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On justifying eco-unfriendly behaviors

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Publication date

2014

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Meijers, M. H. C. (2014). *On justifying eco-unfriendly behaviors*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Chapter 4

Close Others Providing Justification

This chapter is based on:

Meijers, M. H. C., Noordewier, M. K., Verlegh, P. W. J., & Smit, E.G. *Taking close others' behavior into account when striking the moral balance*. Revision invited for an international academic journal.

Close Others Providing Justification

Imagine walking on the street with another person during a street fair. It is crowded, sunny, and there is a festival-like atmosphere. The person you are with throws an empty plastic cup in the roadside flora. Does this environmentally unfriendly act influence the chance that you will donate at the Greenpeace stand later that day? We posit it will, depending on your closeness to the other person.

Research shows that individuals search for balance in their moral behaviors such that they cleanse previous immoral behaviors by subsequently behaving morally (i.e., *cleansing effect*) and feel justified to behave immorally after a previous moral act (i.e., *licensing effect*; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva, Ilic, & Medin, 2009; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). We will argue and show that individuals may not only search for balance in their own moral behaviors, but will also take into account behaviors of those close to them. When individuals feel close to another person there is great self-other overlap (Aron et al., 1991) and individuals may perceive the actions of the other as if they are the actions of themselves (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). In other words, individuals incorporate the behaviors of close others into their

own self-concepts. We, therefore, posit that immoral behaviors of close others may lead to vicarious cleansing effects, whereas the moral behaviors of close others may lead to vicarious licensing effects. Following this reasoning, the likelihood of vicarious moral cleansing and licensing effects should depend on the degree of interpersonal closeness: When individuals are close to one another they are more likely to vicariously balance the other's moral behaviors than when individuals are less close to one another. In the remainder of the article, we will elaborate on the theoretical background for this proposition and report three studies supporting it.

Moral Licensing and Cleansing Effects

In general, individuals want to see themselves as moral, however, they do permit themselves morally questionable behavior from time to time (e.g., lying, engaging in environmentally unfriendly behavior, cheating; Mazar et al., 2008). Recent research suggests that in order to uphold their moral self-view, individuals feel the need for a justification to permit themselves such morally questionable behaviors. Engaging in a moral act may provide such a justification (e.g., De Witt Huberts et al., 2012; Effron et al., 2009; Effron et al., 2013; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Merritt et al., 2012; Merritt et al., 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001; Sachdeva et al., 2009). By behaving morally, individuals establish moral credentials which boost their moral self-regard and subsequently 'free' them to behave morally questionable (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Miller & Effron, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001). Therefore, individuals can behave relatively immorally, while maintaining their moral self-view. Consistent with this reasoning, individuals are more likely to behave in a racist or sexist fashion after they behaved in a non-racist or non-sexist fashion (Monin & Miller, 2001). Similarly, when individuals purchased environmentally friendly products they are subsequently more likely to cheat (Mazar & Zhong, 2010).

Balancing moral behaviors to maintain one's moral self-regard can also occur the other way around, such that individuals behave relatively morally after a previous morally questionable behavior – a so called moral cleansing effect (e.g., Jordan et al., 2011; Sachdeva et al., 2009; Tetlock et al., 2000; Zhong, Liljenquist, & Daylian, 2009). For example, undermining one's moral self-regard by recalling general immoral behaviors performed in the past leads

to moral behaviors in the present (Jordan et al., 2011; Sachdeva et al., 2009). Also, when individuals merely contemplate immoral behaviors their willingness to behave morally increases (Tetlock et al., 2000) and individuals may even literally feel the need to wipe their slate clean by use of hygiene products (Gollwitzer & Melzer, 2012; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). In sum, previous research has suggested that individuals balance their moral and immoral behaviors to maintain a moral self-view. We extend this notion by proposing that individuals not only take their own moral and immoral behaviors into account when striving for moral balance but may also take external sources into account, such as the moral and immoral behaviors of close others.

Inclusion of Others in the Moral Self

Whereas individuals may experience a connection with non-close others such as colleagues or acquaintances, they may actually experience a sense of ‘oneness’ with close others such as partners or relatives (Cialdini et al., 1997). Aron and Aron (1986) have argued that individuals’ sense of self can be expanded to include others which is especially the case when it concerns close others (see also Aron et al., 1991). When individuals experience oneness with a person they may actually perceive the other person to be part of the self and integrate the other’s attributes, behaviors, and characteristics in the self (e.g., Aron et al., 1991; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007).

Research, for example, shows that the self and close others may be incorporated in the same cognitive category (Hogg & Turner, 1987) such that individuals treat close others as if they are oneself (Aron et al., 1991). Accordingly, research has shown that individuals memorize words associated with the self to the same extent as words associated with close others and that the (monetary) resources of close others are perceived to be the resources of oneself (Aron et al., 1991). Such a highly overlapping mental construal may lead to vicariously experiencing depletion (Ackerman, Goldstein, Shapiro, & Bargh, 2009) and emotions (e.g., Batson, 2011; Davis, 1994; Welten, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2012). It may make individuals see themselves as possessing the same traits as close others (e.g., Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007) and even actions of close others may be perceived as the actions of oneself, changing one’s self-view through vicarious self-perception (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). Thus, when individuals feel close

to another person, they may act as if aspects and behaviors of this close other are in part also one's own (Aron et al., 1992; Aron et al., 1991; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007; see also Heider, 1958).

We expect that similar effects occur with moral and immoral behaviors of a close other: These may be perceived as one's own and subsequently affect one's own moral balance. Therefore, we hypothesize that the moral and immoral behavior of close others affect individuals' own moral balance. As a result, individuals will actively balance the moral and immoral behaviors of a close other: When a close other behaves morally, individuals are ironically more likely to subsequently behave relatively immorally (i.e., vicarious moral licensing), whereas when a close other behaves immorally individuals are subsequently more likely to behave relatively morally (i.e., vicarious moral cleansing). By contrast, when there is little self-other overlap we expect that the immoral and moral behaviors of another person are less likely to be balanced, such that moral (vs. immoral) behaviors of non-close others will not instigate moral licensing (vs. cleansing) effects.

One recent study in the domain of racism provides initial support for our proposition. Specifically, Kouchaki (2011) showed that participants were less likely to rate a Latino as suitable for an ambitious, but stereotypical White job when individuals of the same subject pool had previously included the sole Latino in their list of preferred applicants in a hiring decision task. This suggests that non-racist behavior of one's in-group may serve as an external source of justification to behave racist in a similar context. In the present article, we will test our hypothesis in a dyadic context, looking at vicarious licensing through close others in the domain of environmental friendly decision making.

We chose to test our hypotheses in the domain of environmentally friendly behavior, as environmentally friendly behavior is often seen as an ethical and morally right thing to do (Bratanova et al., 2012; Schmuck & Schultz, 2002). Furthermore, understanding the factors that influence individuals' environmentally friendly behaviors is a first step in inducing long-lasting environmentally friendly behaviors. When and how others may affect one's own environmentally friendly behaviors is not only relevant for gaining knowledge about vicarious moral licensing and cleansing, it also provides

important information about the dynamics of environmental friendly behavior, and may therefore have important societal implications.

Overview of Studies

We conducted a series of studies to test our hypothesis that individuals show vicarious moral balancing effects and that these effects are more likely to occur when it concerns a close other than when it concerns a non-close other. Study 4.1 tested whether individuals feel vicariously licensed to behave environmentally unfriendly after a close other behaved in an environmentally friendly rather than in a conventional manner. Study 4.2 tested another aspect of our hypothesis and examined whether individuals are more likely to feel vicariously licensed when it concerns a close rather than a non-close other. Lastly, Study 4.3 tested the full hypothesis that individuals are likely to show moral balancing effects (i.e., licensing and cleansing) when it concerns close others but will be less likely to do so when it concerns non-close others.

Study 4.1: Close others' environmental behavior providing justification

In this first study, we examined whether a close other purchasing an environmentally friendly product may serve as an external source of justification for being less willing to engage in environmentally friendly behavior.

Method

Participants and design. Seventy-one participants ($M_{age} = 34.18$ years, $SD_{age} = 12.00$, 70.4 % female) completed our study on Amazon MTurk in exchange for a monetary reward. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (purchase: environmentally friendly purchase, conventional purchase) of a between-subjects design.

Procedure. First, we asked participants to think about a close other (for example their best friend or partner; Aron et al., 1991) and to think about how they complement each other. Hereafter, they were asked to write down the first name of this person. After writing down the name of the person they kept in mind, participants read a scenario regarding this person. We programmed

the scenario such that the name of the person the participants kept in mind (X) appeared in the scenario. In the *conventional purchase* condition participants read that X was going to buy a new fridge and that X's eyes were set on two refrigerators with the same capacity and the same price. X decided to choose the one that fitted the design of his/her kitchen. In the *environmentally friendly purchase* condition participants read that X was going to buy a new fridge and that X's eyes were set on two refrigerators with the same capacity and the same price, however, one was more environmentally friendly than the other. X decided to buy the environmentally friendly fridge as it was better for the environment. In order to check whether the participants read the scenario, we asked participants why X decided to buy the fridge with an open end question as a manipulation check. Eight participants gave nonsensical reasons (e.g., "because he wanted") and were excluded for analyses. Please note that inclusion of these participants would have resulted in nearly identical, but slightly more significant, effects.

Dependent measure. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire regarding environmentally friendly intentions. Intentions were measured by using the Minton and Rose Behavioral Intentions scale (1997) with six items "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 $\alpha = .91$.

Results and Discussion

As expected, an independent samples t-test showed that when a close other purchased an environmentally friendly fridge, participants were subsequently less likely to report environmentally friendly intentions ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.36$) than when a close other purchased a conventional fridge ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.29$), $t(61) = -2.08$, $p = .041$, $\eta_p^2 = .066$. These results are consistent with our reasoning that individuals feel vicariously licensed to report environmentally unfriendly intentions after a close other was environmentally friendly rather than non-environmentally friendly (i.e., conventional). This provides initial support for our hypothesis that individuals are likely to show vicarious moral balancing effects when it concerns a close other and that the

environmentally friendly behavior of close others may serve as an external source of justification for environmentally unfriendly behavior.

Study 4.2: Close versus non-close others

Study 4.2 extends Study 4.1 by testing whether individuals are more likely to show vicarious moral balancing effects (i.e., licensing effects) when it concerns a close other rather than a non-close other. In other words, whether there may be boundary conditions to using the behavior of others as an external source of justification.

Method

Participants and design. Sixty-two students ($M_{age} = 22.61$, $SD_{age} = 2.99$, 32.3% female) were randomly assigned to one of the conditions (closeness: close, non-close) of a between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were approached in several restaurants of the university and asked to participate in a paper-and-pencil study. We used an unrelated task paradigm (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977) and participants completed two tasks: The first task was called ‘Empathy in relationships,’ the second was called ‘Economic Decision Making.’ First, participants read that there are different kinds of relationships. Sometimes individuals feel close to each other and therefore feel like a unity, for example, best friends. In other cases individuals know each other well but do not feel that close to each other and feel more like separate individuals, for example, fellow students. In the *close* condition they were asked to imagine somebody being close to them like a best friend. To visualize this closeness, participants were provided with a figure based on Aron and colleagues (1992) in which the closeness was pictured by means of two overlapping circles, see Figure 4.1. In the *non-close* condition they were asked to imagine somebody they know and who is non-close to them, like a fellow student. This closeness was visualized by two non-overlapping circles, see Figure 4.1. Then participants wrote down the name of the person they kept in mind.

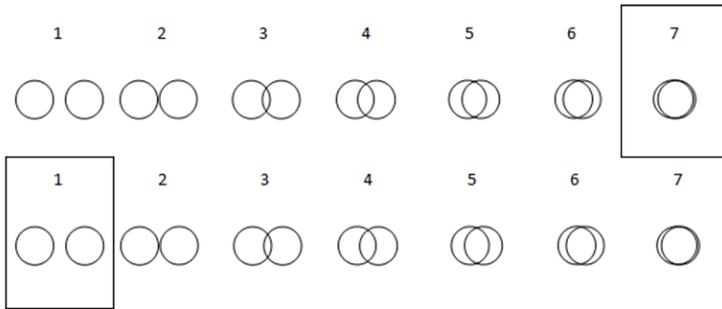


Figure 4.1. Figures that were used in Study 4.2 to visualize degree of closeness. The upper figure is illustrating a close other, the lower figure a non-close other. Based on Aron and colleagues (1992).

Next, the participants read that the researchers were interested in studying empathy in relationships. Therefore, they were asked to read an environmentally friendly behavior scenario describing how the person they kept in mind separated waste like bottles, cans, and paper. In order to keep up the ‘empathy’ study cover story, participants were then asked some bogus questions on how much trouble they had with imagining the person they kept in mind performing all the behaviors and how much work they thought the behaviors were.

Dependent measure. Hereafter, participants completed an environmentally friendly behavior task disguised as an economic decision making task. In this task they were confronted with a dilemma in which they had to choose between the environment and money. We used the scenario of Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin (2009) in which participants were told that they are managing a manufacturing plant that pollutes the air via smokestacks. In order to prevent the release of pollutants, they could run filters at monetary costs. The more often the filters would run the better for the environment, but also the higher the financial costs. The participants learned that under pressure from environmentalist lobbyists and at the risk of a new law prescribing running the filters 100% at all times, all manufacturing plants agreed with the lobbyists to run the filters 60% of the time. Participants could choose to run filters for any 10% interval between 0% and 100%, with each incremental step

costing €0.2 million. A higher percentage thus means a more expensive but also a more environmental friendly choice.

Results and Discussion

We used the percentage that the participants chose to run the filters as the dependent variable in an independent samples *t*-test. As expected, participants chose to run the filters for a lower percentage of the time after imagining that their close other was environmentally friendly ($M = 58.06\%$, $SD = 18.15$) than after imagining that their non-close other was environmentally friendly ($M = 67.00\%$, $SD = 13.43$), $t(59) = 2.18$, $p = .033$, $\eta_p^2 = .075$. The results thus show that environmentally friendly behavior of a close other leads to less environmentally friendly behavior than environmentally friendly behavior of a non-close other. Individuals are thus more likely to show vicarious moral licensing effects when it concerns a close rather than a non-close other. Whereas close others' environmentally friendly behavior may thus serve as an external justification for environmentally unfriendly behavior, non-close others' environmentally friendly behavior may not.

Study 4.3: Balancing the behaviors of close others

In Study 4.3, we test our full hypothesis that individuals actively balance the moral behaviors of close others such that they are likely to show vicarious licensing and cleansing effects when it concerns a close other, whereas they will be less likely do so when it concerns a non-close other.

Method

Participants and design. Ninety-two individuals ($M_{age} = 24.80$, $SD_{age} = 8.73$, 63.0% female) participated voluntarily in the study. They were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of a 2 (closeness: close, non-close) x 2 (words: moral, immoral) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants were sampled in two waves. First, we approached potential participants in several campus restaurants and the library of the university. In addition, we emailed potential participants to invite them to participate in our study. Sampling method did not affect the results. Similar to Study 4.2, we used an unrelated studies paradigm (Higgins et al., 1977). In

the *close* condition participants were asked to keep someone in mind that is close to them, for example, their best friend. To strengthen the manipulation, they were asked to think about their similarities for a while and to write down the name of the person they kept in mind (thinking of similarities is a common way to induce a sense of oneness; Cialdini et al., 1997). In the *non-close* condition participants were asked to keep someone in mind that they know, but is not too close to them, for example, a fellow student. They were asked to think about their dissimilarities for a while and to write down the name of this person. Subsequently, participants saw six words and were asked to apply those to the person they kept in mind. In the *moral* condition these were words like honest, compassionate, and helpful, in the *immoral* condition these were words like dishonest, selfish, and unhelpful (cf. Sachdeva et al., 2009).

Dependent measure. We measured environmentally friendly behavior using an organic food-shopping task. Previous research has shown that consumers associate organic products with caring for the environment and that individuals valuing the environment are more likely to choose organic products (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992; Thøgersen & Ölander, 2003). Therefore, we

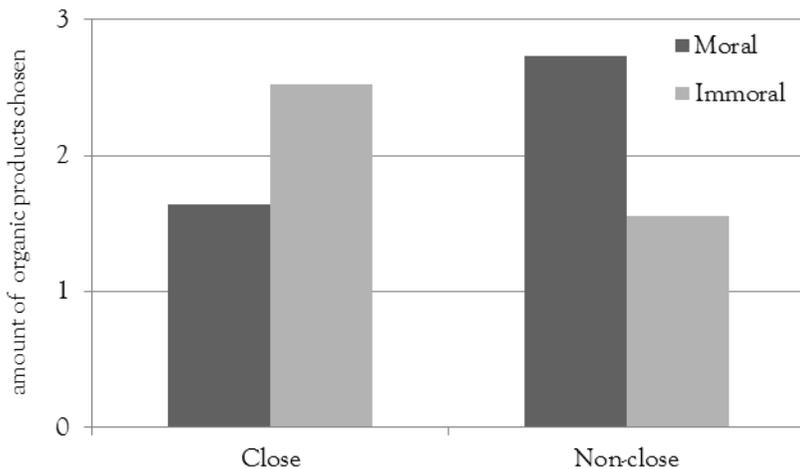


Figure 4.2. The amount of organic products (0-8) that participants chose in Study 4.3 as a function of thinking about a moral (vs. immoral) close (vs. non-close) other.

operationalized environmentally friendly consumer behavior by measuring the number of organic food items that participants chose in this task. Participants were asked to imagine that they are shopping at a grocery shop. They were asked to look at eight sets of three products of existing brands that are available in the supermarket (e.g., milk, pasta, olive oil). In each set participants had to choose a product out of the three available options. One of the options was always organic (e.g., one organic olive oil bottle and two conventional olive oil bottles). We added the number of organic product participants chose so the scale ranges from 0 (none of the products chosen is organic) to 8 (all of the products chosen are organic).

Results and Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, a 2 x 2 ANOVA showed a significant interaction between closeness and morality $F(1, 87) = 4.79, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .052$ (see Figure 4.2). One-tailed simple main effects showed that when participants thought of a moral close other they tended to choose less organic products ($M = 1.64, SD = 1.79$) than when they thought of a moral non-close other ($M = 2.73, SD = 2.60$), $p = .056$. By contrast, when participants thought of an immoral close other they tended to choose more organic products ($M = 2.52, SD = 2.10$) than when they thought of an immoral non-close other ($M = 1.55, SD = 2.42$), $p = .071$. In line with this, when participants thought of a moral close other they tended to choose less organic products ($M = 1.64, SD = 1.79$) than when they thought of a immoral close other ($M = 2.52, SD = 2.10$), $p = .091$ and when participants thought of a moral non-close other they tended to choose more organic products ($M = 2.73, SD = 2.60$) than when they thought of an immoral non-close other ($M = 1.55, SD = 2.42$), $p = .043$. Although the effects are only marginally significant, the means replicate the significant results of Study 4.1 and 4.2. The overall pattern of means (see Figure 4.2) and the significant interaction effect provide additional evidence for the notion that individuals balance their moral and immoral actions with those of close others, whereas individuals are less likely to balance the behaviors of non-close others.

General Discussion

In three studies we showed that individuals take close others into account when striving for moral balance. The moral and immoral behaviors of close others are therefore likely to spark respectively moral licensing and cleansing effects of the self. So if a close other behaves in a moral way, individuals are ironically more likely to subsequently behave in an environmentally unfriendly way. The same holds for the reverse: if a close other behaves immorally, individuals are subsequently more likely to be environmentally friendly. We argued that individuals actively balance close others' moral and immoral behaviors when striving for moral balance, because of the self-other overlap in close relationships (Aron et al., 1991; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007). Consistent with this, our studies demonstrated that individuals are less likely to show vicarious moral licensing and cleansing effects with non-close others (i.e., when there is less self-other overlap).

Our results contribute to previous research in several ways. First of all, we add to the literature on licensing and cleansing by showing that individuals not only seek balance in their own moral behaviors, but that they also seek balance with those close to them. Concerning close others there thus appears to be an interpersonal moral balancing effect. This is consistent with research that shows that others may be included in the self and may affect one's moral self-view (e.g., Aron et al., 1991; Kouchaki, 2011). The current research shows that as a result of including close others in the self, individuals also feel the need to balance the moral behaviors of those close to them. Therefore, our results show an important new factor in when and why individuals are likely to behave morally.

Furthermore, in the current research we investigated whether both vicarious licensing and cleansing may be affected by other individuals' behaviors and their degree of closeness whereas most studies investigate moral licensing and moral cleansing effects independently (e.g., Catlin & Wang, 2013; De Witt Huberts et al., 2012; Effron et al., 2009; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Kouchaki, 2011; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009; Tetlock et al., 2000; Tiefenbeck et al., 2013; but see Sachdeva et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2011). Future research could investigate vicarious licensing versus cleansing effects in more details and study whether vicarious licensing effects may be more likely than vicarious cleansing

effects. Ample research has shown individuals' tendency to be self-serving (e.g., Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Kunda, 1987; Sanitioso et al., 1990; see also Study 4 - Gino & Galinsky, 2012). In other words, individuals probably like an external source of justification for justifying their immoral behaviors. Therefore, vicarious licensing effects could be more likely than vicarious cleansing effects - since permitting oneself a morally questionable or vice behavior by relying on other individuals' morally laudable or virtuous choices seems to be more self-serving than compensating for other's morally questionable or vice behavior by behaving morally laudable or virtuous oneself. Whether this asymmetry exists is an interesting question for future research.

Lastly, we proposed and showed that individuals balance moral (and immoral) behaviors of close others, whereas individuals are less likely to balance the moral and (immoral) behaviors of non-close others. The cross-over interaction in our third study additionally suggested that contemplating non-close others may be more likely to instigate social norm rather than balancing effects. Thinking of a moral non-close other (vs. an immoral non-close other) tended to lead to *more* rather than less environmentally friendly behavior. This is in line with social norm studies that have consistently shown that the behavior of others influences behaviors of the self such that individuals are likely to behave consistent with those around them (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990; Goldstein et al., 2008). It thus appears to be the case that individuals balance others' behavior when there is a large degree of self-other overlap (i.e., a close other) but show social norm effects when there is less self-other overlap (i.e., a non-close other). Although future research is warranted, we suggest that the degree of closeness is thus an important moderator in expecting balancing versus social norms effects in the moral domain.

Conclusion

Individuals are social beings and their behaviors are often influenced by others. Others' moral behavior may inspire individuals to behave morally and be environmentally friendly (e.g., Gino & Galinsky, 2012; Goldstein et al., 2008). The current studies show that the reverse may also be true such that other's moral or environmentally friendly behavior may serve as an external source of justification for immoral or environmentally unfriendly behavior. This is especially the case when it concerns close others. For non-close others

these balancing effects are less likely. Feeling close to another person may thus have the downside of feeling vicariously licensed to behave in a morally questionable manner. The other side of the coin is that the immoral behaviors of close others may inspire individuals to 'make up for it' by behaving morally. When trying to understand why individuals behave morally questionable it is thus important to not only take in account their own previous behaviors, but also those of close others as individuals are truly social beings.