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Moral Credentialing and the Rationalization of Misconduct

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Abstract

Recent studies lead to the paradoxical conclusion that the act of affirming one's egalitarian or pro-social values and virtues might subsequently facilitate prejudiced or self-serving behavior, an effect previously referred to as "moral credentialing." The present study extends this paradox to the domain of academic misconduct and investigates the hypothesis that such an effect might be limited by the extent to which misbehavior is rationalizable. Using a paradigm designed to investigate deliberative and rationalized forms of cheating (von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005), we found that when participants had credentialed themselves (versus a non-close acquaintance) via a set of hypothetical moral dilemmas, they were more likely to cheat on a subsequent math task, but only if cheating was highly rationalizable. When cheating was difficult to rationalize, moral credentialing had almost no impact on cheating.

Keywords

rationalization; misconduct; cheating; moral credentialing

Motivational speakers, not unlike social psychologists, are often fond of noting that perception can create reality. If we *see* ourselves as successful people, so the reasoning goes, we are more likely to *be* successful. If we can envision ourselves scoring a goal, playing the tuba, or reciting our lines, that vision might translate into actual behavior. Might the same be true of *moral* behavior that appears to be true of other kinds of behavior? Research on moral credentialing actually suggests the opposite can sometimes be true. Moral credentialing refers to the act of establishing oneself as a virtuous or moral person, and recent research has shown that it can actually facilitate selfish or ethically questionable behavior, whether the act of credentialing occurs in public or in private and whether it involves real or merely imagined behavior (e.g., Khan & Dhar, 2006; Monin & Miller, 2001).

Monin & Miller (2001) first demonstrated the effect of moral credentialing in a series of studies examining the expression of prejudice in hiring decisions. They found that men who had been given the opportunity to establish their egalitarian bona fides by disagreeing with blatantly sexist statements (compared to men who had no such opportunity) were subsequently *more likely* to rate a male candidate as being better suited than a female for a stereotypically masculine job. Likewise, White participants were more likely to favor a White male (over an African American or a female) for a job after first being given the opportunity to hire a highly-qualified female or African American for a hypothetical consulting firm. In related studies on the "licensing effect," Khan and Dhar (2006) demonstrated that participants who imagined volunteering or donating to charity were more

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likely to make a self-indulgent purchase of a luxury item than were participants who had not been able to affirm their moral integrity.

These studies demonstrate that moral credentialing can free people to behave according to their "darker" impulses, loosening the bonds of self-restraint imposed by a socially tuned conscience. However, this paradoxical effect of moral credentialing appears to be at odds with theories of self-consistency. People have a strong motivation for consistency (Steele, 1988; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992), and violations of the consistency motive are often aversive (Higgins, 1987). From a self-consistency perspective, establishing one's moral credentials should inhibit, rather than exacerbate, immoral behavior. By asserting one's virtues, the credentialer makes salient his or her moral standards, making these standards more accessible guides for subsequent behavior (Fazio, Powell, & Williams, 1989; Fazio & Williams, 1986) and risking the stigma of exposed hypocrisy should he or she violate these standards. Given the consistency-based motive to reduce immoral behavior following the proclamation of one's moral integrity, why would moral credentialing ever facilitate misconduct?

We believe the answer to this question lies in the mental maneuverings of rationalization. Rationalization can enable immoral behavior to be reinterpreted as moral (or at least as neutral) and can allow people to erect a psychological barrier between their misbehavior and the self-concept, enabling them to see themselves as "decent human beings" while they engage in immoral or unethical behavior. Thus, rationalization can free people to misbehave without being plagued by the dissonance and guilt that would otherwise stem from their contradicting their moral values (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bersoff, 1999a; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004; Tsang, 2002).

The role of rationalization in misconduct has been reliably demonstrated in previous studies. For example, using a sample of elementary and junior high school students, Bandura et al. (1996) found a consistently positive relationship between multiple reports of delinquent behavior and a combination of various rationalization techniques (e.g., dehumanization, displacement of responsibility, and justification). Likewise, Batson and colleagues (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999) found evidence of moral rationalization in a series of moral dilemma studies. Participants who flipped a coin to assign tasks to themselves and a stranger tended to ignore the outcome of the coin toss and assign the positive task to themselves, yet they maintained that their decision was more moral than did those who did not flip a coin. In this way, participants were able to experience the benefits of appearing virtuous without having to bear the costs of actually being so. Similarly, Norton, Vandello, and Darley (2004) found that participants tended to favor the more educated applicant for a stereotypically male job when either no gender information was provided or when the more educated candidate was a male. When the more educated applicant was a female, *experience* rather than education suddenly became the most important characteristic for applicants. This research highlights people's agility in shifting their decision-making criteria to suit their preferred conclusions while also protecting the self-concept from any undesirable repercussions.

Ambiguity seems central to the process of rationalization. If a behavior is unambiguously immoral, rationalization will tend to be difficult. Although previous research on credentialing (e.g., Monin & Miller, 2001) suggests that moral credentialing operates by taking advantage of the ambiguity of certain behaviors, this possibility has yet to be established empirically. The study we report here investigates whether the degree to which behavior is rationalizable might determine when moral credentialing will facilitate misconduct. We hypothesized that moral credentialing would result in more misconduct

when that misconduct is highly rationalizable. In contrast, moral credentialing should not enhance misconduct when that misconduct is unambiguously immoral, in which case it would be difficult to rationalize. Indeed, in such instances, self-consistency motives might undermine the effects of self-credentialing and could even lead to a *reduction* in misconduct following moral credentialing. Direct assessments of rationalization processes are difficult to make, especially while they are occurring. Because of this difficulty, rather than testing the *mediating* role of rationalization in the effects of moral credentialing, we investigated our hypothesis by *manipulating* the rationalizability of misbehavior and examining whether credentialing the self (versus an acquaintance) resulted in increased or decreased levels of cheating in a competitive situation.

Method

Participants

Two hundred thirty-six undergraduates (171 female, 65 male) participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Data from 45 participants were excluded from the analyses due to high suspicion levels (16 participants revealed that they believed we were assessing cheating behaviors), procedural problems (n = 8), or failure to follow instructions (n = 21), the latter of which we describe in more detail in the Results.

Materials and Procedure

After being escorted to a private cubicle, participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to explore individual differences in abstract and concrete reasoning ability. Then participants were randomly assigned to complete the moral credentialing task either for themselves or for a non-close acquaintance. The moral credentialing task required participants to read 4 moral dilemmas and to rate how likely they (or an acquaintance) would be to behave in a pro-social fashion if they were to encounter such a situation. For example, in one scenario participants read that they (or their acquaintance) had just inherited a large sum of money from a dead relative, and soon after receiving their inheritance they were approached by a representative from a charitable organization asking for a sizeable donation. Participants were asked to rate how likely they (or their acquaintance) would be to make this donation to the charity out of their inheritance. The 4 scenarios were adapted from a larger set of such items developed by Barnes and Brown (2007) and were selected based on pilot data indicating that people tend to believe they would be especially likely to behave pro-socially if they were ever faced with these dilemmas, unlikely though the scenarios were. Thus, participants credentialed either themselves or an acquaintance through these hypothetical dilemmas.

Prior to completing this task, participants in the acquaintance condition were prompted to write down the initials of an acquaintance whom they did *not* consider to be a close friend and to rate how close they were to this acquaintance using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “not close” to 7 “very close.” Participants in the acquaintance condition were instructed to use this individual to respond to the 4 moral dilemmas on the moral credentialing task. A non-close acquaintance was selected as the target for the non-self-credentialing condition because pilot research revealed that people draw upon their own personal values when predicting the behaviors of close friends but do not do so when predicting the behavior of mere acquaintances. This evidence suggested that the social expansiveness of the self-concept (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) might cause participants to feel personally credentialed if they were to predict the hypothetical behaviors of a close friend, similar to the phenomenon known as “basking in reflected glory” (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976). Following the moral credentialing task, participants completed an open-ended self-description task, which instructed them to describe their general

characteristics. Responses from these self-descriptions were rated for general positivity, followed by eight subcategories (i.e., personality, morality, abilities, social desirability, work ethic, religiosity, relationships, and general demographics) by two trained graduate students (more details about these ratings appear in the Results). If moral credentialing boosts people's sense of their personal integrity, then the effect of credentialing might be expected to be exhibited in their immediate self-descriptions (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986), at least with respect to morality. Thus, the positivity of participants' self-descriptions served as a manipulation check on the effectiveness of the moral credentialing task.

Finally, participants completed the Mental Math Task (MMT; for a detailed description, see von Hippel, Lakin, & Sakarchi, 2005), which served as our operationalization of misconduct. On the MMT, participants had to solve two sets of 10 mathematical equations on a computer by adding or subtracting 10 numbers (between 1 and 20). Participants were informed that the MMT was originally developed for another project and the current version was modified for the present study but was still in the piloting phase. Once the task began, they would need to press the spacebar to bring up a response box after the question came on the screen (due, ostensibly, to a programming "bug" that the experimenter had been unsuccessful in eliminating without crashing the program altogether). If they did not do so, the answer would appear. They were told that they would have all the time that they needed to solve each equation once the response box was on the screen. Depending on the condition, participants had either 10 sec to press the spacebar for the first set of questions and 1 sec for the second set, or vice versa. Based on prior research, 1 sec is enough time to press the spacebar in the context of solving these math problems when participants are rewarded for doing so (see von Hippel et al., 2005). Thus, there is no question about participants' *ability* to press the spacebar in time to keep the answers from appearing, but the nature of the task does allow them to rationalize their failure to do so as incidental rather than as immoral. Indeed, as von Hippel et al. (2005) have shown, performance in this 1 sec condition is predictive of subsequent self-serving rationalizations and judgments, independent of social desirability motives.

The total number of times a participant failed to press the spacebar served as our dependent measure. Because failing to hit the spacebar within the larger, 10-sec time lag was only attributable to a deliberate desire to cheat, we construed such behavior as low in rationalizability. In contrast, failing to hit the spacebar within the 1-sec time lag could be more easily rationalized by participants as a momentary lapse of attention or simply as a product of the greater difficulty of this task; thus, we construed this behavior as high in rationalizability. Participants were left alone and were allowed all the time that they needed to complete the MMT. After completing the MMT, participants completed a brief questionnaire, which included their assessment of their performance on the MMT and their recall of the total number of times they failed to press the spacebar during the task. Finally, participants were interviewed to assess their suspicion levels and debriefed.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Participants in the acquaintance condition were instructed to choose someone they knew but with whom they did not have a close relationship. Midway through the experiment, we discovered that 21 participants in this condition had chosen someone at or above the midpoint of the relationship closeness scale. A slight adjustment to the procedure allowed the experimenter to note reported closeness levels in the acquaintance condition and to ask participants to choose another acquaintance if they had reported closeness levels at or above the midpoint of the closeness scale. Data from the 21 participants who had failed to follow instructions regarding their relationship with the acquaintance they selected were excluded

from subsequent analyses, for, as noted previously, credentialing a close friend could indirectly lead to a sense of self-credentialing.

To determine whether responding to the hypothetical scenarios for the self (versus an acquaintance) had any effects on participants' working self-concepts (Markus & Kunda, 1986), two judges (blind to condition) rated participants' open-ended self-descriptions (intra-class correlation = .90) using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from −3 ("very negative") to +3 ("very positive"), with the 0 point representing either neutral content related to the sub-dimension or simply no content on that dimension. We analyzed these ratings with a series of independent samples *t*-tests and found that participants who credentialed themselves received higher scores in the general positivity of their self-descriptions (M = 1.83), $t(189) = 1.69$, $p < .10$, $d = 0.24$, as well as receiving higher (more positive) scores on the sub-dimensions of personality ($M = 0.99$), $t(189) = 2.28$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.34$, and morality ($M = 0.78$), $t(189) = 2.12$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.31$, relative to participants who credentialed an acquaintance (Ms = 1.58, 0.55, and 0.45, respectively). In contrast, and supporting the specificity of the moral credentialing task, credentialed and non-credentialed participants did not significantly differ in their self-descriptions on the sub-dimensions of ability, social desirability, work ethic, religiosity, relationships, or demographics (all ts < 1.0). Thus, the act of credentialing the self (versus an acquaintance) on our hypothetical scenarios appeared to influence the positivity of participants' working self-concepts, but in a narrowly defined way.

Cheating

Recall that participants completed both the 10-sec set of math problems and the 1-sec set, which were counterbalanced across participants. However, due to the presence of significant carryover effects across problem sets (which were especially strong when the first set of problems was the 10-sec set), we focused our analyses on just the cheating levels obtained on the *first* set of math problems that participants completed, so that the design was completely between-groups. Results from the 2 (moral credentialing: self vs. acquaintance) × 2 (rationalizability: high or low) ANOVA indicated a main effect of rationalizability, $F(1, 187) = 21.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.71$, such that participants in the high rationalizability condition ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 3.38$) cheated significantly more than those in the low rationalizability condition ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 2.77$). The main effect of moral credentialing was not significant, $F(1, 187) = 1.14$, $p > .05$. As predicted, however, the ANOVA also revealed a credentialing × rationalizability interaction, $F(1, 187) = 3.80$, $p = .05$, $MSE = 9.44$. The pattern of means across conditions is shown in Figure 1. As these means show, moral credentialing of the self, relative to an acquaintance, led to significantly *more* cheating in the high-rationalizability problem set, $t(187) = 2.14$, $p = .034$, $d = 0.44$, just as we hypothesized.. In contrast, credentialing the self led to slightly *less* cheating in the low-rationalizability problem set, although a planned comparison revealed that this reduction was not statistically significant, $t(187) < 1$, $p > .05$. Thus, rationalizability moderated the effects of moral credentialing on misconduct.

Self-Serving Bias in Recall of Misbehavior

Degree of bias in recall of misbehavior was calculated by subtracting the total number of times participants *recalled* failing to press the spacebar during the math task from the *actual* number of such failures. Higher scores, thus, indicated more self-serving recall errors (or failure to recall one's failures). Credentialing the self, relative to an acquaintance, led to more recall bias, $F(1, 187) = 3.74$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.31$. Participants also exhibited more bias in recall of failures to press the spacebar in the high-rationalizability problem set than in the low-rationalizability set, $F(1, 187) = 12.72$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$. However, these main effects were qualified by a significant credentialing × rationalizability interaction, $F(1, 187) = 5.56$,

$p < .05$, $MSE = 3.76$, such that participants who credentialed the self under-recalled their failures to hit the spacebar in the high-rationalizability problem set more than anyone else, as shown in Figure 2, consistent with our interpretation of their higher levels of cheating as being driven by covert rationalization.

Discussion

Research on moral credentialing has demonstrated that by endorsing egalitarian standards (Monin & Miller, 2001) or thinking about behaving in pro-social ways (Khan & Dhar, 2006), people can add to their moral stockholdings and thereby gain license to express their non-egalitarian preferences or to behave selfishly. The present study tested the hypothesis that such credentialing effects are bounded by the extent to which such behaviors can be easily rationalized, noting that when rationalization is difficult, credentialing might not lead to misconduct because of consistency motives (Steele, 1988; Swann et al., 1987; Swann et al., 1992). The results of our study support this hypothesis. Morally credentialed individuals cheated the most, but only when behavior was highly rationalizable – although, rather conveniently, they seemed unable to recall having done so. In contrast, when rationalizability was low, morally credentialed participants did not cheat more than non-credentialed participants. If anything, they actually cheated slightly *less* than non-credentialed participants, although this difference was non-significant and should be interpreted with caution. Thus, asserting one's moral fiber in a set of hypothetical moral dilemmas was, if anything, morally inspiring when participants were subsequently faced with an opportunity to cheat overtly and deliberately. However, this same moral proclamation led to greater immorality when participants were subsequently faced with a more easily rationalizable opportunity to misbehave. These results extend previous credentialing research to the realm of cheating and add an important caveat to previous studies examining how the acquisition of moral "brownie points" can facilitate less-than-ideal conduct – specifically, that moral credentialing effects are most pronounced when misbehaviors can easily be rationalized.

To what extent are such moral credentialing effects a function of self-deception, and to what extent are they a matter of social impression management? Monin and Miller (2001; Study 3) addressed this question by manipulating whether the experimenter with whom participants credentialed themselves was the same as (same-audience condition) or different from (different-audience condition) the experimenter with whom they subsequently expressed their implicit prejudices. They reasoned that if moral credentialing were primarily a function of impression management concerns, then credentialing in the different-audience condition would not license participants to express their racist preferences to the same extent as credentialing in the same-audience condition would. Their results showed that moral credentialing produced virtually identical effects across both conditions, suggesting that moral credentialing effects might be driven more by self-perception motives than by impression management concerns. This perspective, of course, has implications for the interpretation of the recall data shown in Figure 2. Does the special failure to recall their misconduct in the high-rationalizability/self-credentialed condition reflect participants' desire to deflect social condemnation, or might it reflect a more subtle form of denial designed to protect participants' self-concepts from recognizing the reality of their misdeeds? Although we lean toward the latter interpretation, for the reasons already noted, the precise roles of self-deception and impression management motives in this and related phenomena await explication by additional studies.

One potentially important limitation of the present study that must be mentioned is its sole use of college students as participants. Although this is a common limitation of psychology experiments, it could be of particular relevance to the phenomenon of moral credentialing.

Specifically, one could argue that moral credentialing effects rest upon the utility of credentialing experiences for affirming an uncertain self-concept, and this uncertainty might be especially pronounced among adolescents and young adults. Considering that the few moral credentialing studies that have been conducted to date (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Monin & Miller, 2001) have all been conducted with similar samples, it would be useful to examine whether other age groups show similar effects. Likewise, individual differences in self-certainty could also be explored as potential moderators of moral credentialing in the realm of ethical misconduct, licensing, prejudice, or other value-relevant domains of interest.

Recent research by Valdesolo and DeSteno (2006) demonstrated that situationally-induced positive affect can undercut the natural aversion people exhibit to utilitarian (but logically appropriate) choices in a classic ethical dilemma (the footbridge dilemma). Thus, by inducing positive affect, these researchers changed participants' moral judgments. This finding raises the question of whether our credentialing task produced its effect on cheating behavior simply by changing participants' moods. Although a mood-as-mediator perspective would not explain the *interaction* between rationalizability and moral credentialing that we predicted and obtained, we attempted to rule out this explanation in a follow-up study in which participants were asked to rate the extent to which they currently felt *happy*, *content*, *pleasant*, and *good* (taken from Valdesolo and DeSteno, 2006) after predicting either their own behavior or the behavior of the average student at their university in the same ethical dilemmas used in the present study. We found that the mood of individuals who predicted their own behavior ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 0.99$) was no different than the mood of individuals who predicted the behavior of the average student ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.24$), $t(82) = 0.38$, *ns*. This finding suggests that the results of the present investigation cannot be interpreted as a simple mood effect. Indeed, we would suggest that moral credentialing is actually a more direct approach to self-defense than mood enhancement, as the latter merely counteracts the affective *consequences* of engaging in (or contemplating) behavior that would threaten the self-concept, whereas the former actually preempts the experience of self-threat in the first place. From this perspective, a mood boost might be analogous to taking a pain killer, whereas moral credentialing might be analogous to preventing the experience of pain in the first place.

Implications

Many of the moral transgressions that people are tempted to make in their daily lives (e.g., taking office supplies for personal use, fudging on financial forms, pocketing a cashier's overpayment) are those for which the line between right and wrong can be readily blurred with a minor perceptual adjustment or rationalization, which can set the stage for moral credentialing effects. One such adjustment can be the very standards upon which a behavior or decision is based, as demonstrated in research showing that such standards may be shifted from one criterion to another to suit the goals and prejudices of the perceiver (e.g., Biernat & Manis, 1994; Norton et al., 2004; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). This mechanism for rationalization seems especially pernicious and difficult to overcome, given that the standards people emphasize in one context or another might never be inherently immoral. Thus, people can reach self-serving conclusions that justify self-serving behaviors without accruing any of the moral approbation that might result from overtly selfish standards. The slipperiness of moral standards underscores the ease with which people can rationalize their behaviors, suggesting that the opportunity for misdeeds to arise from credentialing processes might be more routine than rare.

Our study also suggests that it is not necessary for people to *do* anything to buffer their identities against the implications of behaving immorally. Rather, they need only exercise their *imaginations* to generate an effective moral buffer. There also appears to be some flexibility in the imagined behaviors on which people can morally credential themselves.

Highly unlikely behaviors, such as giving a multimillion-dollar inheritance to a charity, appear to be as capable of substantiating one's moral credentials as the more realistic behaviors imagined by participants in previous studies (e.g., Khan & Dhar, 2006). Being able to use one's imagination alone makes moral credentialing a powerful tool, but the ability to credential oneself via outlandish imagined behaviors only enhances this power. Whereas imagining a mundane act of morality (e.g., performing a random act of kindness to a stranger) might lead to a sense of obligation if one were to encounter the opportunity to engage in that behavior, imagining an unrealistic act of extreme morality (e.g., risking one's life to save a helpless child from a burning building) serves the dual goals of credentialing the self and minimizing the risk of moral obligation – as long as one stays away from burning buildings. Of course, people might also accrue moral points through actual moral behaviors, in effect bartering small, moral deeds to rationalize larger misdeeds. The limits of such bartering processes, particularly with respect to the "allowable" magnitude of differences among bartered actions and the domain-specificity or non-specificity of "fair trades" remains an important arena for future research on moral credentialing. In a subtle way, the phenomenon of moral credentialing might have important implications for ethics training programs. A recent series of meta-analyses have shown that both business-oriented and science-oriented ethics training programs have very modest effects overall (Antes et al., in press; Waples, Antes, Murphy, Connelly, & Mumford, 2009). Indeed, a recent investigation of ethics training programs aimed at scientists revealed that some programs actually resulted in *less* ethical decision-making *after* training than before (Antes, Wang, Mumford, Brown, Connelly, & Devenport, in press). Considering the obvious goals of ethics training, such detrimental effects are more than a little concerning. But why would this counter-intentional outcome occur? One possibility concerns the nature of the training and the effects of moral credentialing. A common tool in such training programs is the dilemma-based scenario, which paints a relevant situation involving the temptation to engage in (or the actual engagement in) unethical behavior, and which requires trainees to evaluate the behavior or decisions of characters portrayed in the scenario. To the extent that these ethical scenarios involve fairly obvious examples of misconduct – and perhaps especially if the misconduct is extreme, such as data fabrication or falsification – the use of these scenarios might inadvertently result in moral credentialing by trainees. Specifically, when people are given the opportunity to judge the misconduct of another person, even a hypothetical person, and to assert the immorality and unacceptability of that behavior, they could readily contrast this behavior with their own history (all the more likely when the behavior is extreme) or come to believe that they would never engage in such behavior if presented with a similar situation.

In a similar way, ethics training programs that focus on inculcating rules and principles of moral conduct might cause trainees to feel credentialed simply because they cite chapter and verse from a field-specific code of conduct. This ability, though potentially useful, could be paradoxical in its effects. When one is grappling with a simple dilemma that requires the straightforward application of an ethical regulation, being well-versed in ethical rules and regulations should be beneficial. We would argue that such situations are analogous to the low-rationalizability condition of our experiment, in which the nature of one's behavior and the ethics at play are generally unambiguous. However, the ethical dilemmas encountered in the real world, rather than the hypothetical, paper-and-pencil world of ethics training programs, are seldom so simple. Complexity is the calling card of real dilemmas, which often involve multiple actors, an array of emotions, and even competing values, each of which might be perfectly appropriate in its own right. In the midst of such complicated dilemmas, people who can think back to their rule-based ethics training might feel protected from the pangs of conscience they would otherwise experience as they embark upon a self-serving course of action. In essence, their training allows them to feel incapable of immorality, an illusion that decision-making experts have cited as a factor that leads to

impaired judgment (Janis, 1972). They might even have an embossed training certificate that materializes the otherwise internal credentials represented by their training. Thus armed, trainees might be inadvertently equipped to engage in misbehavior that they can easily rationalize.

If this admittedly speculative analysis is accurate, how then should we train business people or researchers to work with integrity? One option is to equip them not just with regulations for their behavior, but with strategies for maneuvering effectively within the minefields of ethical dilemmas. Such training ought to include exercises that promote a sense of self-awareness and humility, revealing the ease with which trainees themselves can slip into the rationalization process when motivated to do so. Exercises that promote this kind of awareness, along with strategies for dealing with complex ethical dilemmas, has been field tested recently among graduate students in the social, biological, and engineering sciences, with encouraging preliminary results (Kligyte et al., 2008; Mumford et al., 2008). Incorporating similar approaches in other training programs in business and in other career fields would appear to be a worthwhile venture for those interested in promoting effective ethics training.

Conclusion

The outcries of a distressed conscience might sometimes prove difficult to silence with any single act of credentialing invoked on the front end of immoral conduct. For this reason, it seems likely that people oscillate in an ongoing fashion between psychological defense tactics and misbehaviors so as to convince themselves that what would otherwise be construed as dishonorable is, in fact, morally neutral or even righteous, or that their bad behavior can be disassociated from the content of their characters. Thus, rather than being a *prerequisite* for indulging one's dishonorable desires, moral credentialing might sometimes occur *alongside* misbehavior, and when combined with the dissonance reduction strategies documented in prior studies on value-violating behavior, the resulting amalgamation could produce a psychological shield of such strength that many acts of misconduct are possible.

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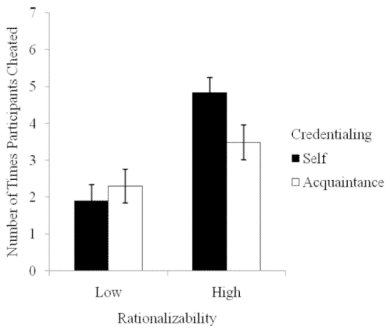

Figure 1.
Number of times participants cheated as a function of credentialing and rationalizability.

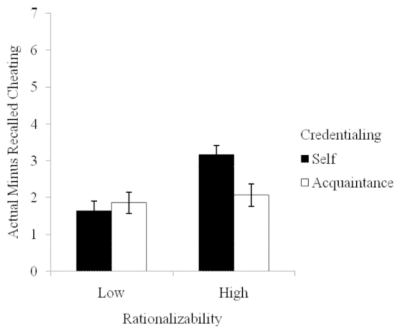

Figure 2.
Bias in recall of misconduct (difference between actual and recalled cheating) as a function of credentialing and rationalizability.