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Being Better but Not Smarter Than Others: The Muhammad Ali Effect at Work in Interpersonal Situations

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Allison, Messick, and Goethals have recently shown that people see themselves as more likely to perform desirable behaviors and less likely to perform undesirable behaviors than others and that this effect is stronger for fair/unfair (moral/immoral) than intelligent/unintelligent behaviors. The present study examined the generality of this so-called Muhammad Ali effect by using a substantially different methodology focusing on judgments of interpersonal behaviors. Subjects were asked to write a story about their own typical behavior that had influenced another person and a story about another person's typical behavior that had influenced the subjects themselves. After completion of each story, subjects were asked to judge those behaviors in terms of morality (goodness) and intelligence. Consistent with the Muhammad Ali effect described by Allison and associates, it was found that subjects judged their own behavior as more desirable than the other's behavior, and significantly more so in terms of morality than in terms of intelligence. The discussion describes and evaluates some explanations for the Muhammad Ali effect.

Research has indicated that people are inclined to think of themselves as fairer or better than others. Among the first who examined this fairness bias were Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, and Samuelson (1985), who asked subjects to write down as many fair or unfair behaviors as they could think of. If subjects thought they performed those behaviors more often than others, they were asked to start the sentence with *I*; if not, they were asked to start the sentence with *They*. The most important finding was that subjects rated themselves as performing fair behaviors more often and unfair behaviors less often than others. Liebrand, Messick, and Wolters (1986), using Dutch-speaking subjects in the Netherlands, provided evidence for the cross-cultural stability of the fairness bias. Further evidence for the generality of the fairness bias was provided by Goethals (1986), who found that subjects rated themselves as more likely to perform a

variety of moral, cooperative behaviors (e.g., returning \$5 extra they had been given in their change, giving up studying for a final exam to drive a friend to the airport) and less likely to perform immoral, selfish behaviors (e.g., taking the bigger of two remaining pieces of pizza) than their peers.

Generally, one might explain the fairness bias by assuming that people are inclined to hold more positive and less negative beliefs about themselves than about others. However, recent work by Allison, Messick, and Goethals (1989) suggests that such self-enhancing perceptions are influenced by the *type* of judgment people are asked to make about themselves and others.

By comparing the ubiquitous evaluative dimensions of morality (fairness) and intelligence, Allison et al. observed that self-enhancing perceptions were stronger for fair and unfair behaviors than for intelligent and unintelligent behaviors. For example, using a similar paradigm to that of Messick et al. (1985), they showed that subjects saw desirable behaviors as performed more often, and undesirable behaviors less often, by themselves than others to a greater extent for fair/unfair behaviors than for intelligent/unintelligent behaviors. Further, in Experiment 3, in which Allison et al. (1989) used a similar paradigm to that of Goethals (1986), subjects reported that they were more likely than the average student to perform fair and moral behaviors, while such an effect on intelligent behaviors was absent. The interesting finding that self-enhancing perceptions are larger for moral-

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ity judgments than for intelligence judgments has been labeled *the Muhammad Ali effect* (see Allison et al., 1989).¹

The major purpose of the present study is to examine the generality of the Muhammad Ali effect by focusing on interpersonal behaviors that subjects had to judge in terms of both morality and intelligence. This extends the Allison et al. (1989) study, because in all three experiments that Allison et al. describe, morality judgments were related to interpersonal behaviors, whereas intelligence judgments were more likely to be related to individual, cognitive task performances.

In Experiment 1 of the Allison et al. (1989) study, subjects judged whether they would perform fair/unfair and intelligent/unintelligent behaviors more or less often than others. The behaviors were generated by the subjects themselves and were also used in Experiment 2, where a different group of subjects judged the frequency with which these behaviors occur. It is likely that the moral and intelligent behaviors that subjects generated were quite different from each other. Whereas subjects might select primarily social or interpersonal behaviors as examples of fair or unfair acts, they might select cognitive task-like performances more often, and interpersonal behaviors less often, as examples of intelligent or unintelligent acts. In Experiment 3 of Allison et al. (1989), the intelligent behaviors were directly related to cognitive task performances (e.g., solving crossword puzzles, performances on *Trivial Pursuit*), whereas all moral behaviors occurred in social, interpersonal situations (e.g., helping a stranded elderly couple or arriving at a job interview on time).

In the present experiment subjects were asked to make judgments of *both* morality and intelligence about interpersonal behaviors. Specifically, in two separate tasks subjects were asked to write a short story about their own behavior that had influenced another person's thoughts, feelings, or behavior and a short story about another person's behavior that had influenced their own thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. After completing each story, subjects rated the behavior in that story on morality (goodness) and intelligence.

On the basis of the Muhammad Ali effect, as observed by Allison et al. (1989), two major predictions were tested. First, we predicted a main effect for target of judgment: Subjects would judge their own behavior as more desirable than the other person's behavior. Second, we predicted an interaction effect between target of judgment and dimension of judgment: The extent to which own behavior was judged as more desirable than that of another person would be greater on the morality than on the intelligence dimension.

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-three male and 54 female subjects were recruited from social sciences classes at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Their average age was 21 years.

Experimental Design

The major design was a 2 (Target of Judgment: self vs. other) \times 2 (Dimension of Judgment: moral vs. intelligent) \times 2 (Order of Judgment: self then other vs. other than self). The first two factors were within-subject factors, the last one a between-subjects factor.

Procedure

The experiment was scheduled in groups of at least four persons, and each subject was seated in a cubicle. The whole session was conducted on a personal computer, and all instructions were presented to each subject individually on a computer screen. Subjects were told that in case of problems with understanding the instructions, they could consult the experimenter.

Two tasks were administered in order to examine the morality and intelligence judgments of own and other's behaviors. One of these tasks was to write a short story about the subject's own behavior that had influenced another person's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Subjects were asked to think about one recent interaction with another person with whom they did not interact on a daily basis. This was done so that subjects would not choose another to whom they were very close (e.g., their romantic partner). Further, it was emphasized that subjects should think of an interaction indicative of their own typical or characteristic behavior. After they typed the short story (maximum 7 lines) into the computer, subjects rated their own behavior, as described in the story, on a number of randomly ordered personality-descriptive adjectives, including morality (goodness) and intelligence as in the Allison et al. (1989) study. Judgments were made using a 7-point scale ranging from 1, *not good (intelligent)*, through 4, *moderately good (intelligent)*, to 7, *good (intelligent)*.

As the other task, each subject was asked to write a story about another person's interactive behavior that had influenced the subject's own thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. As in the first task, subjects were asked to think about a recent interaction with another person with whom they did not interact daily and to remember an example of the other's behavior indicative of the other's typical or characteristic behavior. After they completed the story, they judged the other person's behavior in

terms of morality (goodness) and intelligence, using the same 7-point scale as in the previous judgment task. The two writing tasks were separated by a filler task, and their order was counterbalanced in order to examine the possible influence of the sequence in which subjects made judgments of own and other's behavior.

Generally, our impression is that, on average, subjects took both writing tasks very seriously. Using an average of 76 words in each story, subjects went into rather detailed descriptions of own and other's behavior. Although the stories varied in the types of interpersonal behavior they described and the situations in which these behaviors occurred, some descriptions were found to be rather common. Forty-seven of the 174 stories (27%) were judged by two independent judges as dealing with influencing another's decisions (e.g., persuading another person not to drop a class, to quit a job); another 38 stories (22%) were classified as dealing with influencing another's feelings of personal well-being (e.g., enhancement of self-confidence or contentment), and 31 stories (18%) were classified by both judges as dealing with influencing another's attitudes (e.g., political views, attitudes toward minority groups).

RESULTS

Subject's ratings of own and other's behaviors were analyzed by a 2 (Order) \times 2 (Target of Judgment: own vs. other's behavior) \times 2 (Dimension of Judgment: morality vs. intelligence) ANOVA with repeated measures for the last two factors. This analysis revealed two significant effects. In line with the idea that people would view themselves as more desirable than others, we found a main effect for target of judgment, $F(1, 85) = 8.80, p < .005$. As can be seen from Table 1, own behavior was rated as more desirable than another person's behavior. More important, we also found a significant interaction between target and dimension of judgment, $F(1, 85) = 6.02, p < .02$. Consistent with the Muhammad Ali effect (Allison et al., 1989), the extent to which own behavior was judged as more desirable than another person's behavior was greater for morality than for intelligence judgments.

Tests for simple main effects were conducted to examine the interaction of target and dimension of judgment more closely. These analyses revealed that subjects judged their own behavior as more moral, $F(1, 86) = 14.09, p < .001$, but not as significantly more intelligent, $F(1, 86) = 1.67, n.s.$, than the other person's behavior. In addition, subjects judged their own behavior as more moral than intelligent, $F(1, 86) = 6.09, p < .02$, but did not judge the other's behavior as less moral than intelligent, $F(1, 86) = 1.09, n.s.$ This suggests that the Muhammad

TABLE 1: Mean Ratings of Own and Other's Behavior on Morality and Intelligence

Target of Judgment	Dimension of Judgment		Mean
	Morality	Intelligence	
Self	5.92	5.55	5.74
Other	5.11	5.29	5.20
Mean	5.52	5.42	

NOTE: Ratings could range from 1 to 7; higher numbers indicate judgments of greater goodness or intelligence.

Ali effect is primarily due to differences in the morality and intelligence judgments of own behavior, rather than those of other's behavior.

DISCUSSION

The major purpose of the present study was to assess the generality of the Muhammad Ali effect, as recently observed by Allison et al. (1989), by focusing on judgments of the morality (goodness) and intelligence of interpersonal behaviors. Consistent with the Muhammad Ali effect, it was observed that (a) people judged their own behavior more favorably than another person's behavior and, more important, (b) this self-enhancing effect was larger for morality than for intelligence judgments. These findings suggest the robustness of the Muhammad Ali effect in at least two ways. First, the Muhammad Ali effect seems to generalize to behaviors occurring in interpersonal situations. Second, in contrast to the Allison et al. (1989) study, subjects made both morality and intelligence judgments of the same behaviors.

An important difference from the Allison et al. (1989) study is that in the present research judgments of self and others involved different behaviors—namely, the subject's own and that of another person. This methodology gives rise to the question whether the Muhammad Ali effect we observed is exclusively or primarily due to differences in the behaviors described for self and others or is due to the judgments themselves. This latter possibility would imply that the effect should also be found when subjects make judgments of the same behaviors for self and others. To examine potential differences between the descriptions of own and other's behaviors, three independent and blind judges rated all stories on five dimensions: They rated the extent to which the behavior described was positive, the behavior described was controllable by the actor, and the judgments of the behavior were verifiable, and they rated the relevance of morality and intelligence judgments. All ratings were made using 7-point scales. We found the descriptions of own and other's behavior to be different on two types of

dimensions. Collapsed across the judges, the descriptions of own behavior were rated as more positive ($M = 5.11$) than those of other's behavior ($M = 4.21$), $F(1, 84) = 21.33$, $p < .001$.² In addition, own behavior ($M = 5.74$) was judged as more controllable than other's behavior ($M = 5.15$), $F(1, 84) = 18.61$, $p < .001$. These differences raise the possibility that the Muhammad Ali effect we observed was due to the differences in the positivity and/or controllability of the behaviors for self and others. To examine this relationship more closely, we correlated positivity and controllability differences with the strength of the Muhammad Ali effect—that is, the extent to which self-other differences were more self-enhancing for morality than for intelligence judgments. More precisely, the strength of the Muhammad Ali effect was assessed by using the following measure: Muhammad Ali effect = (morality of self – morality of other) – (intelligence of self – intelligence of other). We found a significant relationship between the positivity difference and the strength of the Muhammad Ali effect, $r = .25$, $p < .01$. No such relationship was found for controllability, $r = .03$, n.s. These findings suggest that differences in the positivity of the behaviors that subjects described for self and others account, at least in part, for the Muhammad Ali effect observed in the present study.

This explanation does not directly account for the Muhammad Ali effect observed by Allison et al. (1989), because they examined self-other judgments by using the same set of behaviors for judgments of self and others. Nevertheless, the explanation may be important for our general understanding of the Muhammad Ali effect. Self-enhancing views of self tend to be larger to the extent that the judgmental dimension is seen as more desirable or positive (Alicke, 1985). Hence, if it is true that morality tends to have a somewhat stronger evaluative meaning than intelligence (Brokken, 1978), then the Muhammad Ali effect can be explained by the idea that seeing oneself as moral is more desirable than seeing oneself as intelligent.

Perhaps more important, however, is that morality judgments may be more salient, or relevant, than intelligence judgments when people make judgments of interpersonal behavior. For example, incidents of interpersonal influence that have positive consequences for the other may be seen as more moral and fair than incidents that have negative consequences for the other. Consistent with this view, morality judgments were rated by the three judges as more relevant to both own ($M = 5.33$) and other's behavior ($M = 5.21$) than intelligence judgments ($M_s = 4.87$ and 4.81 , respectively).³ These findings suggest that in the present study morality judgments were more salient than intelligence judgments and that

subjects liked to see themselves as better than others on this salient morality dimension. Although this explanation is likely to be quite important in the present study, it does not seem crucial to the Muhammad Ali effect, because Allison et al. (1989) found support for this effect using a methodology in which morality was not likely to be more salient than intelligence.

What additional underlying psychological mechanisms for the Muhammad Ali effect could there be? A first explanation, as described by Allison et al. (1989), derives from the idea that morality and intelligence judgments differ in verifiability. Specifically, they argue that relative to the correspondence between moral behaviors and moral judgments, behaviors requiring abilities correspond more directly to the actor's intelligence. Whereas smart behaviors require intelligence from the actor, moral behaviors may be seen as caused by a variety of situational factors (e.g., others would like him or her to do so) in addition to the actor's morality. Hence, morality judgments may involve more interpretational or attributional ambiguity than intelligence judgments. That is, behaviors expressing abilities are more directly, objectively, and specifically related to intelligence judgments than moral behaviors are related to morality judgments. This would imply that intelligence judgments are more publicly and objectively *verifiable* than morality judgments. The Muhammad Ali effect can then be explained by assuming that people prefer not only to hold desirable rather than undesirable beliefs about themselves but also to hold accurate rather than inaccurate beliefs in order to take such favorable views of themselves seriously (Allison et al., 1989; see also Brown, 1990).

A second, and perhaps somewhat related, explanation for the Muhammad Ali effect might be that people are inclined to show a stronger positive view of themselves to the extent that the traits underlying such views are controllable. In his study of global self-evaluation, Alicke (1985) predicted and found that people have stronger self-enhancing perceptions on highly controllable desirable traits (e.g., sincerity) than on relatively uncontrollable desirable traits (e.g., intelligence). Consistent with Alicke's *controllability* hypothesis are the findings of Perloff and Fetzer (1986) and Weinstein (1980). For example, Perloff and Fetzer observed that people see themselves as more invulnerable to negative events than others when they think they have personal influence on the likelihood of such events (e.g., drinking problems, venereal diseases) than when they think the occurrence of such events is more beyond their own control (e.g., car accidents, diabetes). To the extent that being moral and fair is seen as more controllable (something one can choose to do or not to do) than being

intelligent, people are more likely to hold more desirable beliefs about themselves than about others along the morality dimension than along the intelligence dimension.

Although it is likely that both explanations account for Allison and associates' findings as well as the present findings, one might assume that the relative importance of these explanations differed in the two studies. With regard to verifiability, it may be assumed that in interpersonal situations, rather than individual cognitive task-like situations, intelligence judgments are perhaps as difficult to verify as morality judgments. For example, if somebody leaves a group because of its lack of efficiency, this may be judged a smart choice. At the same time, however, it could have been wise to stay in the group and try to increase its efficiency. Whereas in cognitive task situations people usually agree about the criteria for an intelligent performance, in interpersonal situations such criteria are generally more debatable because people may have different views on the intelligence of a goal or different views on the intelligence of the different means toward a goal. Thus, behaviors occurring in interpersonal settings may have a more relative meaning as to what is intelligent or unintelligent.

As regards controllability, it may be assumed that in a variety of interpersonal situations people feel that they have less personal influence on the goals they want to achieve than in individual task situations. Whereas individual task situations often require just one specific task-related ability in order for the actor to be seen as intelligent, interpersonal situations often require a diversity of abilities, such as an accurate perception of the social situation and good social skills. Because more abilities are required, people may perceive less controllability than in individual task situations. Consequently, differences in perceived controllability and verifiability may have been less important as an explanation for the Muhammad Ali effect observed in the present study than the effect observed by Allison et al. (1989).

All in all, the present study contributes to the generality of the Muhammad Ali effect by examining judgments of interpersonal behavior. An important explanation for this effect observed in the present study seems to be that the descriptions of own behavior are more

positive than those of another person's behavior and that these positive self-descriptions are more strongly related to morality than to intelligence judgments because the former judgments are more salient in an interpersonal context.

NOTES

1. The name for this effect derives from *The Greatest: My Own Story* by Muhammad Ali (1975). Heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali was asked whether he had really failed the army mental examination or whether he had performed poorly to stay out of the army service. He jokingly answered, "I only said I was the greatest, not the smartest," leaving the interviewer with perhaps even more doubts about the truth of his claim that the failure was genuine.

2. Two of the 87 subjects were excluded because of missing data in one of the judges' ratings. The reliability among the three judges was assessed by computing the Pearson's correlations. For positivity judgments the average correlation for the three judges was .57, and for controllability judgments the average correlation was .35.

3. A 2 (Target of Judgment: subject's own vs. other's behavior) \times 2 (Judged Relevance of Dimension: morality vs. intelligence) ANOVA with repeated measures for the last factor revealed a significant main effect for relevance of dimension, $F(1, 84) = 37.00, p < .001$. No other effects were found to be significant.

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