Why So Serious? Experimental and Field Evidence that Morality and a Sense of Humor are Psychologically Incompatible

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Abstract

Many of the jokes people enjoy carry a certain degree of moral violation. Since displaying humor often requires committing benign moral violations, we hypothesize that 1) a moral mindset stifles humor and 2) morally-focused people are less humorous, and are therefore less liked by their workplace peers. Participants primed with a moral mindset were less likely to appreciate humor that involved benign moral violations (Study 1) and less likely to generate jokes others found funny (Study 2) compared to participants in the control condition. Additional field studies demonstrated that morally-focused employees are seen as lacking a sense of humor by their coworkers and are therefore less liked and less socially popular (Studies 3 and 4). We further demonstrate that this mediational effect is stronger for targets who strongly endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation (Study 4). These results suggest that morality and humor are to some degree psychologically incompatible, helping to explain why morally-focused individuals are often socially marginalized in organizations.

Keywords: Morality; Humor; Interpersonal liking; Popularity; Benign Violation Theory
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“There is no humor in heaven”
(Mark Twain, 1910)

Humor is ubiquitous. Most people enjoy a good laugh and prefer to interact with humorous rather than non-humorous others (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006). Yet, in moral philosophy and religion, humor has historically been characterized negatively. In the Philebus, Plato (1975) suggested that humor is malicious and morally objectionable. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle (1939) echoed with this assessment and viewed humor as a kind of mockery. In the Bible, humor was considered offensive. The boys who made fun of the prophet Elisha were punished with death (2 Kings 2: 23-24), and the famous Catholic teaching, the Rule of Saint Benedict, requires monks and nuns to “speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter” (Benedict, 1982). While direct empirical evidence of a link between morality and humor is lacking, this anecdotal evidence leads to the following research question: Are morality and humor to some degree psychologically incompatible? In this paper, we draw from Benign Violation Theory (BVT; McGraw & Warren, 2010) to suggest that although moral individuals can undoubtedly benefit others (e.g., helping coworkers selflessly), their morality might also paradoxically serve to decrease their sense of humor, which in turn leads others to like them less.

In general, humor is recognized as a tool for both navigating the social world and assuaging the hardship of everyday life. For example, humor can relieve stress (Abel & Maxwell, 2002), enhance physical and psychological well-being (Martin, 2001), and increase purchase intention of products advertised in humorous ways (Eisend, 2008). People also prefer to date and marry humorous rather than non-humorous others, suggesting that humor is a valued attribute within social exchanges (Bressler et al., 2006; Lundy, Tan, Cunningham, 1998). In sum, extant
research generally suggests that people appreciate humor and being humorous can lead to positive social consequences, whereas a lack of humor has been found to lead to numerous negative social consequences (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012).

Although scholars have revealed the social consequences of humor, and have increasingly explored what factors lead something to be viewed as funny (Gruner, 1997; Gonzales & Wiseman, 2005; McGraw & Warren, 2010), far less is known about the conditions under which humor is facilitated or suppressed. To explore this question, we draw from BVT (McGraw & Warren, 2010) to suggest that moral cognition and a sense of humor are to a certain degree psychologically incompatible. Briefly stated, BVT proposes that humor often emerges when a norm is violated, yet the violation is simultaneously appraised as benign. We hypothesize that morally-focused individuals, defined as individuals who have a high (induced or chronic) accessibility to moral cognition, would be less willing to engage in the benign moral violations common to the display of humor, as condemnatory moral judgments serve to uphold valued social norms and create distress for individuals who even contemplate such violations (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). We further hypothesize that reduced levels of humor are associated with decreased interpersonal liking and popularity for morally-focused individuals. Finally, we hypothesize a theoretically-meaningful boundary condition for the negative effect of morality on humor: that such effects are significantly stronger among morally-focused individuals who also strongly endorse the moral foundation of purity/sanctity (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva, & Ditto, 2011).

To investigate these ideas, we conducted four studies and employed multiple methodologies including two experiments, a multi-source field study conducted in China, and a two-wave multi-source field study conducted within the United States. Through these studies, we
make a number of important theoretical contributions to research on morality and humor. By drawing on recent developments in our theoretical understanding of humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010), we build theory and provide both experimental and field evidence that morality and humor are often psychologically incompatible as a function of proscriptions around violations. We also extend research on humor by examining its antecedents, identifying psychological processes (i.e., accessibility of moral cognition) and categories of individuals (i.e., individuals for whom morality is chronically accessible) that are least likely to be humorous. Finally, this research provides direct evidence of why morally-focused individuals are liked less by others, offering a complementary explanation to existing accounts of the social marginalization of moral individuals (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008; Parks & Stone, 2010; Trevino & Victor, 1992). Taken together, our findings suggest an unanticipated negative consequence of reinforcing morality—that those for whom moral considerations are most central face an increased risk of marginalization, as a function of being less humorous.

**Morality, Humor, and Benign Violation Theory**

Philosophers and psychologists have long hinted a link between morality and humor. At the dawn of Western philosophy, both Plato and Aristotle conceptualized humor as a form of mockery. They argued that humor emerges when people exert superiority over others or their former selves, a theory later formalized as superiority theory of humor (Gruner, 1997). In contemporary psychological research, laughing at others’ misfortunate or intentionally exerting superiority by making fun of others (e.g., a boss ridicules his/her followers publicly) is often characterized as deviant or even unethical behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Thus, the superiority theory hints at a potentially negative relationship between morality and humor.
Later conceptualizations, however, challenge this superiority account of humor. Freud (1928) proposed the relief theory of humor, suggesting that the main function of humor is to relieve sublimated desires and emotions in socially acceptable ways. For example, telling a sexual joke is proposed to release our repressed hostile sexual desires. Thus, according to this theory humor is used to express our socially unacceptable desires in a playful manner. Another early theory of humor is incongruity theory (Suls, 1972). This account of humor suggests that humor emerges when unexpected things happen. For example, stand-up comedians often create an expectation at the beginning of a joke (e.g., A man in the library goes up to the desk and asks for a burger. The librarian says, “Sir this is a library.”) and then violate it at the end (“Oh I’m sorry, and leans over and whispers, “Can I get a burger?”) to generate humor.

Although these theories (particularly incongruity theory) have dominated Western thoughts on humor and humor research for many years, McGraw and Warren (2010) argued that these theories of humor often erroneously predict humor. For example, “unintentionally killing a loved one would be incongruous, assert superiority, and release repressed aggressive tension, but is unlikely to be funny” (pp. 1-2). Therefore, McGraw and colleagues (McGraw & Warner, 2014; McGraw & Warren, 2010; McGraw, Williams, & Warren, 2013; McGraw, Warren, Williams, & Lenard, 2012) proposed Benign Violation Theory, which better predicts a wide-range of humor while also drawing careful boundaries that exclude events which are simply esoteric, tragic, or perverse. BVT makes three interrelated predictions about the generation of humor. First, a norm violation must occur, and that the violation can be physical or symbolic in nature, or both. For example, primates often laugh when they play fight each other (i.e., a violation of physical norm; Gervais & Wilson, 2005), and humans often laugh when an expected norm is violated (e.g., a rabbi is hired as a spokesperson for a meat product; McGraw & Warren, 2010). Second, the
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violation must be perceived as benign; laughter often ceases when primates are fighting seriously (e.g., for mating purposes; Gervais & Wilson, 2005). Third, the first two conditions must occur simultaneously (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Empirical support for this theory comes from multiple studies. For example, McGraw et al. (2013) found that jokes about Hurricane Sandy’s destruction during the crisis were considered offensive and malicious, thus not funny. However, the same jokes became more innocuous over time, and participants found those jokes to be funny about a month after the crisis. Critically, BVT does not suggest that all humor is rooted in benign violations (leaving room for other sources of humor), but rather argues that the broadest domain of humor is produced by leveraging benign violations.

Drawing from BVT, we suggest that morally-focused individuals are less likely to generate or appreciate humorous content because humor often requires violations of moral norms, and violations to sacred values are often met with reactions of other-focused moral outrage (e.g., anger) or self-focused moral cleansing (e.g., guilt; Tetlock et al., 2000). Of course, not all norms are morally-laden. For example, violations of linguistic norms (e.g., puns) can be perceived as benign and thus funny. However, all things being equal, we suggest that morally-focused individuals, in general, are less likely to be humorous because they would be less willing to engage in the benign moral violations often involved in the display of humor. Thus, morality places a restriction around the types of norms which can be permissibly violated as a tool for producing humor, thereby limiting the available sources of humor available to those for whom moral cognition is highly accessible.

A recent study provides some indirect support for this hypothesis. Gino and Wiltermuth (2014) proposed that because immoral behavior and creativity both require breaking rules (e.g., divergent thinking requires people to break rules to connect previously unassociated concepts to
generate novel ideas), participants who acted immorally should feel that their subsequent behaviors are not restrained by rules and thus engage in more creative thinking. The results of their experiments support the negative relationship between morality and creativity. We contend that similar to creativity, humor often requires breaking rules and flexible thinking, and morally-focused individuals are unlikely to break these rules, even when they are benign in nature.

**Implications for Interpersonal Liking and Popularity**

While previous research has suggested that exceptionally competent and morally-focused individuals are often disliked by others (Trevino & Victor, 1992), work to date has generally focused on disadvantageous comparisons as the cause of the relative unlikeableness of morally-focused individuals. For example, participants who refused to participate in a racist task were viewed less favorably by others who had gone through the task and failed to object to it (Monin et al., 2008). Likewise, participants who were the most selfless and prosocial were more likely to be expelled from a group than participants who were less selfless (Parks & Stone, 2010), and this relationship is in part driven by peers’ upward social comparisons of morality (Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin et al., 2008; Parks & Stone, 2010).

Beyond social comparison processes, however, we know very little about why morally-focused people are often disliked by others. We suggest that the psychological incompatibility between morality and humor is likely to have implications for how morally-focused individuals are treated by others. If morally-focused individuals are less humorous as we hypothesize, and a sense of humor generally increases interpersonal liking and popularity (Cooper, 2005), then it is logical to suggest that morally-focused individuals are disliked and socially unpopular in part because they are less humorous. Although humor has been theorized as a double-edged sword (Malone, 1980), decades of research generally suggests that humorous individuals are often liked in social interactions. For example, humorous individuals are perceived as more socially adept
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by the opposite sex (Bressler & Balshine, 2006) and a sense of humor predicts mating success 
(Greengross & Miller, 2011). Humor can also be conceptualized as the glue of friendship 
(Kalbfleischl, 2013). Even in the workplace, humor is theorized as an effective ingratiation tactic 
for gaining social visibility and capital (Cooper, 2005). Research in different areas of psychology 
thus converges on the positive effects of humor on forming and maintaining social relationships. 
Therefore, if morality stifles humor as predicted by BVT (McGraw & Warren, 2010), then it is 
likely that morally-focused individuals will be less liked and socially unpopular as a result of a lack of humor.

**The Moderating Role of Purity/Sanctity Endorsement**

Thus far, we have hypothesized that morally-focused individuals are less humorous and that this in turn leads them to be less liked and popular in social settings. Given the novelty of these hypotheses, it is important to explore the boundary conditions of these effects in order to advance our theoretical understanding of the relationships among morality, humor, and interpersonal liking. Toward this end, we draw from Moral Foundations Theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Haidt & Graham, 2007) and suggest that morality based on the foundation of purity/sanctity should be the most resistant to benign violations, and therefore the most relevant to humor. Put differently, we suggest that morally-focused individuals who also highly endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation are the least humorous, and are therefore least liked by others.

Contrary to the dual-focus of morality (justice and care) advocated by Kohlberg (1971) and Gilligan (1982), and expanding on the “big three” of morality (i.e., autonomy, community, and divinity) advocated by Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997), scholars of moral foundation theory adopt a cross-disciplinary view and draw from research on evolutionary
psychology (De Waal, 1996), value pluralism (Ross, 1930), and anthropology (Fiske, 1992; Rai & Fiske, 2011) to suggest six distinct moral foundations that better represent the entire moral domain (Haidt, 2012). These moral foundations include (1) care/harm, (2) fairness/cheating, (3) loyalty/betrayal, (4) purity/sanctity, (5) authority/subversion, and (6) liberty/oppression.

Although most moral foundations are based around discernible consequences to other people or to society (e.g., not enforcing a fair procedure leads to unjust outcomes; oppressing others violates freedom), we reason that people are perhaps willing to tolerate benign violations to the extent to which no one is actually harmed or treated unfairly. That is, hypothetical violations of many moral foundations such as care/harm (e.g., “What do you call 100 dead lawyers? A Good Start!”) are viewed as benign because no one is actually harmed. In contrast, purity/sanctity concerns are not readily reducible to consequences and are more symbolic in nature (e.g., rules around kosher food preparation or religious proscriptions are viewed as the unquestioned will of God).

Recent research supports the notion that the purity/sanctity moral foundation emerges as the driver of moral judgments towards a wide range of important morally-laden issues (e.g., abortion), above and beyond the other foundations (Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). In addition, research suggests that reading about hypothetical violations to the foundation of purity/sanctity produces automatic moral outrage for many individuals, even when it is made explicitly clear that no harm will be caused (e.g., a vignette about consensual incest in which two forms of birth control are used, and no psychological harm is caused to the siblings; Haidt, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize that individuals who are particularly sensitive to the purity/sanctity moral foundation would be the least likely to engage in even benign moral violations, and therefore especially likely to be perceived as less humorous by their coworkers.
Research Overview

We conducted two experiments and two field studies to test our hypotheses. In Study 1, we examined the effects of activating concepts related to morality on humor appreciation with an experimental design to establish a causal relationship. We conceptually replicated the findings and examined the link between morality and humor production in Study 2. An additional goal of these two experimental studies was to examine the role of moral violations as a mechanism that underlies the relationship between morality and humor through both moderation (Study 1) and mediation (Study 2) approaches. We further conducted two field studies to examine the downstream implications of a lack of humor on interpersonal liking and popularity of morally-focused individuals (Studies 3 and 4). Study 4 further examined the moderating role of purity/sanctity endorsement on the relationship between morality and humor. In each study, we used different measures and manipulations of morality to increase the generalizability of our findings.

Study 1: Morality and Humor Appreciation

In our first study, we examined whether experimentally activating a mindset of morality would negatively affect humor appreciation. We chose to examine this dependent variable because being able to appreciate and recognize humor is an important dimension in a person’s overall sense of humor (Thorson & Powell, 1993).

Participants

A total of 80 undergraduate students at a large public business school participated in this study in exchange for course credit ($M_{age} = 21.60$; $47.5\%$ female; $57.5\%$ White).

Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to either a moral or a neutral mindset condition. We used a sentence completion task to prime a temporary mindset by giving participants six five-
word strings. Participants were then instructed to delete one target word from each string and unscramble the remaining words in order to form four-word sentences. Target words in the moral mindset condition were morally-laden (e.g., fair, honest, kind), whereas target words in the control condition were not. Similar procedures have been frequently used to increase the temporary accessibility of a particular concept (Bassili & Smith, 1986; Srull & Wyer, 1979), and prior research in ethical decision making suggests that this type of priming task can successfully induce a temporary moral mindset (Leavitt, Xu, & Aquino, 2014).

After the manipulation, participants were provided with 18 jokes and written captions (see Appendix for sample jokes/captions) and were asked to rate them on a 7-point scale (1 not funny to 7 = very funny). Nine of the jokes/captions contained moral violations, whereas the other nine did not. Five independent raters, with an average of over 15 years of experience researching behavioral ethics, and who were blind to both experimental condition and our hypotheses were asked to rate the degree of moral violation for each joke and caption (1 = no moral violation to 5 = definitely contains moral violations). Jokes and captions in the moral violation category were evaluated by these independent raters as containing a significantly higher degree of moral violation ($M = 2.38, SD = 1.00$) than jokes/captions in the amoral category ($M = 1.13, SD = .14$), $t(4) = 3.16, p < .05$. We therefore examined the underling process using a moderation approach, hypothesizing that priming a moral mindset would only reduce appreciation for jokes that involved a moral violation (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005).

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants in the moral mindset condition were less likely to appreciate humor associated with a moral violation ($M = 3.69, SD = .50$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 4.06, SD = .71$), $t(78) = -2.69, p < .01$, but participants in the moral mindset
condition were no less likely to appreciate humor that contained no moral violation, \( t(78) = .67, p = .51 \) (see Figure 1). These results are consistent with the hypothesis that morality and a sense of humor are to some degree psychologically incompatible, at least in part due to morally-focused people’s unwillingness to accept the benign moral violations contained in much contemporary humor.

Study 2: Morality and Humor Production

In Study 2, we further explored the hypothesized psychological incompatibility between morality and humor by examining whether or not participants primed with a moral mindset would generate less humorous content than participants in the control condition. We hypothesized that participants in the moral mindset condition would be less likely to generate humorous content because they would be unwilling to engage in the benign moral violations often necessary for humor.

Participants

We recruited 81 adults (\( M_{age} = 33.42; 42\% \) male; 65.4\% White) from Amazon Mechanical Turk for the study. All participants were compensated with $0.50.

Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to either a moral or a neutral mindset condition. In the moral mindset condition, participants were provided with a list of morally-laden words (e.g., honest, fair, kind), whereas participants in the control condition were provided with amoral words (e.g., elephant). We then instructed participants to write a story using each of the words at least once, with the goal of priming vs. not priming morality, depending on the experimental
condition. Prior research has demonstrated that this manipulation can successfully induce a moral mindset (Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009). As a manipulation check, at the end of the study, participants were asked to what extent the stories they wrote involved morality (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). Participants in the moral mindset condition indicated that their stories involved significantly more moral components ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.02$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 1.82, SD = 1.00$), $t(79) = 17.37, p < .01$.

After the manipulation, participants proceeded to an ostensibly unrelated task in which they were presented with two different photos and asked to create the funniest captions they could (see Appendix). Generating humorous captions has been validated as a measure of humor production in previous studies (Feingold & Mazzella, 1991; Greengross & Miller, 2011; Mickes, Walker, Parris, Mankoff, & Christenfeld, 2012). Two trained coders, blind to experimental condition, subsequently coded the level of humor for each written caption (1 = not funny at all to 7 = very funny). Weighted kappa coefficients for the two captions were .52 and .55, representing adequate inter-rater agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). In addition, they also coded whether or not the captions contained a moral violation (0 = no caption contained a moral violation to 2 = both captions contain a moral violation). The two coders only disagreed once in rating whether or not the captions contained a moral violation, and an average score was used for that particular case.

**Results and Discussion**

Participants in the moral mindset condition displayed significantly less humor ($M = 2.23, SD = 1.10$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.33$), $t(79) = -2.42, p < .05$. We followed the recommendations of Preacher and Hayes (2008; also see Shrout & Bolger, 2002)
to examine mediation through a bootstrapping procedure (for a summary of the advantages of using this procedure to test for mediation, see Hayes, 2009). A bias corrected bootstrapping analysis (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) revealed that this effect was mediated by reduced likelihood of writing captions that involved moral violations (\(coefficient = -.13, SE = .09, 95\% \ CI = -.40 \text{ to } -.001\)). In short, results suggest that morally-focused individuals are less likely to produce humorous content because they are less willing to commit moral violations.

**Study 3: Morality and Humor in the Workplace**

Studies 1 and 2 provided convergent support for our hypotheses that morally-focused people are less humorous, in part because they are unwilling to engage in the benign moral violations often necessary to display humor. In Studies 3 and 4, we examined the downstream implications of the incompatibility between morality and humor. Specifically, we hypothesized that morally-focused employees would be perceived as less humorous by their coworkers, and would therefore also be less liked and socially popular.

**Participants and Procedures**

Participants were 70 dyads (54.3\% male, 55.7\% between the ages of 26 to 35) from multiple organizations located in central China. Participants worked in a variety of industries, including construction, sales, telecommuting, and human resource management. We intentionally recruited participants from multiple industries to increase generalizability and to avoid the contextual constraints associated with limited industries (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). We contacted Executive Master of Business Administration students from a large public university and asked these managers to randomly recruit two subordinates who worked in the same department or work team that have daily interactions. To avoid biases, we asked the managers to select the two employees based on the last alphabet of their last names. We then mailed the surveys to each employee and ensured anonymity throughout the processes. The focal employees
completed a measure of moral identity, whereas their coworkers rated the focal participants’ humor and indicated how much they liked the other person and his/her popularity among other coworkers. We controlled for the dyads’ demographic characteristics in the analyses.

**Measures**

Because the scales we used were originally developed in English, we followed Brislin’s (1980) back-translation procedure to develop the Chinese versions of the measures.

**Moral identity.** To measure the focal employees’ moral identity, we asked them to complete the internalization dimension of the moral identity scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002). This measure assessed the extent to which being “moral” is believed to be particularly self-defining and central to one’s self-concept, and is thus appropriate as assessing the extent to which moral content was chronically accessible to participants. Participants were first provided with a list of positive moral traits (e.g., caring, fair) and were asked to visualize the kind of person who has these characteristics and imagine how that person would think, feel, and act. Afterward, participants were asked to answer the five-item internalization of moral identity scale. Sample items included “I strongly desire to have these characteristics” and “it would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics” (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; \( \alpha = .82 \)).

**Perceptions of peer’s humor.** We measured perceptions of humor with a seven-item scale adapted from Thorson and Powell (1993). Because the original scale was designed for measuring recognition of oneself as a humorous person, we reworded the items to reflect perceptions of others’ humor for the purpose of this study. Sample items included “my coworker says things in such a way as to make people laugh” and “my coworker uses humor to entertain coworkers” (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; \( \alpha = .95 \)).
**Interpersonal liking.** We measured interpersonal liking with a four-item scale (Wayne & Ferris, 1990). Sample items included “I get along well with my coworker” and “I think my coworker would make a good friend” (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .91$).

**Popularity.** We measured popularity with an eight-item scale (Scott & Judge, 2009). An introductory question asked “When answering the following questions, please consider how your coworker is perceived by his/her coworkers. Consider the perceptions of coworkers only in your immediate work group.” Sample items included “my coworker is popular” and “my coworker is socially visible” (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .90$).

**Controls.** We controlled for both the focal employees’ and their coworkers’ demographic characteristics (i.e., gender and age) in the analyses because of the possibility of homophily effects: people of similar backgrounds often like each other more (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

**Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics of the variables are presented in Table 1.

We first conducted a hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to test our hypotheses. In Model 1, we entered all the demographic control variables. In Model 2, we entered moral identity as a predictor and found that it is negatively associated with perceptions of peer’s humor ($\beta = -.29, p < .05$) and explained significantly more variance than Model 1 ($\Delta R^2 = .08, p < .01$). This result provided support for the negative relationship between morality and a sense of humor: peers perceived their morally-focused coworkers to be less humorous.

We again used a bootstrapping procedure to examine mediation (Hayes, 2013). Results suggested that the indirect effect of moral identity on interpersonal liking via perceptions of peer’s humor was significant ($coefficient = -.08, SE = .05, 95\% CI = -.22$ to .01). Likewise,
results suggested that the indirect effect of moral identity on popularity via perceptions of peer’s humor was significant (coefficient = -.06, SE = .04, 95% CI = -.15 to -.01). In sum, these results suggested that morally-focused employees were perceived as less humorous by their coworkers, which in turn led coworkers to like them less and diminished their social popularity in the workplace.

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**Study 4: The Moderating Role of Purity/Sanctity Endorsement**

Study 4 was different from Study 3 in three key aspects. First, although we found support for our hypotheses in a field setting in Study 3, we wanted to extend the generalizability of these findings to a Western work setting. We thus recruited a sample of leader-subordinate dyads in the United States. Examining our hypotheses with a leader-subordinate dyad sample also allowed us to examine whether or not our findings are generalizable to people with different status. Second, we increased temporal precedence by employing a two-wave design in order to minimize common-method bias concerns (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Finally, we sought to distinguish the role of different foundational moral values (Graham et al., 2011) in causing people to be perceived as lacking in humor by their coworkers.

**Participants and Procedures**

Participants were recruited through the Study Response Project, a non-profit research project maintained by a large private university in the U.S. (for a detailed discussion, see www.studyresponse.net; for recent articles utilizing this data collection method, see Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011; Reynolds & Ceramic, 2007). With the assistance of the Study Response administrators, we first pre-screened potential participants to select those that were 1) working full time, 2) willing to invite their direct leaders to participate, and 3) willing to
complete surveys at two different time points. To minimize potential self-selection biases, participants were only provided with a generic description about the intent of the study during the pre-screening process. Administrators from the Study Response Project validated all leaders’ email addresses.

A total of 283 focal employees expressed interest in participating. Surveys were sent to each of these employees and their corresponding leaders. A total of 180 dyads successfully completed the study at both time points (63.6% response rate). On average, subordinates were 38.21 years old, 67.2% male, and 75.8% White; leaders were 41.59 years old, 70.1% male, and 76.5% White. All participants were compensated with $7 at the end of the survey. At Time One (T1), subordinates completed measures of ethical leadership and perceptions of leader’s humor; leaders self-reported their endorsement of the purity/sanctity moral foundation. At Time Two (T2), which was approximately two weeks later, subordinates completed measures of leader liking and popularity.

**Measures**

**Ethical leadership.** At T1, we measured ethical leadership by asking subordinates to complete a ten-item ethical leadership scale (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005). This scale is a widely-used measure in assessing the ethicality of people in leadership positions, and includes items that assess leaders’ morality regarding both their managerial practices (e.g., “my leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards”) and how they behave toward others in general (e.g. “my leader can be trusted”; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; \( \alpha = .93 \)). Recent studies have provided evidence for the scale’s validity across a wide range of settings and samples (e.g., Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012).
Perceptions of leader’s humor. At T1, we measured perceptions of leader’s humor by asking subordinates to complete the same scale as in Study 3 (Thorson & Powell, 1993; \( \alpha = .96 \)).

Leader’s purity/sanctity endorsement. At T1, leaders self-reported their endorsement of the purity/sanctity moral foundation by completing a six-item scale developed by Graham et al. (2011). This scale is divided into two components, one that assesses whether concerns about purity/sanctity are morally relevant to leaders (three items) and one that assesses whether leaders make moral judgment consistent with concerns of purity/sanctity (three items). In the moral relevance section, an introductory question asked “to what extent are the following statements relevant to your ethical decision making?” Sample items in the moral relevance section included “whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency” and “whether or not someone did something disgusting” (1 = not at all to 6 = extremely relevant). Sample items in the moral judgment section included “chastity is an important and valuable virtue” and “I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural” (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Although divided into two sections, prior research has suggested that this scale is best conceptualized, both theoretically and empirically, as a unified measure of endorsement of the purity/sanctity moral foundation (Graham et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2009). We therefore combined the two different sections into a single measure (\( \alpha = .87 \)).

Leader liking. At T2, we measured leader liking by asking subordinates to complete the same scale as in Study 3 (Wayne & Ferris, 1990; \( \alpha = .89 \)).

Leader popularity. At T2, we measured leader popularity by asking subordinates to complete the same scale as in Study 3 (Scott & Judge, 2009). An introductory question asked “When answering the following questions, please consider how your leader is perceived by his/her coworkers. Consider the perceptions of coworkers only in your leader’s immediate work
group (i.e., those people, including yourself, who report to the same leader)”. Sample items included “my supervisor is popular” and “my supervisor is well-known” (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .90$).

**Control variables.** In all subsequent analyses, we controlled for leader and follower demographics due to the same concern for homophily discussed in Study 3. To further enhance the validity of our findings, we control for leader-subordinate relationship quality, as perceptions of liking should be strongly influenced by this factor. We asked subordinates to complete an eight-item measure of leader-member exchange at T1 (Bauer & Green, 1996). Sample items included “I would characterize the working relationship I have with my manager as extremely effective” and “I usually know where I stand with my manager” (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .92$). In addition, because humor is often said to be in the eye of the beholder, we controlled for subordinates’ purity/sanctity endorsement by asking them to complete the same six-item purity/sanctity moral foundation measure at T1 to strengthen our analyses ($\alpha = .88$).

**Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics for the variables are presented in Table 2.

We conducted a hierarchal OLS regression to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and perceptions of leader’s humor. In Model 1, we entered all the control variables. In Model 2, we entered ethical leadership as a predictor and found that ethical leadership is negatively associated with perceptions of leader’s humor ($\beta = -.27, p < .01$; see Table 3) and explained significantly more variance than Model 1 ($\Delta R^2 = .10, p < .01$). In short, subordinates perceived their leaders to be less humorous when their leaders displayed high levels of ethical leadership. This result holds even after controlling for the dyad’s demographics information, relationship quality, and subordinates’ own purity/sanctity endorsement.
We again examined our mediation model by using a bootstrapping procedure (Hayes, 2013). Results suggested that the indirect effect of ethical leadership on leader liking via perceptions of leader’s humor was significant (coefficient = -.14, SE = .04, 95% CI = -.23 to -.08). Likewise, results suggested that the indirect effect of ethical leadership on leader popularity via perceptions of leader’s humor was significant (coefficient = -.16, SE = .04, 95% CI = -.25 to -.09). These results suggested that ethical leaders are liked less and are less popular in the workplace in part because they are less humorous.

To test for the moderating role of leader’s purity/sanctity endorsement, we began our analysis by examining the interactive effect of ethical leadership and leader’s purity/sanctity endorsement on perceptions of leader’s humor. We entered the interaction term in Model 3. The addition of the interaction term resulted in a significant change in $R^2$ ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p < .01$) and was significant ($\beta = -1.60, p < .05$; see Table 3). To aid interpretation, we graphed this interaction effect at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator (see Figure 2). We then statistically compared these two slopes to zero using the simple slopes test (Aiken & West, 1991). Ethical leadership significantly predicted lower levels of humor when leader’s endorsement for purity/sanctity was high ($t = -2.95, p < .01$), but not when leader’s endorsement for purity/sanctity was low ($t = -.26, p = .79$).

To test our hypotheses in an integrated fashion, we utilized the bootstrapping-based analytic approach of Edwards and Lambert (2007) and the statistical software of Hayes (2013) to test for conditional indirect effects at high vs. low levels of leader’s purity/sanctity concern (with 1,000 resamples). We entered ethical leadership as the independent variable, leader’s
purity/sanctity endorsement as a first-stage moderator, perceptions of leader’s humor as a mediator, and leader liking/popularity as the dependent variables. When morally-focused leaders strongly endorsed the purity/sanctity moral foundation, they were most likely to be perceived as less humorous and consequently liked less (conditional indirect effect = -.17, SE = .05, 95% CI = -.33 to -.10) and less popular (conditional indirect effect = -.20, SE = .05, 95% CI = -.34 to -.12). However, these effects dissipated for morally-focused leaders who did not strongly endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation (conditional indirect effect = -.06, SE = .05, 95% CI = -.19 to .02; conditional indirect effect = -.06, SE = .05, 95% CI = -.19 to .03, respectively).

In sum, the results of our two field studies suggest that, regardless of status or cultural background (United States vs. China), morally-focused employees are less likely to be perceived as humorous, and in turn are less liked and less popular in organizations. In addition, Study 4 finds that these effects are most pronounced for morally-focused targets who also strongly endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation.

**General Discussion**

In four studies, we found support for our hypotheses that 1) morality and a sense of humor are to a significant degree psychologically incompatible, 2) morally-focused individuals are less liked partly because they are less humorous, and 3) the inverse relationship between morality and a sense of humor is strongest for individuals who strongly endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation. In Study 1, participants primed with a moral mindset were less likely to appreciate humor that involved moral violations. In Study 2, participants for whom a moral mindset was activated generated less humorous content than participants in the control condition, and this effect was mediated by reduced likelihood of creating humorous content that contained moral violations. Studies 3 and 4 extended these findings to the workplace,
demonstrating that morally-focused employees were less liked by their coworkers in part because they were perceived to lack a sense of humor. Finally, Study 4 showed that this was especially true for morally-focused individuals who strongly endorsed the purity/sanctity moral foundation (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011). Below, we discuss the theoretical contributions of our work and suggest future research directions.

**The Psychological Incompatibility of Morality and Humor**

Although the notion of a relationship between morality and humor can be dated back to ancient philosophy, to our knowledge, this research is the first to empirically document causal and correlational effects of a moral focus on a person’s sense of humor. Consistent with BVT, we hypothesized and found a negative relationship between morality and humor. While there is no doubt that moral individuals benefit our society (e.g., financial scandals cost billions), little is known about whether morality may also have negative consequences. This research suggests that morally-focused individuals may become less humorous because they are less willingly to engage in even the benign moral violations often necessary for the display of humor.

Our results also contribute to the broader field of moral psychology. To date, scholars have remained largely optimistic about the consequences of being paragons of morality. Indeed, only recently have scholars begun to examine the potential dark side of morality, demonstrating that moral individuals can be less creative (Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014). Our results add a unique insight into this discussion by utilizing BVT to identify another important way in which morality can be detrimental. Our findings also complement moral psychology research that traditionally examines the antecedents of morality (e.g., Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Whereas a majority of research focuses on factors that predict moral behaviors, we underscore the importance of examining the consequences
(reduced levels of humor, interpersonal liking, and popularity) of a moral mindset (Studies 1-2) and endorsing moral principles in the workplace (Studies 3-4).

The results of Study 4 suggest that the negative relationship between morality and humor may be especially strong for individuals who strongly endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation, where even symbolic violations are not tolerable. Interestingly, a recent large-scale study revealed that most of the funniest cities in the United States can be characterized as heavily liberal (e.g., Chicago, Boston, Seattle, Portland; McGraw & Warner, 2014). This is consistent with our moderation finding since politically liberal individuals are significantly less likely than others to endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation (Graham et al., 2009). Nevertheless, we suggest that more research is needed in order to determine how endorsement of different moral foundations contributes to humor. Relatedly, although we controlled for subordinates’ purity/sanctity moral foundations in Study 4, humor is often in the eye of the beholder. For example, church goers, who often highly endorse the purity/sanctity moral foundation (Graham et al., 2009), will likely find religious jokes offensive and not funny, even when they are benign in nature to others. This suggests the need to not only consider the targets’ moral foundations, but also the perceivers’ moral foundations in examining the relationship between morality and humor.

Beyond moral psychology, we also contribute to research on humor. Despite the importance of humor in social life, it has continued to be an understudied topic in mainstream social sciences. In a comprehensive review, a group of researchers noted “[humor research] has followed a somewhat disjointed and irregular path” (Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990, p. 274). Not only does our research directly speak to the literature on humor, but we also examine both the antecedents and consequences of humor. It appears that a morally-relaxed mindset may
facilitate the appreciation and expression of humor. Given the benefits of humor (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), future research should continue to explore individual traits or situational factors that may lead to increased levels of humor production and appreciation.

**Morality and Social Marginalization**

Our work also contributes to research on the relationship between morality and social marginalization. Past research has revealed that moral individuals are often socially marginalized by their peers (Minson & Monin, 2012; Monin et al., 2008; Parks & Stone, 2010; Trevino & Victor, 1992), and scholars have typically used upward social comparison to explain this puzzling finding. For example, victims sometimes experience threats to self-esteem after receiving help (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982); team members experience negative self-evaluations after interacting with highly cooperative and generous teammates (Parks & Stone, 2010). This explanation suggests that when comparing ourselves to morally superior individuals, we feel a sense of moral inferiority, which eventually leads to resentment (for a review, see Monin, 2007). Because individuals in general care a lot about their moral self-image (Aquino & Reed, 2002), these feelings of moral inferiority and resentment lead to social rejection of “do-gooders”.

In this research, we offer a complementary explanation for the relationship between morality and social marginalization: morally-focused individuals are less humorous and therefore less liked and socially popular. Put differently, perhaps morally-focused individuals are less liked in part because they are less enjoyable to interact with. Unlike feelings of moral reproach and resentment (Monin et al., 2008) or pressure to become selfless (Parks & Stone, 2010), this finding may have some practical implications for morally-focused individuals to gain social acceptance. For managers, cracking a few jokes while discussing business ethics with
subordinates may partially reduce the negative social consequences of displaying morality. For organizations, formal policies should be institutionalized in order to ensure moral leaders and employees to not suffer as a consequence of upholding their moral principles. Business educators should also ensure that students are taught strategies to overcome such effects, to avoid trading off morality for interpersonal influence.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Although we replicate the negative relationship between morality and humor both in experimental and field studies using different manipulations and measures (Anderson, Lindsay, & Bushman, 1999), a few limitations warrant further discussion. First, in our field investigations (Studies 3 and 4) we measured humor using third parties’ perceptions rather than objective measures of humor production, a limitation since the observed effects could be partly due to a popular belief that morally-focused individuals are less humorous. While this could partly account for the results of our field investigations, it is important to emphasize that the experimental studies (Studies 1 and 2) confirm that individuals in a moral mindset appreciate humor less and produce less humorous captions. Nevertheless, we recommend future research to include objective measures of humor production (rather than just third party perceptions of humor) in field settings. Second and relatedly, the humor appreciation and production tasks used in Studies 1 and 2 might not have captured the entire range of the construct (e.g., attitudes toward humor). Although the caption-writing task has been validated by prior research (Feingold & Mazzella, 1991; Greengross & Miller, 2011; Mickes et al., 2011), we encourage future research to examine these effects with a larger set of jokes/captions.

Finally, future research should also explore the generalizability of these effects across cultures. Although we have some evidence of cross-cultural generalizability (U.S. and China),
variability is also of great interest. For instance, morality and humor maybe even more negatively related in cultures in which purity/sanctity are strongly endorsed, such as traditional, religiously fundamentalist cultures. A potential way to capture these cross-cultural differences would be to conduct text analyses of representative social media posts, newspapers, and books (e.g., Graham et al., 2009, Study 4).

Conclusion

As noted in the opening quote by Mark Twain that there is no humor in heaven, people have long considered the idea that there is a tension between morality and humor. Through the use of Benign Violation Theory, we examine the effects of morality on humor, likeability, and popularity. Both experimental and field data indicate that such tension not only means that morality may impinge upon humor, but that this can come at the expense of likeability and popularity. Thus, morality can have a downside that was previously overlooked. Although our society will be better off if people are moral, there appears to be social cost in becoming paragons of morality.
References


Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion.* Random House LLC.


Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the focal variables (Study 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Means (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Moral Identity</td>
<td>4.15 (.88)</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perceptions of Humor</td>
<td>3.57 (1.10)</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Interpersonal Liking</td>
<td>4.11 (.70)</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.91</td>
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<td>4. Popularity</td>
<td>3.48 (.60)</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Alpha coefficients are presented on the diagonal
*p < .05  
**p < .01
Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the focal variables (Study 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Means (SD)</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ethical Leadership</td>
<td>3.90 (.69)</td>
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<td>2. Perceptions of Humor</td>
<td>3.83 (1.26)</td>
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<td>3. Leader Purity/Sanctity Concerns</td>
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<td>-.27**</td>
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<td>4. Leader Interpersonal Liking</td>
<td>4.09 (.70)</td>
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<td>-.15*</td>
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<td>5. Leader Popularity</td>
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<td>.46**</td>
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<td>.90</td>
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Alpha coefficients are presented on the diagonal
*p < .05
**p < .01
Table 3. Summary of regression results (Study 4)

<table>
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<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>β</td>
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<td>Subordinate Age</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subordinate Gender (^1)</td>
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<td>Subordinate Race</td>
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<td>-.05</td>
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<td>Leader-Member Exchange</td>
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<td>-.31**</td>
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<td>Endorsement</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R^2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR^2</td>
<td></td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Dummy variable (1 = Male, 0 = Female)

\(^2\) Dummy variable (1 = White, 0 = Others)

\(^*p < .10\)

\(^*p < .05\)

\(^**p < .01\)
Figure 1. Humor appreciation by condition (Study 1)
Figure 2. The interaction between ethical leadership and leaders’ purity/sanctity endorsement on perceptions of humor (Study 4)
Appendix

Sample written captions used in Study 1 (left = moral violation; right = no moral violation)

Captions used in Study 2