

Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowships for Research on Human Decision Processes and Risk Management 2008

Applicant Information

Stephanie Finnel

Doctoral Student
The Wharton School
Marketing Department

700 Jon M. Huntsman Hall
3730 Walnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Office Phone: (215) 898-2268
Cellular Phone: (856) 630-1088
Email: sfinnel@wharton.upenn.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Americus Reed II, Associate Professor of Marketing
Signature: _____

Project Title: Being Bad Makes Me Tired – Moral Disengagement as a Cognitively Depleting Task

Purchasing situations often require that consumers make judgments about morally charged issues. For instance, companies may decide to support charitable organizations that have specific political agendas (Finnel, Reed, Aquino, and Thau 2007) or that have certain stances on social and environmental matters (Menon and Kahn 2003). By engaging in such philanthropic efforts, companies aim to demonstrate that they are sympathetic, compassionate entities that care about their communities and their world (Menon and Kahn 2003). However, consumers may vary in the extent to which they think a particular cause is a worthy, morally commendable endeavor, and in some cases, they might even believe a cause is immoral (Finnel et al. 2007). They might determine how they feel about a product in part by passing judgment on the charitable organizations the manufacturing company chooses to support. What consequences might these consumption based moral judgments have on decision making and consumer welfare? The project proposed here is designed to answer this very question.

People normally assert that they have a highly developed moral compass and a natural aversion to unethical behavior (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli 1996; Baumeister 1996). Few individuals would openly admit to being cruel, dishonest, corrupt, or unsympathetic, and veering away from one's personal moral standards can result in negative cognitions and emotions (Bandura et al. 1996; Higgins 1987). Yet we know from our day-to-day lives that individuals somehow manage to behave unethically while remaining convinced of their unscrupulousness and conscientiousness. How is this feat achieved? Bandura et al.'s (1996) social cognitive theory posits that people keep their behavior in line with their personal moral standards by engaging in a self-regulation process. That is, individuals constantly keep track of their actions and compare their actions to their moral code of conduct (Bandura et al. 1996). If they find that their actions are inconsistent with this code, they revise their behavior so that it is once again properly aligned with their moral beliefs (Bandura et al. 1996). They know unpleasant thoughts and feelings will ensue if they act in a manner they deem to be immoral, and this anticipated self-censure pushes them to keep their behavior in check (Bandura et al. 1996).

“Moral disengagement mechanisms,” which are also part of the self-regulation process described above, can change people's impressions of a morally questionable action, its repercussions, or its targets (Bandura et al. 1996, 365). When such mechanisms are unleashed, a morally questionable behavior may come to be viewed as acceptable and praiseworthy, and it may consequently be easier for people to take part in or support immoral acts (Bandura et al. 1996). For example, “moral justification” is a disengagement mechanism that enables individuals to believe that a given action is called for on moral grounds (Bandura et al. 1996, 365). Throughout history, religious groups have relied on this mechanism to convince themselves that it is appropriate to disrespect, mistreat, or kill those who do not adhere to a particular set of beliefs. Another commonly used mechanism is “dehumanization,” which operates by asserting that the targets of a particular action lack human qualities (Bandura et al. 1996, 365). People generally feel more comfortable about behaving immorally when those who suffer as a result are seen as subhuman (Bandura et al. 1996). By strategically calling upon various moral disengagement mechanisms, individuals can safeguard their views of themselves as morally righteous beings while simultaneously engaging in and endorsing morally questionable behaviors (Bandura et al. 1996). In particular, consumers might choose to buy products from a company that is acting unethically, and they may then use moral disengagement mechanisms to convince themselves that this purchasing decision is acceptable from a moral standpoint.

A related stream of research focuses on the costs of self-regulation. According to this research, self-regulation of any sort is difficult and draining, and people must expend a great deal of effort to self-regulate in the moral domain (Baumeister 2002). Moreover, there is only so much mental energy available for self-regulation, and if it is used for one self-regulatory task (e.g., refraining from going out on a Saturday night and instead doing homework), very little is left over for other self-regulatory tasks (e.g., persisting at solving a seemingly impossible puzzle) (Baumeister 2002). Over time, people can expand their available supply of mental energy by engaging in increasingly difficult self-regulatory tasks (Baumeister 2002). Like Bandura et al. (1996), Baumeister (2002) also contended that moral actions could be explained using a self-regulatory model. He argued that the system designed to curb immoral behavior does not necessarily work properly, and he emphasized that a “self-regulatory breakdown” can result in unethical actions (Bandura 1996, 21). Bandura (1996) criticized Baumeister’s approach (Heatherton and Baumeister 1996), arguing that it was wrong in treating self-regulation as a switch that is usually on and only occasionally off. In Bandura’s view, the moral self-regulatory system was better thought of as a complex entity with components that could be “selectively” weakened or strengthened via moral disengagement mechanisms (Bandura 1996, 21).

In the present project, we wish to take some aspects of both the Bandura and the Baumeister perspectives to better understand the effects of moral self-regulation on consumer behavior. In particular, we contend that Bandura’s moral self-regulatory process, which involves both successful inhibition of immoral actions as well as moral disengagement, might drain the mental energy repository in Baumeister’s model. We believe that morally disengaging via the mechanisms described by Bandura et al. (1996) might be very difficult, particularly for those who are not accustomed to disengaging on a regular basis. After all, individuals generally like to think of themselves as morally righteous (Baumeister 1996a), and they do not like to see fellow human beings suffer (Nisbett, Gilovich, and Keltner 2005). Therefore, it should be challenging for people to use moral disengagement mechanisms to rationalize unethical behaviors, and if they do manage to achieve such rationalization, they should have little mental energy remaining for other tasks. Baumeister (2002) proposed that successful moral self-regulation is taxing, but he did not explore how moral disengagement, one particular part of the moral self-regulation process, might be especially draining. In the present project, we aim to fill this gap in the literature. Consumers might find it mentally tiring to convince themselves that it is alright to buy goods from a company that has behaved unethically in the past. Consequently, they might be less alert when making later purchasing decisions and might have less mental energy available to process subsequently encountered advertising messages. At the same time, moral disengagement is a component of moral self-regulation, and we reason that it is a skill that can be practiced and perfected just like any other self-regulatory mechanism. Thus we propose that more habitual moral disengagers might be less drained after a round of disengagement than less habitual moral disengagers. Consequently, consumers who are skilled at morally disengaging might be able to rationalize an unethical behavior and still have energy left over for subsequent purchasing decisions. We aim to test these propositions in the present project.