements were made to the design so it made it "harder" for participants to "ignore" the instructions and make the immoral decision of completing the packet they were not assigned to, which could explain why there were so few participants in the immoral group. Thus, maybe moral hypocrisy research design has to involve enough ambiguities so that participants can have enough leeway to rationalize their immoral choice. At the same time, the design should not include flaws that allow the participant to rationalize their immoral choice based on experimental design flaws so that they still have the desire to alleviate their cognitive dissonance using the rating of the behaviors in the scenarios.

General Discussion

One difference between Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 was that the participants in Experiment 1 retrieved their packets from a box, while the participants in Experiment 2 received their packets from their professor. Although the participants were assured total confidentiality, some may have thought their professor could find out that they did the wrong packet. If a participant thought this, their decision about which packet to do would be impacted. Making the decision to do Packet A was meant to be the immoral decision, however maybe the implications of making that decision may not have caused enough cognitive dissonance to affect the participant's results. Perhaps to some participants the decision of choosing which packet to complete was not sufficiently morally important. An idea to improve this study for the future would be to make the participants more aware of the decision or to make the decision have more implications for the participant. One idea would be to have the participant choose a packet and inform them that someone else would have to do the packet they did not pick. Another possibility would be that one group gets to fill out a questionnaire and leave, while the other group fills out a questionnaire and participates in lengthy tasks afterwards.

Both Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 showed that it is methodologically difficult to induce moral hypocrisy in a laboratory setting. Perhaps moral hypocrisy is too complex to be simulated with a design as simple as the designs of both Experiment 1 and Experiment 2. The lack of significant difference between the moral and immoral groups could imply that just the decision of which packet to do did not create the necessary cognitive dissonance in the experimental group. Perhaps the consequences of the decision were not severe enough for the participant to consider it a cost to make the moral decision, thus eliminating the desire to act immorally.

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Appendix A

Experiment 1 Questionnaire

Please rate the following scenarios on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the least moral and 10 being the most moral.

1. Jane was walking down the street one day when she passed by an unfortunate scene. A homeless man was sitting on a bench. Weakly, he was muttering something about being terribly hungry. Jane, without even thinking, stopped, sat down on the bench beside the homeless man, and began to share her bagged lunch with the man.

2. Greg works at an electronics store that has very lax security. It had lax security because it was a little "mom and pop" store that trusted all of their employees. At first, it was easy for Greg not to steal anything, but as he saw more and more employees getting away with stealing, he decided that may he could too. At first, he took just a DVD or two. He never got caught, so he decided to try to take something bigger. He took a video game console controller. He got away with that too, so he took a MP3 player. By the time he was done stealing things, he had taken $2,611 worth of merchandise.

3. Barbara was negotiating a stroller with two twin infants in it around a shopping mall. Barbara approaches the door to Baby Gap. Between pushing the stroller, and carrying her purse and the diaper bag, getting in the door was proving to be difficult. Upon seeing this, John, although he was not shopping at Baby Gap, he immediately held the door open for her.

4. Jim and Mark were walking around a park in their neighborhood. They were getting increasing bored as the afternoon wore on. On a whim, they decided it would be fun to sit on a bench by the sidewalk and throw acorns at the feet of people walking or skating by.They missed the first two people that walked by, however, when the third person skated by, they throw an acorn at her feet. Her skate got caught on the acorn and she went tumbling. She fell down and rolled down the hill on the other side of the sidewalk. An ambulance needed to be called and it turned out that she broke her leg and bruised her ribs. She will need to be in a cast for months.

Appendix B

Experiment 2 Questionnaire

Please use this scale to rate the behaviors in the following scenarios.

1 = very immoral
2 = moderately immoral
3 = slightly immoral
4 = neither immoral nor moral
5 = slightly moral
6 = moderately moral
7 = very moral

_____ 1. John was at the shopping mall when he noticed a women approach the door to Baby Gap. The women was pushing a stroller with two twin infants in it, carrying her purse, and a big diaper bag, so she was having trouble getting in the door. Even though he was not shopping at Baby Gap, John rushed over to hold the door open for her.

_____ 2. Jim and Mark were walking around a park in their neighborhood, but they were getting increasing bored as the afternoon wore on. n a whim, they decided it would be fun to sit on a bench by the sidewalk and throw acorns at the feet of people walking or skating by. They missed the first two people that walked by, however, when the third person skated by, they throw an acorn at her feet. Her skate got caught on the acorn and she went tumbling. She fell down and rolled down the hill on the other side of the sidewalk. An ambulance needed to be called and it turned out that she broke her leg and bruised her ribs. She will need to be in a cast for months.

_____ 3. Karen was walking in the parking lot of her local Blockbuster Video when she found a wallet on the ground. She opened the wallet to find that it contained seventy-six dollars. She took the cash, throws the wallet back on the ground and kicks it under the nearest car.

_____ 4. Harvey was leaving Chandler Hall after a party Friday night. As he was walking down the hall, he looked into an open dorm room and noticed that no one was inside and the door had been left wide open. Just inside the dorm room, was an iPod lying on the desk.Harvey stood there for a minute, looked around to make sure no one was around, then went into the dorm room, put the iPod in his pocket and left to go home.

_____ 5. Jane was walking down the street one day when she passed by an unfortunate scene. A home less woman was sitting on a bench. Weakly, she was muttering something about being terribly hungry. Jane, without even thinking, stopped, sat down on the bench beside the homeless woman, and gave her bagged lunch to the woman.

_____ 6. Kristin was at the mall one afternoon just killing some time trying on a bunch of clothes. While she was trying on some clothes, she found a shirt she really liked.The only problem was that it was a designer shirt that cost over a hundred dollars and she didn't have that kind of money.Then she noticed that it didn't have a security sensor tag on it. So she ripped off the sales tags, put her oversized sweatshirt on over the shirt, walked out of the dressing room and left the store.