

Why Saints Sin and Sinners Get Saintly

June 26 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- To many, New York Gov. Eliott Spitzer's fall from grace seemed to make no sense at all. But a new Northwestern University study offers provocative insights that possibly could relate to why the storm trooper of reform -- formerly known as the Sheriff of Wall Street -- seemingly went from saint to sinner overnight.

The study suggests that people with ample moral self-worth in one aspect of their lives can slip into immorality or opposite behavior in other areas -- their abundant self-esteem somehow pushing them to balance out all that goodness.

Think, for example, of that sugar- and fat-laden concoction that you wolf down after an especially vigorous run, said Douglas Medin, professor of psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern. "That pretty much eliminates the benefits of running an extra 20 minutes," he said.

Northwestern's Sonya Sachdeva, Rumen Iliev and Medin are co-authors of "Sinning Saints and Saintly Sinners: The Paradox of Moral Self-Regulation," published by the journal [Psychological Science](#).

Conversely, the study shows, people who engage in immoral behavior cleanse themselves with good work.

Other studies have shown the moral-cleansing effect, but this new Northwestern model shows that the cleansing also has to do with restoring an ideal level of moral self-worth. In other words, when people

operate above or below a certain level of moral self-worth, they instinctively push back in the opposite direction to reach an internally regulated set point of goodness.

"If people feel too moral," Sachdeva said, "they might not have sufficient incentive to engage in moral action because of the costliness of being good."

An abundance of research shows that people are motivated both by the warm glow that results from good behavior and recognition of costly, long-term consequences of immoral behavior on kin and society at large.

But the Northwestern study for the first time shows that perhaps people whose glow is much warmer than average are more likely to regulate behavior by acting in an opposite manner or passing up opportunities to behave morally.

"Imagine a line on a plane," Sachdeva said. "If you go above the line, you feel pressure to come back down. The only way you can come back down is either by refraining from good social behavior or by actively engaging in immoral behavior."

"If you do extra good deeds, you're motivated to come back down on that internal barometer," Iliev added.

Based on three experiments, the study of how moral behavior is affected by internal self-regulation included 46 participants. For each experiment, participants were told that they were engaging in a handwriting test at Northwestern's Center for Handwriting Analysis. They also were asked if they would like to donate up to \$10 to a charity of their choice.

All experiments included a positive-traits and a negative-traits condition. In the positive-traits condition, participants copied words such as kind,

caring, generous and honest. In the negative condition, they wrote down words such as selfish, dishonest and cruel. They were asked to think carefully about what each word meant to them before writing a self-relevant story involving the words. To provide a control condition, experiment one also included a neutral condition, providing words such as book, car and house.

In experiment one, participants who wrote a story referring to positive traits donated one-fifth as much money to a charity as those in the negative condition. Conversely, those whose stories encompassed negative traits acted more altruistically. In summary, they gave about \$5 in the negative-traits condition, about \$3 in the control condition and about \$1 in the positive-traits condition.

In the only change in experiment two, participants were randomly assigned to use the words to write specifically about either themselves or someone close to them. (A fourth wrote positive stories about themselves; a fourth positive stories about others; a fourth negative stories about themselves; and a fourth negative stories about others.)

The researchers assumed correctly that changes in self-concept would occur when study subjects took a first-person, rather than a third-person, perspective. The moral-cleansing and moral-licensing effects occurred only when people were talking about themselves.

In the positive condition, those who wrote about themselves donated the least, while those who wrote about others showed opposite behavior. In contrast, those in the negative condition who wrote about themselves gave more than those who told an unflattering story about others.

The third experiment looked at environmental-related behaviors and included neutral, positive-traits and negative-traits conditions. Participants assumed roles of managers of manufacturing plants and had

to make a decision about putting costly filters on their smokestacks.

All the managers in their field, they were told, had gotten together and decided to run the filters 60 percent of the time. So costs were higher for anyone who decided to run the filters more than 60 percent of the time.

People in the neutral condition ran their filters 60 to 65 percent of the time; those in the negative condition ran them 73 percent of the time; and those in the positive condition ran them 55 percent of the time.

The research draws on previous research on moral regulation. People who selected themselves as nonsexist in one study, for example, tended to choose a man for a job over a woman who was a little less qualified. "In that case, when they affirmed to themselves that they were nonsexist, they were more likely to attribute their decisions to external causes rather than to sexism."

The Northwestern researchers stress cross-cultural differences in their model, suspecting, for example, if they ran tests in India, where people's actions are more interdependent, the results would be different.

"Sonya and Rumen may have even more intriguing results in the future," said Medin, the study's senior researcher, "because they are examining whether the results generalize to different cultures."

Meanwhile the Northwestern study provokes thinking about how the image of Spitzer, once a hard-hitting prosecutor who routinely brought down the high and mighty for their crooked ways, will be forever linked with a high-end prostitute.

More information: www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0956-7976

Source: Northwestern University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Why Saints Sin and Sinners Get Saintly (2009, June 26) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-06-saints-sinners-saintly.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.