Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Finger:

How Moral Decoupling Enables Consumers to Admire and Admonish

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This paper examines the reasoning processes consumers use to support public figures that have acted immorally. Current research shows that people morally rationalize by cognitively reconstruing improper conduct in order to maintain support for a transgressor. In contrast, we propose that people also engage in *moral decoupling*, a previously unstudied psychological separation process by which judgments of performance are selectively dissociated from judgments of morality. The studies here demonstrate that moral decoupling exists and is psychologically distinct from moral rationalization. Moreover, because moral decoupling does not involve implicitly condoning immoral behavior, it feels less wrong and is easier to justify than moral rationalization. Hence it allows consumers to tip their hat at a transgressor's performance while simultaneously wagging their finger at his immoral actions. Finally, a field study suggests that in situations involving public figures' transgressions, moral decoupling may be more predictive of consumer support (and opposition) than rationalization.

In 1998, the House of Representatives impeached President William Clinton on allegations that he had lied, under oath, about an extra-marital affair with a White House intern. President Clinton admitted to improper conduct, but was found not-guilty of perjury and obstruction of justice. He went on to complete his tenure as President with a 66% approval rating, the highest Presidential exit ratings since the end of World War II (Saad 2009). Similarly, in 2002, film director Roman Polanski, who had fled the United States decades earlier after being found guilty of statutory rape, won an Academy Award for directing the movie *The Pianist.* The following year, NBA basketball star Kobe Bryant was accused of sexual assault. By 2010, he had the top selling jersey in the NBA (Associated Press 2010). Meanwhile, Martha Stewart, CEO of her own media empire, was convicted of insider trading and sentenced to five months in prison in 2004. Her company's stock price, after initially plummeting 22.6% to $10.86 on the day after her conviction, more than tripled within the year, reaching a high of $36.07.

These are a few examples of many cases involving public figures whose immoral actions threaten their professional reputations. Countless such scandals, across domains such as politics, the arts, sports, and business, attract considerable media attention. For instance, the New York Post devoted twenty consecutive covers to reports of golfer Tiger Woods's extramarital affairs, more than it did for the 9/11 attacks in its own city (Rich 2009). The four above examples each concern public figures that have successfully recovered from their transgressions and regained the approval of an audience that was motivated to support them. The present paper primarily concerns the reasoning processes consumers use to generate support for public figures who have acted immorally. Current research emphasizes moral rationalization processes, whereby consumers reconstrue transgressions as less immoral when they are motivated to do so (e.g. Mazar, Amir and Ariely 2008; Paharia and Deshpandé 2009; Shu, Gino and Bazerman 2011). In

contrast, we propose that consumers often engage in *moral decoupling*, a distinct and previously unstudied form of moral reasoning. We define moral decoupling as a psychological separation process by which consumers selectively dissociate or compartmentalize judgments of morality from judgments of performance. Five studies demonstrate that moral decoupling is psychologically distinct from moral rationalization.

Though moral reasoning processes have received recent attention in the literature, to our knowledge, no prior research has examined the process we propose. In both the laboratory and a real world setting, we demonstrate that moral decoupling leads to consumer support for immoral actors. More specifically, we investigate the psychological distinctions between moral rationalization and moral decoupling: whereas moral rationalization produces consumer support by reducing judgments of immorality, moral decoupling alters an individual's view of the association of immoral actions to performance in a given domain. Perhaps most interestingly, we find that moral decoupling is easier to justify and feels less wrong than moral rationalization. Whereas moral rationalization requires people to implicitly condone an immoral behavior and may thus threaten consumers' moral self-image (e.g. Aquino and Reed 2002), moral decoupling enables consumers to support a transgressor while simultaneously condemning the transgression. By dissociating performance from morality, an individual can support an immoral actor without being subject to self-reproach.

IMMORAL ACTIONS AND MORAL REASONING

Transgressions pose a dilemma for loyal consumers or supporters who have developed deep emotional attachments towards public figures (Thomson 2006) and their associated brands

(Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005). In such cases, people are strongly motivated to maintain a positive viewpoint of an individual or brand towards whom they have developed a personal attachment. However, people also strive to maintain positive self-regard and view themselves as morally upstanding (Aquino and Reed 2002; Baumeister 1998), and thus avoid behavior that might violate their moral standards (Bandura 1990). Supporting an immoral actor may risk compromising one's own moral standards. Thus, transgressions by public figures often pit motivation to support the transgressor against the need to maintain one's moral standards, causing dissonance or tension (e.g. Aronson 1969; Festinger 1957). While some may attempt to resolve this tension by withdrawing their support of a transgressor, those who are sufficiently motivated may instead pursue reasoning strategies that result in continued support.

Current theorizing in moral psychology emphasizes the role of intuitions in forming moral judgments. Accordingly, moral judgments arise through relatively automatic intuitive processes, and moral reasoning processes are employed post hoc to construct reasons that support the intuitive judgment (Haidt 2001; 2007). In other words, moral reasoning is thought to work more like an "intuitive lawyer" that argues in support of a desired outcome than an "intuitive scientist" that engages in unbiased truth-seeking (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Ditto, Pizarro and Tannenbaum 2009; Haidt 2001). Thus, moral reasoning is like motivated reasoning in other domains: individuals are motivated to selectively search for information and reach a desired self-serving moral conclusion, but they can only allow themselves to go so far as to construct a case would be plausible to a dispassionate observer (Kunda 1990). Because of the multifaceted, complex nature of moral judgment, moral dilemmas usually offer enough ambiguity to allow for multiple reasonable arguments, allowing motivation ample opportunity to

influence the direction of moral reasoning (Ditto et al. 2009). Thus far, the literature has focused on moral rationalization processes that exploit such ambiguity.

Moral Rationalization

When there is sufficient ambiguity around the nature or interpretation of an immoral action, people are likely to interpret this action in a way that supports a desired outcome (e.g. Dana, Weber and Kuang 2007; Mazar et al. 2008; Shu et al. 2011). We define *moral rationalization* as this process of reinterpreting or reconstruing immoral actions as less immoral in order to maintain support for an immoral actor. While rationalization represents a class of moral reasoning strategies, some of which have received more or less emphasis from different researchers, we use this definition because it is the unifying characteristic of all of these traditional approaches. By reconstruing transgressions so that immorality is justified, excused, or otherwise reduced, consumers can reduce the tension between desired outcomes and their moral standards (Bandura 1990; Ditto et al. 2009; Tsang 2002).

Among the theoretical approaches consistent with moral rationalization, the literature in moral disengagement presents the most complete and well-developed taxonomy of moral rationalization strategies. Moral disengagement is the process of making immoral actions personally acceptable by employing cognitive rationalizations that make those actions seem permissible (Bandura 1990; 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara and Pastorelli 1996). Bandura outlines a series of rationalization strategies that individuals employ to undermine moral self-regulation. These moral disengagement mechanisms fall into broad categories, and include (1) redefining harmful conduct (2) minimizing a perpetrator's role in causing harm (3) minimizing

or distorting harm caused by a perpetrators and (4) dehumanization or blaming the victim (Bandura 1990; Bandura et al. 1996). Moral disengagement has been linked to a variety of detrimental behaviors, such as schoolyard bullying (Bandura et al. 1996), the perpetration of inhumanities (Bandura 1999), and support for military force (Aquino, Reed, Thau and Freeman, 2007; McAlister, Bandura and Owen 2006). Recent work has examined moral disengagement as an outcome and demonstrated that it can be influenced by motivational factors (Paharia and Deshpandé 2009; Shu et al. 2011). Most relevant to the present research, Paharia and Deshpandé (2009) find that consumers are more likely to rationalize the use of sweatshop labor when they strongly desire a consumer product.

In short, consumers may morally rationalize transgressions by a public figure (e.g. by employing mechanisms of moral disengagement) when they are motivated to support that figure. Accordingly, consumers are likely to view the transgressions in question as morally appropriate (or less immoral). However, we propose that one potential downside of moral rationalization is that it requires people to implicitly condone immoral behavior. That is, even though moral rationalization processes seek to minimize tension between desired outcomes and moral standards, they still entail assuming a more permissive stance towards objectionable behavior. In choosing to defend improper actions, individuals thus reveal information about their own moral selves, and risk violating their own moral standards or being evaluated negatively by others. Because moral judgments are often deeply tied to the self (e.g. Aquino and Reed 2002; Bandura 1991), and are especially central to social comparisons and evaluations by others (e.g. Ditto et al. 2009; Haidt and Kesebir 2010), the possibility of such evaluations may be particularly threatening. This may be one reason that consumers may prefer a reasoning strategy that does not condone improper behavior.

MORAL DECOUPLING

Though the literature has restricted its focus to moral rationalization processes, we argue that consumers who are motivated to support a public figure that has transgressed may adopt a different reasoning strategy to resolve the tension between desired outcomes and moral standards (Ditto et al. 2009; Tsang 2002). In particular, we propose that people often engage in *moral decoupling*, a distinct form of moral reasoning that does not involve condoning improper behavior. Moral decoupling is defined as a psychological separation process by which people selectively dissociate judgments of performance from judgments of morality. Rather than construing an immoral action as less immoral in order to generate support for an immoral actor, consumers that morally decouple generate support by separating or compartmentalizing the immoral action from the performance of the immoral actor. Essentially, morally decoupling works by selectively altering the manner in which an individual views moral actions as associated with performance in a given domain.

Importantly, by dissociating performance from morality, an individual can reason to support an immoral actor without being subject to self-reproach. Moral decoupling enables individuals to acknowledge that a public figure has engaged in an immoral act, but argue that this act should not influence judgments of performance. Because moral decoupling does not involve condoning immoral acts, individuals employing this strategy are in less danger of compromising their moral standards, even as they support an immoral actor. Relative to a moral rationalization strategy, we expect that a moral decoupling strategy will feel less wrong, be easier to justify, and preserve moral self-regard (e.g. Aquino and Reed 2002). Thus, moral decoupling allows

consumers to "tip their hat" and admire the performance of a public figure while simultaneously "wagging their finger" and admonishing his immoral actions.

Decoupling and Public Discourse

Though it has not been examined in the literature, we propose that moral decoupling is pervasive and often characterizes the public discourse surrounding transgressions by public figures. While discussions consistent with rationalization concern the degree of immorality of a public figure's behavior, we argue that the public discourse often centers around another dimension: the relationship between morality and performance in a given domain. For instance, in the introduction to his book about the social and cultural context of morality, Turiel (2002, p. 12-16) outlines the public debate about the 1998 scandal involving President Clinton. Democrats who were motivated to support Clinton's presidency tended to acknowledge that Clinton's actions were immoral, but argued that his private life should not affect our view of his ability to govern. Thus, they were able to admonish Clinton's transgressions while maintaining a positive view of his performance as President. Conversely, Republicans who were motivated to oppose President Clinton tended to argue that these judgments are intertwined, and that moral character is an essential component of presidential performance. Consistent with our theorizing, the crux of the debate was the relationship between performance and morality, rather than morality per se. Thus, we propose that moral decoupling is a construct that may be as prevalent as moral rationalization in some contexts, and it may be especially relevant to situations involving transgressions by public figures.

Hypotheses and Experimental Overview

We therefore propose that in supporting public figures who have transgressed, people often engage in moral decoupling, a psychological separation process involving the selective dissociation of judgments of performance from judgments of morality. Our primary goal is to demonstrate that moral decoupling exists and is distinguishable from moral rationalization, the construct that has been most emphasized in the literature. While each of these reasoning processes will aid people in generating support for public figures who commit immoral acts, we expect that they should result in differential views of the public figure in question. Specifically, we predict that moral decoupling will lead to simultaneously higher assessments of performance and judgments of immorality, since these dimensions are dissociated. Conversely, we predict that moral rationalization will excuse or justify behavior and thus attenuate judgments of immorality, with no direct effect on judgments of performance. Finally, because moral decoupling does not involve condoning immoral acts, we predict that this reasoning strategy will be easier to justify, and feel less wrong, than a moral rationalization reasoning strategy.

A series of studies highlights the role that moral decoupling plays in generating support for public figures who act immorally. A pilot study seeks initial evidence that moral decoupling and moral rationalization are psychologically distinct. In Study 1, to gain causal insight about the differential effects of these strategies, we prime participants to reason using moral decoupling or moral rationalization, relative to a control condition, and assess consumer support, performance judgments, and moral judgments. Study 2 further distinguishes these constructs by varying transgression relevance and thus making moral decoupling (but not moral rationalization) relatively easy versus relatively difficult. We establish process evidence by testing the mediating

role of moral decoupling in determining consumer support. Study 3 uses the same stimuli as Study 2 to investigate how transgression relevance affects the choice of a moral decoupling versus a moral rationalization argument, and assesses ease of justification. Study 4 builds on these results by randomly assigning participants to select a decoupling versus rationalization argument across different types of transgressions to further evaluate ease of justification. Finally, Study 5 offers field evidence of the role of moral decoupling in predicting consumer support by examining online comments made about golfer Tiger Woods after his extramarital affair scandal and prior to his return to golf in 2010.

PILOT STUDY: MORAL DECOUPLING PREDICTS OLYMPIC PERFORMANCE

The objective of the pilot study was to investigate the fundamental distinction between moral decoupling and moral rationalization. According to our theorizing, when forming intuitive reactions towards a transgressor, the specific moral reasoning argument that people construct in support of their reaction will have distinct psychological implications. We expected that the degree to which someone engages in moral decoupling would positively predict ratings of performance but would not directly influence judgments of immorality. Conversely, we expected that ratings of moral rationalization would be negatively associated with judgments of immorality, but have no direct effect on performance.

Method

Ninety-eight participants (61% female; mean age = 22), recruited through a Northeastern university, participated in the study in exchange for financial payment. For exploratory purposes, we used a 2-group (Transgressor: In-group vs. Out-group) between-subjects design. Participants read a scenario describing a hockey player who has led his team to a gold medal at the Winter Olympics and become a hero for his team and his country. However, upon returning, he is discovered to have physically abused his wife. After reading the scenario, participants rated their agreement with statements (see Appendix A for items) consistent with moral decoupling and moral rationalization reasoning processes and evaluated the hockey player's performance and the immorality of his actions on a series of seven point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The moral rationalization items were adapted for the scenario from the moral disengagement literature (Bandura et al. 1996). The order of all measures was randomized. In the In-group condition, the hockey player was described as American, and in the Out-group condition, he was described as Russian.

Results

A factor analysis with a varimax rotation revealed four distinct factors, consistent with expectations. Appendix A displays the factor loadings. We combined each factor into the following composite indices: 1) a three-item scale measuring performance (α = .91); 2) a two-item measure of immorality (α = .72); 3) a three-item scale measuring the degree of moral decoupling (α = .93); and 4) a six-item scale measuring the degree of moral rationalization (α = .73). The exploratory ingroup manipulation had no effect, and we collapsed across conditions.

A multiple regression found that the only significant predictor of performance ratings was moral decoupling (β = 0.39, $t(95)$ = 7.59, $p < .001$), as expected. Neither judgments of the immorality of the hockey player's actions ($t(95)$ = -0.39, p = .70), nor the degree to which a participant rationalized the hockey player's actions ($t(95)$ = -1.16, p = .25) were significant predictors of performance. Meanwhile, moral rationalization was significantly negatively associated with immorality (β = -0.63, $t(95)$ = -3.52, $p < .001$). Neither performance ratings ($t(95)$ = -0.39, p = .70), nor the degree to which a participant decoupled judgments of performance from judgments of morality ($t(95)$ = -0.52, p = .61), significantly predicted judgments of immorality. Table 1 summarizes these results.

-----Insert table 1 about here----

Discussion

Our findings provide preliminary psychometric and correlational evidence that moral decoupling and moral rationalization are psychologically distinct. Consistent with expectations, moral decoupling was associated with higher ratings of performance (since this dimension is separated from immorality), but had no effect on immorality. Conversely, moral rationalization was associated with reduced judgments of immorality (i.e. the hockey player's actions were seen as more morally acceptable), but did not affect judgments of performance. Study 1 sought to further examine this conceptual distinction.

STUDY 1: PRIMING MORAL DECOUPLING BOOSTS CONSUMER SUPPORT

Building on the pilot study, study 1 was intended to activate specific moral reasoning strategies in order to gain causal insight into moral decoupling and its associated outcomes. We also sought to extend beyond performance judgments and moral judgments and examine consumer support. We predicted that, relative to a control, both the moral decoupling and moral rationalization primes would lead to greater consumer support for products associated with the transgressor. More importantly, because we theorize that decoupling and rationalization implicate distinct moral reasoning pathways, we predicted that priming these strategies would produce differential judgments of performance and immorality. Since moral rationalization involves a cognitive reconstrual of morality, we expected that participants primed with rationalization would be more likely to view immoral actions as less immoral, relative to those in both the decoupling and control conditions. Conversely, since moral decoupling involves psychological compartmentalization of moral judgments and performance judgments, we predicted that participants in the decoupling condition would rate performance as higher than those in the rationalization and control conditions, while simultaneously rating immoral actions to be no less immoral than those in the control condition.

Method

One hundred and twenty-one undergraduates, staff, and area residents (58% female, mean age = 20), recruited through a Northeastern university, participated in the study in return for financial payment. We used a 3-group (Moral Reasoning Prime: Decoupling vs. Rationalization vs. Control) between-subjects design.

Participants read and considered a series of three statements in order to prime different

moral reasoning strategies and make them differentially accessible. In the Decoupling condition,

participants read three statements arguing that immoral actions should remain separate from

judgments of performance (e.g. "It is inappropriate to take into account someone's personal

actions when assessing their job performance."). In the Rationalization condition, participants

read three statements adapted from Bandura et al. (1996) that were chosen for their contextual

appropriateness and breadth (e.g. "People should not always be at fault for their immoral actions,

because situational pressures are often high."). In the Control condition, participants read three

statements about the importance of humor in daily life. After reading the three statements,

participants reflected on them and wrote about a situation in which they might apply.

All participants then moved on to an ostensibly unrelated study. They read the following

scenario about the CEO of a consumer electronics company:

> Imagine that a charismatic CEO and founder of a prominent consumer electronics
> company has captivated the public and the media for over a decade. He led his
> company to become a leader in innovative and stylish products. The company's
> personal music players and computers are widely popular, and the CEO is
> regarded as a visionary innovator.

> Now imagine that the company is involved in a scandal, and the CEO is
> confirmed to have supported racist and sexist hiring policies.

After reading the scenario, participants rated the performance of the CEO on a three item scale:

1) The CEO is an effective leader of his company; 2) The ability of the CEO to develop

innovative products is a commendable achievement; and 3) The job performance of the CEO is

excellent (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; averaged to create a performance index, α =

.72). As a measure of consumer support, participants next indicated their likelihood of

purchasing the companies' products on a three item scale: 1) I will continue to purchase the

innovative products that this company makes; 2) I will continue to use and appreciate the

products of this company that I own already; and 3) I will immediately boycott this company's

products (reverse coded; 0 = not at all likely, 100 = very likely; averaged to create a consumer

support index, α = .70). Finally, participants provided judgments of the degree of immorality of

the CEO's actions on a two item scale: 1) It is morally wrong for the CEO to support

discriminatory hiring practices; and 2) I find the CEO's actions to be morally reprehensible (1 =

strongly disagree, 7 = *strongly agree*; averaged to create a immorality index, α = .73).

Results

Consumer Support. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of moral

reasoning prime on reported support for the company (i.e. purchase likelihood of the company's

products; $F(2, 118) = 9.93, p < .001$). Follow up contrasts found that, as predicted, participants in

both the moral decoupling condition ($M = 75.06, t(82) = 3.92, p < .001$) and the moral

rationalization condition ($M = 74.04, t(76) = 3.39, p = .001$) reported a higher likelihood of

continuing to purchase from the company, relative to control ($M = 58.11$; see figure 1). Support

ratings did not differ across the decoupling and rationalization conditions ($t < 1$).

------Insert figure 1 about here------

Performance. A one-way ANOVA found a significant main effect of the moral reasoning

prime on ratings of CEO performance ($F(2, 118) = 9.87, p < .001$). Follow up contrasts found

that participants in the decoupling condition ($M = 5.82$) rated performance as higher than those in

both the rationalization condition ($M = 5.04, t(78) = 3.03, p = .003$) and the control condition (M

= 4.64, $t(82) = 4.54$, $p < .001$; see figure 2), as predicted. Performance ratings did not differ across the rationalization and control conditions ($t(76) = 1.27$, $p = .21$).

------Insert figure 2 about here------

Immorality. Similarly, a one-way ANOVA found a significant main effect of moral reasoning prime on judgments of immorality ($F(2, 118) = 7.00$, $p = .001$). Follow up contrasts showed that participants in the rationalization condition ($M = 5.69$) judged the CEO's actions to be significantly less immoral than participants in both the decoupling condition ($M = 6.22$, $t(78) = 2.26$, $p = .027$) and the control condition ($M = 6.45$, $t(76) = 3.45$, $p < .001$; see figure 2), as expected. Judgments of immorality did not differ across the decoupling and control conditions ($t(82) = 1.50$, $p = .14$).

Discussion

These results offer initial evidence that moral decoupling, like moral rationalization, can lead to consumer support for immoral actors (i.e. greater likelihood to purchase products from the immoral actor's company). More importantly, consistent with the pilot study results, these findings support our proposed theoretical distinction between moral decoupling and traditional moral rationalization processes. While moral rationalization leads consumers to support immoral actors by reconstruing their actions as less immoral, moral decoupling leads consumers to support immoral actors by dissociating judgments of performance from judgments of morality.

Thus, consumers can simultaneously maintain highly positive performance judgments and highly negative moral judgments.

Because we argue that those who morally decouple selectively alter the relationship between performance and morality, we conducted a follow-up analysis to examine the bivariate relations between these constructs by condition. We expected that participants in both the rationalization and control conditions would exhibit a negative correlation between performance and immorality, since moral transgressions might be expected to carry over and affect other domains under normal circumstances. Conversely, we expected that participants primed to morally decouple would dissociate these dimensions and exhibit no correlation between performance and immorality. As predicted, ratings for performance and immorality were significantly negatively correlated for participants in the moral rationalization and control conditions ($r(78) = -.27$, $p = .018$), but uncorrelated for participants primed to morally decouple ($r(43) = .08$, $p = .599$). Together, the results of Study 1 provide preliminary causal evidence of our proposed theoretical account. Next, we sought to further investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying moral decoupling.

STUDY 2: RELEVANT IMMORAL ACTS ARE HARDER TO DECOUPLE

Study 2 was designed to investigate the process by which moral decoupling operates. To do so, we varied the relevance of an immoral action to the domain of performance being assessed, a key conceptual test of the moral decoupling construct. If our theorizing is correct, then people should find it more difficult to selectively dissociate moral judgments from judgments of performance when a transgression is directly relevant to the domain of

performance in question. Accordingly, we expected that relevant transgressions would reduce judgments of performance of an immoral actor, and thus reduce consumer support. Conversely, we expected that irrelevant transgressions would make moral decoupling easier, and thus would not reduce performance judgments or consumer support.

Second, we sought further evidence of the conceptual distinction between moral decoupling and moral rationalization. While transgression relevance was expected to affect the relative ease with which participants could morally decouple, we did not predict that it would necessarily affect moral rationalization. Thus, relevance represents a conceptual factor that should directly influence decoupling but not necessarily rationalization, and further underscore the distinction between these constructs. Finally, we sought mediational evidence to outline the moral decoupling process. We expected that transgression relevance would affect the extent of moral decoupling, which would in turn operate via performance to influence consumer support.

Method

Eighty-nine participants (53% female; mean age = 22) recruited through a Northeastern university participated in exchange for financial payment. The study employed a 2 (Occupation: Baseball Player vs. Governor) x 2 (Transgression: Steroids vs. Tax Evasion) between-subjects design. Participants first read a brief scenario in which a successful governor or baseball player admitted to engaging in an immoral behavior. In the Governor condition, participants read about a governor who supported local communities, decreased crime, and balanced the state budget. In the Baseball Player condition, participants read about a baseball player who was known for his ability to hit home runs and make clutch hits in key situations. In each scenario, the public figure

then admitted to either taking Steriods (high relevance for a Baseball Player vs. low relevance for a Governor) or engaging in Tax Evasion (low relevance for a Baseball Player vs. high relevance for a Governor). Pretest results (using a seven point scale; 1 = not at all relevant, 7 = extremely relevant) confirmed that steroids (vs. tax evasion) was seen as more relevant to job performance for a baseball player ($M = 6.48$ vs. 3.39, $t(45) = 9.00$, $p < .001$), while tax evasion (vs. steroids) was seen as more relevant to job performance for a governor ($M = 6.43$ vs. 3.33, $t(45) = 8.39$, $p < .001$).

After reading the scenario, participants rated statements reflecting their feelings about the scenario on a series of seven point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Our main dependent measure was a three-item consumer support index ($\alpha = .84$). Participants also provided judgments of performance on a three-item index ($\alpha = .84$), judgments of immorality on a two-item index ($\alpha = .56$), and agreement with a three-item measure of moral decoupling ($\alpha = .77$) and an eight-item measure of moral rationalization ($\alpha = .73$). Due to the lower reliability of our immorality measure, we also performed all analyses on the two items separately. Our results hold when each item is evaluated separately. See Appendix B for full measures.

Results

Consumer Support. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between occupation and transgression ($F(1, 83) = 22.2$, $p < .001$), as expected. Specifically, subjects were significantly more willing to support the governor when the transgression involved steroids ($M = 4.85$) versus tax evasion ($M = 3.48$, $t(39) = -3.30$, $p = .002$), and were significantly more willing to support the baseball player when the transgression involved tax evasion ($M = 4.62$) versus

steroids ($M = 3.19$, $t(44) = 3.40$, $p < .001$). That is, highly relevant transgressions reduced

consumer support. Figure 3 illustrates this interaction. There were no main effects of occupation

or transgression on consumer support (Fs < 1).

------Insert figure 3 about here------

Mediation Analysis. Next, we tested for meditational evidence of our proposed process.

We predicted that transgression relevance would affect consumer support by influencing the

degree to which participants are able to morally decouple their performance judgment from a

judgment of immorality. Thus, we predicted that relevance would affect our decoupling measure,

which would in turn operate via performance to affect support. We ran a multiple mediation

analysis, testing whether moral decoupling and performance mediated the effect of relevance on

support. The scenarios were collapsed to create a single independent variable of relevance (i.e.

the baseball player who took steroids and the governor who committed tax evasion were grouped

in the high relevance condition, while the baseball player who committed tax evasion and the

governor who took steroids were grouped in the low relevance condition).

------Insert figure 4 about here------

We used the bootstrapping technique for estimating multiple step mediation

recommended by Hayes, Preacher and Myers (2011), which also allowed us to avoid many of the

problems associated with traditional mediation methods (e.g. Zhao, Lynch and Chen 2010). The

path model along with estimated coefficients is displayed in figure 4. Our results show that a

significant total indirect effect for the mediation path (total indirect effect = -0.82, standard error = 0.20, 95% CI [-1.25, -0.44]). In particular, highly relevant transgressions decreased the extent to which participants engaged in a moral decoupling reasoning strategy (a_1 = -1.16, $p < .001$), and thus decreased performance ratings of a moral transgressor (a_2 = -0.61, $p = .025$). The more a participant was able to morally decouple, the higher they rated a transgressor's performance (a_3 = 0.53, $p < .001$). Further, the more participants engaged in a moral decoupling reasoning strategy (b_1 = 0.22, $p = .026$) and the higher they rated a transgressor's performance (b_2 = 0.46, $p < .001$) the more they supported the transgressor. As predicted, relevance had no effect on the degree of moral rationalization ($t(85)$ = -0.34, $p = .74$) or the degree of immorality ($t(85)$ = -0.63, $p = .53$).

Discussion

Study 2 illustrates the process by which moral decoupling leads to additional consumer support for someone who has acted immorally. We show that more relevant transgressions are more difficult to decouple—key theoretical support for our proposed process. The extent of moral decoupling influences judgments of performance (i.e. the more someone is able to separate performance from immorality, the higher that performance judgment should be). Finally, performance judgments directly drive consumer support. In addition to outlining the psychological process of moral decoupling, these results further distinguish moral decoupling from moral rationalization. Transgression relevance does not affect moral rationalization, and while moral decoupling mediates the effect of relevance on consumer support, moral rationalization does not. To gain further insight into when people decouple versus rationalize, we examined choice of reasoning strategy in study 3.

STUDY 3: RELEVANT ACTS REDUCE DECOUPLING STRATEGY CHOICE

The objective of study 3 was to examine when participants are likely to morally decouple versus morally rationalize and to investigate the psychological implications. Participants freely chose a statement that best represented their reasoning from a series of arguments used to support a public figure who had transgressed, enabling them to select the reasoning process most consistent with their personal beliefs. They then wrote a persuasive argument in support of the public figure based on that statement. Consistent with the results of study 2, we expected that participants would be less likely to select a moral decoupling strategy when transgressions were highly relevant to performance and thus harder to decouple. We also sought to investigate whether a moral decoupling or moral rationalization strategy would be easier to justify. Because moral decoupling does not involve condoning immoral acts, we predicted that a moral decoupling (vs. moral rationalization) reasoning strategy would be generally easier to justify, even when allowing participants to select their preferred strategy. Consistent with our predictions for reasoning strategy choice, we expected that moral decoupling would be easier to justify only when transgressions were low in relevance.

Method

Sixty-two participants (60% female; mean age = 20) were recruited through a Northeastern university to participate in exchange for financial payment. The study employed a 2 (Occupation: Baseball Player vs. Governor) x 2 (Transgression: Steroids vs. Tax Evasion)

between-subjects design. Participants read the same scenario described in study 2, in which a successful governor or baseball player admitted to engaging in either steroid use or tax evasion.

Participants read five different arguments that in support of the baseball player or governor. They were asked to select the statement that best reflects their personal feelings about the situation. The choice set included two statements consistent with moral decoupling 1) "The governor's (baseball player's) actions should not change the way we view his job performance" and 2) "Judgments of performance should remain separate from judgments of morality" and three statements consistent with moral rationalization 1) "The governor's (baseball player's) actions aren't as bad as some of the horrible things people do"; 2) "It's okay to lie on your taxes a little bit (take steroids), because it doesn't really do much harm"; and 3) "People are not at fault for their moral failures because the pressures of modern society are so high". The statement presentation order was randomized. After selecting a statement, participants wrote an argument in support of their chosen statement, and were told that their arguments would be evaluated on their persuasiveness.

After constructing their arguments, participants rated the extent to which their argument was easy to justify on a five item scale: 1) The statement I chose was easy to justify; 2) I felt uneasy writing my argument (reverse coded); 3) I would feel comfortable defending my argument to others; 4) I feel good about the statement I chose and the reasons I wrote down; 5) I am confident that I chose the best statement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; averaged to create an ease of justification index, $\alpha = .91$).

Results

Strategy Choice. We coded participants' selection of strategy into a binary choice of either a moral decoupling or a moral rationalization statement. Overall, 64.5% of participants (n = 40) chose a statement consistent with moral decoupling (vs. moral rationalization). Chi-square analyses found that participants were more likely to choose a moral decoupling statement when a baseball player admitted to tax evasion versus steroids ($\chi^2(1) = 4.01$, $p = .045$), and were more likely to choose a moral decoupling statement when the governor admitted to taking steroids versus tax evasion ($\chi^2(1) = 6.00$, $p = .014$), as predicted. A logistic regression showed a significant interaction between occupation and transgression on choice of moral reasoning statement ($\chi^2(1) = 8.19$, $p = .004$). Figure 5 illustrates this interaction.

------Insert figure 5 about here------

Ease of Justification. A two-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of strategy choice on ease of justification, such that participants who argued in favor of a moral decoupling strategy found their arguments to be easier to justify ($M = 5.22$) than those who selected a rationalization strategy ($M = 3.66$, $F(1,58) = 7.57$, $p = .008$). Moreover, there was a main effect of relevance, whereby transgressions that were less relevant were easier to justify ($M = 5.35$) than transgressions that were highly relevant ($M = 3.99$, $F(1,58) = 7.41$, $p = .009$). However, the expected significant interaction of transgression relevance and reasoning strategy on ease of justification did not emerge ($F < 1$). These findings suggest that, regardless of transgression relevance, a moral decoupling reasoning strategy is easier to justify than a moral rationalization strategy. Figure 6 displays these results.

------Insert figure 6 about here------

Discussion

Study 3 provides further evidence that moral decoupling and moral rationalization strategies are unique and are used in specific situations. First, the high percentage of participants freely selecting a moral decoupling strategy supports our proposition that this construct is prevalent and relevant to situations in which public figures transgress. Second, results suggest that choice of a moral decoupling reasoning strategy is less likely for transgressions that are highly relevant to a given domain of performance, consistent with the results of study 2. However, we were surprised to find that ease of justification was not affected by relevance in the same way. Instead, for both high and low relevance transgressions, moral decoupling was easier to justify than moral rationalization in generating support for an immoral actor. These findings support our argument that moral decoupling does not threaten one's moral self regard because it does not involve implicitly forgiving immoral actions. Study 4 further examined the bounds of this effect.

STUDY 4: DECOUPLING IS EASIER TO JUSTIFY THAN RATIONALIZATION

Study 3 provided initial evidence that people find that moral decoupling is easier to justify and feels less wrong than moral rationalization. However, because participants selected their own moral reasoning strategies, we cannot rule out the possibility that only those participants that felt especially comfortable defending a moral decoupling argument selected this

strategy. The objective of study 4 was to address this limitation and randomly assign participants to either decouple or rationalize to gain causal insight about its psychological consequences. We again allowed participants to choose the statement that best reflected their own feelings, but the choice set included only statements consistent with moral decoupling in one condition, and only statements consistent with moral rationalization in the other.

We also sought to gain insight into how consumer support and ease of justification varied across different types of transgressions. Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated that transgressions that are highly relevant to a given domain of performance are harder to decouple. The present study manipulates the severity of a transgression in addition to its relevance. Since moral rationalization involves implicitly forgiving a transgression, we expected that highly severe transgressions would be more difficult to rationalize, but not necessarily harder to decouple. Given our surprising findings in Study 3, we also sought confirming evidence that a moral decoupling argument is easier to justify regardless of transgression relevance. However, if selection issues accounted for our findings in Study 3, and transgression relevance does matter, then we would expect an interaction: low relevance and high severity would make moral decoupling easier to justify, while high relevance and low severity would make moral rationalization easier to justify. In order to reduce variation across domains and increase internal validity, we restricted our focus to the context of a governor engaging in immoral acts.

Method

Two hundred and thirteen undergraduates, staff, and area residents (62% female, mean age = 21) were recruited through a Northeastern university to participate in return for financial

payment. We used a 2 (Moral Reasoning Argument: Decoupling vs. Rationalization) x 2
(Transgression: Severe vs. Moderate) x 2 (Transgression: Relevant vs. Not Relevant) between-subjects design.

Participants read a scenario about a U.S. Governor engaging in immoral acts. The
scenario was described as an excerpt of a newspaper article detailing a recent scandal, with the
name of the Governor, his party affiliation, and his associated state changed or eliminated from
the excerpt. We manipulated severity by varying the immoral act described in the scenario: tax
evasion (relatively moderate) versus bribery in exchange for state contracts (relatively severe). In
order to manipulate relevance without changing the nature of the transgression, we varied when
the immoral act took place: seven years prior to taking office (irrelevant) versus recently while in
office (relevant). Each participant read the following paragraph:

> Among the Governor's main campaign promises were his efforts to support local
> communities, decrease local crime, and balance the state budget. Nearly two years
> after being elected, Governor Johnson has stayed on track to accomplish his main
> goals. Reported incidents of violent crime, including rape and murder, are down
> as much as 18% during Governor Johnson's first year in charge. Furthermore, the
> Governor has gained a reputation of being a highly effective mediator,
> successfully brokering negotiations with the state assembly to reduce the state's
> budget deficit…

Those in the Severe Transgression condition next read that the Governor had been accused of
accepting a bribe. The Relevance manipulation is in brackets:

> The Governor is currently facing allegations that he accepted a bribe in exchange
> for state contracts [seven years prior to entering the political arena]. Sources
> identify the Governor as having taken a "large bribe" from a local lobbyist in
> exchange for a construction contract [from a vendor while working at a local law
> firm].

Instead, those in the Moderate Transgression condition read that the Governor had been accused
of cheating on his taxes. As before, the Relevance manipulation is in brackets:

The Governor is currently facing allegations that he lied on a recent tax filing [lied on his taxes seven years prior to entering the political arena]. An audit of the Governor's taxes reveals significant inconsistencies, and suggests that he failed to report various sources of earnings [he received before beginning his political career].

Next, participants viewed three statements that had been used in support of the Governor, and asked to select the one that best reflected their own feelings about the situation. In the Decoupling condition, participants chose one of three statements consistent with moral decoupling (e.g. "Reports of personal wrongdoing should not affect our view of a politician's achievements."). In the Rationalization condition, participants chose one of three statements consistent with moral rationalization (e.g. "Politicians are not at fault for their moral failures because the pressures of political life are so high."). After selecting the best argument, participants wrote in favor of that argument in order to justify their choice.

After justifying their argument, participants rated the extent to which their argument was easy to justify on a six-item scale similar to the one used in Study 3: 1) The statement I chose was easy to justify; 2) It feels wrong to support this Governor (reverse coded); 3) I would feel comfortable defending my argument to others; 4) Supporting this statement felt morally wrong (reverse coded); 5) I feel good about the statement I chose and the reasons I wrote down; 6) I am confident that I chose the best statement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; averaged to create an ease of justification index, $\alpha = .86$). Participants also rated their willingness to support the Governor on a four-item scale: 1) I would continue to support this Governor; 2) The Governor should be allowed to remain in office; 3) I would contribute to this Governor's re-election campaign; 4) I would feel comfortable wearing a t-shirt in support of the Governor (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree, averaged to create a consumer support index, $\alpha = .87$).

Results

We assessed the success of our manipulations by asking participants to rate the severity of the accusations against the Governor, as well as the relevance of these accusations to the Governor's job. As expected, the severe transgression (i.e. bribery; $M = 4.89$) was rated as more severe than the moderate transgression (i.e. tax evasion; $M = 4.23$, $F(1, 209) = 12.85$, $p < .001$). The severity manipulation did not significantly influence the relevance of the transgression ($F(1, 209) = 2.75$, $p = .10$). Similarly, the relevant transgression (i.e. recent; $M = 4.89$) was rated as more relevant than the irrelevant transgression (i.e. seven years prior to taking office; $M = 4.31$, $F(1, 209) = 6.72$, $p = .01$). The relevance manipulation had no effect on perceptions of transgression severity ($F < 1$).

Consumer Support. A three-way ANOVA revealed only significant main effects of severity and relevance, with a marginal effect of moral reasoning argument, on reported support for the Governor. As expected, consumer support was higher for moderate transgressions ($M = 3.84$) than for severe transgressions ($M = 3.41$; $F(1, 205) = 5.54$, $p = .02$). Similarly, consistent with predictions, participants reported greater support when the transgression was irrelevant ($M = 3.97$) versus relevant ($M = 3.28$; $F(1, 205) = 13.94$, $p < .001$). A marginally significant effect of moral reasoning argument emerged, whereby participants who had decoupled reported marginally greater support ($M = 3.81$) than those who had rationalized ($M = 3.45$; $F(1, 205) = 3.83$, $p = .052$), with the effect approaching significance.

Ease of Justification. A three-way ANOVA revealed only significant main effects of moral reasoning argument and transgression relevance on reported ease of justification. Specifically, moral decoupling arguments were rated as significantly easier to justify ($M = 4.57$)

than moral rationalization arguments ($M = 3.95$; $F(1, 205) = 12.60$, $p < .001$), as expected. Participants also reported that justification was easier when the transgression was irrelevant ($M = 4.43$) versus relevant ($M = 4.08$; $F(1, 205) = 3.93$, $p = .049$). Interestingly, transgression severity had no effect on ease of justification ($F < 1$). No significant interactions emerged. Figure 7 displays these results.

------Insert figure 7 about here------

Discussion

Consistent with study 3, these results suggest that moral decoupling is easier to justify, and feels less wrong, than moral rationalization. Importantly, this effect is robust and directionally consistent even as transgression severity and relevance vary, and even when participants are randomly assigned a moral reasoning strategy rather than choosing one. These results provide strong support for our theorizing: while moral rationalization requires people to implicitly condone an immoral action, moral decoupling allows them to simultaneously condemn an immoral action and support an immoral actor. As such, moral decoupling allows people to maintain their moral standards, and thus feels less wrong.

While we were surprised by the consistency of this effect in both study 3 and study 4, our findings align with our contention that in most cases of transgressions by public figures, the public discourse centers around issues pertaining to decoupling rather than issues pertaining to rationalization. That is, the immorality of a given transgression is rarely at issue: confirmed public transgressions are often immediately condemned. Instead, the public debate concerns

whether that transgression should be separated from or integrated with judgments of job performance. As an illustrative example, Pennington (2010) reviews the case of two football players, Reggie Bush and O.J. Simpson. Both excelled in college football and won the Heisman Trophy, perhaps the most prestigious award in collegiate athletics. Since then, Simpson went on trial for double murder and was later convicted of burglary and kidnapping, while Bush's family was recently found to have accepted gifts from sports agents in violation of NCAA eligibility rules. While acknowledging that Simpson's crimes were unequivocally severe, the Heisman Committee argued that they were irrelevant to his performance on the field. Meanwhile, Bush recently relinquished his 2005 trophy for an offense that was arguably more relevant but far less severe. Accordingly, we propose that when discussing such issues in public forums, it may be easier and more natural for people to debate the degree of relevance of immoral actions than the degree of immorality. Study 5 sought field evidence that this is the case by examining the prevalence and nature of actual comments posted online about a public figure who has transgressed.

STUDY 5: DECOUPLING PREDICTS REAL-WORLD SUPPORT OF TIGER WOODS

Studies 1 – 4 provide evidence for the existence and characteristics of a previously unstudied reasoning process, moral decoupling. The primary objective of study 5 was to establish the external validity of our proposed construct. We sought evidence that people actually engage in moral decoupling in the real world when motivated to support a public figure that has transgressed. Accordingly, we collected user-generated online comments in response to news articles and opinion pieces regarding professional golfer Tiger Woods. In late 2009, in a highly

publicized case, Tiger Woods admitted to infidelity to his wife and took a hiatus from playing golf. Mr. Woods returned to play in the Masters Tournament in April 2010. The anticipation of the tournament provided an opportunity for motivated consumers to express their support or opposition towards Tiger Woods in a public forum (without being influenced by Mr. Woods's actual performance once the tournament began). We hoped to highlight the prevalence and importance of our construct outside a laboratory setting. Accordingly, we predicted that moral decoupling (i.e. comments that advocated a separation of morality and performance) would predict actual expressed support of Tiger Woods.

As a secondary objective, we sought to explore the predictive power of moral decoupling relative to moral rationalization. In studies 3 – 4, we were surprised to find that moral decoupling was easier to justify than moral rationalization in generating support of immoral actors, regardless of the relevance or severity of immoral actions. However, these findings support our proposition that the public debate surrounding transgressions by public figures often centers on the relationship between morality and performance, rather than the degree of immorality. This moral reasoning strategy may be especially prevalent in such contexts and in public domains. Accordingly, in this context, we predicted that global attitudes towards Tiger Woods expressed in a public domain would be better predicted by the degree to which individuals separated or integrated judgments of morality and judgments of performance than by the degree to which they rationalized the actions of Tiger Woods.

Method

We investigated the attitudes of online commenters responding to articles about Tiger Woods leading up to the 2010 Masters Tournament. We began our analysis by searching for online news and opinion articles about Tiger Woods in the 10 days prior to the start of the tournament, from March 29th to April 7th, 2010. We identified a total of 33 online articles from the four the most visited online news outlets in the United States according to Alexa.com (2010) at the time of the research (The New York Times, CNN, ESPN, and The Huffington Post). These articles contained a total of 5,963 online comments. Given the overwhelming number of comments contained in these articles, we randomly selected a subset of 400 comments.

Three coders blind to hypotheses were recruited to rate the sampled comments. Each coder worked independently, and there was no discussion among coders. We first gave coders instructions to filter out comments that were less than 10 words and length, did not contain original content, or did not directly express an opinion regarding Tiger Woods. A total of 124 comments met these criteria and were included in the final sample. Our measures included ratings of global support and global opposition expressed in the comment towards Tiger Woods. In addition, we took measures of rationalization, degree of separation of judgments of performance and judgments of morality (i.e. moral decoupling), and the degree of integration of judgments of performance and judgments of morality (i.e moral coupling). For each dependent variable measure, coders independently rated each comment on a seven point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so). The independent coder ratings were averaged for use in analyses, and all index measures exhibited excellent inter-rater reliability (all α's > .76). Appendix C contains the coding guidelines and reliabilities for each measure.

Results

To examine the relative prevalence of these different moral reasoning processes in a natural environment, we examined the relative frequencies of rationalization, separation, and integration in the comment ratings. Given that our measures reflected the extent to which a comment was characterized by the presence of each construct (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so), we interpreted unanimous ratings of 1 as the complete absence of a given construct in a given comment. Using this criterion, 37.1% (n = 46) of comments exhibited no moral rationalization, while 62.9% (n = 78) of comments exhibited some degree of moral rationalization (M = 2.31). Meanwhile, 41.1% (n = 51) of comments exhibited no separation (i.e. moral decoupling), while 58.9% (n = 73) of comments exhibited some degree of separation (M = 2.71). Finally, 56.5% (n = 70) of comments exhibited no integration (i.e. moral coupling), while 43.5% (n = 54) of comments exhibited some integration (M = 1.70).

Next, multiple linear regression was used to predict the effect of rationalization, separation, and integration on expressed support for Tiger Woods. The degree of separation (t(120) = 6.18, p < .001) and integration (t(120) = -3.94, p < .001) were strong significant predictors of expressed support, while degree of rationalization was only marginally significant (t(120) = -1.84, p = .067). A multiple linear regression was also used to predict expressed opposition towards Tiger Woods. Again, both the degree of separation (t(120) = -3.48, p < .001) and integration (t(120) = 6.34, p < .001) were strong significant predictors of opposition, while the degree of rationalization did not significant predict expressed opposition (t(120) = -1.03, p = .303). Table 2 outlines these results.

------Insert table 2 about here------

Discussion

The results from our analysis suggest that individuals who expressed their support or opposition towards Tiger Woods leading up to the 2010 Masters Tournament varied primarily in the degree to which they argued that his transgressions were related to judgments of performance. Specifically, individuals expressing support for Tiger Woods did so primarily by separating judgments of performance from judgments of morality (i.e. decoupling), while those expressing opposition towards Tiger Woods did so by integrating performance and morality (i.e. coupling). The degree of rationalization in our sample of comments was weakly related to expressions of support and was not related to expressions of opposition towards Tiger Woods. These findings support our theorizing: in a public forum regarding a transgression by a public figure, the discourse centered around the relationship between performance and immorality, rather than the degree of immorality. This field evidence underscores the pervasiveness and usefulness of the construct we propose.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research investigates the manner in which individuals come to support public figures who have acted immorally. Such situations may arouse tension between one's desire to support a public figure and one's moral self regard (e.g. Aquino and Reed 2002). Ample prior research finds that in order to resolve this tension, people are likely to morally rationalize, reconstruing immoral actions as less immoral in order to maintain their support for a public figure (e.g. Ditto et al. 2009; Paharia and Deshpandé 2009). Our main contribution, in contrast, is

to demonstrate the existence of a distinct form of moral reasoning, moral decoupling, by which people can also reason to support public figures that have transgressed.

We provide consistent correlational and causal evidence that moral decoupling is psychologically distinct from moral rationalization processes: rather than reducing judgments of immorality, moral decoupling works by selectively dissociating judgments of morality from judgments of performance (pilot, studies 1 – 2). Moral decoupling is prevalent and is freely chosen to generate support for public figures who have transgressed in both laboratory (study 3) and field settings (study 5). Whereas moral rationalization entails the implicit forgiveness of immoral behavior, moral decoupling enables consumers to support immoral actors while condemning their actions, simultaneously tipping their hats and wagging their fingers. As such, whether freely chosen or randomly assigned, moral decoupling feels less wrong and is easier to justify than moral rationalization, even as transgression relevance and severity vary (studies 3 – 4). Finally, in situations involving transgressions by public figures, the degree to which someone integrates or separates performance from morality may be more predictive of both consumer support and opposition than the degree of moral rationalization, highlighting the pervasiveness and explanatory power of our construct (study 5).

Theoretical Implications and Directions for Future Research

While the evidence we present suggests the importance of our construct, we do not claim that consumer support is always better predicted by moral decoupling rather than moral rationalization. Similarly, we do not suggest that moral decoupling is always more prevalent, or more frequently employed by people, than moral rationalization. Nor do we claim that these

constructs are necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, we argue that moral decoupling may be particularly applicable (and distinguishable from moral rationalization) within the common situations we have selected and examined. Because our primary goal is proof of concept, we have highlighted such situations. In particular, when a transgressor is clearly guilty of violating well-established and agreed-upon moral standards, we expect a moral decoupling discourse to emerge. Instead, if a violation is questionable, we might expect the public debate to gravitate towards determining the degree of immorality. This view is consistent with past research: while rationalization exploits the ambiguity around certain immoral behaviors (e.g. Dana et al. 2007; Mazar et al. 2008; Shu et al. 2011), decoupling exploits the ambiguity inherent in the placement of the bounds of performance.

As such, moral decoupling may be especially easy in domains such as athletics or business, in which performance is objectively measured and readily observable. Conversely, decoupling may be less likely, or more cognitively demanding, in domains such as politics, in which performance is difficult to assess, multifaceted, and naturally more enmeshed with moral and ideological concerns. Similarly, moral decoupling is likely to vary across individuals, both chronically and with individual investment in domains. Such individual and contextual differences may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

These considerations reveal the deeper issue underlying the present research—the "normal" relationship between performance and morality in any particular domain is unclear, and likely to vary across individuals and contexts. Even normative standards regarding this relationship are unclear. Aronson (1969) highlights this problem in his overview of cognitive dissonance, discussing a hypothetical example about finding out that one's favorite novelist has physically abused his wife. He notes that this information may or may not arouse dissonance

because there is broad disagreement about whether or not a great novelist must be a virtuous and moral human being. The present research provides a framework for understanding how such views may vary with motivation. Likewise, a large body of psychological research has examined halo effects and the broad integration of different constructs. For instance, global judgments of individuals may direct local judgments (e.g. Nisbett and Wilson 1977), and survey responses along one dimension may actually reflect broader attitudes (e.g. Kahneman and Knetsch 1992; Kahneman, Ritov and Schkade 1999) or expressions of attitudes that were not assessed (Gal and Rucker 2011). The present research suggests that such halo effects may not always hold. The degree of overlap between different dimensions of value, such as morality and performance, may be strategically varied. While we examined situations in which participants were expected to be motivated to support a public figure, future research that manipulates motivation directly might better illuminate these dynamics.

Finally, another interesting direction involves considering the role of trust and consumer expectations of public figures that transgress. Consumers relationships with brands resemble interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998), and this is likely to be especially true for "human brands" that comprise a single public figure, such as an athlete, entertainer, or politician (Thomson 2006). Research in the interpersonal domain has demonstrated how apologies, excuses, and justifications work to repair trust (e.g. Kim, Ferrin, Cooper and Dirks 2004; Riordan, Marlin and Kellogg 1983; Wooten 2009), and this work may provide direction to public figures hoping to successfully manage such crises. Willingness to support a public figure after a transgression is also likely to depend on consumer expectations set by that public figure's brand personality (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004): public figures with sincere or virtuous brand personalities may be especially damaged by transgressions. Conversely, some public figures

build their brands around their disregard for social convention, and might actually gain

credibility and consumer support from transgressions. For example, in 1993, Nike released a now

famous commercial in which often-controversial basketball star Charles Barkley repeatedly

intoned, "I am not a role model." The campaign was a success for both Nike and Barkley. The

subtext of the commercial is clear: Barkley may not be the paragon of a virtuous human being,

but that has little bearing on his basketball prowess or whether consumers should purchase the

shoes he wears.

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TABLE 1

MORAL DECOUPLING PREDICTS PERFORMANCE RATINGS, WHILE MORAL

RATIONALIZATION PREDICTS DEGREE OF IMMORALITY (PILOT STUDY)

	Regression 1 Performance			Regression 2 Degree of Immorality		
Predictors	β	SE	*t-statistic*	β	SE	*t-statistic*
(Intercept)	4.56	0.79	5.76***	7.79	0.61	12.68***
Performance Ratings				-0.04	0.11	-0.39
Degree of Immorality	-0.04	0.09	-0.39			
Moral Decoupling	0.39	0.05	7.59***	-0.04	0.07	-0.52
Moral Rationalization	-0.20	0.17	-1.16	-0.63	0.18	-3.52***

Note: *** $p < .001$

TABLE 2

INTEGRATION AND SEPARATION OF MORALITY AND PERFORMANCE PREDICT

SUPPORT FOR TIGER WOODS (STUDY 5)

	Regression 1 Support for Tiger Woods			Regression 2 Opposition towards Tiger Woods		
Predictors	β	SE	t-statistic	β	SE	t-statistic
(Intercept)	2.63	0.41	6.36***	2.62	0.44	6.02***
Integration	-0.44	0.11	-3.94***	0.74	0.12	6.39***
Separation	0.45	0.07	6.18***	-0.27	0.08	-3.48***
Rationalization	0.16	0.09	1.85	-0.09	0.09	-1.03

Note: *** $p < .001$

FIGURE 1

DECOUPLING AND RATIONALIZATION INCREASE CONSUMER SUPPORT (STUDY 1)
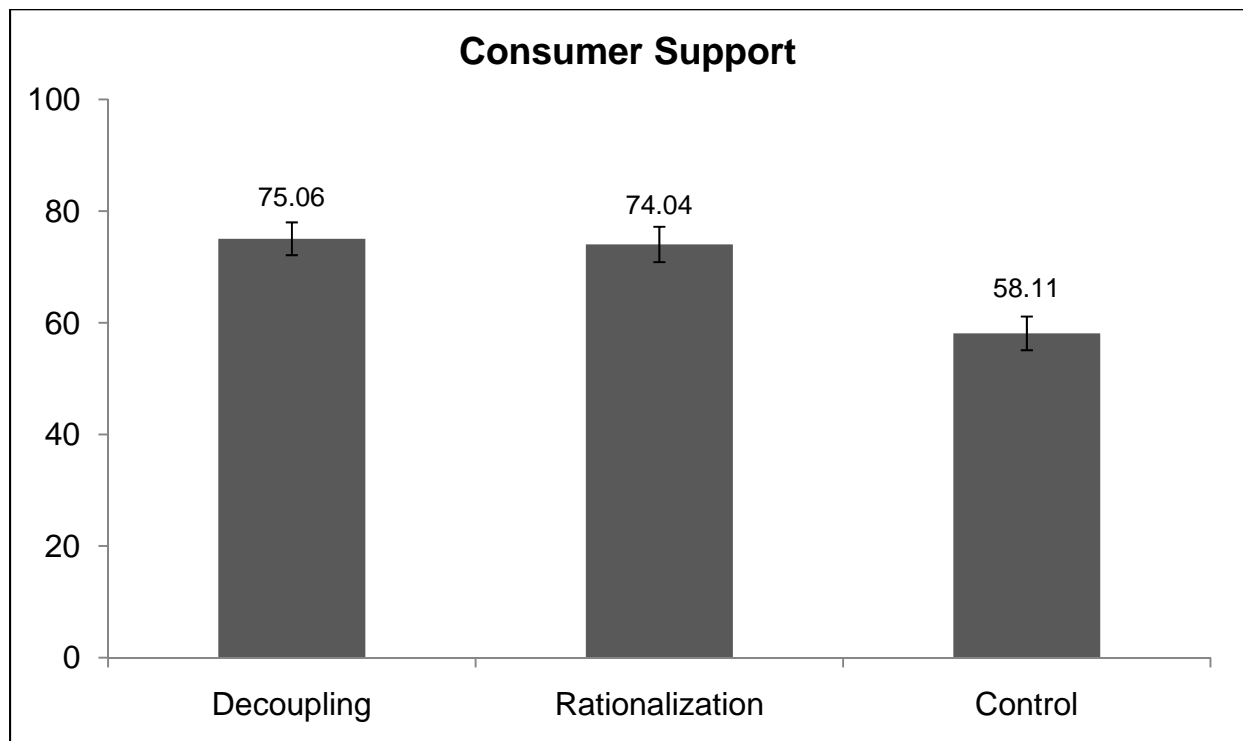
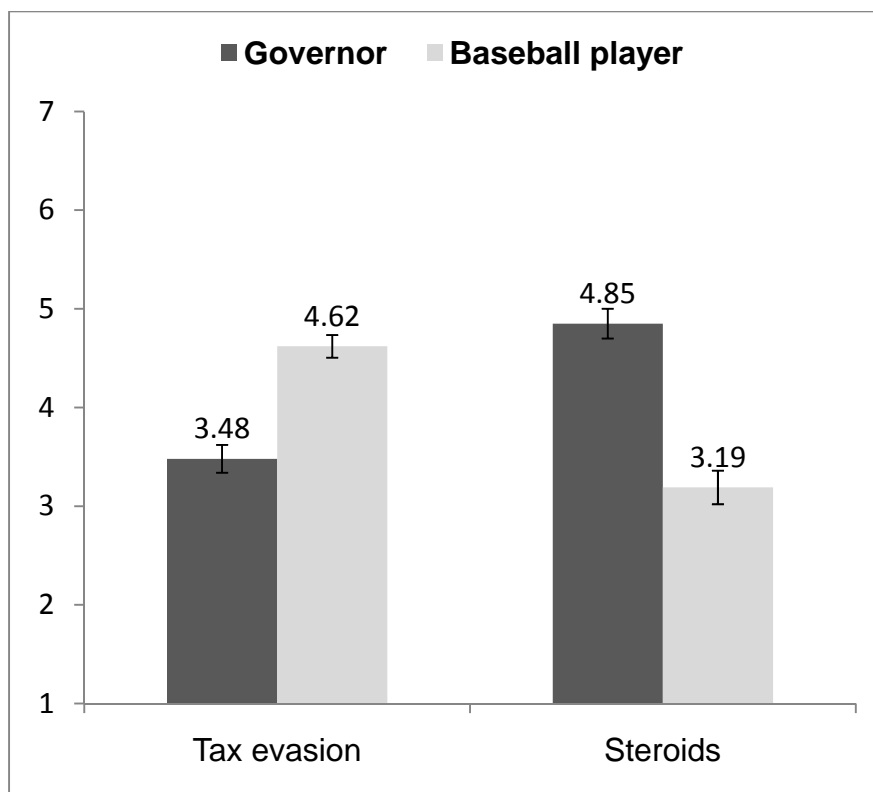Note: Error bars denote standard errors.

FIGURE 2

DECOUPLING INCREASES PERFORMANCE JUDGMENTS WHILE RATIONALIZATION

REDUCES IMMORALITY JUDGMENTS (STUDY 1)
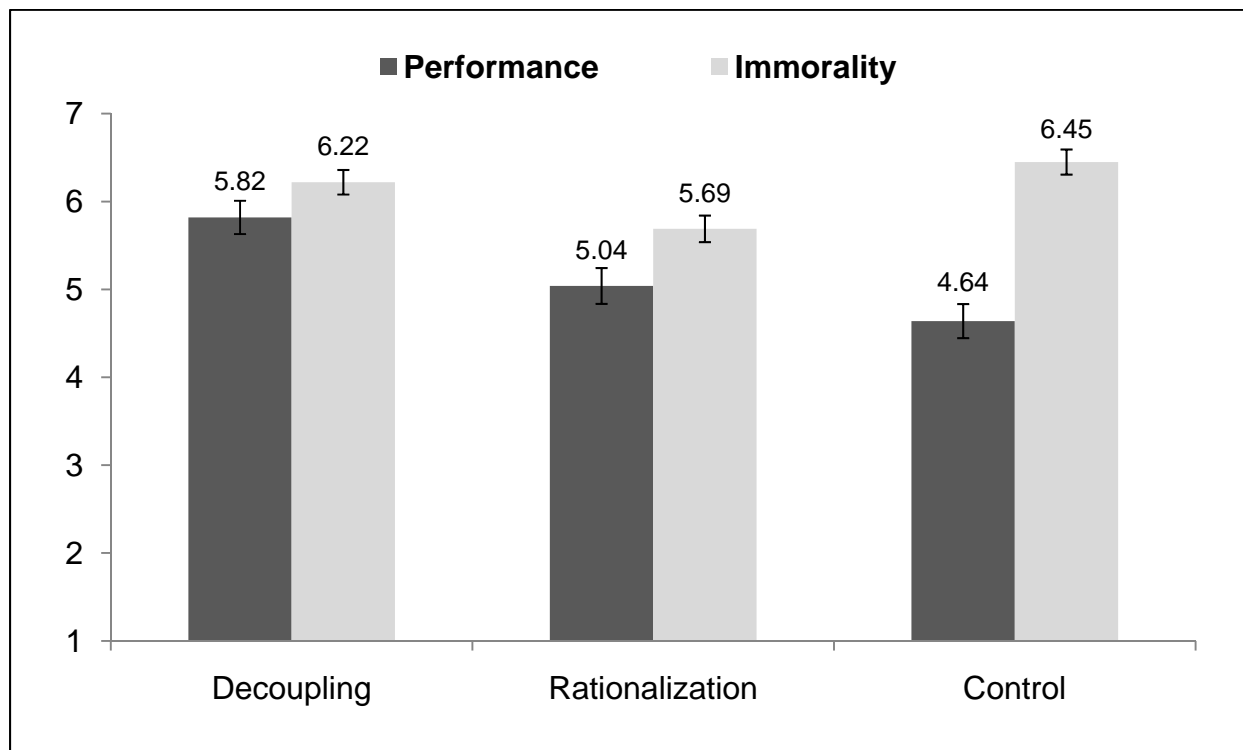
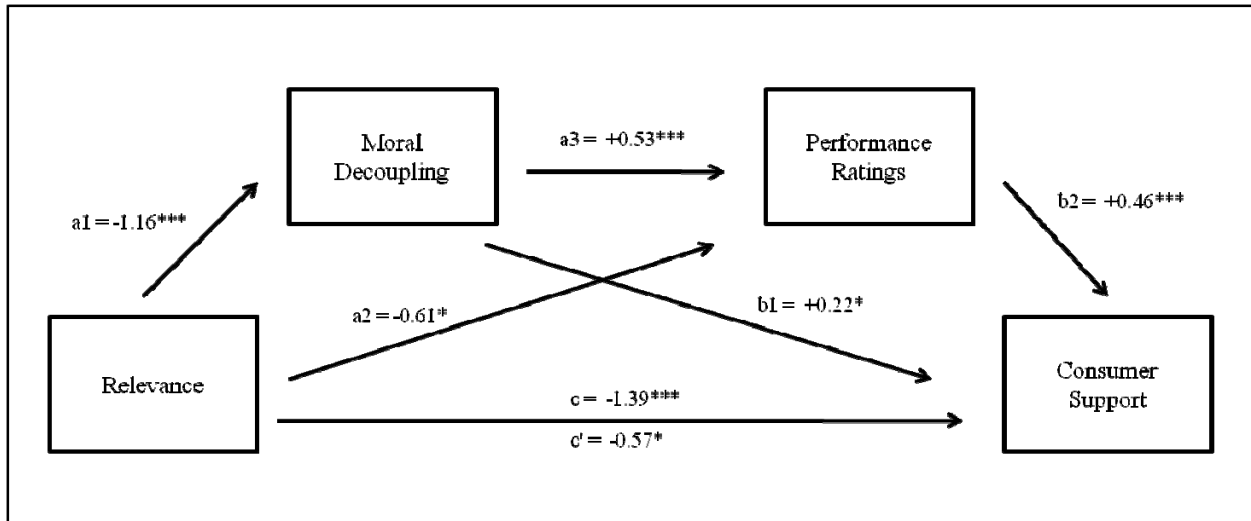Note: Error bars denote standard errors.

FIGURE 3

HIGH TRANSGRESSION RELEVANCE REDUCES CONSUMER SUPPORT (STUDY 2)

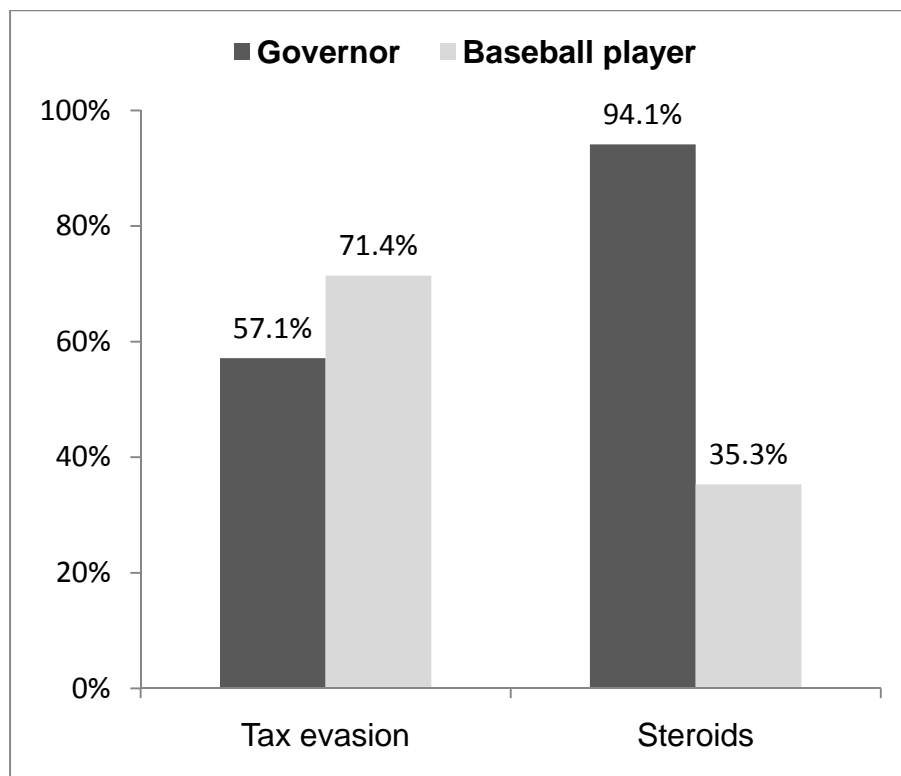Note: Error bars denote standard errors.

FIGURE 4

MULTIPLE STEP MEDIATION SHOWING HOW TRANSGRESSION RELEVANCE

AFFECTS CONSUMER SUPPORT (STUDY 2)

Note: Multiple step mediation run using the Bootstrap method with 1,000 samples (Hayes,

Preacher and Myers 2011). The total indirect effect is significant, with a 95% confidence interval
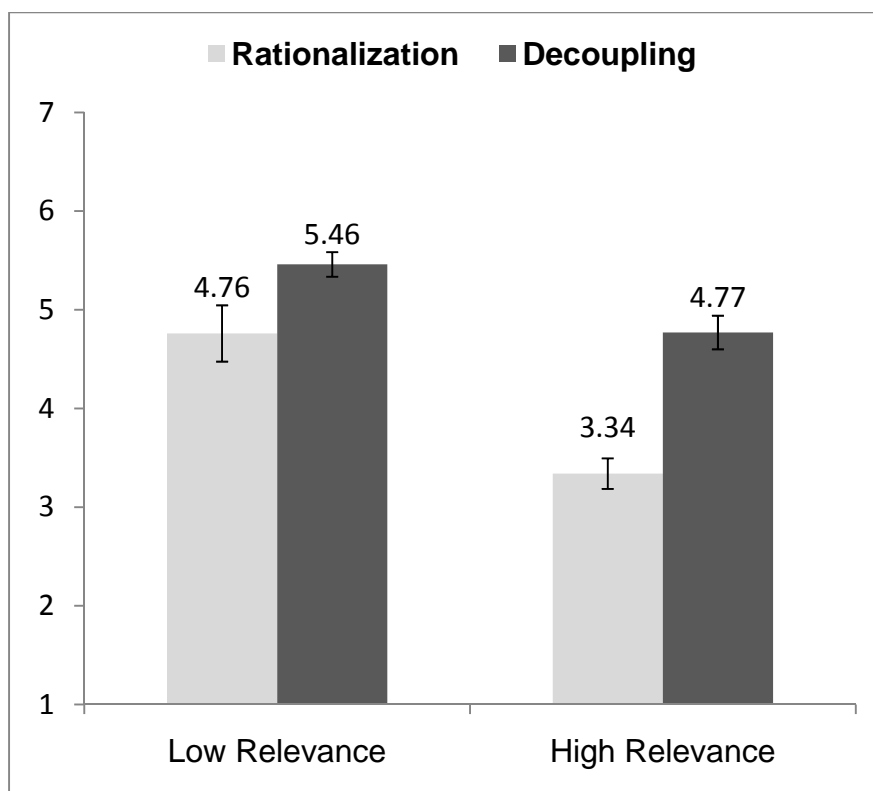
of [-1.25, -0.44] and a standard error of 0.20.

FIGURE 5

HIGH TRANGRESSION RELEVANCE REDUCES PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS

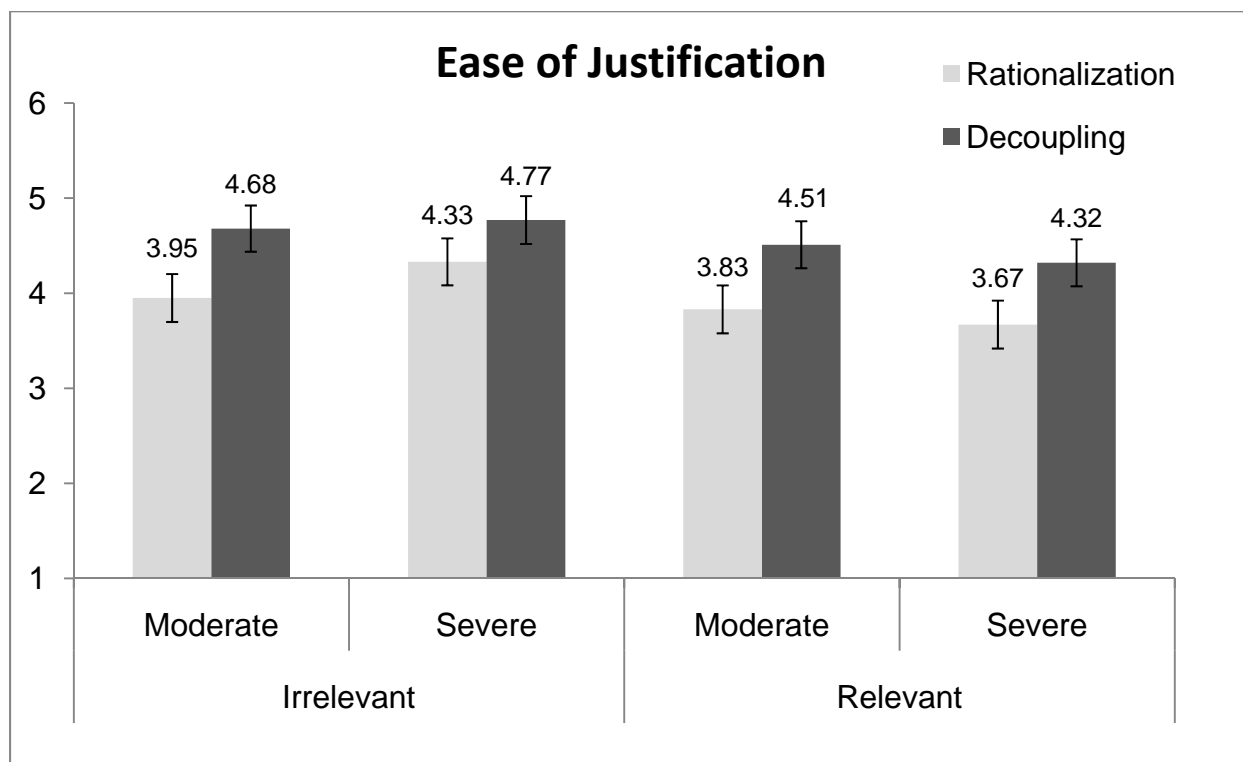CHOOSING A MORAL DECOUPLING (VS. RATIONALIZATION) STRATEGY (STUDY 3)

FIGURE 6

MORAL DECOUPLING ARGUMENTS ARE EASIER TO JUSTIFY THAN MORAL

RATIONALIZATION ARGUMENTS (STUDY 3)

Note: Error bars denote standard errors.

FIGURE 7

DECOUPLING IS EASIER TO JUSTIFY THAN RATIONALIZATION (STUDY 4)

Note: Error bars denote standard errors.

APPENDIX A

FACTOR ANALYSIS SHOWS FOUR DISTINCT CONSTRUCTS

	Factor Loading			
Item	Moral Decoupling	Performance Ratings	Moral Rationalization	Degree of Immorality
The athlete is among the best in the world at his sport.	.34	**.82**	-.06	-.01
The athlete's ability to lead his team to victory is a stellar achievement.	.26	**.90**	.01	-.05
The athlete is a superior competitor	.42	**.72**	-.12	-.03
It is morally wrong for the athlete to beat his wife.	-.13	.00	-.07	**.90**
I find the athlete's actions to be morally reprehensible.	.03	-.07	-.27	**.76**
The athlete's actions do not change my assessment of his performance	**.84**	.29	-.03	-.02
Judgments of performance should remain separate from judgments of morality.	**.91**	.30	.06	-.03
Reports of wrongdoing should not affect our view of the athlete's performance.	**.80**	.30	.07	-.11
It is alright to beat your wife if she belittles you *(Moral Justification)*.	-.06	-.05	**.85**	-.06
It is not a bad thing to hit your wife if she was "asking for it" *(Euphemistic Language)*.	.08	.04	.42	.03
Athletes should not be at fault for spousal abuse, because the pressures of modern relationship are so high *(Displacement of Responsibility)*.	.09	.07	**.55**	-.36
It is okay to hit your wife once, because it doesn't really do much harm *(Distortion of Consequences)*.	-.03	-.04	**.59**	-.03
If a man abuses her wife, it's usually her fault *(Attribution of Blame)*.	.05	-.07	**.52**	-.13
Someone who is obnoxious does not deserve to be treated like a human being *(Dehumanization)*.	-.07	-.07	**.54**	-.15
Eigenvalue	4.26	3.13	1.45	1.01
% variance explained	31.4%	22.3%	10.4%	7.2%

Note: Parentheses indicate corresponding mechanisms of moral disengagement items as defined by Bandura et al. (1996).

APPENDIX B

MEASURES USED IN STUDY 3

Support Measures

I would continue to support this Governor.

The Governor should be allowed to remain in office.

I would contribute to this Governor's campaign.

Degree of Immorality

It is morally wrong for a person to cheat on their taxes.

I find the Governor's actions to be morally reprehensible.

Performance Measures

The Governor is an effective state leader.

The on-the-job performance of the Governor is excellent.

The ability of the Governor to increase a sense of community in the state is commendable.

Decoupling Measures

The Governor's personal actions do not change my assessment of his job performance.

Judgments of job performance should remain separate from judgments of morality.

Reports of wrongdoing should not affect our view of a politician's achievements.

Rationalization Measures

It is alright to cheat on your taxes. *(moral justification)*

It's not a bad thing to "fib a little" on your taxes. *(euphemistic language)*

Cheating on your taxes as bad as some of the other horrible things people do. *(advantageous comparison)*

People should not be at fault for lying on their taxes, because the system is too complicated. *(displacement of responsibility)*

People should not be at fault for lying on their taxes when so many other people do it. *(diffusion of responsibility)*

It's unfair to blame just the governor, because it's probably his accountant's fault. *(displacement of responsibility)*

It's okay to cheat on your taxes a little bit, because it doesn't really do much harm. *(distortion of consequences)*

The government is to blame if people cheat on their taxes, because taxes are too high. *(attribution of blame)*

Note: All items were presented in random order. Parentheses on the moral rationalization items correspond to mechanism of moral disengagement as outlined by Bandura et al (1996).

APPENDIX C

CODING GUIDELINES FOR STUDY 5

Support for the individual being discussed. Comments may vary in terms of how much they support the individual being discussed. Is the comment written in favor of the individual? Please rate how supportive the comment is. (α = .92)

Opposition for the individual being discussed. Comments may vary in terms of how much they oppose the individual being discussed. Is the comment written against the individual's favor? Please rate how negative the comment is towards the individual. (α = .94)

Integration of morality and performance. Comments may vary in terms of how much they argue that moral judgments and performance judgments cannot be separated. For instance, does the comment argue that excellent performance comes with the responsibility to be a role model? Please rate the extent to which the comment argues that judgments of morality and performance should be integrated. (α = .78)

Separation of morality and performance. Comments may vary in terms of how much they argue that moral judgments should be kept separate from judgments of performance. Does the comment state that immoral behaviors should not influence judged performance? Please rate the extent to which the comment argues for this separation. (α = .79)

Rationalization of immoral behavior. Comments may vary in terms of how much they justify, excuse, or explain the behavior of the individual in question. Does the commenter justify or excuse the individual's actions? Please rate the extent to which the commenter rationalizes the behavior of individual in question. (α = .76)