

When Actions Speak Volumes:
The Role of Inferences About Moral Character in Outrage Over Racial Bigotry

Eric Luis Uhlmann

HEC Paris

Luke [Lei] Zhu

University of British Columbia

Daniel Diermeier

Northwestern University

CONTACT:

Eric Luis Uhlmann
HEC Paris - School of Management
1, Rue de la Libération
78351 Jouy-en-Josas
France
Tel: 33 (0)1 39 67 97 44
E-mail: eric.luis.uhlmann@gmail.com

Abstract

Inferences about moral character may often drive outrage over symbolic acts of racial bigotry. Study 1 demonstrates a theoretically predicted dissociation between moral evaluations of an act and the person who carries out the act. Although Americans regarded the private use of a racial slur as a less blameworthy act than physical assault, use of a slur was perceived as a clearer indicator of poor moral character. Study 2 highlights the dynamic interplay between moral judgments of acts and persons, demonstrating that first making person judgments can bias subsequent act judgments. Privately defacing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. led to greater moral condemnation of the agent than of the act itself only when the behavior was evaluated first. When Americans first made character judgments, symbolically defacing a picture of the civil rights leader was significantly more likely to be perceived as an immoral act. These studies support a person-centered account of outrage over bigotry, and demonstrate that moral evaluations of acts and persons converge and diverge under theoretically meaningful circumstances.

Keywords: Person-centered moral judgments, act-person dissociations, informational value, racism, prejudice, racial slurs

“That’s funny. All the black jelly beans seem to be glued to the bottom of the bag.”

– Top Texaco executive at company meeting

In November 1996, executives at Texaco made headlines for the racially insensitive jokes they told during a secretly recorded board meeting. News reports of the “black jelly beans” tape helped fuel a successful \$540 million class action lawsuit against the company for racial bias (Solomon, 1996, November 25). Many observers commented that the racist jokes were highly informative of deeper moral shortcomings. The Chicago Tribune, for example, wrote that the tape “speaks volumes about an organization's apparent lack of concern for simple respect, much less inclusion” (Nordstrom, 1996, December 6). Just as notably, angry public comments focused heavily on what the jokes revealed about the executives’ moral character. The Texaco executives were called “White collar bigots” (White, 1996, November 18) and “a bunch of jerks” (Fisher, 1998, May 11) who “reviled black workers” (Mulligan, 1996, November 5) and were “shot through with hatred for blacks” (Meyers & Meyers, 1997, January 12). Their company meeting was referred to as a “racist cocoon” (White, 1996, November 18) and compared to a “Klan meeting” (Eichenwald, 1996, November 4).

Consider also the more recent scandal involving celebrity chef Paula Deen, who admitted during a court deposition in May 2013 that she had used the N-word twenty-five years earlier during a private conversation with her husband (Poniewozik, 2013, June 21). Despite posting three public apology videos to YouTube, Deen was dropped by most of her major sponsors, among them The Food Network, Walmart, Target, Home Depot, Kmart, J.C. Penney, Sears, Smithfield Foods, Novo Nordisk, and Caesars Entertainment. Her future as a national brand was considered bleak (Woolner & Gillette, 2013, July 3). It is noteworthy that media coverage of the Deen scandal did not focus on the legal issues. Indeed, the lawsuit claiming a hostile work

environment was dismissed after the parties reached a settlement. Rather, observers commented on what the racist comment revealed about her character, even if it was uttered in private (Ballard Brown, 2013, June 20; Lynch, 2013, August 23). For example, in a widely discussed interview on the *Today* show, host Matt Lauer observed that “Right now as we sit here, it seems to me an informal jury of your peers – and your fans and your critics and your business associates are – are weighing the question, ‘is Paula Deen a racist?’” (Longeretta, 2013, June 26).

As these cases illustrate, in the contemporary United States blatant racism is out of the question for anyone wishing to be a respected member of public society. Indeed, one of the principal achievements of the anti-racism movement is that despite the persistence of inequality, discrimination, and implicit forms of prejudice, overt bigotry is widely considered socially unacceptable (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). The present research focuses on complementary social-cognitive reasons why contemporary Americans have such strong negative reactions to acts indicative of racial bias. Our analysis of moral outrage over racial bigotry draws on the distinction between act-centered and person-centered moral judgments (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011) and research on the informational value of social behaviors (Nelson, 2005; Nelson, McKenzie, Cottrell, & Sejnowski, 2010; Reeder & Brewer, 1979).

A Person-Centered Approach to Moral Judgment

An emerging perspective in moral psychology argues that moral judgments are frequently person-centered in nature (Inbar, Pizarro, & Cushman, 2012; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Uhlmann, 2012; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011; Uhlmann, Zhu, & Tannenbaum, 2013; Uhlmann & Zhu, in press). In addition to assessing the permissibility

of acts, people use behavior as a cue to make inferences about the individual who carries out the act. The character information signaled by a behavior serves as an additional input into judgments of blame, over and above evaluations of the act itself. As a result, moral outrage is amplified when acts are perceived to be strong signals of poor character. Thus, consistent with perspectives from both contemporary and ancient philosophy (Anscombe, 1958; Aristotle, 4th Century B.C.E./1998), human beings often operate as intuitive virtue theorists who view acts as clues to underlying moral traits rather than the endpoint of moral judgment.

Theory and evidence suggest that evaluations of acts are relatively more likely than evaluations of persons to focus on the degree of material harm caused (Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann & Zhu, in press; Uhlmann et al., 2013). In contrast, person-centered moral judgments are more likely to center on whether the act signals the presence or absence of moral virtues such as integrity and respect for others. Inferences about moral character are highly intuitive and automatic (Gilbert, 1998; Olivola & Todorov, 2010), and once formed constitute a set of expectations about a person that shape social perceptions more generally (Alicke, 2000).

Many acts of everyday bigotry violate fundamental standards of fairness and respect rather than inflicting direct physical harm on others (Graham et al., 2011), suggesting that moral reactions to such transgressions may often be driven by character inferences in addition to calculations of material harm. Because emotional distress can result from the disrespect inherent in bigoted acts and can be considered a negative material consequence (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003), the present studies focused on racist acts that occurred in private in order to more effectively parse concerns about harm and character. Thus, Study 1 examined evaluations of a man who muttered a racial slur to himself and Study 2 of a person who defaced a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. they had in their possession. Our scenarios therefore

sought to separate concerns about the harm inflicted by racist acts from what they communicate about the agent's character (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993).

There are further reasons to expect that in contemporary America racist acts are viewed as high in informational value regarding character. Bigoted acts violate strong social norms (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) and as shown by classic research on attribution theory, norm violations are seen as highly informative of underlying characteristics: intentions and traits are made clearer when people go "against the grain" (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989; Fiske, 1980; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). Note that although prior work on attribution theory helps explain when people make internal attributions, such studies did not distinguish evaluations of acts and persons and were therefore unable to test for the act-person dissociations that are the focus of the present research. We predicted that dissociations between moral evaluations of an act and the person who carried it out would emerge, such that bigoted acts would signal poor moral character to a greater extent than they were condemned as immoral in-and-of themselves (Studies 1 and 2).

Act-person dissociations have been observed in several prior investigations. Although aggression directed at a woman was perceived as more blameworthy than aggression directed at her cat, aggression toward the cat was perceived as a clearer signal the agent lacked empathy for others (Tannenbaum et al., 2011). In addition, although having sexual intercourse with a dead chicken was seen as a less immoral act than stealing a dead chicken, sex with the chicken was perceived as a clearer indicator of poor moral character (Uhlmann & Zhu, in press). Finally, throwing a passenger overboard to prevent a lifeboat from sinking was seen as the morally right thing to do under the circumstances, but led to negative evaluations of the personal character of individuals who carried out such an act (Uhlmann et al., 2013). These prior demonstrations can

be justifiably criticized for focusing on bizarre acts and situations the typical social perceiver is unlikely to ever encounter in real life. The present research therefore sought to demonstrate that act-person dissociations can emerge in the context of everyday acts of racial bigotry, such as the use of slurs (Study 1). Such a finding would represent an important step toward establishing the generalizability and real-world relevance of act-person dissociations.

In addition to examining unusual acts, prior studies have documented act-person dissociations only in the context of behaviors that inflict physical harm and violations of moral purity (Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann & Zhu, in press; Uhlmann et al., 2013). The present studies extend research into person-centered morality into the novel domain of concerns about fairness and respect for others (Graham et al., 2011), raising the possibility that inferences about moral character play a central role in reactions to many transgressions that do not involve physical harm.

The Dynamic Interplay Between Moral Judgments of Acts and Persons

The present research also directly examines, for the first time, interactions between moral evaluations of acts and persons. Although act-centered and person-centered moral judgments can be distinguished theoretically and empirically, they are of course closely related. Certainly it seems straightforward that moral judgments of people are typically based on the things they do. Indeed, the rational and logical direction for inferences to flow is from judgments of actions to those of persons. Absent any specific information about a person's internal states or past history, it is reasonable to base our evaluations of their character on their observable behaviors. However, in some cases the causal sequence may flow in the opposite direction. In other words, moral evaluations of acts may shift to become more consistent with judgments of persons. This would be consistent with research showing that general schemas or expectations about a person can

shape perceptions of her more specific behaviors (Bodenhausen, 1990; Darley & Gross, 1983; Effron & Monin, 2010). For instance, negative preconceptions about a person based on their race can influence interpretations of ambiguous evidence in a criminal case (Bodenhausen, 1990).

Prior research further indicates that schemas are more likely to shape social judgments when they are temporarily salient (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977). Study 2 therefore varied the order in which moral judgments of actions and persons were made. We expected that while first evaluating a specific act would have no effect on global judgments of moral character, first evaluating the person's general moral character would lead act judgments to shift in a consistent direction. Although this hypothesis draws on prior studies of schema-based processing, no other research to date has directly measured moral evaluations of acts and persons and documented dynamic interactions between them. Moreover, in the present Study 2 the only information provided about the agent was the specific behavior they had carried out, providing an extremely conservative test of the hypothesis that person-based inferences can bias judgments of acts. In prior research, expectations about a person were always based on *additional information* besides the focal act, such as their social background, race, or past history of behaviors (e.g., Bodenhausen, 1990; Darley & Gross, 1983; Effron & Monin, 2010). What is completely unique to the present research is that impressions of the target's character based on a single act are shown to feedback on evaluations *of that very same act*.

More generally, it is important to emphasize that in both of the present studies participants were not provided with any extraneous information about the agent that might impact person judgments independently of act judgments. As a result, in our studies act-person dissociations can only result from inferences about moral character based solely on observations

of the focal act itself, providing conservative tests of the theoretical prediction that moral evaluations of acts and persons can be dissociated from one another.

Study 1

According to the person-centered approach to moral judgment, some acts signal poor character to a greater extent than they are condemned as immoral in-and-of themselves. In contemporary America, bigoted acts that symbolically denigrate minorities may often fall into that category. We therefore hypothesized that although referring to a coworker with a racial slur would be perceived as a less blameworthy act than physically assaulting him, use of a slur would be seen as a clearer signal of poor moral character.

Method

Eighty-two American adults (51% female; $M_{age} = 35$, range = 18-71; 74.4% White Americans, 6.1% Asian-Americans, 4.9% Hispanic-Americans, 12.2% African-Americans, and 2.4% “Other”; 41.5% liberal, 34.1% moderate, 17.1% conservative, 7.3% unsure or no response) were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk service (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010).

Each participant read a description of two managers. One manager reacted to a disliked coworker by punching him in the face, and the other manager reacted by referring to him using a racial slur. The *physical assault scenario* read as follows: “John a factory manager, is unhappy about a coworker’s behavior, so he punches him in the face. The *slur scenario* read as follows: “Robert, a factory manager, is unhappy about a coworker’s behavior, so he says ‘damn Nigger’ to himself.” The pairing of the names John and Robert with the physical assault vs. slur scenario was counterbalanced across participants.

Next, participants were randomly assigned between-subjects to evaluate either whose *act* was more immoral (1 = *definitely John's act*, 7 = *definitely Robert's act*) or who had worse moral character (1 = *definitely John*, 7 = *definitely Robert*). Responses were coded such that lower scores reflected negative reactions towards the manager who used a slur, and higher scores reflected negative reactions towards the manager who physically assaulted a coworker.

Results and Discussion

Confirming the expected pattern of act-person dissociation, a between-subjects t-test indicated that moral judgments differed reliably between the act judgment condition and the person judgment condition, $t(80) = 5.74, p < .001$. Follow-up one-sample t-tests using the scale midpoint of four as the test value (since participants made comparative judgments of John and Robert) indicated that the act of using a slur was seen as less wrong than the violent act ($M = 5.64, SD = 1.71, t(38) = 6.00, p < .001$). However, the manager who used a slur was seen as having *worse* moral character than the manager who physically assaulted a coworker ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.79, t(42) = 2.13, p = .04$). Thus, although referring to a coworker with a racial slur was seen as a less blameworthy act than physically assaulting him, use of a slur was perceived as a clearer indicator of poor character.

Study 2

Our second study examined the dynamic interplay between person-centered and act-centered moral judgments. Once formed, the character judgment that a person is a racist is likely to shape other evaluations, including those of his or her acts. This suggests that, consistent with the thesis that person centered concerns drive moral cognition and contrary to traditional rational models of moral judgment, moral assessments of acts should shift to become consistent with evaluations of the person who carried them out.

As noted earlier, it has of course previously been demonstrated that people's evaluations of an act are biased by their beliefs about the person who engages in the act (e.g., Bodenhausen, 1990; Darley & Gross, 1983; Effron & Monin, 2010). But again, in prior studies participants were always provided with additional information about the person (such as social class, race, or past history) that shaped their perceptions of his or her specific acts. In the present Study 2, no additional information about the person is being brought to bear on evaluations of the act other than inferences spontaneously drawn from a simple description of the act itself. We show that when person inferences are highly salient, they can feedback on evaluations of the very same act on which they were based.

This distinction is subtle but important. In the first case, a bank is robbed by an unsympathetic person (e.g., a career criminal) or sympathetic person (e.g., a father who needs money for his sick son's operation), and this additional information about the agent shapes evaluations of the act of robbing the bank. In the second case, participants are told only that the bank was robbed, and reflecting on the personal character of someone who would do such a thing (i.e. drawing person inferences from the act information) feeds back on moral evaluations of the act itself. This second case, examined in the present Study 2, examines whether act evaluations and person inferences *based on that very same act* interact in complex ways.

In Study 2 each participant reported both act and person evaluations, with the order in which these judgments were made counterbalanced between-subjects. We hypothesized that although first evaluating a specific act would have no effect on global judgments of moral character, first evaluating the person's general moral character would tend to bias subsequent act judgments in the same direction. The logic of this design is based on classic work by Epstein and colleagues on rational-experiential framing (Epstein, Lipson, Holstein, & Huh, 1992; for a

replication, see Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Bloom, 2003) in which the researchers used a mixed design to vary both rational vs. intuitive responses and the order in which these judgments were provided. Thus, there is precedent for using a mixed design in which participants provide two types of responses in counterbalanced order to test for theoretically predicted carryover effects.

Method

Two-hundred-and-forty-nine American adults (59% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 26$, range = 18-79; 67.4% White Americans, 14.9% Asian-Americans, 5.0% Hispanic-Americans, 9.5% African-Americans, and 3.3% “Other”; 64.3% liberal, 22.5% moderate, 12 % conservative; 1.2% unsure or no response) were recruited using Mechanical Turk. The study employed a 2 (act vs. person judgments) x 2 (counterbalancing order of act and person judgments) design, with the first factor manipulated within-subjects and the second factor between-subjects.

In the *act judgments condition*, participants were asked to choose which of two acts they felt was more immoral: stealing a car or defacing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the *person judgments condition*, they were asked to indicate which of the two acts showed worse moral character. Thus, the outcome measure in each condition was based on a categorical choice between two options. Half of participants provided their act judgments first and then their person judgments; the other half made person judgments first, followed by act judgments. Given the categorical nature of the dependent measure and use of both a within and between subjects factor in the experimental design, data was analyzed using a binary logistic GEE regression, which takes into account the non-independence of data caused by repeated measures from individual subjects.

Results

As expected, an act-person dissociation emerged only when evaluations of acts preceded person judgments. When person judgments came first, evaluations of acts shifted to become consistent with evaluations of the person who carried them out. The predicted interaction between act vs. person judgments and the order in which these judgments were made was statistically significant, $B = .69$, $p = .019$ (raw means reported in Figure 1).

When act judgments were provided prior to person judgments, a significant act-person dissociation was observed, $B = .93$, $p < .01$. Expressed descriptively, 59% of participants felt that defacing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. reflected worse moral character than stealing a car, but only 37% felt that defacing the picture was the more immoral act. Thus, in this condition an act-person dissociation similar to that in Study 1 emerged: bigotry led to greater moral condemnation of the person who committed the act than of the act itself.

In contrast, no significant act-person dissociation emerged when person judgments preceded act judgments, $B = .22$, $p = .30$. Fifty-five percent of participants in this condition felt that the bigoted act reflected worse moral character. However, consistent with our hypothesis that first completing person judgments leads act judgments to shift in the same direction, act judgments in this counterbalancing condition were essentially the same as person judgments. Indeed, 51% of participants reported that defacing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. was a worse act than stealing a car. Thus, when participants first condemned the moral character of a person who committed a symbolic bigoted act, evaluations of the act itself became correspondingly more negative.

Discussion

Although the causal influence might be expected to flow from evaluations of an act to the person who carried it out, the opposite can also be true. When person judgments were made first, moral assessments of acts essentially mirrored assessments of moral character. This provides evidence that, consistent with prior theory on person-centered evaluations (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011) and research on schema based processing (Darley & Gross, 1983), act judgments can shift to become consistent with recently made person judgments.

A potential alternative explanation for these findings is that participants felt pressure to be consistent in their act and person judgments, and were also very reluctant to say the car thief was a worse person than the bigot, and that this bias in person judgments then carried over to subsequent act judgments. However, participants' mean responses across conditions are inconsistent with this alternative account. Note that when person judgments were provided first, nearly half (45%) of participants actually felt the car thief was the worse person, thus there was no strong reluctance to express such an opinion. Even more importantly, when act evaluations came first, a full 63% of participants deemed stealing the car the worse act, yet participants did *not* show consistency bias and carry over their act judgments to their person judgments (indeed, they subsequently displayed the *opposite* pattern of person judgments). For these reasons we are confident that a combination of consistency pressures and a directional bias in the first type of evaluation provided cannot explain our results.

A potential limitation of Study 2 is the use of a forced-choice methodology rather than the continuous scale employed in Study 1 and in most investigations of person-centered moral cognition (Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann et al., 2013; Uhlman & Zhu, in press). In addition to losing some potentially meaningful variability in act and person judgments, participants in

Study 2 were unable to indicate neutrality between response options. However, it is better to use a diversity of methodological approaches to demonstrate a phenomenon rather than just one approach, and we therefore intentionally varied our study designs and scales across investigations to show that act-person dissociations are not tied to any single methodology. At the same time, it is worth noting that in real life decisions one cannot always remain neutral. Sometimes it *is* necessary to choose which of two persons has more blameworthy character, or has committed the more immoral act. Study 2 demonstrates that act-person dissociations can emerge in such contexts.

General Discussion

The present research highlights the central role of questions of moral character often play in outrage over racial bigotry. These studies make important contributions to both our understanding of contemporary reactions to racial bias (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Tetlock et al., 2000) and the growing literature on person-centered moral judgments (Pizarro et al., 2012; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann et al., 2013; Uhlmann & Zhu, in press).

Our first study demonstrates a theoretically predicted dissociation between moral judgments of acts and persons. Although referring to a coworker with a racial slur was seen as a less blameworthy act than physically assaulting him, use of a slur was perceived as a clearer indicator of poor moral character. That act-person dissociations can emerge in the context of the everyday use of racial slurs demonstrates the generalizability of such effects beyond the bizarre acts and situations examined in past studies (e.g., beating up a cat, sex with a chicken carcass, and throwing a passenger off a sinking lifeboat; Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann & Zhu, in press; Uhlmann et al., 2013). This study also extends inquiry into person-centered morality into

the novel domain of fairness concerns (Graham et al., 2011), raising the possibility that outrage over moral transgressions that do not cause physical harm is frequently character-based. Thus, Study 1 provides the first evidence that act-person dissociations may generalize to everyday judgments and beyond the morality of harm and purity. It further shows that denigrating others based on their race sends a powerful signal of poor moral character, far beyond moral condemnation of the act itself.

Study 2 examined the dynamic interplay between person-centered and act-centered moral judgments, finding that moral judgments of acts can shift to become consistent with inferences about the person that carried it out. When act judgments preceded person judgments, a robust act-person dissociation was evident. Defacing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. led to greater moral condemnation of the agent than of the act itself. However, when participants first made evaluations of moral character, a very different pattern of act judgments emerged. Specifically, defacing a picture of the civil rights leader was significantly more likely to be perceived as an immoral act. Thus, consistent with research on the activation of general schemas (Darley & Gross, 1983), act judgments can shift to become consistent with recently made assessments of global moral character. This further indicates that moral evaluations of persons are not invariably derivative of their behaviors (as stipulated by rational models of moral judgment). The reverse causal path can also hold, such that assessments of the permissibility of a behavior are determined by what one thinks of the person who carried it out.

Limitations and Future Directions

Moral outrage over racial bigotry is most likely only person-centered for symbolic acts such as those examined in the present studies. Racist acts that inflict severe material harm, such

as hiring discrimination and racially motivated violence, are likely to result in extremely negative person *and* act judgments.

A critic might argue that moral condemnation of bigoted acts is merely the product of politically correct norms in the contemporary United States. However, a political correctness account fails to predict the act-person dissociations observed in these studies. Consider, for instance, that Study 1's participants believed use of a racial slur reflected worse moral character than physically assaulting someone, but at the same time found use of the slur the less blameworthy act. If participants' judgments were driven entirely by political correctness, they should have rated use of a slur to be the worse act as well. However, the opposite pattern of judgments emerged.

Prior research provides additional reasons to believe participants' negative reactions to racial bigotry in our studies reflected their personal attitudes and not just norms. Americans respond to race-based discrimination by engaging in moral cleansing on measures not directly relevant to the moral violation in question (Tetlock et al., 2000) and exhibit strong negative associations with racial prejudice even on implicit measures on which it is very difficult to consciously control one's responses (Glaser & Knowles, 2008). That said, the present results are doubtless driven by a combination of personal opposition to racism and normative injunctions against prejudice, and parsing these concerns is an important avenue for future research.

The present Study 1 establishes that act-person dissociations are not limited to bizarre acts. However, examining everyday acts of racial bigotry is only a first step toward establishing the real-world relevance of person-centered moral judgments. Future studies should focus on other commonplace behaviors likely to lead to dissociated evaluations of acts and persons. For instance, enjoyment of the virtual violence in "aversive media" such as horror movies (Williams,

Hennessey, & Bargh, 2007) and workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2004) may be perceived as not particularly immoral in-and-of-themselves, yet nonetheless suggestive of severe deficits in positive character traits. The spontaneous and naturally occurring nature of person centered moral judgments could further be established using content analyses of moral interviews (Haidt et al., 1993) and think-aloud protocols (Ericsson & Simon, 1980).

Finally, given that the present studies examined the moral judgments of convenience samples of Americans (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Paolacci et al., 2010), potential cultural and subcultural differences are worth considering. Although East Asians do of course draw trait inferences from observed behaviors, they are less likely to do so than Westerners (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Markus, & Kitayama, 1991), which may lead to comparatively moderate assessments of both blameworthy and praiseworthy character. Also, Jewish American have been shown to focus more on the outward morality of behaviors than on the intentions behind them (Cohen & Rozin, 2001) which may likewise cause a diminished emphasis on underlying moral traits relative to considerations about whether an act is moral or immoral in-and-of itself.

Conclusion

Throughout U.S. history African-Americans have suffered inequality and discrimination that persists even today. But at the same time, public norms have changed considerably and racism is generally deemed unacceptable. Indeed, even symbolic cases of racial bias can provoke widespread moral outrage. The present studies highlight a social-cognitive reason why: moral reactions to racism are in some cases less about what the individual actually did than what it says about them as a person.

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Author Contribution Statement

E.U. and D.D. developed the research hypothesis and theoretical framing of the paper. L.Z. designed the studies and collected and analyzed the data. The introduction and discussion of the paper were written by E.U., and the methods and results by L.Z., with D.D. providing guidance on the research studies and detailed comments on the overall manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the paper for submission.

Figure 1. Moral judgments of acts and persons by order of measures. Higher numbers reflect greater condemnation of privately defacing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. than of stealing a car.

