

Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship for Research on Human Decision Processes and Risk Management: 2010 Application

Moral Decoupling: Motivated Dissociations of Moral Value and Product Value

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Descriptive Summary of Project

How has the recent Tiger Woods scandal affected perceptions of his ability as a golfer? Is Roman Polanski seen as a less skilled filmmaker because of his past indiscretions? The current research examines a very fundamental question: when do judgments of morality and judgments of performance affect one another, and when are these judgments decoupled?

While traditional psychological theories of morality have emphasized moral reasoning (e.g. Kohlberg 1969), more recent work in moral psychology has emphasized the role of intuitions and emotions in driving moral judgments. Cognitive processes may be enlisted only after the fact to justify these judgments (Haidt 2001). Thus, our judgments are not necessarily grounded in any objective moral reality. Instead, we may seek justifications for desired behaviors and outcomes so that they are seen as morally acceptable. In other words, we may behave more like “intuitive lawyers” driven by predispositions toward particular outcomes than “intuitive scientists” who engage in unbiased inquiry (Tsang 2002). Bandura (e.g. 1996) has developed a unifying framework that outlines classes of rationalization techniques that people may use to morally disengage and justify moral lapses. A growing body of work has documented how these moral disengagement mechanisms can be employed to reduce dissonance with moral standards while engaging in desired unethical behaviors (Aquino Reed Thau & Freedman 2007; Bandura 1996; Paharia & Desphandé 2009).

However, extant research does not address the fundamental issue of when moral principles are integrated into other dimensions of value and when they are kept separate. I propose that *moral decoupling* is a psychological separation process by which people selectively compartmentalize moral value from the value of a given performance or product. This mechanism is distinct from moral disengagement, which displaces or diffuses responsibility and reduces perceived moral culpability. Instead, moral transgressions are acknowledged as immoral but decoupled from other dimensions of value. Nevertheless, moral decoupling is a post hoc rationalization more likely to be employed by people when it serves their interests, when the immoral act is less relevant to the performance in question, and when the immoral act is more difficult to excuse.

A series of preliminary studies begins to test this theorizing. Results thus far suggest that in the context of Olympic athletes who transgress, favorable judgments of performance are significantly associated with greater moral decoupling but not with moral disengagement. Meanwhile, less severe moral judgments are significantly associated with greater moral disengagement but not with moral decoupling, supporting the distinction between these constructs. Furthermore, transgressions affect judgments of performance only under certain circumstances. Consistent with our theory, irrelevant moral transgressions detract from performance less than transgressions related to performance.

I hope to utilize the support of the Ackoff Fellowship to build on these preliminary findings and further explore the nature and bounds of this previously untested phenomenon. To establish external validity and demonstrate the existence of this process in the wild, an initial correlational study will analyze the content of blog postings regarding moral transgressions by prominent politicians, athletes, businesspeople, and artists. Research assistants blind to study hypotheses will code these postings for valence (i.e. whether they support the person or not) and evidence of moral decoupling versus moral disengagement strategies. A second study will use a Qualtrics online panel of registered Democrats, Republicans, and Independents to test how political affiliation influences people’s propensity to morally decouple transgressions from job performance in the context of Democratic versus Republican politicians. Finally, a series of laboratory studies will further examine the boundaries of moral decoupling in athletic and corporate contexts, and explore the implications for subsequent decisions and behaviors.

Budget of Anticipated Expenses

The financial support that I am seeking will be used for two purposes with regard to this research project: to fund data collection and to share the results of my research at two conferences. Data will be collected in a series of experiments in both the Wharton Behavioral Lab and using online Qualtrics panels. Because Qualtrics panels are composed of very specific populations, the data obtained are of higher quality, allowing for more appropriate and rigorous tests of hypotheses and increasing the generalizability of any findings. However, these panels can be expensive to use. While cost per participant varies, \$5 seems to be a conservative estimate. Furthermore, a correlational study using actual blog postings will greatly increase the external validity of these findings and make this program of study far more compelling. In order to properly code these postings, I will need the help of research assistants who are blind to the objectives of this research. Undergraduate research assistants are typically paid \$10 per hour, and 20 hours of work represents a conservative estimate of the time required for this task.

In addition, I anticipate that this research might be of interest to both the marketing community and the psychology community, and I hope to present my results at two relevant conferences: the Association for Consumer Research North American conference in Jacksonville, and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference in San Antonio. The budget outlined below reflects estimated costs of lodging (at conference room rates) and travel to and from the conferences. While the Marketing Department allocates some funding for research and travel, it is sufficient to cover only a small portion of the research I intend to conduct over the course of my studies, and no more than two conferences over this entire period. Any incurred expenses that the Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship does not cover will thus be paid out-of-pocket or by any funds remaining in my departmental research budget.

If you have any questions, or if there is any further information I can provide, please do not hesitate to call or email me. I greatly appreciate any support the Ackoff Fellowship can provide. Thank you for your consideration.

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