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### On justifying eco-unfriendly behaviors

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# Chapter 2

## Choosing to Donate Provides Justification

This chapter is based on:

Meijers, M. H. C., Verlegh, P. W. J., Noordewier, M. K., & Smit, E.G. *The Dark Side of Donating*. Revision invited for an international academic journal.



## Choosing to Donate Provides Justification

Despite the global recession, the amount of charitable donations grows steadily every year (Charity Aid Foundation, 2013). There are multiple reasons why individuals donate to charity, one of them being that individuals experience a warm glow of giving when they do so (Andreoni, 1990). Indeed, research has shown over and over again that giving to others makes individuals feel good (Dunn, Akin, & Norton, 2008; 2014). This finding is fairly universal and is even observed concerning toddlers (Akin et al., 2013). Even imagining donating to charity gives individuals the feeling of being moral (Khan & Dhar, 2006). The fact that donations make individuals feel good about themselves suggests that donating to charity is a win-win situation, that does not only help others, but also helps oneself.

Recent research however suggests that the warm glow of giving may in fact be a double edged sword, rather than a win-win situation. Namely, when individuals experience a feeling of morality after a moral deed they are likely to behave *less* morally on a subsequent occasion (Jordan et al., 2011; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Sachdeva et al., 2009). Donating to charity may then serve as an internal justification for abstaining from moral behavior. This phenomenon is

called the licensing effect and entails that by performing moral behavior, individuals establish moral credits that justify (or license) subsequently immoral behavior (Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva et al., 2009). In this chapter, we test this hypothesis in a field setting and show that when individuals just donated to charity they are subsequently less likely to behave morally in seemingly unrelated situations.

### **Licensing Effects**

Over the past years, studies have documented the existence of licensing effects in a variety of domains. Monin and Miller (2001) were the first to demonstrate the licensing effect in a series of studies that show that individuals are more likely to behave prejudiced in hiring decisions after they initially had the opportunity to behave in a non-prejudiced manner. For example, when individuals were given the opportunity to disagree with racist statements, they were subsequently more likely to indicate that a job was more suitable for a White rather than a Black person (Monin & Miller, 2001). Other research concerning the licensing effect has shown that these effects also occur across domains: when individuals imagine donating money to charity, they are subsequently more likely to cheat in order to perform better on an unrelated task (Brown et al., 2011) and when individuals shop in a webshop with mostly environmentally friendly products they are subsequently more likely to take out more money out of an envelope than they had actually earned (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Engaging in moral behavior can thus provide individuals with a justification to subsequently behave immorally (Monin & Miller, 2001).

The assumed underlying mechanism is that the initial moral behavior provides individuals with moral credentials which boost their moral self-regard. This boosted moral self-regard subsequently liberates them to behave morally questionable (Jordan et al., 2011; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Sachdeva et al., 2009). Similar, research shows that boosting individuals' moral self-regard by reminding them of their moral traits subsequently leads to immoral behavior. For example, recalling humanitarian behaviors resulted in donating less money to charity (Sachdeva et al., 2009) and lower intentions to volunteer (Conway & Peetz, 2012).

Unfortunately, studies concerning the licensing effect are mostly conducted in laboratory settings where individuals are assigned to conditions

motivating them to behave in a specific way, it is therefore uncertain whether these effects also occur in real life (e.g., Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva et al., 2009). A notable exception is a field study in which residents received feedback on their water usage. The residents were assigned to a feedback or a non-feedback condition and the study showed that when residents received feedback on their water consumption, they lowered their water usage but at the same time increased their electricity usage (Tiefenbeck et al., 2013). In this study by Tiefenbeck et al. (2013), individuals were still assigned to conditions. In real life, however, individuals *choose* to behave morally (e.g., charitably, environmentally friendly) rather than doing so because they are pushed in that direction by experimental procedures.

Therefore, it is possible that licensing effects are (partially) explained by reactance toward the manipulation. When individuals feel their freedom of choice is being constrained they may experience a feeling of reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Dillard & Shen, 2005). As a response toward this reduced freedom, individuals may move in the opposite direction. So, when individuals feel they are being ‘forced’ to behave morally by experimental procedures, they may show the exact opposite behavior (i.e., immoral behavior) as a response toward this reduced freedom. It is therefore important to investigate whether licensing effects indeed occur in real life settings.

### **Consistency Effects**

This question is particularly relevant given the extensive body of research that shows that the opposite of licensing effects may be as likely: After a moral act, individuals may feel compelled to behave consistently and therefore also behave in a moral manner in subsequent decisions (e.g., Benabou & Tirole, 2011; Burger & Caldwell, 2003; Freedman & Fraser, 1966; Gawronski, 2012; Snyder & Cunningham, 1975; Steele, 1988). Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), the foot-in-the-door principle (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), and self-perception theory (Bem, 1967) all emphasize that individuals want to appear *consistent*. In addition, self-affirmation theory posits that individuals want to view themselves as being moral (Steele, 1988), making continued moral decisions more likely. There is thus also ample research suggesting that a moral act will lead to subsequent moral choices as individuals

infer from their past behavior what they find important (Albarracín & Wyer, 2000).

In fact, a recent field study showed that individuals were actually *more* likely to show such consistency effects than licensing effects after an initial moral act (Gneezy et al., 2012). In the study of Gneezy et al. (2012), visitors of an amusement park had the opportunity to purchase a photograph which was taken while taking a ride in one of the attractions. This photograph was either sold with a charitable-giving promotion (i.e., half of the price was donated to charity) or not. When individuals bought a photo with a charitable-giving promotion they were subsequently more likely to purchase presents for others rather than for themselves (i.e., display pro-social behavior) than when they bought a photo without such a promotion. The authors suggest that this consistency effect (i.e., behaving pro-socially on two subsequent occasions) was caused by the self-perception mechanism (Bem, 1967). Participants presumably perceived themselves as the ‘giving-kind’ after having purchased the photograph with the charitable-giving promotion and therefore were more likely to give again. Based on this research of consistency effects it would thus be the case that donating to charity may lead to subsequently behaving morally again.

### **The Current Study**

Overall, there is evidence suggesting that individuals will behave less morally after donating to charity (i.e., licensing effect) and evidence that individuals want to behave consistent and will display moral behavior again (i.e., consistency effect). We are interested in whether individuals in real life (where they initially *choose* to behave morally) are more likely to feel licensed or to behave consistently after a moral act. To steer clear of the influence of self-perception we will therefore study whether choosing to behave morally in one domain (i.e., donating to the Red Cross) leads to behaving immorally in another domain (i.e., being environmentally unfriendly) – rather than investigating licensing effects within domains (e.g., giving). Please note that even across domains self-perception effects could occur. After a moral act individuals may come to see themselves as moral, motivating them to behave morally again. The chance that these self-perception effects occur

spontaneously across domains, however, appears less likely than self-perception effects within a specific domain. By contrast to the Gneezy et al. (2012) study, we therefore expect a licensing effect. Moreover, to circumvent the alternative reactance explanation pointed out earlier, we employ a quasi-experimental design in which participants *choose freely* whether or not they donate to charity, as in real life, rather than being assigned to conditions. As far as we know, all other studies into licensing encompass experimental procedures, assigning individuals to conditions.

Since we used a naturalistic quasi-experimental design, it is important to control for possible confounding factors such as demographic variables and individuals' tendency to donate in general. Additionally, to make sure that the effect on our dependent measure (i.e., environmentally friendly behavioral intentions) is due to individuals' donating behavior and not to prior differences in environmentally friendliness, we controlled for individuals' environmental self-identity. A large body of research shows that environmentally friendly intentions and behaviors are largely influenced by individuals' environmental self-identity (Fielding et al., 2008; Gatersleben et al., 2002; Nigbur et al., 2010; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992; Van der Werff et al., 2013a; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). Individuals with a strong environmental self-identity are, for example, more likely to recycle, consume organic vegetables, use green energy, and engage in environmental activism (Fielding et al., 2008; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992; Van der Werff et al., 2013b; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). So, to prevent distortion of our results, we included environmental self-identity as a covariate in our study.

### **Study 2.1: The dark side of donating**

#### **Method**

We chose the yearly charitable event 'Serious Request' to test our hypothesis. This is one of the largest nationwide charitable events in The Netherlands. On the six days before Christmas, DJ's of a popular radio station are locked in a 'glass house' to raise money for the Red Cross. They do so by performing live radio, 24 hours a day, and abstaining from eating. Each year, the glass house is situated in a different city and individuals go visit to donate money or simply to enjoy the atmosphere. Money is donated by requesting a

song for whatever amount. Throughout the country fund raising activities are organized by, for example, schools and companies. Moreover, on national television updates are given twice a day and even the national news covers the event. In sum, Serious Request is a nationwide event, engaging many individuals. For more background information, please see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serious\\_Request](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serious_Request).

**Participants and Design.** Potential participants were approached during Serious Request in two different cities (one in which the ‘glass house’ was situated). Since we expected that most individuals in the city center of the Serious Request city would have donated, we collected data in the city center of an additional city as well, to have comparable group sizes (donating versus not donating). This city was comparable in size and similar to the Serious Request city it was a student town with a specialized university. As expected, in the Serious Request city, a majority of the individuals donated to Serious Request (81.1%), whereas in the other city relatively less individuals donated to Serious Request (but still a substantial amount; 22.5%).

Two hundred eighty three participants filled out our questionnaire. Nineteen participants did not adhere to instructions, for example, they completed the questionnaire with multiple persons or did not fully complete the questionnaire. A subgroup of these participants also indicated to not have donated to Serious Request on the first question, but later on stated that they donated 50 euro last year or indicated that they not yet donated to Serious Request (but were about to). This may cause a problem as prior moral deeds and future moral deeds may also provide individuals with a license (e.g., Jordan et al., 2011). Therefore, these nineteen participants were omitted from the main analyses. Furthermore, six participants were identified as outliers based on the Mahalanobis Distance method, which exceeded the critical value at  $p < .001$  (Pallant, 2001; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) and were omitted from the analyses. Leaving a total of 261 participants ( $M_{age} = 31.49$ ,  $SD_{age} = 13.56$ , 53.3% female) for our analyses. Please note that inclusion of the outliers would have resulted in the same results.

**Procedure.** Participants first read and signed an informed consent. Since our participants may not be very familiar with filling out questionnaires, they were shown an unrelated example question illustrating how to answer

questions using a Likert scale. After this, they were asked to indicate whether they just donated to Serious Request.

Next, participants were asked to rate six items regarding environmentally friendly intentions. Intentions were measured by using items like “*I would be willing to pay more each month for electricity if it meant cleaner air*” measured on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*), Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$  (Minton & Rose, 1997). Then, participants completed several background questions (i.e., age, education, gender) to be able to control for their potential influence on our dependent measure environmentally friendly intentions. They also indicated how often they typically donate to charity, how much they typically donate to charity, and how much they donated to Serious Request. Next, to be able to control for participants’ environmental self-identity, they completed an environmental self-identity measure with four items like “*I think of myself as an environmentally-friendly consumer*” measured on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*), Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$  (Whitmarsh & O’Neill, 2010). Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and fully debriefed.

## Results and Discussion

**Preliminary analyses: Covariates.** To control for confounding variables, we checked the correlations between demographics, donating behavior in general, environmental self-identity and our dependent measure environmentally friendly intentions. We also investigated whether it was required to control for the surveyor who administered the questionnaire.

Age ( $r = .15$ ,  $p = .018$ ), how often individuals typically donate to charity ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and environmental self-identity ( $r = .60$ ,  $p < .001$ ), were significantly correlated with the dependent measure (environmentally friendly intentions). Additionally, surveyor ( $p = .050$ ) had a significant effect on environmentally friendly intentions. A post-hoc test showed that participants surveyed by one surveyor consistently reported higher environmentally friendly intentions than the other six surveyors. Therefore, we took age, surveyor, how often individuals typically donate to charity, and environmental self-identity into account as covariates. Gender ( $r = -.02$ ,  $p = .749$ ), education ( $r = .10$ ,  $p = .122$ ), how much individuals typically donate to charity ( $r = -.01$ ,  $p = .838$ ),

and how much individuals donated to Serious Request ( $r = .03, p = .614$ ), were not correlated with environmentally friendly intentions.

**Main analyses.** We conducted an ANCOVA with donating (yes/no) as predictor and age, surveyor, how often participants typically donate, and environmental self-identity as covariates. In line with the licensing effect, the ANCOVA showed that participants who donated to Serious Request had lower intentions to be environmentally friendly ( $M = 4.11, SE = .07$ ) than participants who did not donate ( $M = 4.42, SE = .10$ ),  $F(1, 247) = 6.36, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Donating to charity may justify environmentally unfriendly intentions.

As expected, the covariate environmental self-identity strongly influenced individuals' environmentally friendly intentions,  $F(1, 247) = 118.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$ , which is consistent with previous research in the domain of environmental friendliness (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). The covariate how often individuals typically donate also had a positive effect on environmentally friendly intentions  $F(1, 247) = 11.21, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . So along the lines of research stating that the moral domain is multifaceted (Aquino & Reed, 2002), we observed that individuals who frequently donate to charity were also more likely to be environmentally friendly. Surveyor and age did not have a significant effect on environmentally friendly intentions,  $F(1, 247) = 2.24, p = .136$  and  $F(1, 247) = 0.02, p = .969$ , respectively.

Please note that when not accounting for the covariates age, surveyor, and how often individuals typically donate, the ANCOVA displayed the same pattern. Thus, the ANCOVA showed once more that participants who donated to Serious Request were subsequently less likely to report environmentally friendly intentions ( $M = 4.12, SE = .07$ ) than participants who did not donate to Serious Request ( $M = 4.38, SE = .10$ ),  $F(1, 254) = 4.40, p = .037, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . Taking the covariate environmental self-identity into account was vital due to its large effect on environmentally friendly intentions, as consistent with previous research on the role of environmental self-identity in expecting environmentally friendly behaviors (Fielding et al., 2008; Gatersleben et al., 2002; Nigbur et al., 2010; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992; Van der Werff et al., 2013a; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010). The strong effect of environmental

self-identity as a covariate suggests that it deserves a closer look in the future research, perhaps as a moderator (we will return to this in Chapter 3).

### General Discussion

Our study shows that donating may have a dark side to it, as donating to charity may subsequently license individuals to behave immorally in other domains. Specifically, when individuals donated to Serious Request they subsequently reported lower environmentally friendly intentions than individuals who did not donate. Giving to charity thus appears to provide donors with an internal justification that subsequently frees them to behave less environmentally friendly. Donating to charity may thus not always be a win-win situation. In fact, it could have negative consequences for individuals' subsequent moral behaviors.

This chapter adds to the existing literature on both charitable giving and the licensing effect. Our study demonstrates that the licensing effect also emerges when individuals *choose* to behave morally in the first instance. So far, the licensing effect had been mainly investigated in the lab or by assigning individuals to behave in a moral way (e.g., Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva et al., 2009). This study establishes the ecological validity and robustness of the licensing effect by showing that the effect also emerges in the field when participants *choose* to behave morally rather than being assigned to do so. Licensing effects thus not appear to be merely caused by experience a feeling of reactance toward the manipulations used in many licensing studies, but also occur in real life when individuals choose themselves to behave morally.

Also, it establishes the need for investigating what happens *after* individuals donate to charity. Abundant studies investigate what factors influence individuals' donation behavior (e.g., Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Bennett, 2003; Rabinovich et al., 2009; Sargeant, Ford, & Hudson, 2008; Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012) and how individuals may be persuaded to donate to charity (e.g., Das, Kerkhof, & Kuiper, 2008; Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013; Fisher, Vandenbosch, & Antia, 2008; Handy, 2000; Liu & Aaker, 2008; White & Peloza, 2009). Studies investigating sequential decision making within the domain of charitable giving are, however, scarce (e.g., Beldad, Snip, & Van

Hoof, 2014; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007; Winterich, Mittal, & Aquino, 2013), and studies investigating how charitable giving influence subsequent seemingly unrelated moral behaviors are virtually nonexistent. The current study fills this gap by demonstrating that donating behavior impairs subsequent moral behaviors and shows that it is thus important to also investigate the effects of charitable giving on seemingly unrelated behaviors. Particularly since this may not always constitute of a positive spill-over but may, ironically, have negative side consequences.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted that the effect size of our finding is relatively small. This is consistent with a recent meta-analysis of the licensing effect (Blanken, Van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2013). Although the effect is relatively small, the effect should not be disregarded. The majority of individuals in both the US and the UK regularly make donations (Charity Aid Foundation, 2013). Given this prevalence of donating, even a small effect may have substantial consequences. Another limitation of our study is that it constitutes of self-report measures. Individuals may report more socially desirable and therefore may (unknowingly) overstate their environmentally friendly intentions (Paulhus, 2002). If this would be the case in our study, the licensing effects would in reality be stronger. So, the problem of answering socially desirable would sooner harm than help finding the licensing effect.

### **Future Research**

One may wonder whether the amount of the initial donation affected the magnitude of the licensing effect. Previous research suggests that the licensing effect may operate proportionally, such that a larger previous moral behavior leads to a larger subsequent immoral behavior (Jordan et al., 2011). We checked whether the amount donated affected the magnitude of the licensing effect, but this was not the case. Donating larger sums of money does not appear to provide one with a 'larger' license to subsequently be even less environmentally friendly. Future research could investigate this topic in more detail.

Additionally, future research could investigate how licensing effects may be prevented by the use of self-perception mechanism. Individuals tend to

behave consistently with how they perceive themselves (Bem, 1967) and previous research shows that by using the social labeling technique individuals may be stimulated to behave morally consistently through the self-perception mechanism (Allen, 1982). Research, for example, shows that when providing individuals with the social label 'you are an environmentally friendly person' they become more likely to actually see themselves as an environmentally friendly person and behave accordingly (Allen, 1982; Cornelissen et al., 2007). This suggests that when individuals are being actively labeled as moral, they may come to see themselves as moral and behave accordingly, implying that they will be less likely to use the moral credits earned in one situation to behave immorally in another. In this way, it may be prevented that people use donating to charity as an internal source of justification for immoral (e.g., environmentally unfriendly) behavior. This constitutes a valuable avenue for future research.