

Can Being Good Make You Bad?

Hello, my name is Lauren Smith. Today I would like to talk to you about how doing something good can make you do something bad.

What happens when you do a good deed, or think of yourself as a great citizen? You're more likely to behave morally in the future, right? NO! A new psychological study disagrees. It suggests doing something good can make you bad. This may seem like an oxymoron, good and bad are opposites, and this correlation is a bit odd. However it is based in social psychology and has been researched this as a topic called moral self-licensing.

Moral self-licensing is where you commit a perceived 'good' act and later use this as an excuse for a morally wrong act. Three experiments conducted by Sonya Sachdeva, of Northwestern University, found that people who think well of themselves behave less altruistically than those whose moral identity is threatened. If you see yourself as a public role model, someone to look up to, you are less likely to donate to charity than those who think they're pitiful members of society.

Sachdeva suggests that the choice to behave morally is a balancing act between the desire to do good and the costs of doing so – be that time, effort or actual money. We see ourselves on a scale of good/bad and as long as we are somewhere in the middle we think that's fine. The balancing point is set by our sense of self-worth. If we're on the good side then we are allowed to do something bad to return to the center. Having established our persona as a 'do-gooder', we feel less inclined to bear the costs of future moral actions.

In the first experiment 46 students were asked to copy a list of nine words that were positive (kind, generous, loving), negative (disloyal, greedy, selfish), or neutral (book, keys, house). They were told that they had signed up for a study on the psychology of handwriting, and afterwards they had to write a story about themselves which included all of the words they saw. After a filler task they were asked if they wanted to make a small donation to a charity of their choice. Sachdeva found that the students who described themselves with positive words gave the least to charity – only \$1.07. This was less than the average \$2.71 donations of the neutral words, and about 1/5 of the \$5.30 contributions given by the negative-word users. This suggests that those who think they're bad people want to improve their image by doing something good. Those who already think they're great see no reason to lose out on that money. Those who aren't quite sure fit in the middle.

Of course, the volunteers' essays may not have affected their moral identity. They mainly used the positive words to describe themselves, but negative ones to portray others. To allow for this, Sachdeva repeated the experiment with another group of students this time, randomly telling them to write about either themselves or someone they knew. With those who described other people, the nature of the words they used had no real bearing on the amount

of money they donated. In the group who wrote about themselves correlated with the previous experiment. It seems that a person's inclination for selflessness changes when their self-image shifts.

A third experiment supports this idea. After completing the same task as before, 46 students were led to what they thought was a second unrelated study. They were role-playing as the manager of a factory, who was receiving pressure from environmentalists to reduce its pollutants using expensive air filters. They were told other managers had agreed to run them for 60% of the time.

Amid a smokescreen of general questions, volunteers were asked how often they would run the filters for. Their answers showed the same trend as the first experiment. Those who saw the negative words were extra-cooperative, running the filters for 73% of the time. The neutral group would run the filters 67% of the time. And the positive-word group were the least cooperative, running them 56% of the time. The positives were more likely to think that the factory's profits were more important than environmental concerns. However, when Sachdeva asked them to predict what proportion of the other managers would stick to the 60% agreement, the three groups gave similar answers. **Again, it was their self-image that mattered.**

Sachdeva believes that her story-telling task psychologically primed the volunteers with positive or negative traits. They either wanted to cleanse themselves morally, or felt they had license to kick back a bit and 'let their wicked out.' Other groups have found similar results before. In 1969, Merrill Carlsmith and Alan Gross found that people are more compliant to a researcher's requests if they had previously been forced to deliver painful electric shocks to a victim but not if they watched this happening. Their motive was to remove their own personal guilt, as they behaved in the same way even when researcher was unaware of their wrongdoing and even if it had no impact on the victim.

Several other studies, such as that by Gerald Koocher and Patricia Keith-Spiegel ("What Should I Do?" - Ethical Risks, Making Decisions, and Taking Action) have found that ethical behaviour provides a license for laxer morality. People who can prove their non-prejudiced personality, by contradicting certain statements or hiring from an ethnic minority, become more likely to make prejudiced choices later on. There are many potential ways of expanding on this study. For example, to see if asking people to remember many instances where they behaved morally would produce a stronger license to misbehave than recalling just a single

good deed. We could find out whether moral licensing gives people an excuse to avoid doing good deeds, or whether it increases the chances of immoral behaviour, by lowering the bar for what is acceptable. **Do people just avoid being good or are they actively be bad?**