Dissertation Proposal

The Role of Morality in Product Disposal Decisions

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When people are uncertain whether they will want or need a material possession in the future, they may consider getting rid of it altogether. Such decisions determine the fate of an enormous volume of material goods, yet there has been a lack of research revealing the underlying psychological processes that drive people’s choices amongst different modes of disposal (e.g., throwing away, recycling, donating, trading, and selling) and non-disposal alternatives (e.g., using as intended, storing, repurposing). In this proposal, I argue that morality is a key driver of disposal behavior. I suggest that people often moralize disposal decisions, framing certain actions as more morally “right” or “wrong” than others. For example, recycling a book one has already read could be considered more praiseworthy than throwing it away, but more blameworthy than giving it away to a friend or donating it to charity.

In the present research, I first test the relative perceptions of different modes of disposal and non-disposal alternatives. I present evidence of Moral Indices of Disposal in four completed studies (Studies 1A-1D), which find evidence that people differentiate modes of disposal across multiple elicitations of morality, including moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, anticipated guilt and shame, and perceived harm. I propose to conduct 4 additional studies elucidating the role and process by which morality influences disposal intentions and behavior. I directly examine whether moral considerations are an underlying mechanism affecting disposal behavior by testing the effect of moral inferences on disposal behavior. First, I test the influence of incidental moral emotion (i.e., guilt) on willingness to incur higher transaction costs of prosocial disposal (i.e., increased time and effort to donate vs. recycle; Proposed Study 2). Second, I test the influence of moral credentials, testing whether reflecting on a morally praiseworthy deed will subsequently free people to put less effort into ensuring that they engage in more morally desirable acts of disposal (i.e., moral licensing; Proposed Study 3).

Finally, I consider more specific process accounts of the reasoning and motivations underlying moral judgments in the disposal context (Proposed Studies 4A & 4B). Moral judgments may be deontological—determined by the intrinsic nature of a given act of disposal (e.g., recycling might always be good). Alternatively, the morality of an act of disposal might be utilitarian—it might depend on its consequences (e.g., recycling might be bad if it causes harm or waste, such as when recycling a usable object prevents others from benefiting from its potential utility). I predict that people will be responsive to the consequences of disposal, specifically to manipulations that affect the extent to which an act of disposal would preserve or destroy value.