



# Prospective moral licensing: Does anticipating doing good later allow you to be bad now?



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Anticipating engaging in a moral behavior allows people to behave immorally now.
- People who anticipate performing a future moral action display more racial bias.
- Prospective moral licensing occurred for both ambiguous and overt prejudice.
- Prospective moral licensing is likely due to moral credits accumulating.
- Prejudice can be licensed by moral behavior in a different domain.

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## ABSTRACT

Moral licensing, whereby behaving morally allows a person to subsequently behave immorally, has been demonstrated in numerous experiments. The current research examined the effects of prospective moral licensing: how planning to perform a future moral behavior affects the morality of current behavior. Across four studies we explored whether anticipating engaging in a moral behavior in the future (e.g., taking part in a fundraiser or donating blood) leads people to make a racially biased decision (Studies 1 and 2) or espouse racially biased attitudes (Studies 3 and 4) in the present. Participants who anticipated performing a moral action in the future displayed more racial bias than control participants. Additionally, prospective moral licensing occurred for both ambiguously and overtly prejudiced acts suggesting that prospective licensing is due to moral credits accumulating rather than moral credentials being established. These results demonstrate that anticipating a future moral act licenses people to behave immorally now and indicate that perceptions of morality encompass a wide variety of concepts, including past as well as anticipated future behavior.

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## Introduction

Imagine the following scenario: George is a middle-aged, White manager in the human resources department at a mid-sized company. While at work, George sees a poster advertising a canned food drive next week for a local food bank, and he decides that he will bring in some cans when the drive begins. George heads to his office and is faced with hiring a new employee. He must choose between two qualified candidates: one Black, one White. Does planning to do good next week (i.e., bringing in canned goods next week for the food drive) make it more likely that George will respond with racial bias in this hiring decision and favor the White candidate over the Black candidate today?

The above scenario illustrates the idea that was explored in this paper: prospective moral self-licensing. Does planning to act morally in the future allow one to act immorally in the present? For example, if you plan on donating to a food drive next week, are you more likely to express an ingroup racial preference now? Across four studies we demonstrate that when people plan to engage in moral behavior in the future, it makes them more likely to respond in a morally questionable way in the present.

## Moral licensing

Being moral is important to a person's identity (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002). When making morally relevant decisions, people may survey their previous behavior. If they can point to past moral behavior, it can make them less concerned about engaging in behavior that is morally dubious because they are confident in their overall morality. Monin and Miller (2001) first demonstrated this moral self-licensing by showing that participants were more likely to make morally ambiguous

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decisions (e.g., say a job was better suited for a White candidate) after first performing a nonprejudiced behavior (e.g., selecting a minority candidate for a different job). Monin and Miller argued that engaging in nonprejudiced behavior provides people with a feeling of secure moral self-worth, which allows for the subsequent honest expression of their prejudiced attitudes. This effect has since been demonstrated across many studies and behaviors. For example, supporting a Black political candidate licenses White people to exhibit a subsequent preference for Whites over Blacks, particularly among more racially prejudiced White people (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009). Simply choosing to buy green products (Mazar & Zhong, 2010) can license people to later cheat and steal.

In addition to moral behaviors licensing subsequent immoral actions, licensing effects can occur without an individual actually engaging in moral behavior at the time of the licensing. Thinking about past moral behavior (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011) or writing about oneself as a moral person (Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009) can decrease the likelihood of subsequently performing charitable acts. Having a friend who is a minority group member (Bradley-Geist, King, Skorinko, Hebl, & McKenna, 2010), expressing support for gay rights or espousing nonprejudiced beliefs (Krumm & Corning, 2008) can all license morally dubious behavior. A few studies have even demonstrated that imagining performing a moral act can license future unethical behavior (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Zhong, Ku, Lount, & Murnighan, 2010).

The robust nature of the moral licensing effect led us to hypothesize that people may license themselves to engage in morally ambiguous behavior after merely planning to engage in future moral behavior. That is, people may not have to actually engage in a moral behavior or recall or imagine themselves engaging in a moral behavior, it may be enough just to expect that they will engage in moral behavior at a later point. Consistent with our prediction, Khan and Dhar (2007) showed that when people think they can choose a more virtuous item later (e.g., a highbrow movie or healthy snack), they are more likely to choose a frivolous item in the present (e.g., a lowbrow movie or cookie). We suspect that people will similarly license themselves to engage in immoral behavior when they expect that they will be able to demonstrate their morality at a later point. Khan and Dhar (2006) demonstrated that participants felt licensed even by making costless, hypothetical decisions about future moral behavior. Although it is possible that people frequently imagine these hypothetical moral situations, we suspect that it is more likely that people, presented with a future opportunity, actually plan to do good later. By showing that people can gain morally licensing from actions that they anticipate they *will* do, rather than actions that they *could* do, we more closely capture how moral licensing for future events would occur in the real world.

Providing some insight into why such prospective moral licensing may occur, research examining goal pursuit has demonstrated that when people expect to engage in goal-relevant behavior in the future (e.g., being healthy), they are more likely to act counter to their goal in the present if they perceive their expectation of future goal-relevant behavior as indicating goal progress as opposed to goal commitment (Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007). If people perceive that their prospective moral behavior represents progress toward their goal of being a moral person, then it may lead to moral licensing in the near term.

## The current research

The current research examined the effects of prospective moral self-licensing: how planning to perform a future moral behavior affects the morality of current behavior. Across four studies we explored whether anticipating engaging in a moral behavior in the future (e.g., taking part in a fundraiser or donating blood) leads people to make a racially biased decision (Studies 1 and 2) or espouse racially biased attitudes (Studies 3 and 4) in the present. In our first two studies we examined whether people would be more likely to respond with racial bias on a hiring task after first planning to engage in a moral activity in the future

as compared to no future moral behavior planned. In the first study, participants committed to taking part in a charity event and then decided whether a White or Black candidate would be better suited for a position (Monin & Miller, 2001). In the second study, we explored whether prospective moral licensing would occur when participants did not commit but merely indicated that they anticipated taking part in the charity event prior to making the hiring decision.

In Studies 3 and 4, we tested the boundary conditions of prospective moral licensing. Specifically, we examined whether anticipating engaging in future moral behavior would license unambiguously racially biased behavior. This methodological approach may also provide important insight into the processes involved in prospective moral licensing. Moral licensing can occur when people's behavior either establishes their moral credentials or provides moral credits (see Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010 for review). When people's behavior establishes their moral credentials, it bolsters their perception that they are good and moral people, which allow them to interpret future behavior with a positive bias that presumes morality. Such moral credentials aid the reinterpretation of ambiguous behavior but would not aid in interpreting unambiguously immoral behavior in a positive light. Therefore, if prospective moral licensing has its effect by establishing moral credentials, we would not anticipate that prospective moral licensing would extend to overtly prejudiced behavior.

In contrast, when people engage in moral behavior it can provide them with moral credits, a moral currency, that can be spent at a later date by engaging in immoral behavior. Moral credits do not require reinterpreting behavior and can lead to the licensing of overtly immoral as well as more ambiguously immoral behavior. Thus, if prospective moral licensing establishes moral credits, we would expect to see its effects on overt as well as subtle behavior. In Study 3, participants responded to a series of items regarding their attitudes toward Black people that varied in how subtle or overt they were. In Study 4, participants completed items measuring their endorsement of overtly negative stereotypes of Black people. Examining if people were willing to express overt prejudice may provide insight into the processes involved in prospective moral licensing.

Finally, in previous studies looking at moral licensing of prejudiced responses (Bradley-Geist et al., 2010; Effron, Miller, & Monin, 2012; Effron et al., 2009; Kouchaki, 2011; Merritt et al., 2012; Monin & Miller, 2001), the individuals were licensed by engaging in nonprejudiced acts, keeping both behaviors within the domain of prejudice. We examined whether planning a moral act *not related* to prejudice would license someone to express prejudice. That is, does engaging in moral behavior unrelated to prejudice license racially prejudiced behavior?

## Study 1

Study 1 was designed as an initial test of prospective moral licensing. Participants were asked to agree to a future moral behavior, participating in a fund raiser later in the semester, and then were given the chance to make a potentially biased decision about a Black candidate on a hiring task. We purposely selected a fundraising event that was somewhat unusual (a Skip-A-Meal fundraiser) to increase the likelihood that participants had never previously engaged in such an event. The goal was to avoid having participants recall past moral behavior or have a clear image of what the event would be like, so that they would only focus on the future moral act. We predicted that agreeing to take part in the future fundraiser would license our participants to make a racially biased decision in the present (say a job was better for a White than Black candidate).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 106 non-Black undergraduate students at a large public university in the southern United States. Participants were

recruited through an online sign-up system and participated in exchange for partial fulfillment toward a course requirement. Eleven participants (11.3% of the total sample) did not agree to the moral request and were also excluded from the primary analysis. This left 86 total participants for analyses (69.8% female; 76% White non-Hispanic, 16% Hispanic, 6% multiracial, 1% Native American and 1% Asian).

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: prospective moral behavior ( $n = 41$ ) or control ( $n = 45$ ). Upon entering the lab, participants in the prospective moral behavior condition were asked whether they were interested in taking part in a fundraiser. The experimenter explained that the department would be

... holding a Skip-A-Meal fundraiser for the Red Cross at the end of the semester .... The way the fundraiser would work is that students volunteer to skip 1–2 meals during the event .... The price of the meal skipped along with the price of the food that was not produced because of the reduction in students eating at the dining halls will be donated to the Red Cross ... Are you willing to participate in our Skip-A-Meal fundraiser for the Red Cross?

Those who agreed to participate provided their email address to the experimenter. All participants then completed the police hiring task used by Monin and Miller (2001). For this task, participants were told to assume the role of a police chief in a small town who is in charge of hiring a new police officer. They were told that the population of the small town is primarily White and racially prejudiced and the police department can be a hostile work environment for Black officers. They were then asked if they felt that this specific position is better suited for a Black or White officer. Answers were provided on a Likert-scale from 1 (*Yes, much better for a Black*) to 7 (*Yes, much better for a White*). Higher scores above the midpoint of 4 indicated preference for a White over Black candidate.<sup>1</sup> After completing the experiment, participants were probed for suspicion and awarded credit. None of the participants in the present or subsequent studies expressed suspicion that the initial request was related to the rest of the study.

### Results and discussion

A  $t$ -test was conducted to compare responses on the hiring task between participants who agreed to the prospective moral behavior and control participants.<sup>2</sup> Levine's Test of Equality of Variances was significant,  $F(84) = 4.528, p = .036$ . Therefore, the  $t$ -test with equal variances not assumed is reported. Results revealed that participants in the future moral behavior condition were more likely to indicate that the job was better suited for a White candidate ( $M = 4.62, SE = 0.13$ ) than control participants ( $M = 4.16, SE = 0.12$ ),  $t(78.829) = 2.49, p = .015, d = 0.55$ . Thus, intending to perform a moral behavior in a few weeks led to the expression of more racial bias in the moment.

We were interested in whether the participants on average indicated that the position would be better suited for a White than Black applicant (i.e., did they express racial bias). One-sample  $t$ -tests comparing participants' responses to the hiring task to the neutral response of 4 (indicating that race should not play a role in the decision) revealed that participants in the future moral behavior condition on average

provided a racially biased response,  $t(40) = 3.95, p < .001, d = 0.62$ , whereas the control participants on average did not,  $t(44) = .93, p = .36$ . Thus, whereas control participants did not feel that race should not play a role in the hiring decision, participants who had agreed to take part in the fundraiser in a few weeks tended to indicate that the job was better suited for a White than Black candidate. These findings provide an initial demonstration of prospective moral licensing.

### Study 2

Study 1 provided initial evidence of prospective moral licensing by demonstrating that participants who expected to take part in a fundraiser in a few weeks responded with more racial bias on a hiring task. Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend Study 1. Participants were once again told about the Skip-A-Meal fundraiser but instead of having them commit and provide their email address, the experimenter indicated that they were just taking a quick poll of students' interest in the fundraiser. This allowed us to assess whether participants would experience the prospective moral licensing effect when they had only indicated whether they anticipated taking part but had not committed to the fundraiser.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were 55 non-Black undergraduate students at a large public university in the southern United States. Participants were recruited through an online system and participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Four participants (7%) did not agree to the moral request and were excluded from the analysis. This left 51 participants (75% female; 69% White non-Hispanic, 24% White Hispanic, 6% multiracial, 2% Asian).

#### Procedure

As in Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to the prospective moral behavior ( $n = 24$ ) or control condition ( $n = 27$ ). Upon entering the lab, participants in the prospective moral behavior condition were asked whether they were interested in taking part in the same fundraiser described in Study 1. They were told that organizers were trying to get a feel of how many students would likely participate to aid planning, and they were asked if they would take part if the fundraiser occurred. Participants verbally answered "yes" or "no" and the experimenter recorded their answer after leaving the room. All participants then completed the police hiring task from Study 1. After completing the experiment, participants were probed for suspicion and awarded credit.

### Results and discussion

A  $t$ -test was conducted to compare responses on the hiring task between participants who agreed to the future moral behavior and control participants. As in Study 1, the Levine's Test of Equality of Variances was significant,  $F(49) = 8.94, p = .004$ . Results from the  $t$ -test with equal variances not assumed revealed that, consistent with Study 1, participants in the prospective moral behavior condition expressed greater preference for a White candidate ( $M = 4.54, SE = 0.20$ ) than control participants ( $M = 4.00, SE = 0.12$ ),  $t(38.1) = 2.33, p = .025, d = 0.68$ .

Also, replicating Study 1, one-sample  $t$ -tests comparing participants' responses to the hiring task to the neutral response of 4 (indicating race should not be a factor) revealed that participants in the future moral behavior condition provided responses that were significantly higher than 4,  $t(23) = 2.72, p = .012, d = 0.55$ , indicating that they felt the job was better suited for a White than Black officer. In contrast, the control participants' responses on average did not differ from the midpoint, indicating that they did not think race should play a role,  $t(26) = 0.00, p = 1.00$ . Together these findings replicate Study 1 and indicate that

<sup>1</sup> Examination of the data via nonparametric tests available in online supplement.

<sup>2</sup> Examination of the responses of participants who declined the moral request ( $n = 11, M = 4.36, SE = .24$ ) fell in between the two conditions and did not significantly differ from either condition,  $t_s < 1, p_s > .35$ . This suggests that exposure to the fundraising opportunity was not enough to increase participants' racially biased behavior. Participants who declined the moral request did not vary from other participants on demographics such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and political orientation. For this and all subsequent studies, inclusion of the participants who declined the request in the main analysis did not substantially change the nature or pattern of the key finding, although in some cases the inclusion weakened the reported effect (e.g., in Study 1  $t(80.76) = 2.20, p = .03, d = 0.48$ ).

people who anticipate they will engage in a moral behavior in the future are more willing to respond in a racially biased manner in the present even when they have not committed to the future moral behavior.

### Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that participants who are willing to take part in a future fundraiser were morally licensed to show a preference for White over Black candidates in a hiring task. In addition to providing an additional replication of the effect using a different future moral behavior and assessment of racial prejudice, Study 3 was designed to test the boundary conditions of prospective moral licensing. First, participants were asked about a different future moral behavior, donating blood, and a different measure of racial prejudice was used, responses on the Attitudes Towards Blacks scale (Brigham, 1993). Second, an additional control condition was added to the design in which the participants were asked to perform a future non-moral behavior. This way, we ruled out the possibility that agreeing to any request, rather than a specifically moral request, results in more racially biased responding. Finally, we were also interested in determining whether prospective moral licensing occurs for overt as well as ambiguous prejudice-relevant behaviors. The behavior assessed in both Study 1 and Study 2 was relatively ambiguous, and participants may have interpreted their responses as not being prejudiced (e.g., perceived the job as likely unpleasant for a Black officer). Examining whether the prospective moral licensing effect extends to responses to overly racially biased items on a self-report measure will provide insight into whether the licensing is due to moral credentials being established or moral credits accumulating. If the moral licensing effect extends to the overt items on the measure of racial prejudice, it suggests that moral credits rather than moral credentials are at play in prospective moral licensing.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were 94 undergraduate students at a large public university in the southern United States. Participants were recruited through an online system and participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The three participants who declined the non-moral request and 10 participants who declined the moral request (cumulatively 15% of the total sample) were excluded from the primary analysis. This left 81 participants for analyses (49.4% female; 79% White non-Hispanic; 10% Hispanic; 4% Asian, 6% multiracial, 1% unknown).

#### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: moral behavior ( $n = 25$ ), non-moral behavior ( $n = 29$ ), and control ( $n = 27$ ). For the moral condition, participants were told:

Before we begin, we wanted to take an informal survey. The Psychology Department is interested in holding a blood donation drive in the near future .... Would you be willing to donate blood if we held a blood drive within the next few weeks?

The participant then answered “yes” or “no” and the experimenter recorded their answer after leaving the room. Participants in the non-moral condition received a similar prompt about a new email system:

Before we begin, we wanted to take an informal survey. The Psychology Department is interested implementing a new system for letting students know when new studies are available .... For the researchers, the new system wouldn't be any different from the old system but it would be better for the students .... Would you be willing to use the new system should the Psychology Department decide to implement it?

Participants in all three conditions then completed the Attitudes Towards Black scale (ATB; Brigham, 1993). The ATB is a 20 item questionnaire that measures explicit racism toward Blacks. Example items include “I would rather not have Blacks live in the same apartment building I live in.” and “Generally, Blacks are not as smart as Whites.” Items rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-scale and scored such that a higher score meant more prejudice toward Blacks. After completing the experiment, participants were probed for suspicion and awarded credit.

In order to identify the most overtly prejudiced items on the ATB, we examined which items tended to have the lowest level of agreement. We suspected that the items that had the lowest means would also be the most blatantly prejudiced. We drew upon a dataset collected around the same date from the same subject pool (i.e., undergraduates receiving course credit for participation,  $n = 106$ , 67% female; LaCosse & Plant, 2014) and examined average item agreement. The items that tended to have the lowest level of agreement also tended to be blatantly prejudiced.

Next, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with an Oblimin rotation on the ATB items in the present study. Examination of the scree plot indicated that there were three factors that accounted for 55% of the variance. One factor consisted of the six items that were relatively subtle (e.g., “I enjoy a funny racial joke, even if some people might find it offensive.”; “Some African-Americans are so touchy about race that it is difficult to get along with them.”). These same six items received the highest level of agreement in our alternative sample described above. Another factor consisted of 4 of the 6 items that people tended to be least likely to endorse and these items tended to be more overt (e.g., “Black people and White people are inherently equal.”; “I would not mind it at all if an African-American family with about the same income and education as me moved in next door.”; “If I had a chance to introduce African-American visitors to my friends and neighbors, I would be pleased to.”; “If an African-American were put in charge of me, I would not mind taking advice and direction from him or her.”). These four items were combined to create the overt prejudice scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ). A third factor consisted of most of the remaining items that tended to fall in the middle in terms of participant endorsement.

### Results and discussion

A one-way 3 (Future Moral vs. Future Nonmoral vs Control) ANOVA was conducted on the overt prejudice scale. The analysis revealed that condition significantly affected the amount of prejudice expressed,  $F(2, 78) = 12.136$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$  (see Fig. 1). Planned contrasts were then used to compare the future moral licensing condition to each of the other conditions. Participants in the future moral condition ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ) expressed significantly more prejudice than participants in the non-moral condition ( $M = 1.43$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ) and than control participants ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ),  $ps < .001$ ,  $ds = 1.14$  and  $0.89$ , respectively. Participants in the non-moral condition and control condition did not differ from each other,  $p = .42$ . It is worth noting that if the full 20-item version of the ATB is used, the pattern of results is similar, although weaker, indicating that the effect tends to be stronger for the more blatant items.

The present study replicated the prospective moral licensing effect with a different future moral behavior and an explicit measure of racial prejudice. Additionally, the fact that anticipating donating blood in the future licensed even overtly prejudiced responses in the present, suggests that prospective moral licensing likely provides moral credits that people may use to justify expressing racial prejudice in the short term. It is worth noting that participants who did not agree to the moral request were removed from the reported analysis, although the findings held even if they were included. However, these exclusions could make the test of the hypothesis particularly conservative. It is possible that those individuals who feel comfortable declining a moral request may be the most likely to feel comfortable expressing racial



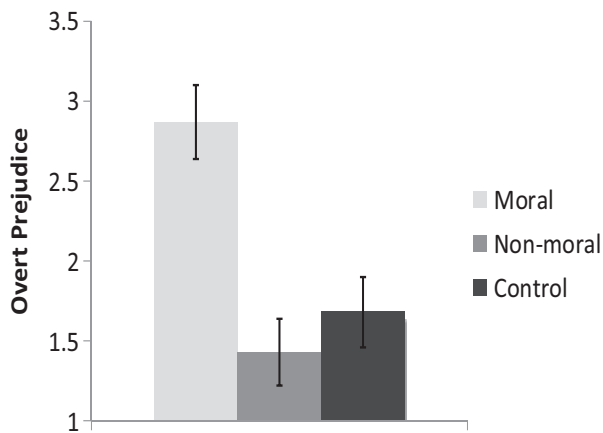


Fig. 1. Overt prejudice expressed as a function of experimental condition.

prejudice. If this is true, then excluding these participants from the condition which would license the expression of prejudice would actually bias the sample away from the hypotheses.<sup>3</sup>

Participants who declined to donate blood ( $M = 1.75$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ ) responded similarly to control participants,  $F(1,35) = .044$ ,  $p = .84$ , revealing that the prospective moral licensing effect was specific to those who agreed to the moral request. This provides further evidence that simply activating morality (by making the request) does not create a prospective moral licensing effect. Additionally, this effect was specific to moral behaviors; participants who agreed to use the sign-up system did not express any more prejudice than control participants.

#### Study 4

Study 3 demonstrated that participants who were willing to give blood in the future were morally licensed to express overtly prejudiced attitudes. The licensing of overt prejudice suggests that prospective moral licensing is likely due to accumulating and spending moral credits, rather than using moral credentials to reinterpret the behavior as nonracist. Additionally, Study 3 showed that anticipating performing a future moral act, rather than agreeing to any future task, led to moral licensing. The present study was designed to provide a replication of moral request vs. non-moral request conditions and provide further evidence that prospective moral licensing is due to moral credits rather than moral credentials. Participants were asked about either participating in a future fundraiser or using a new email system, and then they completed an explicit measure of racial bias, a stereotype endorsement measure. The endorsement of negative stereotypes of Black people represents overt unambiguous racial bias. If the moral licensing effect extends to overt stereotype endorsement, it provides further evidence that prospective moral licensing is due to moral credits.

#### Method

##### Participants

Participants were 84 non-Black undergraduate students at a large public university in the southern United States. For the present study, we conducted a power analysis to determine the necessary sample size drawing upon the effect size for the comparison between the moral and non-moral request conditions from Study 3 ( $d = 1.14$ ). The power analysis indicated that in order to have an 80% of finding an effect of that magnitude with a  $p$ -value of .05, we would need 44 participants. However, we chose to collect a larger sample in order to ensure we would be adequately powered to find an effect size more consistent

with the ones from first two studies. As in the other studies, participants were recruited through an online sign-up system and participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The four participants who declined the non-moral request and six participants who declined the moral request (cumulatively 12% of the total sample) were excluded from the primary analysis. This left 74 participants (79.7% female; 62.2% White non-Hispanic, 21.6% White Hispanic, 9.5% multiracial, 2.7% Asian).

##### Procedure

As in Study 3, participants were randomly assigned to the prospective moral behavior ( $n = 35$ ) or non-moral behavior ( $n = 39$ ). Upon entering the lab, participants in the prospective moral behavior condition were asked whether they were interested in taking part in the same Skip-A-Meal fundraiser described in Study 1. They were told that organizers were trying to get a feel of how many students would likely participate to aid planning, and they were asked if they would take part if the fundraiser occurred. Participants in the non-moral condition received the prompt about a new email system described in Study 3. Participants verbally answered “yes” or “no” and the experimenter recorded their answer after leaving the room. Participants then completed a stereotype-endorsement measure. The 22 item measure included 12 items that represented negative stereotypes about Blacks as assessed by Devine and Elliot (1995) (i.e. violent, lazy, aggressive, criminal, hostile, educated (reverse scored), reliable (reverse), hardworking (reverse), trustworthy (reverse), wealthy (reverse), competent (reverse), intelligent (reverse)). Participants were asked please rate their beliefs about Blacks on the traits, using the prompt “On average African American/Black people are ....” Answers were provided on a Likert-scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated a stronger endorsement of negative Black stereotypes ( $\alpha = .87$ ). After completing the experiment, participants were probed for suspicion and awarded credit.

##### Results and discussion

A  $t$ -test was conducted to compare responses on the stereotype endorsement measure between participants who agreed to the future moral behavior and participants who agreed to the future non-moral behavior. As in previous studies, the Levine's Test of Equality of Variances was significant,  $F(72) = 4.01$ ,  $p = .049$ . Results from the  $t$ -test with equal variances not assumed revealed that participants in the prospective moral behavior condition expressed stronger stereotype endorsement ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ) than non-moral request participants ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ),  $t(69.34) = 2.57$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $d = 0.59$ . The present study replicated the prospective moral licensing effect with a different measure of racial bias, an explicit measure of racial stereotyping. Additionally, the fact that anticipating participating in a fundraiser licensed stronger endorsement of negative Black stereotypes provides further evidence that prospective moral licensing working via moral credits that people may use to justify expressing racial prejudice in the short term.

##### General discussion

People can gain moral license from a large variety of moral actions (e.g. Effron et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2011; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001). The purpose of the present work was to explore whether people will license themselves for actions they anticipate doing in the future, an effect we termed prospective moral licensing. To this end, we allowed participants to indicate whether they were willing to engage in charitable behavior in the future before assessing their racial attitudes and behaviors. We hypothesized that those participants who agreed to perform the future moral act would be more likely to express racial bias because they felt morally licensed to express prejudice without diminishing their moral self-image. Consistent with our

<sup>3</sup> Thank you to the reviewers for this excellent point.

hypothesis, we found evidence indicating that people can feel morally licensed for actions they anticipate performing in the future.

Our results indicate that anticipating performing a moral act in the future can license people to respond in a racially biased manner in the present. This effect held regardless of whether people were asked to commit in writing to perform the act (Study 1) or just verbally agree to perform the act (Studies 2–4). Additionally, this prospective moral licensing occurred across a variety of anticipated moral behaviors, such as participating in a fundraiser (Studies 1, 2, and 4) or donating blood (Study 3). The present work extends the moral licensing literature by examining whether acts that have not even been performed yet can license morally dubious behavior. These data show that non-Black people are more likely to express both ambiguously and overtly anti-Black views in the present when they anticipate being moral in the future. Therefore, prospective moral licensing may allow people to reap the same benefits as other forms of moral licensing without putting in any actual moral work. If people can give themselves credit for what they think they will do, they can maintain their self-perceptions of morality while engaging in immoral acts. Additionally, if people's self-images benefit from simply anticipating being moral, there may be less incentive for them to actually follow through with the moral act (Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009). This may result in a decline in moral behavior. Thus, prospective moral licensing may actually show an ironic effect of decreasing actual future moral behavior, once the benefits have already been gained.

The present work also provides valuable insight into the processes involved in prospective moral licensing. We were interested in whether prospective moral licensing was due to the establishing moral credentials or spending anticipated moral credits (see Merritt et al., 2010). Given that moral credentialing relies on one's morality being proven, we wondered whether anticipating future moral behavior would be sufficient to establish such credentials. The fact that prospective moral licensing licensed both ambiguously prejudiced acts (Studies 1 and 2) and overtly prejudiced attitudes (Studies 3 and 4) indicates that prospective licensing is due to moral credits accumulating rather than moral credentials being established. This implies that, rather than reinterpreting ambiguous behavior as nonprejudiced, these participants were exchanging the moral credits from their anticipated moral behavior to perform immoral, prejudiced behavior in the present. Consistent with this proposition, Effron and Monin (2010) demonstrated that when observers are determining how much to license an actor, they consider moral credits rather than moral credentials when the moral and immoral deeds are in different domains. That is, observers did not reinterpret the actor's bad behavior but excused the behavior because the actor had behaved morally in a different domain. If self-licensing works in a similar manner, then the fact that the moral and possibly immoral behaviors were in different domains strengthens the case that prospective moral licensing works due to moral credits.

Finally, this work expands the current knowledge of when prejudice may be licensed. In previous research (Bradley-Geist et al., 2010; Effron et al., 2009, 2012; Kouchaki, 2011; Merritt et al., 2012; Monin & Miller, 2001), participants first performed nonprejudiced acts which then licensed them to express their prejudice in a subsequent act, keeping the acts in the same domain. In our studies, the licensing action was in a domain not related to prejudice, yet participants still felt licensed to express both ambiguously biased and overtly prejudiced views. That is, prospective moral licensing of prejudice occurred even though the anticipated moral behavior was not one that established the participants as nonprejudiced. Therefore, it may not be necessary to "prove" you are nonprejudiced before acting in a prejudiced manner; simply demonstrating you are moral (or will be moral in the future) is enough to license ambiguous and overt prejudice. To our knowledge, this is the first study to show that prejudice can be licensed by moral actions in a separate domain.

## Limitations and future directions

Because this was the first examination of prospective moral licensing, there are many exciting avenues for future research. For example, these findings highlight that people are willing to license themselves to behave in morally dubious ways by giving themselves credit for something they have not actually done. Therefore, we may have to reassess what is considered a moral act. Perhaps the participants, rather than actually intending to perform a future moral act, saw their agreement *itself* as the moral act. Saying yes to donating may be seen as moral, regardless of actual intentions to donate. The last three studies, in which participants were not required to provide any proof of their intentions, speak to this idea. In the first study, participants thought they would be held accountable for agreeing to participate so possibly only those participants who really intended to do the behavior agreed to it. Therefore, their intentions would create the prospective moral licensing. However, for the final three studies, there was no way to hold the participants accountable for what they said; it is likely then that some participants agreed to the moral request even though they did not actually intend to follow through with it. These participants still showed the prospective moral licensing effect, indicating that they say their agreement, regardless of actual intentions, as the moral act. This possibility needs to be examined further in future studies. It may be that, in people's minds, morality encompasses a wide variety of concepts, including past, future, and intended behavior as well as simply anticipated behavior.

The idea that agreeing to a moral request maybe be considered the moral act itself raises another question. If a person plans to engage in a good behavior of their own volition, rather than in response to a request, would that person still show the prospective moral licensing effect? If anticipating doing a moral behavior in the future is what creates the prospective moral licensing effect, then this effect should occur even for individuals who decided on their own they would do the future moral behavior. However, if individuals feel licensed only because they see agreeing to future moral behavior as a moral act, then it is possible that the prospective moral licensing effect would not occur for individual who planned to do a moral behavior out of personal initiative. Further work would be needed to determine if individuals license themselves for unrequested anticipated moral behavior.

In future work, it will be important to explore whether prospective moral licensing would reduce the likelihood of actually performing the anticipated moral act in the future. If someone has already gained the benefits of feeling moral by anticipating the future moral act, they may no longer feel it is necessary to do the moral work. However, other research (e.g. Brandstätter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001; Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997; Webb & Sheeran, 2003) shows that once a person commits to a plan, it actually becomes more likely that he/she will follow through with the plan. Our participants did agree to perform the moral behavior in the future, which could be seen as goal commitment. It would be interesting to examine whether prospective moral licensing decreases the likelihood of following through on the moral act (e.g., because an important benefit of the moral act has already been realized) or if it increases people's commitment to their future moral act. It may be that individual differences in personal commitment to the future moral act would determine whether people would be more or less likely to follow through with the moral act.

It is important to note that in our studies agreeing to the moral act and assessing the immoral behavior occurred very close together in time. Participants were asked about performing a charitable act in the future, then immediately given the opportunity to express their racial prejudice. It will be important in subsequent work to examine how long the prospective moral licensing effect lasts. It may be that prospective moral licensing only happens when there is a short duration between anticipating the future behavior and the potentially licensed behavior. However, it is also possible that the prospective moral licensing may last a longer period of time. Because anticipating performing a moral action appears to earn moral credits, these credits may be stored

for some length of time. A more complete understanding on how long prospective moral licensing occurs and when the credit gained can be stored or used will improve our understanding of how people balance and negotiate their moral and immoral behaviors.

It will also be valuable to examine whether these findings hold when others are not aware that the individual anticipates performing a moral act. In our studies, participants always let the experimenter know that they would perform the anticipated moral act. Even when the experimenter had no way to keep them accountable, another person still knew about their charitable plans. If the person feels morally licensed simply because they anticipate doing the moral behavior, then it shouldn't matter if someone else knows what they plan to do. Previous work has shown that participants still felt morally licensed, even when others did not know of their prior moral acts (Monin & Miller, 2001, Study 3). That study involved moral credentials, rather than moral credits but it is reasonable that the effect here would work in a similar manner. However it is also possible that, rather than gaining credit for their intentions, people may be giving themselves credit for sharing these intentions with another person. In this case, an audience would be required for the prospective moral licensing to occur. Returning to our opening example, George may think to himself that he will donate to the food drive, but it may not license his prejudiced hiring decision if his coworkers are not aware of his plan. Future research should examine whether an audience is needed for the prospective moral licensing effect to occur.

## Conclusions

Morality is an important part of a person's self-concept. This can lead to situations where moral actions are used to license morally questionable actions. The current work provides evidence that people can feel morally licensed even for actions they anticipate doing in the future, which we have termed prospective moral licensing. Anticipating doing a moral action in the future licenses individuals to act in morally questionable ways in the present by permitting people to gain moral credit for actions they anticipate doing. Thus, simply planning to do good later can allow you to be bad now.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2014.09.009>.

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