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Depletion, moral identity, and unethical behavior: Why people behave unethically after self-control exertion

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ABSTRACT

Self-control enables people to resist short-term temptations in the service of long-term goals. Previous exertion of self-control leads to a state of ego depletion. Three studies demonstrated that ego depletion leads to a high level of unethical behavior. These studies also hypothesized and confirmed that depleted individuals behave unethically because of low moral identity. Study 1 found that depleted participants were more likely to over-report their performance than non-depleted participants. Study 2 revealed that depletion reduced people's moral identity, which in turn increased their propensity to engage in unethical behavior. Study 3 proved that priming moral identity eliminated the effect of depletion on cheating. Findings suggest that reduced moral identity accounts for the effect of self-control depletion on unethical behavior.

1. Introduction

Unethical behavior refers to any action that violates widely held moral principles (Ruedy, Moore, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2013).¹ Examples of unethical behavior include cheating, dishonesty, stealing, and breaking ethical norms or standards. People value morality and aim to maintain a moral self-image and ethical reputation (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). However, even good people (i.e., people who care about being moral) sometimes do bad things when unethical behavior serves self-interest (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). Unethical behavior comes in varied forms and has caused remarkable harm to individuals, organizations, and society (Ariely, 2012). What are the factors that determine when and why people resist ethical temptations and succumb to them at other times (and thus fail to behave ethically)?

Individuals in ethical dilemma situations often face a motivational conflict between the desire to maximize self-interest and the desire to act in morally appropriate ways (Sheldon & Fishbach, 2015). Individuals need to exert self-control or “moral muscle” to override selfish impulses and do what is morally right (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Self-control is defined as a process that allows people to alter or override their impulses, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to achieve overarching goals (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). From a self-control perspective, ethical dilemmas involve a tradeoff between short-term (e.g., monetary rewards) and long-term benefits (e.g., moral self-image, reputation, and social acceptance) (Fishbach & Woolley, 2015). Self-control enables people to refrain from engaging in unethical behaviors that bring about short-term gains and enact behaviors that are consistent with their long-term goals (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). A person's capacity for self-control (individual differences and situational

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¹ A widely accepted definition of unethical behavior is: acts that have harmful effects on others and are either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community (Jones, 1991). However, restricting the definition of unethical behavior to acts that cause interpersonal harm would be problematic, for some unethical acts do not involve harm to salient victims (Ruedy et al., 2013). Thus, we adopt Ruedy et al.'s (2013) definition of unethical behavior. Throughout the paper, we use the terms (un)ethical and (im)moral interchangeably.

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changes) should influence how he or she responds to ethical dilemmas if ethical behavior depends on self-control.

A growing body of research supports the critical role of self-control in morality. Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime is one of the most prominent theories in criminology and has inspired empirical studies that confirm the link between low self-control and criminal or deviant behavior (for recent meta-analysis, see Vazsonyi, Mikuška, & Kelley, 2017). For example, childhood self-control inversely predicts the crime independence of adults of their intelligence and social class (Moffitt et al., 2011), university students with high levels of self-control are less involved in academic dishonesty (Cochran, Wood, Sellers, Wilkerson, & Chamlin, 1998), and adults who have low in self-control are likely to commit employee theft (Langton, Piquero, & Hollinger, 2006). Besides stable individual differences in dispositional self-control, state self-control that varies across situations and time influences people's likelihood to engage in unethical behavior. Recent research showed that immoral behavior increases when the capacity for self-control is reduced by prior exertion (Bereby-Meyer & Shalvi, 2015).

According to the strength model of self-control (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), self-control relies on a common resource akin to muscle strength, such that exerting self-control quickly consumes this limited resource and leads to reduced capacity for further self-control. Thus, an initial act of self-control (e.g., attention control, thought control, and emotion control to impulses control) impairs subsequent acts of self-control in unrelated domains; this state is called ego depletion (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Thus, ego depletion affects a wide range of behaviors that depend on self-control (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). Depletion would increase unethical behavior if self-control helps people refrain from engaging in tempting unethical behavior (Baumeister & Alghamdi, 2015).

The strength model has been challenged despite its intuitive appeal and the large body of empirical support for its predictions (Hagger et al., 2010). One source of skepticism concerns the robustness of depletion effect. Several researchers contended that the evidence for the ego depletion effect has been overestimated due to publication bias (e.g., Carter & McCullough, 2014). A series of meta-analytic tests (e.g., Carter, Kofler, Forster, & McCullough, 2015) and pre-registered replication studies (e.g., Hagger et al., 2016; but see Baumeister & Vohs, 2016a, for a commentary) did not find evidence on the existence of depletion effect. However, as pointed out by some researchers (Luethi et al., 2016), a replication of one specific depletion manipulation with one specific outcome variable only allows conclusions about this particular procedure and is less suited to infer that the depletion effect is null. In addition, researchers (e.g., Inzlicht, Gervais, & Berkman, 2016) found conceptual, methodological and statistical flaws in the practice of meta-analysis (e.g., Carter et al., 2015). Thus, further high-powered, pre-registered research adopting different tasks from multiple domains is needed to provide additional data for the depletion effect. In fact, a recent preregistered experiment found support for the ego depletion effect when the Stroop task was used as the depleting task (Dang, Liu, Liu, & Mao, 2017). This study also highlights the importance of employing effective depleting tasks.

Despite null effects in domains such as cognitive performance (e.g., Hagger et al., 2016), depletion appears to increase unethical behavior. Poor self-control (low trait self-control and temporary depletion of self-control) was associated with strong willingness to take ethical risks (Gailliot, Baker, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2012), and ego depletion increased the likelihood of cheating; this effect was observed while controlling for trait self-control (Muraven, Pogarsky, & Shmueli, 2006). Researchers demonstrated that depleted participants were more likely to overstate their performance for monetary gain than non-depleted participants (Gino et al., 2011; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). Other studies showed that work-related activities (e.g., customer interactions) influence unethical behaviors in organizations via the mediating effect of depletion (Yam, Fehr, Keng-Highberger, Klotz, & Reynolds, 2016). Lack of sleep also impairs self-control and leads to ego depletion (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011). Consequently, sleep deprivation was associated with high levels of unethical behavior in laboratory and field settings (Barnes et al., 2011; Christian & Ellis, 2011). Moreover, the relationship between sleep deprivation and unethical behavior was mediated by cognitive fatigue, which is a proxy for ego depletion (Barnes et al., 2011). Similarly, participants engaged in less unethical behavior in the morning than in the afternoon (Kouchaki & Smith, 2014). This "morning morality effect" was also mediated by a measure of self-control depletion in the afternoon. These lines of research support the idea that unethical behavior increases when self-control was depleted by previous exertion.

Another source of skepticism regarding the strength model is that the depletion of a limited resource has not been directly demonstrated (Inzlicht, Schmeichel, & Macrae, 2014). Some researchers have proposed that glucose is the limited resource behind self-control (Gailliot et al., 2007). However, the glucose hypothesis remains controversial. The finding that self-control depletes blood glucose has been difficult to replicate and the proposed mechanism has been challenged (for a review, see Vadillo, Gold, & Osman, 2016). Moreover, findings that are incompatible with the resource model have accumulated. For example, rewarding self-control, eliciting a positive mood, and affirming core values can all attenuate the depletion effect (for a review, see Masicampo, Martin, & Anderson, 2014). An alternative non-resource-based account of the occurrence of depletion effect, namely, the process model, proposes that exerting self-control on a first task leads to motivated switching of task priorities (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012). Specifically, depleted people are less motivated to suppress and inhibit desires and more motivated to approach and gratify them than non-depleted people. This account suggests that depleted individuals are less motivated, but not unable to inhibit their aggressive urges. Nevertheless, there is little direct evidence that depletion is mediated by motivational changes (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016b). The current research seeks to directly test a main hypothesis derived from the process model in the moral domain, that is, depletion may weaken the motivation to act morally and strengthen the motivation to act selfishly for personal gains. The present research uses moral identity as a proxy for moral motivation (Blasi, 1980; Hardy & Carlo, 2005).

Moral identity is conceptualized as the cognitive schema of a person of his or her moral character (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1980). Moral identity reflects the extent to which being a moral person (e.g., compassionate, fair, honest, and kind) is important to an individual's identity. Moral identity is an important source of moral motivation (Hardy & Carlo, 2005, 2011) and predictive of moral behavior (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Moral identity may be treated as an individual difference variable (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002;

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