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Moral Licensing in the context of Environmental Behaviour

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1. Introduction

At the end of a long day, after accomplishing a personal goal or simply after having done some sports activity, it comes to a person's mind that one deserves something for the good performance. Often the reward is something that yields in the opposite direction than the previous behaviour (e.g. a lazy time on the sofa after working productive, or an ice cream after a work-out) and therefore sabotages the achievements made. This effect, which gives us permission to act in dubious ways, is called the *moral licensing effect*. Casually speaking, it frees us to do something bad after doing something good. It not only occurs with the seemingly small, personal problems but also with behaviour on larger scales like racism, environmental friendly behaviour and most probably every human behaviour. Overall in the environmental realm this might have fatal consequences in the long run if people foil their environmental friendly behaviour due to damaging behaviour. Therefore an in-depth understanding of the moral licensing effect can be important for humans and politics to be able to avoid this effect.

The following paper gives insights about when and how people, overall confronted with environmental decisions, feel permitted to act opposite their previous behaviour by using studies which investigate moral licensing among different settings. After presenting the concept of moral licensing and its implications, the initial point of the analysis is the paper of Sachdeva et al. (2009) who extend the model of moral licensing, followed by an investigation how peoples motivation and the way an action is induced affect licensing (Clot et al. 2014). A further study shows how donating influences our environmental behaviour (Meijers et al. 2015) whilst another explores how environmental behaviour influences the altruistic behaviour (Mazar and Zhong 2010). Finally an experiment reveals the moral licensing in a real-world setting (Tiefenbeck et al. 2013).

2. The Moral Licensing Effect

The homo oeconomicus was for many years the origin for economic modelling. But the assumptions that humans act rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing and with perfect information and constant preferences got contradicted in the last years through experimental

economics. Many studies indicate that people behave social and altruistic. In dictator games people give on average approximately 25% of the endowment (e.g. List 2007). This is often explained by people's desire for fairness (Fehr and Schmidt 1999), models of reciprocity (Rabin, 1993) or the "warm glow" due to acting good (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003). Research showed that these behaviours aren't consistent over time as "Past good deeds can liberate individuals to engage in behaviours that are immoral, unethical, or otherwise problematic, behaviours that they would otherwise avoid for fear of feeling or appearing immoral" (Merritt et al. 2010: 344). This psychological phenomenon is called "Moral Self-licensing". As people feel more confident about their behaviour, licensing solves dilemmas by making ambiguous decisions easier (Monin and Miller, 2001: 40). It assumes that people gain moral credentials due to their past behaviour and therefore act immoral without the fear to seem immoral. The licensing effect contradicts that prior actions commit people to act always the same way due to the consistency effect like the *food-in-the-door* effect (examined by Freedman and Fraser 1966). But licensing also seems to work the other way round, in form of moral credits. People act more (less) egoistic if the self-worth is high (low) (Sachdeva et al. 2009). Following these concepts actions are dependent and can't be viewed and interpreted isolated like in experiments of dictator games. Humans have a moral account, which they try to keep in balance through good or bad deeds and thus liberates them to act in certain ways. Due to the investigated interdependency of actions many factors influence when and to which extend the moral licensing effect occurs. This makes it hard to measure and predict the effects of one behaviour on other actions and, regardless if it occurs in the same or different domains, the overall effect of decisions. The question if the acquisition of an electric car has an explicit positive effect on the general environment can no more be answered that easy. In this context policy designs have to consider that voluntary and mandatory laws have different effects as well as the personal characteristics of people. These include if the person is intrinsic motivated or not (Clot et al. 2014), age and the general altruistic behaviour (Meijers et al. 2015). It also seems to make a difference on subsequent actions if people see the opportunity to act moral or really act moral (Mazar and Zhong 2010).

3. Empirical Evidence for Moral Licensing in the context of Environmental Behaviour

3.1. Sachdeva et al. (2009) – “Sinning Saints and Saintly Sinners”

The model of moral licensing can be enlarged by the action of *moral cleansing*, which works in the opposite direction than moral credentials. After behaving morally bad, people try to re-establish their moral self-worth by accomplishing a good deed. Combining the two models of moral licensing and moral cleansing results in a general moral balance which has to be in equilibrium. Sachdeva et al. (2009) examined that the moral self-regulation is linked to the self-concept. After writing stories about themselves containing negative (positive) words, participants donated more (less) to a charity. However, this effect didn't show up when participants wrote about other people using positive or negative words. By replacing the opportunity of donating by the possibility to behave environmental friendly as a manufacturing plant manager Sachdeva et al. (2009) studied the licensing- and cleansing-effects in a further domain. Managers of the negative-trait condition behaved more environmental friendly compared to the positive-trait participants and invested more in pollutant-filter than a pre-existing cooperation suggested. The fact that for most people it is hard to imagine being the manager of such a plant might falsify the results of the last experiment as participants had to simulate a decision which involves a high monetary cost. The results of the experiments show that an increased moral self-concept can lead to unmoral and more egoistic subsequent choices, as well as a decreased moral self-worth can lead to prosocial behaviour. Furthermore the self-concept must be activated to cause moral self-regulation (Sachdeva et al. 2009: 525). What remains unclear is the extend of the licensing effect as the study couldn't show if people have in general a tendency to behave immoral or if the behaviour is only based on prior moral actions (Sachdeva et al. 2009: 527).

3.2. Clot et al. (2011) – “Do Good Deeds Make Bad People?”

Faced with environmental topics, people are often confronted with policies which force them to behave in a certain way. Clot et al. (2011) conducted a study to see if and how this enforcement compared to a voluntary act licenses people with and without intrinsic motivation to behave environmental unfriendly. Compared to the previous study, in this study the manipulation consists of either the obligation to act moral or the opportunity to behave

moral and the effects on subsequent choices rather than the possibility to behave either moral or immoral in a first setting and its effects on a subsequent action. This investigation is quite important because it already has been shown that external interventions can lead to lower intrinsic motivation and subsequently negative long run effects (Frey and Jegen 2001). The experimenter assume that students of an environmental-related major are more intrinsic motivated to behave moral with respect to the environment than students of a business-related major. Participants of the voluntary condition were given the opportunity to engage one hour per week for one month in a pro-environmental program. After deciding whether to participate they allocated in a standard dictator game 30\$ between an environmental union and themselves. In contrast participants of the mandatory condition were informed that they had to engage in the same program, afterwards they also participated at the dictator game (Clot et al. 2014: 7-8). Of the group of 185 Master students (123 subjects of them from a business-related major), the intrinsically motivated students donated significantly less than the non-intrinsically after a mandatory moral act (7,04\$ vs. 13,55\$). In addition the intrinsically motivated participants donated more when assigned to the voluntary condition (11,29\$ vs. 8\$). The results evidence that licensing depends not only the fact if it is moral achievement or not but also on the way it is generated.

The experiment-design wasn't able to show the real extend of the licensing effect. It couldn't fully separate the participants in groups of intrinsically and non-intrinsically people as business-students also might care about the environment. Regarding the aim for more pro-social behaviour in the environmental realm it can be suggested that voluntary measures combined with people who are concerned about the environment is desirable. Anyway these results show that 'one-size-fits-all' policies are not the best solution and population subgroups have to be taken into account to determine effective policies (Clot et al. 2014: 11).

3.3. Meijers et al (2015) – “The dark side of donating: how donating may license environmentally unfriendly behaviour”

In the previous studies people always had or were given the opportunity to behave (im-) moral to see how it influences their subsequent action, but in real-life settings people choose to behave moral, so the settings of previous studies might manipulate behaviour. Therefore Meijers et al. (2015) conducted a quasi-experimental field-study to examine how donating influences environmental-friendly behaviour. To prevent that the results are distorted by a

general attitude towards the environment the environmental self-identity was tested as well. The results are gathered by a self-assessment of the participants, who had to answer a survey. The conducted survey identified that participant who donated at a national charitable-giving event showed lower environmental friendly intentions. Furthermore by asking for several other personal information in the survey it figured out that the age, how often participants donate to charity and environmental self-identity are positive correlated to the environmental intentions (Meijers et al. 2015: 257).

In summary the field-experiment showed that also in a free choice setting the licensing effect is stronger than the consistency effect as people who donated showed afterwards lower environmental intentions. Nevertheless the study-design has also shortcomings as also other variables may explain the relationship between the donation and the environmental intentions. Furthermore the licensing effect might be stronger as people self-report their environmental intentions and therefore answer with social more desirable answers (Meijers et al. 2015: 258).

3.4. Mazar and Zhong (2010) – “Do Green Products Make Us Better People?”

In their research, Mazar and Zhong assigned participants from a university to either a conventional online-store or one with a higher share of green products (green store) and made them buy products with a 25\$ credit. Afterwards participants had to answer a set of easy questions with diverse payoffs for the answers, regardless if it was the right or wrong answer. Participants knew the payoff for each answer before answering and therefore could increase their payoff through answers which were wrong. Nevertheless they were motivated to answer correct through a hint that results are going to be used in future research. It was revealed that participants who shopped in the green store are more willing to lie and steal. The results suggest that green-shoppers answered questions on purpose wrong to increase their pay-off. Furthermore they were more likely to steal money to increase once more the payoff as they took the payoff anonymously out of an envelope. (Mazar and Zhong 2010: 495-497). Hence the students revealed a transgression towards explicit immoral behaviour.

In the experiments the prices between the conventional and the green products didn't differ. In real world settings green products are generally more expensive, hence the licensing effect could be greater if people have to pay a higher price to behave moral.

3.5. Tiefenbeck et al. (2013) – “For better or for worse? Empirical evidence of moral licensing in a behavioural energy conservation campaign”

Outside the lab the licensing effect implicates that environment-friendly campaigns can have an overall negative effect. If so, many of these campaigns have been interpreted wrong as they only observed the consumption of one good and omitted if the consumption influences behaviour regarding other goods. To test this Tiefenbeck et al. (2013) conducted an eleven week lasting field study on the residential energy consumption of water and electricity in a multifamily building complex with 200 apartments. A two week baseline period to observe the consumption of the households was followed by a seven week lasting feedback period. During this period the treatment group received a weekly feedback on their water consumption, the average consumption of the 10% less-water-using apartments and a water saving advice. The experiment ended with a two weeks lasting post-intervention period to see how households behave after the treatment (Tiefenbeck et al. 2013: 163-165). During feedback and post-intervention period, participants of the treatment group used on average 4.1% less water than the control group. But furthermore the authors observed that the electricity consumption of households receiving feedback was 6.9% higher than the control group. Overall the energy-balance through this experiment was negative. Despite the saved water, no energy was saved as the increase in electricity consumption was higher than the energy saved through less water-heating (Tiefenbeck et al. 2013: 167-169). The study was able to show the moral licensing effect in a real world setting where participants didn't self-report their actions but acted in a drawn from life situation.

In the post-intervention period the electricity consumption of the treatment-households decreased to almost the levels before the experiment while the water consumption stayed at lower levels. This might give important insights on the long-run efficiency of these campaigns. The water- and electricity-consumption is partly dependent in a complementary direction (Tiefenbeck et al. 2013: 170), which might have influenced the results of the study and therefore the licensing effect might have been even greater. Finally, thus the water was free, the researchers could eliminate the possibility of a “rebound”-effect, i.e. that the increased electricity consumption is caused by the saving of costs for water.

4. General Discussion

Each study researched the moral licensing effect under different settings and gave insights of either the characteristics of persons or situations which cause this phenomenon. The mechanism of moral licensing could be enlarged by the moral cleansing effect which works the other way round. Whilst almost all presented studies showed that people acted immoral but somehow only in a self-interested way after a good deed, Mazar and Zhong (2010) were able to show a clear transgression to a bad action. In their experiment people increased their payoff knowing that this might lead to future higher costs, this means they were ready to decrease overall welfare and not only to increase personal welfare.

In all presented experiments the licensing effect acts stronger than the consistency-effect or spillover-effect except if people feel intrinsically motivated towards a voluntary action. Tiefenbeck et al. proofed that environmental campaigns don't make people to transfer their behaviour on other areas. It's important to note that in all studies the self-concept, which was investigated by Sachdeva et al., got activated. Deriving and combining from the presented studies, people who are intrinsically motivated, act often moral and voluntary, identify themselves with the action and are in higher age have a lower extent of moral licensing. However, Meijers et al. demonstrated that people who freely chose to donate and therefore can be assumed to be intrinsically motivated to act moral felt more licensed to behave immoral afterwards than people who didn't donate. With a view to effective environmental policy designs this insight has to be taken into account. To educate people about environmental awareness and long run effects of damaging actions and therefore create an intrinsic motivation might be one way to encourage consistent behaviour and come along with lower external cost as voluntary measures usually have lower costs than mandatory policy-designs.

The time between the (im-) moral actions seems to influence people's behaviour. In the study of Meijers et al. the participants who donated more often showed higher environmental and therefore moral intentions as well, although they still felt licensed. Similar to this, Tiefenbeck et al. observed that in a longer run the licensing effect seemed to decrease. This matches with the suggestion of Sachdeva et al. to make moral-licensing causing actions to habits and therefore coming along with lower costs and so without a demand for compensation

(Sachdeva et al. 2009: 528). All other presented studies weren't able to monitor these indications as they were experiments with only short time breaks in-between the moral acts.

5. Conclusion

All studies confirm the concept of moral licensing; people don't have constant preferences and foil prior behaviour when they feel liberated to do so. They are also able to shed light on drivers of moral licensing. But the insights also raise new questions. Further research could investigate whether the self-concept of an individual is also activated and causing moral licensing if a group of people including the individual acts overall moral. Regarding environmental behaviour the results could show if an individual feels licensed to act environmental-unfriendly after the general public has achieved a defined climate goal.

Subsequently it is necessary to study the importance of the time period after acting moral more closely and if results like the in the long run decreasing licensing effect in the experiment of Tiefenbeck et al. can be repeated and connected to the incorporation of habits.

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