RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Avatar Effect: The Harmful Consequences of Decision-Making through a 'Separate' Entity

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Abstract:

As we are in the midst of a global crisis, caused primarily by human activity, it is vital to ask, what leads us to make such ethically compromised decisions? This paper reveals a phenomenon that may cause an individual to loosen or lose their moral compass: the avatar effect. The case is made that there are frequent situations where individuals and groups can make decisions through—what appears to them as—a separate entity, and that through compounding underlying mechanisms, this can result in an increased sense of disconnection, compromised judgement, and harmful consequences.

Introduction

As we are in the midst of a human-caused global crisis (Cook et al, 2013; Cook et al, 2016), it is vital to ask ourselves, what leads us to make ethically-compromised decisions? Why do we make choices that harm the environment (Cook et al, 2013; Zhu et al, 2014; Chandrappa et al, 2015; Cook et al, 2016), others (Kaur et al, 2008; Trojan et al, 2011; Lin et al, 2018; Stone, 2019), and ourselves? (Klonsky et al, 2014; Lloyd-Richardson et al, 2015; Brådvik, 2018; Roh et al, 2018)

A uniting theme that appears in the research of harmful conduct is disconnection. For example, having connections with those around you decreases the potency of the bystander effect (Latané et al, 1969; Brody et al, 2016), fewer breaks in chains of production reduces consumer tolerance of unethical business practices (Macdonald, 2020a), and greater proximity to potential victims (Bandura, 1992; Mencl et al, 2009; Brody et al, 2016), eye contact (Valentine,

1980; Bull et al, 1981; Cañigueral et al, 2019), or even the mere image of eyes (Baillon et al, 2012; Francey et al, 2012; Bateson et al, 2013), can decrease the likelihood of unethical decision-making.

And on a more abstract level, participants primed via word games that include connection-related terminology (Macdonald, 2019; Macdonald, 2020b), and participants primed via images of connected stick figures (Macdonald, 2020c), were shown to be less likely to make unethical choices.

Therefore, when we are subject to systems, tools, or ideas that disconnect us from one another, our ethical behavior can significantly decrease. But what about disconnection from ourselves?

Moral disentanglement is suggested to also play a significant role in unethical conduct. As Albert Bandura notes, a key component to ethical conduct is the self-regulatory mechanisms tied to personal standards (Bandura, 2001). Bandura states that in addition to not wanting others to view us in a negative light, we also have a strong fear of self-condemnation (Bandura, 2002). In other words, we internally judge our behavior as it is also important what we think of ourselves. Just as we'd like others to behave in a morally responsible manner, we'd also like ourselves be in line with that vision. We'd like to be able to respect ourselves. As a result, people tend to strive to maintain a positive self-image, even when there is no risk of being found out (Allport, 1955; Rosenberg, 1979; Mazar et al, 2008; Sachdeva et al, 2009; Barkan et al, 2012; Shalvi et al, 2015).

Thus, how we frame our behavior can play a key role in moral conduct. If a decision can be framed in a way that is deemed as justified, then the immoral behaviour can be seen as excusable in context, thus preserving a positive self-image (Shalvi et al, 2015). Similarly, if one can absolve personal responsibility, such as deeming the situation as uncontrollable, then there is an increase in unchecked unethical conduct (Gottfredson et al, 1990; Baumeister et al, 2001; Trevino et al, 2006; Mead et al, 2009). Lower levels of guilt have also been strongly related to increased unethical behavior, again implying that a reduced sense of personal responsibility is a key underlining mechanism of unethical conduct (Karremans et al, 2005; Eisenberg, 2007; Tangney et al, 2007; Cohen et al, 2011; Cohen et al, 2012; Olthof, 2012; Xu et al, 2012; Czarna, 2014; Arli et al, 2016; Ackerman et al, 2017; Arli et al, 2017; Poless et al, 2018).

This led me to explore scenarios where one might be able to view themselves as another entity. Theoretically speaking, if one no longer viewed themselves as personally being involved in a given situation, then one could make unethical decisions without the judgment of others and themselves. In theory, this could have a compounding negative impact on morality. Someone operating as a 'separate' entity wouldn't need to be disconnected from others, or find a way to justify a situation, as from their perspective, they aren't personally involved in the situation. In other words, one might be able to enter a state of mind where they are acting through an avatar, like a video game.

Online avatar

A situation where we might see individuals temporarily view themselves as a separate entity is online, as individuals could 'become' an online avatar.

A related area, that is currently gathering attention due to the current scale of the problem, is cyberbullying (Hasebrink et al, 2009; Patchin et al, 2016; Hinduja et al, 2017; Lee et al, 2017; Fluck, 2018; Hinduja et al, 2019). By virtue

of the medium, several compounding factors may disconnect an online avatar from others and the outside world: anonymity, the absence of rules, and a lack of monitoring (Harrison, 2015). Yet while the inherent potential for anonymity has its implications (Moore et al, 2012; Vaillancourt et al, 2017; Coe, 2018; Young et al, 2018), there are also potential consequences of pseudonymity (Adeney, 2012; Coe, 2018; Maltby et al, 2018; Arrington, 2019). That is to say that just as an online user could hide their identity, they could also create or adopt a new identity. And as a result, in addition to being less observed by the outside world, they may also be less self-critical as they become a new entity, 'separate' from themselves.

When reviewing the research on cyberbullying, we can see that it is a rather complicated challenge. It isn't simply the case that when online one is essentially the same person but with a reduced fear of getting caught. When children bully online, they feel less shame, guilt, and compassion (Menesini and Camodeca, 2008; Pozzoli and Gini, 2010). They feel as though they are doing less wrong (Gini, 2006; Perren and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Menesini et al, 2013). Their perception significantly changes when they communicate as a different 'entity', and this can increase the likelihood of unethical conduct. As Bandura notes, moral control is strongest when there is a clear acknowledgment that one is personally contributing to the outcomes (Bandura, 2002).

We also have the possibility of a further compounding effect: avatar-to-avatar. In an online platform, when you act as an avatar it is often with other avatars and so there is a further disconnect. One can act with reduced fear of judgement from others, with less self-critique, and when interacting with another avatar, there may be a decreased sense of a potential real-world victim. As Bandura also notes, moral disengagement can occur through the dehumanization of potential victims (Bandura, 2002). We can find vivid examples of this throughout history, where the victims were first dehumanized by being labelled as non-human before wide-scale violence took place (Harris et al, 2011; Livingstone Smith, 2011; Neilsen, 2015; Mukasonga, 2016; Bruneau et al, 2017; Rai et al, 2017; Bastian, 2019; Calissendorff et al, 2019).

Mindsets and the corporate avatar

With an online avatar, one could argue that a sense of disconnection from others and even ourselves is somewhat apparent as we are communicating through a digital medium. However, there are also scenarios in everyday life where the avatar effect can appear in more discrete ways, with face-to-face communication.

As living beings, we Homo sapiens are entwined in a complicated web of connections. The personal mindset will be used to describe a frame of mind in which we have direct links to our most important conscious connections. For example, family is often a very important personal connection, and as a result, it is one that we'll strive to maintain. Therefore, in a personal mindset, strong connections might include mother, father, brother, sister, child, and so forth. Other key personal connections might include close friends, community, or perhaps, nature. It could also include a set of values and virtues if we deem them

as part of our personal principles, these might include environmental sustainability, equality, compassion, patience, ethics.

As there are multiple important connections, decisions made from the personal mindset can be complicated. One might deeply consider various options, as each decision can affect the rest of the web. From this perspective, staying late at work might be avoided where possible as it could impact valued connections: children, partners, friends, values.

The term avatar mindset is used to describe the frame of mind of an avatar. If you switch to an avatar mindset, you can temporarily disable the connections of the personal mindset, and borrow a new set of connections. Rather than making decisions based upon your own set of principles and with consideration of the connections around you—humanity and the natural environment—you can instead make decisions from the perspective of a hypothetical third person, an avatar: a separate entity with different connections.

In the business world, we can often see people acting as different entities. A CEO, for example, might act as a given corporation, which may be very different to how they would act themselves. Therefore you could say that they have adopted an avatar mindset. One might also say that it is less apparent as they are still in the real, physical world. To explore this concept in greater detail, let's take a look at a case study: Shkreli.

Shkreli

In 1983, Martin Shkreli was born in Brooklyn, New York. With modest means, his working-class parents—Albanian and Croatian immigrants—worked hard to raise Martin, his brother, and his two sisters (Thomas et al, 2017). Martin started to study chemistry and teach people online after discovering that a family member was suffering from depression. Therefore, one might assume that from the perspective of his personal mindset, family is a key connection. We could also assume that art is an important connection to him as he funded an indie record label (Conti et al, 2016), collects music (Conti et al, 2016), plays the guitar (Workman et al, 2015), and often posts select lyrics from his favorite songs on social media (McLean , 2015). One might also expect that community and compassion are key connections for him, as he was so moved by a child suffering from a rare disease , he said that he would devote himself to developing treatments (McLean, 2015).

Why then, despite the humble beginnings, and signs of sensitivity and compassion, is Martin Shkreli often referred to as the most hated man in America? (Thomas et al, 2017)

There are many underlining reasons as to why he received this label, but perhaps the most notable reason is that after purchasing the rights to Daraprim—a pill used to treat patients with HIV—he decided to raise the price by over 5000% (Conti et al, 2016). And so, why would a man who says that he deeply cares about helping people (Conti et al, 2016) make such an unethical decision?

After studying the interviews that Shkreli gave after the incident, I found numerous clues that suggest a disconnect from his personal mindset and the adoption of an avatar mindset. To begin with, he tends to use 'we' when he defends the decision rather than 'I', even though as founder and CEO, with a very small team, the choice was ultimately his. He also regularly uses collective

nouns as a way to speak in the third-person as though he is disconnected from himself (McLean, 2015; Conti et al, 2016). And he speaks of the company as though it were a living organism, as though it made its own decisions separate from his (Tirrell, 2015).

In a live interview with David Westin, Shkreli states that the decision was made from a cash-flow perspective (Westin et al, 2016). He goes on to state that the mission was to increase revenue, therefore he is happy with the outcome (Westin et al, 2016). During the various aftermath interviews, the only explanation he offers is money, indicating that his mindset at the time was reductive or simplified, as though other connections had been severed.

When questioned directly on his personal ethics, Shkreli never fully addresses it and instead relates the decision to what the market allows for. For example, he mentions that other companies are doing the same or worse (Tirrell, 2015), he reiterates that it was incredibly profitable (Conti et al, 2016), or simply states that it wasn't technically illegal (McLean, 2015). In the few moments when he suggests that the decision was rational, he quickly adds a caveat; such as, after stating that the cost increase was appropriate, he added, when compared to other companies (Tirrell, 2015), indicating an avatar-to-avatar perspective. He also states that, "In capitalism, you try and get the highest price" (Westin et al, 2016), "extracting as much profit as possible is the rule of law" (Conti et al, 2016), and it's "the way the world works." (Conti et al, 2016) However, he also adds that "markets are not rational." (Tirrell, 2015); further indications of personal disconnects and conflicting perspectives.

If we were to view Shkreli's decision to raise the price of HIV treatments by over 5000% from a personal perspective, with many considerations, we can see that it is uncompassionate and hurtful. It negatively affects those already suffering. However, if he were to borrow the perspective of another entity, one with far fewer considerations, and a primary focus on profit, we can see how one could justify the decision. If the choice was made with regard to whether or not the flow of money is likely to increase or decrease, then it could be viewed as the 'correct choice'. It makes business sense. Personal factors such as ethics can be disconnected from this mindset. After all, 'it's just business', 'nothing personal'.

Concluding remarks

There is a known phenomenon in psychology where individuals can adopt 'multiple-selves', leading to conflicting beliefs (Schelling, 1982; Bazerman et al, 1998; Bahl, 2005; Lester, 2012; Perlovsky, 2013; Gergő et al, 2017; Hinojosa et al, 2017). With the avatar effect, there is no conflict as the individual is operating as another entity rather than themselves. Thus they can have a new set of connections, new goals, and a new purpose.

One of the concerning things about the avatar effect is that it goes relatively unchecked. It appears to disguise the unethical and unhealthy decisions of people. For example, if Martin Shkreli were to speak in the third-person, but as himself, one might be deeply concerned. If he said, "It wasn't personal, Martin did it", then this would be a clear indication of delusion and mental illness. However, if he states, "It isn't personal, it was a business decision", then it is culturally accepted. It is loosely understood that it isn't a personal choice but rather the choice of another entity, in this case, a corporate avatar. It is therefore important for us to translate it back into reality: it is a human making a decision. While the

entities can appear as decision-making, living organisms, in reality, they are merely a human construct.

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