



Transfer effects between moral dilemmas: A causal model theory



Alex Wiegmann*, Michael R. Waldmann

Department of Psychology, University of Göttingen, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 April 2013

Revised 15 December 2013

Accepted 17 December 2013

Keywords:

Moral judgment

Moral dilemmas

Causal models

Analogical mapping

Transfer effects

ABSTRACT

Evaluations of analogous situations are an important source for our moral intuitions. A puzzling recent set of findings in experiments exploring transfer effects between intuitions about moral dilemmas has demonstrated a striking asymmetry. Transfer often occurred with a specific ordering of moral dilemmas, but not when the sequence was reversed. In this article we present a new theory of transfer between moral intuitions that focuses on two components of moral dilemmas, namely their causal structure and their default evaluations. According to this theory, transfer effects are expected when the causal models underlying the considered dilemmas allow for a mapping of the highlighted aspect of the first scenario onto the causal structure of the second dilemma, and when the default evaluations of the two dilemmas substantially differ. The theory's key predictions for the occurrence and the direction of transfer effects between two moral dilemmas are tested in five experiments with various variants of moral dilemmas from different domains. A sixth experiment tests the predictions of the theory for how the target action in the moral dilemmas is represented.

© 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Some readers might recognize the following anti-piracy advertisement that has recently been shown in movie theaters. A person is sitting in front of a computer and about to start illegally downloading a film. In the following scene big letters appear on the screen, saying “You wouldn't steal a car”, and you see a person trying to steal a car. A second later, you are told “You wouldn't steal a television”, and you see the respective scene. Eventually, you read “You wouldn't steal a movie”, and you can see a person running away after he has grabbed a DVD in a movie store. Back to the initial scene the text appears “Downloading pirated films is stealing”.

The strategy behind this anti-piracy advertisement is clear. Showing several instances of stealing highlights one aspect of downloading a pirated film, namely the aspect of taking away someone's property. Highlighting a

specific aspect of an action can be achieved in several ways: The easiest way is to simply point out the respective aspect. A more implicit, but possibly more successful strategy is to present analogous cases in which people's intuitions are more clear-cut than in the target dilemma. For instance, in the discussions about the moral status of abortions, anti-abortionists may present ultrasounds showing the heartbeat of embryos inside the womb, whereas pro-abortionists may point to the case of a pregnant woman that has been brutally raped. This argumentation strategy is chosen with the aim that people presented with the analogies will automatically transfer their moral intuitions onto the target case. If in the example above people agree that stealing is wrong in one of the clear cases, and they cannot point out why downloading pirated films significantly differs from stealing, they might feel committed to judge that downloading pirated films is wrong as well.

Research on moral judgment strongly suggests that there are indeed *transfer effects* (e.g., Horne, Powell, & Spino, 2013; Lanteri, Chelini, & Rizzello, 2008; Liao, Wiegmann, Alexander, & Vong, 2012; Lombrozo, 2009;

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, Gosslerstr. 14, 37073 Göttingen, Germany. Tel.: +49 5513991250.

E-mail address: awiegma@uni-goettingen.de (A. Wiegmann).

Petrinovich & O'Neill, 1996, Wiegmann, Okan, & Nagel, 2012). Such transfer effects have been found to be robust and strong, sometimes even counteracting other factors known to influence moral judgments (Wiegmann et al., 2012). The aim of the present article is to propose a new theory of transfer effects between moral dilemmas that focuses on highlighting of components of causal models.

To test theories of transfer, cases that demonstrate that transfer can be asymmetric are particularly informative. In the following section we will report recent studies showing that sometimes transfer only occurs when moral dilemmas are ordered in a specific sequence, but not when the sequence is reversed. This is an interesting finding because transfer effects are often justified as attempts of reasoners to be consistent across different situations. However, while attributing the goal to be consistent may be a plausible hypothesis when transfer is observed, this does not explain why transfer occasionally is absent in the opposite order. Different theories have been proposed but so far the effect of asymmetric transfer resists a convincing explanation.

Asymmetries of transfer are not only interesting as test cases for cognitive theories, they are also important for predicting how intuitions influence each other outside the laboratory. A politician, for example, may think about how she can influence the intuitions of her constituents about privacy issues or about a military invasion. A poll about several political propositions may yield different results depending on the ordering of the votes. Parents may think about how they can influence intuitions of their children about theft on the Internet, or advertising agencies may work out strategies on how to convince buyers to buy more expensive organic food items. The research on asymmetric transfer indicates that it will be of crucial importance to pick the right cases in the right order to make the analogies work. Our research will focus on specific cases of asymmetrical transfer that are designed to test between competing theories.

1.1. Asymmetrical transfer effects between intuitions about trolley dilemmas

Most of the studies in which transfer effects were found investigated trolley dilemmas. Trolley dilemmas have been extensively discussed in moral philosophy, which has stimulated various empirical studies in moral psychology (see Gräfenhain & Wiegmann, 2012, chap. 81; Waldmann, Nagel, & Wiegmann, 2012, for overviews). In trolley dilemmas, an out-of-control train is threatening a group of people who are about to die if nothing is done to stop the train. To save this group, a bystander could intervene at the cost of the death of another person who would otherwise not be in danger.

Push and *Switch* are the two best-known trolley variants discussed in both the philosophical and psychological literature (e.g., Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1985).¹ In both dilemmas

¹ Conventionally, these two dilemmas are labeled “Footbridge dilemma” and “Trolley dilemma”, respectively. Since both dilemmas involve trolleys, the conventional labels are somewhat misleading so that we will instead use the terms “Push” and “Switch”. In most of our experiments, three individuals (instead of the usual five in the philosophical literature) can be saved.

three people are threatened by an out-of-control train. In *Push*, the only possibility to save the three persons is to throw a heavy person from a bridge in front of the train, resulting in the death of the heavy person but saving the three (Thomson, 1985). In *Switch*, the threatening train can be redirected away from the three onto another track where one different person would die in the collision with the train (Foot, 1967). Research in moral psychology has shown that the majority of people disapprove of intervening in *Push*, whereas they favor an intervention in *Switch* (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Greene et al., 2009; Hauser, Cushman, Young, Jin, & Mikhail, 2007; Sloman, Fernbach, & Ewing, 2009; Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007; Waldmann & Wiegmann, 2010; see Waldmann et al., 2012, for an overview).

Interestingly, transfer effects for these two moral dilemmas have been shown to be asymmetrical (e.g., Lanteri et al., 2008; Lombrozo, 2009; Petrinovich & O'Neill, 1996; Wiegmann et al., 2012). Presenting *Push* before *Switch* affects people's judgment for the proposed action in *Switch*: In this condition, subjects are less likely to approve of the proposed action in *Switch* than when being confronted with *Switch* alone. However, presenting *Switch* before *Push* does not change people's judgment for the proposed action in *Push*. Explaining this asymmetry is a key challenge for every theory of transfer effects between evaluations of moral dilemmas.

2. Selective highlighting within causal models: a theory of transfer effects

We will introduce our theory in four stages: First, we will specify the scope of our theory. Second, we will present its general spirit by using an ambiguous image as an analogy. Third, we will describe the core components of our theory. Fourth, we will outline the predictions of our theory, and show how it handles the asymmetrical transfer effect between moral dilemmas, such as *Push* and *Switch*.

2.1. The scope of our theory

The target domain of our theory is moral dilemmas in which potential victims are threatened by physical (often deadly) harm. The principal goal is to explain transfer effects between harm-based moral dilemmas that are consecutively presented and individually evaluated. Apart from these constraints, the scope of our theory is not limited to specific kinds of dilemmas, for example trolley dilemmas. In Section 8.2 we will discuss possible extensions of our theory.

2.2. The ambiguous image analogy

To illustrate the intuition motivating our theory, we would like to use an ambiguous image as an analogous case. Fig. 1 illustrates an asymmetrical transfer effect (adapted from Medin, Goldstone, & Gentner, 1993). Most people perceive four prongs if they look at the image on the left side first, but if they see the left image after having been shown the right image first, they instead see three

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10457569>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10457569>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)