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Exposure to moral relativism compromises moral behavior

Tage S. Rai [a,*], Keith J. Holyoak [b]

[a] Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, USA
[b] Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined whether exposure to moral relativism would compromise moral behavior.
- Participants who read a relativist argument were more likely to cheat.
- Participants who read an absolutist moral definition were less willing to steal.
- The subjectivity of morality implied by relativism appears to compromise behavior.

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ABSTRACT

Across two studies we investigated the relationship between moral relativism versus absolutism and moral behavior. In Experiment 1, we found that participants who read a relativist argument for tolerating female genital mutilation were more likely to cheat to win an incentivized raffle than participants who read an absolutist argument against female genital mutilation, or those in a control condition. In Experiment 2, participants who read a definition of morality phrased in absolutist terms expressed less willingness to engage in petty theft than those who read a definition of morality phrased in relativist terms, or those in a control condition. Experiment 2 also provided evidence that effects were not due to absolutist arguments signaling that fewer behaviors are morally permissible, nor to relativist arguments defending more disagreeable moral positions. Rather, the content of the philosophical positions themselves—the fact that relativism describes morality as subjective and culturally-historically contingent, whereas absolutism describes morality as objective and universal—makes individuals more likely to engage in immoral behaviors when exposed to moral relativism compared to moral absolutism.

Introduction

The philosophical position of *moral absolutism* holds that some moral beliefs are objectively true, and reflect facts that are independent of any social group's specific preferences. Under this view, a statement such as "killing is wrong" is similar to the statement "2 + 2 = 4." The statement is either true or false; it is not a matter of opinion. On the other end of the spectrum, the philosophical position of *moral relativism* holds that the truth or falsity of moral beliefs are products of our traditions and cultural histories, rather than objective statements based on logic, or facts about the state of the world independent of our own opinions or perspectives. According to moral relativism, if we had different traditions and cultural histories we would have different moral beliefs, which would be no more "right" or "wrong" than those we now hold (Harman, 1975). In recent decades, philosophers and psychologists alike have adopted less absolutist positions on morality in light of evidence that people across cultures and time periods differ radically in their moral beliefs (Flanagan, Sarkissian, & Wong, 2008; Haidt, 2007; MacIntyre, 1984; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Wong, 2006). In the present paper we examine what effects, if any, exposure to these different moral perspectives may have on moral behavior and moral intentions.

The inherent subjectivity of moral relativism may imply that people can have no basis for making moral judgments against those with whom they disagree, as relativism provides no objective criteria for determining who is right (Gowans, 2012). For example, whereas human rights advocates have argued that female genital mutilation harms women's bodies and is therefore intrinsically morally wrong, defenders of the practice have argued that moral judgments must be made relative to the social groups in which practices take place, and therefore we must tolerate female genital mutilation because it carries important meaning for the people who practice it (Gruenbaum, 2001; James, 1994). Importantly, those who fear the consequences of moral relativism believe that if people lose their objective basis for judging others, they will eventually direct this attitude inward and become more likely to engage in immoral behaviors themselves.

* Corresponding author at: Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Road, Jacobs Center 501, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.
E-mail address: tage.rai@gmail.com (T.S. Rai).

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Note that there is no intrinsic reason why a relativistic conception of morality need adopt all of these positions. In philosophy, meta-ethical relativism accepts that our moral beliefs are ultimately subjective, but does not hold the normative position that this subjectivity forces us to tolerate behaviors that we find morally disagreeable, nor that our own behavior should necessarily be impaired (Wong, 2006). And yet, is it possible that the folk conception of moral relativism carries less weight for laypeople than does moral absolutism, because the former is thought to imply that nothing is definitively right or wrong? And might this perspective weaken the moral motivation we need to refrain from engaging in immoral behaviors ourselves?

Previous research has found that priming participants' sense of morality in some way (e.g., by having them write down the Ten Commandments or reminding them of their school's honor code) reduces their willingness to engage in immoral behavior (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). However, this line of research has not distinguished between more absolutist and more relativist conceptions of morality. Goodwin and Darley (2008) found that people often view their moral values in more absolutist, factual terms than their non-moral values, such as aesthetic preferences and tastes. However, there is considerable variability in the perceived objectivity of moral beliefs, and perceived consensus regarding the moral status of an act and the negativity of the act both predict more absolutist beliefs in regard to the act (Goodwin & Darley, 2012).

Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005) have argued that this quality of strongly held moral beliefs, which they refer to as *moral conviction*, is crucial to their functioning. Specifically, they have argued that deeply held moral values derive their strength to motivate moral behavior from being experienced as universal and rooted in facts about the state of the world, rather than in subjective opinions that differ across time and cultures. Skitka and colleagues have found that greater moral conviction is predictive of more strongly held beliefs and judgments on a range of moral–political issues, greater willingness to act on moral beliefs (e.g., to vote), and greater intolerance of those who disagree with them (for reviews, see Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Skitka, 2010). However, only one experimental study has provided support for a causal link between moral absolutism and actual behavior. In a study of donating behavior, Young and Durwin (2012) found that participants primed with an absolutist question about morality, "Do you agree that some things are just morally right or wrong, good or bad, wherever you happen to be from in the world?" were twice as likely to donate to a charitable cause as participants in a control condition or those primed with a more relativist question about morality.

Studies of workplace attitudes across cultures have consistently found that people who hold more relativist attitudes about morality are more likely to express behavioral intentions and support for unethical workplace practices, such as misleading customers and co-workers, stealing from the company, or misreporting work (Barnett, Bass, & Brown, 1994; Singhapakdi, Vitell, & Franke, 1999; for a meta-analytic review, see Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). Outside of work settings, (Baker, 2005; Inglehart & Baker, 2000) found that participants in the World Values Survey, a large cross-cultural survey of values and opinions, that agreed with the statement, "There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances at the time," assigned slightly reduced blame for various moral offenses. However, Forsyth and Berger (1982) found that people who scored higher on the relativism subscale of the Ethics Position Questionnaire (Forsyth, 1980), an individual differences measure of relativist attitudes, were no more likely to cheat on a test than non-relativists.

Previous research thus demonstrates a robust relationship between individual differences in relativist attitudes and relaxed moral standards and corresponding behavioral intentions, but not actual immoral behavior. Although one study has demonstrated that priming moral absolutism increases engagement in pro-social behavior, none have demonstrated causal links between exposure to relativism and engagement in immoral behavior, nor have any studies elucidated the causal mechanisms that might underlie such effects.

In the present paper, we examine whether exposure to moral relativism versus moral absolutism shifts our willingness to engage in immoral behavior. We hypothesized that if moral beliefs derive their motivational strength from being perceived as universal and rooted in facts about the state of the world rather than in subjective preferences, exposure to moral relativism will lead people to engage in immoral behavior, whereas exposure to moral absolutism will make people refrain from engaging in immoral behavior. From this perspective, to be absolutist in our moral beliefs increases motivation to behave in accord with them, whereas the inherent subjectivity of morality implied by moral relativism reduces this motivation and increases the likelihood of engaging in immoral behavior.

In Experiment 1, we investigated whether exposing participants to either a moral relativist argument in favor of tolerance toward a culturally disagreeable practice, or a moral absolutist argument against tolerance of the practice, would influence their cheating behavior in a subsequent incentivized task. In Experiment 2, we investigated whether exposing participants to either relativist or absolutist definitions of morality would influence their willingness to engage in a petty theft while testing between competing hypotheses regarding the causal mechanisms underlying our effect.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 investigated whether exposure to arguments for moral relativism and moral absolutism could impact moral behavior. We presented participants with either a moral relativist argument for tolerating the practice of female genital mutilation or a moral absolutist argument for banning the practice. If adopting more relativist perspectives weakens moral motivation by making morality more subjective, then exposure to an argument for moral relativism should make participants more likely to engage in an immoral behavior: specifically, lying in order to increase their chances at winning a cash prize.

Method

Participants

Participants ($n = 120$) were recruited via the introductory psychology subject pool at the University of California, Los Angeles. After giving consent to participate, each participant was randomly assigned to a condition and completed the study anonymously in an isolated room. Participants were told they were taking part in a study on learning and remembering.

Design and materials

Experiment 1 employed a between-subjects design. Participants in the experimental conditions were presented with a brief description of female genital mutilation ("female genital mutilation refers to the practice of cutting or otherwise modifying female genitalia, including the clitoris and labia minor"). Following the description, participants were informed of the opinion of "many prominent scholars, activists, and world leaders" and presented with an accompanying argument from a "leading scholar" that varied based on condition. Participants in the moral relativism condition read an argument for respecting the practice, while participants in the moral absolutism condition read an argument for banning the practice. A control group of participants read an emotionally neutral opinion from a chef about cooking.

In the moral relativism condition, participants were told that our moral values are subjective opinions and we cannot impose them on another group of people because they see female genital mutilation as a necessary, purifying act ("…it is not our place to judge and

it would be wrong for us to impose our values on other people.... If we grew up in a culture where female genital mutilation is practiced, we would think it was the morally right thing to do.... We have to step back from our immediate gut reactions and realize that our own moral beliefs are simply a product of our cultural upbringing rather than any objective set of criteria"). Male circumcision was used as a source analogy for explaining the subjectivity of our moral values ("…male circumcision is also painful, can have risks.... Yet, it is seen as normal, and perhaps even necessary by many people in the United States").

In the moral absolutism condition, participants were told that some moral values are objectively right or wrong and it is our duty to impose our values on other groups of people regardless of what they believe because female genital mutilation causes irreparable harm and is an intrinsic form of violence ("This is not a situation where we should exercise tolerance for other cultures' practices, because ultimately, they are morally wrong.... Our moral beliefs are based in intrinsic facts about what is right and wrong in the world.... We should realize that our feelings are telling us something important and be willing to act on them."). Killing newborn infant girls in countries that favor boys was used as a source analogy for explaining the objectivity of our moral values ("We know that the practice is wrong because the wrongness of murdering newborns based on their gender is not a matter of opinion—it is simply evil").

Participants in the experimental conditions were thus told that adopting a relativist or absolutist position required them to judge the practice as morally acceptable or morally wrong, respectively. However, no statements were made suggesting that these positions should impact their own moral behavior. Moreover, because the arguments were made regarding practices in another culture, there was no reason for participants to assume that the positions should necessarily have any bearing on acceptable moral behavior in their own community.

Procedure: cheating manipulation

Following exposure to the argument, participants were asked to recall as much of it as they could, and those in the experimental conditions answered a questionnaire to assess prior familiarity with female genital mutilation as well as to check the effectiveness of the arguments using Likert scales that ranged from 1 to 7. To measure whether participants' moral behavior was affected by what they read, all participants were given the opportunity to cheat at the end of the experiment. Participants were told that in addition to credit for the experiment, they would be entered into a raffle with three cash awards following completion of the experiment. The number of raffle tickets they received would be based on the outcome of a roll of two 10-sided dice (0–9). Participants were instructed to multiply the two numbers together and record the product, and were told that the higher the number they rolled, the more raffle tickets they would receive.

Although this method does not allow the experimenter to know whether or not a given individual actually cheated, it does allow the experimenter to examine the pattern of reported scores across conditions. If the number of raffle tickets awarded is higher in one condition compared to the others, as well as to the arithmetic mean that would be expected by chance, this pattern would imply that participants in the "overly successful" condition lied about the outcome of their dice-roll (adapted from Fischbacher & Heusi, 2008).

Results

No significant differences were found between participants in the experimental conditions in their entering familiarity with female genital mutilation ($p = .487$). A manipulation check revealed that participants reported greater change in their beliefs about female genital mutilation following exposure to the argument in the moral relativism condition ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.80, n = 40$) than in the moral absolutism condition ($M = 2.45, SD = 1.54, n = 40$), $t(78) = 2.68, p = .009$. Participants also reported greater willingness to have a roommate with opposing views on female genital mutilation in the moral relativism condition ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.19$) than in the moral absolutism condition ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.41$), $t(78) = 2.06$, $p = .043$, suggesting that the moral relativist argument was successful in inducing more tolerant attitudes toward female genital mutilation. At the same time, participants reported being more convinced by the argument in the moral absolutism condition ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.24$) than in the moral relativism condition ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.58$), $t(78) = 2.68$, $p = .009$, and they reported greater agreement with the argument in the moral absolutism condition ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.06$) than in the moral relativism condition ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(78) = 6.01$, $p = .000$, suggesting that participants' entering attitudes were uniformly opposed to female genital mutilation across experimental conditions.

As the cheating data was not normally distributed because of the multiplication procedure, we performed a Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, comparing the distributions of each condition to the distribution expected by chance. Only the moral relativism condition differed significantly from that which would be expected by chance, $p = .004$, $ks = .275$. Based on simple t-tests, participants who were exposed to arguments for moral relativism recorded significantly higher dice-rolls ($M = 30.25$, $SD = 23.94$, $n = 40$) than participants in either the moral absolutism condition ($M = 19.03$, $SD = 18.44$, $n = 40$), $t(78) = 2.35, p = .021$, or what would be expected by chance ($M = 20.25$), $t(39) = 2.64$, $p = .012$, and trended toward higher dice-rolls than participants in the control condition ($M = 21.48$, $SD = 21.44, n = 40$), $t(78) = 1.71, p = .091$. Dice-rolls of participants in the control condition and the moral absolutism condition did not differ significantly from chance or from each other (see Fig. 1). Level of agreement with the argument was negatively correlated with dice-roll scores across the experimental conditions ($n = 80$, $r = -.28, p = .011$), such that participants who disagreed with the argument they read reported higher scores on their dice-roll. This correlation was driven entirely by participants who read the argument in the moral relativism condition ($n = 40$, $r = -.29$, $p = .072$) rather than participants who read the argument in the moral absolutism condition ($n = 40, r = .08, p = .621$).

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 extended our findings to include people's expressed willingness to engage in immoral behavior and allowed us to test between competing explanations for the effect found in Experiment 1.

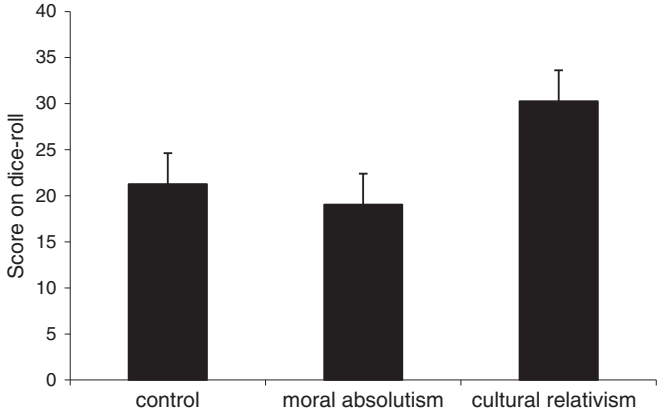

Fig. 1. Mean dice-rolls following exposure to either a relativistic, absolutist, or control argument. Error bars indicate 1 standard error of the mean.

We had hypothesized that participants in the relativist condition would cheat more than participants in the absolutist condition because the subjectivity of morality implied by moral relativism weakens moral commitments, whereas the objectivity of morality implied by moral absolutism strengthens moral commitments. However, there are two alternative explanations for our effect.

First, the relativist condition may have signaled that more behaviors were permissible. Signaling accounts of moral behavior argue that people are sensitive to the permissibility of different behaviors and the likelihood of being watched or punished when they are considering engaging in impermissible behavior (Haley & Fessler, 2005; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). For example, broken windows theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) argues that people use evidence of the tolerance of minor transgressions, such as graffiti, as a signal that more serious crimes are more likely to be permitted in that environment. In Experiment 1, participants in the relativist condition may have cheated more because they interpreted an argument in favor of tolerance as a signal that more behaviors are permitted in this environment, whereas participants in the absolutist condition inferred that fewer behaviors are permitted.

Second, the relativist argument defended a position that our participants morally disagreed with, whereas the absolutist argument defended a position our participants already supported. It has been found that exposure to the legitimation of moral outcomes with which one disagrees can compromise moral behavior. For example, in their research on 'moral spillover', Mullen and Nadler (2008) found that when participants were asked to summarize a court case involving a doctor who performed an illegal late-term abortion, pro-choice participants were more likely to steal pens provided by the experimenter if the story indicated that the doctor had been found guilty than if he had been found innocent. The researchers hypothesized that because participants read about the legitimation of a moral position with which they disagreed, they reacted, or 'acted out', by engaging in immoral behavior (also see Mullen & Skitka, 2006). In Experiment 1, participants in the relativist condition may have cheated more because the relativist argument defended and legitimated a moral position that they found morally reprehensible, to which they reacted by engaging in immoral behavior themselves. This 'agreeableness' hypothesis is particularly intriguing in light of the correlational data from Experiment 1, which indicated that greater disagreement with the argument predicted higher dice-roll scores.

In Experiment 2 we varied our experimental conditions to test between these competing hypotheses by adding two new conditions: a moral absolutism condition in which participants were exposed to an argument for permitting a behavior rather than prohibiting it, and a moral relativism condition in which participants were exposed to a relativist argument in favor of a position with which they agreed rather than disagreed. Thus, Experiment 2 included an absolutism-permissible variant, an absolutism-impermissible variant, a relativism-disagree variant, and a relativism-agree variant, as well as a control condition. If our hypothesis is correct, participants in both relativism conditions should be more willing to engage in an immoral behavior than participants in either of the absolutism conditions. If the permissibility hypothesis is correct, participants in the absolutism-permissible condition should be more willing to engage in immoral behavior than those in the absolutism-impermissible condition. If the agreeableness hypothesis is correct, then participants in the relativism-disagree condition should be more willing to engage in immoral behavior than those in the relativism-agree condition.

Method

Participants

Participants ($n = 320$, 110 women) were recruited via the Internet and compensated with $0.22 following completion of a questionnaire administered through the Mechanical Turk site run by Amazon.com. All participants were drawn from the United States. After giving consent to participate, each participant was randomly assigned to a condition. The IP addresses of participants' computers were recorded to ensure that they did not participate in the study multiple times. It has been found that data collected from Amazon's Mechanical Turk site is as reliable as data gathered through traditional methods (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

Design, materials and procedure

Experiment 2 employed a between-subjects design. Participants in the control condition ($n = 160$) were simply presented with the statement, "This is a study on morality. Please answer all of the questions carefully." The other participants ($n = 160$) were distributed equally across the four experimental conditions. Participants in the experimental conditions were given a definition of morality that was either absolutist or relativist in nature. Each definition included an example espousing a moral position that manipulated levels of permissibility and agreeableness. The absolutist and relativist definitions were adapted from those used by Baker (2005) and Young and Durwin (2012). Participants in the absolutism conditions read, "Morality is defined by things that are just morally right or wrong, good or bad. There are absolutely clear guidelines, that always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances." Participants in the relativism conditions read, "Morality is defined by values that are shaped by our culture and upbringing. There can never be absolutely clear guidelines and what is right or wrong depends entirely upon the circumstances."

Embedded in the definition, participants were presented with an example meant to highlight the definition they had received. In the absolutism conditions, the examples were manipulated to vary whether they signaled that a greater or fewer number of behaviors were permissible. In the absolutism-impermissible condition, participants were given the example of how morality requires that the practice of female genital mutilation in some countries be prohibited. In the absolutism-permissible condition, participants were given the example of how morality requires that we ensure that women have equal rights to drive in countries that currently prohibit it.

In the relativism conditions, the examples were manipulated to vary whether participants agreed or disagreed with the moral position supported by the argument. In the relativism-disagree condition, participants were given the example of how morality requires people to tolerate the practice of female genital mutilation. In the relativism-agree condition, participants were given the example of how people in countries where arranged marriage is practiced have had to learn to accept the practice of marriage being an individual choice in the United States because that is what is culturally accepted among Americans.

Following exposure to a definition of morality and its accompanying example, each participant was asked how willing they would be to engage in a morally questionable behavior. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine that they were "at the grocery store and saw an item that they regularly purchase but whose price had clearly been mismarked. Instead of 4 dollars, it is listed as only costing 4 cents." Participants were then asked, "How willing would you be to go to the self-checkout lane and purchase the item for 4 cents and leave the store?" on a 1 (would never do this ever) to 7 (totally and completely willing to do this) rating scale. To check the validity of the vignette, participants also completed the moral conviction scale (Skitka et al., 2005), a two-item individual differences measure based on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) rating scale. The first item on the scale asked to what extent the participant's position on the vignette reflected core moral beliefs and convictions, and the second item asked to what extent the participant's position was connected to fundamental beliefs about right and wrong. The moral conviction measure was designed to capture individual differences in attitudes toward specific moral issues.

Results

Participants in the absolutism conditions ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.99$, $n = 80$) were significantly less likely to support taking the mismarked item than participants in the relativism conditions ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 2.09$, $n = 80$), $t(158) = 2.55$, $p = .012$, or the control condition ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 2.09$, $n = 160$), $t(238) = 2.35$, $p = .020$, supporting our hypothesis. No significant differences were found between participants in the relativism conditions and the control condition, $t(238) = .57$, $p = .57$. No significant difference was found between the absolutism-permissible ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.76$, $n = 40$) and absolutism-impermissible variants ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 2.22$, $n = 40$), $t(78) = .33$, $p = .739$, arguing against the permissibility hypothesis. No significant difference was found between the relativism-agree ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 2.12$, $n = 40$) and relativism-disagree variants ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 2.09$, $n = 40$), $t(78) = .32$, $p = .751$, arguing against the agreeableness hypothesis (see Fig. 2).

Across conditions, no reliable differences were found in reported levels of moral conviction in willingness to purchase the mismarked item, suggesting that all participants had similar entering moral attitudes. In line with previous research, moral conviction was negatively correlated with willingness to purchase the mismarked item in the control condition ($r = -.27$, $p = .001$), such that participants who had stronger moral convictions regarding the issue were less likely to express willingness to take the mismarked item. These findings support the validity of the vignette for tapping into morally relevant attitudes. However, no reliable correlation was found within either the absolutist ($r = -.08$, $p = .471$) or the relativist conditions ($r = -.13$, $p = .254$), suggesting that participants' judgments in those conditions were driven primarily by the morality primes they received, rather than individual differences in entering moral attitudes. No reliable effects of gender or cultural background were found.

Discussion

Building on correlational studies that have identified links between moral relativism-absolutism and support for different moral behaviors (Baker, 2005; Barnett et al., 1994; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Singhapakdi et al., 1999), as well as an experimental study demonstrating that priming moral absolutism increases pro-social behavior (Young & Durwin, 2012), we investigated whether exposing people to moral relativism and moral absolutism would affect people's moral behavior and moral intentions. In Experiment 1, we found that exposing participants to a relativist argument for tolerance of female genital mutilation led to increased cheating in a subsequent incentivized dice-roll, compared to participants exposed to an absolutist argument against tolerance, those in a control condition, or the pattern that would be expected by chance. In Experiment 2, we found that exposing participants to either of the moral absolutism conditions reduced their willingness to engage in a morally questionable purchase compared to participants in the relativism conditions or the control condition. At the same time, we found no evidence for the permissibility hypothesis, as no difference was observed between the absolutism-permissible and absolutism-impermissible variants; nor did we find evidence for the agreeableness hypothesis, as no difference was found between the relativism-agree and the relativism-disagree variants. Although scores on the moral conviction measure predicted reduced willingness to engage in the questionable purchase in the control condition, scores on the moral conviction measure were not predictive of willingness to engage in the purchase in the experimental conditions. We suggest that this discrepancy is due to the moral conviction scale having been designed to tap into individual differences in moral attitudes (Skitka et al., 2005). When participants were exposed to the morality primes, any differences in judgment that would normally be captured by individual differences in entering moral convictions regarding theft or deception were overridden by the priming procedure.

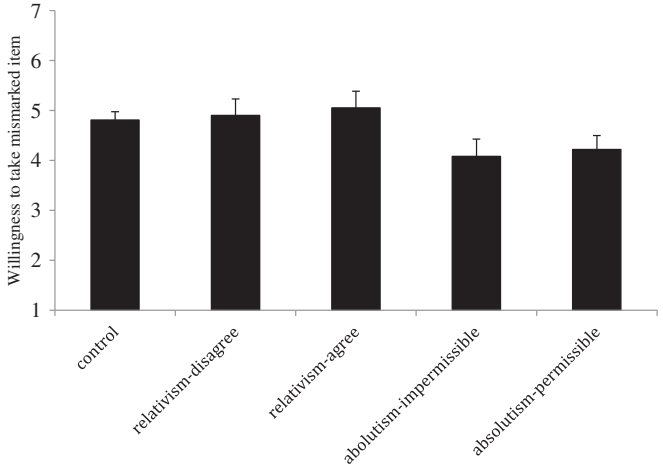

Fig. 2. Mean expressed willingness to purchase the mismarked item following exposure to relativistic, absolutist, or no definitions (control) of morality. Error bars indicate 1 standard error of the mean.

Across the two experiments, participants in the absolutist conditions were less willing to cheat or engage in marginal theft, whereas participants in the relativism conditions were more willing to cheat and engage in theft. Compared to the respective control conditions, the differences in Experiment 1 appeared to be driven by the influence of moral relativism (which increased cheating compared to the control condition), whereas the differences in Experiment 2 appeared to be driven by the influence of moral absolutism (which decreased support for engaging in a questionable purchase compared to the control condition). This pattern likely reflects the entering positions of participants in the two control conditions relative to the two different dependent measures. Actually engaging in explicit cheating (Experiment 1) is presumably a more serious offense than making a legal purchase that takes advantage of a store's mistake (Experiment 2). Thus, most participants in the control condition of Experiment 1 demonstrated no evidence of cheating, but those in the control condition of Experiment 2 expressed a high willingness to engage in the (less serious) morally questionable purchase. We predict that in situations in which people are initially reluctant to engage in immoral behavior, exposure to moral relativism will have a greater effect in fostering the immoral behavior; whereas when participants are initially predisposed toward engaging in an immoral behavior, exposure to moral absolutism will have a greater effect in preventing them from engaging in the immoral behavior.

Taken together, the present findings indicate that meta-ethical worldviews related to moral relativism and moral absolutism can have a causal impact on people's moral judgments and behaviors. Specifically, increased moral relativist and decreased moral absolutist perspectives may lead to relaxed moral standards and willingness to engage in immoral behaviors. We found no evidence in Experiment 2 to suggest that differences in moral behavior are due to absolutist perspectives implying that fewer behaviors are permitted. Whereas the correlational data in Experiment 1 suggested that participants in the relativist condition may have engaged in more cheating because they were upset that the argument legitimated a moral position with which they disagreed, no support for the agreeableness hypothesis was found in Experiment 2.

Rather, it appears that the subjectivity of moral belief implied by moral relativism may undermine the sense of objectivity required to motivate moral action. As noted earlier, there is no intrinsic reason why moral beliefs must be grounded in objective facts rather than subjective preferences in order to carry moral weight in guiding our behavior (Wong, 2006). Nonetheless, lay theories of morality may attribute moral beliefs to facts about the external world, rather than to the

collectively shared opinions of a society. As a consequence, any metaphysical worldview that detracts from the objectivity of moral belief may impair subsequent moral behavior.

The present findings fit within the larger body of research on how meta-ethical worldviews may compromise moral judgments and behaviors. For examples, studies of free will have found that disbelief in free will is associated with reduced helpfulness. Inducing disbelief in free will leads to reduced helping behavior, increased aggression, and increased cheating (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Stillman et al., 2010; Vohs & Schooler, 2008). In accord with the findings of Young and Durwin (2012), our results suggest that although previous studies have found that reminding people of morality strengthens moral behavior, this will only be the case when the moral reminder is absolutist in nature. Exposure to moral relativism will not strengthen moral behavior, and will sometimes decrease it. Our results move beyond previous studies by demonstrating causal effects of moral absolutism and moral relativism on actual engagement in immoral behavior. We also provide evidence to rule out permissibility and agreeableness explanations for these effects, while isolating the role that the metaphysical grounding of moral absolutist and moral relativist philosophies may play in restricting and facilitating immoral behavior, respectively.

Our results contrast with those of Forsyth and Berger (1982) who found no effect of individual differences in relativist attitudes and cheating behavior. Future studies should investigate whether the measure designed by Fischbacher and Heusi (2008) is simply more sensitive to cheating, or whether relativist attitudes must be activated in order to affect behavior. Determining whether relativist and absolutist perspectives must be made salient in order to affect moral behavior is crucial to understanding whether increased discussion and acceptance of moral relativism will have long-term effects on moral behavior. This issue is also particularly intriguing in light of our finding that scores on the moral conviction measure predicted responses in the control condition, but not the experimental conditions.

In both our experiments, we employed scenarios in which our participants likely had very homogeneous positions with respect to the issues in the moral arguments they read. Future studies should investigate issues that are steeped in greater controversy, such as abortion or gay rights, where participants have direct experience with the lack of consensus on these issues. Moreover, whereas Experiment 2 relied on examples drawn from different domains (i.e. female genital mutilation, arranged marriage, driving), future studies should try to identify cases that can be argued for and against in both absolutist and relativist terms, in order to eliminate any possibility of effects being driven by differences in the content of the arguments.

It should be noted that Experiment 1 examined actual behavior whereas Experiment 2 examined attitudes. Given that the correlational data in Experiment 1 supported the agreeableness hypothesis, but no support for it was found in Experiment 2, future studies should examine possible differences in the causal mechanisms underlying the effects of relativism and absolutism for behaviors versus judgments. In addition, we have argued that exposure to moral relativism may relax our moral standards because it implies that our moral beliefs are ultimately subjective. However, Goodwin & Darley (2010) have argued that moral relativism also requires more abstract and reflective thinking. In our own materials, relativist arguments asked participants to step back from their feelings while absolutist arguments asked participants to rely on them. In a separate study, we found that participants exposed to a description of moral relativism were less willing to punish offenses than participants exposed to a description of mind-body dualism, an equally abstract philosophical issue (Rai & Holyoak, 2013). In addition, when we were piloting our materials, we did not find that participants exposed to relativist arguments scored higher on abstract thinking problems (e.g., the Cognitive Reflection Task or the Tower of Hanoi problem). However, future studies should investigate whether effects of moral relativism may be driven in part by the more abstract, reflective, and potentially cognitively depleting thinking that it requires.

Finally, our findings have implications for research on tolerance of cultural practices that are different from our own. Specifically, the present results suggest that arguments for tolerance that are framed in relativist terms may lead people to commit moral transgressions. As an alternative, it may be preferable to frame arguments for tolerance in absolutist terms based on equal rights and the inherent value of diversity. Future studies should investigate these alternative modes of encouraging tolerance and their effects on moral judgment and behavior by investigating effects on subsequent moral behavior after being exposed to absolutist and relativist arguments in favor of the same position.

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