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Withstanding moral disengagement: Attachment security as an ethical intervention [☆]

Dolly Chugh ^a, Mary C. Kern ^b, Zhu Zhu ^b, Sujin Lee ^{c,*}^a New York University, 44 West 4th Street, KMC 7-55, New York, NY 10012, USA^b Baruch College, 55 Lexington Avenue, Box B9-240, New York, NY 10010, USA^c KAIST, Building N5, #2110, 373 Guseong-Dong, Yuseong-Gu, Daejeon 305-701, Republic of Korea

HIGHLIGHTS

- We propose an ethical intervention with the potential to reduce unethical decision-making.
- We challenge the relationship between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making.
- We use attachment theory as the basis for the ethical intervention.
- Individuals primed with attachment anxiety experience the usual effects of moral disengagement.
- However, individuals primed with attachment security are able to withstand moral disengagement.

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ABSTRACT

We propose an ethical intervention leading to improved ethical decision-making. Moral disengagement has long been related to unethical decision-making. We test an ethical intervention in which this relationship is broken. Our ethical intervention consisted of priming individuals to be securely-attached, in which they recalled a past instance of relational support and acceptance. We predicted and found an interaction between attachment state and moral disengagement, in which individuals primed with attachment security were able to withstand moral disengagement. In Study 1, we demonstrate that the securely attached behave more ethically than the anxiously attached in an achievement context. In Study 2, we show that secure attachment overrides one's natural propensity to morally disengage through the mechanism of threat construal. Within both student and working adult samples and using both judgment and behavioral dependent variables, we show that the priming of secure attachment is a relatively simple and effective intervention that managers, educators, and organizations can use to reduce unethical behavior.

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“Nothing good ever happens after moral disengagement.”— The psychologist's amendment to Mama's old saying about nothing good ever happening after midnight.

Introduction

While Albert Bandura (1986) never actually said those words, he did first put forth the notion of moral disengagement and perhaps, the subsequent literature on moral disengagement is captured in that hypothetical quotation. Moral disengagement enables ordinary people to do unethical things, free from the stomach-churning and self-flagellation

that such behavior usually evokes (Bandura, 1990). Much like the hours after midnight, the mind after moral disengagement seems to welcome transgressions, both the everyday and trivial sort as well as the cruel and egregious (ranging from taking home office supplies to perpetuating genocide: Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Fiske, 2004; Moore, 2007; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; Ntayi, Eyaa, & Ngoma, 2010). The current paper investigates a condition under which this seemingly tight linkage between moral disengagement and ethical transgressions might not hold. Specifically, we hypothesize and test an ethical intervention based on attachment theory that enables individuals to withstand moral disengagement.

Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is a psychological process by which individuals engage in sanctionable behavior without distress or self-condemnation (Bandura, 1990). More specifically, moral disengagement refers to a set

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +82 42 350 4340.

E-mail address: sujinlee@kaist.ac.kr (S. Lee).

of eight cognitive mechanisms which serve to disinhibit an individual's unethical behavior (Bandura, 1986): moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregarding or distorting the consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. When an individual morally disengages from an action through any of these (interrelated) mechanisms, the action becomes morally palatable and thus, the individual is able to engage in unethical behavior without the self-censure such an act would normally provoke (Bandura, 1999). The trait-based tendency to use these cognitive mechanisms varies by individual and can be measured (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008); this individual difference is also sometimes referred to as the propensity to morally disengage (Moore et al., 2012).¹

Moral disengagement is often discussed in the context of war, genocide, and terrorism, and has been shown to lead to greater aggression (Bandura et al., 1996), more deviant behavior (Ntayi et al., 2010), more violent behavior (Bandura, 1999), and less humane conduct (Fiske, 2004). Moral disengagement also plays a critical role in the processes of organizational corruption (Moore, 2007). Moore et al. (2012) demonstrate that the propensity for moral disengagement predicts a broad range of work-related behaviors above and beyond individual difference constructs commonly associated with unethical behavior (e.g. Machiavellianism, moral identity, cognitive moral development), such as self-reported unethical behavior, decisions to commit fraud, self-serving decisions in the workplace, and co-worker and supervisor-reported unethical work behaviors. Similarly, Detert et al. (2008) find that moral disengagement explains variance in unethical decision making beyond that explained by empathy, moral identity, trait cynicism, and chance locus of control orientation. Bandura (1990, p. 43) articulated the importance of moral disengagement to more “ordinary” ethical behavior early on: “Such mechanisms operate in everyday situations in which decent people routinely perform activities having injurious human effects, to further their own interests or for profit.” This paper investigates this relationship between moral disengagement and ethical behavior, leveraging the learnings of attachment theory to diminish the impact of moral disengagement.

Attachment theory

In its original form, attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982) captured the idea that early close-relationships experienced by children shape the psychological template for the relationships that the child will eventually form as an adult. Attachment orientations are characterized as secure (anticipating that one's needs will be met), anxious (uncertain if one's needs will be met), avoidant (withdrawing so that the dependence on others for meeting needs is less), or fearful (combining both avoidant and anxious orientations) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Although attachment was traditionally treated as a dispositional construct, the current literature conceptualizes and empirically tests both the trait-based and the state-like aspects of attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Different attachment-related feelings can be made salient due to situational triggers, and thus, temporary attachment states can be dynamically aroused (Lee & Thompson, 2011). Both in trait and state forms, attachment predicts a wide range of relational and emotional outcomes (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), as well as work-related, organizational outcomes (Lee & Ling, 2007). Within the work domain, attachment theory has been extended to non-close relationships (Lee & Thompson, 2011).

Attachment, ethics, and threat construal

Attachment orientation has been linked to ethical beliefs and behavior (Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008; Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010; Van Ijzendoorn & Zwart-Woudstra, 1995). For example, attachment security generated the most ethical beliefs in a consumer context (Albert & Horowitz, 2009) and attachment security enhanced authenticity and honesty in relational contexts (Gillath et al., 2010). In this paper, we explore why the anxiously attached behave less honestly than the securely attached, focusing on the achievement context as our setting. We propose that part of the explanation can be found in how secure versus anxious attachment affects a wide variety of psychological processes, including how people construe the achievement setting.

The construal of an achievement setting is surprisingly relevant to attachment theory. In fact, one of the more pernicious features of attachment anxiety is its tendency to not only affect how an individual views a particular relationship but also to more broadly shape the individual's construal of his or her circumstances, even those unrelated to the particular relationship. Elliot and Reis (2003) describe how attachment anxiety leads individuals to “imbue achievement settings with diverse personal meanings” (p. 327). One implication of this tendency is that the securely attached view achievement situations as challenges while the insecurely attached view the same situations as threats and as evaluative of their competence (Elliot & Reis, 2003).

This “threat construal” is a perception that the situation holds potential for harm or loss (Lazarus, 1991; McGregor & Elliot, 2002). Threat construal has been shown to mediate the relationship between attachment anxiety and achievement motivation; specifically, anxiously-attached individuals were more likely to construe situations as threats, and subsequently, to be motivated to avoid doing poorly (as opposed to motivated to perform well) (Elliot & Reis, 2003, Study 4). Construing a situation as a threat has a profound effect on subsequent behavior, and we will propose that the relationship between anxious attachment and threat construal has important ethical implications.

Bowlby, 1982 originally described the attachment system as a system that is activated by environmental threats that endanger an individual's survival, thus creating a need for protection from other people and proximity-seeking behavior. As Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) describe, “In (Bowlby's) view, a combination of attachment-unrelated sources of threat and lack of access to an attachment figure compounds distress and triggers the highest level of attachment-level activation” (p. 60). In other words, lack of secure attachment is a threat in and of itself, and secure attachment is also a response to other threats. Attachment security is the condition of being protected from threat and the condition of perceiving fewer threats while attachment anxiety leaves individuals exposed to more threats and perceiving more threats. We propose that it is this condition that leaves the anxiously-attached individual ethically vulnerable.

We argue that the tendency for the anxiously attached to feel more threatened relates to their tendency to be less ethical, and the feeling of threat experienced by the anxiously attached is the mechanism behind their moral lapse. We expect that priming attachment anxiety leads individuals to view situations as threats, and subsequently, to behave more unethically. In three studies, we investigate this relationship. First, we hypothesize that, consistent with previous studies, priming attachment security will generate more ethical behavior than priming attachment anxiety in an achievement context (Study 1). Second, we hypothesize that secure attachment overrides one's natural propensity to morally disengage (Study 2). Finally, we hypothesize that secure attachment will minimize the impact of the propensity to morally disengage, by reducing the construal of the achievement situation as a threat (Study 3). We conclude by discussing the opportunities that this mechanism offers in the form of ethical interventions.

¹ Readers should note that some earlier work, such as Detert et al. (2008), uses the term “moral disengagement” to refer to what Moore et al. (2012) define as propensity for moral disengagement. Our work here refers to the individual difference measure.

Study 1

Method

Participants and design

Fifty-six people were recruited through a national on-line subject pool via Qualtrics in the United States and were paid for their participation. Eighteen percent of the sample was male; the mean age was 21.8 ($S.D. = 2.15$). Twenty-seven percent had completed high school, 70% had completed at least some college, and 3% had an advanced degree. Participants were randomly assigned to either the secure or anxious attachment conditions.

Procedure

Participants read a paragraph priming attachment state (e.g., Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Har Enns, & Koh Rangarajoo, 1996; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002) which began "People interact with others every day. Think about a time in which you interacted with someone." Then, in the secure condition, they read:

In particular, recall a situation in which you were secure and comfortable depending on this person and having this person depend on you. You didn't worry about this person getting too close to you. You found it easy to get close to this person and having him or her depend on you. You felt very accepted and supported.

In the anxious condition, they read:

In particular, recall a situation in which you were anxious because you found this person was reluctant to get as close as you would like and to depend on you. You wanted to know this person more, but you somehow felt that he or she didn't want it. You were unsure whether he or she liked you. You often worried that he or she didn't really accept you.

Participants were then told to "take a moment to refresh your memory and think about your experience in this type of interpersonal situation. It might be helpful to close your eyes and visualize this particular situation." They then wrote when this happened, and described their key thoughts and feelings in that particular situation.

Afterwards, they read the following scenario about an achievement context:

You are preparing your resume to submit to a company you are interested in working for. The job description states that there is a minimum GPA requirement of 3.7. The company did not request a transcript. You have a 3.6 GPA.

Participants were then asked how likely they were to put a 3.7 GPA on their resume using a scale ranging from 0 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). Finally, demographic measures were collected.

Results and discussion

Men were more willing to lie about their GPA than women ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) and so we included gender as a control measure. As hypothesized, participants primed with attachment security were less willing to lie about their GPA ($M = 3.50$, $S.D. = 2.35$) than those primed with attachment anxiety ($M = 4.13$, $S.D. = 2.36$), $F(1, 55) = 4.15$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$.

Study 1 replicates previous research (Gillath et al., 2010) by showing that state-like attachment security generates more ethical decision-making in an achievement context (e.g., GPA). It is important that we highlight the critically important contribution of Study 1 in uncovering the mechanism, and thus to our paper and to the literature. In this study, we replicate an important finding in a conceptually distinctive context that has critical theoretical implications. The achievement context is particularly useful as it provides insight into the potential mechanisms

of this effect. If the effect only appeared in relational contexts, this would suggest that the mechanism might not be cognitive. But when the effects of attachment, a presumably relational construct, appear in a non-relational, achievement context, then we are led to consider mechanisms that are related to how such situations are construed as well. Ultimately, in this paper, we will test the mechanism of this effect. But, first, we move to Study 2, which also takes place in an achievement context, measuring propensity to morally disengage and testing secure attachment as an ethical intervention.

Study 2

Method

Participants and design

One hundred one students at a Northeastern U.S. university participated to fulfill a course research requirement. Forty-three percent were male, and the average age was 20.93 ($S.D. = 3.09$). Forty-two percent reported being American, 17% were Chinese, 4% were from the Dominican Republic, and the remaining 37% reflected nationalities represented by fewer than 3%. Participants were randomly assigned to either an attachment security or anxiety condition.

Procedure

Attachment was primed as in Study 1. Participants then completed a 24-item measure of moral disengagement ($\alpha = .85$) (Detert et al., 2008) adapted from Bandura et al. (1996), and Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (2001). Responses to the items were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The participants were then given the following scenario:

Imagine that you are participating in an experiment where you can earn between \$7 and \$21 and the compensation is based on your performance. Based on your performance on the task in the experiment, your compensation works out to be \$7. When you complete the experiment, you follow the instructions in which you are to open an envelope of cash containing a total of \$25 and withdraw your compensation from a stack of \$1 and \$5 bills. The experimenter is not in the room and you have been told not to write your name or any identifying information on any of the materials. There is no chance of being caught if you take more than \$7 from the envelope.

Participants circled how much they would take out of the envelope in one dollar increments ranging from \$7 to \$25. This response served as our dependent measure, willingness to steal. Again, this context was selected as an achievement context, allowing us to examine the effects of attachment security in a non-relational context in which individual performance is being assessed. Finally, they completed a demographic questionnaire.

Results and discussion

Gender was correlated with moral disengagement ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$), such that men were higher on moral disengagement than women; thus, as in Study 1, we retained gender as a control variable. There was no main effect of attachment prime on moral disengagement, $F < 1$. However, there were two main effects of attachment prime and moral disengagement on participants' willingness to steal. That is, consistent with Gillath et al. (2010), participants primed with attachment security were less willing to steal ($M = 8.08$, $S.D. = 3.68$) than those primed with attachment anxiety ($M = 10.10$, $S.D. = 5.79$), $F(1, 96) = 4.21$, $p < .05$. And replicating previous research (Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012), the greater the propensity to morally disengage, the more willing they were to engage in stealing, $F(1, 96) = 4.84$, $p = .03$.

More central to our hypothesis, these main effects were qualified by the hypothesized interaction between attachment prime and moral disengagement, $F(1, 96) = 3.93, p = .05$. Testing of the simple slopes revealed a significant simple slope for attachment anxiety, $t = 2.20, p = .03$; whereas the simple slope for attachment security was non-significant, $t < 1$.

To summarize, moral disengagement led to unethical decision-making only under conditions of primed attachment anxiety. Under conditions of primed attachment security, moral disengagement no longer predicted unethical decision-making. The security-primed participants were resistant to unethical decisions, despite their propensity for moral disengagement. Like Study 1, Study 2 takes place in an achievement context. In Study 3, we use yet another achievement context and test threat construal as a mechanism of this effect.

Study 3

Method

Participants and design

Three hundred and fifteen individuals were recruited via Mturk to participate for \$1.00 plus a potential performance bonus of up to \$1.00. Fifty percent were male and the average age was 33 years ($S.D. = 11.57$). All participants reported speaking English as a first language. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: secure or anxious attachment.

Procedure

Participants were told that the study would take place in five parts. In Part 1, they completed a 24-item measure of moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008). Responses to the items were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These items were found to be reliable (Cronbach's alpha = .88).

In Part 2, they completed a filler task related to feature search where they searched for letters or symbols in a matrix of information. In Part 3, participants were primed with either secure or anxious attachment using the same manipulation as in Studies 1 and 2. In Part 4, participants completed two items reflecting threat construal and two items reflecting challenge construal (Elliot & Reis, 2003; McGregor & Elliot, 2002). Challenge construal was measured with "I view this task as a positive challenge" and "I think this task represents a positive challenge to me." Threat construal was measured with "I view this task as a threat" and "I think this task represents a threat to me." Participants responded on 1 (*not at all true of me*) to 7 (*very true of me*) scales. Responses were summed to form the challenge (Cronbach's alpha = .95) and threat (Cronbach's alpha = .94) construal indices.

Finally, in Part 5, participants were introduced to a word scramble task in which they were tasked with solving as many of the four provided word scrambles as they could in 2 min. Again, as in Studies 1 and 2, an achievement context was selected, and in this case it serves as a behavioral dependent variable. Participants were instructed that they could use scrap paper, but were told not to search the internet or refer to any other resource or person for help of any kind. The word scrambles were: RTEACLIS, FSNAITE, MRBTHUE, and RODCAEE. After the 2 min were up or when the participant advanced the screen they were told that for each scramble they solved correctly they would receive a bonus of \$.25. They were then asked to report their score from 0 to 4 scrambles correct. Two of these scrambles are unsolvable, and so to operationalize stealing, we coded any score greater than 2 as unethical behavior.

Results and discussion

There was a main effect of attachment condition on stealing. In an ANCOVA, controlling for gender to maintain consistency with earlier studies, attachment condition ($F(1, 311) = 5.74, p = .02$, partial

$\eta^2 = .02$) predicted stealing behavior. Those in the secure condition ($EMM = .12, SE = .04$) stole significantly less than those in the anxious condition ($EMM = .26, SE = .04$). Gender was not related to stealing ($F = .03$).

In addition, in a MANCOVA on challenge and threat construal controlling for gender, an effect of attachment on challenge and threat construal was found, $F(2, 307) = 10.48, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. Those in the secure attachment condition construed the task as a challenge ($EMM = 11.71, SE = .20$) more than those in the anxious condition ($EMM = 10.95, SE = .20$), $F(1, 308) = 7.10, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. And, those in the anxious attachment condition construed the task as a threat ($EMM = 4.47, SE = .20$) more than those in the secure condition ($EMM = 3.22, SE = .20$), $F(1, 308) = 20.30, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. Gender was also related to challenge construal, as women were more likely to construe the task as a challenge, $F(2, 307) = 4.72, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$.

We next tested the hypothesized effect of secure attachment diminishing the influence of the propensity to morally disengage. Stealing was regressed on attachment condition, moral disengagement, and the interaction of attachment and moral disengagement in Step 1 in a hierarchical ordinary least squares regression analysis. Both independent variables were centered (secure = -1, anxious = 1) (Aiken & West, 1991). Gender and challenge construal were entered as control variables in Step 2 (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011).² The main effect of attachment was qualified by the interaction of attachment condition and the propensity to morally disengage (see Fig. 1). Simple slope analyses reveal the predicted effect of secure attachment, such that there was no effect of one's propensity to morally disengage when primed with a secure attachment, $t = .03, p = .98$. In contrast, when primed with an anxious attachment, the more they were prone to morally disengage, the more they stole, $t = 2.69, p < .01$. The propensity to morally disengage, gender, and challenge construal were not significantly related to stealing.

We posited that this effect of attachment prime was the result of how the achievement situation was construed as a threat. To test this, we followed the steps recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) and further specified by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005). As described above, there is an overall treatment effect of attachment on stealing, thereby meeting the first criterion (see Model 1 in Table 1). The second criterion specifies a treatment effect on the proposed mediator. Both attachment condition and moral disengagement predicted threat construal (see Model 2 in Table 1), such that anxiously attached and those more prone to morally disengage perceived the task as more of a threat. To assess the third and fourth criteria, threat construal was centered and added to the hierarchical regression model (see Model 3 in Table 1). The third criterion was met. Threat construal significantly and positively predicted stealing behavior, while controlling for attachment condition, the propensity to morally disengage, and the interaction of attachment and moral disengagement. Including threat construal increased the variance explained significantly from $r^2 = .05$ to $r^2 = .06$, $F(1, 304) = 5.30, p = .02$. Finally, the fourth criterion was also met. When controlling for the effect of threat construal, the effect of attachment decreased from $B = .06, t = 2.00, p < .05$ to $B = .05, t = 1.60, p = .11$ and the interaction effect of attachment and moral disengagement also decreased from $B = .13, t = 1.93, p = .05$ to $B = .11, t = 1.74, p = .08$. We also conducted a bootstrapping procedure to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals around the indirect effect based on 1000 random samples (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The 95% confidence interval excluded zero [.002, .058], indicating that threat construal mediated the relationship of attachment to stealing behavior.

² We operationalized stealing in two ways: as a continuous variable reflecting the extent to which they stole (see Table 1) and as a dichotomous variable indicating whether they stole. The results are consistent with each other. For parsimony, we present results using the continuous variable only.

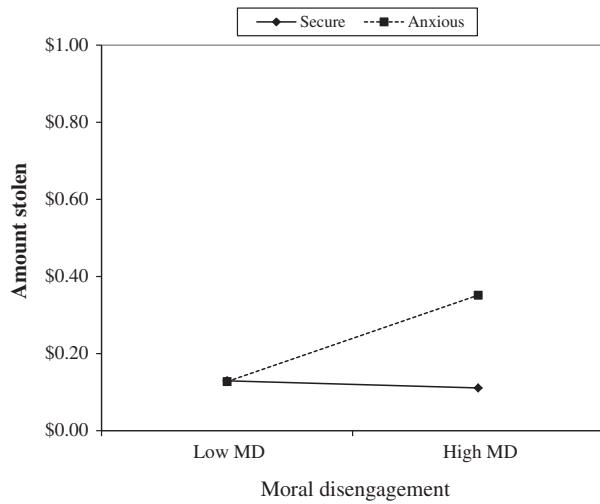


Fig. 1. Study 3.

Study 3 thus replicates the interaction effect between attachment and moral disengagement that we found in Study 2; that is, attachment security replicates as an effective ethical intervention. In Study 3, the conceptual importance of threat construal to attachment theory becomes clear as threat construal serves as the mechanism underlying this effect.

General discussion

The link between moral disengagement and unethical decision-making (Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012) is well-established. We investigated an ethical intervention grounded in attachment theory that breaks the link, allowing individuals to withstand their propensity to morally disengage. One of the most influential theories in developmental and social psychology is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and the insights of attachment theory provide the foundation for the ethical intervention we demonstrate. We explain the tendency for the securely-attached to behave more ethically than the anxiously-attached and find that individuals primed with attachment security are more able to ethically withstand the impact of moral disengagement due to whether they perceive the task to be a threat. These results suggest that an effective ethical intervention

heightens attachment security in the moment, perhaps as simply as prompting the recall of a specific episode in which an individual felt they could depend on someone else.

Attachment has surprising psychological reach. Not only do stable orientations borne of childhood experiences matter, but so do temporary states of momentary attachment feelings. Not only do close relationships matter, but so do non-close relationships such as those in the work domain. Not only are relationships affected, but so are one's general perceptions of daily experience outside of those relationships. This span of antecedents and consequences positions attachment as a critical construct in the study of human behavior generally, and ethical decision making specifically. In this paper, we integrate two previously disconnected consequences of attachment: 1) attachment shapes ethical beliefs and behavior, and 2) attachment shapes one's construal of situations as threats or challenges.

Our results have two important implications. First, our findings suggest that even individuals predisposed to morally disengage are not doomed to experience the morality-sinking effects of moral disengagement. Thus, we identify a boundary condition for moral disengagement's effects on ethics. And, second, the construal of situations as threatening is a critically important mediator. Other situations, unrelated to attachment or moral disengagement, may lead to a similar construal, and thus, have a similarly troublesome effect on ethics. And, other interventions, unrelated to attachment, may diminish the feeling of threat, and thus, also be effective interventions.

For example, the relationship between secure attachment and gain framing offers a rich area for potential study in the growing literature of ethical interventions. The framing of a situation as a loss (instead of a potential gain) leads to less ethical behavior (Kern & Chugh, 2009), suggesting that gain framing is also an effective ethical intervention. Perhaps the "ethical framing effect" is explained by a similar threat construal mechanism.

We note our work's limitations and opportunities for additional research. A fruitful line of research might rest in ethical domains characterized by close relationships as our studies only focused on achievement contexts. Future research might also examine social exclusion (which is closely related to attachment anxiety), which has been shown to decrease prosocial behavior (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002). Finally, we do not measure attachment but rather, rely on the strength of the manipulation. Thus, we do not know if individuals predisposed to anxious attachment orientation can be prevented from making unethical decisions if their state-based attachment security is primed or if the effects are stronger for those who experience congruence between their attachment state and trait.

Table 1
Study 3: Stealing operationalized as a continuous measure.

Predictor variable	Criterion variable		
	Stealing (Model 1)	Threat construal (Model 2)	Stealing (Model 3)
Step 1			
Constant	.18 (.03)***	.02 (.14)	.18 (.03)***
Attachment	.06 (.03)*	.62 (.14)***	.05 (.03)
MD	.11 (.07) ⁺	.78 (.30)**	.10 (.07)
AttachmentXMD	.13 (.07)*	.11 (.30)	.12 (.06) ⁺
Threat construal			.03 (.01)**
Step 2			
Gender	.03 (.06)	-.08 (.26)	.03 (.06)
Challenge construal	-.01 (.01)	-.40 (.05)***	.02 (.01)
F(df)	(5, 306) = 2.87**	(5, 305) = 19.40***	(6, 304) = 3.34**
Adjusted R ²	.03	.23	.04

Note. Values are unstandardized beta coefficients and standard errors are presented within the parentheses. Attachment condition was coded -1 for secure and 1 for anxious. MD = moral disengagement.

⁺ *p* < .10.
* *p* < .05.
** *p* < .01.
*** *p* < .001.

We see great potential for future research to explore how these findings can have maximal practical benefit through the development of field-based versions of the lab manipulations used to generate attachment security. Gillath, Selcuk, and Shaver (2008) summarize the manipulations found to be effective in both subliminal and supraliminal forms, by exposing people to: security-related words (e.g. love, support); names of security-providing attachment figures; and, pictures representing attachment security. Additionally, they include: asking participants to recall memories of being supported by attachment figures (as in our studies), and asking people to imagine scenarios in which they are supported by attachment figures. We wonder, for example, might photographs of loved ones on a desktop or as a computer screensaver serve as a security prime in the workplace? What is the impact on cheating of recalling one's security-providing attachment figures before an exam within schools? What adaptations can be made, as Lee and Thompson (2011) did in the context of negotiations, to capture workplace situations in which individuals experience security with a boss, a client, or an organization? The potential to leverage the relatively simply ethical intervention of security priming is significant and ripe for further exploration.

Additional benefits are likely to accompany such an intervention. For example, security priming has been found to increase compassion and prosocial behavior (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). That said, additional research should explore whether security priming might have unintended consequences as well, perhaps on individual's receptivity to extrinsic motivators such as performance incentives, or on overall effort and persistence. Investigating these potential side effects will allow researchers to more fully prescribe an effective ethical intervention.

Conclusion

We have drawn from the attachment and moral disengagement literatures to posit that state-based attachment interacts with moral disengagement in predicting ethics. The current paper contributes to the theoretical understanding of unethical behavior, deepening our knowledge of its basis and mitigating circumstances, and in the future, we are hopeful that this understanding will grow in this line of research. Our goal was to develop an ethical intervention that could diminish the impact of moral disengagement on unethical decision-making. Feeling supported and accepted by others would seem to be a reward in itself while feeling unsure and worried about whether others like you would seem to be sufficient burden to bear. Yet, these feelings of secure and anxious attachment generate rewards and burdens well beyond the relational domain in which they originate.

The potential of an ethical intervention is much needed in today's complex and at times, stunningly corrupt, society when moral disengagement sometimes seems to threaten our very essence of humanity. As organizations, families, schools, and governments search for strategies to undo the ethical perils of moral disengagement amongst an undoubtedly multi-causal set of psychological, sociological, and economic forces, we offer a relatively simple ethical intervention with tremendous real world implications: secure attachment.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.11.005>.

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