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Abstract

People express more prejudice if they have established their “moral credentials.” Five studies explored the acquisition of moral credentials through associations with racial minorities, particularly close relationships that are personally chosen. Participants choosing to write about a positive experience with a Black person (Study 1) or Hispanic person (Study 2) subsequently expressed more preference for Whites and tolerance of prejudice than did other participants. In Study 3, the credentialing effect of choice was diminished when participants were given an incentive for that choice. Participants in Study 4 who wrote about a Black friend were more credentialed than those who wrote about a Black acquaintance, regardless of whether the experience was positive or negative. Study 5 suggested that participants strategically referred to close associations with minorities when warned of a future situation in which they might appear prejudiced.

Keywords

moral credentialing, choice, prejudice, discrimination, racism, cognitive dissonance

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Research and common wisdom suggest that overt racism is not acceptable in today’s mainstream society (e.g., Fiske, 1998; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). Indeed, substantial evidence suggests that White people are keenly aware of politically correct values and want to avoid being perceived as racist (McConahay, 1986; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981; Vorauer, Main, & O’Connell, 1998; Winslow, 2004). However, despite their fears of appearing racist, many people nevertheless disclose racist attitudes under circumstances when they feel “safe” or justified in doing so (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Norton, Vandello, & Darley, 2004). The current research explores the phenomenon of “moral credentialing” (Monin & Miller, 2001) which is an example of a situation in which people may feel safe in expressing racial biases.

The theory of moral credentialing (Monin & Miller, 2001) suggests that people are more likely to express prejudiced attitudes once they have been given an opportunity to establish their “credentials” for being unbiased. As an example, Monin and Miller (2001) found that participants given the chance to denounce patently sexist statements subsequently were more likely than other participants to favor a man for a stereotypically masculine job. That is, after ostensibly “proving” that they were not sexist, participants were more likely to engage

in sexism. Moral credentialing was also illustrated in an experiment that showed people who were given the opportunity to endorse Barack Obama obtained moral credentials and were subsequently more likely than other individuals to express preference for a White over a Black job candidate (Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009).

Moral Credentialing by Association

Our purpose is to explore the bounds of moral credentialing theory in several ways. One key objective is to assess whether people can obtain moral credentials through referencing experiences and associations with members of stigmatized groups. In other words, we wanted to see whether people could “prove”

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themselves unbiased by disclosing a positive interaction with someone of a minority group.

This research question comes in part from evidence that people sometimes react to accusations of racism by citing their friendships with minority members to “prove” their innocence (e.g., Winslow, 2004). The research question was also stimulated by anecdotal observations of the “some of my best friends” strategy: People sing the praises of a minority friend so that they can then freely disparage that particular minority group. Despite being common enough to be cliché (Jackman & Crane, 1986), this anecdotal folk wisdom has yet to be tested empirically. We address this gap by exploring whether people who cite positive experiences and associations with minorities are indeed more likely to later express biases against that same group. Importantly, citing positive interactions and relationships with minorities is a readily available and easy means of credentialing oneself. Unlike the credentialing opportunities employed by Monin and Miller (2001), citing associations is something that people can do “on the spot” in social interactions to acquire credentials. Moreover, moral credentialing by association may be particularly effective because people attach extensive meaning to personal associations and make evaluations of others based on their associations (Jackman & Crane, 1986).

The Importance of Free Choice in Establishing Moral Credentials

A second objective of the current study is to examine whether moral credentialing is dependent on the individual’s free choice in engaging in the behavior that might establish credentials. In Studies 1 to 4 we compare whether people who were *instructed* to write about a positive experience with a racial minority member were credentialed to the same extent as people who could freely *choose* to write about a positive experience based on their own volition. Arguably, the authenticity of the moral credentials (both to the individual attempting to get credentialed and to outside observers) is dependent on whether the individual actively *chose* to gain those credentials through self-directed behaviors. This effect may be explained by the role of choice in the insufficient justification effect (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Hobden & Olson, 1994; Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999). For instance, in one study, participants either were given a choice or were instructed to tell disparaging jokes about lawyers (Hobden & Olson, 1994). The results show that choice played a significant role in attitudes, as those who chose to tell the jokes exhibited more negative attitudes toward lawyers later on, presumably because they had insufficient justification for why they chose to tell the jokes. In relation to moral credentialing, choice may play a similar role—participants who choose to write about a particular experience would have insufficient justification for their actions, and this may heighten their sense of moral good and ability to garner moral credentials (e.g., “I wrote nice things

about a Black coworker, and I had no incentive to do so. Therefore I must have no racial biases.”).

In the original Monin and Miller (2001) series of studies, the importance of choice could not be ascertained because *all* participants were *always* given the choice whether to engage in behaviors that might establish their moral credentials. For example, in one of the studies, participants were given the opportunity to select a job candidate. In the experimental conditions, the authors manipulated the candidates such that all the candidates were White males except for one far superior job candidate who happened to be a minority. The participants who chose the minority job candidate over the White male candidates felt morally credentialed and were subsequently more likely than uncredentialed participants to prefer White male applicants over minority applicants. Even though the minority job applicant was obviously the “right” choice for the job, participants nevertheless had *free choice* in the selection. However, because no participants in the Monin and Miller studies were denied free choice in their decisions, that research does not provide a test of whether free choice was essential to the credentialing effect.

The perception of free choice may be essential to the process of moral credentialing. If the participants in the Monin and Miller (2001) study had been instructed to offer the job to the minority candidate, the forced instructions would have eliminated a sufficient justification for their behaviors (e.g., “I was told to do it”) and could have prevented participants from feeling morally credentialed (see Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Hobden & Olson, 1994; Stukas et al., 1999). In other words, the behavior of offering a job to a minority member is not revealing of one’s propensity to be nonracist unless that behavior was freely chosen.

Like in Monin and Miller (2001), participants in the Effron et al. (2009) studies were always given free choice to establish their credentials by saying whether they would vote for Obama. In fact, participants who indicated that their choice was for McCain were excluded from the analyses. Although the studies were important in showing that endorsing Obama established moral credentials, the studies leave unaddressed the important role that free choice might have played in the study. One might ask what would have happened if, for instance, the McCain supporters had been *instructed* by the researchers to voice praise and support for Obama in spite of their true feelings. Would those individuals have obtained moral credentials through their praise of Obama, or would those credentials be nullified by the fact that the praise was not freely offered?

Friendships Versus Acquaintances: Does the Closeness of the Relationship Affect Credentials?

A third purpose of this research was to examine whether the degree of closeness with the referenced person influences

credentials (Study 4). Based on the rationale that closeness bolsters credentials, we assessed whether describing an interaction that involved a very close relationship (e.g., romantic partner, close friend) with a minority member would be more likely to warrant moral credentials than those interactions with a casual acquaintance (e.g., a neighbor, coworker) who is a minority member.

In Study 5, we assess whether people *strategically* attempt to credential themselves *prior* to a situation when they know that they might be perceived as racist. To the extent that relationship closeness affects credentials, we assessed whether people who were warned that they might later be perceived as racist would be more likely to disclose *close* rather than *casual* relationships with minority members. Taken together, the set of five studies described above assesses the conditions under which moral credentials can be established through referencing experiences and associations with minorities.

Study 1

Study 1 builds on Monin and Miller's (2001) research by determining whether moral credentials are acquired through describing a positive experience or association with minorities. We assess whether describing a positive experience with a Black person provides "proof" of one's nonracist attitudes, thereby enabling subsequent expression of racial bias. As argued above, the role of *choice* in writing about the positive experience is expected to be critical to establishing credentials. As such, we predict that people who acquire moral credentials by *choosing* to cite *positive* experiences with a Black individual subsequently will be more likely than other people to show preference for White over Black applicants in a job selection scenario.

Method

Participants. In an effort to sample people of various ages, occupations, and socioeconomic status, four experimenters (two women, two men) approached individuals who appeared to be White (and who were alone) at various public locations (e.g., coffee shops, airports) in Houston, Texas, and asked if they would be willing to complete an anonymous research questionnaire. The response rate was 79%, with a total of 28 female and 26 male participants, ages 16 to 77 (*Mdn* = 40). Except for one Native American participant, who was excluded from the final analysis, all participants were White.

Design and measures. Participants were assigned randomly to one of three experimental conditions: (a) forced choice (instructed), (b) free choice, or (c) control. More specifically, participants were (a) instructed to write about a positive experience with a Black individual ($n = 17$), (b) asked to *choose* whether to write about a positive or negative experience ($n = 15$), or (c) given no writing assignment ($n = 21$). Participants in the "free-choice" condition circled either the

word *positive* or the word *negative* to indicate their choice. Only one participant chose to write about a negative experience and was therefore excluded from the final analyses.

Immediately on finishing the writing assignment, participants read an ambiguously racist scenario adapted from Monin and Miller (2001). In this scenario, participants imagine themselves as chief of police responsible for recruiting new officers to join a force that is exclusively White and has a history of hostility toward Black individuals. To assess biased responses, we followed Monin and Miller's assessment approach by asking participants to indicate whether the position described would be better suited for an individual of a particular ethnic background on a scale ranging from 1 (*much better for a Black*) to 7 (*much better for a White*).

Results and Discussion

To test the hypothesis that participants who received moral credentials would be more likely than other participants to express bias against Black job applicants, we conducted a one-way ANOVA on job suitability ratings that suggested that there were significant differences across the conditions, $F(2, 51) = 3.10, p = .05$. Supporting expectations, free-choice participants who were able to choose to write about a positive experience with a Black individual later expressed more bias toward White applicants ($M = 4.29, SD = .64$) than did those in the control condition ($M = 3.86, SD = 0.57$), $t = -2.32, p < .05$, and those in the forced-choice condition who were instructed to write about a positive experience ($M = 3.76, SD = 0.72$), $t = -2.25, p < .05$. The job suitability ratings for participants in the forced-choice condition who were instructed to write about a positive experience with a Black individual were not significantly different from those in the control condition, $t = -0.43, p > .10$. In sum, individuals did obtain moral credentials from writing about a positive experience with a Black person but only if they could freely choose whether to describe the positive experience.

Study 2

The results of Study 1 were consistent with expectations that White individuals who established moral credentials by choosing to write about a positive experience with a Black individual were more likely to subsequently show pro-White bias than participants who were instructed to write about a positive experience. Presumably, people who were instructed to describe a positive situation with a Black person did not feel credentialed to the same extent as people who voluntarily chose to describe a positive interaction, perhaps because forced testimony carried less meaning than one that was freely chosen. Consistent with the notion of insufficient justification, people who freely chose to write a positive experience had no tangible reason for doing so and therefore could

attribute their choice to their own goodness and acquire moral credentials.

In Study 2, we tested the generalizability of the Study 1 results in two ways. First, we attempted to generalize the results by using an additional dependent variable that assesses participants' tolerance for the prejudiced behaviors of the racist police unit described in the scenario. Arguably, with the job suitability measure in Study 1, it is possible that some participants preferred a White job candidate over a Black job candidate for the racist organization simply because they feared for the well-being of a Black employee. Another measure could more directly assess how the participant felt about the racist behavior of the organization.

In addition to an alternative dependent variable, we conducted Study 2 to see if the results of Study 1 were replicated with a target ethnic group that is less commonly studied in the academic literature—Hispanic individuals. Studying prejudice against racial and ethnic groups other than Black people is important because the content, strength, and valence of stereotypes can differ depending on the particular group (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Indeed, recent research has revealed differential levels of comfort in condoning or condemning prejudice against various stigmatized groups (e.g., Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002; Zitek & Hebl, 2007). Across a series of studies assessing the acceptability of prejudice and discrimination against a variety of groups, Crandall et al. (2002) found that people tended to rate prejudice and discrimination against Black people as being *less* acceptable than prejudice against Hispanic people. Although the reason for these differing norms is not entirely clear, they may partially stem from the especially troubled U.S. history of slavery and racial relations between Black and White people.

Given Crandall et al.'s (2002) findings that the norms against Black racism were stronger than norms against Hispanic racism, we anticipated that the role of choice in establishing credentials might be more important for Black rather than Hispanic targets. In other words, people may be less sensitive of (or wary of) appearing racist when the situation involves Hispanic individuals than Black individuals. Thus, in Study 2, given that people feel more comfortable stereotyping Hispanics, we predicted that choice may not be as important of a factor in establishing credentials as it was for Study 1 when the target was Black.

Method

Participants. As in Study 1, four experimenters (two women, two men) individually approached potential participants at various public locations in Houston, Texas, and requested their participation in a brief questionnaire. The overall response rate was approximately 80%, with a total of 27 female and 36 male participants (and 3 participants who did not specify their gender), ages 18 to 66 ($Mdn = 25$). All participants indicated that they were White, with the exception of 1

individual who did not specify ethnicity and subsequently was excluded from the analyses.

Design and procedure. As in Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: (a) forced choice (instructed), (b) free choice, or (c) control. Participants were (a) instructed to write about a positive experience with a Hispanic individual ($n = 22$), (b) allowed to choose whether to write about a positive or negative experience ($n = 21$), or (c) given no writing assignment ($n = 22$). Participants in the free-choice condition circled either the word *positive* or the word *negative* to indicate their choice. As in Study 1, only one participant chose to write about a negative experience and thus this individual was excluded from analyses.

Next, participants read the same ambiguously racist scenario adapted from Monin and Miller (2001) that was used in Study 1 (modifying for race). In this scenario, participants imagined themselves as the chief of police responsible for recruiting new officers to join a force that is exclusively White and has a history of hostility toward Hispanic individuals.

Measures

Job suitability. Consistent with Study 1 and Monin and Miller (2001), participants indicated whether the position described would be better suited for an individual of a particular ethnic background on a scale ranging from 1 (*much better for a Hispanic*) to 7 (*much better for a White*).

Tolerance for prejudice. Second, participants responded to an additional eight items ($\alpha = .73$) that were designed to reflect tolerance for the prejudice referred to in the scenario, including "The police officers who openly express negative attitudes about Hispanics should be reprimanded" and "I feel sorry for Hispanics in this police force." Some items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated greater tolerance for prejudice. The entire scale can be found in the appendix.

Results and Discussion

A MANOVA was first conducted on the job suitability and tolerance for prejudice variables with experimental condition as the independent variable. Wilks's Lambda was marginally significant (.98, $p = .11$), and Roy's largest root was statistically significant (.12, $p < .05$), so separate one-way ANOVAs were run on each of the dependent variables. Experimental condition was not significantly related to job suitability ratings, $F(2, 61) = 0.45$, $p > .10$, but the pattern of means was consistent with the evaluation items such that participants in the control condition tended to express less prejudice ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.67$) than participants in the free-choice condition ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.63$). Experimental condition was significantly related to the tolerance for prejudice scale, $F(2, 62) = 3.17$, $p < .05$. t tests revealed that individuals in the free-choice condition expressed greater tolerance

for prejudice ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.84$) than did individuals in the control condition ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.83$), $t = -2.76$, $p < .01$, but the ratings did not differ significantly from those individuals in the forced-choice writing assignment condition ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.84$).

The results from Study 2 show some important departures from those of Study 1. With regard to the job suitability measure, the results of Study 2 did not generalize from Study 1. Although the pattern of means mirrored those of Study 1, the results were not statistically significant; participants did not differentially prefer White over Hispanic job applicants regardless of their study condition. As mentioned previously, it is possible that all participants regardless of condition did not feel as threatened by being perceived as racist as had participants in Study 1 who were asked to make a decision comparing Black and White applicants. In short, participants may be more sensitive about Black–White racism than Hispanic–White racism (see Crandall et al., 2002; Zitek & Hebl, 2007).

Results from the tolerance for prejudice scale, however, presented a somewhat different story; participants who were in the free-choice condition and chose to write about a positive experience with a Hispanic person subsequently were more likely to condone prejudiced actions than were participants who did not have the opportunity to describe an experience with a Hispanic person. However, participants in the forced-choice condition who were *instructed* to describe a positive experience fell somewhere between the control group and the free-choice group in their expressions of prejudice but did not differ significantly from either. The difference in the results between the job suitability measure and the tolerance for prejudice scale might be attributable to the more sensitive nature of the questions in the tolerance for prejudice scale. As mentioned previously, participants might not be afraid to show preference for the White candidate over the Hispanic candidate because they could justify their decision as protecting the applicant from the racist organization. However, tolerating or condoning the racism of the organization is a different story and more closely reflects the participants' own biases. Thus, to feel safe in expressing tolerance for the racist organization, participants first needed to obtain moral credentials. The only participants who clearly obtained these credentials were those who were freely able to choose to write about a positive experience with a Hispanic individual beforehand.

Study 3

Both Study 1 and Study 2 explored the role of choice in citing positive experiences with minority members as a way to establish moral credentials. Although some differential results emerged based on whether the minority group in question was Black or Hispanic, both studies supported the notion that free choice is an important factor in whether credentials are established.

In Study 3, we wanted to delve further into the nature of choice, test the insufficient justification explanation, and assess whether the impact of choice could be lessened if participants believed that their choice could be seen as self-serving and therefore inauthentic. In Studies 1 and 2, participants in the free-choice condition had no blatant external incentive (i.e., insufficient justification) for opting to describe a positive experience with a minority. We reasoned, but did not explicitly test, the desire to appear egalitarian as a motivation for describing a positive experience with an ethnic minority. In Study 3, we continue to give some participants a choice as to whether to describe a positive experience with a minority member, but we test the insufficient justification explanation by adding one of two external incentives (i.e., incentive to avoid appearing prejudiced, incentive to avoid personal failures) that should provide more sufficient justification than in Studies 1 and 2. It is possible that even a small incentive could remove the power of the free-choice condition because the incentive would provide sufficient justification and consequently taint the authenticity of the moral credentials. In short, we wanted to know whether participants still obtained moral credentials through choosing to write about a positive experience with a minority member *if that choice also resulted in some self-gain*. We predicted that incentivized participants would not be credentialed because they would realize that their choice could be interpreted as reflecting their own self-interests as opposed to altruism and authenticity.

In Study 3 we also added a condition in which we instructed participants to write about a *negative* experience with a minority member. We did this to tease apart the importance of choice from the valence of the writing task. Even though Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that people who freely chose to write about positive experiences were more credentialed than other people, we were interested in whether people instructed to write about a positive experience were more credentialed than people instructed to write about a negative experience. If free choice is necessary to the process of moral credentialing then there should be no difference in the participants in the forced-choice conditions; participants would realize that their writings offer no reflection of their own views. However, if free choice is *important* but not *essential*, then it is possible that people who were instructed to write about positive experiences would be more credentialed than those people instructed to write about negative experiences. In that case, we can assume that participants would feel that even the instructed writings would be perceived as representing their own views.

Method

Participants. Students in a business course in a California university were invited to participate in this study in exchange for course extra credit. Students were also able to recruit a friend or family member to participate in the study for additional

extra credit. A total of 86 women and 61 men, ages 18 to 59 ($Mdn = 23$), agreed to participate in the online study. Approximately 43% indicated that their ethnicity was Caucasian, and an additional 40% indicated a Hispanic ethnicity, 15% indicated an Asian ethnicity, and 3% indicated a Native American background. The 4 participants who indicated a Black ethnicity were excluded from analysis.

Design and procedure. The study is a 2 (valence: positive experience, negative experience) \times 2 (choice: forced choice, free choice) \times 2 (incentive: avoiding prejudice incentive, avoiding personal failure incentive) between-subjects design. Similar to the procedures of Study 1 and 2, participants engaged in a writing activity before evaluating a hypothetical police department in which an ambiguously racist event took place. Participants were assigned to write about a positive or negative experience with a Black individual or were given the choice about whether to write about a positive or negative experience. Participants in the free-choice condition circled either the word *positive* or the word *negative* to indicate their choice.

Participants also read either “you might like to know that people who write about a negative experience *tend to be more prejudiced than people who write about a positive experience*” (avoiding prejudice incentive) or “*tend to be less successful in their professional lives and less happy in their personal lives than people who choose to write about a positive experience*” (avoiding personal failure incentive). As in the previous studies, the few participants who chose to write about negative experiences (including 1 person in the condition emphasizing personal failure and 10 people in the condition emphasizing prejudice) were excluded from analyses. Thus, the results are based on a sample size of 126 participants. Immediately on finishing their writing assignment, participants read the same ambiguously racist scenario adapted from Monin and Miller (2001) presented in Studies 1 and 2.

Measures

Job suitability. Participants indicated whether the position described would be better suited for an individual of a particular ethnic background on a scale ranging from 1 (*much better for a Black person*) to 7 (*much better for a White person*).

Tolerance for prejudice. Participants responded to an additional ten items ($\alpha = .83$) that were designed to reflect prejudice with reference to the scenario, including “The police officers who openly express negative attitudes about Blacks should be reprimanded.” Some items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated greater tolerance of the racist police unit.

Results and Discussion

A MANOVA, which included all three independent variables, was run on the dependent variables of job suitability

and tolerance for prejudice. Given the theoretically relevant missing data in the Free Choice \times Negative Valence conditions, only two interactions were tested: (a) the interaction between the incentive variable (avoiding prejudice, avoiding personal failure) and the valence (positive, negative) variable and (b) the interaction between the incentive (personal failure, prejudice) variable and the choice (forced, free) variable. Given the larger sample size in this study compared to Studies 1 and 2, we were able to enter participant gender and age as covariates to ensure that the conclusions were not affected by these demographic characteristics. The only significant multivariate effect was a two-way interaction between the incentive (personal failure, prejudice) variable and the valence (positive, negative) variable, Wilks's Lambda = .96, $F(2, 130) = 2.9$, $p = .05$.

Separate univariate ANOVAs were run on each of the dependent variables. Job suitability was not significantly related to any of the independent variables or their interactions. However, the manipulations did affect tolerance for prejudice; a two-way interaction between the incentive variable and the valence variable emerged, $F(1, 117) = 3.30$, $p = .05$. Planned comparisons suggest that individuals in the avoiding personal failure incentive condition tended to express less tolerance for prejudice when they wrote about a negative experience ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.28$) than did individuals in the avoiding prejudice condition who wrote about a negative experience ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 42) = 1.97$, $p < .10$. Individuals in the avoiding personal failure condition tended to express more tolerance of prejudice when they wrote about a positive experience ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.20$) than when they wrote about a negative experience ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.63$), but none of the other condition comparisons was statistically significant.

Importantly, unlike Study 1 and Study 2, the power of free choice no longer differentiated those who were credentialed in Study 3. Participants who freely chose to write about a positive experience with a Black individual were no more credentialed than participants who were instructed to write about a positive experience. In short, the free choice appears to be tainted by the incentive; although the participants had the choice of whether to write about a negative or positive experience, they also had a self-interested reason (sufficient justification) for choosing the positive experience.

Study 4

In addition to assessing the difference in credentialing between people who are able to freely choose to write about a positive experience versus people who are instructed to do so, in Study 4 we wanted to examine whether the closeness of the relationship with the minority member described affects moral credentialing. More specifically, in Study 4, we investigated if describing a positive relationship with a *close friend* garnered moral credentialing more than describing a positive

relationship with a *casual acquaintance*. Having a close relationship with someone of another race presumably means more than simply knowing, or casually interacting with, an outgroup member (hence the saying “some of my best friends are . . .” as opposed to “some people I know are . . .”). Thus, bringing to mind the closeness of the positive relationship may heighten awareness of one’s sense of moral good as being unbiased and consequently increase the likelihood of establishing moral credentialing.

Research on the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1958) consistently highlights the critical role of *personal and intimate* interactions with racial outgroup members in reducing prejudice (e.g., Amir, 1976; Pettigrew, 1998). Indeed, meta-analytic research shows that having outgroup friendships is associated with lower prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2006). Perhaps even more than having outgroup friends, dating an outgroup member is also indicative of low prejudice (cf. Crandall et al., 2002; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Together this body of research suggests that close relationships may be a powerful factor in “proving” one’s credentials as being nonracist, as people with closer interracial relationships typically do exhibit lower prejudice. Participants who write about an experience with a Black friend actually are communicating much more than participants who write about an experience with a Black acquaintance. The former indicates a choice to engage in an ongoing association with someone of another race whereas the latter may indicate nothing more than happening to work or live in the vicinity of a racial minority member.

In line with the findings of Studies 1 and 2, we anticipated that choosing to write about a positive interaction with a Black *friend* would result in the highest level of credentialing more so than choosing to write about a positive interaction with a Black *acquaintance*. The choice of writing something positive and the ability to point to a close relationship with a Black person should give participants confidence that they have “proven” that they harbor no racial biases.

Method

Participants. Participants were 123 students at a small private northeastern university (66 males, 57 females) who were recruited from social science courses in exchange for course credit. Of these participants, 8 were removed from the data analyses because they were Black and 4 were removed for either not following instructions or being extreme outliers (i.e., more than two standard deviations from the mean) on the study measures. Thus, the data are based on 111 participants (61 males, 50 females).

Design and procedure. This experiment features a 2 (choice: forced choice, free choice) \times 2 (valence: positive, negative) \times 2 (closeness: close friend, acquaintance) between-participants design. Similar to the procedures in Studies 1 to 3, participants engaged in a writing activity before evaluating a hypothetical

police department in which an ambiguously racist event took place. Participants were assigned to write about a positive or negative experience with a Black individual or were given the choice whether to write about a positive or negative experience. Participants in the free-choice condition circled either the word *positive* or the word *negative* to indicate their choice. To investigate if the closeness of the relationship described in the writing influences moral credentialing, half of the participants were assigned to write about a “close friend or someone you know well” whereas the remaining half were assigned to write about an “acquaintance or someone you do not know well.”

Measures

Job suitability. Participants indicated whether the position described would be better suited for an individual of a particular ethnic background on a scale ranging from 1 (*much better for a Black person*) to 7 (*much better for a White person*).

Tolerance for prejudice. Participants responded to 10 items ($\alpha = .80$) designed to reflect the extent to which they condoned the racist behavior of the police unit. Some items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated greater tolerance of the racist police unit.

Results and Discussion

We ran a MANOVA on the measures of job suitability and tolerance for prejudice with choice, valence, and closeness as independent variables. Given theoretically expected missing data in the Free-Choice \times Negative Valence conditions, we included two-way interactions for the Choice \times Closeness effect as well as the Closeness \times Valence effect. As in Study 3, participant gender and age were entered as covariates to ensure that the conclusions were not affected by these demographic characteristics. The results of the MANOVA show a significant multivariate main effect for closeness, Wilks’s Lambda = .75, $F(2, 107) = 18.28$, $p < .00$. There was also a significant multivariate main effect for valence, Wilks’s Lambda = .86, $F(2, 107) = 8.79$, $p < .00$. In addition, there was a significant multivariate effect for the two-way interaction between closeness and valence, Wilks’s Lambda = .95, $F(2, 107) = 3.08$, $p = .05$. Separate univariate ANOVAs were run on each of the dependent variables.

Job suitability: Choice and closeness. There were no significant main effects for choice or closeness, nor was there a significant interaction between choice and closeness on the job suitability measure.

Job suitability: Valence and closeness. There was a significant main effect for valence, $F(1, 105) = 5.77$, $p = .01$, such that those who wrote about a negative experience ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.80$) were more likely to show a preference for the White applicant than those who wrote about a positive experience ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.72$). These effects were qualified

by a significant interaction between valence and closeness, $F(1, 105) = 4.77, p = .03$.

Planned comparisons showed that those who wrote about a negative experience with a Black friend ($M = 4.71, SD = 0.78$) were more likely to prefer the White applicant than those who wrote a positive experience with a Black friend ($M = 4.12, SD = 0.78$), $F(1, 105) = 9.78, p = .02$. Looking at those who wrote negative essays, the simple effects analysis showed that those who wrote about a Black friend ($M = 4.71, SD = 0.78$) were more likely to prefer the White applicant than those who wrote about a Black acquaintance ($M = 4.31, SD = 0.79$), $F(1, 105) = 3.85, p = .05$. Contrary to our prediction, when looking at those who wrote about positive experiences, those who wrote about a Black friend were no more likely to prefer the White applicant than those who wrote about a Black acquaintance ($p > .3$). In addition, writing about a positive or negative experience with an acquaintance did not influence preferences ($p > .8$).

Tolerance for prejudice: Choice and closeness. There was no main effect of choice on tolerance for prejudice, nor was there a significant interaction between choice and closeness. However, a significant main effect for closeness emerged, $F(1, 105) = 7.05, p = .01$. As predicted, those who wrote about a Black friend ($M = 3.03, SD = 0.99$) were more tolerant of the racist police department than those who wrote about a Black acquaintance ($M = 2.52, SD = 0.73$).

Tolerance for prejudice: Valence and closeness. A significant main effect for closeness, $F(1, 105) = 11.45$, was qualified by a marginally significant interaction between valence and closeness, $F(1, 105) = 3.42, p < .07$.

Exploratory planned comparisons of this marginally significant interaction showed that those who wrote about a negative experience with a Black friend ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.15$) were more tolerant of the racist police department than those who wrote about a positive experience with a Black friend ($M = 2.78, SD = 0.80$), $F(1, 105) = 5.37, p = .02$. Looking at those who wrote about a negative experience, those who wrote about a Black friend ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.15$) were more tolerant of the racist police department than those who wrote about a Black acquaintance ($M = 2.51, SD = 0.68$), $F(1, 105) = 11.80, p = .00$. Contrary to our prediction, when looking at those who wrote about positive experiences, those who wrote about a Black friend were no more likely to express tolerance for the racist police department than those who wrote about a Black acquaintance ($p > .2$). In addition, when people wrote about an acquaintance, it made no difference whether the writings were positive or negative experience with regard to tolerance for prejudice ($p > .9$).

The results of Study 4 suggest that the closeness of the relationship matters, albeit not in exactly the same way that we predicted. In short, it appears that writing about a Black friend buys participants moral credentials more than writing about a Black acquaintance regardless of whether the

participants wrote something positive *or* negative. In fact, people who wrote something negative about a Black friend were even more likely to show preference for a White candidate and tolerate prejudice than people who wrote something positive about a Black friend.

One potential explanation for this finding is that context can influence the extent to which people exhibit stereotyping and prejudice (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001; Skorinko & Sinclair, 2010; Wittenbrink, Park, & Judd, 2001). For instance, in one study, participants who saw a Black individual in a negative context (i.e., a ghetto) showed more automatic prejudice than participants who saw the same Black individual in a positive context (i.e., a church; see Wittenbrink et al., 2001). In Study 4, writing about a negative experience with a Black person might have primed and reinforced negative stereotypes toward Black people, and subsequently the negative context led to increased tolerance toward prejudice. In addition, the negativity of the experience may have been heightened when writing about a close friend compared to writing about a casual acquaintance.

Interestingly, there was no significant main effect of choice in Study 4. Exploratory analyses did reveal that for participants who wrote about positive experiences with acquaintances, those who chose to write about the positive experience showed more preference for a White candidate ($M = 4.5, SD = 0.78$) than those who were instructed ($M = 4.1, SD = 0.45$), $F(1, 32) = 4.28, p < .05$. With regard to people who described an experience with a friend, the fact that choice was insignificant is not entirely surprising. Even if participants had been *instructed* to write about a positive interaction with a Black friend, the fact that they do in fact have a Black friend is indicative of free choice on the part of the participant. In other words, even if they did not freely choose to discuss the positive interaction, they did freely choose to have that person as a friend, so that in and of itself was sufficient to establish moral credentials. In sum, Study 4 provides some support for the “some of my best friends . . .” strategy; participants in this study did, in fact, garner moral credentials through their associations with minorities.

Study 5

The previous studies demonstrate that people can obtain moral credentials by discussing their associations with minority members. Moreover, these studies show the ramifications of free choice and insufficient justification in expressing those experiences as well as the closeness of the relationship described. In Study 5, we addressed the issue of choice more directly by asking whether people choose to refer to relationships with stigmatized individuals *strategically* or intentionally use those credentials later to avoid being perceived as racist. More specifically, we assessed whether people strategically attempted to credential themselves when they were

aware that something they were about to do might be perceived as racist. Our hunch was that people *do* use their associations with minority members strategically to express prejudice without the fear of being perceived as racist. For example, people who want to criticize President Obama (or the NAACP, or affirmative action, or even a Black friend) might try to preemptively prove they are not racist so their criticism would not be interpreted as such. The real-world analogy would be the statement “some of my best friends are Black, *but . . .*” which is the speaker’s attempt to establish credentials that in turn free him or her to express something that might be interpreted as racist.

Given that Study 4 shows that friendships garner stronger credentials than casual acquaintances, we anticipated that participants in Study 5 who were aware they might later be perceived as racist would describe associations with minority *friends* as opposed to minority *strangers*. We also anticipated that this tendency would be less pronounced among participants for whom concerns about appearing racist were less salient.

Method

Participants. Students in an organizational psychology course in Houston, Texas, were invited to complete a questionnaire in exchange for course credit. To be eligible for participation, students had to be working full-time in addition to attending school. If the students were not employed full-time, they instead gave the questionnaire to another working adult. A total of 231 (52% female) individuals completed the questionnaire. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 70 (*Mdn* = 33). Nearly all (95.7%) were White, with an additional 2 participants who indicated that they were Black, 2 participants who indicated that their ethnicity was Hispanic, and 6 individuals who did not indicate their ethnicity. Because the focus of the manipulation in this study related to Hispanic individuals, the 2 participants who indicated a Hispanic background were eliminated from analyses, yielding a sample size of 229.

Design and procedure. This study is a 2 (choice: free choice, forced choice) \times 2 (notification: negative, positive) \times 2 (closeness: friend, stranger) between-subjects design. All participants learned that the purpose of the study was “to try to better understand people’s experiences with diversity in the workforce.” After the cover story, participants in the “notify-positive” condition learned that they would have the opportunity to write about a positive experience with a minority member but were not informed about any other tasks they would perform in the study. However, the participants in the “notify-negative” condition learned that they would later write about something that could possibly be construed as negative toward Hispanic people. More specifically, these participants were informed that they would

need to argue against quotas in employment for Hispanic individuals. They read,

Hard quotas are used when a specific number of positions are set aside for minority individuals regardless of qualifications. For a large portion of this questionnaire, you will be asked to compile arguments against hard quotas that currently favor many Hispanic individuals. . . . Before we have you complete this major part of the questionnaire, we will have you write about an experience with someone who is Hispanic.

All participants, regardless of the notification condition, were then asked to write about an experience with a Hispanic individual. Participants in the forced-choice conditions were assigned to write about either a friend or a stranger. Participants in the free-choice conditions were allowed to choose whether they were going to write about a close friend or a casual acquaintance; they were asked to indicate whether they would be writing about an experience with a friend/close acquaintance or a stranger/casual acquaintance who is Hispanic by circling *stranger* or *friend*. We expected that notify-negative participants in the free-choice condition would describe friendships with Hispanic individuals as opposed to mere acquaintances because being able to cite a Hispanic friend would provide stronger evidence of moral credentials than merely citing a Hispanic acquaintance.

After writing about a Hispanic individual, all participants wrote a brief argument against affirmative action programs for Hispanic workers. We anticipated that individuals who felt credentialed by their first writing assignment would write stronger arguments against affirmative action than individuals who felt they still needed to establish themselves as egalitarian. To assess the content of the written arguments, we used a software program that analyzes the emotional and structural components of verbal and written speech samples (i.e., Linguistic Inquiry Word Count; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). We were particularly interested in the degree to which participants used language that reflects emotion in their arguments; the use of affective language is an indicator of personalization and persuasion. Given research on persuasion that suggests the importance of emotional as opposed to cognitive appeals (e.g., DeSteno, Petty, Rucker, Wegener, & Braverman, 2004), we anticipated that credentialed participants would use more emotional language when arguing against hard quotas than would uncredentialed participants.

Results and Discussion

To test the hypothesis that closer friendships would be evoked when it was clear that moral credentials were needed, we conducted a χ^2 test. Confirming our expectations, among participants who could freely choose whether to write about

a friend or stranger, participants in the notify-negative condition (i.e., warned that they might appear prejudiced because they would argue against hard quotas) tended to choose to write about a friend ($n = 32$) more often than a stranger ($n = 13$), compared to participants who were in the notify-positive condition (i.e., not warned that they might appear prejudiced; $n = 27$; $n = 21$), $\chi^2(93) = 2.22, p < .10$.

We also conducted an ANOVA, with the variables of choice, notification, and closeness as independent variables, on the extent to which participants used affective language in their arguments against affirmative action. Given the findings of DeSteno et al. (2004), we anticipated that individuals who felt that they had established moral credentials would use affect in their arguments against affirmative action. No main effects emerged, but a two-way interaction between notification and choice was significant, $F(1, 212) = 4.04, p < .05$. The pattern of means suggests that individuals who are notified that they may appear prejudiced and do not have a choice in writing assignment use more emotion in their arguments against affirmative action ($M = 5.10, SD = 2.90$) than individuals who have a choice ($M = 3.99, SD = 3.00$), $t = 2.08, p < .05$. The means in the no-notification condition did not differ significantly from each other ($t = 0.21, p > .10$).

Importantly, this was qualified by a significant three-way interaction among all of the independent variables, $F(1, 212) = 5.38, p < .05$. In the no-choice conditions, none of the means were significantly different from each other (all $ps > .10$). In the choice conditions, participants who chose to write about a Hispanic friend used comparable amounts of affective language in the notify-negative ($M = 4.12, SD = 2.80$) and notify-positive ($M = 4.62, SD = 3.46$) conditions, $t = 0.60, p > .10$. This suggests that choosing to write about a friend yielded comparable credentials regardless of whether or not participants were warned about appearing prejudiced. However, participants who chose to write about a Hispanic acquaintance used more affective language in the notify-negative condition ($M = 6.59, SD = 4.04$) than in the notify-positive condition ($M = 3.22, SD = 2.14$), $t = -3.18, p < .01$. That is, when participants were aware that they would have to argue against affirmative action and they had chosen to write about an acquaintance on the previous task, they used emotion in their arguments. This suggests that individuals who chose to write about a stranger when they were aware that they would be arguing against affirmative action may feel they have garnered some credentials. In addition, in light of the findings of Study 3, individuals who chose to write about a Hispanic friend after prejudice was made salient to them through the notification manipulation may have felt that their choice was less authentic and less indicative of moral credentials.

Together, the results support the notion that people strategically attempt to acquire moral credentials when there is a threat of appearing racist. Participants who knew that they would be making racially loaded statements (and thus might be perceived as racist) presumably believed that credentials

could be acquired better through citing associations with Hispanic friends versus Hispanic strangers. The bias for describing an experience with a friend as opposed to an experience with a stranger was less pronounced among participants who were not warned that they would be making racially loaded statements. In addition, supporting the findings of Study 3, these results suggest that when individuals choose to write about a friend when prejudice is highly salient (i.e., when they are notified that they may appear prejudiced), they may not feel licensed to make strong arguments against affirmative action.

General Discussion

The five studies presented here demonstrate that people acquire moral credentials through their associations with stigmatized others and that free choice is important in establishing credentials, both in the volitional choice to discuss positive associations with minority members and in the volitional choice to have close relationships with minority members. In general, it appears that *choosing* to describe positive experiences and associations with minorities is a more powerful means of obtaining credentials than describing positive experiences and associations because a researcher has requested it. Relating this to the insufficient justification explanation (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Hobden & Olson, 1994), those *assigned* to write positive descriptions most likely felt more sufficient justification for their behavior.

Moreover, when free choice was “tainted” by a sufficient justification via an external motivation (either avoiding being prejudiced or avoiding personal failures in Study 3 or making prejudice salient in Study 5), credentials were not established any more than when participants were in a forced-choice situation. These findings suggest that moral credentials are more likely to be established when there is insufficient justification for one’s behavior. With regard to the relationships people choose to have with outgroup members, close relationships with racial minorities were shown to garner credentials more than casual relationships. Interestingly, even when people described a *negative* experience with a Black friend, the credentialing effect was observed.

In addition, moral credentialing seems to be a strategic process: Warning participants that they would be making statements that might be construed as racist resulted in them being more likely than unwarned participants to try to acquire moral credentials. Specifically, warned participants tried to establish that they had Hispanic friends by choosing to write about one such Hispanic friend as opposed to choosing to write about a Hispanic stranger.

Limitations and Future Research

Before closing, we do wish to point out several important limitations and issues that could be examined further and

elucidated in future research in this area. We focused primarily on *racial* associations in this study, but future research is needed to ascertain whether these findings would generalize to gender or other types of diversity. Monin and Miller (2001) did find credentialing effects with regard to gender; however, it is possible that credentialing by association might yield different results. Associations between men and women are more common than those between members of different racial groups. Depending on the particular region, race and ethnicity may be relatively homogenous whereas men and women coexist in every society. Thus, it is arguably less meaningful from a credentialing standpoint for a man to say that he has female friends than it would be for a White person in a racially homogeneous region to refer to a Black or Hispanic friend.

In addition, future research should investigate the role of individual differences in moral credentialing. Monin and Miller (2001) found no moderating effects of individual differences, leading to the conclusion that “moral credentials affect people equally, irrespective of their motivation for responding without prejudice” (p. 41). However, racial attitudes moderated the credentialing effect in another study (Effron et al., 2009) such that only prejudiced participants subsequently discriminated against a Black organization after they had been credentialed. Thus, these mixed findings suggest that, in some cases, individual differences in prejudice influence the extent to which individuals discriminate and use credentialing, and future research can further investigate the underlying mechanisms of these contradictory findings.

Findings related to free choice in the current study may have applications for future research in areas beyond the context of moral credentialing. Manipulations that require participants to “think of a time” are becoming increasingly popular; this article suggests that some effects could be made even stronger if they were preceded by choices that vary in appeal. In other words, to the extent that free-choice descriptions seem more authentic to participants than instructed descriptions, researchers may wish to give participants choice in these manipulations. Overall, the current research is a novel extension of moral credentialing theory and reaffirms not only that moral credentialing can increase expressions of racial bias but also that credentials can be established by way of citing positive experiences and associations with minority members.

Appendix

Items for Tolerance for Diversity

1. The police officers who openly express negative attitudes about Black people should be reprimanded. (R)
2. This police unit would be a hostile working environment for Black people. (R)
3. A Black officer would not get along well with other officers in this unit. (R)

4. I feel sorry for Black people in this police force. (R)
5. A Black officer would not be respected by the members of this town. (R)
6. Policies to protect Black people should be initiated in this application process. (R)
7. I feel bad about how Black people are treated in this town. (R)
8. Diversity programs should be instituted in this department. (R)
- 9.^a It is appropriate for the officers to tell jokes about Black people.
- 10.^a I am saddened by the attitudes toward Black people in this town. (R)

Note: In Study 2, “Black” was changed to “Hispanic” in all of the items. (R) indicates items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated greater tolerance for prejudice.

a. Items added in Studies 3 and 4.

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