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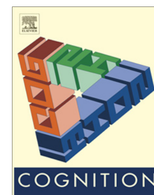

Original Articles

Variations in judgments of intentional action and moral evaluation across eight cultures

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ABSTRACT

Individuals tend to judge bad side effects as more intentional than good side effects (the Knobe or side-effect effect). Here, we assessed how widespread these findings are by testing eleven adult cohorts of eight highly contrasted cultures on their attributions of intentional action as well as ratings of blame and praise. We found limited generalizability of the original side-effect effect, and even a reversal of the effect in two rural, traditional cultures (Samoa and Vanuatu) where participants were more likely to judge the good side effect as intentional. Three follow-up experiments indicate that this reversal of the side-effect effect is not due to semantics and may be linked to the perception of the status of the protagonist. These results highlight the importance of factoring cultural context in our understanding of moral cognition.

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1. Introduction

The ability to distinguish between intentional and non-intentional action is an essential component of social cognition (Malle, Moses, & Baldwin, 2001). In general, intentional harms are judged more harshly than unintentional harms (Cushman, 2008; Cushman, Sheketoff, Wharton, & Carey, 2013; Young, Cushman, Hauser, & Saxe, 2007). Intention-based moral evaluations and third party preferences are early developmental facts, observable in babies younger than 12 months (Hamlin, 2013; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009). Some researchers have argued that the relation between attributions of intentional action and moral evaluations, either positive or negative, is an innate principle of our moral psychology, part of a "universal moral grammar" (Mikhail, 2007). As a case in point, in U.S. criminal law and the codes of most other cultures, intentional harms tend to be judged more severely than non-intentional harms (Fletcher, 1998; Green, 2000). In the U.S., manslaughter is associated with lesser penalties (10–16 months in prison), whereas the federal sentence for murder ranges from 19.5 years in prison to a mandatory life sentence (Federal Sentencing Guidelines Manual **§**2A1.1–**§**2A1.4)**.** The punishment is different, even though the absolute outcome of the crime is the same. Likewise, the severity of our moral judgments depends in general on our ascription of relative intention behind the offense.

Recent research in psychology and philosophy draws a complex picture of the relation between attribution of intentional action and moral evaluation. For example, numerous findings report that people are much more likely to judge that bad outcomes are brought about intentionally compared to good outcomes, the so-called side-effect effect or Knobe effect (original research by Knobe, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2010; Knobe & Mendlow, 2004; see additional studies by Cova & Naar, 2012; Cushman & Mele, 2008; Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Lanteri, 2012; Nadelhoffer, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006; Pellizzoni, Girotto, & Surian, 2010; Sousa & Holbrook, 2010; Wright & Bengson, 2009). The side-effect effect has been claimed to reflect deep and fundamental facts about human cognition. However, these claims often occur in the absence of considerations of culture and context. Our approach here is cross-cultural. The general rationale guiding our study is that if these effects are truly intrinsic and pervasive facts about our moral psychology, they are likely to be universal and should hold outside the predominantly W.E.I.R.D. (White Educated Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) populations tested to date (Henrich, Heine, & Norensayan, 2010). The question is whether these phenomena might hold across a wide range of cultures, as implied by many moral theorists studying the side-effect effect and allied phenomena.

In the original Knobe (2003a) study, participants were presented with one of two scenarios. Both scenarios involved a

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decision made by the chairman of a board of a company to increase company profits. The only thing that differed between the two scenarios was the goodness or badness of a foreseen side effect of the chairman's decision, specifically whether the environment was helped or harmed as a result of the decision. After reading the scenario, participants were asked whether the chairman intentionally harmed (or helped) the environment and whether the chairman deserved blame (or praise) for harming (or helping) the environment. Knobe's results were striking: Eighty-two percent of participants said that the chairman intentionally harmed the environment, while only 23 percent said the chairman intentionally helped the environment. In response to the blame/praise question, participants strongly agreed that the chairman deserved blame for harming the environment, but that the chairman did not deserve praise for helping the environment. The author also found a strong, positive correlation between attributions of intentional action and judgments of blame/praise.

The tendency to attribute intentions to negative but not positive outcomes (the side-effect effect) has been observed across a wide variety of methodologies. This asymmetry in intentional action attributions has been replicated with other scenarios (Knobe, 2003b; Knobe & Mendlow, 2004; Mallon, 2008; Nadelhoffer, 2004a, 2006; Shepard & Wolff, 2013; Uttich & Lombrozo, 2010; Wright & Bengson, 2009), with children as young as four years (Lesle, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006), with participants who suffer from deficits in emotional processing due to lesions in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (Young, Cushman, Adolphs, & Hauser, 2006), and, for at least some versions of the scenarios, with adults with high functioning autism or Asperger's (Zalla & Leboyer, 2011; Zalla, Machery, & Leboyer, 2010). The asymmetry has also been reported with word changes in the original script introducing varying concepts such as *intention* and *intending* (McCann, 2005), *deciding*, *being in favor of*, *advocating for* (Pettit & Knobe, 2009), *knowledge* (Beebe & Buckwalter, 2010), *belief* (Beebe, 2013; Tannenbaum, Ditto, & Pizarro, 2007), *awareness* (Tannenbaum et al., 2007) *remembering* (Alfano, Beebe, & Robinson, 2012), and *desire* (Guglielmo & Malle, 2010; Tannenbaum et al., 2007).

In general, these findings have been interpreted to suggest that our concept of intentional action, along with other theory of mind concepts, is fundamentally moral or morally driven (Knobe, 2005) and that this role is deep and pervasive (Knobe, 2005, 2006, 2010). Further support for such moral underpinnings comes from the fact that there is a pervasive asymmetry in the ratings of blame and praise (Knobe, 2003a).

In all, the question is whether such asymmetries do actually tell us anything fundamental about the way we think about moral evaluations, intentional action, and their relation. In other words, we ask whether the side-effect effect is truly universal or might vary across cultures. To our knowledge, a limited number of cross-cultural comparisons have yielded contrary findings. Knobe and Burra (2006) replicated the side-effect effect in a sample of 61 US college Hindi-speaking students in South Asian clubs at Princeton University and Yale University using a Hindi translation of the original script, but a more recent comparison of US participants and Indian participants tested in either Hindi or English suggests a reversed side-effect effect, whereby Indian participants judged helpful acts as more intentional than harmful ones (Clark, Bauman, Kamble, & Knowles, 2017). The explicit claims, and often implicit assumptions, of the side-effect effect as being intrinsic to human cognition require further scrutiny. To further address the question of how universal these effects are, we assessed them across eleven cohorts of adults amongst eight highly contrasted cultures (Study 1). In a series of follow-up experiments, we demonstrate that inversions of the side-effect effect may be linked to perceptions of status (Studies 2–4).

2. General method

A convenience sample of 464 participants (253 female) between the ages of 14–90 ($M = 31.39$, $SD = 13.40$ years) completed the study. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information for each of the eleven cohorts and their corresponding eight different cultures. Participants were recruited and tested individually in public spaces (e.g., public park, company break room) by experimenters who were residents of the area and fluent in the local language, or who were non-natives assisted by local informants fluent in both English and the local language. In all cultures, the vignettes and follow-up questions (described in detail below and reproduced in the Supplemental Materials) were translated and back-translated by independent research assistants who were native speakers of the local language and also fluent in English. The translated vignettes were then presented to participants in written format and read aloud by the experimenter or her assistant. At test, participants indicated their responses to the experimenter, who recorded them on a coding sheet. Participants who could not answer prompts probing for story comprehension were excluded from analysis, yielding an attrition rate of 2% collapsed across all cultures.

In two conditions (harm versus help), we assessed whether judgments of intentional action, as well as ratings of either blame or praise, depended on the framing of a story in which a protagonist makes a decision about an agricultural policy that will increase community profits, but with consequences for the local environment and crops. This protagonist (either a CEO or village High Chief depending on culture) represents an individual recognized as having decision-making power and social ascendance. They represent a supreme authority in economic decisions. In this sense, the responsibilities of CEO and Chief overlap. In the vignettes, a subordinate approaches the protagonist with a suggestion about how to increase profits. In the "harm" condition, this suggestion will increase profits but also damage the environment. In the "help" condition, this suggestion will increase profits and also improve the environment. In both conditions, the protagonist responds by saying that his only concern is maximizing profit, and that he does not care at all about the effect on the environment. The suggestion is adopted, and the vignette ends with the environment being either harmed or helped. Crucially, the vignettes differ only in the effect (help or harm) that the suggestion will have on the environment (see Supplemental Materials). Note that the well-being of the local environment was a moral concern for all cultures, and particularly so for our subsistence-based populations (see O'Meara, 1990; Shore, 1982, and Vienne, 1984 regarding the South Pacific but also Cusack & Dixon, 2006; Dahlquist et al., 2007, and Polidoro et al., 2008 regarding environmental practice in Central America).

Following the story, participants answered two questions. The first question asked participants to determine how much praise (help condition) or blame (harm condition) the protagonist deserves on a seven-point Likert scale, with zero indicating none and six indicating a lot. Across culture and conditions, participants tended to make full use of the scale. The second question asked participants whether they thought the leader *intentionally* helped or harmed the environment (coded as yes or no). Although other versions of the paradigm have used continuous measures for this judgment of intentional action, we elected to use a dichotomous outcome because intentional action is typically construed as binary (i.e., either someone acted intentionally or they did not) and in order to keep the question simple by avoiding an agree-disagree scale.

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