



The Macbeth Effect May Not Occur Vicariously

Noah R. Reed
Daniela C. Estrada
Brianna M. Pisauru

Advisors: Dr. Liz Majka and
Dr. Merrilee Guenther

Background

The Mind and Body Are Connected:

- Religious practices (“wash away your sins”)
- Morality and bodily purity
- Maintaining a moral self-image
- Metaphors: “Getting your hands dirty”, etc.

Macbeth Effect: Phenomenon wherein people feel the need to physically cleanse themselves after performing an immoral act (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006)

Origin: Shakespeare's play "Macbeth" “Out damned spot!”

Research Question: Does the Macbeth Effect emerge vicariously?

Hypothesis

People will express a greater desire to physically cleanse themselves after viewing others in moral distress (vs. a control condition)



Method

Participants

- 43 Participants (86% college students)
- Participants were tested individually online using Qualtrics.

Procedure

- 1) Manipulation Check
“How morally distressed did the character feel?” ($\alpha = .77$)
- 2) Self-Rating of Moral Distress
“How morally distressed do you feel?” ($\alpha = .60$)
- 3) Desire to Cleanse: Cleaning Products Preference
Participants were shown 10 products and asked to rank their interest in them (just top 4) (Gollwitzer & Melzer, 2012)
 - 5 cleaning products and 5 non-cleaning products



Cleaning Products Preference Items

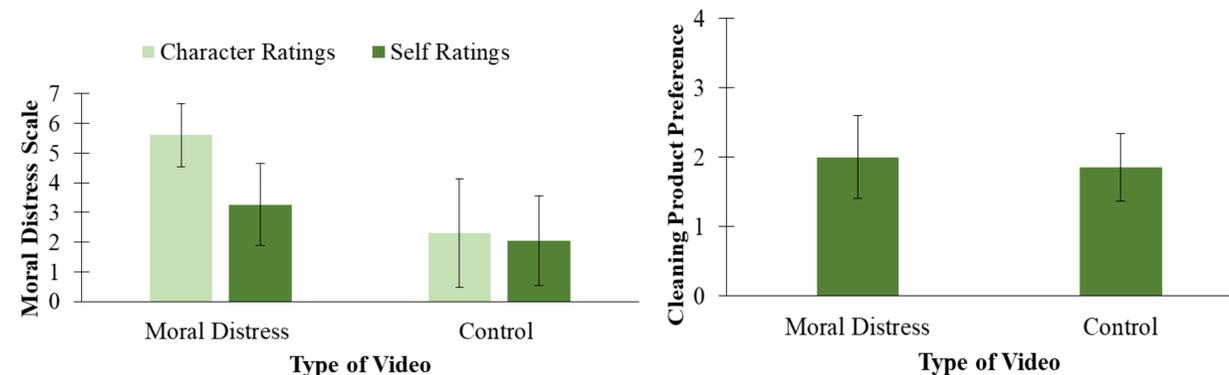
Morally Distressing Video



Control Video



Results



Note: Only the independent samples t- tests for moral distress (for both character and self-ratings) were statistically significant, both $ps < 0.05$.

Discussion

Recap of Findings:

- Hypothesis not supported: No vicarious Macbeth Effect emerged—after observing someone else in moral distress, participants did not report a greater desire for products related to physical cleansing.
- Results are not consistent with vicarious moral cleansing effects (Kouchaki, 2011).

Future Research

- IRB approval for videogame study
- Lab setting
- Larger sample size

References

Zhong, C. B., & Liljenquist, K. (2006). Washing away your sins: Threatened morality and physical cleansing. *Science*, 313, 1451-1452.

Gollwitzer, M., & Melzer, A. (2012). Macbeth and the joystick: Evidence for moral cleansing after playing a violent video game. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48, 1356-1360.

Kouchaki, M. (2011). Vicarious moral licensing: The influence of others' past moral actions on moral behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Acknowledgements



Elmhurst College KEYSTONE Project
KEYs to Success Through year ONE (KEYSTONE) Project is an Elmhurst College initiative funded by the National Science Foundation to increase the retention and success of 1st year students in the STEM disciplines. Award #DUE 1160956