Psychological License: When It Is Needed and How It Functions

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Abstract

Differences among people in the actions they take or the opinions they express do not always reflect differences in underlying attitudes, preferences, or motivations. When people differ in the extent to which they are psychologically licensed (i.e., feel able to act without discrediting themselves), they will act differently despite having similar attitudes, preferences, and motivations. Wanting to do something is not sufficient to spur action; one must also feel licensed to do it. We show that feeling licensed can liberate people to express morally problematic attitudes that those who do not feel licensed are inhibited from expressing. We also show that feeling one lacks license can inhibit people from expressing even morally non-problematic attitudes that those who feel licensed are comfortable expressing. The chapter explores a wide range of social phenomena in which licensing plays a role and identifies a number of variables that grant or revoke psychological license.

Article Outline

1. Moral Licensing
    1.1 Domain-specific licensing
    1.2 Cross-domain moral licensing
    1.3 Licensing by observers
    1.4 Mechanisms underlying licensing
        1.4.1 Why does moral licensing occur?
            1.4.1.1 Licensing via balance: the moral credits model
            1.4.1.2 Licensing via construal: the moral credentials model
            1.4.1.3 Integrating credits and credentials
        1.4.2 When does behavioral history promote consistency, and when does it promote contrast?
            1.4.2.1 Individual differences
            1.4.2.2 Goal progress vs. goal commitment
            1.4.2.3 Avoiding hypocrisy
            1.4.2.4 Summary
        1.4.3 What is the role of counterfactual thinking in moral licensing?
    1.5 Conclusion

2. Standing as License
    2.1 Category membership and personal experience as standing
    2.2 Stake as standing
    2.3 Moral stake as standing
    2.4 Forfeiting standing
        2.4.1 Repudiating social category membership
        2.4.2 Undermining personal experience
    2.5 Reactions to others' standing
        2.5.1 Deferring to those with more standing
        2.5.2 Resenting those with more standing
        2.5.3 Inhibiting those with equal standing
        2.5.4 Reacting to those who act without standing
        2.5.5 Conclusion

3. General Discussion
    3.1 Summary
        3.1.1 The disinhibition story
        3.1.2 The inhibition story
    3.2 From whom does one need a license?
    3.3 Conclusion

4. References

Heather and Liz both oppose affirmative action, but only Heather, who frequently mentions her work on the Obama campaign, reveals her attitude to her friends. Cynthia and David both support insurance coverage for abortion, but Cynthia feels comfortable attending a pro-coverage rally, whereas David feels that his attendance would not be welcomed. Monique is outraged by what she perceives as an unfair grade, but refrains from complaining when she learns that Matt, who received a worse grade than she, has not complained. As these examples and many others from everyday life suggest, people do not always act on or even express their attitudes and feelings. One common reason for not expressing or acting on one's attitude is reputational concern: fear that doing so would signify, either to oneself or others, something discrediting about the self. Liz might keep her views on affirmative action to herself for fear of appearing racist; David might feel that it is not really his place, as a man, to attend a rally about a "women's issue;" Matt's forbearance from complaining about his "F" may shame Monique into keeping quiet about her outrage at receiving a "C^+."

People's reluctance to express their attitudes or act upon their preferences can have important consequences. One consequence is that the actual modal attitude of a group can be difficult to assess. Group members, for example, might not publicly express resentment but privately harbor it (Bicchieri, 2006; Kuran, 1997; D. T. Miller & Prentice, 1994). A second consequence is that it can be difficult to interpret differences between individuals. Those who do and do not express resentment, for example, might differ in the amount of resentment they feel, or in their comfort expressing it. It often will be viewed as more appropriate for some people to express resentment (or any other attitude) than for others. Identifying when and why expressing the same attitude or taking the same action can have different consequences for different people

is the goal of this chapter. Specifically, the chapter focuses on how *psychological license* regulates the comfort people feel expressing or acting on their attitudes.

By the term *psychological license*, we refer to people's perception that they are permitted to take an action or express a thought without fear of discrediting themselves. The defining experience of having license is the perception that one's behavioral history, social context, or category membership permit one to legitimately do or say something that otherwise would discredit the self. For example, a person might feel that having recently made a large donation to one charity licenses her to deny another charity's request for a donation. The defining experience of lacking license is the perception that one cannot legitimately do something that one could legitimately do if one had a different behavioral history, social context, or category membership. For example, despite wanting to discipline a misbehaving child, a person might feel that not being the child's parent deprives him of the license to do so.

Sometimes, license is enshrined in law, as is the case with the act of Congress that licenses an American in the Armed Forces who is a family's sole surviving child to apply for transfer away from position of imminent danger. Other times, people may have psychological license to act even without legal or institutional approval. For example, a soldier might feel that his years of loyal military service license him to violate regulations and go AWOL to avoid imminent danger. Note that being or feeling licensed does not mean that one is compelled to act in a certain way. Being a family's sole surviving child does not mean that one *must* apply for removal from imminent danger, only that one *may* if one wishes.

In this chapter, we demonstrate how the concept of licensing can help us better understand when people will and will not act upon their attitudes. Psychological license allows people to act without fearing that they will discredit themselves, but different kinds of license are

required to diminish concerns about different types of discredit. We first consider how people's perception of their past behavior can reduce their concern that acting on or expressing an attitude will discredit them morally. We next consider how people's perception of their relationship to a given issue can increase or reduce their concern with discrediting themselves by expressing an attitude about that issue, even if there is nothing morally discrediting about the attitude.

I. Moral licensing

A common reason people do not act upon or even express their attitudes is that they fear that doing so will signal to themselves and others something morally discrediting about the self. For example, people will refrain from expressing pride so as not to appear boastful, abstain from dessert so as not to feel like a glutton, or avoid violating a group norm so as not to be seen as a bad group member. But people's concern that a particular action will signal something discrediting about them does not depend only on the action itself; it also depends on their past behavior. People will feel comfortable expressing even potentially discrediting attitudes to the extent that they can point to past behaviors that license such expressions. We propose that when considering whether or not to express such attitudes, it is as if people ask themselves, "Can I say or do this without signaling something morally discrediting about myself?" To the extent that their past behavior makes them confident that the answer is yes, they will feel licensed to act. Thus, having behaved modestly licenses one to express pride without fear of appearing boastful, having ordered a salad instead of a steak licenses one to eat a decadent dessert without feeling like a glutton, and so forth. More generally, when people can call to mind previous instances of their own socially desirable or morally laudable behaviors, they will feel more comfortable taking actions that could be seen as socially undesirable or morally questionable. We call this phenomenon *moral licensing*.

In the following sections, we review several findings in the growing literature on moral licensing. First, we describe research showing that people who have a past history of socially desirable actions in a particular behavioral domain feel licensed to undertake morally questionable behavior in that same domain. Next, we turn to work suggesting that a past history of socially desirable behavior in one behavioral domain can even license people to undertake morally questionable behavior in another domain. In a third section, we present evidence suggesting that observers are sometimes willing to grant actors license on the basis of the types of behavioral histories that actors themselves find licensing. Finally, we consider a number of questions that remain unanswered about moral licensing: what mechanism is responsible for it, when it will be undermined by a motivation to be consistent, and what role counterfactual thinking plays in producing it.

A. Domain-specific moral licensing

Social norms in contemporary North America strongly proscribe expressing views that could be construed as prejudiced; though individuals often hold such views, they normally lack the psychological license to express them (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). The ability to point to previous actions that demonstrated one's egalitarianism, however, could allow one to obtain such a license. Having previously acted in a non-racist way, for example, might make one feel that expressing a racially questionable attitude would not signal that one is a racist. More generally, people may feel licensed to act on or express potentially discrediting attitudes in a given domain (e.g., related to race) when their prior behavior in the same domain renders it unlikely that expressing those attitudes would send a morally discrediting signal.

Consider the dilemma faced by white participants in a study by Monin and Miller (2001a) who were asked whether a particular job on a police force was better suited for Whites, for

Blacks, or equally suited for both races. Participants were told that the job required honesty and integrity, and that the police force was characterized by hostility towards African-Americans. On the one hand, many participants might have been tempted to describe the job as better suited for Whites, perhaps based on the concern that an African-American employee would perform poorly in a racially hostile environment. On the other hand, concern that this preference for Whites might appear racist could make participants feel unlicensed to express it. Before considering this scenario, participants first had to select one of four candidates in a different hiring task. In one condition, one candidate (the most qualified) was Black, whereas in another condition, all candidates were White. When participants had the opportunity to hire a Black applicant in the first task, they were more likely to describe the police job as better suited for Whites in the second task. Selecting an African-American in the first task thus seems to have licensed participants to favor Whites in the second task, presumably because it reduced participants' concern that doing so would signal something morally discrediting about themselves.

A similar finding was obtained in the context of the 2008 Presidential election (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009). Before the election, participants – all supporters of African-American candidate Barack Obama – responded to the police force scenario described above. Only participants who were given an opportunity to express their support for Obama before responding to this scenario described the police job as better suited for Whites than for Blacks. It seems that endorsing Obama provided participants with evidence of their non-racist views that they could point to when assessing whether or not favoring Whites would signal that they were racist. A follow-up study ruled out two alternative explanations. First, merely expressing one's political beliefs was insufficient to produce the licensing effect: participants described the job as equally well suited for both races when they expressed their support for John Kerry, a former

Democratic Presidential candidate who is White. Second, simply being primed with Obama was insufficient to produce the effect: participants described the job as equally well suited for both races when they identified Obama as the younger of the two Presidential front-runners but did not have the opportunity to endorse him. Instead, it seems that the act of endorsing Obama made participants feel that they had established themselves as non-prejudiced and therefore were licensed to express an ambiguously prejudiced view.

Recent research suggests that people will strategically take actions that reduce the likelihood that future behaviors will signal something morally discrediting about the self. In one study (Merritt, Fein, & Savitsky, 2009), participants were told they would complete a hiring task the next day, and were given information about the two candidates between whom they would have to choose. Then, they were asked to indicate whether or not each of several ambiguous behaviors were racist (e.g., a woman crosses the street at night when she sees a Black man; Crosby & Monin, 2009). Participants indicated that more of these behaviors were racist when the least-qualified job candidate was Black. Apparently, the expectation of choosing a White candidate over a Black one raised concerns about appearing racially insensitive, thus motivating participants to establish themselves as racially sensitive by identifying more behaviors as racist.

In a similar study, Bradley, King, and Hebl (2009) allowed participants to choose between writing about a Hispanic friend or a Hispanic acquaintance. Participants who expected to write two additional essays, one opposing affirmative action for Hispanics and one about a negative experience with Hispanics, were more likely to choose to write about a friend than were participants who expected to write only one additional essay about a positive experience with Hispanics. The threat of behaving in a way that might signal prejudice against Hispanics seems to have prompted participants to strategically establish themselves as non-prejudiced by

describing their friendship with a Hispanic person. These results may explain the observation that people frequently preface ambiguous statements about stigmatized groups by noting that "some of my best friends" are members of that group.

The research reviewed in this section assumes that behaviors such as disagreeing with sexist statements (Monin & Miller, 2001a), endorsing Obama (Effron et al., 2009), or writing about a minority friend (Bradley et al., 2009) license people to express potentially biased viewpoints because it provides them with evidence of their lack of bias. Although this hypothesized process was not directly measured in these studies, other research has manipulated it. Uhlmann and Cohen (2007) gave some participants an opportunity to establish their objectivity by asking them how much they agreed with statements like, "My judgments are based on a logical analysis of the facts" (p. 209). The data revealed a licensing effect: male participants who were given the chance to agree with these statements, compared to males who were not, were more likely to express a hiring preference that discriminated against women. Presumably, having established their objectivity made male participants more confident that expressing this preference would not signal personal bias.

Moral licensing is not confined to the domain of prejudice. Jordan, Mullen, and Murninghan (2009, Study 2) investigated the licensing effects of helpful behavior. Participants assigned to write about a time when they had helped someone, compared to those assigned to write about a typical Tuesday, subsequently expressed weaker intentions to help people in other ways (volunteering, donating to charity, and donating blood). This licensing effect seems not to be driven by simply feeling proud of oneself: writing about a past accomplishment did not affect participants' intentions to help.

Other studies have demonstrated licensing effects in the consumer domain. In one study, participants had the opportunity to choose a movie to watch from a list that included both "low-brow" and "high-brow" movies (Khan & Dhar, 2007). This decision was intended to create a conflict for participants: on the one hand, they may have been tempted to choose a more enjoyable low-brow movie, but on the other hand, they may have feared that doing so would signal that they were uncultured and unsophisticated. The anticipation of choosing a high-brow movie in the future, however, might license the choice of a low-brow movie in the present. Indeed, when participants anticipated having an opportunity to choose a second movie from the list, they were more likely to choose a low-brow movie as their first choice. A follow-up study similarly showed that participants were more likely to choose a tasty but unhealthy snack (a cookie) over a healthy but less-tasty one (plain low-fat yogurt) when they expected to be faced with the same decision later. One interpretation of these findings is that merely anticipating making a healthy choice or choosing a sophisticated movie made participants feel that they had evidence of their health consciousness or cultural sophistication, thus allowing them to make an unhealthy or uncultured choice without concern that these choices would signal that they were unhealthy or uncultured. People thus seem to be willing to give themselves credit for their good intentions, even without acting on them (see also Kruger & Gilovich, 2004).

If intending to behave well is sufficient to license one to behave badly, perhaps merely considering behaving well is also sufficient. Evidence for this possibility comes from a series of studies in which participants made hypothetical choices among snack foods (Wilcox, Vallen, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2009). In one condition, participants chose among three indulgent snacks, one of which was especially indulgent (e.g., French fries); in another condition, participants chose among the same snacks with the addition of a healthier snack (e.g., salad). Among

participants who were high in self-control, the presence of the healthy snack *increased* the likelihood of choosing the especially indulgent snack. Perhaps participants who were high in self-control were more likely to consider choosing the healthy option, which ironically licensed them to choose the least healthy option. An alternative is that viewing the healthy option reminded participants high in self-control of healthy choices they had made in the past (whereas those low in self-control had fewer accessible memories of choosing healthy snacks). Either way, it appears that the presence of the healthy choice made participants less concerned with being healthy: a lexical decision task showed that for participants high in self-control, the healthy option made the concept *healthy* less accessible (whereas the opposite was the case for those low in self-control).

In summary, people apparently feel licensed to act in potentially discrediting ways when their behavioral record tempers their fear that the action would convey a discrediting signal. Intending to behave well in the future, even if one does not act on those intentions, may also be sufficient to make people feel licensed. The idea that even unfulfilled intentions can provide license raises the question of whether licensing is primarily for public or a private consumption. In other words, to feel licensed do people need to establish their behavioral history and intended behavioral future to others, or merely to themselves? In brief, the available data suggest that public behavior is not always necessary to produce licensing (Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Monin & Miller, 2001a), although we argue that the imagined reactions of others to one's behavior nonetheless play a central role in the phenomenon. We return to this issue in greater detail in the General Discussion.

In the research reviewed in this section, both the licensing behavior and the licensed behavior have been in the same domain (e.g., both related to race or to healthy eating). In the

next section, we present evidence that good behavior in one domain can license otherwise-discrediting behavior in an unrelated domain.

B. Cross-domain moral licensing

Behaviors that establish oneself as moral in general can have broadly licensing properties. For example, to the extent that environmentally friendly behavior makes one feel like a moral person, one may feel licensed to engage in morally questionable behaviors in domains unrelated to environmentalism. Mazar and Zhong (in press) investigated this possibility by asking participants to select among an array of products, manipulated so that the majority of the products were either “green” (i.e., environmentally friendly) or conventional. Participants whose array allowed them to choose more green products, compared to those whose array contained fewer green products, were more likely to cheat on an experimental task and steal money from the experimenter. A different study showed that whereas choosing green products made participants more likely to behave selfishly, mere exposure to green products did not (and tended to have the opposite effect), thus ruling out priming as an explanation for the results. It appears that purchasing green products provided participants with evidence of their general moral worthiness, thus licensing them to cheat and steal without fear of discrediting themselves. Other researchers obtained similar results by having participants simply recall their past behavior (Jordan et al., 2009). Participants assigned to recall helping someone, compared to those assigned to recall using someone to accomplish a selfish goal, were more likely to cheat on a subsequent experimental task.

If this kind of cross-domain moral licensing works by making people feel moral in general, then simply inducing them to think about themselves in a morally favorable light might produce similar effects. Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin (2009) manipulated whether participants

wrote a story about themselves using words that were morally positive (e.g., *caring, generous, kind)*, neutral (e.g., *book, keys, house*), or negative (e.g., *mean, greedy, selfish*). When subsequently given the opportunity to donate some of their experimental payment to charity, participants assigned to use positive words donated the least amount of money. A follow-up study ruled out priming as an explanation for these results: participants did not show the same effect when they used positive versus negative words to write about someone else. Apparently, establishing oneself as having moral attributes – even without performing or recalling actual behavior – reduces people's concern that their subsequent actions will morally discredit them.

The possibility that moral behavior is not necessary for cross-domain licensing to occur is further supported by the finding that merely thinking about hypothetical moral behavior is sufficient to license unrelated behavior. Khan and Dhar (2006) found that allowing participants to make a hypothetical choice about whether to volunteer for one organization or another licensed them to express a preference for a luxury good over a utilitarian one. Mediation analysis indicated that the initial choice made participants feel more moral (e.g., compassionate, helpful), which increased their expressed preference for the luxury good. Although purchasing luxury goods may not fall within the moral domain for most people, feeling moral seems to have made participants feel licensed to make a potentially frivolous or wasteful decision without fearing this decision would discredit them as frivolous or wasteful people.

The research reviewed in this section suggests that licensing effects do not require that the licensed behavior and the behavior that grants the license be in the same domain. The ability to point to past acts of broadly moral behavior seems sufficient to license people to act in morally questionable ways– even if the licensing behavior (e.g., purchasing green products) is unrelated to the licensed behavior (e.g., lying and stealing; Mazar & Zhong, in press). Moreover,

evidence suggests that merely feeling moral, even without having actually behaved morally, is sufficient to license potentially discrediting behavior (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Sachdeva, et al., 2009).

C. Licensing by observers

Are observers willing to extend license to actors on the basis of the actors' behavioral history? Some evidence suggests that they are. Effron and Monin (2009, Study 1) found that participants expressed less condemnation of targets who committed a transgression (e.g., marital infidelity) when the targets had previously performed good deeds that were unrelated to the transgression (e.g., volunteering at a soup kitchen). In a related study, Nisan and Horencyzk (1990) asked Israeli 7th graders to read vignettes about target people who were tempted to commit transgressions. One of the targets was described as generally well behaved, and one was described as generally badly behaved. When asked whom they would rather allow to transgress, participants were more likely to choose the well-behaved target; free responses suggested that this was because they perceived him as a good person.

Not all observers may be equally willing to grant actors license on the basis of the same track record, however. In particular, members of groups that suffer from an actor's misdeeds may be more reluctant than others to grant license to the actor based on a commendable behavioral history. In one study, participants read about actors' ambiguously discriminatory behaviors towards gays and lesbians (e.g., a banker denying a loan to a gay couple; Krumm & Corning, 2008). Heterosexual participants rated ambiguous behaviors that were preceded by acts of non-prejudice (e.g., attending a gay pride parade) as less discriminatory than different ambiguous behaviors that were not preceded by acts of non-prejudice. This effect was

attenuated, however, among homosexual participants, suggesting that members of the group against whom the potential prejudice would be directed remained wary of the actors.

In a similar study, Czopp (2009, February) had Black and White participants evaluate a potentially offensive statement about African Americans by a White target person who either did or did not precede this statement with the disclaimer, “I’m not racist or anything, but …”. Although White participants indicated that the potentially offensive statement was somewhat less racist when it was preceded by the disclaimer, Black participants showed the reverse pattern. Consistent with Krumm and Corning’s findings (2008), it seems as though members of the group targeted by the potentially prejudiced statement were less willing to license it than were members of the non-targeted group.

D. Mechanisms underlying licensing

1. Why does moral licensing occur?

Described in broad terms, moral licensing occurs because one’s behavioral history allows one to act in a way that might otherwise signal specific or general moral discredit. But how does one’s behavioral history allow one to avoid discredit? Two different answers have emerged from the literature.

a. Licensing via balance: the moral credits model. One possibility is that behavioral history can offset or balance out future wrongdoing. As an example, consider a group member who wishes to deviate from group norms without being perceived as a bad group member. According to Hollander (1958), the group member can do so if she has a history of conforming to group norms. Hollander suggested that conformity to group norms allows group members to accumulate *idiosyncrasy credits* that can then be used to “purchase” the right to deviate. The metaphor is one of a bank account or balance sheet: conformity provides credits, whereas norm

violations incur debits that will be tolerated so long as one has sufficient credits to balance them out. In other words, a history of conformity negates the discredit that norm violations would otherwise signal. Though Hollander's work is regularly cited, direct tests of his claims remain scarce (for a review, see T. H. Stone & Cooper, 2009).

Hollander restricted the scope of his theory to the domain of conformity and influence in groups, but more recently theorists have proposed a similar, more general view of licensing that we describe as the *moral credits* model (see also Merritt, Effron, & Monin, in press). In this view, moral behavior provides one with moral credits that serve to balance out subsequent immoral behaviors, conceptualized as moral debits. Immoral behavior will be permitted, both by the self and by others, so long as it is sufficiently balanced by moral credits accrued from past good deeds (Jordan et al., 2009; Nisan, 1991; Sachdeva et al., 2009; Zhong, Liljenquist, & Cain, 2009).

There are two noteworthy features of the moral credits model. First, moral credits make bad deeds seem more permissible without changing their perceived meaning. In other words, someone with moral credits who commits a transgression will still be perceived (by himself and others) as transgressing, though this transgression will seem more permissible than it would have without credits. Second, the moral credits model posits a moral self-concept that fluctuates depending on one's history of good and bad deeds: good deeds boost the moral self-concept, whereas bad ones deflate it (Jordan et al., 2009; Nisan, 1991; Sachdeva et al., 2009; Zhong et al., 2009).

The psychology described by the moral credits model is analogous to the practice of purchasing "carbon offsets" to minimize one's environmental impact. Money spent on carbon offsets contributes to projects that decrease the amount of CO_2 emitted, or already in the

atmosphere – for example, by funding the construction of a hydroelectric dam or the planting of trees. Literally, the purchase of a carbon offset can allow one to do something environmentally harmful, such as taking a transcontinental flight, while keeping one's net environmental impact neutral. Psychologically, the purchase of a carbon offset may license a traveler to do something morally questionable, like contributing to carbon emissions, while maintaining a positive view of her morality. Environmentally and morally, carbon offsets do not change the meaning of a transcontinental flight: the flight still emits carbon and from an environmental perspective it still represents a morally questionable behavior. Instead, the offsets balance out whatever harms the flight causes to the environment and to the traveler's sense of moral worth.

b. Licensing via construal: the moral credentials model. A second mechanism that could underlie licensing is what we have called *moral credentials* (Monin & Miller, 2001a). The moral credentials model of licensing differs from the moral credits model on two key features. First, in the credentials model, one's behavioral history provides license by changing the way subsequent behavior is construed. Consider again the study by Monin and Miller (2001a) in which expressing a preference for hiring a Black applicant in a first task licensed white participants to say on a subsequent task that a police job was better suited for Whites than for Blacks. As noted previously, a preference for Whites on the second task was highly ambiguous: it could have represented prejudice, or it could have represented a more legitimate preference based on the way the job was described. Monin and Miller argued that hiring a Black applicant on the first task made participants feel that they had established their moral credentials as non-prejudiced, thus increasing their confidence that their preference for Whites in the second task would be construed as legitimate rather than prejudiced. By contrast, a moral *credits* interpretation of the results would suggest that hiring a Black applicant made participants feel licensed to express a

view that *would* be construed as prejudiced, secure in the knowledge that this misdeed would be balanced out by their prior act of non-racism. More generally, moral credits provide license by offsetting the negative impact of a transgression on one's moral self-concept, whereas moral credentials provide license by making a behavior appear as if it were not a transgression at all. If moral credits function like currency that can be used to "purchase" a license to commit immoral behavior, moral credentials function like a character witness on which one can call to testify that subsequent behavior is not immoral.

A second key feature on which the moral credentials and the moral credits models of licensing differ is that only the moral credits model posits that good deeds and bad deeds make one's moral self-concept fluctuate around an equilibrium (e.g., Zhong, et al., 2009). If, as in the moral credentials model, one's behavioral history makes morally questionable deeds seem as if they were not transgressions at all, then one can perform these deeds without "taking a hit" to one's moral self-concept. One implication of this difference between credits and credentials is that the former, but not the latter, should diminish with use. Imagine that leaving a soup kitchen, a volunteer is approached first by one panhandler and then another, each asking for money. To the extent that the volunteer derived moral credits from her recent volunteering, she would probably feel licensed to say no only to the first panhandler; by the time the second one approached her, she would have already used up her credits in "purchasing" a license to act selfishly with the first panhandler. To the extent that she derived moral credentials from volunteering, however, declining to give money to panhandlers should not appear selfish at all – perhaps instead it would appear to arise out of a concern that they would "just spend the money on drugs." As a result, moral credentials would license her to decline to give to both panhandlers, because neither act would seem like a transgression.

Because licensing via credentials, unlike licensing via credits, does not depend on fluctuations in the moral self-concept, even behaviors that are completely irrelevant to the moral self-concept should be able to license subsequent actions. For example, Dutton (1971) found that restaurateurs were more likely to deny service to an inappropriately dressed White couple than an inappropriately dressed Black couple, presumably out of concern that turning away the Black couple would appear racist. When restaurateurs had previously denied service to a White couple, however, they were equally likely to deny service to an inappropriately dressed couple of either race. Having turned away a White couple for a dress-code violation seems to have made the restaurateurs more confident that refusing to seat the Black couple reflected their reaction to the couple's dress, and not to their race. It was probably not the case that turning away Whites made the restaurateurs feel particularly moral. In fact, the restaurateurs likely did not realize the credentialing implications of their behavior at the time; instead, they likely recruited this behavior as credentials only when faced with the decision about whether or not to turn away the Black couple. These findings raise the possibility that even immoral behavior can have a licensing effect – a prediction not made by the moral credits perspective. To the extent that expressing blatant anti-White prejudice implies that one is unbiased towards Blacks, for example, it might license one to express ambiguously discriminatory preferences about Blacks.

To summarize our discussion thus far of potential mechanisms behind licensing, credits and credentials differ on two key features. First, whereas credentials change the way subsequent behavior is construed, credits do not. Second, credits boost one's moral self-concept, allowing one to tolerate a challenge to the moral self-concept caused by misdeeds; licensing via credentials need not involve such fluctuation. As a result, credits, but not credentials, should

diminish over time, and credits, but not credentials, require performing morally laudable behavior.

c. Integrating credits and credentials. Researchers investigating moral licensing have differed on whether they frame their findings in terms of moral credits or moral credentials. Sachdeva et al. (2009) for example, suggested that thinking about oneself in positive terms promotes the "accrual of 'moral currency'" (p. 527) that can purchase a license to engage in future questionable behavior (e.g., declining to donate). Similarly, Jordan et al. (2009) interpreted their licensing findings in the framework of a "moral equilibrium" model (see also Zhong, et al., 2009). By contrast, in line with Monin and Miller's description of moral credentials (2001a), Effron and colleagues (2009) argued that endorsing Obama made participants confident that a subsequent, ambiguous preference would be construed as less racist (see also Merritt et al., 2009). Finally, the finding that prior pro-gay behavior by actors led observers to rate actors' ambiguous behavior towards gays and lesbians as less discriminatory (Krumm & Corning, 2008) is consistent with the credentials view as well.

Many of the findings reviewed above could be interpreted within either the credits or credentials frameworks. For example, in the study by Sachdeva et al., writing about themselves using positive adjectives may have made participants feel sufficiently moral to offset the perceived selfishness of declining to donate (an interpretation consistent with the moral credits model), or it could have made them more confident that declining to donate would not appear selfish (e.g., stemming from a lack of disposable income rather than from misanthropy – an interpretation consistent with the moral credentials model). Likewise, in the Bradley et al. (2009) study, writing about a positive interaction with a minority group member may have made participants feel that they had established themselves as non-prejudiced (moral credentials), or it

may have made them feel that doing something non-prejudiced would offset doing something prejudiced (moral credits).

We should emphasize that it is not necessary to view credentials and credits as competing models; they can be viewed as two independent routes to licensing. In fact, we suspect that credits and credentials may often operate simultaneously to produce moral licensing. For example, someone who makes a large donation to charity may feel that she has accumulated sufficient moral credits to license selfish behavior, such as leaving a small tip at a restaurant. Yet to the extent that her donation also establishes her credentials as a generous person, skimping on the tip may appear less selfish than it otherwise would. Situations will vary in their capacity to promote licensing via one mechanism or another. Two important variables that likely determine whether prior behavior licenses a target behavior via credentials or credits are a) the ambiguity of the target behavior, and b) whether or not it is in the same domain as the prior behavior.

We first consider the target behavior's ambiguity. Some behaviors clearly represent transgressions. For example, failing to hire an applicant based on the premise that his race "makes him incapable of working hard" would be a blatant example of racial discrimination. Other behaviors may generate suspicion, but ultimately remain ambiguous as to whether or not they represent transgressions. For example, in the police force task created by Monin and Miller (2001a), expressing a preference for hiring a White person could have represented racial prejudice, or it could have arisen from a reluctance to place Blacks in a work environment in which they would face others' racism. Because moral credentials function by changing one's construal of a target behavior, licensing is most likely to occur via moral credentials when the target behavior is ambiguous, and thus open to favorable reconstrual. Thus, a track record of egalitarianism should make a racially ambiguous preference seem non-racist. By contrast, the

licensing of blatant transgressions is most likely to occur via credits. Thus, a morally admirable track record may make blatant acts of discrimination seem more permissible by offsetting their immorality without making them seem any less discriminatory.

A second variable that likely determines whether licensing occurs via credits or credentials is whether or not the target behavior is in the same domain as prior behavior. The research reviewed above suggests that questionable behaviors can be licensed by a prior action in either the same domain (e.g., Monin & Miller, 2001a) or a different domain (e.g., Khan & Dhar, 2006). If a target behavior is morally ambiguous and can be reconstrued in a more favorable light, prior behavior in the same domain should seem more relevant for disambiguating it than prior behavior in a different domain. For example, whether or not one voted for Obama seems more relevant than whether or not one donated to the United Way for determining whether an ambiguous hiring preference is racist. Thus, ambiguous behavior is more likely to be licensed via credentials when the relevant prior behavior is in the same domain and via credits when it is in a different domain.

Effron and Monin (2009, Study 3) tested these predictions in the context of observers licensing actors. Participants read about a target person who had committed an ambiguous target behavior (e.g., promoted five White employees, but not two Black employees), and then participants indicated how much they condemned the target and his behavior. Effron and Monin manipulated whether the target behavior was preceded by good deeds in the same domain as the transgression (e.g., advocated for more minority recruitment), in a different domain (e.g., advocated for sexual harassment prevention), or was preceded by no good deeds. Orthogonally, they also manipulated whether the target behavior represented a blatant transgression (e.g., the executive said that he thought Blacks were unsuitable for management) or remained ambiguous

(e.g., the executive said that the two Black employees had simply been outperformed by colleagues who happened to be White). Evidence for licensing via moral credentials was obtained only when the target behavior was a) ambiguous, and b) in the same domain as the target's prior good deeds. Under these conditions, participants expressed less condemnation than they did when they had not read about any good deeds, and most importantly, this effect was mediated by participants' construal of the target behavior. Specifically, participants licensed the target behavior when it was ambiguous because prior same-domain good deeds led them to perceive it as less of a transgression (e.g., relatively unlikely to represent racial discrimination).

Evidence for licensing via moral credits was also obtained, but under different conditions. When the target person had performed good deeds in a *different* domain than the target behavior, participants responded with less condemnation than when he had performed no good deeds, regardless of whether the target behavior was ambiguous or a blatant transgression. This licensing effect was *not* mediated by construal, indicating that it was driven by a different mechanism than the licensing effect produced by same-domain good deeds. Presumably, different-domain good deeds provided targets with a license by offsetting even behaviors that participants perceived as blatant transgressions.

In summary, the Effron and Monin (2009, Study 3) research suggests that observers' willingness to license actors can be driven either by moral credits or by moral credentials. Moral credentials seem to operate when good deeds precede ambiguous behavior in the same domain. Moral credits seem to operate when good deeds precede behavior that is in a different domain and that can be either morally ambiguous or a blatant violation. We suspect that the two mechanisms function similarly with respect to actors' licensing of themselves, but confirmation of this prediction must await further research.

2. When does behavioral history promote consistency, and when does it promote contrast?

The licensing phenomena reviewed in this section can all be described as contrast effects: acting in one way (e.g., making an egalitarian decision) frees people to act in an inconsistent way (e.g., favoring Whites over Blacks). Yet there is considerable research in social psychology that documents people's motivation to act consistently (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Freedman & Fraser, 1966; R. L. Miller, Brickman, & Bolen, 1975). On the basis of this research, it might be predicted that one's behavioral history would constrain one to act consistently rather than liberate one to act inconsistently. When does one's behavioral history liberate and when does it constrain? We suggest several possibilities.

a. Individual differences. People who are especially motivated to view themselves as adhering to a specific set of values (e.g., people who place high value on being egalitarian) may be more likely than others to be constrained by their past behavior that is relevant to those values (e.g., expressing egalitarian views). One reason is that these individuals may simply exhibit less behavioral variability – for example, as Zhong and colleagues (2009) have argued, individuals who place a high value on morality (e.g., see Aquino & Reed, 2002) may not allow themselves to deviate much from the straight and narrow path, and thus act with greater moral consistency over time than others do. Another reason is that individuals who are highly motivated to view themselves as adhering to certain values may set a higher threshold for what behaviors establish their adherence. For example, an employer for whom egalitarian values are only moderately important might feel that hiring a single minority candidate established himself as egalitarian, thus licensing him to pass over other minority candidates. By contrast, an employer for whom egalitarian values are highly important might view hiring a minority as a step in the right

direction, but also as a reminder of how much needed to be done to achieve true equality in hiring practices.

Consistent with this analysis, Effron et al. (2009, Study 3) found that expressing support for Obama had different effects on Obama supporters with different racial attitudes, as measured by the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). Participants with more negative racial attitudes (for whom racial egalitarianism was presumably less important) showed a contrast (licensing) effect: endorsing Obama made them recommend allocating more money to an organization serving a White community at the expense of one serving a Black community. Participants with more positive racial attitudes (for whom racial egalitarianism was presumably more important) showed a consistency effect: endorsing Obama made them recommend allocating marginally more money to an organization serving Blacks at the expense of one serving Whites. One interpretation is that endorsing Obama made participants with more negative racial attitudes feel that they had done enough to establish themselves as non-racists, and therefore were licensed to increase their allocation to Whites, whereas endorsing Obama served as a reminder to participants with more positive racial attitudes that more needed to be done to live up to their egalitarian values.

b. Goal progress vs. goal commitment. The interpretation of the Effron et al. (2009, Study 3) findings offered above fits with theory from the literature on goals. Consider a student who has spent an afternoon studying. According to Fishbach and Dhar (2005), if studying is framed as *progress* towards the goal of completing academic tasks, the student should feel liberated to put down the books and socialize with her friends (a licensing effect), whereas if studying is framed as *commitment* to this goal, she should be more likely to forego socializing and continue studying (a consistency effect). Whether the student interprets her studying as commitment or

progress will depend in part on whether she is focused on the subordinate goal of studying or the superordinate goal of academic success. If focused on the superordinate goal, she will be more likely to view her actions as representing commitment, and therefore redouble her academic efforts rather than feel licensed to socialize (Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006; see also Koo & Fishbach, 2008). Perhaps participants in Effron et al. (2009, Study 3) who had more positive racial attitudes viewed their Obama vote as commitment to a superordinate goal of being egalitarian, which motivated them to act consistently by giving more money to the organization serving Blacks.

c. Avoiding hypocrisy. One factor that could prevent people from acting inconsistently with their previous behavior is the concern that doing so would make them appear like a hypocrite, defined as someone who "says one thing, but does another" (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005; see also J. Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). People have good reason to fear the appearance of hypocrisy. Consider reactions to Eliot Spitzer, who fought against prostitution and sex trafficking as New York state district attorney, but patronized prostitutes himself as New York state governor. The public showed little inclination to license Spitzer's transgression based on his work as DA, which undeniably contributed to the fight against sex crimes. On the contrary, as political consultant Roger Stone, Jr. explained, "Spitzer held himself out as a model of rectitude, as morally superior, and prosecuted escort services while patronizing one. This is really about hypocrisy and not sex" (quoted in Hakim & Santos, 2008). Empirical evidence has also demonstrated people's negative responses to hypocrites. In one study, observers expressed greater *schadenfreude* (pleasure at another's misfortune) toward a student who was punished for academic dishonesty when the

student had previously helped punish others' academic dishonesty, and was therefore perceived as hypocritical (Powell & Smith, 2009).

Concerns about hypocrisy seem especially likely to nullify licensing effects when three conditions exist. The first is when people's prior behavior is perceived as a claim about their own moral values. For example, Spitzer's fight to reduce prostitution seemed like a claim that he personally opposed prostitution and that others should too, which made his own visits to prostitutes appear hypocritical. By contrast, performing well on a midterm examination and then failing the final examination would not be hypocritical, because it would not contradict one's stated values. Under-preparing for an exam after touting the importance of hard work, however, would seem hypocritical.

A second condition in which the fear of hypocrisy is likely to nullify licensing is when people's prior behavior is in the same domain as the subsequent, potentially hypocritical behavior. Someone who donates to charity and then makes a series of sexist comments may be a boor, but is not a hypocrite. By contrast, someone who writes an editorial about the importance of gender equality and then makes sexist comments is a hypocrite. The more similar the domains of the prior and subsequent behavior, the more hypocrisy will be a concern.

A third condition is the ambiguity of the potentially hypocritical behavior. Earlier, we drew a distinction between blatant transgressions and ambiguous behaviors that, though suspicious, need not represent transgressions. Blatant transgressions clearly contradict claims implied by prior behavior. Suspicious but ambiguous behavior, by contrast, can be reconstrued in a more favorable light when prior behavior provides moral credentials. For example, marching in a gay rights parade might make firing a gay employee because of his sexual orientation (a blatant transgression) seem hypocritical, but it might make firing a gay employee who has been slightly

underperforming (an ambiguous behavior) seem less likely to represent discrimination. The idea that ambiguous transgressions are more easily licensed than blatant ones may explain group differences in observers' willingness to license potentially prejudiced behavior (Czopp, 2009, February; Krumm & Corning, 2008). Individuals who would not be targeted by this prejudice may be more likely to perceive such statements as ambiguous, and therefore be more willing to license them, than individuals who would be targeted.

Research by Effron and Monin (2009, Study 3), described previously, tested two of these conditions under which hypocrisy might preempt licensing. Recall that an actor's history of moral behavior made observers license his ambiguously immoral behavior, regardless of whether or not the two behaviors were in the same domain. Recall also that an actor's history of moral behavior made observers license even blatant transgressions, so long as the transgressions were in a different domain than the prior moral behavior. This study also revealed that observers were *unwilling* to license blatant transgressions (e.g., denying a deserved promotion to two employees because of their race) that were in the same domain as prior moral behavior (e.g., promoting the welfare of racial minorities). Further analysis showed that this was because same-domain moral behaviors made blatant transgressions appear hypocritical, which suppressed licensing. In other words, learning about same-domain moral behavior would have increased participants' willingness to license blatant transgressions if this willingness had not been counteracted by the ascription of hypocrisy.

d. Summary. In this section, we have suggested that one's behavioral history will liberate rather than constrain future behaviors when: a) one acts in domains that are relatively unimportant to one's identity, b) one's past behaviors are framed as progress rather than commitment to a goal (e.g., Fishbach & Dhar, 2005), or c) one can avoid appearing hypocritical

because past behavior appears not to make a claim about one's values, future behavior is morally ambiguous, or past and future behaviors are in different domains. Additional research is needed to test each of these and other possibilities more thoroughly.

3. What is the role of counterfactual thinking in moral licensing?

Consistent with the literature on moral licensing, we have focused our discussion on how acting in socially desirable ways licenses ones to act in potentially socially undesirable ways. It seems likely, however, that *abstaining* from socially undesirable behavior can also provide license. For example, skipping dessert at lunch licenses one to eat a more indulgent dinner; declining to lodge a complaint in the past licenses one to complain in the future. In reference to Bill Clinton's critics during his second term in office, the journalist Gary Wills observed that, "Some of these [critics] believe that their showing a bit of restraint in dealing with sexual allegations [about Clinton] gives them the mandate for [making] any or all other charges." In effect, Wills is saying that by abstaining from criticizing Clinton for his alleged sexual indiscretions, some critics felt licensed to hammer him on other charges.

These examples illustrate the role that counterfactual thinking may play in moral licensing. That is, thoughts about what one *could have* done, but declined to do, may provide license as effectively as what one actually did. Counterfactual thinking may help explain why people seem to be willing to license themselves based on relatively unremarkable behaviors. For example, selecting the one Black candidate in a first hiring task licensed participants to describe a subsequent job as better suited for Whites than for Blacks – even though the Black candidate in the first task was clearly the most qualified (Monin & Miller, 2001a). Objectively, selecting the Black candidate represented only weak evidence of one's lack of racism, yet it seems to have made participants feel that they had established themselves as non-racists. We suspect that the

counterfactual thought, "I *could have* chosen a less qualified White candidate" contributed to this feeling. It was not only what participants *did* (acting somewhat non-racist) that licensed them, but also what they did *not* do (acting flagrantly racist).

More generally, the idea that counterfactual thinking plays a role in moral licensing suggests that the extent to which a given behavior provides license will depend not only on the behavior itself, but also on other behaviors that one could have performed instead. Ordering salad over pasta for lunch may license some indulgence at dinner, but it would license even greater indulgence if one chose salad over French fries. Similarly, traveling by public transportation (an environmentally friendly behavior) will provide greater license if one could have traveled by car than if public transportation were the only option. In both of these cases, it is the counterfactual thought about what one could have done that licenses more powerfully than what one actually did.

E. Conclusion

People will be inhibited from expressing their attitudes and preferences if they worry that doing so will signal something morally discrediting about them. When this happens, individuals find themselves in an approach-avoidance conflict situation (Lewin, 1951): Their desire to act on their attitudes pushes them in one direction, whereas their desire not to discredit themselves pushes them in the other direction. Licensing can be viewed as a process that diminishes the inhibitory force of people's avoidance motivation, thereby liberating them to act on their approach motivation. A licensed person is thus a disinhibited person – one for whom a psychological barrier has been removed. Moral licensing in particular, as we have defined it, occurs when one's past actions (or current intentions) reduce one's concerns that one's future

actions will be morally discrediting. Feeling that one has a moral license is thus empowering: it permits people to do what they otherwise would not psychologically permit themselves to do.

Our discussion of moral licensing provides insight into why some individuals will express a potentially discrediting attitude when others will not. On the one hand, an individual who expresses such an attitude may hold it more strongly than those who do not express it, or perhaps find the discredit less aversive. On the other hand, as our discussion implies, he or she may simply have a different behavioral history than others – one that leaves him or her less worried than others that expressing the attitude will be discrediting. People's concern about what future actions will say about them depends critically on what they think their past actions have said about them.

In the next section, we examine licensing from another perspective. Our focus shifts from the disinhibiting effect of having license to the inhibiting effect of lacking license. We also shift from considering people's concern about bringing moral discredit to themselves to considering their concern with acting in a way in which they are not socially entitled to act. Specifically, the next section examines how a lack of psychological license can inhibit one from expressing attitudes that are not themselves morally discrediting but that one may nonetheless feel disentitled to express.

II. Standing as License

Sometimes, people are concerned that their future actions will signal something morally questionable about themselves, and therefore they require what we have described as a moral license, obtained from their past behavior, in order to act comfortably. Other times, however, people feel uncomfortable expressing or acting upon attitudes that are not themselves morally problematic. Even when people are not concerned that an attitude will call their morality into

question (e.g., portray them as a racist, ingrate, or braggart), they may still feel that it would not be their place to act on or express the attitude. In other words, they may feel they are not entitled to express the attitude – that doing so would be illegitimate or inappropriate, and therefore discredit them. In order to feel comfortable speaking up or acting in such situations, people require a different kind of license than a moral license: They require what we describe as *psychological standing*, which refers to the subjective sense of legitimacy or entitlement to act (D. T. Miller, Effron, & Zak, 2009). Just as the courts must decide who does and does not have the legal standing to bring a case forward for judicial review, social groups decide who does and does not have the standing to express a particular position or to take a particular action. For example, communities might agree, even if only tacitly, that only the parents of misbehaving children have the standing to discipline them, that only those who voted in the last election have the standing to criticize an elected official, or that only those whose homes were most damaged in a storm have the standing to ask for community assistance. Individuals who feel that they meet their group's criteria for who may act or speak up on a particular issue have psychological standing, and thus a license, to do so. Reprimanding a child, criticizing an official, and asking for assistance are not themselves morally questionable behaviors, yet performing them without the appropriate psychological license can nonetheless be discrediting.

We begin our discussion of psychological standing by presenting examples of how one's social category or personal experience can grant or deprive one of standing. In the next sections, we argue that people can derive standing from having a stake – even if only a symbolic one – in a particular issue. We then examine how people can forfeit their standing through their prior actions. Next, we discuss how individuals respond to people with more standing than they have,

people with the same standing that they have, and people who express attitudes despite lacking the standing to do so.

A. Category membership and personal experience as standing

Most rights granted to citizens of Western democracies are conditional rather than universal. Age is an example of a social category used to place restrictions on individual rights. In the U.S., for example, citizens do not have the right to vote until they are 18, to run for president until they are 44, to claim Medicare until they are 65, and so on. Some private organizations also use social categories to determine who has the right to join: The Knights of Columbus, for example, restricts membership to “practical Catholic men aged 18 or older,” whereas B’nai B’rith restricts membership to people of “Jewish faith.” Sometimes, however, restrictions like these are not enshrined in law or other formal provisions, but exist in people’s social understanding. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for instance, puts no restriction on membership, though its mission is primarily to promote the civil rights of African Americans. Whites have been represented in the membership of the organization since its inception over 100 years ago, yet in the year 2008 only one of its over 400 branch presidents was White. Why would the percentage of Whites in leadership positions in the NAACP not mirror the percentage of Whites (over 10%) on the organization’s membership rolls? Do White members tend to be less committed to the goals of the organization than Black members? Perhaps, but there is another possibility, one that assumes that the Whites who join the NAACP are every bit as committed to the organization and its goals as are the Blacks who join it. This other possibility points to a racial gap not in commitment but in psychological standing. Whatever prevents members from running for, or being elected to, a leadership position in the NAACP, Whites have the additional hurdle, by virtue of their race

(social category), of having less standing to lead (or perhaps even to belong to) the organization than Blacks do.

That a lack of perceived standing can prevent a certain category of members from assuming leadership roles in organizations is also evident in the case of MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving). Despite admitting male members throughout its 25-year history, the organization did not elect its first male president until 2007. Notably, this male president's son had been killed by a drunk driver (*MADD's first male president to honor area police*, 2005, October 17). Formal eligibility requirements for the presidency of MADD demand neither that you have lost a child to a drunk driver nor that you be a mother, but psychological standing requirements favor candidates for whom both are true. As difficult as it is to imagine MADD members electing a male president, it is even more difficult to imagine them electing one who did not at least have the standing provided to those who have been victimized by (have personal experience with) drunk driving.

The possibility that Whites may lack the standing to assume a leadership position in the NAACP, and that men who have not lost children to drunk drivers do not have the standing to become president of MADD, is striking in that the attitudes that seeking the leadership positions indicate are not themselves morally questionable. No member of the NAACP would fault a White person for caring about the welfare of African-Americans, nor would members of MADD take offense at a non-parent's outrage about drunk driving. Nonetheless, it is more appropriate for individuals whose category membership and personal experience gives them a direct connection to an issue to assume leadership roles in organizations that address these issues.

B. Stake as Standing

One reason why category membership and personal experience can grant or deny one standing is that they often indicate whether or not one has a stake in an issue. Whites seem to have less of a stake in the advancement of African-Americans' welfare than do African-Americans themselves, for example. The idea that standing requires some sort of stake is expressed in the concept of legal standing. One cannot bring a suit for judicial review merely because one feels an injustice has occurred; to have the legal standing to do so, one must additionally be able to show that one has been materially affected by it. This means that it is not sufficient to feel outraged about an issue or policy in order to seek judicial remedy for it. But what about seeking social remedy? There is no legal barrier to people expressing their opposition to (or support for) a social policy or cause, but is there a psychological barrier? Miller and Ratner (1996; 1998; D. T. Miller, 1999; Ratner and Miller, 2001) have suggested that there is.

The idea that a lack of standing inhibits people from expressing strong attitudes toward social causes or policies offers a unique interpretation of a well-established finding in the literature on attitude-behavior correspondence. Namely, whereas those affected and unaffected by a controversial policy or action are often equally opposed to it, those directly affected by it are much more likely to protest it (Green & Cowden, 1992; Regan & Fazio, 1977; Sivacek & Crano, 1982). One popular interpretation of this finding is that being outraged by an action or policy in which one does not have a stake is insufficient to motivate one to take social action. Green and Cowden (1992), for example, proposed that the opportunity to protest an injustice (in contrast to merely being outraged by it) leads the sympathetic actor to ask "Is it worth it?" They argue that the answer to this question (especially if money, time, or effort is required) is more likely to be affirmative when the actor has a stake in the issue. Stated more generally, one may not need to be directly affected by a policy or action to be outraged by it, but in order to convert outrage into an

act of protest, one does require a level of motivation that only having a stake in the issue can provide.

Miller and Ratner (1996; 1998; D. T. Miller, 1999; Ratner & Miller, 2001) offered an alternative account for why a sense of outrage is insufficient to produce social protest. They suggested that a lack of material stake in an issue would undermine an actor's psychological standing to express outrage, rather than his or her motivation to do so. The actor considering behavioral involvement in a social cause must ask not only, "Is it worth it?" but also, "Is it appropriate?" Concluding that "it is not my place" to protest will inhibit people from acting, irrespective of how unjust they find the state of affairs. In other words, what often prevents people who are not materially vested in an issue from acting on their attitudes is not their lack of approach motivation derived from material incentives, but rather their surfeit of avoidance motivation derived from their lack of psychological standing.

Initial empirical support for the claim that a lack of standing inhibits action among those not materially affected by policy came from a study by Ratner and Miller (2001, Study 4). These researchers presented Princeton undergraduates with a circumstance designed to offend their sense of justice—the proposed decision to shift government funds from a worthy to an unworthy cause. After reading of the injustice ("Proposition 174"), participants were given the opportunity to indicate their opposition to it and also their willingness to protest it by assisting an organization called *Princeton Opponents of Proposition 174*. The researchers manipulated the participants' material stake in the cause by varying whether the threatened "worthy" cause would primarily benefit participants' sex or the opposite sex.

Ratner and Miller correctly predicted that although participants would be equally opposed to the proposed action regardless of which sex it affected, these comparably strong

feelings of opposition would be more likely to translate into behavioral opposition among members of the sex with a greater material stake (i.e., vested participants) than among members of the sex with a lesser material stake (i.e., non-vested participants). Specifically, whereas 94% of the vested participants signed a petition and 50% agreed to write a statement expressing their views, only 78% of the non-vested participants signed the petition and only 22% agreed to write a statement, though all held equally strong anti-proposition attitudes.

Ratner and Miller (2001) further reasoned that if the higher rate of protest among vested than among non-vested participants in this study was due to non-vested participants' lack of psychological standing rather than their lack of incentive, then granting standing to the non-vested should equalize the rates of protest between both groups. They tested this hypothesis by including another set of conditions that employed a different name for the group that participants had the opportunity to help. The rationale for this manipulation was that the name *Princeton Opponents of Proposition 174,* although it did not explicitly exclude the non-vested gender, did not extend the standing they needed to feel comfortable acting. In this other set of conditions, therefore, Ratner and Miller called the group *Princeton Men and Women Opposed to Proposition 174*, reasoning that the inclusiveness of this name would provide even the non-vested gender with the standing needed to feel comfortable participating. If this organization welcomed both male and female advocates, then both male and females must be licensed to advocate, even if one gender lacked a material stake in the Proposition.

The results supported these predictions: when the group bore the inclusive name, non-vested participants were just as likely as vested participants to protest by signing the petition and writing the statement. Ratner and Miller argued that the fact that the group label explicitly acknowledged the appropriateness of non-vested actors joining the group disinhibited them.

Without a sufficient stake, even passionate actors may feel inhibited from acting unless their inhibitions are reduced by a framing that grants them standing in some other way.

C. Moral Stake as Standing

Although a lack of material stake in a cause may inhibit attitude expression, there are several sociopolitical issues about which individuals without a material stake seem to have little compunction expressing strong attitudes. For example, many heterosexuals speak out about their support for or opposition to same-sex marriage, and men can be found at protests and counter-protests about legalized abortion. Do these individuals speak up despite their lack of standing, or do they derive standing from something besides material stakes? In considering the latter possibility, Effron and Miller (2008) proposed that having a *moral stake* in an issue may grant people the psychological standing to protest, even if they lack a material stake. In other words, defining an issue in moral terms (i.e., relevant to an individual or community's basic values) licenses more people to act on their attitudes.

In one study, Effron and Miller (2008, Study 4) manipulated whether or not participants had a moral stake in an issue and measured how comfortable they would feel publicly expressing their privately held attitude. In a paradigm closely paralleling the previously described study by Ratner and Miller (2001), they told participants about "Proposition 174," which would shift funding from a worthy to an unworthy cause – an issue that participants overwhelmingly opposed. As a manipulation of material stake, participants were randomly assigned to learn that the worthy cause either benefited only their own sex (vested condition) or only the other sex (non-vested condition). As a manipulation of moral stake, some participants read a passage in which an advocacy group described the proposition in moral terms and urged people to oppose it based on their "core values and convictions;" other participants read a similar passage that did

not use moralizing language but described the issue as very important; a third group of participants read no passage.

Participants who read the non-moralizing passage or read no passage showed the same pattern of results that Ratner and Miller (2001) observed: those who had less of a vested interest in the issue said they felt less comfortable publicly expressing their attitudes than did those who had more of a vested interest. By contrast, there was no difference in comfort between vested and non-vested participants who had read the moralizing passage. The discomfort of non-vested participants' was apparently alleviated when they learned that others viewed the issue in moral terms.

Additional data from this study strengthen the claim that the moralizing passage liberated non-vested participants to feel comfortable expressing their outrage rather than increasing their motivation to do so. A measure of *private* attitudes did not respond to any of the manipulations; all participants in all conditions opposed the funding cuts. Persuasion produced by the moralizing passage thus does not seem responsible for these results. Rather than increasing non-vested participants' felt obligation to speak up, the moralizing passage appears to have given these participants the standing to feel comfortable acting on their privately held attitudes.

D. Forfeiting standing

We have argued that membership in a certain social category or having a personal connection to an issue can grant people the psychological standing to act on their attitudes. The standing people derive from these sources, however, can be undermined by their prior behavior.

1. Repudiating social category membership

Repudiating membership in a social category deprives one of the standing that members of that category enjoy. This idea is conveyed by a Philadelphia resident quoted by Buzz

Bissinger in his book *A Prayer for the City* (1997). The resident, in explaining why he chose to stay in Philadelphia rather than move to the suburbs where taxes were much lower, says "Once you leave Philadelphia, you lose your standing to care and complain about it." It is noteworthy that the resident, as a lawyer, is familiar with the legal definition of standing, but is using the term here to refer to the forfeiture not of a legal right but a social right.

Research by Hornsey and Imani (2004) provides an empirical demonstration of how repudiating one's social category membership can forfeit one's standing. These researchers presented Australian participants with derogatory comments about Australians and attributed them to a fellow Australian, a foreigner, or an Australian who had recently left the country and adopted British citizenship. Participants reacted just as negatively to the ex-Australian critic as they did to the foreign critic, which was significantly more negatively than how they reacted to the Australian critic. If you have abandoned the requisite relationship with a person or group that you feel critical toward, it appears you no longer have the standing to express your criticism. We claim that it is the voluntary nature of abandonment that forfeits standing. One cannot continue to enjoy the rights and privileges associated with an identity that one has repudiated. On the other hand, an expatriate who emigrated involuntarily likely would still be able to criticize her country if she continued to identify as a citizen of that country.

2. Undermining personal experience

Having personal experience with an issue can grant people the standing to weigh in on that issue – but they forfeit this standing if their personal experience involves behavior that is inconsistent with the position they adopt. Consider a current smoker who wishes to persuade others to quit smoking. Although she clearly has personal experience with smoking, her attempts

to persuade others to quit will likely fall on deaf ears; she lacks the standing to take this position because it is inconsistent with her current behavior.

One reason that inconsistency deprives one of acquiring standing from personal experience is that inconsistency appears hypocritical. What you preach seems insincere if you do not practice it. Inconsistent behavior can undermine standing, however, even if it does not make one appear insincere. A former smoker who admonishes his child for smoking is not exactly a hypocrite, yet the child may still see the protest as illegitimate. The parent would lack the standing to ask his child to do what he himself was not willing to do at that time in his life, even if he sincerely wished that he had been willing. If the parent developed lung cancer as a consequence of taking up smoking as a teenager, however, the parent likely would have standing. We have the standing to inveigh against the dangerous or immoral actions of others even if we previously did the same thing ourselves, as long as we paid a price for it.

The idea that prior behavior can undermine standing plays an important role in geopolitical discourse. It is common to hear one country respond to criticism from another by charging that the criticizing nation, by virtue of its past or present behavior, lacks the standing to level that particular criticism. One example is the frequent charge by developing countries that developed countries lack the standing to urge carbon emission constraints on them given developed countries' history of pollution. As another example, consider the claim frequently made by the Israeli government that Europe's disregard for the fate of Jews in the 1930s and 40s undermines their standing to harshly criticize Israel for its treatment of Palestinians. Israel's charge that its critics once engaged in similar practices is not intended to establish that its critics do not genuinely hold their concerns, only that they are not licensed to voice them.

E. Reactions to others' standing

To this point our focus has been the impact that one’s own standing has on one’s willingness to act on a particular attitude. In the present section, we consider people reactions to their perception of others’ standing.

1. Deferring to those with more standing

The standing to feel or act a particular way depends on whether there are others with more standing present and how they act. The actions of those with the most standing in a situation powerfully influence the actions of those with less standing. Often those with less standing must wait to see whether those with more standing take action before they themselves can act. Recall our earlier contention that White members of the NAACP, no matter how committed to the goals of the organization, will not feel licensed to pursue leadership positions in the organization when there are able African-Americans willing to serve in this capacity. The reason for this is that leadership roles in the NAACP are resources to which Blacks are more entitled than Whites, and on which Blacks therefore have “first dibs.” Were there not a sufficient number of Blacks pursuing these resources, we suspect Whites would feel licensed to pursue them.

In other cases, those with less standing in a group will look to those with more standing to determine when to take group action. Announcing when a group activity ends is often “the call” of the person with the most standing in the group. For example, on fishing trips, it is customarily the person who has caught the fewest fish who has the most standing to decide when to call it a day. Those with more fish are not licensed to tell those with fewer fish that it is time to go home. Similarly, individuals who are losing the most money are the ones most entitled to decide to end a poker game among friends.

In still other cases, those with less standing look to those with more standing to determine if they are licensed to feel the way they do. When someone who has the most standing in relation to an issue or outcome has a muted response to it, those with less standing will not be licensed to have a stronger response. This is true in the case of both positive and negative outcomes but maybe strongest in the latter case. Consider Mark Twain's advice for appropriate behavior at a funeral.

> At the moving passages, be moved – but only according to the degree of your intimacy with the parties giving the entertainment, or with the party in whose honor the entertainment is given. Where a blood relation sobs, an intimate friend should choke up, a distant acquaintance should sigh, a stranger should merely fumble sympathetically with his handkerchief. Where the occasion is military, the emotions should be graded according to military rank, the highest officer present taking precedence in emotional violence, and the rest modifying their feelings according to their position in the service.
>
> (*Mark Twain's helpful hints for good living: A handbook for the damned human race*, 2004, p. 117)

Its humor aside, Twain's advice reveals the important point that one's reaction to an event must be calibrated to one's relative standing. If the closest relative to the deceased does not sob, those with a more distant relation will not feel licensed to do so however distraught they are.

2. Resenting those with more standing

As we have seen, our decisions about how to respond to events depend on how those with more standing in the situation respond. What we are licensed to feel and do depends on what those with more standing feel and do. This idea raises the possibility that people could come to resent the actions of someone with higher standing if that person's behavior denies them the license to act how they wish to act. A person with high standing who models measured behavior might both constrain the behavior of people with lower standing who wish to behave more extremely, and incur their disfavor. Consider the case of Nelson Mandela. A leader in the Black liberation movement in South Africa, Mandela had been imprisoned by the country's White

political leaders for almost 30 years before his release and election to the Presidency of his country in 1976. It would hardly have been surprising if Mandela, once in power, took political revenge on those who previously oppressed both him and the now-enfranchised black majority. Instead, however, Mandela preached forgiveness and reconciliation, even including some of his former oppressors in his cabinet.

It is widely agreed that Mandela's magnanimity played a large role in smoothing the transition from White to Black rule in South Africa. But how might Mandela's example have influenced his followers? One possible route is inspiration: "If he can show forgiveness after all he suffered, then I can too." A second possible route is shaming: "If he can show forgiveness after all he suffered, what right do I have to be vengeful?" We would expect that Mandela's followers who were influenced by the former route were happy to imitate his forbearance, and admired him. By contrast, we would expect that any of his followers who were influenced by the latter route would have resented him for essentially revoking their license to act on their anger.

Miller, Zak, and Effron (2008) tested the hypothesis that observing someone decline to protest an injustice that he or she has experienced will inhibit people from protesting a milder injustice that they themselves have experienced. Participants played an Ultimatum Game, ostensibly with another participant. In the Ultimatum Game, one player (*the proposer*) receives an endowment (e.g., $5) that he or she must decide how to split with a second player (*the responder*). The only power the responder has in the situation is to accept or reject the offer. If the responder accepts, both she and the proposer get the money specified in the offer. If the responder rejects the offer, neither player gets any money. Although the rational response for a responder would be to accept any offer (something is better than nothing), responders typically reject offers of less than 20% of the proposer's endowment (Camerer, 2003). Responders

apparently find such offers insulting and unjust, and thus feel licensed to deviate from the rational response, thereby punishing the perpetrator by ensuring that he or she gets nothing.

Miller et al. (2008) predicted that participants in the role of receiver would be more likely to accept an unfair offer if they observed another player accepting an even less fair offer. This prediction was based on the reasoning that witnessing another player's rational, non-vindictive response to a highly insulting offer would undermine participants' standing to act vindictively by rejecting the somewhat less insulting offer that they themselves received. In a test of these predictions, participants were "randomly" assigned to play the role of the responder in one round of a computerized Ultimatum Game. They were assured that their responses would be anonymous. Ostensibly, another participant (actually imaginary) played the role of the proposer. When the game began, participants learned that the proposer had been endowed with $5, but had offered them only $1.50. They also learned that in another Ultimatum game currently being played with other participants, the proposer had offered the responder an even less fair amount (i.e., $1). Miller et al. manipulated participants' standing to protest by varying information about the responder's decision in this other game: the other responder had either rejected or accepted the offer, or no information was provided. Consistent with prediction that learning of a more victimized other's forbearance would undermine participants' psychological standing to act vindictively, only 28% of participants rejected their offer when they learned that the other, more victimized, responder had accepted, whereas 51% of participants rejected their offer in each of the other two conditions.

If the more victimized responder's acceptance of the unfair offer undermined participants' standing to act on their outrage at their own (less unfair) offer, then participants should resent her. Consistent with this prediction, participants liked the other responder less

when she accepted the more unfair offer than when she rejected it, even though (or, we would argue, because) she influenced participants' behavior more when she accepted it. Additional evidence for resentment of the responder who accepted the offer was obtained when participants had to choose whether or not to give the responder full control over how to split a different pot of money with another participant. When the other responder had rejected the offer, 70% of participants benefitted her by giving her this control, but when she had accepted the offer, only 37% of participants gave her control. The finding that the other responder's non-spiteful behavior decreased participants' liking for her and their willingness to benefit her is consistent with the notion that responders' lack of spite shamed participants into acting non-spitefully themselves – not reducing participants' outrage at having been wronged by an unfair offer, but reducing their standing to act on it.

The fact that the legitimacy of a complaint depends upon the relative standing of the complainant is one reason people react so negatively to even well meaning attempts by others to console them about their misfortunes by pointing out that others are worse off. The claim that others have it worse off than you is a direct challenge to your standing to feel and express outrage. Being told that you are luckier than others may or may not diminish your sense of injustice, but it certainly will diminish the standing you think you have to express it.

3. Inhibiting those with equal standing

If people who have less standing determine their entitlement to actions or feelings by looking to those who have more standing, what happens when everyone in a group has equal standing? Such situations present potential conflicts when a valued resource (e.g., a literal commodity or a desired action) is scarce. For example, all members of a sales team, each of whom has an equivalent sales record, may wish to represent the team at a national conference,

but only one representative may be permitted to attend. A more familiar situation may be the one experienced by partygoers who find that only one appetizer remains on the plate and is being hungrily eyed by several guests, all of whom are equally entitled to it. One hypothesis is that equal standing makes everyone feel entitled to the behavior or resource, and a mad dash ensues in which people compete to be the one to claim it. Everyday experience suggests, however, that the opposite will occur, at least in communal settings: the last piece of cake will remain untouched, even though everybody wants it.

We demonstrated this phenomenon in a laboratory study in which participants and a confederate were asked who would like to volunteer to complete an appealing task (Effron & Miller, 2009). The confederate was instructed not to volunteer. When participants were told that only one person would be permitted to do the task, they were *slower* to volunteer than when they believed that both they and the confederate could do the task. It was as if participants inhibited their desire to claim a scarce resource to which they and the confederate were equally entitled. Consistent with this explanation, the effect was attenuated when the confederate seemingly convinced the experimenter to let her leave the study early without loss of payment. The fact that participants believed that they would receive the same payment as the confederate, despite spending more time in the study, seems to have made them feel more entitled to the fun task, licensing them to claim it with less hesitation.

The inhibition created by having no more standing than another person is exacerbated when one has no more standing than multiple people. In a follow-up study, between two and six naïve participants came into the lab at the same time, and were given the opportunity to volunteer for an appealing task that was either scarce (only one person could do it) or plentiful (everyone could do it). The more participants in the study, the longer it took before someone

volunteered for the task when it was scarce, but not when it was plentiful. In other words, the more people there were who wanted a limited resource, the longer it lasted. It appears that the more participants present who wanted the task, the less standing each felt to claim the scarce task – as if standing "diffused" among those present.

In summary, the Effron and Miller (2009) studies suggest that equal standing among peers translates into inhibition to take a scarce resource, and this inhibition is magnified the more people there are who want the resource. Thus, equal standing among everyone can translate into no standing for anyone.

4. Reacting to those who act without standing

People who express opinions or take action when they lack the standing to do so risk censure from observers. Consider the reaction that an American, Joshua Katzen of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, describes receiving from Israeli doves when he expresses his opposition to the proposal that Israel return occupied territories in exchange for peace treaties with its neighbors (the so-called land-for-peace option). According to Katzen, Israeli supporters of the policy commonly respond to his objection to it by dismissing his standing to weigh in on the debate, saying, "When your son has to fight you can have an opinion" (Goldberg, 2008). Although political debate and dissent flourishes in Israel, it is still the case that participating in a debate in which one lacks a stake will be deemed inappropriate.

Experimental evidence supports the claim that observers are sensitive to a critic's relation to the group that he or she criticizes. In one relevant line of work described earlier, a target person who made derogatory comments about Australians was perceived more negatively when he was presented as a non-Australian than when he was presented as an Australian (Hornsey, Trembath & Gunthorpe, 2004). Importantly, both Australian and non-Australian participants

showed this tendency, suggesting that negative perceptions of the non-Australian critic are driven by shared understandings of who has a right to criticize (Sutton, Elder & Douglas, 2006; Sutton, Elder, Douglas & Tarrant, 2008). Because critics lack the standing to criticize those with whom they do not share a social identity, they can expect more negative social consequences for their criticism relative to in-group critics (see also Hornsey & Imani, 2004). For similar reasons, jokes at the expense of a particular group (e.g., ethnic humor) are generally considered more appropriate when told by a member of that group than when told by an outgroup member.

In the examples cited above, people lacking standing incurred censure when they expressed an attitude that was contrary to observers' attitudes. Even expressing an attitude that observers share, however, can leave observers feeling confused and suspicious if the actor lacks standing. In one study (Ratner & Miller, 2001, Study 2), participants considered a person who attended a meeting in support of a government health plan that provided abortion coverage. Participants themselves were moderately supportive of the plan, yet nonetheless expressed greater confusion and skepticism about a male attendee than a female attendee. Presumably, male attendees were seen as lacking standing because they lacked the type of stake in the issue that females had. We found similar results in our investigation of psychological standing from moral stakes (Effron & Miller, 2008, Study 1). Participants read about either a male or female student who had engaged in a number of advocacy behaviors related to abortion laws. Participants who shared the advocate's attitude on abortion nonetheless expressed greater confusion and skepticism when the advocate was male versus female – unless participants viewed abortion as a moral issue. In that case, they expressed little confusion or skepticism regardless of the advocate's gender, presumably because they perceived the advocate as having a moral stake in the issue. Although observers in these studies did not express outright hostility

towards targets who lacked standing, the kind of confusion and suspicion that they did express can be sufficient to give pause to actors who lack standing when deciding whether or not to express their attitudes (Ratner & Miller, 2001).

One consequence of observers' reactions to standing, or a lack thereof, is that observers will be more likely to grant advocates with standing the right to be heard. The public will find it easier to deny the appeals of a group spokesperson if he or she lacks standing (e.g., a White spokesperson for the NAACP) than if she has it (D. T. Miller, Ratner, & Zhao, 2009). To illustrate this point, consider the effective role that Ronald Reagan's former press secretary Jim Brady played in the gun control movement in the U.S. following his injury during an assassination attempt on Reagan. If Brady had attempted to become a leading spokesperson for gun control before his injury, it seems likely that his efforts would have garnered less attention. It is not so much that his injury made him an expert on gun control; rather, it gave him a personal connection to the issue that gave him the standing to speak out about it, in the same way that category membership (e.g., parent whose child was killed by a drunk driver) grants standing to speak out about an issue relevant to that category (e.g., by presiding over MADD). In other words, the public may or may not have thought that Brady knew of what he spoke, but they certainly perceived him to have the right to speak.

In general, advocates or spokespersons with standing compel a certain degree of respect or deference that those lacking standing do not. Supporting this clam, Miller et al. (2009) found evidence that people find it easier to deny an advocate's request when the advocate lacks standing (i.e., has no personal connection to the cause) than when the advocate, by virtue of his or her category membership, does have standing. They argued that the reason for this is that having standing on an issue means that noncompliance with the person's request will be seen as

discrediting or dishonoring him or her (Goffman, 1959). In essence, standing confers a form of protection on advocates resulting in people's threshold for saying no to them being higher than it would be if they lacked standing. Rejecting Brady's appeal, then, would not just constitute a rejection of their message; it would constitute a rejection of him, something people will be hesitant to enact (Goffman, 1959). It is important to note that standing in this context is not simply derived from sympathy. James Brady's injury may have generated sympathy from his audiences, but this alone would not have given him his standing on gun control. Any sympathy his injury generated for him is unlikely to have helped him had he chosen to be a spokesperson for the NAACP or for any other cause to which he lacked a personal connection.

To summarize, observers react negatively to people who act on or express strong attitudes without having the requisite standing: When observers disagree with the attitude expressed, they react with hostility or anger, but even when they agree, they react with confusion and skepticism. An important consequence of these negative reactions is that advocates who lack standing will be more easily denied the opportunity to express their views.

F. Conclusion

People sometimes require a psychological license to express or act upon attitudes without discrediting themselves, even when the attitudes themselves are not discrediting or morally problematic. Some people have a greater social right than others to express themselves on particular issues. When people inhibit their attitude expressions because they feel that it is "not their place" to speak up, they lack what we have called psychological standing. Thus, two individuals who differ in the extent to which they act consistently with an attitude may differ not in the strength with which they hold the attitude, but rather in the comfort they have expressing it.

We have suggested that people can obtain psychological standing by being a member of a particular social category, having a personal experience that connects them to an issue, and having a material or moral stake in the issue. Conversely, repudiating one's category membership, having a personal history inconsistent with the message one wishes to express, or simply having less cause for outrage than someone else can all deprive people of standing. This list is not exhaustive, and further research is necessary to identify additional variables that grant or deprive people of psychological standing. In doing so, it will be important to consider the extent to which these variables are culturally specific. We suspect, for example, that the relation between material stakes and psychological standing is particularly pronounced in contemporary American culture.

III. General discussion

A. Summary

People who hold different attitudes are not always equally willing to express or act upon them. One obvious reason for this is that some attitudes are more socially desirable than others: people will be reluctant to reveal unpopular or otherwise discrediting attitudes. But it is not only the content of attitudes that affects people's comfort expressing them. Even people holding the same attitude can vary greatly in how comfortable they are expressing it. This chapter considered two reasons why people will be more or less willing to express the same attitude. Our analysis has told both an inhibition story and a disinhibition story.

1. The disinhibition story

Our discussion of moral licensing told a disinhibition story. We described how people's prior behaviors or future intentions could make them feel licensed (disinhibited) to act on or express attitudes that could potentially signal something morally discrediting about the self. The

fear of discrediting the self through morally suspect behavior places a psychological barrier between attitudes and action; a moral license based on one's past behavior or future intentions removes this barrier, allowing one to act without fearing censure from the self or from others.

We considered two routes by which a moral license could reduce these fears of censure. By one route, people come to feel that the virtue of their past actions has granted them sufficient moral credits to balance out future wrongdoing: Even if someone with moral credits engaged in an immoral action, its net effect would not convey a negative signal about them. By a second route, people's past actions provide moral credentials that attest to the morality of subsequent, ambiguous actions. Moral credentials make one's subsequent behavior appear less immoral than it would otherwise appear.

2. The inhibition story

Our discussion of psychological standing focused on situations that inhibit people from expressing or acting on attitudes that are not themselves morally problematic. Whereas people requires a moral license to comfortably engage in morally suspect behavior, they require psychological standing to engage in behavior that is not itself morally problematic but is nonetheless socially regulated. Acting without a moral license implies that one is morally deficient in general or in a particular domain (e.g., racist, gluttonous, selfish, etc.), whereas acting without psychological standing implies that one does not know one's place. Attitude expressions function like resources, and psychological standing represents entitlement to those resources. People who lack standing will often inhibit themselves from claiming such resources, lest they feel or appear like they have taken something that does not belong to them. Thus, as our discussion has indicated, standing regulates who may express the most grief at a funeral, who

may express support by joining or leading a service organization, who may express outrage by acting vindictively, and who is entitled to other social resources.

B. *From whom does one need a license?*

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed situations in which observers grant license to actors (e.g., Effron & Monin, 2009; Ratner & Miller, 2001) and in which actors license themselves (e.g., Monin & Miller, 2001a; Ratner & Miller, 2001). When actors license themselves, do they do so with observers in mind? Said differently, when actors lack a license to perform a particular behavior, are they inhibited by concern about what that behavior would signal to themselves, what it would signal to others, or both?

We suspect that the answer to these questions depends on how individuals feel about the specific signal that their behavior might send. For example, individuals are motivated to avoid acting prejudiced for different reasons: some are mostly internally motivated and want to avoid feeling prejudiced, whereas others are mostly externally motivated and care more about avoiding appearing prejudiced to others (Plant & Devine, 1998). Similarly, some people may have internalized the idea that it is not their place to express attitudes about issue in which they lack psychological standing, whereas others may be happy to do so as long as they can avoid censure from others. Thus, it may be difficult to generalize across domains and individuals about whether the audience from whom actors seek license is themselves or others.

Nonetheless, extant data do allow us to conclude that there are some situations in which people seem to care more about obtaining a license from themselves than from others. Monin and Miller (2001a, Study 3) found that hiring a Black candidate in a first task increased comfort expressing an ambiguously racist preference in a second task – even if the audience that observed participants' responses to the second task ostensibly knew nothing of the first task. This

suggests that participants were more concerned about proving their lack of prejudice to themselves than to an audience. Moreover, other studies have suggested that merely intending to make a moral choice in the future, even if that choice is not expressed, is sufficient for actors to license their own questionable behavior (Khan & Dhar, 2007); even the mere presence of a healthy food option seems to satisfy some people of their own healthiness, thus licensing them to choose a more indulgent food item (Wilcox et al., 2009). It seems, therefore, that public behavior is not necessary for people to feel licensed. Instead, consistent with the idea that actors' self-perceptions are central to licensing effects, Khan and Dhar (2006) found that licensing of questionable consumer choice was mediated by participants' ratings of their own morality.

Evidence that the literal presence of others may not be necessary for licensing to occur, however, should not be taken as evidence that the *psychological* presence of others is unnecessary. In the spirit of Allport's classic definition of social psychology (1954), which emphasized the possibility that imagined others can exert social influence, we suggest that people consult an imagined audience when determining whether or not they have license to perform a behavior. This idea may explain why an unpublished study by Monin and Miller (2001b) found that the licensing of an ambiguously racist preference was mediated by participants' beliefs about the extent to which others perceived them as racist, and not by how racist participants perceived themselves to be. This finding at first seems discrepant from the evidence reviewed above suggesting that people are more concerned with obtaining a moral license from themselves than from others. One reason for this discrepancy may be methodological: participants may have been more reluctant to report on their own prejudice than on others' perceptions of their prejudice. A second reason may be more psychological: the measure of others' perceptions may speak to the role of an imagined audience in producing

licensing effects. In other words, one may feel morally licensed when one imagines that others *would* respond favorably *if* they knew about one's past behavior.

In summary, the extent to which people attempt to obtain a license from themselves versus others likely differs across individuals and behavioral domains. Future research is needed to map these domains and individual differences, but there do seem to be situations in which people appear to seek license more from themselves (or at least from an imagined audience) than from others.

C. Conclusion

It is tempting to assume that differences in the actions that people perform or the opinions that they express reflect differences in underlying attitudes, preferences, or motivations (D. T. Miller & Nelson, 2002). This assumption undoubtedly is often warranted – but not always. This chapter has shown that when people differ in the extent to which they are psychologically licensed (i.e., feel able to act without discrediting themselves), they will act differently despite having similar attitudes, preferences, and motivations. Wanting to do something is not sufficient to spur action; one must also feel licensed to do it. On the one hand, feeling licensed can liberate people to express morally problematic attitudes that those who do not feel licensed are inhibited from expressing. On the other hand, feeling that one lacks license can inhibit people from expressing even morally non-problematic attitudes that those who feel licensed are comfortable expressing. The present chapter has explored a wide range of social phenomena in which licensing plays a role and has identified a number of variables that grant or revoke psychological license. A full analysis of the licensing process must await further research, but we hope that this chapter has demonstrated the utility of the concept of licensing.

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