How We Rationalize Our Morals: A Qualitative Analysis of Cognitive Dissonance, Rationalization, and Criminal Behavior

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Author Note

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments 2
List of Tables 4
Abstract 5
Chapter 1 6
Problem Statement 6
Morality 7
Decision Making 14
Locus of Control and Rationalization 19
Decision Making and Rationalization 21
Cognitive Dissonance 21
Rationale of Study 25
Research Questions 26
Chapter 2 27
Philosophical Worldview 27
Research Design and Strategy 28
Participants and Sampling 28
Data Collection Process and Procedures 29
Protection of Participants 30
Interview 30
Field Notes 31
Reliability and Validity 31
Reflexivity 31
Member Checking and Transparency 32
Triangulation of Data 32
Analysis of Data 33
Summary 34
Chapter 3 35
Data Collection Procedures and Analysis 35
Description of Participants 38
Findings of Group Experiential Themes 39
Theme 1: Rationalization for Ethical Violations 39
Theme 2: The Difficulty of Recalling Past Experiences 44
Chapter 4 50
Petty Crime Rationalizations 50
Understanding the Cognitive Dissonance Experience 52
Implications of Research Findings 55
Study Limitations 58
Future Research 59
Conclusion 61
References 62
Appendix A 72
Appendix B 74
Appendix C 75

List of Tables

Table 1. Description of Participant Demographics 39

Abstract

With the goal of attempting to understand how people rationalize their behaviors when engaging in petty crimes that go against their moral beliefs and create cognitive dissonance, this study was comprised of eight participants that provided their personal experiences. Furthermore, this study's purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of how people experience cognitive dissonance in terms of thoughts, emotions, and feelings. This included detailing their experiences with cognitive dissonance and engaging in petty criminal activity through an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach. Results from the study indicated multiple themes about how people rationalize decisions that violate their moral beliefs. First, many participants suggested they were not to blame or not responsible for their actions. Another theme revealed time management played a significant role when engaging in petty crimes. Finally, the participants in this study seemed to have a difficult time remembering behaviors from their past when engaging in petty crimes and were unable to remember specific thoughts and emotional reactions to experiencing cognitive dissonance. The implications of the research findings were discussed in terms of clinical applications. Limitations of this study and future research considerations were also identified to continue the process of understanding cognitive dissonance related to petty crimes and decision making in general.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance, petty crime, morals, rationalization

Chapter 1

Problem Statement

Morality provides insight into how people think, feel, and behave. Cognitively, morality can impact their schemas that may impact choices (Fleischmann et al., 2019). Morality impacts how people view right from wrong. Furthermore, morality may evolve over time and is related to an individual's development (Kohlberg, 1984, 1994). Societal factors also impact people's morality. When individuals act incongruently with their morals, it can create cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). An example of someone acting incompatible with their moral values may exist when someone commits a petty crime. Defined in this dissertation as minor, nonviolent offenses often resulting in citations, fines, or fees, petty crimes may be compromised more frequently, and with consideration. Furthermore, understanding how individuals rationalize engaging in behaviors that go against their morals could help people understand how it impacts their cognitive dissonance. The following chapter outlines relevant theories and studies related to cognitive dissonance, morality, decision making, and rationalization, providing the context and background for understanding how people rationalize decisions that violate their moral and ethical identity.

The following example is a scenario illustrating this topic of morality. Sam learned littering was bad for the environment when he was in grade school, and he considered himself someone who cares about the environment. Sam was driving down the road while eating a burger when the grease started to leak through the wrapper. To avoid getting grease in his new car, he threw the burger and wrapper out the window. Sam immediately recognized this practice went against his values of not littering. He

began to rationalize the behavior by telling himself it was a one-time thing. Then he considered the financial cost of littering and how it did not outweigh the cost of having the car professionally cleaned. As he looked around the area, he noticed other garbage and told himself other people do it too. Thus, these rationalizations appeared to lower his cognitive dissonance.

Morality

The concept of morality has been a consistently relevant topic from the beginning of human existence. People have constantly investigated what behaviors are morally right and wrong and attempted to understand how to make those judgements. For some people, moral thinking involves an intellectual debate considering pros and cons of moral principles, while others use moral feeling, or emotions, to track what feels right and wrong (Cohen & Ahn, 2016). Alternatively, there are people who rely on culture and education as the foundation of moral distinctions (Marshall et al., 2022). In general, however, people consult explicit moral principles or ideology, engage in conscious reasoning, and behave rationally (Helzer et al., 2017).

Moral hypotheticals have explored this idea through examples like the runaway trolley case. A runaway trolley is heading toward five people on the track; they will be killed if the trolley continues on its course. The only way to save them is to pull a lever, which will set the trolley on a different set of tracks where it will only kill one person on the track instead of five. One may consider if they should pull the lever to sacrifice one person to save the five people (Thomson, 1986). To understand how and why people make moral judgements such as the trolley case, developmental psychologists Piaget (1948) and Kohlberg (1984, 1994) supported the idea of a reason-based model of moral

judgement and identified people's ability to articulate justifications for their moral judgments as the primary indication of moral maturity (Young, 2021).

Piaget (1948) attempted to understand how children think about standards of conduct and rules by presenting them with hypothetical moral dilemmas and asking them how they judge the behavior of the characters in the story and then explaining what the decision should be. He proposed children (ages 1–5) are in a premoral stage in which they are unconcerned about rules and standards in which they make up rules as they go and may have little regard for their own rules. In the heteronomous stage (ages 5–9), the child becomes more of a realist in which the letter of the law must be followed, resulting in punishments if they are not. These laws are determined by parents and authority figures. Finally, in the autonomous stage (ages 9–12), children interpret social rules as arbitrary and they are meant to promote cooperation, equality, and reciprocity (Broderick & Blewitt, 2003).

In an attempt to assess Piaget's (1948) theory that children's peer groups were a function of moral development, Einhorn (1971) conducted a study of 5- and 8-year-old children in which groups of three were tasked with completing pencil and paper assignments, unaware that cheating could be detected. Einhorn hypothesized (a) 5-year-old children would cheat significantly more than the 8-year-old children, (b) cohesiveness would be stronger with children who were 8 years old, and finally, (c) the older children would have a greater moral autonomy over the younger children. Results from the study were consistent with Piaget's theories of moral development in children. The first hypothesis was supported because 5-year-old children cheated 3 times more than the older children. Furthermore, there was less cheating in the more cohesive 8-year-old

groups, but not in the younger children's groups, suggesting more cohesive 8-year-olds create bonds such as loyalty, respect, and affection, that aid in development of moral autonomy.

Furthering the previous works of Piaget, Kohlberg (1984, 1994) detailed his own cognitive developmental approach to morality. Although he also investigated moral reasoning in children, his theory went beyond Piaget's to include adolescent and adult morality issues. Years later, he reintroduced and expanded upon his own theory (Kohlberg, 1984), which revolutionized the study of morality. His moral stages theory has achieved widespread recognition, debate, and controversy (Gewirtz & Kurtines, 1991).

Kohlberg (1984) postulated moral reasoning consisted of three levels and two developmental stages in each level, each being more proficient at responding to moral dilemmas. The first level—preconventional—consisted of avoiding punishment and self-interest ideology. More common in children and animals, the first level of moral development is concentrated on a self-serving egocentric focus. In the second stage—conventional morality—development is shifted to a societal version of what is right and wrong. Typically associated with adolescents and adults, individuals in this stage often adhere to societal norms and rules without questioning their fairness. Postconventional is the third and final stage in Kohlberg's moral development theory. It suggests people at this stage separate their own perspectives from societal views and therefore may not follow rules that are inconsistent with their own principles. Rules are viewed as changeable mechanisms rather than absolutes, promoting the concepts of majority decisions and democracy (Kohlberg, 1984, 1994).

Using the previous research of Piaget (1948) and with special emphasis on Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1984, 1994), Herzog and Einat (2016) conducted a study to examine the relationship between crime seriousness, moral judgment, and perceptions. They hypothesized a significant relationship would exist between seriousness of criminal offenses and moral judgments toward moral dilemmas. Using the Defining Issues Test (DIT)—a quantitative Likert scale instrument, their study indicated interesting findings, as participants were more inclined to agree with breaking moral rules as the scenario increased in perceived seriousness. Also, they found a correlation between the tendency to disagree with the immoral behavior presented in the moral scenario and increased perception of seriousness of the crime. Their research suggested crime seriousness and moral judgement of offenses may not act as predetermined judgements or barriers against criminal activity.

Furthermore, Vasconcelos et al. (2021) attempted to investigate the inclusion of callous-unemotional (CU) traits during childhood and adolescence as a factor contributing to moral processing and evaluation. Their study used 47 adolescents with varying levels of CU traits in which they completed an animated cartoon depicting everyday moral transgressions. Participants were asked to indicate how morally wrong the situations were and how they would feel in those situations. The findings indicated the individuals with higher CU traits rated the scenarios at a lower wrongness appraisal and with reduced anticipated guilt. Their study provided evidence suggesting an early sign of dissociation between affective and cognitive dimensions of behavior in adolescence. In the reason-based models, one assumes moral judgements and justifications are influenced by factors such as education and culture, as well as other

demographic variables that determine the ability to access and rely on reason (Ward & King, 2018).

Another assumption is people make moral judgements based on factors they believe are morally relevant, such as harming someone through action or omission, and therefore, people are able to reject moral judgements if they are regarded as morally irrelevant (Ward & King, 2018). In contrast to the reason-based models of moral judgement previously discussed, a more contemporary approach was theorized in resistance. The emotion model of moral psychology suggests people feel rather than think about our moral decisions. Judgments are made by emotional responses instead of consciously principled reasoning (Haidt, 2001; Young, 2021).

Emotional models of moral judgment (Gawronski et al., 2018; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2001; Pizarro et al., 2011) suggest emotional responses such as disgust are heavily weighed when making moral judgements based on individual perceptions. In a study investigating the impact of disgust on moral judgements, individuals were induced with disgusting smells, videos, and memories of physically disgusting experiences. Participants made harsher moral judgements after disgust induction, particularly when it was related to their own body (Schnall et al., 2008). Another study evaluating the role moral behavior found people were more likely to engage in physical cleansing after participating in immoral behaviors and engage in immoral behaviors after physical cleansing (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). Findings such as these provide some validity to the theory that emotional responses, such as disgust, can play a role in the moral thought process.

More recently, Dedeke (2015) proposed a cognitive-intuitionist model for moral decision to bridge the cognitive and neurocognitive approaches with an intuitionist approach. This integrative approach consists of five stages: issue framing, preprocessing, moral judgement, moral reflection, and moral intent. The cognitive-intuitionist model posits even before making moral judgements, people capture and reframe the issue; therefore, they do not make moral judgements on the actual situation, but rather on framing of the situation. Therefore, people do not simply perceive an issue when engaging in moral framing, they reconstruct the perceived situation and evaluate it in a way that may or may not be congruent with the actual situation.

There are many factors that influence how a situation is framed, including expectations, unconscious desires, motivations (Sonenshein, 2007), financial interests (Kelly et al., 2003), and the presence of sanctions (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). Secondly, the cognitive-intuitionist model proposes framing of a situation triggers the unconscious and automatic processing of cognitions and emotions. As the brain receives moral stimuli, it attempts to match the stimuli to previous moral prototypes that have already been stored in the brain's memory from past situations. The pattern matching process finds the closest matching situation and identifies the normative action as being immoral (Dedeke, 2015). And lastly, the moral reasoning capabilities of our mind validate, justify, and rationalize our moral judgements and the intensity of them.

According to Dedeke (2015):

> A strong emotional response toward an act could equally create a feeling of helplessness against the urge (temptation) to violate a moral principle that a potential wrong doer intellectually knows to be right. If he/she goes ahead and

> violates the moral rule, he/she may experience thereafter an emotional satisfaction or gratification. (p. 452)

In this scenario, a person is likely to engage in a process of rationalization and try to come up with reasons for why the act was not immoral in the first place or is not a violation severe enough to merit worry. Thus, the individual will experience a change in moral judgment, increasing the likelihood of future violations (Dedeke, 2015).

To bridge the competing theories of cognition and intuition, Greene and Haidt (2002) provided a model proposing both processes jointly contributed to moral judgements. The dual-process theory posits moral decision making is first impacted by affective reactions to moral stimuli, then if motivation, resources, and time are allowed, cognitive processing may override the initial reaction. According to the model, when confronted with a moral dilemma in which one person must be hurt to help a group of others, people immediately and involuntarily experience a negative emotional reaction to the thought of inflicting harm. If a certain threshold of emotional reaction is reached, or if there is not enough time, resources, or motivation to engage in utilitarian deliberation, the emotional experience will overpower the decision-making process, resulting in a deontological moral judgment—it is morally unacceptable to cause a harmful action.

Alternatively, when conditions allow for more optimal thought processing, people may engage in cognitive deliberation in terms of the cost benefit ratio inflicting harm on another person. In this case, having more time, resources, and motivation, these cognitive processes can influence decision making, resulting in a utilitarian judgment—it is acceptable to inflict a harmful action if it results in an overall increase in well-being (i.e., a larger group is saved for the sacrifice on one). Therefore, the model suggested

deontological and utilitarian judgments are dependent on the underlying psychological processes, making it possible for them to produce dialectical and conflicting moral outcomes (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Greene & Haidt, 2002).

Furthering the discussion of the dual-process model of moral reasoning, Białek and De Neys (2017) attempted to understand the process in which individuals detect harming others is wrong (i.e., deontological System 1) and then engage in deliberation whether harm is acceptable when considering the consequences (i.e., utilitarian System 2). They evaluated the nature of this interaction by introducing subjects to four classic moral dilemma scenarios (i.e., trolley, plane, hospital, cave) while also requiring participants to memorize dot placements on a four-by-four grid ranging from simple to complex. This process intended to measure the sensitivity of System 2 processing when cognitive load was increased. Their studies found people showed increased doubt (i.e., processing difficulty) about their decision when cognitive load (i.e., dot memorization) was introduced during scenarios in which utilitarian and deontological responses were in conflict. Findings also indicated sensitivity was not affected by the amount of cognitive load, only that it was introduced at all, suggesting the process of utilitarian moral decision making and the conflict of deontological considerations happen intuitively and effortlessly.

Decision Making

Entrenched in the work of Heider (1958) and expanded on by others (e.g., Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1985), attribution theory attempts to conceptualize the ways people explain (or attribute) the causes of their behavior. Simply put, attribution theory distinguishes between causal relationships in the form of internal (i.e., personal)

attribution (i.e., personality, ability), and external attributions (i.e., cultural norms, time of day). Weiner's (1985) extension of attribution theory suggested a three-dimensional structure of causality for thinking about achievement motivation and emotion. Stability, controllability, and locus of control were studied as the responsibility process and emotional consequence. As an example, a student may accept personal internal causality when taking an exam, and alternatively may deny external responsibility due to mitigating or uncontrollable circumstances. Furthermore, a student who believes intelligence is an internal or uncontrollable entity may feel pride if they perceive themselves as having a lot of it, or conversely, may feel hopeless or shameful if they perceive themselves as not being very intelligent (Stephens, 2017).

Stephens (2017) theorized academic cheating is natural and a part of human nature and attempted to understand how students cheat and do not feel guilty, or more specifically, reduce cognitive dissonance. Using the previously discussed model set forth by Weiner, Stephens argued humans' capacity to avoid or reduce dissonance explains the wide-spread nature of cheating and allows people with an expanded capability to cheat even though they believe it is wrong. Although perhaps disingenuous, a change in personal cognition related to cheating such as thinking, "If everyone else is doing it and don't care if I do, then maybe it isn't so bad and I shouldn't feel so bad about myself," which allows cognitive dissonance reduction via the false pretenses that the majority of one's peers are approving of cheating when the reality is most peers reject it.

Directly related to attribution theory, a 1967 experiment conducted by Jones and Harris attempted to have participants read or listen to pro- and anti-Fidel Castro speeches; then, they asked participants to rate the pro-Castro attitudes of the target person.

Believing the target person freely chose the positions for or against Castro, the participants rated the pro-Castro individuals as having a more positive attitude toward him, as was suspected. However, when participants were informed the target person's positions of for or against were determined by a coin flip, they still rated the true attitude of the pro target person as having a more positive attitude toward Fidel Castro than the people who spoke against him. Contradicting their initial hypothesis, the participants attributed some disposition of sincerity to the speakers even when they knew they were performing a task that was chosen for them. Years later, this phenomenon would be described as the fundamental attribution error (FAE; Ross, 1977).

Although attribution theory appeared to be more focused on how people perceive and explain our own behaviors, FAE focuses on how people make distortions during the attribution process. The fundamental assumption of the FAE is people will usually attribute negatively perceived behaviors of others as dispositional qualities and diminishing the environmental or situational variables (Flick & Schweitzer, 2021). Alternatively, when attributing the negative outcomes of one's own behaviors, environmental and situational variables are emphasized more heavily (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Luong & Butler, 2023). Simply put, the FAE theorizes people are likely to blame the situation for their personal negative behaviors but are more likely to blame the individual when other people engage in negative behaviors (Flick & Schweitzer, 2021; Luong & Butler, 2023; Ross, 1977; Ross & Anderson, 1982).

A recent study examining FAE, blame, and negligence regarding automobile accident scenarios (Flick & Schweitzer, 2021) found mock jurors were significantly influenced by environmental factors when deciding driver negligence. In line with

previous FAE research showing individuals tend to view others as more inherently blameworthy, the mock jurors in the study viewed the driver as more negligent during poor driving conditions rather than considering the poor conditions influenced the negative behavior.

Another factor that may contribute to ethical decision making and moral judgment may include executive control and working memory capacity (WMC). Moore et al. (2008) investigated this concept by conducting a study in which participants rated how morally acceptable it would be to save multiple people or kill one person. Individuals in the study completed three different automated complex-span measures including operation span, reading span, and symmetry span to measure WMC. Subjects were also screened to report no history of psychiatric diagnosis, no current illness, not taking any psychiatric medication. The findings suggested individual differences in WMC predicted consistency with making moral judgments about personal harm as well as moral judgments about harming individuals whose fate was already decided. Furthermore, individuals with "higher WMC scores were more likely to endorse personal killing only when harm was inevitable, and this increased endorsement would seem to result from deliberative reasoning, rather than simply from executive control over emotion" (Moore et al., 2008, p. #).

Many of the forementioned scholars proposed or contributed to models of ethical decision making to explain unethical behavior. And many suggested unethical actions evoke negative feelings such as guilt, shame, or disgust, which discourages us from engaging in these actions. However, Ruedy et al. (2013) challenged the fundamental assumption that negative affect is triggered by unethical behavior. They postulated an

advantage is achieved by unethical behavior that provides access to undeserved social, psychological, or financial resources, which may be interpreted as windfalls. Secondly, they suggested circumventing rules that others are bound to may provide an enhanced sense of autonomy and influence. For example, manipulating information and deceiving others can inflate an individual's sense of control, which therefore increases positive affect. Lastly, because unethical behavior often involves overcoming systems designed to constrain behavior, the challenge of breaking rules such as lying or finding a loophole to avoid paying taxes may present an enjoyable challenge.

Succeeding in such endeavors, although unethical, can evoke a sense of pride and worthiness. The results of Ruedy et al.'s (2013) experiments found unethical behaviors often fail to trigger negative affect and can alternatively trigger positive affect instead. Also, individuals in their studies failed to predict how they would feel after participating in unethical behaviors, sometimes anticipating higher levels of negative affect than were achieved. Overall, the studies found individuals who cheated in a setting that had no specific victim experienced more positive affect than the participants who did not cheat. This finding is referred to as the cheater's high, which is indicative of cheating and the thrill of getting away with it (Ruedy et al., 2013).

In another study, when children and monkeys made blind choices for a toy or candy, Egan et al. (2007) found they devalued the next round of a different toy or candy options, even though the initial choice was made blindly. This finding would suggest a forced choice between two equally appealing alternatives will increase the perceived value of the chosen option and devalue the rejected option, demonstrating choice can induce preference.

Locus of Control and Rationalization

The concept of perceived control is a related and salient notion that considers personal autonomy, rationalization, unconscious behavior, and decision making. Social proof (Cialdini et al., 1990), for example, is a term used to describe a phenomenon in which occurrences of undesired, norm-violating behaviors are increased when those behaviors are visible to others. This theory suggests environmental factors such as litter, speeding, or other demonstrations of petty crime behavior, lead to inferences about social rules and provide an indication of how to behave. Similar to social proof is the broken windows theory (BWT; Wilson & Kelling, 1982) that implies more serious criminal actions can be triggered when there are signs of petty crime in a neighborhood. Unlike social proof, BWT suggests environmental cues can not only inspire behaviors of the same kind, but also trigger more serious behaviors. When interpreting signs of norm-violations in the environment, BWT assumes more of a rational thought process. As such, it interprets a disordered area as not being actively monitored; therefore, there is minimal risk of getting caught when breaking norms. Social proof, however, is more of a subconscious influential factor (Jansen et al., 2017).

Specific to this discussion, locus of control (LOC; Rotter, 1966; Spector, 1988) is a personality variable that attempts to explain how people attribute outcomes in life, either by our own actions (internally) or other variables (externally). Therefore, individuals with an internal LOC would attribute outcomes to be at least partially due to their own actions, while individuals with an external LOC do not see any relationship between their own behaviors and the consequences associated with them, focusing more on external factors such as fate or the actions of others. In a study examining entitlement

and LOC, Carnes and Knotts (2018) found internal LOC decreases the sense of entitlement while individuals with external LOC had higher levels of entitlement. Furthermore, people with internal LOC saw a link between the perceived ability to earn rewards and their associated actions. Because externals do not associate their behaviors with perceived rewards it decreases entitlement toward any rewards they receive. In the workplace, for example, externals may not see the link between their effort and expected rewards and need more encouragement to work toward goals in lieu of rewards (Carnes & Knotts, 2018).

When thinking about LOC, petty crime, and how individuals rationalize their behaviors, Jansen et al. (2017) attempted to examine how external factors influenced behaviors such as cheating and littering. They hypothesized cheating and littering would be higher in a more disorderly environment rather than orderly environment and individuals with a higher external LOC would be more strongly influenced by the environment than with people with a higher internal LOC. Their findings supported their hypotheses and found people littered more in a disorderly, messy environment; however, only individuals with external LOC cheated more in the same type of environment.

LOC has been examined and identified as an influential aspect of criminal behavior and decision making (Brown & Murray, 2021; Murray et al., 2011, 2014). Furthering the discussion of crime causality and the effects of LOC, Brown and Murray (2021) conducted a study to investigate the effects of age, sex, and LOC in regard to perceptions of crime. Their results suggested there were no significant differences between LOC across three different age categories (18–30, 30–50, and 50–80), suggesting age is not a moderating factor when determining external versus internal

LOC. They also found no significant difference between male and female participants in LOC relating to petty crime perception, except male participants were less likely to report suspicious behavior around someone else's property.

Decision Making and Rationalization

In a study examining the relationship between honesty, effort, and making moral decisions, Lee et al. (2019) attempted to identify the impact effort had on making honest decisions. They found individuals were more likely to behave dishonestly when they associated honesty with effort, and secondly, believing honesty is effortless decreased dishonesty. Furthermore, when exploring how the relationship between honesty and effort related to the strength of situational forces, they found the theory of honesty requires effort increased dishonesty only when the situation did not contain a strong desire to cheat. Overall, Lee et al.'s study suggested theories related to honest and effortful decision making may provide justification for actions that do not present obvious opportunities to justify dishonest behaviors.

Cognitive Dissonance

While at Stanford University, Festinger (1962) conducted a social experiment in which the subjects were asked to perform uninteresting and repetitive tasks and then lie to the next subject, telling them it was interesting and fun. Some participants were paid $1 while others were given $20 for lying. Based on his theory that preferences are the consequences of actions, Festinger correctly predicted the subjects who were paid less for lying would later rate the tasks as more enjoyable due to not being provided ample justification for the lie, creating a cognitive dissonance, and thus attempting to mentally reconcile the difference. Festinger proposed when people have conflicting inconsistent

cognitions, they experience psychological distress called cognitive dissonance. This distress caused by the cognitive dissonance is a motivating factor for individuals to reduce its effects (Cooper, 2019). Seeking to reduce psychological discomfort, individuals often attempt to adjust the easier of the two cognitions to align with their actions (Acharya et al., 2018). Misinterpreting, ignoring, or actively searching for information to confirm decisions are a few ways individuals can help to reduce cognitive dissonance. If the dissonance is too overwhelming, however, changing decisions and perceptions of effectiveness may be warranted (Kim & Bay, 2017).

Cognitive dissonance can be conceptualized as having two main components—arousal dissonance and discomfort dissonance—the former being the cognitive aspect and the latter being the emotional aspect. Arousal dissonance happens when a decision is made, while discomfort dissonance is the result of the decision conflicting with currently held beliefs causing anxiety and uncertainty (Chung & Cheng, 2018; Festinger, 1962). Using the term “cognitive” to precede dissonance, Festinger (1962) argued thoughts, behaviors, and perceptions were all variations of cognitive representations for the way people think. When two or more inconsistent cognitions are held by an individual, an uncomfortable tension is experienced, resulting in an effort to reconcile this strain. This drive reduction was the intuitive human desire to have consistency among cognitions, such as reducing thirst and hunger by drinking or eating (Cooper, 2019).

Cognitive dissonance has been shown to be a factor regardless of age or species. Egan et al. (2007) found cognitive dissonance in both children and monkeys was evident in their study as both indicated a decrease in preference for equally preferred alternatives after they had already chosen against it. Their original decision to choose between two

equal options seemed to influence their next preference and choose against their original discarded option when it was again a choice with an equally preferred option. Therefore, continuing not to choose the originally discarded option is seen as a method of dissonance reduction that does not require a historical experience, as the participants were 4 years old, and may be more of a general aspect of human psychology.

On the other end of the spectrum, Cooper and Felman (2019) conducted the first empirical test to identify if healthy aging in older adults had any effect on cognitive dissonance compared to younger adults. By using a paradigm that asked participants to make statements that were contradictory to their personally held attitudes, dissonance was created and assessed. Their results indicated both younger and older adults adjusted their attitudes in accordance with their behavior to reduce cognitive dissonance at similar effect strengths. Although older people may have a stronger drive for emotional satisfaction, they may also be more accepting of inconsistency regarding their challenged cognitions, and results from the study suggested dissonance was reduced in a similar manner to younger adults.

There have been numerous studies documenting the effects of cognitive dissonance since the work of Festinger (Cooper, 2019). To better understand the psychological impact of cognitive dissonance, Chung and Cheng (2018) evaluated the mediating and/or moderating impact on the sunk cost effect (SCE). The SCE is the tendency to stick with an investment or venture despite prior unrecoverable assets and an uncertain or unfavorable outcome (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). Their study found discomfort dissonance was attributed to the SCE and suggested even when an investment is likely to fail, decision makers tend to continue with an investment that is unfavorable, causing

internal discomfort. Furthermore, regression analysis indicated higher cognitive dissonance was related to a more obvious SCE.

Hamzagic et al. (2021) also examined the effects of the SCE when the continued investments that cannot be recovered are directly related to violations of the ethics of care by harming others. In their study, they used multiple harm vignettes such as (a) going to a concert even though one's friend has a migraine due to the cost of the tickets, (b) continuing to watch a movie in the theater even though a person's children finds it scary due to the cost of the movie, and (c) keeping a bike a person found for free after the owner reports it missing even though the person's car just broke down. All the vignettes created some degree of cognitive dissonance in which participants were forced to make a choice irrespective of the SCE. Their results found people in the study were more likely to continue with the vignette on investments that were high compared to lower ones. Furthermore, participants were also more likely to continue with investments in nonharm compared to harm scenarios, showing evidence for the SCE.

One of the more popular cognitive dissonance examples is the smoker who continues the habit even though they are aware of the health risks. According to the theory, individuals who continue to smoke are more likely to adjust their beliefs about the behavior (reduces stress and/or increases concentration) rather than change the behavior itself. Fotuhi et al. (2013) attempted to assess if smokers adjusted their beliefs according to cognitive dissonance theory, and the relational direction of beliefs and behaviors. Findings indicated current smokers had higher rationalizations compared to individuals who had quit smoking. Interestingly, when a quit attempt failed, rationalizations returned to original, or near the original level. Finally, the study indicated changes in behavior

prompted changes in beliefs, supporting Festinger's (1962) theory that individuals reduce dissonance through the path of least resistance.

There has also been an effort to bring cognitive dissonance theory into the realm of teaching and learning. Because cognitive dissonance acts as an alert or cue that our beliefs are being compromised, McGrath (2020) suggested it could be a tool used to improve behaviors by learning and proceeding with appropriate action. Specifically, three suggested areas of implementation included academic dishonesty, confronting misconceptions, and effective studying strategies. Shu et al. (2011) added to this hypothesis by conducting a study in which participants were presented with real tasks involving the opportunity to cheat. Focusing on how people can turn ethicality on or off, they found people often seize the opportunity to cheat depending on the permissiveness of their environment. Results also suggested having to sign a moral code prior to engaging in an academic activity reduces dishonest behavior and provides evidence to the malleability of moral self-regulation.

Rationale of Study

This review of literature provided a historical and modern perspective related to decision making, cognitive dissonance, and moral judgement. The research noted in this essay revealed a vast body of research and the continued evolution of science and knowledge regarding these concepts. However, previous studies seem to be limited regarding the specific reasons people use to reduce cognitive dissonance when faced with ethical decision making related to petty crime. The current study focused on perceptions of petty crimes, which were defined as a punishable act which could result in citations, fines, or fees. This would allow for a narrowed focus on more general crimes which may

reduce the likelihood of having an emotional impact on the participants that assault or murder would have. The purpose of this study was to identify rationales related to petty crime and cognitive dissonance to further the knowledge in this subject area which could lead to new and valuable information to help people in their daily lives.

People make many decisions throughout each day, some unconsciously and some with minimal cognitive effort. It was a goal of this study to shed light onto the decision-making process when those decisions are in direct conflict with our personal moral identity. In terms of application for therapeutic purposes, this study provides clarity and insight regarding how people think, behave, and understand their decision process. The simple fact of knowing the effects of cognitive dissonance can be used to inspire change, improve deliberation, minimize criminal activity, and prevent snowballing into continued and more serious criminal activity.

Research Questions

To add to the body of literature regarding cognitive dissonance and more specifically fill a gap in the research, the following questions were used as a framework to guide this study:

1. What reasons do people use to rationalize their moral dilemmas?
2. How do people understand their experience of resolving cognitive dissonance?
3. What themes are identified throughout the data collection process?

Chapter 2

The previous chapter presented an overview of relevant research, theories, and concepts related to cognitive dissonance, decision making, rationalization, and morality. To address the gap in the literature regarding moral decision making, the purpose of this study was to identify the rationalizations people make when engaging in petty crime. The following chapter describes procedures that were used in this study, including philosophical worldview, methodology and procedures for recruitment, data collection and analysis, and protection of participants. In addition, procedures ensuring the promotion of validity, reliability, and credibility.

Philosophical Worldview

To understand the experience of how individuals rationalize cognitive dissonance related to personal morality, a qualitative research design was implemented. Understanding the phenomenon of how people rationalize behaviors that are inconsistent with their morals lent itself to qualitative methods as the study focus was on the subjective nature of human experience. The study findings could have significance for counseling psychology by helping people understand and resolve cognitive dissonance.

Generally, a phenomenological research design is used to ask participants to describe their experiences as they perceived them. More specifically, a qualitative approach and phenomenological method referred to as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used. Developed by Smith et al. (2022), IPA research design is primarily focused on the examination of human lived experience, using broad and open-ended questions to explore individuals' experiences and gain a more advanced understanding of the interested topic. This approach is flexible and idiographic, allowing

for the generation of specific information about individual experiences rather than producing generalization of findings. As opposed to focusing on common structures of experiences, IPA is more suitable for personal meaning making and sense making in a specific context.

By investigating experiences and understandings of a particular phenomenon that are perceived and viewed by participants, IPA research reflects the interpretive and phenomenological aspects (Smith et al., 2022). Another major theoretical component of IPA is the inclusion of hermeneutics. A theory of interpretation, hermeneutics focuses on the relationship between the part and the whole as a dynamic, nonlinear style of thinking. Finally, IPA's integration of ideography allows the ability for commitment to detail of the phenomenon, resulting in an in-depth analysis, and to understand the perspective of particular people's experiences regarding an event, process, or relationship (Smith et al., 2022). Due to the nature of this research study, IPA's use of personal meaning making of a particular phenomenon, whole/part interpretation, and commitment to detail of the particular made it an ideal research design to investigate how people rationalize internal moral conflicts to reduce cognitive dissonance.

Research Design and Strategy

Participants and Sampling

Due to the idiographic nature of this study, eight participants were recruited because IPA research is often conducted with relatively small sample sizes to provide detail and depth of analysis committed to a particular experiential phenomena (Smith et al., 2022). Participants were recruited using methods of purposive sampling through an online post submitted through Facebook, referral, and snowballing, as recommended in

IPA research (Smith et al., 2022). The post asked people to share the post with others to find volunteer participation for this study. Individuals interested in the study responded to the post to indicate their desire to be involved in the study and be contacted and screened to ensure they met the participant criteria.

Due to the nature of IPA research, inclusion criteria were minimal, requiring participants to be 21 years or older and able to speak and read English fluently. Then, when individuals were determined to meet the criteria, a brief explanation of the study was provided and a meeting time was scheduled. Participants were also asked to read and sign an online consent form (see Appendix A) allowing permission to use their information in this study. These individuals encompassed a diverse background. Volunteers were not offered any incentives to participate in the study.

Data Collection Process and Procedures

Individuals that met criteria and consented to participate in the study were contacted and a meeting place and time was scheduled. Meetings were scheduled online through the secure online platform Zoom Video Communications. As previously mentioned, informed consent forms were used to provide participants with information about the study including benefits, risks, the acknowledgement of voluntary participation, and the researcher's contact information. The consent forms were electronically signed through Qualtrics, an experience management software. Throughout the duration of the research process, all hard copy notes and recordings were immediately transferred to a digital folder after each interview and protected by password to ensure participant safety. Furthermore, all electronic data compiled during the research process were kept in a secure location, only accessible to the researcher.

Protection of Participants

Using basic strategies such as building rapport, maintaining friendly mannerisms, and encouraging their right to withdraw from participating at any time, I emphasized protection of the participants in this study due to the sensitive nature of the questions regarding criminal behaviors. I also included an example question in the informed consent form as a description of the type of questions that could be asked to facilitate transparency and ensure participant comfortability. Before the initiation of this study, I obtained approval through the Northwest University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure participant safety, protection, and confidentiality. Furthermore, each participant was assigned a pseudonym as a measure to ensure they would be unable to be identified by others.

Interview

The interviews were only conducted online using Zoom as a platform to ensure confidentiality. Interviews started with a basic self-report of demographic information (see Appendix B) followed by a semistructured interview (see Appendix C) in which responses were electronically audio recorded by the Zoom platform. The interview questions were based on understanding how people rationalize their morals when confronted with cognitive dissonance related to committing a petty crime. The overall goal was to identify themes, add to a limited research area, and perhaps lead to identity enhancement and improved self-awareness. Interviews lasted approximately 15–45 minutes.

Field Notes

During and after each interview, I completed notes regarding the interaction with the participant. Keeping notes was important while doing a qualitative analysis to enhance descriptions and it provided secondary analysis and metasynthesis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The field notes included behavioral characteristics, environmental descriptions, and facial expressions, as well as my own reactions and impressions. Because the field notes varied widely depending on the context of the situation, adaptations were required for each participant in terms of amount of detail, specificity, and totality of content. Although a basic template of notes was implemented initially, a flexible approach that accounted for variation and unexpected circumstances was necessary. According to Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018), comprehensive field notes and a detailed overview of the setting provided are exceedingly valuable in analysis and may even be used in future studies by other researchers.

Reliability and Validity

Reflexivity

According to Gemignani (2017), reflexivity is seen as the defining feature of qualitative research, distinguished as ways in which the researcher affects the data in an investigation by being unavoidably present and influential. Therefore, as the primary researcher, I made a concerted effort to identify and reflect on potential biases to enhance the credibility and reliability of this study. Although my environmental, familial, economical, and cultural background have had influences on my perception of criminal behavior, morality, and decision making, I also take with me the training of a doctoral

student who understands the diversity of people and how distinct differences create individualized identities.

Member Checking and Transparency

To enhance the research process, member checking and transparency was employed during the interview with participants. When conducting certain qualitative analysis, member checking has been widely recommended as a method to increase validity by soliciting feedback and validation from participants (Motulsky, 2021). I conducted member checking and transparency by providing each interviewee with a verbal summary of their responses throughout the interview and as an overall summary upon conclusion to ensure recorded responses were fair, precise, and accurate. Furthermore, I offered each participant an opportunity to review their transcript and make necessary corrections to ensure interview answers were recorded correctly and enhance validity.

Triangulation of Data

There are many forms of data triangulation that can be used when conducting qualitative analysis. The most appropriate method for the current study included the implementation of multiple methods of analysis technique. As opposed to a mixed methods study, this form of inductive triangulation uses a variety of different approaches to analyze the data (Natow, 2020). Specifically for this study, triangulation was achieved by incorporating semistructured interview, demographics, and field notes as sources of information. This combination allowed me to have multiple sources of information that I verified and checked for consistency.

Analysis of Data

After each research interview was concluded, the phase of conducting analysis was initiated. In IPA research, there are multiple steps that may be implemented as needed to ensure a commitment to detailed analysis and consistency throughout the process. Research in this manner is encouraged to be innovative, flexible, and nonlinear, to allow the researcher freedom to maneuver accordingly. The first step in the data analysis process was reading and rereading each case to ensure the participant was the focus of the research. During this phase, I recorded my own recollections and experiences, and observations about the transcript. The second step involved a free textual analysis or exploratory noting of the transcript in which I made notes regarding anything of interest to produce a detailed commentary on the data. This included elements that mattered to the participant and the meaning of those elements (i.e., events, principles, values).

Constructing experiential statements was the third phase of data analysis. This process involved reducing the volume of detail in the transcript and exploratory notes and identifying the most important features. This process was done by breaking up the narrative transcript through reorganization of the data to produce a more concise summary of important data. In Step 4 of the IPA research process, I searched for connections across experiential statements. I completed this step by using a copy of the original transcript with my notes and experiential statements and cutting them out of the transcript and pasting them onto a separate document to cluster them into groups as a way of mapping their interconnections. These clusters were then named and placed in a table of personal experiential themes (PET), encompassing Step 5.

I repeated the forementioned five step IPA process for each participant until the individual analysis was concluded. At that point, the final stage of developing group experiential themes across cases was started. The aim of the final analysis of data was to identify patterns and differences across PET's, highlighting shared features and unique outcomes. Similar to Step 5, group experiential themes (GET) were identified and placed into a table.

Summary

The focus of this chapter was to provide a summary of the qualitative methodology, philosophical worldview, and research methods used. Within those confines, I also described how research participants were protected and how I ensured reliability and validity. None of the applications mentioned in this section were started until the Northwest University IRB accepted this proposal.

Chapter 3

The following chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology, data analysis, and research procedures used in the study. It also presents a summary of the study's findings based on the eight participant semistructured interviews with the overall goal of understanding how people rationalize their morals in relation to petty crimes. An integrative phenomenological approach (IPA) method was used to facilitate this research guided by the following underlying research questions:

1. What reasons do people use to rationalize their moral dilemmas?
2. How do people understand their experience of resolving cognitive dissonance?
3. What themes are identified throughout the data collection process?

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

For this qualitative IPA study, eight participants were recruited to provide detail and depth of analysis. Purposive sampling was used through an online post submitted through Facebook, referral, and snowballing (Smith et al., 2022). The post asked people to share it with others as a way to exponentially broaden the potential for volunteers. The first eight people who responded to the post electronically signed the consent form on Qualtrics, and met the inclusion were contacted via email to schedule an interview time. The criteria required the participant to be 21 years or older and able to read and speak English fluently.

Each meeting was conducted, recorded, and transcribed through the online platform Zoom. Prior to each interview, participants were given a numerical pseudonym to protect their identity. At the start of each interview, participants were informed they

were free to terminate the interview at any time and for any reason, and they were not required to answer any questions with which they were not comfortable. Although some preferred not to answer certain demographic questions, no other interview questions were refused, and no interviews were prematurely ended by any participant. I kept handwritten notes during the interview process that served as a secondary method to guide and enhance the analysis process (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). These notes consisted behavioral and environmental characteristics, my thoughts, follow up questions, and potential themes and important details to examine.

After each interview was completed, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript to ensure the data were correct and valid. Very few omissions and edits were applied to the participant transcripts. When participants started a sentence with "umm" or "uhh," participants were notified it was stricken from the transcript with no objections. Two participants requested to review their transcripts, and both approved without any corrections or changes. All handwritten notes and videos were transcribed to an electronic document and all original notes and videos were destroyed along with emails from the participants.

Unlike traditional psychology research methods, IPA provides the opportunity for the researcher to engage with the research questions on an idiographic level. This process allows the analysist to enter the research process with a subjective and reflective process of interpretation (Reid et al., 2005). An important element of IPA research is using substantial verbatim excerpts as a basis for analysis to highlight the importance of the participant's voice (Reid et al., 2005). Drawing upon strategies such as line-by-line analysis of experiential claims, identification of patterns, identifying experiential themes,

and development of a narrative, the IPA process is not meant to be linear and allows for considerable room for maneuvering (Smith et al., 2022). After the data were collected, the first step in the IPA analysis process involved reading and rereading the transcript from the first interview to make sure the participant became the focus of the analysis (Smith et al., 2022). During this process, I also made general impression notes while reading the transcript about elements that stood out to me at the time. This process is important as it allowed me to enter a phase of active engagement with the data to identify how narratives were developed and bound together (Smith et al., 2022). In Step 2, I used noting to examine the use of participant language on an exploratory level. The goal was to begin to identify abstract concepts, make sense of patterns, and make meaning of participant events, values, and principles (Smith et al., 2022). During this step, I made notes of anything of interest within the transcript to gain a better understanding of how the participant talked about, thought, and understood the topics discussed during the interview (Smith et al., 2022).

The third phase involves constructing experiential statements, which seeks to simultaneously reduce the volume of detail while also maintaining the most significant features of the exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2022). In this study, the most important commentary often included statements about the participants' experiences with cognitive dissonance such as justifications and emotions. The experiential statements are intended to be more concise and polished to capture an understanding of the personal experience that is directly related to the research questions (Smith et al., 2022). The process of searching for connections across experiential statements was the fourth stage of the IPA data analysis process. During this stage, I attempted to draw together the most

meaningful participant experiences and compile the experiential statements into specifically related clusters. This process also allowed me to discard experiential statements that were not related to any themes or clusters as a final method to narrow the data to the most important and meaningful features (Smith et al., 2022). These four stages were implemented for each participant in the study on an individual level.

After completing these stages for all interviews, the fifth stage of the IPA data analysis process was to name the personal experiential themes (PETs) of each participant and consolidate and organize them into groupings for cross case analysis (Smith et al., 2022). This was the final and highest level of organization as the PETs were designated into themes and subthemes as (GETs). The final product consisted of two overarching themes (i.e., Rationalization of Ethical Violations and Difficulty Recalling Past Experiences) and three associated subthemes (i.e., Rationalizing Responsibility and Blame; Rationalizing the Importance and Sensitivity of Time Management; and Speculation, Assumptions, and Recalling Situations).

Description of Participants

Participants were required to be 21 years of age or older and read and speak English fluently. All eight individuals met the study's eligibility requirements, signed an informed consent, and participated in the interview. In terms of demographics, four of the participants identified as White/European American, and the other four identified as Black/African American (see Table 1). Regarding age, six participants were in their 30s, the other two in their 40s. Exactly half of the participants lived in the state of Washington, the other half indicated they lived in New York. All eight of the participants stated they were Christian, and all participants were married. Only two of the participants

identified as cisgender female, while the others stated they were cisgender male. Regarding household income, one participant stated $200,000, all other participants preferred not to answer.

Table 1

Description of Participant Demographics

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age	40	34	36	38	45	36	30	32
Location	WA	WA	WA	WA	NY	NY	NY	NY
Education	MA	MA	BA	Some college	BA	Some college	BA	Some college
Race/ethnicity	White	White	White	White	Black	Black	Black	Black
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male

Findings of Group Experiential Themes

Two primary group experiential themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme involved the rationale for ethical violations. The second theme was comprised of how difficult it was for people to recall past experiences. Multiple subthemes were also identified. The first subtheme was Rationalizing Responsibility and Blame; the second was Rationalizing the Importance and Sensitivity of Time Management; and the third was Speculation, Assumptions, and Recalling Situations. The following section explores each primary theme and the subthemes associated with the participant responses.

Theme 1: Rationalization for Ethical Violations

One of the main intentions of this study was to identify rationales associated with cognitive dissonance. Thus, the overall theme of rationalizations provided by the participants was the priority of focus. During the semistructured interview, participants were asked to reflect on why they violated their moral belief and how they rationalized

their decision. This question was intended to elicit an in-depth thought process and identification of cognitive dissonance. Participants were confronted with identifying their rationale for violating moral beliefs, perhaps for the first time in such detail. Follow-up questions and requests for elaboration were necessary to gain a more thorough understating of participant experiences. Surprisingly, responses to this line of questioning elicited two main groupings of responses that could be categorized under the descriptions of displacing responsibility or prioritizing time management. The following sections provide descriptions and participant commentary related to these two subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Rationalizing Responsibility and Blame. The first subtheme identified was in relation to sense of responsibility and blame. Many respondents identified not taking responsibility for an ethical violation or placing blame on others to resolve the moral dilemma. Often, their responses were short and did not provide a detailed thought process, which prompted me to ask them to elaborate. Most participants also focused primarily on the rationale for why they were not to blame instead of the regret or remorse of the violation.

Participants were asked how they justified engaging in an action that went against their ethical beliefs to resolve any cognitive dissonance that may have occurred. Often, participants identified a rationale that placed blame elsewhere or on others as justification for their actions. When speaking to Participant 1, he admitted to driving in the carpool lane when he was the only person in the car, thus violating the carpool lane rules. He also acknowledged he believed he was doing something wrong, and it went against his moral beliefs. When asked how he justified his actions he stated, “Well, there are so many people that get in accidents on the highway, and it slows everyone else down. Otherwise,

I wouldn't have to get into the carpool lane to go any faster." He again placed blame elsewhere when discussing another ethical violation in which he littered by throwing his cigarette out the car window. He said, "I see people doing it all the time. My truck doesn't have an ashtray, so I don't have any other options to get rid of it." Finally, the theme of blame continued during this participant's interview when he indicated sometimes he sped while driving. He noted this was often because the speed limits should not be so low in the first place. He stated:

> I know I could get a ticket or whatever and most people shouldn't speed way over the limit but it's way too low in most areas . . . I probably told myself I'm not actually speeding because the speed limit isn't what it should be. They shouldn't have made the limit that low in the first place.

When speaking with Participant 2, she also provided responses that suggested she was not at fault when compromising her moral values. She detailed an instance in which she was not charged the correct amount when using the self-scan to check-out at the grocery store. She stated she scanned the bar code, and it charged her a significant amount less than it should have. She commented:

> What am I supposed to do, check to see if everything is the correct amount when I scan it? I probably get charged more than I should a lot of the time and don't even know it . . . I can't be responsible for making sure they have the correct prices for everything.

While interviewing Participant 5, he explained how parking in a no-parking zone his fault was not completely, in order to resolve dissonance. He said, "Yes, I know I should not be

parking there but there is [*sic*] so many constructions and what am I supposed to do. There is none. I cannot park far away."

Finally, Participant 6 contributed to the theme of resolving dissonance by reducing self-blame when talking about a time when he illegally parked in a handicap spot, knowing it went against his values. He contributed to the theme of deflecting responsibility, stating:

> The parking lot is small and I have pain in my back. There is no place to park so what can I do? I don't have the sticker to park there but what can I do? I cannot wait for a spot to be open. If they make it bigger for more spots, I would not do it.

Subtheme 2: Rationalizing the Importance and Sensitivity of Time Management. The second subtheme was associated with variation of time in terms of quickness, duration, and sense of importance. The reoccurring theme of time management was an obvious theme throughout the interview process as respondents continuously stated how it played a role in their judgment making process. It became clear many of the participants valued their time above moral values and placed importance on time duration when resolving cognitive dissonance in relation to committing petty crimes. Some participants detailed their experience of going against their moral values to save time, while others placed emphasis on rationalizing dissonance by referencing the perceived trivial duration of the petty crime.

While discussing his moral dilemma of driving in the carpool lane illegally, Participant 1 was asked how he justified going against his ethical beliefs. He stated:

> I see all these people driving past me and I know I'm going to save like 45 minutes if I get into the carpool lane. It's just not worth it to me to sit there

> forever when I can save time. I would rather be on time than just sit there because people don't know how to drive . . . my time is worth more than risking a ticket so I guess that's how I justify it.

He made similar comments after stating speeding went against his moral beliefs, and he knew it was wrong, commenting:

> Yes, I know speeding is wrong, but I can't just sit behind people who are going slow. It probably doesn't save me a lot of time to be honest, but in that moment, I believed it would save me some time. It feels good, bad, but also good. Like I'm accomplishing something. But I'm probably not.

When speaking to Participant 2, she described a time in which she made the decision to "cheat" on an exam, which added to the theme of time management and the importance it made in her decision process. She said:

> I had to save time somehow. I knew that I didn't have enough time to study for it . . . I had a bunch of other things going on at the time because of all the classes I was taking. This was the best thing I could think of. Not sure how they expected us to get everything done anyway. It's kind of unrealistic at times so I had to do something.

Participant 4 also detailed her experiences of driving in the carpool lane. She stated "saving time" was the reason she went against her ethical beliefs, and when asked how she justified it, she again stated "saving time" was more important to her. She also indicated she had parked in no-parking zones as well. When detailing this experience, she stated her justification was because she would not be parking for an extended period of time. The short duration of the violation was enough for her to justify going against her

moral beliefs. She said, "I was just going in to grab something and coming right back out. Not like I was staying there for an hour."

Continuing with the theme of perceived duration as a form of justification to resolve cognitive dissonance, Participant 5 also indicated the duration of time was a factor when committing a petty crime. Participant 5 acknowledged he had parked in a no-parking zone recently when he went to the store. He said, "I would not be a long time. It's very fast so nobody will be bothered." Similarly, Participant 8 stated the duration of time would not be very long with parking in a handicap spot illegally. He commented, "not for a long time," and "I'd be quick." These participants attempted to identify what rationales were used to resolve the cognitive dissonance they were experiencing when engaging in petty crimes. These subthemes best captured the thought process of the participants and represented most of the rationales endorsed.

Theme 2: The Difficulty of Recalling Past Experiences

During the interview process, individuals were tasked with remembering past experiences and the emotional conflicts associated with them. Beyond having to recall their past experiences, they were also required to make meaning of what may have been a split-second moral dilemma decision associated with varying levels of conscious and unconscious cognitive resolution. This proved to be a more difficult process for some than others. Half of the sample was able to identify at least three examples, while the other half could only identify two or fewer.

Subtheme 3: Speculation, Assumptions, and Recalling Situations. Due to the nature of the study requiring participants to remember specific details of past experiences, many individuals provided statements that indicated they were attempting to

construct a plausible retroactive narrative they believed was most likely to be true. Many participants also had a difficult time providing multiple scenarios of engaging in petty crimes, and examples that were given were rarely recent. The verbiage used highlighted the notion that specific thoughts and feelings were difficult to recall, and many of provided examples were often many years old. Thus, recent and emotionally attuned examples were difficult to elicit.

Participants were asked to reflect and recall any specific feelings associated with cognitive dissonance and their moral decision making. When speaking to Participant 1, he made multiple statements that indicated he was unable to recall exactly what thoughts and feelings he had experienced when deciding to drive in the carpool lane on the highway when he was the only person in the car, stating, “I was probably bothered by doing it but I don’t remember taking too much time to think about it when it happened.” At another point, he stated, “I don’t remember thinking about any specific emotions, probably disappointment and frustration but it’s hard to remember exactly. I know I wouldn’t feel good about it though.” While discussing a second scenario in which he endorsed littering out of his vehicle, the respondent indicated it was not a recent behavior, and it had happened many years ago, stating, “I remember a time when I threw cigarettes out of my window, but I haven’t done that in a while. It was a few years ago.” Again, when attempting to ask the respondent for other instances of petty crimes that may have happened during the past year, he indicated he was not able to recall anything more recent.

Participant 2 made similar statements about not remembering specifically what emotions she felt. She was asked how it made her feel to take something from the self-checkout without paying for it. She said:

> I'm sure I didn't feel great about it because I knew it was wrong and I was doing something wrong. Maybe it was disappointment in the fact that I don't think of myself as that type of person, you know? I mean, it wasn't like I thought I was a bad person or anything but I was like, damn, now I feel bad.

Furthermore, during the process of being asked to provide the most recent examples of committing crimes, she provided examples that occurred many years earlier, saying, "It was back when I was in school, probably 10 years ago." She also detailed a situation related to stealing clothes from a store "back when [she] was younger." And when asked if she could identity other examples she said, "Not that I can think of."

When speaking with Participant 3, he made more statements that indicated he was attempting to guess about how it made him feel to go against his moral beliefs when discussing how he accepted more money back from a cashier than he should have received. He shared:

> Oh, it was a while ago man. I remember that I was cool with it when I saw it was more money than I should've got back. Like I came up a bit. But when I got out of the store, I'm pretty sure I would have felt like a jerk. Like I didn't really need the extra $10s that bad you know?

He commented another time about how he assumed how he felt when he engaged in another ethical violation regarding taking clothes from a store without paying for them, stating:

> I mean it was a while ago. When it was happening, I don't remember feeling bad at all. It was a rush to do something like that and try to get away with it. Probably more to impress my friends than anything. They were doing it so I was just trying to fit in. Maybe I didn't have as much remorse as I do now that I'm older. I don't know. I was young and stupid so clothes were important to me.

Both examples from Participant 3 not only suggested he was unsure of what emotions he felt while engaging in the behaviors, but also they were not recent. He denied there were other examples of situations in which he engaged in petty crime behaviors, stating, "I'm sure there have been other things but I'm not remembering them right now." Although prompts and suggestions were offered to the respondent, he was still unable to identify other examples.

When speaking with Participant 4, she stated one of her ethical violations was having someone buy her alcohol before the age of 21. She confirmed it went against her ethical beliefs but had a difficult time describing the emotions that accompanied the behavior or the rationale she used to reduce any cognitive dissonance. She commented, "Oh my gosh, that was like . . . 15 years ago. I'm not sure what I was thinking. Just trying to have fun with friends." When asked if she remembered having any specific thoughts or feelings, she again denied knowing what feelings may have come up for her when violating her ethical beliefs. She reiterated she "just wanted to have fun" and did not recall how she may have resolved the cognitive dissonance. Although two of her examples were within the past few months, the other was 15 years ago. She only provided minimal information and stated she had "grown out of that phase" when asked to provide other examples of petty crime behaviors despite being offered examples.

Participants 5–8 not only had a difficult time identifying emotions related to compromising moral values and cognitive dissonance, but they also struggled to recall specific instances where they engaged in petty crimes. When speaking with Participant 5, he was only able to identify the situation of parking in a no-parking zone with some prompting; furthermore, he was not able to identify any emotions associated with his scenario and repeatedly indicated he could not remember any other instances when he had committed a second petty crime in his past. He repeatedly stated "no" or "I do not" when asked about other potential situations from his past, recent or otherwise.

Continuing the theme of having difficulty recalling the engagement of petty crime behaviors, Participant 6 provided limited information and only one scenario. He required prompting and suggestions before acknowledging he had parked in a handicap spot illegally. When discussing a situation, he stated "I don't know" when asked what thoughts or feelings he had when engaging in a situation that went against his moral values. He also had a difficult time identifying a second instance in which he compromised his morals, despite prompting and suggestions.

Participants 7 and 8 were able to identify two instances in which they compromised their ethical values, but it proved to be a difficult task to remember what emotions were felt during that time and what rationales helped them to resolve the dissonance they felt. Although they acknowledged the petty crimes went against their ethical values, they both stated they did not know what emotions were associated with the behaviors. Participant 7 reiterated his underage drinking was "wrong" and he "should not have done it," but also said, "I don't remember," when attempting to identify the rationale for violating his morals. Although he offered a second example of speeding that

went against his moral values, he said it was about a year ago and did not remember another time he engaged with that type of petty crime or any examples of other behaviors from his past.

Similarly, Participant 8 identified two petty crimes but only provided minimal details and did not offer any insight into his thought process, emotions, or rationale for engaging in a behavior he noted was “wrong.” Despite providing prompts or potential examples he stated, “I don’t do anything like that.” And when attempting to elicit more details from his example of speeding he was unable to recall any specific times it happened.

Chapter 4

Prior to this study, there had been limited research regarding the rationale people use when violating their ethical values related to petty crime behaviors. To enrich the previous research in this area, this study attempted to identify specific emotions, rationales, and behaviors associated with petty crimes to understand the process of resolving cognitive dissonance more specifically. This was accomplished by implementing a qualitative phenomenological research design guided by the following questions:

1. What reasons do people use to rationalize their moral dilemmas?
2. How do people understand their experience of resolving cognitive dissonance?
3. What themes are identified throughout the data collection process?

Petty Crime Rationalizations

In accordance with the research that has indicated uncomfortable tension is experienced when two or more inconsistent cognitions are held by an individual resulting in the drive to reconcile this strain (Cooper, 2019), this research found a variety of ways people use to resolve the tension of cognitive dissonance. Although there are a vast number of studies that have been published on the general nature of cognitive dissonance, this study added to the literature by including the specific aspect of petty crime engagement.

During the interview process, it became clear heavy emphasis was placed on time management. It appeared the individuals in this study valued time above their moral values when engaging in petty crimes. Although most of this rationale included situations

that involved traffic scenarios, it also included an ethical violation of parking and cheating. Furthering the importance of time, the duration of time engaging in the petty crime act was also a notable rationale for people. The amount of time spent violating their morals acted as a way to resolve cognitive dissonance by rationalizing it would only be for a minimal period of time. The frequency of time management as a theme in this study appeared to be justified by the nature of current Western societal structure that is constantly ingesting information in real time and motivated by capitalistic tendencies of success and consumerism. This concept was further evidenced by comments during the interview process that saving time was even more important than the punishment that may proceed the criminal act.

The aspect of responsibility and blame also stood out as a theme for rationalization. These individuals indicated they were not at fault for having to engage in behaviors that went against their moral code. They placed blame elsewhere or on factors outside of their control. These participants reduced their cognitive dissonance by indicating they were not at fault for violating their moral beliefs and potentially introduces other considerations such as personality characteristics and traits. Although the displacement of responsibility is an identified rationale for reducing cognitive dissonance, it is also possible these individuals have an external locus of control (LOC), which coincides with previous research from Rotter (1966) and Spector (1988). They suggested these individuals place heavier emphasis on external factors and the actions of others. These types of rationales tended to be much quicker and decisive than the others. There was also less deliberation and responses were given as matter of fact. The ability to influence this type of thought process may be more difficult to address than the

aforementioned time management rationales. The awareness that time management may lead to ethical breaching behaviors has the potential for behavior changes, if desired; however, blame, responsibility, and LOC may be personality characteristics that would require more direct and intentional focus on change if there was a desire to avoid these circumstances.

Research from Lee et al. (2019) found people who associated honesty with effort were more likely to behave dishonestly; therefore, they believed the pursuit of honesty required a certain level of effort to be achieved. There may be a relationship between Lee et al.'s research and the rationalizations associated with blame in the current study. Many of the participants provided justifications that their behaviors were outside of their control or not responsible for them in some way. Therefore, they may be perceiving their actions as effortless which increases their likelihood of engaging in dishonest or unethical behaviors.

Understanding the Cognitive Dissonance Experience

It was clear throughout the interview process that individuals either had a difficult time remembering scenarios in which they engaged in a morally compromising decision, or alternatively, did not want to divulge some of these behaviors to the researcher in this study. This finding was an unexpected outcome as the study focused on minor petty crimes as opposed to more serious crimes, and explicitly stated that discussing and divulging these behaviors would be a requirement of the study.

One potential reason for the lack of cognitive dissonance examples from the participants may be that the process of compromising morals and resolving dissonance related to petty crimes is an automatic and mostly unconscious process. This type of

cognitive process is reflective of the cognitive-intuitionist model in which situations trigger an unconscious and automatic processing of our cognitions and emotions. In this theory, our brain attempts to match the situation to similar scenarios from our past and identify a normative action (Dedeke, 2015). Therefore, the matching process reduces the amount of cognitive processes that may otherwise happen during an unfamiliar situation. For instance, if a person has constantly compromised their morals in a similar situation or repetitive manner, the cognitive load will be reduced, creating an automatic response requiring less conscious thought compared to someone who is doing it for the first time.

Alternatively, the individuals in this study may have been attempting to distance themselves from the admission of engaging in petty criminal activity. Although there were some minor examples of speeding or illegal parking, many of the participants chose to identify examples that were not within the past year, and many times they focused on examples that were significantly older. Multiple participants chose examples from which they were over a decade removed. This was another reason why identifying thoughts and feelings may have been difficult to recall. Using examples that were not recent may have provided some moral security as a method to ignore potential dissonance or maintain a positive sense of self.

Recalling examples of situations that examine moral violations and resolution of cognitive dissonance might, as a result, bring up current dissonance. Continuing the theme of using older examples, these individuals may be attempting to distance themselves from having to present an identity they do not want to be associated with or have to reexamine. Participants often made comments that they were not that person anymore, had different priorities, or do not think that way anymore. Although the

dissonance was resolved when the initial behavior happened, discussing it may create new dissonance that is easier to reconcile than a more recent behavior that could not be dismissed as an expired thought process or past self.

When speaking to each participant, they had varying levels of consciousness regarding their historical experience with cognitive dissonance. Each participant attempted to reveal their own thoughts and behaviors when faced with this phenomenon and tried to make sense of their decision process retrospectively. It became clear the respondents in this study had not previously considered the depth of how these decisions were affected and the following rationale that accompanied them. As indicated by Chung and Cheng (2018), decisions conflicting with currently held beliefs are comprised of arousal dissonance (when a decision is made), and discomfort dissonance (the result of the decision).

The component of cognitive dissonance that appeared to be the hardest part to conceptualize for individuals in this study was the result of the decision, or the discomfort dissonance. Discomfort dissonance causes an emotional reaction such as anxiety or uncertainty (Chung & Cheng, 2018; Festinger, 1962); however, many people struggled with this concept to recall or attempted to guess at it. Many individuals took pause or repeated the question in confusion as to how they resolved the dissonance in their mind and what emotions come up for them, suggesting more of an unconscious reaction during the time of the event.

It is also possible having to recall emotional reactions from distant memory may have prevented them from accurately describing what specific reactions they had. Zhang et al. (2017) conducted a study in which groups of people were divided into high and low

working memory capacities. Their study suggested individuals with lower working memory were impacted by the introduction of negative emotions, which further reduced their working memory capacity at the time of the event.

Many of the examples participants provided were motor vehicle decisions people make on a daily basis, such as speeding, driving in the carpool lane, or parking illegally. None of the participants in the study indicated they received a citation for any of their petty criminal acts, and therefore, may not have ever thought about their decision after the initial dissonance was resolved. As opposed to criminal acts that are more severe, memories of these more seemingly small decisions may not have elicited the emotional impact that would cause them to be ruminated upon and rehearsed, and thus, inspire less cognitive recall after time has passed.

Another consideration regarding participants' lack of depth regarding their experience with cognitive dissonance is they may not have the emotional language to explain or identify what was going on with them during their provided examples. Emotional prosody, defined as the ability to express emotion through the variations of speech, is a learned skill developed in different ways and is more pronounced in people depending on their learned experience with this concept. This is an important skill for overcoming cognitive dissonance (Perlovsky, 2013) and may prevent some from describing their situation in emotional detail.

Implications of Research Findings

Findings from this research may shed some light on how people understand the process of decision-making when that decision is in direct conflict with their personal moral values. This knowledge can be highlighted, assessed, and improved through

therapeutic services in many ways. First, many participants in this study indicated they placed blame elsewhere when engaging in petty crimes that went against their moral values. With this knowledge, people who tend to use this type of rationalization more frequently may benefit from a conscious effort to examine this specific personality characteristic to avoid engaging in petty crimes that may lead to more severe infractions over time. The tendency to blame other circumstances for behaviors can be understood and measured on the continuum of a spectrum. As with other personality traits, all people engage in this thought to some degree. Using a LOC questionnaire would be a helpful way to start the process of identifying any external or internal tendencies.

It also became clear participants in this study placed heavy weight on time management and time duration when engaging in petty crimes that went against their moral values. By developing a higher conscious awareness of this value, individuals could benefit and use this knowledge as a motivational factor to avoid the potential inclination or desire to commit petty crimes. Furthermore, having the conscious awareness that time management is important to them could play a major role in limiting the probability of finding themselves in situations that place them in a position that may compromise their values. Therapeutically, this may be achieved by a focus on how time management has affected the individual in the past and identifying ways to reduce the frequency of how these types of situations arise.

As previously illustrated, emotional language and prosody is an important factor when attempting to resolve dissonance and describe the effects it has. Many participants in this study had a difficult time identifying their thoughts and feelings related to their experience with cognitive dissonance. According to Perlovsky (2013), cognitive

representations require a connection to language and emotions, otherwise only practically useful words would have cognitive meaning. Furthermore, emotions people learn must be connected to language sounds to have a cognitive context. This skill is acquired throughout the lifetime and can be enhanced in many ways, such as reading, listening to music, and increased variation of emotion based human interaction. It would be beneficial for therapists to evaluate this skill with their clients prior to examining the effects of dissonance related concerns.

Finally, in terms of overall therapeutic application, this study provided clarity and insight about how people think, behave, and understand decision-making process when engaging in petty crimes that are in direct conflict with their moral values. This study sheds light on the possibility that when people make decisions that go against their personally held moral values, the subsequent cognitive dissonance that is created may be resolved quickly and perhaps unconsciously.

If people could develop an awareness regarding the process in which they resolve cognitive dissonance, they would have the opportunity to make changes to avoid being put in those situations and the ability to make more informed decisions and develop a higher level of deliberation. These types of skills could be achieved during the therapeutic process with an individual therapist, or in a group setting. With a focus on discomfort dissonance during the decision-making process, individuals have the opportunity to bring a level of consciousness to the forefront of their choices and rationalization. As this research has shown individuals may have a difficult time examining situations from their past, keeping a journal or log of how daily encounters

with cognitive dissonance are understood and experienced would provide a therapeutic foundation regarding behavior tendencies and how to address individual concerns.

The overall data from this study suggest people may not be considering how their daily lives impact potential decisions regarding committing petty criminal acts. The participants from this study indicated they made split second decisions that were often made based on responsibility, duration, and time management. With this knowledge, people can begin the process of moving toward continued research to provide further clarification on the impact of cognitive dissonance and how people rationalize their decisions. The data from this study can serve as a guide to individuals seeking self-improvement and to therapists who intend to help their clients regarding decision making and behavior change. This knowledge may also help to minimize the occurrences of engaging in petty crimes and prevent snowballing into more severe criminal activities or penalties going forward.

Study Limitations

One of the limitations for this study was the small sample size of eight participants. The number of participants was acceptable for conducting an IPA qualitative study; however, caution should be exercised when generalizing findings. A second limitation of this study was some participants found it difficult to either recall specific emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, or were unwilling to divulge such actions from their past. Although a small sample size was sought to provide depth, the qualitative data were limited due to participants' finite ability to provide expansive experiential information. This limitation in conjunction with a smaller sample size reduced the study's ability to identify themes and explore participant experiences when confronted with cognitive

dissonance. Furthermore, racial identity may have played a role in the outcome of the study as the Black participants provided fewer examples than the White participants. It is possible they had not engaged in as many petty criminal acts, or they did not feel comfortable discussing petty criminal activity with a White researcher.

Future Research

Future research would be aided by a larger sample size to gain a more diverse sense of experiences and reduce the influence of participants who are not able to provide a variety of examples of engaging in petty crime behaviors. Due to the importance of participant depth of knowledge, a larger sample size would be a safeguard against individuals who are only able to provide minimal data. Additionally, asking participants about their concerns they may have with divulging criminal activity or how they feel about the researcher knowing these behaviors may gain some understanding as to their reluctance to discuss certain topics.

Also, as previously mentioned, some individuals had difficulty recalling their past experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Participants in this study often used language to suggest they were attempting to guess what their experience was like. Future research may be enhanced by asking participants to keep a log of their experiences with cognitive dissonance over a designated period of time going forward instead of having to recall their behaviors from memory. It may also be beneficial to present participants with a case study or a vignette about having to handle a moral dilemma as a method to elicit an emotional reaction to cognitive dissonance. This will guard against memory recall concerns and provide more depth of information as participants could document their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in real time. Furthermore, introducing a working

memory assessment to recruit individuals who may be able to retain their experiences at a higher degree may also prove to enhance the amount of detail provided.

The concept of blame and responsibility was a rationalization theme for participants in this study. The research has shown LOC is a determining factor related to how people view their decisions as their fault or not. Due to the frequency of these responses, future research may benefit from implementing questionnaires or assessments aimed at identifying this mediating factor as participant inclusion criteria. Gathering participants who have a higher LOC may provide more depth from rationales and reduce the number of decisions impacted by lack of responsibility or blame. Furthermore, prestudy assessments aimed at evaluation of emotional language skills would also allow the research to potentially exclude individuals who lack the ability to verbally describe their experience with discomfort dissonance.

This study found the aspect of time played a significant role in the participants' decisions to violate their moral values. This included time spent while engaging in the behavior or the consideration of perceived amount of time that would be saved by violating their morals. Because many of the participants described situations that were related to traffic violations such as speeding, driving in the carpool lane, and parking in a no-parking zone, future researchers may want to separate these types of petty crimes to further examine the impact of time management on moral violations. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to specifically focus this research design on different demographics to understand this phenomenon from different perspectives (e.g., clergy, police, inmates).

Finally, some of the participants in the study asked about a gift card being provided for participating in the study. Specifically, multiple people sent follow-up

emails requesting a gift card or asking when they would receive it. Although the informed consent stated there would be no compensation for participating in the study, it may be beneficial for future studies to also inform participants verbally whether there is any compensation before conducting any interviews or acquiring any data from them.

Conclusion

With the goal of exploring how people rationalize the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance when engaging in a petty crime that is in direct conflict with their personal morals, this study recruited eight individuals who offered their historical experiences when encountering these situations. This included not only rationalizations, but also what thoughts and feelings were experienced during these situations. This study found multiple themes that provided important information regarding the decision process and how people resolve and understand cognitive dissonance. People may benefit from exploring their own experiences to avoid putting themselves in situations that could lead to more serious financial and legal troubles. Furthermore, developing a higher understanding of their own resolution of cognitive dissonance may provide improved personal and situational awareness in circumstances that often occur unconsciously.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

How We Rationalize our Morals: A Qualitative Analysis of Cognitive Dissonance, Rationalization, and Criminal Behavior

Northwest University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Wesley Westbrook, a graduate student in the doctoral program in Counseling Psychology at Northwest University. The study is being conducted for the purpose of completing his doctoral dissertation. The purpose of this study is to understand how people rationalize their morals when engaging in petty criminal activity.

To be eligible for this study, participants must:

a) Be an adult of 21 years or older
b) Read and speak English fluently

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

a) Participate in an in person semistructured interview
b) Review a transcribed copy of the interview to ensure accuracy and provide any additional comments (you may choose to decline this request)

Participation in this study is estimated to be approximately 30-45 minutes and will be conducted in person or online via Zoom, a HIPAA compliant video platform, depending on participant location. The interviews will be audio recorded and any identifying information will be removed. These recordings will be kept confidential and stored in a secure environment at the researcher's residence. Any digital files will be password

protected and physical documents will be kept in a secure environment. All research data will be destroyed after 5 years upon the completion of this study.

The Northwest University Institutional Review Board has approved this study. No deception is involved, and participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

By signing this form, you are giving your permission to use the information you provide for this study. However, you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point. You may choose to decline right now as well as withdraw at any point during the study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the principal researcher, Wesley Westbrook at xxxxx@northwestu.edu. If you have further questions, please contact my faculty dissertation chair, Nikki Johnson, Psy.D. at xxxxx@northwestu.edu.

Before moving forward with this study, please read this consent form in full. If you understand all information contained in this form and agree to freely participate in this study, please click the "I Agree" button. Please note the principal researcher will print out this agreed upon informed consent form to store it as a hard copy and appropriately store in a secure location. If you choose to decline the invitation to participate in this study, you may exit out of this window. Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Wesley Westbrook, M.Ed.

Doctoral Student in Counseling Psychology, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; xxxxx@northwestu.edu

Nikki Johnson, PsyD Assistant Professor, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences ; xxxxx@northwestu.edu

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

Participant ID_____________

Please describe the following . . .

1. What is your age?
2. What is your occupation?
3. What is your marital status?
4. Where do you currently live?
5. What is your religious affiliation?
6. What is your highest level of education?
7. What is your annual household income?
8. What is your racial identity?
9. What is your ethnicity?
10. What is your gender identity?

Appendix C

Semistructured Interview

1. Can you describe a recent time you have told a white lie to someone in your life?
2. Do you believe engaging in petty crimes (stealing/littering/traffic violations/etc.) goes against your moral beliefs?
3. Are there any petty crimes that do not go against your moral beliefs?
   a. If so, why?
4. For petty crimes that go against your moral beliefs, why do you believe it is wrong?
5. When and how did you learn it was wrong?
6. Have you ever committed petty crimes in the past?
7. Can you give me 3-4 examples of petty crimes you have committed in the past?
   a. Ask for details (what/when/where)
8. In reflecting on this example, do you recall having any specific feelings or emotions about it?
9. In reflecting on this example, why did you do it?
10. In your mind, how did you justify going against your ethical beliefs?
    a. Did you have any other justifications for going against your beliefs?
11. Do you have other examples of violating this specific ethical belief?
    a. If yes, repeat questions 6-10
    b. If no, begin new ethical violation with questions 6-10