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## **Are Welfare Recipients Judged Differently for Choosing Ethical Products?**

Most of us feel good buying ethical products such as organic food, hybrid cars, or cruelty-free cosmetics—they're generally seen as better for us, animals, and the environment. A recent study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#) reveals that consumers typically respect such purchases by others—unless those others happen to be on welfare.



“Ethical choices often cost much more than their alternatives, and as a result, polarize moral judgments: people earning high or moderate incomes are seen as more moral for choosing the costly ethical goods, whereas those in the lowest income bracket, receiving government assistance, are seen as less moral and ‘undeserving’ of the right to make such choices,” write authors Jenny G. Olson (University of Kansas), Brent McFerran (Simon Fraser University), Andrea C. Morales (Arizona State University), and Darren W. Dahl (University of British Columbia).

Through a series of studies, the authors found that consumers who “earned” their money (regardless of the size of their income) were perceived as more virtuous and moral when selecting ethical goods (such as organic food or an environmentally friendly car), while consumers receiving government assistance were judged as immoral for making the exact same selections. Participants even donated less money to a charity that provided organic versus conventional food to area families in need.

The only exception to the pattern occurred when welfare recipients bought *discounted* organic food—in that case, they were viewed just as favorably as the wealthier people who chose regularly priced organic food.

“Because government assistance comes from taxpayer dollars, consumers seem to regard recipients with extra moral scrutiny—judging the choice to buy pricier ethical goods as taking advantage of ‘their’ hard-earned money,” the authors conclude.

Jenny G. Olson, Brent McFerran, Andrea C. Morales, and Darren W. Dahl. “[Wealth and Welfare: Divergent Moral Reactions to Ethical Consumer Choices.](#)” *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2016. DOI: [10.1093/jcr/ucv096](#)



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