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The Effects of Moral Licensing on High-Cost and Low-Cost Helping Behaviors

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Honors Thesis

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Advisor: Erin M. O'Mara, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Previous research on moral licensing demonstrates that individuals who behave morally are less willing to help in the future; but is this still the case when the cost of helping is low? The present thesis examined the effects of moral licensing on prosocial behavior that is high in cost-to-self and low in cost-to-self. Contrary to past literature, participants in the control condition did not rate themselves as more willing to help than participants who felt morally licensed. This presents a need for more thorough research on the mechanisms of moral licensing. Participants did, however, rate themselves as more willing to help when the cost-to-self was low than when the cost-to-self was high. These findings are important for understanding how moral licensing works, specifically with respect to cost of helping, to predict when people are likely or not likely to engage in moral behaviors.



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Moral Licensing

Moral licensing is a phenomenon in which individuals feel confident enough in their morality to refrain from acting morally in the future (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). People with a strong moral identity (e.g., a person that has just helped) are more likely to then engage in immoral behavior because it is not a threat to their positive self-concept (Sachdeva, Ilic, & Medin 2009). They maintain a self-view that is consistent with their previous behavior and have proof through that moral deed that they are a moral person. They therefore feel entitled to act immorally without feeling like an immoral person.

Moral licensing includes the moral credits approach and the moral credentials approach (Merritt et al., 2010). The moral deed a licensed person performed can serve as a moral credit which is added to the individual's personal account of acts, both moral and immoral. A person feels licensed when their moral account maintains more helping acts than harmful acts, and they therefore will not feel guilty for spending some moral credits on immoral behavior—they can afford it (Merritt et al., 2010). The moral deed can also be a means by which the person interprets a morally ambiguous behavior. In the moral credentials approach, the prosocial deed can inform the morality of a subsequent act in light of the individual's past behavior, yielding a second kind of licensing (Merritt et al., 2010). It was hypothesized that participants in the present study would feel they had gathered enough moral credit to excuse refraining from further moral behavior, or their moral credentials would frame the act of withholding help as not immoral in the first place.

Consistency vs. Compensation

Moral behavior can result in either morally compensatory behavior or morally consistent behavior (Conway & Peetz, 2012). Whether a moral deed licenses an individual to subsequently engage in immoral activity or remain consistent with their moral identity depends on the nature of the moral behavior itself. Recalling one's moral identity in an abstract way (e.g., labeling one's self as charitable or generous) tends to result in behavior consistent with that conceptualized identity (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Strenta & Dejong, 1981). On the other hand, if a person recalls a concrete moral act

performed, they are more likely to perceive that act as a moral credit and feel licensed to engage in immoral behavior (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Schadeva et al., 2009). For the present study, participants recalled specific and recent moral acts in an attempt to yield licensing.

Prescriptive Immorality

The present thesis is concerned with prescriptive immorality, a subset of immorality in which a person refrains from helping. As opposed to proscriptive immorality, which involves doing things we should not, prescriptive immorality involves failing to do things we should (Carnes & Janoff-Bulman, 2012). Prescriptive immorality is vague, in that it does not involve action, and occurs in the absence of an incentive to help. People are less motivated to behave prosocially (i.e., are not looking for moral credits) when they feel licensed, which is why moral licensing can often result in prescriptive immorality (Carnes & Janoff-Bulman, 2012). Helping, in general, is a prescriptive act in that it is voluntary and positive; the present study examined moral licensing in the prescriptive domain of morality only.

High-Cost and Low-Cost Helping Behavior

Moral behavior licenses a person to engage in prescriptive immorality when the helping behavior comes at a high cost (i.e., requiring the use of time or effort) (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Schadeva et al., 2009). It frees them from the guilt associated with withholding help because they feel as if they have done their moral duty and they are free from feeling responsible. Although behaving altruistically is costly by definition (Schadeva et al., 2009), the present study was interested in whether morally licensed individuals feel entitled to refrain from performing prosocial acts that come at a low cost (e.g., lending out a garden tool that you never use or letting someone cut you in the check-out line when you are in no rush). Research has shown that licensed individuals are less likely to help when the proposed helping behavior will cost them a significant amount of resources (Schadeva et al., 2009); however, research has not yet examined the effects of moral licensing on participation in low-cost helping behaviors. This was the goal of the present study: to understand the influence of moral licensing on low-cost helping behaviors in contrast with high-cost helping behaviors.

Limitations of Previous Research

Previous research has found evidence for an effect of moral licensing on prescriptive immorality when the prosocial act withheld would cost the individual significant resources. However, research has not yet examined the influence of the cost of helping on the likelihood of helping behavior after being morally licensed. That is, does the cost of the moral action have an impact on the effects of moral licensing such that low-cost helping behaviors are excused from the effects of the moral licensing phenomenon, or are they impacted in the same way as high-cost helping behaviors? The present study sought to examine this influence of cost on engagement in helping behaviors after moral licensing.

Method

To examine the role of cost on helping behaviors after moral licensing, 121 participants (87 female, 34 male) were recruited from Introductory Psychology courses at the University of Dayton. The data of 9 participants were removed before analysis due to errors.

Participants were randomly assigned to either a licensing condition or a control condition. They came into the lab and were either asked to write about a topic that relates to morality or an event unrelated to morality. The participants in the licensing condition were asked to write about a time when they “acted in such a way that they felt righteous or honorable...” The same licensing mechanism developed by Conway & Peetz (2012) was employed (with permission from the authors) in the present study. The participants in the control condition were asked to recall what they ate for dinner over the past week, a control condition (used successfully in previous research by Dr. O’Mara) that provides the participants with a task that is independent of morality.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to read three short scenarios that called for either high-cost or low-cost levels of helping. They then rated their willingness to help in each scenario on a scale from 1 = very unlikely to 7 = very likely (Conway & Peetz, 2012). When the participants finished reading and evaluating the scenarios, they completed demographic questions. Finally, the researcher told the students that the study had ended, and the participants were debriefed.

Results

A 2 (Moral Licensing: yes, no) x 2 (Cost: high, low) ANOVA was conducted to examine whether moral licensing and cost interacted to predict helping and whether there were main effects for moral licensing and cost on helping. A key interest was whether morally licensed participants in the low-cost condition were significantly more willing to help than morally licensed participants in the high-cost conditions. This would allow us to conclude that the cost of helping is an important predictor and limitation of the effects of moral licensing on helping behavior. If morally licensed participants in the low-cost condition were not significantly more willing to help than morally licensed participants in the high-cost condition, it would suggest that moral licensing affects helping behavior, regardless of the cost of helping.

The results indicated that the interaction between moral licensing and cost was not significant, $F(1, 108) = 0.00, p = 0.99$. As Figure 1 illustrates, moral licensing and cost did not significantly interact to predict helping behavior. Further, we did not replicate the moral licensing effect described in Conway & Peetz (2012). The analysis did not indicate a significant main effect of moral licensing on helping behavior, $F(1, 108) = 3.06, p = 0.08$. In fact, we found a surprising trend in the opposite direction, such that the participants in the moral licensing condition tended to help more ($M = 6.226, SD = 0.715$) than the participants in the control condition ($M = 6.040, SD = 0.840$). We suspect that the licensing manipulation yielded consistency rather than compensatory behavior. Participants may not have thought about a concrete example of behaving morally in the recent past, and instead perhaps thought of a vague example of their morality, yielding behavior consistent with that identity.

We found a significant main effect of cost on helping behavior, such that the participants were more willing to help in the low cost condition ($M = 6.62, SD = 0.47$) than in the high cost condition ($M = 5.67, SD = 0.74$), $F(1, 108) = 66.60, p < .0001$. This finding serves as a pilot test for subsequent studies and a manipulation check for our cost of helping manipulation. To better test whether helping significantly varied by cost without the influence of the moral licensing information, we examined only the data from participants in the control condition to examine the effect of cost on helping. There was also a significant main effect for cost, $F(1, 57) = 28.54, p < .0001$, such that the mean

willingness to help rating in the low cost condition ($M = 6.529$, $SD = 0.531$) was significantly higher than the mean willingness to help rating in the high-cost condition ($M = 5.567$, $SD = 0.817$), see Figure 2. This indicates that participants who read scenarios that were low in cost-to-self rated themselves as significantly more likely to engage in the helping behavior described than participants that read scenarios that were high in cost-to-self.

Limitations and Discussion

First, the present study demonstrated the need for more reliable moral licensing manipulations. The initial writing task that participants completed did not succeed in licensing the participants in the moral licensing condition in the way that it did in the Conway & Peetz (2012) study. Perhaps the present study did not replicate the manipulation exactly as Conway & Peetz employed it, or perhaps the manipulation is simply not reliable. Whatever the case, more studies should be done to develop this manipulation in order to test further hypotheses on moral licensing and its effects.

Second, the present study examined participants' willingness to help in hypothetical situations. To obtain more concrete evidence for the effects of moral licensing in real-life situations, more research should be conducted to evaluate participants' helping behaviors in actual scenarios. This would allow findings to be generalized and to reliably describe the helping behaviors of various populations.

Since the present study did find evidence that individuals tend to help more when the cost-to-self is low, it would be interesting to see if this trend is maintained when the individuals are licensed. The results of this study add to the body of research describing when people are likely or not likely to behave morally. They also highlight that the present literature on moral licensing needs to be revisited and replicated in order to enhance its reliability. Research in the realm of moral licensing is important for understanding how humans tend to behave in various situations, specifically when moral decision-making is involved.

Future Directions

To reevaluate the moral licensing manipulation, we are conducting a follow-up study in which we will use the effective cost manipulation, but alter the moral licensing

manipulation. We will construct the moral licensing manipulation based on multiple studies, in addition to the Conway & Peetz (2012) article, in order to yield higher efficacy. We are also including more specific instructions for the moral writing task, a longer period of required writing time, and a filler task to be completed before the helping scenarios are read and evaluated. We hope that these changes will result in an effective moral licensing manipulation and allow us to study its effects on helping in high-cost and low-cost situations.

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Figure 1.

Participants' mean willingness to help across licensing and cost conditions.

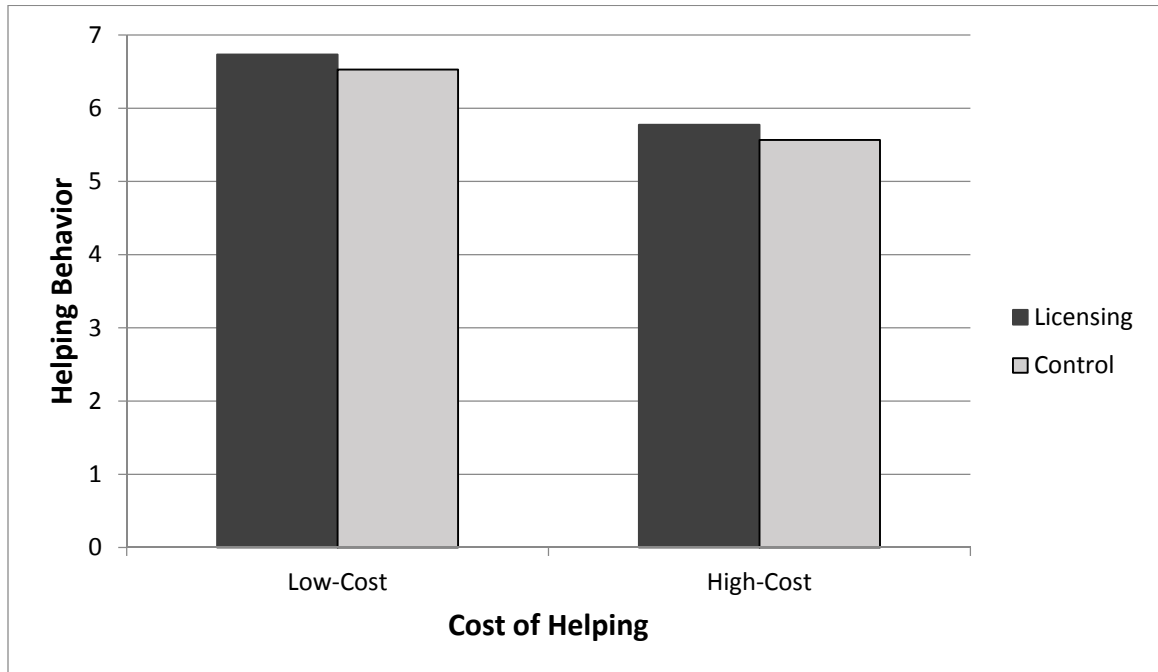


Figure 2.

Control participants' mean willingness to help across cost conditions.

