Moral Superiority and Dishonest Behavior
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ABSTRACT
Moral traits are both desirable and ambiguous. This combination leads to self-enhancement of morally-focused traits—the “illusion of moral superiority.” It is currently unknown if this illusion actually predicts moral behavior, specifically dishonesty for monetary gain. By counterbalancing a morally-focused personality item/questionnaire and a hypothetical dictator game (Study 1) and an incentivized over-claiming task (Study 2), we show that moral superiority predicts dishonest behavior, but only if the over-claiming task comes first. That is, moral self-judgments become more rational if first anchored by level of participant dishonesty in the over-claiming task. This effect is driven by dishonest participants, who exhibit the illusion of moral superiority if they rate their morality before engaging in dishonest behavior, but not if they rate their morality after engaging in dishonest behavior. These results suggest that, given the ambiguity of morality, an individual’s moral superiority does not predict their moral behavior, but their moral behavior, if experienced first, does rationally predict their moral superiority.

METHODS

• Study 1 (278 Amazon Mturk participants)

COUNTERBALANCED:
- Hypothetical dictator game dividing $10 with blind partner. How much money do you tell your partner you’re dividing?

• Study 2 (201 Amazon Mturk participants)

COUNTERBALANCED:
- Morally-focused Personality Questionnaire (Tappin & McKay, 2016)
- Incentivized Over-claiming Questionnaire Task (Paulhus & Bruce, 1990)

RESULTS

• Study 1
  - Personality-first condition: No difference in Moral Superiority between honest and dishonest participants (t-test; p = .141)
  - Game-first condition: Significant difference in Moral Superiority between honest and dishonest participants (t-test; p = .002)

  OQ Bias = \( \frac{(\text{Hit Rate} + \text{False Alarm Rate})}{2} \)

• Study 2
  - Significant interaction of dishonest behavior and condition in predicting level of moral superiority (ANOVA; p = .043)
  - Personality-first condition: No difference in Moral Self-rating between high-cheating and low-cheating participants (t-test; p = .122)
  - Task-first condition: Significant difference in Moral Self-rating between high-cheating and low-cheating participants (t-test; p < .001)

DISCUSSION

• Moral Superiority does not predict dishonest behavior, but dishonest behavior does predict Moral Superiority
• Without an anchor (demonstration of their own behavior), those who are dishonest will provide especially inflated moral self-assessments
• Moral Licensing X
  - We saw people abstain from cheating after rating themselves as “morally superior”
• Belief-Behavior Consistency X
  - We saw high levels of cheating among those who rated themselves “morally superior”
• Self-Perception Theory ✓
  - People use their own behavior to gauge their place on the moral spectrum

REFERENCES