

Licensed to say no: How and why does engaging in a prior moral action influence family support provision?



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ABSTRACT

The family support literature tends to draw on a *level* paradigm focusing on support from a particular source over time. In the present study, we take the *event* paradigm (or the episodic approach) which treats family support provisions as specific encounters. Specifically, we draw on the moral licensing literature to examine why, when, and how individuals' prior moral action influences the provision of family support in three studies. In Studies 1a and 1b, we found that individuals who engaged in a prior moral action provided less family support in comparison to those who did not engage in a prior moral action. In Study 2, we found that the indirect effects of engaging in a prior moral action on family support provision as mediated by individuals' counterfactual thinking were observed only when situational severity was low. Theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed.

Organizations have increasingly acknowledged the importance of assisting their employees to cope with work-family conflict, which has been associated with numerous negative employee and organizational outcomes such as lower job satisfaction, symptoms of physical and psychological disorders, and higher levels of absenteeism and turnover (e.g., Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Aryee, Fields, & Luk, 1999; Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007). Official human resource policies and benefits such as on-site childcare center, flexible work schedules, and job sharing are offered as remedial measures (Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013; Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005). However, past research has shown that these policies are less efficacious in alleviating employees' work-family conflict in comparison to the family support that employees receive from their supervisors and coworkers (Allen, 2001; Behson, 2005). Recent research has shown that family support, referring to assistance given to those who experience work-family conflict, generates valuable resources that buffer the negative effects associated with high work and family demands (Bagger & Li, 2014; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011).

The family support literature (and the work-family literature in general) tends to draw on a *level* paradigm focusing on support from a particular source – such as coworker or supervisor – that is accumulated over time (Maertz & Boyar, 2011). The level approach assumes that individuals' tendency to offer family support is relatively stable and is influenced by a variety of individual or organizational characteristics such as organizational culture and leader-member relationship (e.g., Li & Bagger, 2011; Li, McCauley, & Shaffer, 2017; Straub, 2012). An alternative approach that has not garnered sufficient research attention is the *event* paradigm (or the episodic approach) which treats family support provisions as episodic events that ebb and flow (e.g., Bagger, Reb, & Li, 2014; Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001). The event paradigm suggests that individuals' provisions of family

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support are highly variable and may be influenced by specific situations preceding the event of support provision. Therefore, knowing that someone generally offers family support to others (the level paradigm) does not mean that we know the sequential decisions that result in the same individual either offering or withholding support within the short term (the event paradigm). This distinction is particularly important as past research has suggested that family support is a class of extra-role behaviors that is somewhat discretionary and may not be explicitly required in the workplace (Straub, 2012). Therefore, knowing the specific circumstances under which the family support event may or may not occur has significant theoretical and practical implications.

To fill this gap, we draw on the moral licensing literature to examine whether an individual's prior moral behaviors may influence his or her decisions to provide family support (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010). Imagine, for example, that an employee participates in a company-wide food drive for the community. Back at work, she faces the decision of whether to offer family support to a coworker who has to leave work early to attend to a sick child but has to complete a project that is due before the end of the workday. Is this employee, who just acted morally, more or less likely to offer family support to her coworker relative to someone who did not previously engage in moral behaviors? The moral licensing literature demonstrates that acting morally could license individuals to lessen their motivation to engage in future prosocial actions (Effron & Monin, 2010). Therefore, engaging in a prior moral action may paradoxically reduce individuals' provision of family support.

In addition, we examine a boundary condition of these effects. Past research suggests that the licensing effects are more pronounced when there is sufficient ambiguity surrounding the subsequent target behavior (Mullen & Monin, 2016). In other words, a high level of ambiguity provides moral cover for the target behavior thereby making it appear less immoral or selfish. For example, cheating is more justifiable when there is an extenuating circumstance that obfuscates the (immoral) motive behind the cheating (Brown et al., 2011). Drawing on these arguments, we focus on the severity of the situation giving rise to the need for family support (situational severity in short) as a moderator of the licensing effects, suggesting that a prior moral action is more likely to lead to the reduction of family support when situational severity is low (resulting in more ambiguity with respect to the need for support). We also examine the mechanism through which these effects are realized. One of the mechanisms used to explain the licensing effect is moral credential which means engaging in a prior moral action may allow individuals to view their subsequent (immoral or selfish) behavior in a more positive light (Miller & Effron, 2010). As a result, the subsequent target behavior may be construed as less egregious or more justifiable. Therefore, we operationalize moral credential as counterfactual thinking, defined as considerations of what could have been, or a comparison of a hypothetical situation with reality (Roese, 1997) and consider it as a mediating mechanism of the licensing effect.

We used two studies (three experiments) to test these propositions. We used Studies 1a and 1b to examine the main effect of moral licensing, testing our prediction that those who reported engaging in a prior moral action are less likely to offer family support relative to those in the control condition who were not morally licensed. We then used Study 2 to examine the entire theoretical model, incorporating both the moderator (situational severity) and the mediator (counterfactual thinking, see Fig. 1).

This study aims to contribute to both the work-family and the moral licensing literatures in several important ways. First, our conceptualization of family support provisions as discrete events that are situationally determined represents an important advancement to this literature that tends to treat family support as a pattern of behaviors influenced by stable individual or contextual factors (Kossek et al., 2011). Second, the use of an experimental design to understand what impacts individuals' decisions to offer family support is a rarity in work-family research in general (Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood, & Lambert, 2007) and research on family support in particular. Third, Effron and Conway (2015, p. 34) noted that to advance licensing research, researchers should “refine understanding of key moderators of moral self-licensing” and “unpack the underlying mechanisms.” By modeling situational severity as a moderator and counterfactual thinking as a mediator, we contribute to the licensing literature by examining not only *when* but also *why* the licensing effect takes place.

1. Family support

Family support is a type of relational behavior that may “reduce the stress employees experience as a result of the conflict between work and family” (Bagger & Li, 2014, p. 1124). Such support may be instrumental or emotional in nature (Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009). Instrumentally, family support allows the recipient of such support to meet the needs of work and family, including such behaviors as rearranging work shifts for an employee who can then stay home to take care of a sick child and covering for an employee who has to take a family call. Emotional support refers to a cluster of behaviors that makes employees feel that their well-being is valued and cared about, including expressing concerns to someone who is overwhelmed by competing work-family

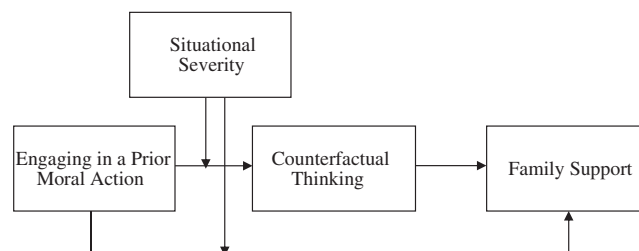


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

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