



## Gradual escalation: The role of continuous commitments in perceptions of guilt

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Four studies investigate how gradual escalations affect the judgments of guilt made by observers.
- ▶ Making commitments to escalating behaviors led observers to later rate actors as less guilty.
- ▶ Inducing a categorical mindset counteracted the effect of commitment on perceptions of guilt.
- ▶ Continuous commitments explain why gradual escalations reduce the severity of moral judgments.

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### ABSTRACT

Many immoral acts are the result of gradually escalating behaviors. The present work focuses on observers of immoral acts and the role of continuous commitments in shaping their perceptions of another person's guilt. Across four studies investigating how gradual escalations affect moral judgments, participants read a scenario describing an instance of immoral behavior that gradually built in severity. In Study 1, female participants perceived a perpetrator as less guilty when his behavior gradually escalated to rape after explicitly committing to the appropriateness of his initial morally ambiguous behavior. The findings from Study 2 suggest that inducing a categorical mindset can counteract this reduction in perceptions of guilt. Study 3 illustrated the power of the categorical versus continuous mindset by examining how a categorical (versus a continuous mindset) impacts perceptions of guilt even in the absence of gradually escalating behavior. Finally, Study 4 extended the findings from the prior studies to a sample of both men and women and investigated the effect of the mindset manipulation on perceptions. Together, these studies demonstrate that the potency of gradual escalations to induce acquiescence to immoral behavior may inhere in their ability to create initial commitments to and continuous perceptions of morally ambiguous behavior.

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"The safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." C. S. Lewis

### Introduction

Many immoral acts begin with a series of minor negative events that gradually escalate. A psychopath may start by harming animals and then move onto humans (Ascione, 1993) or a business executive may start by misreporting profit earnings and soon find himself attempting to hide billion of dollars of debt (Grant, 2000). Similarly, a woman does not wake up overnight to an abusive husband, but rather, abuse develops gradually over time, perhaps starting with name-calling and a small shove and then building to a slap and so on (Evans, 1996).

These examples demonstrate the potency of gradual escalation to lead to large unethical acts. Minor harmful steps can escalate in wrongness

until actors have committed major infractions, as Milgram (1974) illustrates with the incremental shock procedures making individuals more likely to engage in minor behaviors that gradually escalate to overtly negative acts (Gilbert, 1981). Indeed, a number of researchers have even maintained that this gradual escalation may be to blame for much of the misconduct on the part of corporate executives (Gino & Bazerman, 2009; Moore & Loewenstein, 2004; Prentice, 2007; Schrand & Zechman, 2011) and that acts like acquaintance rape are more likely to be overlooked because they start off innocuously (Warshaw, 1988).

### From actors to observers

Observers may also be implicated in the immoral acts of others since they too may fall victim to gradual escalations in their evaluations of the potential wrongdoing of others. That is, the gradual way in which many unethical acts develop, ranging from corporate misconduct to arguments that explode into violence, may also account for the failures of auditors to report misconduct on the part of corporate executives (Corona & Randhawa, 2010) or the failures of bystanders to intervene when violence erupts. Therefore, while prior research has examined

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how gradual changes affect *actors*, in the present work, we focus on how gradual escalations affect outside *observers*.

Since tacit approval of immoral and unethical acts contributes to a climate where they are more likely to occur, we focus on understanding what it is about the gradual escalation of morally wrong behaviors that leads individuals to overlook the wrongdoing of others. Further, understanding what it is about gradual escalations that affect observers seemed particularly interesting because unlike actors who are motivated to maintain views of themselves as “morally adequate” (Steele, 1988) and therefore to reframe their behavior in ways consistent with these views, observers are unlikely to be driven by these same motives when judging the behavior of others and in particular the behavior of outgroup others.

We argue that gradual escalation entails two factors, initial commitments to and continuous perceptions of behavior that alter how observers perceive moral behavior and lead outside observers to be more likely to overlook the unethical behavior of others. First, because these gradually escalating acts start out with innocuous behaviors, individuals are more likely to express explicit agreement with or *commitment* to the acceptability of these behaviors and in so doing, set a precedent for future judgments before observers fully realize the momentum and the direction of the situation. Just as actors have been shown to escalate in response to behaviors they have committed to (Loewenstein, 1996; Staw, 1976; Staw & Ross, 1989), observers may also escalate approval to other people's behaviors of which they have previously approved. Similarly, many compliance techniques rely on creating a sense of commitment to induce future compliance. For example, Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, and Miller (1978) argue that the low-ball technique leads individuals to agree to purchase goods at higher prices by inducing individuals to commit to buying the products at a low price and then gradually increasing the price. Similarly, research on the foot in the door effect illustrates that individuals are more likely to commit to engaging in a larger act (e.g., donating money) if they start off with a smaller act (signing a petition) and their behavior gradually escalates (Freedman & Fraser, 1966; see Burger, 1999 for review). We reason that when observers commit to the rightness of an actor's initial small acts—asking a girl out on a date—it increases the likelihood of later committing to the rightness of an actor's more significant acts—forcing the girl to engage in a sexual act. However, in the absence of such initial commitments, observers may be less bound to the moral rightness of the actor's later behaviors, and as a result, more likely to judge such behaviors as immoral or wrong. Thus, in our research we sought to heighten the impact of the initial commitments that we believe are implicit in gradual escalations of behavior by making them explicit.

Second, gradual escalation creates *continuous perceptions* of behavior such that each step on the path towards eventual wrongdoing is indistinguishable from the last step because each step is only a minor, incremental, increase beyond what had been already done. As research on change blindness indicates (Simons, 2000), perceivers often have difficulty seeing changes that occur incrementally compared to changes that occur more abruptly. Analogously, in the Milgram (1974) studies, since each shock was a mere 15-volts more than the prior shock, it is hard to determine a specific point when the teacher's behavior became “immoral.” According to the “induction mechanism” (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004), when evaluating the acceptability of an actor's current behavior, individuals consider the acceptability of the actor's prior behavior as well as how similar the present behavior is to the prior behavior. Since gradual escalation leads observers to view present behaviors as minor incremental increases beyond what an actor has already done, present behaviors are evaluated similarly to prior behaviors, attenuating perceptions of wrongdoing.

Consistent with this perspective, recent research has found that incremental changes in negative acts can lead perceivers—as well as actors—to view negative acts as more permissible (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). Individuals are more willing to condone others' potential cheating behavior if the unethical behavior develops gradually over

time, starting with small increments of overestimation (e.g., adding a few cents to their payout) and gradually building. By contrast, if the cheating behavior occurs abruptly, with large overestimations, then individuals are more likely to report the cheating (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). Further, when behavior gradually escalates, observers spend less time deciding whether to approve of behaviors and are less likely to complete word stems with words related to unethical behavior. Based on these findings, Gino and Bazerman (2009) suggest that “implicit biases” account for the effects of gradual escalations on moral judgments. Yet, to fully understand the impact of gradual escalation of immoral behavior requires an examination of the specific factors leading individuals to overlook the misconduct of others. That is, while prior research by Gino and Bazerman (2009) compared observers' responses to gradual escalating immoral behavior versus abrupt shifts to immoral behavior, in the present work, all studies (with the exception of Study 3) focus on instances of gradual escalation in which we varied the different factors—commitment and continuous perceptions—that we theorize account for the effectiveness of gradual escalations. In doing so, we sought to understand the conditions under which gradual escalations affect and do not affect observers' perceptions of behavior.

In focusing on commitment and continuous perceptions, we test two key hypotheses: 1) increasing observers' commitment to individual acts as they escalate should make outside observers less likely to hold actors accountable for their actions; and 2) when present behavior is perceived as categorically different than prior behavior, observers will be more willing to see actors as guilty when behavior becomes morally wrong. Across four studies, we assess whether manipulating these two factors can heighten or attenuate the effect of gradual escalation on perceptions of guilt in the contexts of acquaintance rape and a drunken brawl that ends in murder, two situations in which minor negative behaviors can gradually escalate to extreme wrongdoing (Warshaw, 1988).

More specifically, in Study 1, we investigate whether increased commitment can heighten the effect of gradual escalations. In Study 2, we focus on whether inducing a categorical mindset can attenuate the effect of gradual escalation. Study 3 shows the power of the categorical versus continuous mindset manipulation by examining how a categorical versus a continuous mindset impact perceptions of guilt even in the absence of gradually escalating behavior. Finally, in Study 4, we extend the findings in the prior studies to both male and female participants.

## Study 1

In Study 1, we examined how an observer's commitment to the acceptability of an individual's initial ambiguous acts would affect the observer's later judgments of that individual once the individual's behavior had escalated into a clearly immoral act, focusing on acquaintance rape. We chose to focus on acquaintance rape because such acts are characterized by gradual escalation, beginning, for example, with an innocent date, and progressing to an unwelcome criminal sexual act (Koss, 1988). We predicted that agreeing to the moral acceptability of earlier innocuous actions makes it more likely that individuals will condone future worse actions when the behavior escalates. In particular, if the initial commitments inherent in gradual escalations account for the power of gradual escalations to reduce the severity of moral judgments, then increasing the power of those commitments by making the commitments explicit should further depress the severity of moral judgments. Consistent with this manipulation, Kim and Sherman (2007) find that explicit expressions of choice lead to a greater sense of commitment. Accordingly, in Study 1, participants were asked to read an acquaintance rape scenario that gradually escalated while being given the opportunity to explicitly commit to the appropriateness of perpetrator's behavior or not. We then examined how all participants later viewed the perpetrator's culpability after the behavior had escalated. We also examined how commitment affected observers' feelings

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