



Case Report

From impure to harmful: Asymmetric expectations about immoral agents☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 March 2016

Revised 10 August 2016

Accepted 10 August 2016

Available online 15 August 2016

Keywords:

Morality

Harm

Purity

Moral judgment

Behavior expectation

ABSTRACT

How does information about agents' past violations influence people's expectations about their future actions? We examined this question, with a focus on the contrast between past harmful and past impure actions. Participants' judgments reflected two independent influences: action consistency and expectation asymmetry. An expectation asymmetry was observed across seven studies, including two pilot studies and two supplemental studies: impure agents were judged as more likely to be harmful than harmful agents were judged likely to be impure. This expectation asymmetry is not due to an expectation that impure agents will be globally deviant, i.e., likely to commit all kinds of violations (Study 1), nor is it due to differences in the perceived wrongness or weirdness of harmful versus impure acts (Study 2). Study 3 demonstrated that this asymmetry is not attributable to the perceived harmfulness of impure actions; only impure agents, and not harmful agents, were expected to be more harmful than they were previously. These findings highlight an important asymmetry in the way people make predictions about future wrongdoing: immoral agents are expected to behave consistently, and are also expected to be harmful, regardless of their prior violation.

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1. Introduction

In advocating the death penalty for homosexual acts, the psychologist Paul Cameron noted that “those who act on their homosexual desires or interests usually end up being parasites on society, and parasites that are very dangerous for society, not only because they take far more than they contribute to society, but they particularly injure children” (Gettys, 2014). This statement captures a tragically widespread sentiment that gay men and women are likely to act in harmful ways. Similar charges have been leveled at people who engage in other forms of non-normative sexual practices, such as zoophilia, despite evidence to the contrary (see Beetz, 2002, 2004). What is the psychology behind inferences like this? The present research investigates people's expectations about agents' future transgressions, based on information about agents' past behaviors.

1.1. The expected behaviors of others

A key function of social cognition is behavior prediction (Dennett, 1989; Saxe, 2012). A reasonable predictor of how people may behave

in the future is how they behaved in the past. People are expected to behave consistently over time (Kelley, 1967; Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013). Thus, someone who has unjustly harmed others in the past may be predicted to be similarly harmful in other contexts and also across time. These inferences are not necessarily irrational. For example, the odds that property offenders will be rearrested for the same kind of crime are 2.7 times the odds that non-property offenders will be arrested for a property offense (Langan & Levin, 2002). Such statistics indicate that at least some offenders are likely to commit similar kinds of crimes over time, though we note there is a general tendency to overestimate the likelihood of reoffending within particular domains, and this is true for both violent and sexual crimes (Cunliffe & Shepherd, 2007).

Do people's inferences follow this logic across all kinds of past actions? Prior work has distinguished between two broad types of moral violations: *harmful* (e.g., theft, murder, abuse) versus *impure* (e.g., incest, bestiality, eating dog meat) (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013; Young & Saxe, 2011). When evaluating harmful acts, people weigh circumstantial evidence before passing judgment, including whether the act was intentional and whether there was a good reason for the agent to perform the act (Cushman, 2008; Sousa, Holbrook, & Piazza, 2009). By contrast, judgments of impure acts tend to be less affected by contextual factors, including the

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intentions of the agent (Chakroff, Dungan, & Young, 2013; Chakroff et al., 2015; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011a; Young & Saxe, 2011) and the reasons and external circumstances leading to the act (Piazza, Russell, & Sousa, 2013; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011b, 2011c). While harmful acts are often thought to be motivated by a combination of internal and external forces, impure acts are more likely to be attributed to causes internal to the agent rather than situational forces (Chakroff & Young, 2015; Russell & Piazza, 2015).

1.2. Pilot research: the expected behaviors of harmful and impure agents

Given this prior work, we predicted that impure behaviors would be more informative about an agent and the agent's likely future behavior, compared to harmful acts. Simply learning that an agent has acted impurely in the past might raise expectations that the agent will act impurely in the future, e.g., someone who committed incest yesterday may be likely to do so tomorrow. By contrast, learning that an agent was harmful in the past may be less informative: the harmful act could have been due to external circumstances and less indicative of the agent's stable, underlying dispositions, e.g., someone who punched a man yesterday may be unlikely to do so tomorrow. Two studies were independently conducted in two different labs (PSR + JP; AC + LY) investigating the expected behaviors of agents who committed harmful versus impure actions. As reported in Pilot Studies 1 and 2 (see Supplemental materials), both impure and harmful agents were largely expected to engage in future actions of a similar kind (though the precise means varied across studies). However, in addition to this consistency effect, we also observed an unanticipated finding, an *expectation asymmetry*: impure agents were expected to be harmful more than harmful agents were expected to be impure. Indeed, in at least one of the studies (Pilot Study 1), the impure agent was expected to be harmful just as much as they were expected to be impure. Notably, this expectation asymmetry (more harmful behavior anticipated from impure agents than impure behavior anticipated from harmful agents) was obtained when contrasting harmful acts with two different kinds of impure acts: sexual deviance (e.g., incest; Pilot Study 1) and actions involving contact with taboo substances (e.g., touching feces; Pilot Study 2). Furthermore, this expectation asymmetry occurred despite what might be predicted on the basis of a reverse or negative halo effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Thorndike, 1920)—namely, that both agents should be expected to behave badly in all respects.

1.3. The present research

Why would impure agents be expected to behave in harmful ways? One possibility is that, once someone has committed an impure act, observers regard the impure individual as globally corrupt and capable of anything. By contrast, harmful agents may not engender the same kind of attributions because harmful acts are generally more common and easier to justify in terms of external causes or reactions to circumstances (see earlier discussion). On this account, impure agents, but not harmful agents, should be judged as likely to engage in *all kinds* of violations. We refer to this account of the expectation asymmetry as the global deviance account.

The aims of the present research are threefold. First, we sought to replicate the findings from the pilot studies and garner further support for the expectation asymmetry: more harmful behavior should be anticipated from impure agents than impure behavior should be anticipated from harmful agents (Studies 1–2 and S1–S2). Second, we tested whether the expectation asymmetry could be explained by the global deviance account (Studies 1 and S1). Third, we sought to determine whether the expectation asymmetry can be explained at the level of action perception or action expectation, that is, by observers' perceiving initial impure actions as in fact harmful, or whether, as hypothesized, observers simply expect impure actors to act in ways that are more harmful than their initial impure act (Study 3).

2. Study 1. Impure agents and global deviance

According to the global deviance account, impure agents should be judged as highly likely to engage in all kinds of violations. A liberal test of this account would be to test whether agents who committed one kind of impure violation (e.g., sexually deviant acts, labelled “impure-sexual violations” below) are also expected to commit other kinds of impure violations (e.g., contact with impure substances, labelled “impure-substance violations” below). In Study 1, participants judged the likelihood that an agent who had committed one of three kinds of violations (harmful, impure-sexual, impure-substance) would engage in all three kinds of violations. We sought to replicate the findings of Pilot Studies 1–2 using new scenarios, while also testing the global deviance account of the expectation asymmetry. Our Pilot Study 1 reliably observed the expectation asymmetry using $n = 35$; thus, our recruitment strategy throughout aimed to recruit at least 35–50 participants per cell. Participants were only excluded if they did not complete the entire study. Because Study 1 and Studies S1–S2 involved the most complex designs, these studies required the largest samples.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Four participants did not finish the survey and were excluded. We recruited a sample of 255 adults located in the United States (139 female; $M_{age} = 36.68$ years, $SD = 11.37$) via Amazon Mechanical Turk.

2.1.2. Materials and procedures

In a 3 (*agent type*: harmful vs. impure-sexual vs. impure-substance) \times 3 (*expected behavior*: harmful vs. impure-sexual vs. impure-substance) mixed-measures design, participants were randomly assigned to read about an agent who intentionally performed a harmful violation (e.g., assault), an impure-sexual violation (e.g., incest), or an impure-substance violation (e.g., eating dog meat) (see Appendix A for stimuli). For each subdomain of impure acts there were two scenarios, and for harmful acts there were four scenarios. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight scenarios. To standardize the agent and target of each action, the scenarios always involved two brothers, and participants were asked to imagine that one of the brothers “willfully and intentionally” engaged in the act. Participants then rated the likelihood that the agent would commit the eight harmful violations ($\alpha = 0.95$) and eight impure-sexual violations ($\alpha = 0.93$) used in Pilot Study 1, and the eight impure-substance violations ($\alpha = 0.94$) from Pilot Study 2. Participants then rated the wrongness of the behavior and completed additional measures,¹ including whether something internal or external to the agent was the likely cause of the action (see Appendix SE), and demographic questions² before being debriefed and paid.

2.2. Results

For brevity, wrongness measures for all studies are reported in Table S1, and internal vs. external attribution measures for Studies 1–2 are reported in Table S2. Three separate within-subjects ANOVAs of likelihood judgments are reported for each agent type: harmful, impure-sexual,

¹ In all studies, we tested ancillary hypotheses building on earlier work of the authors (e.g., Chakroff & Young, 2015; Russell & Piazza, 2015), regarding the emotional reactions elicited by harmful versus impure agents, and inferences about the motives and character of these agents. These measures were not the focus of the present paper and will be summarized only briefly here. Harmful acts tended to evoke anger, while impure acts (sexual and substance) tended to evoke disgust. Harmful actors were perceived to be cruel, while impure actors were perceived as perverse and motivated by sexual desires. Finally, harmful acts were more likely to be seen as having a victim and involving a lack of consent than impure acts (please contact the authors for more information).

² Participants reported their political orientation in all studies. In no analysis did social conservatism significantly predict participants' judgments of likelihood that agents would commit harmful or impure acts.

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