Being Clean and Acting Dirty: The Paradoxical Effect of Self-Cleansing

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Being Clean and Acting Dirty: The Paradoxical Effect of Self-Cleansing

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In two studies we investigated the association between physical cleansing and moral and immoral behavior in real-life situations. In Study 1, after a workout at the gym, participants cheated more after taking a shower than before taking one. In the second study, participants donated more money to charity before rather than after they bathed for religious purification. The results extend previous findings about moral cleansing and moral licensing and are discussed within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory.

Keywords: cheating, morality, licensing

INTRODUCTION

Most people would like to believe that they are moral individuals (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Monin & Jordan, 2009; Nisan, 1991). However, moral behavior can also change on a moment-to-moment basis. It has been shown that previous moral or immoral behaviors, thoughts, and recollections influence subsequent moral and immoral behavior. A key question that has intrigued researchers is the directionality of this influence. These studies tend to make two opposing predictions regarding the influence of past moral behavior or recollection on subsequent moral behavior (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Joosten, van Dijke, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2013). The first supposition is that people are likely to behave in a moral manner after recalling past moral behavior. The mechanism behind this prediction is referred to as moral consistency, that is, moral self-regard motivates consistent behavior in order to maintain this sense of self. However, recalling past moral behaviors has also been found to reduce subsequent moral behavior. In this case it is argued that the recollection of past moral behavior reassures moral self-regard and thus reduces the motivation to act morally. This process results in compensatory moral behaviors.

What are the mechanisms underlying these competing predictions? One suggestion is that the conceptualization of moral behavior moderates this association (Conway & Peetz, 2012). Findings indicate that conceptualizing moral behavior in a concrete manner (e.g., behavior that...
is temporally close) leads to compensatory behavior, whereas an abstract conceptualization (e.g.,
temporally distant) results in consistency behavior (Conway & Peetz, 2012). The present research
focused on moral compensatory behaviors.

Two processes are considered to be involved in moral compensation: moral cleansing and
moral licensing (Harkrider et al., 2013; Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011; Khan & Dhar,
2006; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). Moral cleansing is the process that helps restore a threat-
ened moral self-image after acting immorally (Sachdeva et al., 2009). Individuals who engage in
immoral behavior are motivated to engage in compensating moral behaviors such as volunteer-
ing to restore their moral self-concept. In contrast, moral licensing is a process where previous
moral behavior increases the likelihood of subsequent immoral behavior (Sachdeva et al., 2009).
Individuals who are involved in ethical activities feel moral enough and thus authorize themselves
to act immorally.

Sachdeva et al. (2009) found that participants who were asked to describe themselves in a posi-
tive way by using positive traits such as caring, generous, and kind said that they would donate
less money to charity and expressed lower intentions to engage in pro-environmental actions than
those who used neutral words. Participants who wrote about themselves using negative traits
such as selfish and disloyal donated more and expressed higher intentions to engage in pro-
environmental actions than both those who described themselves using positive or neutral traits.

This licensing phenomenon can also be observed in consumer behavior. Khan and Dhar (2006)
examined whether positive self-concept licenses more hedonistic choice. Participants were given
a choice between expensive designer jeans and a vacuum cleaner. Participants who imagined they
had volunteered for community service chose the luxurious product (designer jeans) more often
than those in the control group (Khan & Dhar, 2006).

Jordan et al. (2011) conducted several experiments that revealed both moral cleansing and
moral licensing. In one experiment, participants were asked to write a story about a time when
they helped others (moral behavior) or when they used others to get something they wanted
(immoral behavior). Participants were then given a task that incorporated an opportunity to cheat.
Those who recalled moral behavior cheated more than those who recalled immoral behavior.
In another experiment, the researchers used the same manipulation but this time they asked par-
ticipants how willing they would be to donate blood, donate to charity and volunteer. Participants
who recalled moral behavior expressed fewer prosocial intentions than those who recalled
immoral behavior.

It is not surprising that the process of compensating for immoral behavior is called moral
cleansing. Ritual purification and physical cleansing as a symbol of moral purification and atone-
ment exist in most religions. Christians baptize their children so that they will “no longer be
slaves of sin” (Philippians 2:13). In the Jewish tradition, bathing for purposes of purification is
discussed in detail in the Bible, and observant men and women go to special bathing facilities
for that purpose. In Islam it is customary to wash before prayer. Hindus bathe in the holy river
Ganges to wash away their sins. This association between physical cleansing and moral behavior
is also reflected in many languages, in expressions such as “clean conscience,” “dirty work,” and
“dirty hands.”

Several recent studies have demonstrated association between the mental representation of
physical cleansing and morality (e.g., Lee & Schwarz, 2010; Liljenquist, Zhong, & Galinsky,
2010; Zhong, Strejcek, & Sivanathan, 2010). These studies showed that the metaphors that
associate physical cleansing with morality are expressions of the link between the representations
of the concrete experiential concept of physical cleansing and the abstract concept of morality. Zhong and Liljenquist (2006), for instance, showed that participants who recalled an unethical act from their past, or hand-copied a story about a dishonest worker, evidenced a greater need to physically cleanse themselves than those who recalled or copied an ethical deed. The former were more prone to thinking of cleansing-related words, and preferred cleansing-related products.

Physical cleanliness may serve as moral cleansing through its influence on moral self-regard. Cleaning one’s hands with an antiseptic wipe was reported to eliminate the effect of compensatory behavior (e.g., willing to volunteer) subsequent to a description of past unethical behavior (Zhong et al., 2010). Hence, the act of hand washing after recalling past immoral behavior may have restored participants’ sense of moral self and thus reduced their motivation to feel moral by volunteering. Another experiment examined the mediating role of moral self-regard on the association between physical cleanliness and moral judgment (Zhong et al., 2010). The findings showed that the influence of priming of cleanliness (compared to dirtiness) on harsher moral judgments was eliminated when moral self-regard was statistically controlled for. The authors concluded that “a clean self feels like a moral self” (Zhong et al., 2010).

These findings are in line with conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999), which suggests that the comprehension of abstract concepts such as morality is grounded in the primary representation of basic concrete experiences such as contamination and physical cleansing. The conflation between emotional and physical events leads later on to an association between the concrete and abstract concepts. This perspective is also consistent with Embodied Cognition theories which suggest that higher order mental activities are scaffolded on sensory motor experiences and that abstract concepts involve embodied modes of cognition (Barsalou, 1999; Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008; Williams, Huang, & Bargh, 2009).

Thus, the association between moral cleanliness and moral behavior may be governed by two conflicting mechanisms—namely, moral consistency and moral compensation—and this association could be mediated by construal level (Conway & Peetz, 2012). The present research investigated actual physical cleansing (i.e., a concrete act) and moral behavior and thus hypothesized that this association should be manifested in a compensatory manner.

The study was designed to investigate the influence of physical cleansing on both moral (donation) and immoral behavior (cheating) in real-life situations. Another innovation of this study is that the participants were recruited in situations where they intended to cleanse themselves rather than being required to do so by the experimenter. In the first study, we examined cheating behavior before and after the participants took a shower at the gym. In the second study we examined the donations people made before and after they bathed specifically for purification in the Mikveh, the ritual bath used for immersion in Judaism. Thus, in the first study, participants took a shower because they felt physically dirty, whereas in the second study, participants bathed themselves with the clear intention of purification. We predicted that physical washing would make the participants feel more morally clean and that they would cheat more after the shower and would donate less money after purification in the Mikveh.

**STUDY 1**

This study examined whether participants who had just stepped out of the shower were more likely to cheat than those who were still sweating and were headed to the shower.
Method

Thirty participants—12 men and 18 women ($M_{\text{age}} = 26.68$ years, $SD = 5.62$ years) who had just finished their workout at the Tel Aviv University gym—volunteered to participate in the experiment. All the participants had finished exercising, but half were on their way to the shower and the other half were on their way out of the shower. Each participant was asked individually to participate in a short study, which ostensibly examined the influence of physical training on memory. Compliance with the request to complete the questionnaire was similar before and after the shower. Participants were given a “general knowledge” questionnaire comprising 13 questions to fill out. Nine of the questions were extremely difficult and almost impossible to answer, and four of the questions were very easy. These questions were chosen on the basis of a pretest on 50 Tel Aviv University students. In the pretest we selected 20 very difficult questions aimed at minimizing the probability of anyone answering them correctly and 20 very easy questions at a level considered to ensure a correct answer. The questions were drawn from various fields such as history, geography, sports, literature, and biology.

We defined the very easy questions as those that were unanimously answered correctly on the pretest and very difficult questions those that not even one participant answered correctly. The final cheating questionnaire had nine very difficult and four very easy questions. For example, one very difficult question was, “In what year was the stethoscope invented?” One very easy question was, “How many centimeters are there in one meter?” We decided to use only four easy questions out of 13 to ensure that all participants would fail the test.

As in Lobel (1993) and Mazar et al. (2008), we measured cheating by enabling participants to self-score their tests. Each participant was given the correct answer key and was asked to self-score his or her answers by writing the score on a separate sheet. Participants were asked to hand in only the last page to the experimenter on which they wrote their score and were told to keep the original questionnaires along with their answers. This way, participants could be certain that there was no way for the administrator of the test to determine their actual performance.

Results and Discussion

To examine whether taking a shower following a workout was associated with cheating, we divided the participants into those who did not cheat (i.e., reporting answering four questions or less correctly) and those who cheated (i.e., reporting answering more than four questions correctly). A chi-square test of independence yielded a significant effect, $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 4.83$, $p = .028$, indicating that cleansing influenced cheating. Three participants who had not taken a shower yet cheated and 12 did not cheat, whereas nine of those who had already taken a shower cheated and six did not cheat.

In addition, to examine whether cleansing influenced the level of cheating we conducted a one-way analysis of variance comparing the self-reported scores of the pre-shower and post-shower groups. As predicted, the analysis of variance yielded a significant effect, $F(1, 27) = 5.07$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Participants who had just showered reported significantly higher scores ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 1.72$) than those who had just finished their workout and were on their way to the shower ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.88$). These findings support our prediction that physical cleansing would license the participants to cheat more.
We conducted the second study in the Mikveh, the traditional Jewish ritual communal bath, on two special days, the New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The period of 10 days between these two holidays is known as the High Holy Days, or the Days of Awe. According to Jewish tradition, on Rosh Hashanah God writes in the book of life who will live and who will die and seals the book with the verdict on the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year. This period is therefore a time for soul-searching, during which believers will seek to make amends and ask for forgiveness for wrongdoings. Observant Jews also go to immerse themselves in the Mikveh as part of their efforts to purify themselves. Another tradition during the 10 Days of Awe is charity; representatives of various organizations commonly set up stands outside the Mikveh to ask for donations.

We examined whether men were likely to donate more before rather than after immersing themselves in the Mikveh. We predicted that those who were on their way to the Mikveh would have a greater need for purification and would therefore donate more money than those who had just left the bath.

**Method**

One hundred forty-seven men participated in the study near a Mikveh in Elad, a religious town, on two specific days—the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement. The experimenter was positioned at the stand of a genuine charitable organization that works to ensure that stores sell food at low prices and distributes food to the needy. We put a table with flyers presenting information about the organization’s activities and open boxes where people could place their financial donation. The table was outside the Mikveh building, only few meters from the entrance and exit. An experimenter who was blind to the purpose of the study stood behind the table and recorded the amount of the donation and whether the person donating was entering or leaving the Mikveh. We also recorded whether the donation was made on New Year’s Day or the Day of Atonement.

**Results and Discussion**

To test our hypothesis we conducted a two-way analysis of variance on time of donation (before vs. after immersion in the Mikveh) by day (New Year vs. Day of Atonement) on the amount for donation (in NIS, where $1 = approx. 3.7 NIS). As predicted, a significant main effect of donation time was found, $F(1, 142) = 5.28, p = .02, \eta^2 = .04$, indicating that participants donated more money before ($M = 4.43, SD = 7.13$) than after they went to the Mikveh ($M = 2.05, SD = 2.47$). No effect was found for day of donation $F < 1$, indicating that there was no difference between the New Year and the Day of Atonement.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The findings of both studies show that physical cleansing influences moral and immoral behavior in real life situations. In the first study, participants who had just showered after working out in the gym cheated more than those who had just finished their workout and were just about to enter
the shower. In the second study, men who were on their way to purify themselves in the Mikveh donated more money than those who had just finished their ablutions.

Although previous studies have shown that acting morally enhances licensing to behave less morally (Jordan et al., 2011; Sachdeva et al., 2009), our findings show for the first time that physical cleanliness has the same effect. Participants who washed themselves and felt physically clean behaved less morally: They cheated more and donated less than those who had not washed.

Our findings that participants evidenced less moral behavior after physical cleansing are complemented by Zhong and Liljenquist (2006), who found that physical cleansing reduced the need for compensatory behavior, that is, moral behavior. However, previous studies that have investigated the association between cleansing and morality primed participants to morality (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006) or to the concept of cleansing (Schnall et al., 2008). In the current study, participants were not primed. The influence of physical cleansing on moral behavior was observed in a real context of washing or cleansing. Furthermore, unlike previous studies, our study examined actual donations rather than behavioral intent.

Our results should also be considered in the light of findings reported by Liljenquist et al. (2010), who found that participants who were in a clean-scented room evidenced fairer behavior in the dictator game and expressed a greater wish to engage in charity, that is, consistent moral behavior. Their study, however, exposed participants to a clean-scented room for the entirety of the experiment. This clean scent probably served as a cue for the association between morality and cleanliness, thus influencing participants to behave morally. In contrast, in our study cleanliness was present through the physical act of washing that took place before or after the measurement itself. Thus there was no constant priming of cleanliness. This seemingly contradictory result might be accounted for by abstraction level. According to Conway and Peets (2012), an abstract conceptualization of morality results in consistent moral behavior, whereas a concrete conceptualization leads to compensatory moral behavior. A clean-scented environment (in Liljenquist et al.’s study) may have served as an abstract cue for consistent behavior (prosocial behavior), whereas physical washing (such as in the current study) served as a concrete cue and therefore led to compensatory moral behaviors (such as cheating and lower donations).

This study is consistent with Zhong et al. (2010), who found that participants who washed their hands evidenced harsher moral judgments through the mediation of moral self-regard. They concluded that physical cleansing leads to taking the moral high ground that permits harsher moral judgments of others. Hence the perception of a moral self that results from physical cleaning may license immoral behavior of the self but more severe evaluations of others’ immoral behavior.

The present study was conducted in the field, unlike most previous studies, and thus reports the implications of the association between physical cleansing and moral behavior in a natural environment. However, several potential limitations of the present study should be noted. Regarding the first experiment, because the tendency to cheat was measured in two experimental groups, the result may not indicate a clear directionality, that is, whether feeling dirty reduced cheating or whether cleansing increased cheating. Because physical training itself has complex influences on mood and cognitive functioning (Etnier & Labban, 2012), testing participants before their workout as a control group might have biased the results. Research so far has not determined whether the effect of cleansing compared to feeling dirty affects moral behavior symmetrically, or in opposite directions, or whether one of the two has a more pronounced effect.

The second experiment also has some limitations. First, the data were collected from a single donation stall, which was located among other stalls. However, there is no reason to assume that
the donations pattern was different in other stalls. Also, there was no difference in access to the stall for individuals entering the Mikvah compared to those leaving it. In addition, future studies should extend our results to a sample of women to enable generalization.

Individuals constantly encounter situations where they can choose to commit small sins and moral transgressions, as well as opportunities to be generous and behave morally. Future studies should further investigate the association between moral cleansing, physical cleansing, and moral licensing.

REFERENCES


