



Tainting the soul: Purity concerns predict moral judgments of suicide



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ABSTRACT

Moral violations are typically defined as actions that harm others. However, suicide is considered immoral even though the perpetrator is also the victim. To determine whether concerns about *purity* rather than harm predict moral condemnation of suicide, we presented American adults with obituaries describing suicide or homicide victims. While harm was the only variable predicting moral judgments of homicide, perceived harm (toward others, the self, or God) did not significantly account for variance in moral judgments of suicide. Instead, regardless of political and religious views and contrary to explicit beliefs about their own moral judgments, participants were more likely to morally condemn suicide if they (i) believed suicide tainted the victims' souls, (ii) reported greater concerns about purity in an independent questionnaire, (iii) experienced more disgust in response to the obituaries, or (iv) reported greater trait disgust. Thus, suicide is deemed immoral to the extent that it is considered impure.

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1. Introduction

Every year, approximately one million people take their own lives (World Health Organization, 2005). These acts of suicide elicit considerable moral condemnation (Gallup, 1978). Suicide represents an unusual kind of moral violation insofar as the perpetrator of the act is also the victim. This self-directed nature of suicide presents a puzzle for dyadic accounts of morality (Gray & Wegner, 2009, 2012), which require a violator (agent) and a victim (patient), and which identify other-directed concerns about harm as the cornerstone of moral psychology (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012; also see Royzman, Leeman, & Baron, 2009). If moral violations are typically considered wrong because of the harm inflicted on third parties, why is suicide so often judged to be immoral?

Some researchers have argued that objectively innocuous actions can nevertheless be *perceived* as causing

unseen harm to others, which then renders these actions immoral (Gray & Wegner, 2012; Gray et al., 2012; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987). There are several ways in which suicide could be conceptualized as harmful; for example, suicide may be thought to cause damage to the deceased person's family, to their community, or even to God or to a "future self". In order for people to perceive harm, one of these potential victims must first be identified. In a recent study, when participants were asked whether anyone is wronged when an individual ends her life, the majority (71%) answered in the affirmative, typically designating either the person's family or the person herself as the victim (DeScioli, Gilbert, & Kurzban, 2012). These perceptions of victimhood, which could then lead to perceptions of harm, have been claimed to account for people's moral condemnation of suicide (Gray et al., 2012).

Here we test whether these inferences of harmed victims play a fundamental role in the moral judgment itself or, alternatively, whether they are more likely to reflect post hoc rationalizations in support of the initial moral judgment of suicide (DeScioli et al., 2012; Ditto, Liu, &

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Wojcik, 2012). As prior work has shown, explicit justifications do not always reflect the intuitive processes underlying moral judgments (Haidt, 2001; Hauser, Cushman, Young, Jin, & Mikhail, 2007). Recent research reveals that inferences of harm in moral violations where actual harm is absent (e.g., eating human tissue derived from cloning) tend to be effortful; harm inferences are impaired under cognitive load and are unrelated to the severity of moral judgments (Gutierrez & Giner-Sorolla, 2007). Thus, while justifications of moral judgments often include appeals to harm, actual or imagined harm are not necessarily the true causes of those judgments.

According to an alternative model of moral psychology, some moral concerns take the form of “sacred” or deontological values that are considered inviolable regardless of clear consequences for the wellbeing of others (Chakroff, Dungan, & Young, 2013; Ditto et al., 2012; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2012; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987; Tetlock, 2003). In particular, the “purity/sanctity” foundation of morality encompasses transgressions that are considered wrong because they contaminate or degrade a sacred entity (Haidt, 2012; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Because moral purity violations do not require harm to third parties, and because suicide is often described as a violation of God’s holy dominion over human life (e.g., Bering, 2006), we suggest that moral judgments of suicide may be closely linked to concerns about impurity and sacrilege. Indeed, people with stronger beliefs that their life belongs to God (Ross & Kaplan, 1994) and that life is sacred (Sawyer & Sobal, 1987) are more disapproving of suicide, providing preliminary support for this claim. The present research provides a direct empirical test of the hypothesis that individual differences in the moral condemnation of suicide stem from variance in the tendency to value purity/sanctity, and, in particular, variance in concerns regarding the defilement of the soul. While it is possible that “purity” and “sanctity” have subtly different conceptual profiles, these concepts are often treated as synonymous (e.g., Graham et al., 2009), and we will use “purity” for the remainder of the paper as a shorthand term to refer to these concerns.

In Study 1, half of the participants were presented with a series of obituaries describing cases of suicide. The remaining participants were assigned to a control condition in which they were presented with obituaries describing cases of homicide, a prototypical harm-based violation. We asked all participants to rate each obituary according to five dimensions (i.e., how morally wrong, how harmful, how impure, how angering, how disgusting), and we entered these variables into a regression analysis to assess which factors predicted individual differences in judgments of moral wrongness. We hypothesized that participants would judge a suicide as morally wrong to the extent that they perceived the suicide to have diminished the victim’s purity, but not to the extent that they perceived the suicide to have caused harm. We expected to find the opposite pattern for homicide. Additionally, because harm violations have been found to selectively elicit anger, whereas purity violations have been shown to selectively elicit disgust (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen,

2009; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013; Russell, Piazza, & Giner-Sorolla, 2013; Seidel & Prinz, 2013; but see Chapman & Anderson, 2013), we investigated whether individual differences in moral judgments of suicide and homicide are associated with distinct emotional responses.

Because some researchers define harm very broadly (e.g., Gray et al., 2012), Study 2 aimed to ensure that the purity item in Study 1 (which asked about “taint to the soul”) was not being re-construed as a form of actual or symbolic harm. We therefore focused on suicide obituaries and asked participants to report the harm they perceived being done to others, to the self, and to God, in addition to reporting perceived impurity as in Study 1. Again, a regression analysis assessed the degree to which these factors independently predicted individual differences in moral judgments of suicide.

2. Study 1

2.1. Participants

Adults ($n = 224$) living in the United States were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing website that has been found to yield valid and reliable data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants were excluded from analyses if they completed the survey very quickly (less than 1 *SD* below the mean response time: 18 participants), missed at least one of two “catch questions” used as attention checks (19 additional participants), or reported being non-American (13 additional participants).¹ The final sample comprised 174 participants (114 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.14$, $SD = 13.96$). Participants were generally liberal ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.74$) and non-religious ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 2.22$), as confirmed by one-sample *t*-tests (scale midpoint = 4), $ps < .001$.

2.2. Materials and procedure

2.2.1. Obituary task

Participants were randomly assigned either to the Suicide condition or to the Homicide condition. In each condition, participants read eight fabricated obituaries (presented in randomized order) describing men and women who had either taken their own lives (Suicide condition) or who had been killed (Homicide condition). Crucially, the obituaries were identical across conditions except for a single word stating the cause of the death. The nature of the suicide or homicide was intentionally left unspecified, both in order to prevent extraneous factors from influencing the moral judgments and in order to make the obituaries more realistic. (All participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the study and told that the obituaries were fictitious.) A sample obituary is as follows (other obituaries are reproduced in [online supplementary materials](#)):

¹ We restricted the Turk participants to the United States in order to obtain a higher proportion of native English speakers. However, the results did not change when the 13 non-Americans were included in the sample.

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