



Brief article

To push or not to push? Affective influences on moral judgment depend on decision frame



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ABSTRACT

People's moods can influence moral judgment. Such influences may arise because moods affect moral emotion, or because moods affect moral thought. The present study provides evidence that, at least in the footbridge dilemma, moods affect moral thought. The results of two experiments are reported in which, after induction of positive, negative, or neutral moods and presentation of the footbridge scenario, participants were asked one of two differentially framed closing questions. In the active frame, participants were asked whether they would be active and push the man, making thoughts about pushing accessible; in the passive frame, they were asked whether they would be passive and not push the man, making thoughts about not pushing accessible. The results show that affective influences on moral judgment depended on participants' decision frame. Compared to neutral moods, positive moods induced utilitarian responding – i.e., deciding to push – in the active decision frame, but induced nonutilitarian responding – i.e., deciding to not push – in the passive decision frame; in negative moods, exactly the opposite picture arose. The results suggest that people's moods affect moral judgment by conferring value on moral thought. Positive moods promote and negative moods inhibit accessible thoughts.

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1. Introduction

People's moods can influence moral judgment (Strohminger, Lewis, & Meyer, 2011; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006). Such influences can arise because moods affect moral emotion, or because moods affect moral thought (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Huebner, Dwyer, & Hauser, 2009). Imagine this scenario: "You are standing on a footbridge over a trolley track and you notice a trolley hurtling down the track out of control. Five children are playing on the track, unaware of the danger. Next to you, there is an old man standing on the bridge. You realize that the only chance to save the children's lives is to push the man off the bridge. His body would stop the trolley. By killing him you can save the children." In this footbridge scenario, when asked whether they would push the

man off the bridge, most people say that they would not push, although not pushing results in a larger number of deaths than pushing (Thomson, 1986). Such nonutilitarian responding – i.e., deciding to not push – has been suggested to arise from prepotent negative emotions that are related to moral violation (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001; for a review of global theories of moral judgment, see Waldmann, Nagel, & Wiegmann, 2012).

Utilitarian responding – i.e., deciding to push – can be enhanced by putting people into positive moods. Before presentation of the footbridge scenario, Valdesolo and DeSteno (2006) induced either positive or neutral moods in participants by showing them either a humorous or a neutral video clip. After presentation of the scenario, participants were asked whether they thought pushing was appropriate or not. Compared to the neutral-mood condition, the prior presentation of the humorous video clip increased the likelihood for a utilitarian decision. Valdesolo

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and DeSteno therefore proposed that positive moods may unhide the direct relation between prepotent moral emotions and choice, thus reducing the causal efficacy of moral emotion in guiding moral judgment. The idea is consistent with the undoing hypothesis of Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, and Tugade (2000), which, as an outgrowth of the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998), assumes that positive moods can undo the cognitive and physiological effects of negative emotions.

Here we propose that, in the footbridge dilemma, moods affect moral thought rather than moral emotion. This proposal is based on the view that moods influence cognitive processing by conferring value on accessible thoughts: Positive moods validate and thus promote accessible thoughts, whereas negative moods invalidate and thus inhibit accessible thoughts, as suggested in the affective-processing principle (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007, 2009). To test the proposal, in two experiments, we induced positive, negative, or neutral moods in participants immediately before they were presented the footbridge scenario. After presentation of the scenario, we posed a closing question in which participants were asked either whether they would be active and push the man (*active decision frame*) or whether they would be passive and not push the man (*passive decision frame*). If the framing of the closing question made different thoughts accessible – thinking about pushing vs. thinking about not pushing (Briñol, Petty, & Barden, 2007; Petrinovich & O'Neill, 1996; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) and moods affected moral thought by conferring value on accessible thoughts (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007, 2009), then affective influences on moral judgment should vary with decision frame. Positive moods should validate thoughts about pushing in the active decision frame (“yes, it is appropriate to push”) and validate thoughts about not pushing in the passive decision frame (“yes, it is not appropriate to push”), inducing utilitarian responding in the active frame and nonutilitarian responding in the passive frame. In contrast, negative moods should invalidate thoughts about pushing in the active decision frame (“no, it is not appropriate to push”) and invalidate thoughts about not pushing in the passive decision frame (“no, it is not appropriate to not push”), inducing nonutilitarian responding in the active frame and utilitarian responding in the passive frame.

2. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examined whether affective influences of positive and negative moods on moral judgment depend on participants' (active or passive) decision frame in the five-child version of the footbridge scenario.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Four hundred participants (291 females, mean age 22.1 years, range 18–40 years) took part in Experiment 1. No participant knew the footbridge dilemma before participation.

2.1.2. Materials and design

Experiment 1 had a 2×2 between-participants design with the factors of *mood* (positive, negative) and *frame* (active, passive). The factor *mood* was manipulated by presenting different musical selections to induce positive (happy) and negative (sad) moods. In the positive-mood condition, participants listened to Mozart's “Eine kleine Nachtmusik (A Little Serenade)”; in the negative-mood condition, they listened to Barber's “Adagio for Strings, Opus 11” (e.g., Chepenik, Cornew, & Farah, 2007; Huntsinger, 2012; Huntsinger, Sinclair, Dunn, & Clore, 2010). Half of the participants additionally wrote down a positive or negative autobiographical memory to enhance positive or negative mood induction (e.g., Baker & Guttfreund, 1993). The factor *frame* was manipulated by asking participants different closing questions after presentation of the footbridge scenario. In the active-frame condition, participants were asked whether they thought it was appropriate to be active and push the man; in the passive-frame condition, they were asked whether they thought it was appropriate to be passive and not push the man. Participants gave simple yes/no answers.

2.1.3. Procedure

For each participant, one of the two musical selections was presented for 5 min via loudspeakers at medium volume level. While listening to the music, half of the participants additionally wrote down a positive or negative autobiographical memory. Recollection of autobiographical memories had no effect on the results and thus is not included as a factor in the present analyses. Following mood induction, the five-child version of the footbridge scenario, as described in the Introduction, was presented on a sheet of paper, read silently by the participants. The yes/no closing question was presented on a second sheet of paper. Half of the participants were asked: “Do you think it is appropriate to be active and push the man?”, the other half were asked: “Do you think it is appropriate to be passive and not push the man?” Finally, all participants rated valence and arousal of their current emotional state on a nine-by-nine affect grid (Russell, Weiss, & Mendelsohn, 1989).

2.2. Results

Mood induction was successful. Participants who decided to not push reported more positive valence when they were in the positive-mood condition than when they were in the negative-mood condition (5.3 vs. 4.0), $t_{304} = 6.5$, $p < .001$, $d = .74$; arousal ratings did not differ between conditions (5.7 vs. 5.6), $t_{304} < 1$. Participants who decided to push reported the same (negative) valence (4.0 vs. 3.8), and arousal (5.8 vs. 6.0) in the two mood conditions, both $t_{925} < 1$, suggesting that utilitarian responding affected participant's valence in the positive-mood condition.

Affective influences on moral judgment varied with decision frame, $F(1,396) = 29.0$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$ (Fig. 1). In the active-frame condition, utilitarian responding was more likely in positive moods than in negative moods, $t_{198} = 3.6$, $p < .001$, $d = .50$ (nonparametric

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