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Title of the commentary: From washing hands to washing consciences and polishing reputations

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Abstract

While Lee and Schwartz (in press) propose grounded procedures of separation as an explanation for physical cleansing in various domains (e.g., washing one's hands), we suggest that separation can also account for behavioral cleansing aimed at washing consciences and polishing reputations. We discuss this extension in terms of degrees of behavioral cleansing, motivations and intentions behind cleansing, and social settings.

Main text

Lee and Schwartz (in press) posit that separation, as a grounded procedure, is a main driver of cleansing. In doing so, they relate physical cleansing to the moral domain; for instance, they review empirical evidence suggesting that moral violations tend to elicit cleansing behavior (e.g., Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). While Lee and Schwartz focus on the antecedents and consequences of physical cleansing (most of it symbolic), we propose to extend the scope of their theoretical contribution to include behavioral cleansing, specifically, the washing of consciences in the moral domain and the polishing of reputations in social settings.

Degrees of behavioral cleansing. Whereas symbolic cleansing (of the kind advocated by Lee and Schwartz) is only metaphorically related to a past misdeed, behavioral cleansing refers to behaviors that compensate in one domain for a misdeed performed in another (West and Zhong, 2015). It has been operationalized, for instance, through the amount individuals donate to a charity (e.g., Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009 or Légeret, 2020). Donations have the advantage of being continuous, thereby providing more information than dichotomized variables and allowing for sharper tests with more power to disentangle competing hypotheses. Note that variables capturing symbolic and physical cleansing can also be continuous, ranging, for instance, from simply rinsing fingers to washing hands thoroughly.

Motivation and intentions. Just as cleansing can be performed to different degrees, the motivations and intentions behind it can vary too. It is only a small step from removing physical or moral dirt to acts of polishing and shining. Polishing and shining can be observed

in both the physical domain (cosmetics and make-up) and in the social domain (managing one's reputation). Such activities are ubiquitous, both for individuals and organizations. For example, many organizations engage in "greenwashing" – the act of superficially signaling interest in social and environmental issues (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Laufer, 2003; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). While some individuals or organizations might engage in this activity to compensate for past misdeeds, others may do so for opportunistic reasons even when there is no need to reduce internal dissonances: They simply seek to bring their public image closer to the expectations of their audience.

Separations and reparations in social settings. It is hard to define morality universally, partly because it is grounded both in the self (i.e., an individual's values and identity; Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007) and societal norms (Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011). For some situations, these two pillars may suggest different behaviors, thereby fueling moral conflict. Consequently, an observable behavior may be misaligned with an identity, with societal norms, or both. A misalignment constitutes an unstable state, which may be overcome through distancing, or another kind of separation, from past misdeeds, from one's identity, and/or from one's social group. While Lee and Schwarz focus on entities, events, and experiences in their theorization of separation, we propose applying the notion of separation to social settings, thereby distinguishing between: (1) the individual and his or her social environment, be it society at large or more localized formations; (2) observable behavior and underlying identity; and (3) whether the observable behavior is aligned with societal norms or not. Figure 1 displays conflicts that can be characterized as combinations of these three distinctions. Such conflicts can be explained by mismatches and/or separations, and can eventually also be resolved by separations or reparations.

These resolutions may be categorized as follows (see the eight cells of Figure 1). *Identity reparation:* A mismatch between behavior and identity within a given individual (cognitive dissonance; Festinger, 1957), specifically if the behavior is aligned with societal norms, may be resolved by changing the individual's identity so as to make it consistent with the individual's behavior and with society (cell 1). Similarly, if the individual's behavior is misaligned with both the identity of a given group and societal norms, then the individual may engage in cleansing or polishing, for instance by signaling values that correspond to that group's identity (cell 4). Likewise, if there is a mismatch between a group's behavior and an individual's identity, and the group's behavior is aligned with societal norms, then the individual's identity may have to be adapted (cell 5). Finally, if a group's behavior conflicts with its own identity and if this behavior is aligned with societal norms, a new group identity may emerge (cell 7). *Identity separation:* In contrast, if a particular behavior is not aligned with societal norms, the individual may condemn his or her own past behavior and distance his or her self from it, that is, engage in cleansing, in order to protect his or her identity (cell 2). *Social reparation:* If the behavior of a group is misaligned both with its own identity and with societal norms, then that group is likely to engage in cleansing or polishing (cell 8). Such reparations at group level can also combine deep and superficial washing; that is, a combination of moral cleansing to solve the internal conflict and greenwashing to reestablish a positive moral identity in the eyes of society. *Social separation:* If an individual's behavior conflicts with his or her group's identity, group members will be alerted. If the individual fails to appease these members or even bluntly refuses to adapt to the group—which may be facilitated if the behavior is in line with society—he or she may be excluded from the group (cell 3). If the group's behavior is not aligned with societal norms, then cleansing on the side of the individual may not be sufficient. Rather, the individual's discomfort arising from such a mismatch may grow internally until it eventually erupts, resulting, for instance, in whistleblowing (Near & Miceli, 1985, 1995). Even though the whistleblower typically aims

at changing (i.e., repairing) certain of the group’s practices, it typically leads to the separation of the group and the whistleblower (cell 6).

Figure 1: Potential solutions to conflicts occurring within an individual, within a group, or between an individual and a group, depending on whether the behavior is aligned with societal norms.

		Is the past behavior aligned with societal norms?	Identity	
			Individual	Group
Behavior	Individual	Yes	1. Change of identity	3. Exclusion
		No	2. Cleansing	4. Cleansing or Polishing
	Group	Yes	5. Change of identity	7. Change of identity
		No	6. Whistleblowing	8. Cleansing or Greenwashing

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