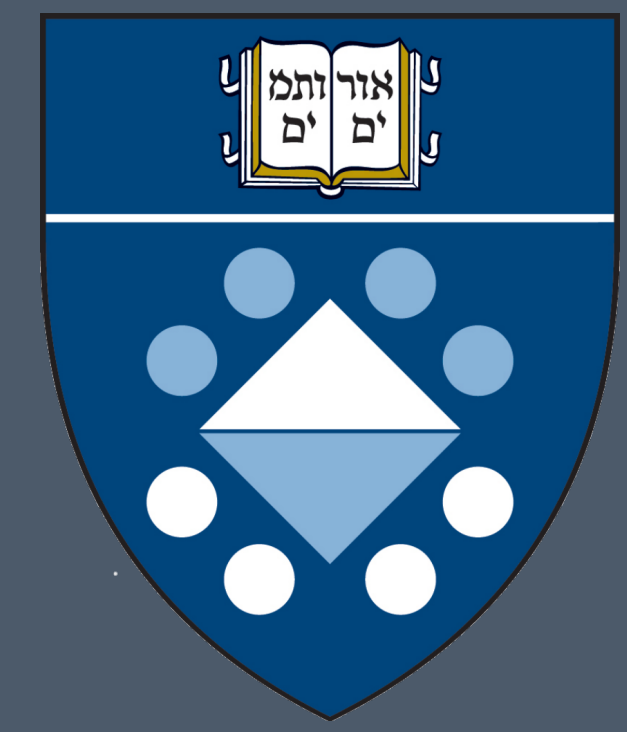




Moral Superiority and Dishonest Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Moral traits are both desirable and ambiguous. This combination leads to self-enhancement of morally-focused traits—the ‘illusion of moral superiority.’ It is currently unknown if this illusion actually predicts moral behavior, specifically dishonesty for monetary gain. By counterbalancing a morally-focused personality item/questionnaire and a hypothetical dictator game (Study 1) and an incentivized over-claiming task (Study 2), we show that moral superiority predicts dishonest behavior, but only if the over-claiming task comes first. That is, moral self-judgments become more rational if first anchored by level of participant dishonesty in the over-claiming task. This effect is driven by dishonest participants, who exhibit the illusion of moral superiority if they rate their morality before engaging in dishonest behavior, but not if they rate their morality after engaging in dishonest behavior. These results suggest that, given the ambiguity of morality, an individual’s moral superiority does not predict their moral behavior, but their moral behavior, if experienced first, does rationally predict their moral superiority.

BACKGROUND

Importance of Morality

- Morality is a cornerstone of identity—use to classify others as “good” or “bad” person
- Most important factor in impression formation and liking, respecting, and knowing a person (e.g. Hartley et al., 2016)
- Most desirable trait type (Tappin & McKay, 2016)

Ambiguity of Morality

- Substantial latitude in defining moral behavior (Dunning et al., 2004)
- Morality is less specific, public, or objective than agency-focused traits like intelligence (Allison et al., 1989)

Moral Enhancement

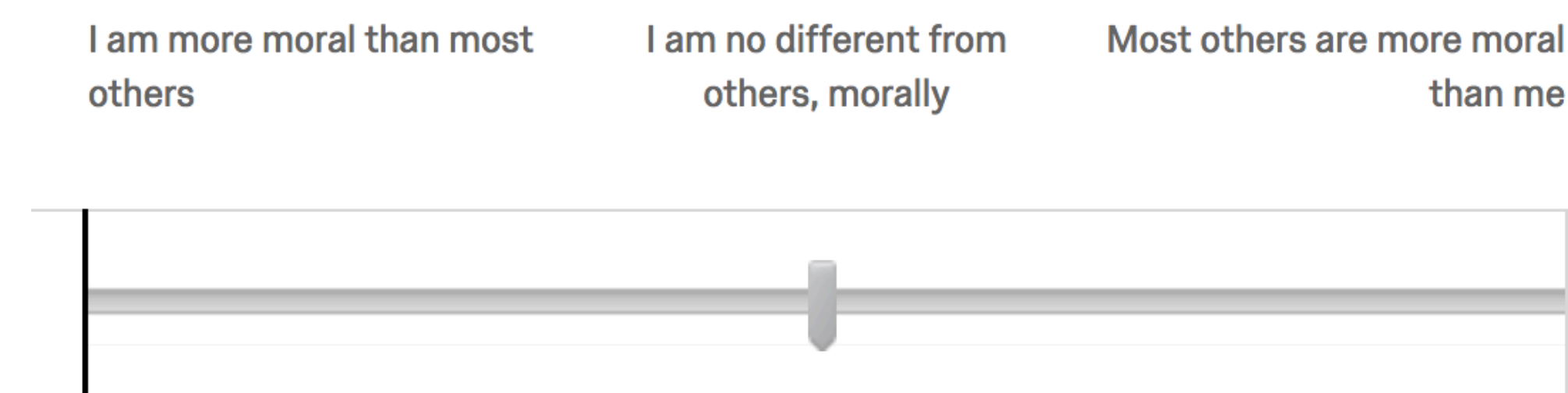
- Combination of high desirability and high ambiguity cause morality to be a personality area ripe for self-enhancement
- Desirable moral traits show the greatest difference in self ratings and ratings of the average person (Alicke et al., 2001)
- Morally-focused traits had significantly higher self-other enhancement than agency- or socially-focused trait categories (Tappin & McKay, 2016)

Behavioral Consequences of Moral Superiority

- Tappin & McKay (2016), while establishing the illusion of moral superiority, did not address the behavioral consequences of the illusion. Possibilities include:
- **Moral Licensing** (moral superiority ‘licenses’ subsequent immoral behavior)
- **Belief-behavior Consistency** (level of moral superiority -> level of moral behavior)
- **Self-perception Theory** (level of moral behavior -> level of moral superiority)

METHODS

- **Study 1** (278 Amazon Mturk participants)
COUNTERBALANCED:



- Hypothetical dictator game dividing \$10 with blind partner. *How much money do you tell your partner you’re dividing?*
- **Study 2** (201 Amazon Mturk participants)
COUNTERBALANCED:
- Morally-focused Personality Questionnaire (Tappin & McKay, 2016)
- Incentivized Over-claiming Questionnaire Task (Paulhus & Bruce, 1990)

RESULTS

Study 1

- **Personality-first condition:** No difference in Moral Superiority between honest and dishonest participants (t-test; $p = .141$)
- **Game-first condition:** **Significant difference** in Moral Superiority between honest and dishonest participants (t-test; $p = .002$)

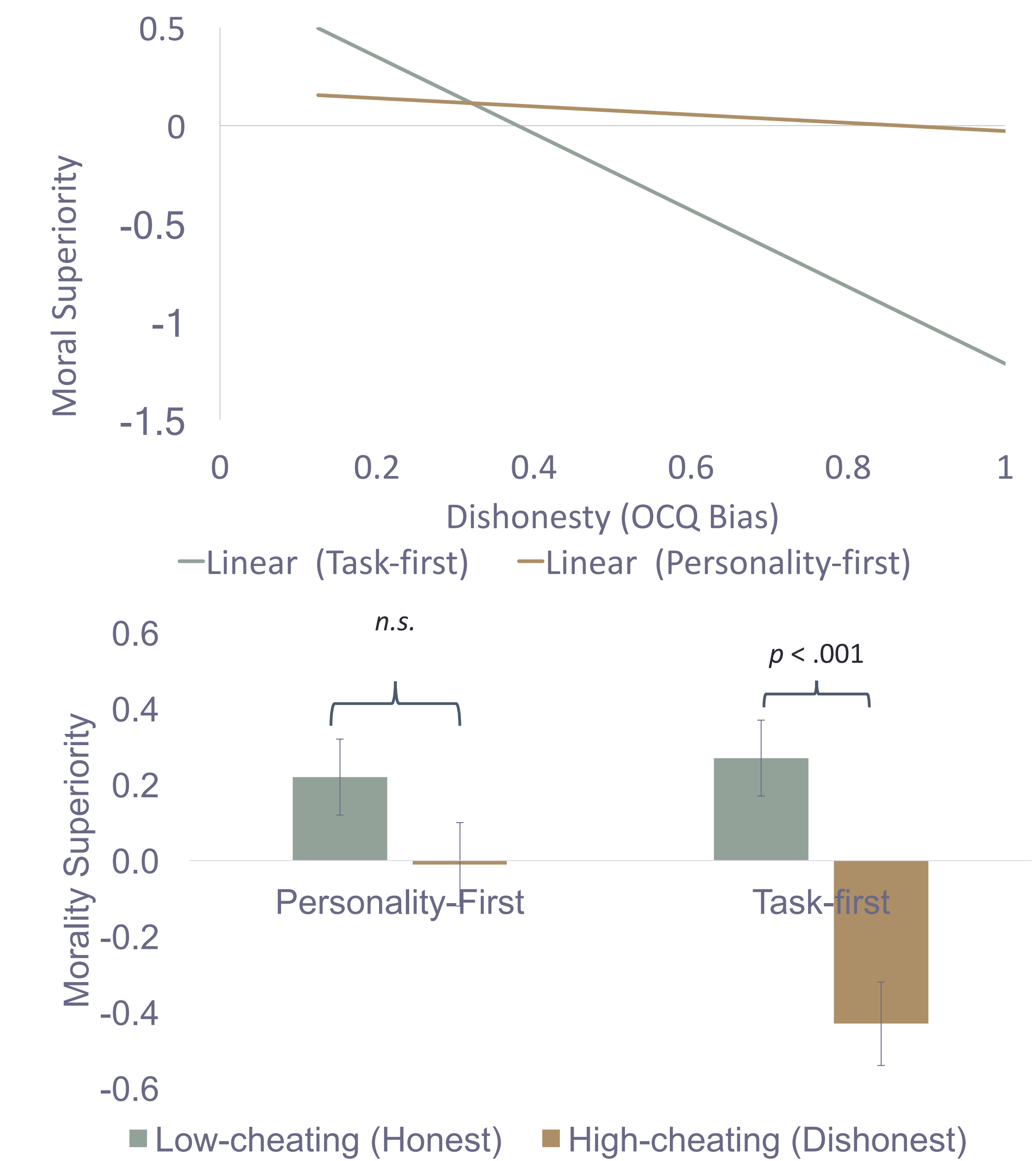


Study 2

- Significant interaction of dishonest behavior and condition in predicting level of moral superiority (ANOVA; $p = .043$)
- **Personality-first condition:** No difference in Moral Self-rating between high-cheating and low-cheating participants (t-test; $p = .122$)
- **Task-first condition:** **Significant difference** in Moral Self-rating between high-cheating and low-cheating participants (t-test; $p < .001$)

$$OCQ\ Bias = \frac{(Hit\ Rate + False\ Alarm\ Rate)}{2}$$

RESULTS



DISCUSSION

- Moral Superiority does not predict dishonest behavior, but dishonest behavior does predict Moral Superiority
- Without an anchor (demonstration of their own behavior), those who are dishonest will provide especially inflated moral self-assessments
- **Moral Licensing** ✗
 - We saw people abstain from cheating after rating themselves as “morally superior”
- **Belief-Behavior Consistency** ✗
 - We saw high levels of cheating among those who rated themselves “morally superior”
- **Self-Perception Theory** ✓
 - People use their own behavior to gauge their place on the moral spectrum

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