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Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Finger: How Moral Decoupling Enables Consumers to Admire and Admonish

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What reasoning processes do consumers use to support public figures who act immorally? Existing research emphasizes moral rationalization, whereby people reconstrue improper behavior in order to maintain support for a transgressor. In contrast, the current research proposes that people also engage in *moral decoupling*, a previously unstudied moral reasoning process by which judgments of performance are separated from judgments of morality. By separating these judgments, moral decoupling allows consumers to support a transgressor's performance while simultaneously condemning his or her transgressions. Five laboratory studies demonstrate that moral decoupling exists and is psychologically distinct from moral rationalization. Moreover, because moral decoupling does not involve condoning immoral behavior, it is easier to justify than moral rationalization. Finally, a field study suggests that in discussions involving public figures' transgressions, moral decoupling may be more predictive of consumer support (and opposition) than moral rationalization.

In 1998, the House of Representatives impeached President William Clinton on allegations that he had lied under oath about an extramarital affair with a White House intern. President Clinton admitted to improper conduct but was acquitted of perjury and obstruction of justice charges. He went on to complete his presidency with a 66% approval rating, the highest exit rating 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 convicted of statutory rape, won an Academy Award for directing the movie *The Pianist*. The following year, National Basketball Association 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, chief executive officer of her own media empire, was convicted of insider trading and sentenced to 5 months in prison in 2004. Her company's stock price, after initially plummeting 22.6% on the day after her conviction, more than tripled within the year.

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These are a few examples of countless cases involving public figures whose immoral actions threaten their professional reputations. Such scandals, across domains including politics, the arts, sports, and business, attract considerable media attention and public interest. For instance, the *New York Post* devoted 20 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 concern public figures who have successfully recovered from their transgressions and regained the approval of an audience that was motivated to support them. This research seeks to examine the reasoning processes consumers use to generate support for public figures who have acted

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immorally. Existing 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 judgments of morality from judgments of performance. Six 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 one's view of the association between immoral actions and 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 condone otherwise immoral behavior and may threaten consumers' moral self-image, moral decoupling enables consumers to support a transgressor while simultaneously condemning the transgression. By dissociating performance from morality, one 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 toward 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 toward whom or which they have developed a personal attachment. However, people also strive to maintain positive self-regard and view themselves as morally upstanding (Baumeister 1998) and thus avoid behavior that might violate their moral standards (Bandura 1991). 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 intuition in forming moral judgments. According to

this view, 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 allow themselves only to go so far as to construct a case that 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 the process of reconstruing immoral actions as less immoral in order to maintain support for an immoral actor. While moral rationalization represents a class of moral reasoning strategies, some of which have received more or less attention, 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 1991; 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 theory of moral rationalization (see Tsang 2002). Moral disengagement is a self-regulatory process of employing reasoning strategies that justify or excuse immoral actions in order to make them personally acceptable (Bandura 1991, 1999; Bandura et al. 1996). Bandura and colleagues refer to these strategies as mechanisms of moral disengagement and group them in broad categories, including (1) redefining harmful conduct, (2) minimizing a perpetrator's role in causing harm, (3) minimizing or distorting harm caused by a perpetrator, and (4) dehumanizing or blaming the victim (Bandura 1991; 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 forces (Aquino et al. 2007; McAlister, Bandura, and Owen 2006). Recent work has examined moral disengagement as an outcome and demonstrated that it can be influenced by moti-

vational 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 and thus view the transgressions in question as more morally appropriate (or less immoral). However, we propose that one potential downside of moral rationalization is that it requires condoning behavior that would otherwise be seen as immoral. 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 toward 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 (e.g., Ditto et al. 2009; Haidt and Kesebir 2010), the possibility of such evaluations may be particularly threatening. Accordingly, consumers may prefer a reasoning strategy that does not entail condoning 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 who has transgressed may adopt a different reasoning strategy to resolve the tension between desired outcomes and moral standards (Ditto et al. 2009; Tsang 2002). 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, consumers who morally decouple generate support by separating or compartmentalizing the immoral action from the performance of the immoral actor. Essentially, moral 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, employing this strategy poses less danger of compromising one's moral standards. Thus, we expect that a moral decoupling strategy will feel less wrong and be easier to justify than a moral rationalization strategy. In sum, 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.

Moral 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 moral 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 his book about the social and cultural context of morality, Turiel (2002, 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 his 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 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 morality and performance rather than morality per se.

Moral Decoupling versus Moral Rationalization

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 establish proof of concept. We seek to demonstrate that moral decoupling exists and is distinguishable from moral rationalization, the construct that has been most emphasized in the literature. Because the best-established and most complete theory of moral rationalization is moral disengagement, we operationalize moral rationalization by adapting existing measures of moral disengagement (Bandura et al. 1996) throughout the article. Importantly, we hope to establish moral decoupling within the consumer domain; since moral decoupling concerns performance and decisions about support, it is inherently a consumer judgment.

Our theoretical framework encompasses two aspects of consumer support: (1) the extent of consumer support and (2) the ease with which consumers can generate support. While both moral rationalization and moral decoupling will aid people in generating support for public figures who commit immoral acts, we expect that they will result in differential views of the public figure. Because moral decoupling operates by dissociating judgments of performance and morality, we predict that it will lead to favorable views of performance but will not directly affect judgments of immorality. Conversely, we predict that moral rationaliza-

tion will reduce judgments of immorality, with no direct effect on judgments of performance. Moreover, we hope to validate our theorizing by showing that moral decoupling can better explain real-world consumer support of a public figure than moral rationalization (Sterthal, Tybout, and Calder 1987). Finally, in addition to the extent of consumer support, we predict differential effects on the ease of generating support. 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.

Experimental Overview

Six studies highlight the role that moral decoupling plays in generating support for public figures who act immorally. Studies 1a and 1b seek exploratory and confirmatory evidence that moral decoupling and moral rationalization are psychologically distinct. In study 2, we prime these different reasoning strategies in order to gain causal insight into their similarities and differences. Study 3 further distinguishes these constructs by varying transgression relevance and thus making moral decoupling (but not moral rationalization) relatively easy versus relatively difficult. We also establish process evidence by testing the mediating role of moral decoupling in determining consumer support. Study 4 examines the reasoning strategies people choose when constructing arguments and assesses the ease with which consumers can justify support. Study 5 builds on these results by randomly assigning participants to select a reasoning strategy across different types of transgressions to further evaluate ease of justification. Finally, study 6 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.

STUDY 1A: MORAL DECOUPLING PREDICTS PERFORMANCE JUDGMENTS

The objective of study 1a was to investigate the fundamental distinction between moral decoupling and moral rationalization. According to our theorizing, when forming intuitive reactions toward 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 the University of Pennsylvania, participated in the study in exchange for financial payment. For

exploratory purposes, we used a two-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 app. A, table A1, for the 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 7-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

An exploratory 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 ($\alpha = .91$), (2) a two-item measure of immorality ($\alpha = .72$), (3) a three-item scale measuring the degree of moral decoupling ($\alpha = .93$), and (4) a six-item scale measuring the degree of moral rationalization ($\alpha = .73$). The exploratory in-group manipulation had no effect, and we collapsed across conditions.

A multiple regression found that the only significant predictor of performance judgments was moral decoupling ($\beta = 0.39$, $t(96) = 7.70$, $p < .001$), as expected. The degree to which participants morally rationalized the hockey player's actions was not significantly associated with performance ($t(96) = -1.10$, $p = .28$). A second regression found that judgments of immorality were significantly (negatively) associated only with moral rationalization ($\beta = -0.63$, $t(96) = -3.52$, $p < .001$). The degree to which participants decoupled judgments of performance from judgments of morality ($t(96) < 1$) did not significantly predict judgments of immorality. Table 1 summarizes these results.

STUDY 1B: MORAL DECOUPLING AND MORAL RATIONALIZATION ARE PSYCHOMETRICALLY DISTINCT

As a follow-up to the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) presented in study 1a, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to better establish discriminant validity. To do so, we collected data from all of the studies we ran that used both moral decoupling and moral rationalization dependent measures. The analysis included data from study 1a, study 3, and two versions of these studies not reported in the final article. The alternate version of study 1a involved

TABLE 1

MORAL DECOUPLING PREDICTS PERFORMANCE JUDGMENTS, WHILE MORAL RATIONALIZATION PREDICTS JUDGMENTS OF IMMORALITY (STUDY 1A)

Predictors	Regression 1: Performance judgment			Regression 2: Judgment of immorality		
	β	SE	<i>t</i> -statistic	β	SE	<i>t</i> -statistic
Intercept	4.22	.36	12.35***	7.60	.38	20.00***
Moral decoupling	.39	.05	7.70***	-.05	.06	-.96
Moral rationalization	-.18	.16	-1.10	-.63	.18	-3.52***

*** $p < .001$.

an athlete who cheated on his wife, and the results were inconclusive. The alternate version of study 3 included a scenario involving the solicitation of a prostitute and replicates our findings. The additional studies were used to (a) conduct the most comprehensive test while minimizing file drawer concerns and (b) obtain a more robust sample size since CFA requires ample statistical power. Altogether, the analysis included a total of 327 participants. All items were measured using the same 7-point scales employed in study 1a, and appendix B (table B1) reports correlations among these constructs. Studies 2, 4, 5, and 6 did not contain scaled measures of moral decoupling and moral rationalization and thus were not included in the analysis.

Results

We tested model fit for one-factor and two-factor solutions to see if the proposed moral decoupling items are psychometrically different from the moral rationalization items. Table 2 summarizes the model comparison. Consistent with the EFA, the CFA results indicate that the two-factor specification had acceptable fit (Hu and Bentler 1998) and modeled the aggregate data better than the one-factor model across all assessed metrics. We also conducted a multiple-groups analysis to ensure that results did not differ across studies. Although the statistics and fit indexes changed slightly, the comparative fit between the models did not: within each unique study, the two-factor model fit the data better than the one-factor model. This evidence supports the conclusion that our moral decoupling measures are psychometrically distinct from the moral rationalization measures adapted from the literature and suggests that moral decoupling is indeed a separate construct.

Beyond the relative comparison, further analysis indicated sufficient absolute fit for the two-factor model. The two-factor model showed high internal consistency (decoupling $\alpha = .89$, rationalization $\alpha = .71$). Moreover, both factors (decoupling = .58, rationalization = .63) exceeded the recommended criterion of .50 for average variance extracted, which indicates the amount of variance explained by the measure relative to that due to measurement error (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Discussion

Our findings provide preliminary correlational and psychometric evidence that moral decoupling and moral rationalization are psychologically distinct. Consistent with expectations, study 1a shows that moral decoupling was associated with higher judgments of performance, while moral rationalization was not. Meanwhile, moral rationalization was associated with reduced judgments of immorality (i.e., the hockey player's actions were seen as more morally acceptable), while moral decoupling had no effect on judged immorality. In addition, study 1b provided confirmatory psychometric evidence of the distinction between moral decoupling and moral rationalization. Study 2 sought to further examine the conceptual distinction between these constructs.

STUDY 2: PRIMING MORAL DECOUPLING BOOSTS CONSUMER SUPPORT

Study 2 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 important, because we theorize that moral decoupling and moral 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 primed participants would be more likely to view immoral actions as less immoral, relative to those in both the moral decoupling and control conditions. Conversely, since moral decoupling involves psychological compartmentalization of moral judgments and performance judgments, we predicted that participants in that condition would rate performance as higher than those in the moral rationalization and control conditions while simultaneously rating immoral actions to be no less immoral than those in the control condition.

Method

One hundred twenty-one undergraduates, staff, and area residents (58% female, mean age = 20), recruited through the University of Pennsylvania, participated in the study in return for financial payment. We used a three-group (moral reasoning prime: moral decoupling vs. moral rationalization vs. control) between-subjects design.

Participants read a series of three statements intended to prime different moral reasoning strategies and make them differentially accessible. In the moral 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

TABLE 2
CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS SUPPORT TWO-FACTOR MODEL (STUDY 1B)

	χ^2 (CMIN)	<i>df</i>	Independence model comparison = 1,520.8 $\chi^2/df = 33.80$	NCP [90% CI]	F_0	RMSEA	AIC ^a	ECVI ^b
One-factor model	884.91	27	$\chi^2/df = 32.78$	857.91 [764.5, 958.8]	2.31	.29	938.9	2.53
Two-factor model	76.86	28	$\chi^2/df = 2.96$	50.86 [28.3, 81.1]	.14	.073	132.9	.36

NOTE.—Across all metrics, higher numbers indicate a worse model fit and lower numbers indicate a better model fit. The two-factor model fits the aggregate data much better than the one-factor model across all assessed metrics: (a) within-baseline comparisons testing the specified factor structure against the independence model, (b) the noncentrality parameter assessment (NCP), (c) F_0 test of misspecification between sample covariances and implied population covariances, (d) the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), (e) the Akaike information criterion (AIC), and (f) the expected cross-validation index (ECVI).

^aThe AIC and/or ECVI provides a means of comparing models and choosing one that will cross-validate best in a different sample of the same size and selection criterion.

^bA value less than .08 is generally considered a good fit (Hu and Bentler 1998).

personal actions when assessing their job performance”). In the moral 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. Participants then reflected on the three statements 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, $\alpha = .72$). As a measure of consumer support, participants next indicated their likelihood of purchasing the company’s 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, $\alpha = .70$).

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 an immorality index, $\alpha = .73$).

Results

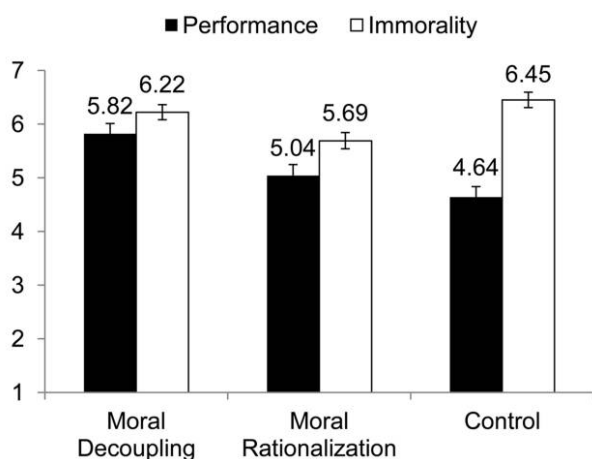
Consumer Support. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of a moral reasoning prime on reported support for the company (i.e., purchase likelihood of the company’s products; $F(2, 118) = 9.93, p < .001$). Follow-up contrasts found that, as predicted, participants in both the moral decoupling 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 the control ($M = 58.11$). Support ratings did not differ across the moral decoupling and moral rationalization conditions ($t < 1$).

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 moral decoupling condition ($M = 5.82$) rated performance as higher than those in both the moral rationalization ($M = 5.04; t(78) = 3.03, p = .003$) and the control conditions ($M = 4.64; t(82) = 4.54, p < .001$; see fig. 1), as predicted. Performance ratings did not differ across the moral rationalization and control conditions ($t(76) = 1.27, p = .21$).

Immorality. Similarly, a one-way ANOVA found a significant main effect of the moral reasoning prime on judgments of immorality ($F(2, 118) = 7.00, p = .001$). Follow-up contrasts showed that participants in the moral rationalization condition ($M = 5.69$) judged the CEO’s actions to be significantly less immoral than participants in

FIGURE 1

MORAL DECOUPLING INCREASES PERFORMANCE JUDGMENTS WHILE MORAL RATIONALIZATION REDUCES IMMORALITY JUDGMENTS (STUDY 2)



NOTE.—Error bars denote standard errors.

both the moral 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 fig. 1), as expected. Judgments of immorality did not differ across the moral 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 important, 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 relations between these constructs by condition. We expected that participants in both the moral 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 ($r(43) = .08$, $p = .599$). A one-tailed test found that the relations between performance and immorality did indeed vary significantly by condition ($z = 1.82$, $p = .034$). Together, the results of study 2 provide preliminary causal evidence of our proposed theoretical account.

One potential concern is that the primes may have produced a demand artifact. However, because the value of this study was as a theoretical test of potentially different outcomes, it was necessary to ensure that participants were endowed with clean representations of these mental processes to allow for a clear and unambiguous causal test. Moreover, since the priming exercise and the consumer scenario study were explicitly separated and since no participants reported suspicion that the tasks were related when prompted, our evidence does not meet the recommended criteria for a demand artifact (Shimp, Hyatt, and Snyder 1991). Nevertheless, we ran study 3 as an alternative means of obtaining casual evidence and further exploring the process by which moral decoupling generates support.

STUDY 3: RELEVANT IMMORAL ACTS ARE HARDER TO DECOUPLE

Study 3 was designed to investigate the process by which moral decoupling operates. If our theorizing is correct, then people should find it more difficult to 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, relative to irrelevant transgressions, would reduce judgments of performance and consumer support. Importantly, this conceptual factor should provide further evidence of the distinction between moral decoupling and moral rationalization. While we expected transgression relevance to affect the relative ease with which participants could morally decouple, we did not predict that it would affect the degree of moral rationalization. Thus, transgression relevance should directly influence moral decoupling but not necessarily moral rationalization. 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 the University of Pennsylvania participated in exchange for financial payment. The study employed a 2 (occupation: baseball player vs. governor) \times 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 steroids (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 7 point scale: 1 = not at all relevant, 7 = extremely relevant) confirmed that steroid use was seen as more relevant to job performance for a baseball player (vs. governor; $M = 6.70$ vs. 3.30 ; $t(42) = 8.38$, $p < .001$), while tax evasion was seen as more relevant to job performance for a governor (vs. baseball player; $M = 6.49$ vs. 3.77 ; $t(42) = 7.11$, $p < .001$).

After reading the scenario, participants rated statements reflecting their feelings about the scenario on a series of 7-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 (adapted from Bandura et al. [1996]; $\alpha = .73$). Owing 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 C for full measures.

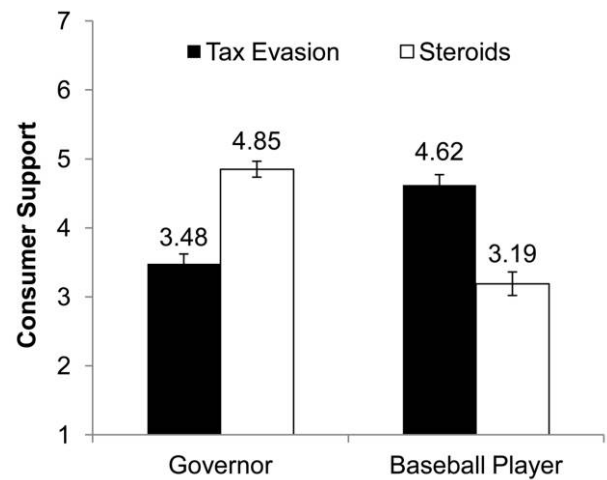
Results

Consumer Support. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between occupation and transgression ($F(1, 83) = 22.2$, $p < .001$), as expected. 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 2 illustrates this interaction. There were no main effects of occupation or transgression on consumer support ($F < 1$).

Mediation Analysis. Next, we tested for mediational evidence of our proposed process. We predicted that relevance would affect our moral decoupling measure, which would in turn operate via performance to affect support. We ran a multiple-step mediation analysis, testing whether moral decoupling and performance mediate the effect of relevance on support. We repeated this procedure to test whether moral rationalization and immorality also mediate. The scenarios

FIGURE 2

HIGH TRANSGRESSION RELEVANCE REDUCES CONSUMER SUPPORT (STUDY 3)



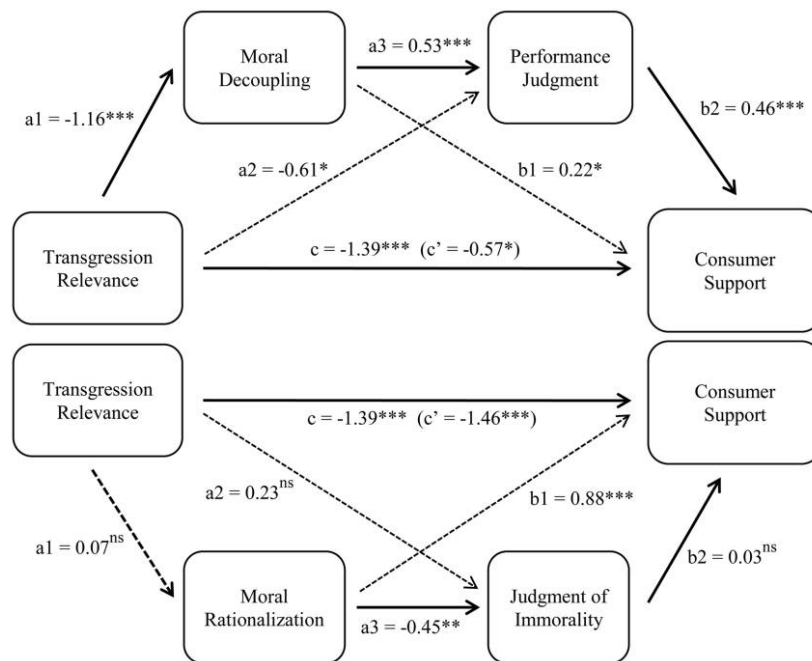
NOTE.—Error bars denote standard errors.

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).

We used the bootstrapping technique for estimating multiple-step mediation (Hayes, Preacher, and Myers 2011; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010). The path model with estimated coefficients is displayed in figure 3. Our results show a significant total indirect effect for the mediation path (total indirect effect = -0.82 , $SE = 0.20$, 95% confidence interval [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 participants were 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 ($t(85) = -0.63$, $p = .53$). Thus, the total indirect effect through moral rationalization and immorality judgment was not significant, with a 95% CI of [-0.27 , 0.44] and an SE of 0.18.

FIGURE 3

TRANSGRESSION RELEVANCE INFLUENCES CONSUMER SUPPORT VIA MORAL DECOUPLING, NOT MORAL RATIONALIZATION



NOTE.—Two multiple-step mediations run using the bootstrap method with 1,000 samples (Hayes et al. 2011). The total indirect effect through moral decoupling and performance judgment was significant, with a 95% CI of [−1.25, −0.44] and an SE of 0.20. The total indirect effect through moral rationalization and immorality judgment was not significant, with a 95% CI of [−0.27, 0.44] and an SE of 0.18. The heavy dashed line denotes a path that is not theorized. Light dashed lines indicate paths tested only for purposes of mediation analysis. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 3 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, providing 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 more that performance judgment increases). 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 was not found to 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 4.

STUDY 4: RELEVANT ACTS REDUCE MORAL DECOUPLING STRATEGY CHOICE

The objective of study 4 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 3, 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 im-

moral acts, we predicted that a moral decoupling (vs. moral rationalization) reasoning strategy would be easier to justify. We sought to test two competing possibilities: (1) that moral decoupling is easier to justify only when moral transgressions are low in relevance or (2) that moral decoupling is consistently easier to justify, even when participants can select their preferred strategy.

Method

Sixty-two participants (60% female; mean age = 20) were recruited through the University of Pennsylvania to participate in exchange for financial payment. The study employed a 2 (occupation: baseball player vs. governor) \times 2 (transgression: steroids vs. tax evasion) between-subjects design. Participants read the same scenario described in study 3 in which a successful governor or baseball player admitted to engaging in either steroid use or tax evasion.

Participants read five different arguments 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." As before, the moral rationalization items were adapted from the moral disengagement literature (Bandura et al. 1996). 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, and (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

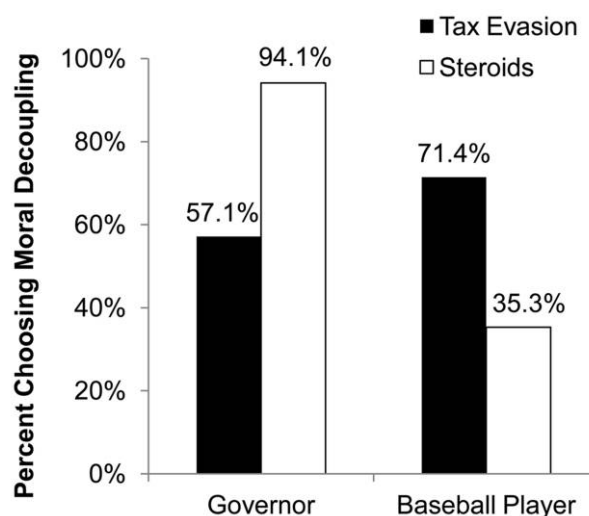
evasion versus steroids ($\chi^2(1) = 4.01, p = .045$) and were more likely to choose a moral decoupling statement when the governor admitted to taking steroids versus tax evasion ($\chi^2(1) = 6.00, p = .014$), as predicted. A logistic regression showed a significant interaction between occupation and transgression on choice of moral reasoning statement ($\chi^2(1) = 8.19, p = .004$). Figure 4 illustrates this interaction.

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 moral 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, there was no significant interaction of transgression relevance and reasoning strategy on ease of justification ($F < 1$). These findings suggest that, regardless of transgression relevance, a moral decoupling reasoning strategy is easier to justify than a moral rationalization strategy. Figure 5 displays these results.

Discussion

Study 4 provides further evidence that moral decoupling and moral rationalization strategies are unique and are used in specific situations to support a transgressor. First, the high percentage of participants freely selecting a moral decou-

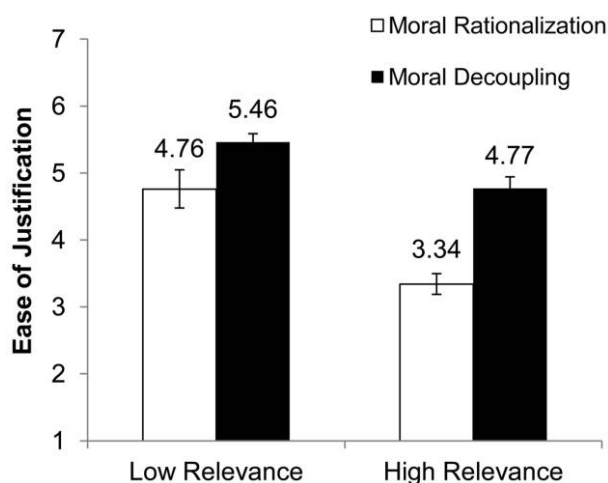
FIGURE 4
HIGH TRANSGRESSION RELEVANCE REDUCES THE CHOICE OF MORAL DECOUPLING STRATEGY (STUDY 4)



NOTE.—Participants chose among statements consistent with either a moral decoupling or a moral rationalization reasoning strategy.

FIGURE 5

MORAL DECOUPLING ARGUMENTS ARE EASIER TO JUSTIFY THAN MORAL RATIONALIZATION ARGUMENTS (STUDY 4)



NOTE.—Error bars denote standard errors.

pling 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 3. Interestingly, ease of justification was not affected by relevance in the same way. 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 5 further examined the bounds of this effect.

STUDY 5: MORAL DECOUPLING IS EASIER TO JUSTIFY THAN MORAL RATIONALIZATION

Study 4 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 who felt especially comfortable defending a moral decoupling argument selected this strategy. The objective of study 5 was to address this limitation and randomly assign participants to either decouple or rationalize to gain causal insight into its psychological consequences. We again allowed participants to choose the statement that best reflected their own feelings, but the choice set included only statements con-

sistent 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 vary across different types of transgressions. Studies 3 and 4 demonstrated that transgressions that are highly relevant to a given domain of performance are harder to decouple. In study 5, we manipulated 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 findings in study 4, 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 4 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

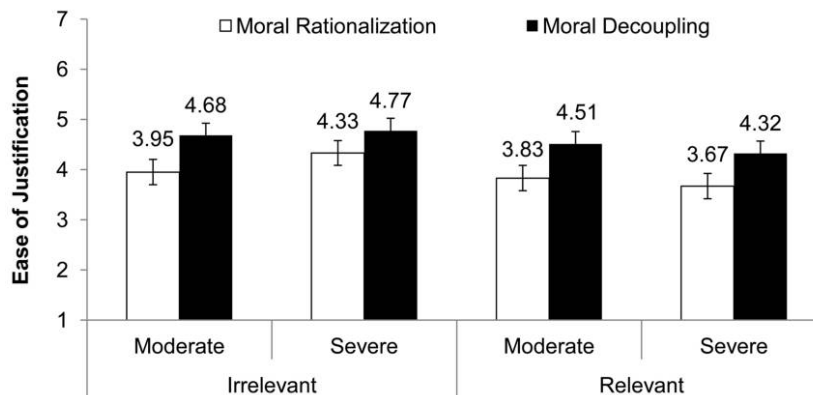
Two hundred thirteen undergraduates, staff, and area residents (62% female, mean age = 21) were recruited through the University of Pennsylvania to participate in return for financial payment. We used a 2 (moral reasoning argument: moral decoupling vs. moral rationalization) \times 2 (transgression: severe vs. moderate) \times 2 (transgression: relevant vs. not relevant) between-subjects design.

Participants read a scenario about a US governor accused of engaging in immoral behavior. 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. Participants read that in his first 2 years in office, the governor managed to help reduce the state's budget deficit and decrease violent crime, consistent with his campaign platform. Participants then read that the governor was facing allegations of improper conduct. We manipulated severity of the transgression by varying the immoral act: 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: 7 years prior to taking office (irrelevant) versus recently during the term of office (relevant).

Next, participants viewed three statements that had been used in support of the governor and selected the one that best reflected their own feelings about the situation. In the moral 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 moral rationalization condition, participants chose one of three statements consistent

FIGURE 6

MORAL DECOUPLING IS EASIER TO JUSTIFY ACROSS TRANSGRESSIONS (STUDY 5)



NOTE.—Error bars denote standard errors.

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 ease of justification on a six-item scale: (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, and (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 reelection campaign, and (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 and relevance of the accusations against the governor. As expected, the severe transgression (bribery; $M = 4.89$) was rated as more severe than the moderate transgression (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 (recent; $M = 4.89$) was rated as more relevant than the irrelevant transgression (7 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 arguments, 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 morally decoupled reported marginally greater support ($M = 3.81$) than those who had morally rationalized ($M = 3.45$; $F(1, 205) = 3.83, p = .052$).

Ease of Justification. A three-way ANOVA revealed only significant main effects of moral reasoning arguments 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 6 displays these results.

Discussion

Consistent with study 4, these results indicate that moral decoupling is easier to justify and feels less wrong than

moral rationalization. Thus, selection effects cannot account for the results of study 4. Importantly, our findings indicate that 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. Though we were surprised by the consistency of this effect in both studies 4 and 5, it is important to note that differences in transgression severity or relevance do not change the fundamental theoretical distinction we propose: 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 feels less wrong. Although these results provide stronger than expected support for our theorizing, we acknowledge that we have not tested exhaustively to identify boundary conditions; for instance, extreme differences in severity may dampen this effect.

These findings support our contention that in most cases of transgressions by public figures, the public discourse centers around issues pertaining to moral decoupling rather than issues pertaining to moral 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 won the Heisman Trophy, perhaps the most prestigious award in collegiate athletics, and were subsequently found to have engaged in improper conduct. There was broad public disagreement over the extent to which the Heisman Trophy should encompass moral as well as athletic excellence. While acknowledging that Simpson's crimes (alleged murder, convicted burglary and kidnapping) 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 (accepting gifts in violation of National Collegiate Athletic Association rules) 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 6 sought field evidence that this is the case by examining the prevalence and nature of actual comments posted online about a public figure's transgressions.

STUDY 6: MORAL DECOUPLING PREDICTS REAL-WORLD SUPPORT OF TIGER WOODS

Studies 1–5 provide evidence for the existence and characteristics of a previously unstudied reasoning process, moral decoupling. The primary objective of study 6 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 who has transgressed. To do so, 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, Woods admitted to marital infidelity and took a hiatus from playing golf. He 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 for or opposition to Woods in a public forum (without being influenced by his actual performance once the tournament began) and for us to examine 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 for Woods.

In addition, we sought to explore the explanatory power of moral decoupling relative to moral rationalization (Sternthal et al. 1987). In studies 4 and 5, we were surprised at how consistently moral decoupling was rated as easier to justify than moral rationalization in generating support for immoral actors, regardless of the relevance or severity of immoral actions. Nonetheless, 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 on the degree of immorality. This moral reasoning strategy may be especially prevalent in such contexts and in public domains. In this context, we predicted that global attitudes toward Tiger Woods expressed in a public domain would be better predicted by the degree to which individuals separated performance and moral judgments than by the degree to which they rationalized the actions of Woods. Finally, as a preliminary exploration of the potential symmetric nature of our proposed mechanism, we also sought to assess whether moral coupling (i.e., integration of morality and performance) predicted opposition toward Woods. Hence, we also included measures of the extent to which consumers integrated judgments of performance and morality.

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 Woods in the 10 days prior to the start of the tournament, from March 29 to April 7, 2010. We identified a total of 33 online articles from the four most visited online news outlets in the United States according to Alexa.com (2010) at the time of the research (*New York Times*, CNN, ESPN, and *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 250 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 shorter than 10 words in 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 for and global opposition toward Woods expressed in the comment. In addition, we took measures of moral rationalization, the 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 7-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 interrater reliability (all $\alpha > .76$). Appendix D contains the coding guidelines and reliabilities for each measure.

Results

To examine the prevalence of these different moral reasoning processes in a natural environment, we examined the relative frequencies of moral 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, 62.9% ($n = 78$) of comments exhibited some degree of moral rationalization ($M = 2.31$), 58.9% ($n = 73$) of comments exhibited some degree of separation ($M = 2.71$), and 43.5% ($n = 54$) of comments exhibited some integration ($M = 1.70$).

Next, multiple linear regression was used to examine the effect of moral rationalization, separation, and integration on expressed support for Tiger Woods. The degrees of separation ($t(120) = 6.18, p < .001$) and integration ($t(120) = -3.94, p < .001$) were strong, significant predictors of expressed support, while the degree of moral rationalization was only marginally significant ($t(120) = -1.84, p = .067$). A multiple linear regression was also used to predict expressed opposition toward Woods. Again, both the degrees 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 moral rationalization did not significantly predict expressed opposition ($t(120) = -1.03, p = .303$). Table 3 outlines these results.

Discussion

The results from our analysis suggest that individuals who expressed their support for or opposition toward 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 Woods did so

TABLE 3

MORAL DECOUPLING DIMENSIONS PREDICT EVALUATIONS OF TIGER WOODS (STUDY 6)

Predictors	Regression 1 Support for Tiger Woods			Regression 2 Opposition toward Tiger Woods		
	β	SE	<i>t</i> -statistic	β	SE	<i>t</i> -statistic
Intercept	2.63	.41	6.36***	2.62	.44	6.02***
Integration	-.44	.11	-3.94***	.74	.12	6.39***
Separation	.45	.07	6.18***	-.27	.08	-3.48***
Rationalization	.16	.09	1.85	-.09	.09	-1.03

*** $p < .001$.

primarily by separating judgments of performance from judgments of morality (i.e., moral decoupling), while those expressing opposition toward Woods did so by integrating performance and morality (i.e., coupling). The degree of moral rationalization in our sample of comments was weakly related to expressions of support and was not related to expressions of opposition toward Woods. Since this study was correlational, it is important to note that the direction of causality between motivation to support Woods and the presence of separation or integration cannot be ascertained. Nonetheless, 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 our proposed construct.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research investigates the manner in which individuals come to support public figures who have acted immorally. These situations may arouse tension between one's desire to support a public figure and one's moral self-regard. Ample prior research finds that in order to resolve this tension, people are likely to morally rationalize, reconstructing 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). In contrast, our main contribution is demonstrating the existence of a distinct form of moral reasoning, moral decoupling, by which people can also reason to support public figures who have transgressed.

The studies presented here provide correlational and causal evidence that moral decoupling is psychologically distinct from moral rationalization: rather than reducing judgments of immorality, moral decoupling works by selectively dissociating judgments of morality from judgments of performance (studies 1–3). Moral decoupling is prevalent and is freely chosen to generate support for public figures who have transgressed in both laboratory (study 4) and field settings (study 6). Further, generating support via moral decoupling feels less wrong and is easier to justify than moral rationalization (studies 4 and 5). Finally, 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 6).

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 than by moral rationalization. Similarly, we do not suggest that moral decoupling is always more prevalent than moral rationalization. Moreover, though our findings show that these constructs are distinct, our theorizing does not rule out the possibility that these processes may operate simultaneously. 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-on moral standards, we expect a moral decoupling discourse to emerge. Instead, if a violation is questionable, we might expect the public debate to gravitate toward determining the degree of immorality. This view is consistent with past research: while moral rationalization exploits the ambiguity around certain immoral behaviors (e.g., Dana et al. 2007; Mazar et al. 2008; Shu et al. 2011), moral 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 is readily observable. Conversely, moral decoupling may be more cognitively demanding in domains such as art, in which performance is subjective, or politics, in which performance is naturally more enmeshed with moral concerns. Similarly, moral decoupling is likely to vary across individuals. For instance, people may differ in the moral foundations they value and how they view moral transgressions (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Such individual and contextual differences may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

These considerations reveal the deeper issue underlying the present research: the normative relationship between performance and morality in any particular context is 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 human being. The present research provides a framework for understanding how such views may vary with motiva-

tion. Likewise, a large body of psychological research has examined halo effects and the broad integration of different informational inputs. 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 we expected participants to be motivated to support a public figure, future research that manipulates motivation directly might better illuminate these dynamics. Moreover, reported consumer support (or even public expressions of support, as in study 6) may not always translate into actual behavioral support; further research is needed to clarify if and when this is the case.

Finally, we hope that this research provides a foundation to pursue a range of interesting questions with more direct applications. For instance, research in the interpersonal domain has demonstrated how apologies, excuses, and justifications work to repair trust (e.g., Kim et al. 2004; Riordan, Marlin, and Kellogg 1983; Wooten 2009), and this work may provide direction to public figures hoping to successfully manage such crises. The nature of trust restoration may be particularly important in examining the temporal trajectory of moral censure and consumer forgiveness: how do such crises evolve over time, and when and how can interventions help restore support?

Willingness to support a public figure after a transgression is also likely to depend on consumer expectations. Public figures and spokespeople from different domains may be held to different standards, and those with sincere or virtuous brand personalities may be especially damaged by transgressions (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Conversely, one intriguing possibility is that some public figures actually gain consumer support from transgressions. Religious leaders or counselors for troubled youth may perform better if they have overcome past transgressions. Further, public figures who have built their brands around their disregard for social convention may benefit from notoriety. For instance, in 1993, Nike released a 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 is clear: Barkley may not be a paragon of virtue, but that has little bearing on his basketball prowess or whether consumers should purchase the shoes he wears.

APPENDIX A

TABLE A1

EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS SHOWS FOUR DISTINCT CONSTRUCTS (STUDY 1A)

Item	Factor loading			
	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 relationships 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 his 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
Eigen value	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

TABLE B1

CORRELATIONS AMONG FOCAL CONSTRUCTS

	Moral decoupling	Moral rationalization	Performance ratings	Immorality ratings	Consumer support	Mean	SD	N
Moral decoupling	1	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	4.87	1.73	327
Moral rationalization	-.070 (NS)	1	. . .	. . .	. . .	2.00	1.12	327
Performance ratings	.675***	-.171***	1	. . .	. . .	5.57	1.50	327
Immorality ratings	.182***	-.538***	.255***	1	. . .	5.31	1.66	327
Consumer support	.679***	.364***	.656***	.131 (NS)	1	3.92	1.58	194

NOTE.—Data are taken from studies used in the CFA. Consumer support was not measured in all studies and thus contains a smaller sample size.

*** $p < .001$.

APPENDIX C

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 his or her 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.

Moral 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.

Moral 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 is not 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 that all items were presented in random order. Parentheticals on the moral rationalization items correspond to mechanisms of moral disengagement outlined by Bandura et al. (1996).

APPENDIX D

CODING GUIDELINES FOR STUDY 6

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 ($\alpha = .92$).

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 toward the individual ($\alpha = .94$).

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 ($\alpha = .78$).

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 ($\alpha = .79$).

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 the individual in question ($\alpha = .76$).

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