

Research Article

From Sucker to Saint

Moralization in Response to Self-Threat

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ABSTRACT—*When people’s rationality and agency are implicitly called into question by the more expedient behavior of others, they sometimes respond by feeling morally superior; this is referred to as the sucker-to-saint effect. In Experiment 1, participants who completed a tedious task and then saw a confederate quit the same task elevated their own morality over that of the confederate, whereas participants who simply completed the task or simply saw the confederate quit did not. In Experiment 2, this effect was eliminated by having participants contemplate a valued personal quality before encountering the rebellious confederate, a result suggesting a role for self-threat in producing moralization. These studies demonstrate that moral judgments can be more deeply embedded in judges’ immediate social contexts—and driven more by motivations to maintain self-image—than is typically appreciated in contemporary moral-psychology research. Rather than uphold abstract principles of justice, moral judgment may sometimes just help people feel a little less foolish.*

Moral indignation is jealousy with a halo.

—H.G. Wells (1914, p. 299)

Imagine that a supervisor asks you, as a favor, to take on a tedious task that is outside your job description. After you complete the task for her, she asks your coworker to complete a similar task. He begins the task but soon quits, claiming that he does not have time for it, and no negative consequence befalls him. How would that make you feel about having completed the first task? Perhaps you would feel foolish for wasting your time on a request that was so easy to refuse, and promise yourself never to be taken advantage of again. We suggest instead that, in an effort to maintain a positive self-image, many individuals would retrospectively moralize what they did and regard them-

selves as morally superior to their unhelpful colleague. Rather than seeing themselves as suckers, they become saints; and instead of seeing their colleague as clever or agentic, he becomes a sinner.

This reaction results from two types of self-threat. First, helpers who witness a colleague’s subsequent refusal realize that they failed to act in line with their self-interest, which, in the Western tradition, is often regarded as the most appropriate guide to rational behavior (Miller, 1999). Second, this failure may reflect a fundamental character flaw—an inability to stand up for oneself and resist inappropriate demands. If, as many scholars argue (e.g., Paulhus & John, 1998; Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Wojciszke, 2005), the self-concept can be broken down into two dimensions—one concerning competence, agency, adaptiveness, and the ability to serve oneself, and the other concerning morality, warmth, communion, and an inclination to serve other people—then complying with an inappropriate request will threaten self-worth only if it is seen as reflecting one’s shortcomings on the competence dimension of the self. Attributing one’s behavior to the morality dimension instead should exalt, rather than threaten, the self.

MORALIZATION AS SELF-DEFENSE

Instead of admitting that they violated their self-interest and failed to display agency, individuals in such situations may reduce self-threat by *moralizing* their behavior, endowing their and their colleague’s behavior with a moral significance that they did not originally assign to it. They may attribute their “choice” to complete the task to their benevolent moral nature, whereas their colleague’s quitting may be regarded as revealing his lack of moral fiber. Thus, as in the classic postdecisional-regret paradigm in dissonance research (Brehm, 1956), they may elevate the attractiveness of their own behavior while simultaneously devaluing the alternative. People’s ingenuity at motivated reasoning in general (Kunda, 1990) and moral rationalization in particular (Haidt, 2001) should enable them to opportunistically reframe many situations from ones threatening

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their self-interested rationality (agency) into ones establishing their moral superiority (communion).

In essence, we hypothesized that individuals will respond to circumstances that implicate a threatening upward comparison on the dimension of self-interested rationality by reconstruing such situations as ones affording downward comparison on the dimension of morality. Our hypothesis rested on the assumption, supported by the self-affirmation literature, that individuals strive to maintain a “phenomenal experience of the self . . . as adaptively and morally adequate” (Steele, 1988, p. 262; see also Sherman & Cohen, 2006). According to our analysis, reinforcing individuals’ beliefs that they are good, adequate people (i.e., self-affirming them; see Steele) should reduce the likelihood that they will exhibit self-threat-induced moralization.

We conducted two experiments to demonstrate the sucker-to-saint phenomenon and establish the role of self-threat in this phenomenon. In Experiment 1, participants in the key “sucker” condition were led to complete a tedious task as a favor to the experimenter (cf. Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) and then observed a confederate quit the same task. We predicted that participants in this condition would increase their perceived moral standing relative to the confederate, whereas this effect would not occur in control conditions in which participants only completed the boring task or only witnessed the confederate quit the task. In Experiment 2, to establish the role of self-threat, we added a condition in which participants described a valued part of their self-concept before completing the boring task and encountering the rebellious confederate. We predicted that participants thus self-affirmed would not feel a need to put down the rebel’s morality relative to their own.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Participants

For course credit, 61 Stanford University undergraduates participated in a study about “behavioral predictions and interactions.” Four participants were dropped because they expressed suspicion about the confederate, leaving a final sample of 57 participants (26 male, 31 female).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: *sucker* (experimental), *no-rebellion* (first control), or *no-task* (second control).

Experimental (Sucker) Condition. After being brought into a lab room, participants in the experimental condition were told the following:

The main part of the study will involve some tasks with another participant who should be here within a few minutes. We’re in-

terested in seeing how communication or noncommunication affects the outcomes of negotiation-type situations. You’ll be in the condition in which you don’t get to communicate with the other participant. But since you’re scheduled for a half-hour of experiment time and the main part of the study will take only a few minutes, we’d appreciate it if in the meantime you’d help us do some pretesting for an applied project in which we’re trying to determine the degree to which performance on essay tests is limited by the time allotted. Right now, as a first step, we’re gauging students’ handwriting speeds. Would you be willing to help out with this?

Participants complied in all cases and were instructed to write the English words for numbers (*one, two, three, . . .*) as quickly as possible, sequentially, until told to stop.

After 4 min, the experimenter audibly greeted the “other participant” (actually a male confederate) just outside the lab room, explained the study to him, and asked whether he would be willing to help out with pretesting. The confederate initially consented and was seated at a separate desk in the same room. As the confederate began to write number words, the experimenter told the real participant that he or she could stop writing and take a break for a few minutes while the “other participant” completed the number-writing task. After 1 min of writing, the confederate paused and asked the experimenter, “Do I have to keep going with this, or is it okay if I stop?” The experimenter responded, acting a bit surprised, “Uh . . . yeah, as with other studies, you’re always allowed to stop if you want to. Is there a problem with anything?” In response, the confederate said, “No, I’m just in a rush and figure the main part of the study is more important.” Without indicating annoyance, the experimenter collected the pretesting forms and handed out all of the following questionnaires to both the participant and the confederate, who completed them simultaneously.

First, using 7-point Likert scales,¹ participants rated themselves (but not the confederate) on the dimensions of intelligence (*very unintelligent* to *very intelligent*), confidence (*very unconfident* to *very confident*), morality (*very immoral* to *very morally virtuous*), and sense of humor (*very unfunny* to *very funny*). Next, participants read about two hypothetical games involving money, an ultimatum game and a prisoner’s dilemma, and predicted privately the confederate’s behavior in each. Then, for credits redeemable for candy rather than money, participants played real versions of the same games with the confederate. In the ultimatum game, we rigged the drawing so that the confederate was always the allocator. Out of 4 total credits, he invariably proposed an equal division of 2 and 2, and participants could either reject the offer, in which case neither player would receive anything, or accept the offer, in which case both players received the proposed number of credits. Partici-

¹The Likert scales used in these experiments went from 1 to 7, but for ease of interpretation, we converted them to a range from -3 to 3 by subtracting 4 from each rating.

pants always accepted the offer. Next, participants and the confederate viewed a payoff table for the prisoner's dilemma, showing how much candy they would earn depending on each player's choice to cooperate or to defect. Participants and the confederate then marked their choices privately, the confederate always cooperating. The experimenter then read their choices aloud and distributed credits accordingly.² Next, participants rated the "other participant" on the same four dimensions used in their self-evaluations (intelligence, confidence, morality, and sense of humor). Finally, participants completed a form asking them to guess the experimenter's hypothesis and received a full debriefing, which included probes for suspicion. Participants traded credits earned in the games for candy and left.

First Control Condition: No Rebellion. The procedure in the no-rebellion condition was identical to that in the sucker condition except that the late-arriving confederate was asked (and agreed) to help out with the number-writing task after, rather than before, the main part of the study. Real participants completed this task at the beginning of the experiment, as in the sucker condition. At the end of the main part of the study, real participants were taken out into the hallway to complete the hypothesis-guessing form and debriefing interview, while the confederate began the number-writing task. Thus, in this condition, participants engaged in the tedious task but did not witness the confederate rebelling, nor did they have any reason to expect that he would rebel.

Second Control Condition: No Task. In the second control condition, the confederate was already present and completing the number-writing task when the real participant arrived. Participants were told about this "pretesting" task and asked whether they would be willing to complete it after the main part of the study; all participants agreed to do so. Soon thereafter, the confederate quit the task in the same manner as in the sucker condition. After the main part of the study, the confederate was taken out into the hallway for supposed hypothesis guessing and debriefing, while participants began the number-writing task. After completing that task, participants went through the usual hypothesis-guessing and debriefing stages. Thus, in this condition, participants witnessed the confederate's rebellion and completed all ratings before they completed the tedious task themselves.

²These games were included to test the ancillary predictions that participants in the sucker condition, compared with those in the control conditions, would expect the confederate to offer less in the hypothetical ultimatum game and to cooperate less in the hypothetical prisoner's dilemma, and that consequently participants in the sucker condition would be more likely than participants in the control conditions to defect in the actual prisoner's dilemma. Thorough analyses of the data provided no support for these predictions in either experiment. Previous research (e.g., Kay & Ross, 2003) suggests that economic games can be construed in many different ways and that only some of these construals make the games relevant to morality; this may explain the disjunction between our robust morality effects and the lack of effects in these games. In the interest of brevity, we do not discuss these measures further.

Results

Did Participants in the Sucker Condition Elevate Their Own Morality Relative to the Confederate's?

To assess moralization, we computed difference scores by subtracting participants' morality ratings for the confederate from their self-ratings, such that positive scores reflect moral superiority of the self. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that these *moral-superiority* difference scores varied by condition, $F(2, 54) = 8.64, p = .001, p_{\text{rep}} = .99, \eta_p^2 = .24, MSE = 1.22$. Planned orthogonal contrasts (see Table 1) revealed that, as predicted, difference scores for participants in the sucker condition ($M = 0.47$) differed from those of participants in the no-rebellion control condition ($M = -0.95$) and the no-task control condition ($M = -0.63$), $t(54) = 4.06, p < .001, p_{\text{rep}} > .99, d = 1.10$, whereas the two control conditions did not differ significantly from each other, $t < 1$. As Table 1 and Figure 1 reveal, this effect on the difference score resulted from self-ratings of morality being higher in the sucker condition than in the control conditions, $t(54) = 2.59, p < .05, p_{\text{rep}} = .95, d = 0.70$, and from ratings of the confederate's morality being lower in the sucker condition than in the control conditions, $t(54) = 2.53, p < .05, p_{\text{rep}} = 0.94, d = 0.69$. Participants in the two control conditions did not differ significantly in their ratings of their own and the confederate's morality, both $t_s < 1$. (See Table 1 for pair-wise comparisons of the sucker condition with the two control conditions.)

Was Self-Enhancement Specific to Morality?

We did not observe self-enhancement on any of the other three dimensions. Self-ratings of intelligence, confidence, and sense of humor did not vary significantly by condition, nor did ratings of the confederate's intelligence and sense of humor, or the corresponding self-other difference scores for the three dimensions (all $F_s < 2, p_s > .25$). Ratings of the confederate's confidence did vary by condition, $F(2, 54) = 4.68, p < .05, p_{\text{rep}} = .94, \eta_p^2 = .15, MSE = 0.97$, with participants in the no-task control group (who saw the confederate rebel but had not completed the task themselves) rating the confederate's confidence as higher ($M = 1.84, SD = 0.96$) than did participants in the sucker ($M = 0.98, SD = 1.08$) and the no-rebellion control ($M = 1.05, SD = 0.91$) conditions.

Discussion

Results were consistent with our central hypothesis: Participants who completed a boring task and then witnessed a confederate quit the task reacted by boosting their own moral standing relative to the confederate, rating themselves more moral for their compliance and the confederate less moral for his rebellion. They did not rate a confederate less moral merely for rebelling if they had not themselves completed the boring task first, nor did they rate themselves more moral merely for completing the task if they did not witness a confederate's rebellion.

TABLE 1
Orthogonal Contrasts and Pair-Wise Comparisons for Morality Ratings in Experiment 1

Statistical comparison	Contrast weight			Contrast test, <i>t</i> (54)		
	Sucker condition	No-rebellion condition	No-task condition	Self's morality	Other's morality	Self's morality – other's morality
Orthogonal contrasts of conditions						
Sucker vs. control	2	–1	–1	2.59*	2.53*	4.06***
No-rebellion vs. no-task	0	–1	1	0.54	0.57	0.88
Pair-wise comparisons of conditions						
Sucker vs. no-rebellion	1	–1	0	2.52*	2.48*	3.96***
Sucker vs. no-task	1	0	–1	1.98†	1.91†	3.08**

†*p* < .07. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Unexpectedly, participants in the two control conditions actually rated the confederate more moral than themselves. We explore this result in more detail in the General Discussion. For now, let us note that this magnanimous view of the confederate in the control conditions contrasts compellingly with participants' more cynical view—and their flattering moral self-elevation—in the sucker condition. In a striking reversal, participants went from feeling morally inferior to claiming moral superiority.

EXPERIMENT 2

Having demonstrated the sucker-to-saint effect in Experiment 1, in Experiment 2 we tested our hypothesis that it results from a threat to “adaptive and moral adequacy” (Steele, 1988, p. 289). We replicated the procedure of Experiment 1 but gave some participants an opportunity to self-affirm (by reflecting on a valued trait or quality; see Sherman & Cohen, 2006) prior to encountering the confederate's rebellion. We predicted that buttressing the self would help participants withstand the threat implied in the other's rebellion, and would thus remove the participants' need to increase their moral standing relative to the rebel.

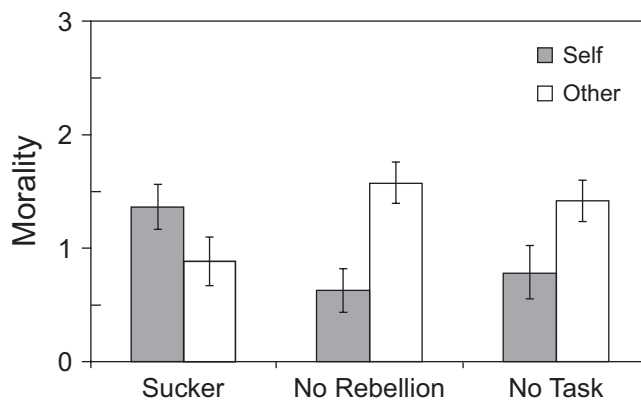


Fig. 1. Mean morality ratings ($\pm 1 SE$) of the self and the confederate as a function of condition in Experiment 1.

Method

Participants

For course credit, 85 Stanford University undergraduates participated in a study about “behavioral predictions and interactions.” They were randomly assigned to four conditions. One participant was dropped from analyses because he expressed suspicion about the confederate, leaving a final sample of 84 participants (40 male, 44 female).

Procedure

The procedure was a replication of Experiment 1 with a fourth condition (*personal-essay*) added. The personal-essay condition was the same as the sucker condition in Experiment 1, but with a self-affirmation manipulation (inspired by Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000) included at the beginning: Prior to the number-writing task, participants were given 3 min to write freely in response to this prompt:

Please write about a recent experience in which you demonstrated one of your most personally valued qualities and felt good about yourself. Examples of “personally valued qualities” might include artistic skills, sense of humor, social skills, spontaneity, athletic ability, musical talent, physical attractiveness, creativity, business skills, or romantic values.

As a control, participants in the sucker condition wrote for 3 min in response to the following prompt (also from Cohen et al.): “Please describe everything you have eaten or drunk in the past 48 hours. Do not worry about things you find yourself unable to remember.” The two control conditions did not include either of these new writing tasks.

Results

Did Participants in the Sucker Condition Elevate Their Own Morality Relative to the Confederate's, and Did Self-Affirmation Eliminate This Effect?

A one-way ANOVA revealed that, as predicted, the self-other morality difference scores varied by condition, $F(3, 80) = 7.52$,

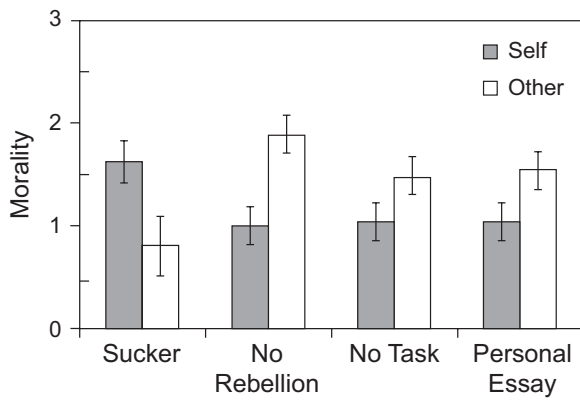


Fig. 2. Mean morality ratings ($\pm 1 SE$) of the self and the confederate as a function of condition in Experiment 2.

$p < .001$, $p_{rep} > .99$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$, $MSE = 1.54$ (see Fig. 2). Planned contrasts (see Table 2) revealed a pattern of results consistent with our hypothesis: The sucker group expressed greater moral superiority ($M = 0.81$) than the no-rebellion group ($M = -0.90$), the no-task group ($M = -0.43$), and the new personal-essay group ($M = -0.53$), $t(80) = 4.56$, $p < .001$, $p_{rep} > .99$, $d = 1.02$, whereas the two control conditions did not differ significantly from each other, $t(80) = 1.24$, n.s., nor did the personal-essay condition differ significantly from the two control conditions, $t(80) = 0.43$, n.s. As is apparent in Table 2, the sucker group also differed significantly from the personal-essay group, $t(80) = 3.48$, $p < .01$, and we obtained the same general pattern of results when we looked separately at morality ratings for the self and the other instead of the morality difference score. (See Table 2 for all pair-wise comparisons of the sucker condition with the other three conditions.)

Was Self-Enhancement Specific to Morality?

For each of the other three dimensions (intelligence, confidence, and sense of humor), ratings of the self and the confederate—as well as the corresponding self-other difference scores—did not vary significantly by condition, all $F_s < 2.2$, $p_s > .1$.

Discussion

As in Experiment 1, participants in the nonaffirmation sucker condition elevated their own morality relative to that of the confederate, whereas participants in the control conditions did not. Adding an opportunity to self-affirm prior to the sucker manipulation wiped out this effect, a result suggesting that the moral self-glorification (and other-condemnation) in the non-affirmation condition constituted a defensive response to self-threat.

As before, we found that control participants rated their morality below that of the confederate, and in fact the same pattern emerged for self-affirmed participants. Because this unexpected pattern was replicated so precisely, we return to it in the General Discussion.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The studies presented here demonstrate that when the self-interested rationality of people’s behavior is implicitly called into question by the more expedient behavior of others, people sometimes justify their choices by feeling more moral than those others. People claim to be saints, rather than feel like suckers, when they see others take shortcuts that they themselves did not think of taking. In Experiment 1, participants who completed a boring task and then saw a confederate quit the task felt morally superior, whereas participants who either did not complete the task or did not see the confederate quit did not. Experiment 2 demonstrated the role of self-threat in this moralization by showing that merely contemplating an important personal quality (i.e., affirming the self; see Steele, 1988) before seeing the rebel was enough to eliminate moral superiority. Participants secure in their sense of personal adequacy did not claim to be morally superior to the rebel, even after doing the boring task themselves. This result suggests that, by preventing motivated moralization, self-affirmation might help facilitate genuine learning from one’s own behavior and that of others, just as self-affirmation can attenuate people’s reflexive dismissal of new information contrary to their prior beliefs (Cohen, Aronson, &

TABLE 2

Orthogonal Contrasts and Pair-Wise Comparisons for Morality Ratings in Experiment 2

Statistical comparison	Contrast weight				Contrast test, $t(80)$		
	Sucker condition	No-rebellion condition	No-task condition	Personal-essay condition	Self’s morality	Other’s morality	Self’s morality – other’s morality
Orthogonal contrasts of conditions							
Sucker vs. controls and personal-essay	3	-1	-1	-1	2.38*	3.12**	4.56***
Personal-essay vs. controls	0	-1	-1	2	0.91	0.42	0.43
No-rebellion vs. no-task	0	-1	1	0	0.16	1.30	1.24
Pair-wise comparisons of conditions							
Sucker vs. no-rebellion	1	-1	0	0	2.05*	3.32**	4.47***
Sucker vs. no-task	1	0	-1	0	1.89†	2.02*	3.23**
Sucker vs. personal-essay	1	0	0	-1	1.89†	2.31*	3.48**

† $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Steele, 2000). Admitting that one has something to learn from another person's behaviors or beliefs sometimes requires an ego freed of concerns about self-adequacy.

In the studies presented here, we gave threatened individuals the opportunity to self-enhance on four dimensions (intelligence, confidence, sense of humor, morality), and, as predicted, we observed self-enhancement on only the morality dimension. Recasting past behavior as moral will be more or less easy depending on the context, but morality is perhaps the most natural means of retrospectively justifying violations of self-interest, given that morality often requires forgoing one's self-interest for the greater good. The specific content of the moral self-construal may vary (e.g., helpful, respectful of the law, caring about the community—Monin & Norton, 2003), but in all cases it should help restore individuals' self-worth by indicating that their actions stemmed from virtue rather than weakness or naiveté. When one's agency and morality are both threatened by someone else's behavior—for example, when someone else refuses to carry out a task because of ethical concerns, thus impugning one's morality for going along—self-justification by moralization is off the table, and one's only recourse may be outright rejection of the rebellious person (see Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008).

Magnanimity in the Control and Personal-Essay Groups

We noted that, in both experiments, participants in the control conditions (as well as participants in the self-affirmation, personal-essay condition) actually rated the confederate as more moral than themselves, in striking contrast to the oft-replicated finding that individuals rate themselves above their peers on desirable qualities (see Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004, for a review). How might these participants' apparent magnanimity be explained?

First, individuals without special moral authority are generally reluctant to reproach others' morality (Sabini & Silver, 1982). For our participants, rating their own morality as greater than the confederate's may have seemed to constitute an unseemly implicit reproach of his morality. Second, self-superiority effects typically involve comparing oneself with a group of peers; when a single person is the point of comparison, these effects dissipate (e.g., Epley & Dunning, 2000, Study 5b). Participants in our study evaluated only themselves and a single comparison target, a situation that might not be expected to produce a self-superiority effect absent any behavioral evidence that the confederate was a bad person. Third, some of the behavioral evidence that participants in our control conditions did have about the confederate made him look rather moral: He offered them half the credits in the ultimatum game and cooperated in the prisoner's dilemma. To rate the confederate as a decent person, then, was consistent with this evidence. Further research is needed, of course, before we can be confident about any of these explanations, but what matters most for our purposes is that this magnanimity was reversed in the sucker

condition, in which the same behavioral evidence of the confederate's decency (and general reluctance to morally reproach another individual) was not enough to wipe out participants' self-justifying moral superiority.

Behavioral Moralization

One important question is whether the moralization observed in the sucker-to-saint phenomenon affects future behavioral choices and not just immediate judgments of the self and others. If completing a boring task for the experimenter was itself sufficiently moralized, this would be expected to affect future behavior in similar situations. People in the sucker condition might be more likely to complete boring experimental tasks in the future, whereas those who simply observed the quitter might be inspired to quit such tasks. Future behavior consistent with one's moralization, in turn, may reinforce one's moral attitude, forming a positive-feedback loop (a process akin to *act rationalization*; see Beauvois & Joule, 1996). Future research should examine whether foot-in-the-door effects, escalations of commitment, or sunk-cost effects (Freedman & Fraser, 1966; Staw, 1981) are, in some cases, mediated by such a reconceptualization of an issue in terms of morality. Just as people often rationalize their immorality (Bandura, 1990, 1999; Tsang, 2002), so they may sometimes moralize their violations of self-interested rationality—and thereby ennoble arduous endeavors that they might otherwise be inclined to avoid. The sucker-to-saint process may thus be a novel avenue through which individuals, and perhaps even cultures, transfer previously nonmoral behaviors into the moral domain (see Rozin, 1999).

The Social Context of Moral Judgments

Moral-psychology research has typically focused on isolated participants making moral judgments or deciding on a moral course of action (e.g., Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Kohlberg, 1969). One lesson of the present research is that the moral meaning of one's own behavior can hinge on the choices of other people in the same situation, and that, symmetrically, the moral meaning of other people's behavior can hinge on one's own. In our studies, participants did not feel particularly moral simply for complying with the experimenter's request to do a boring task, nor did they castigate the morality of a confederate who simply quit a boring task. But when these two events were brought into conjunction, they constituted a threat to participants' self-image, and participants suddenly saw themselves as morally superior and the confederate as morally inferior. Rather than uphold abstract principles of justice, moral judgment may sometimes just help people feel a little less foolish.

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