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Bidirectional associations between descriptive and injunctive norms

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ABSTRACT

Modern research on social norms makes an important distinction between descriptive norms (how people commonly behave) and injunctive norms (what one is morally obligated to do). Here we propose that this distinction is far from clear in the cognition of social norms. In a first study, using the implicit association test, the concepts of "common" and "moral" were found to be strongly associated. Some implications of this automatic common–moral association were investigated in a subsequent series of experiments: Our participants tended to make explicit inferences from descriptive norms to injunctive norms and vice versa; they tended to mix up descriptive and injunctive concepts in recall tasks; and frequency information influenced participants' own moral judgments. We conclude by discussing how the common–moral association could play a role in the dynamics of social norms.

Introduction

Social norms and their power to govern behavior have been studied extensively in the social sciences. There are several different theoretical approaches to social norms, such as the focus theory of Cialdini and colleagues (e.g., Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991), the social norms approach of Berkowitz and Perkins (e.g., Berkowitz, 2004), and Bicchieri's theory of dynamics of norms in social dilemmas (e.g., Bicchieri, 2006). These different approaches share a theoretical division of social norms into two distinct types: *injunctive norms*, referring to people's beliefs about how one ought to behave, and *descriptive norms*, referring to people's beliefs about what most people actually do. For a review of various lines of work based on these concepts, see Lapinski and Rimal (2005).

In this paper we are concerned with the relation between injunctive and descriptive norms. The two types of norms are often *congruent*, by which we shall mean that what is common to do is also what you ought to do. For instance, at a formal meeting the descriptive norm is that most individuals will be silent and attentive. This norm is also injunctive, as noncompliance is likely to incur social sanctions (example from Lapinski & Rimal, 2005, p. 131). Several studies have found that injunctive and descriptive norms tend to be congruent (e.g., Brauer & Chaurand, 2010; Thøgersen, 2008). This statistical correlation is not a logical necessity, though. People are quite capable of endorsing the moral desirability of a certain behavior, yet not practice it (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Thus, the concepts of descriptive and injunctive norms are logically distinct, echoing David Hume's famous law that one cannot derive what *ought* to be from what *is*.

The reason for Hume to state this law was that he saw other writers violating it, that is, they made claims about what ought to be on the basis of what is. An intriguing question is why this fallacy is so common. Can it be that the distinction between the descriptive and the injunctive is not very clear in people's minds? Specifically, can it be that commonness and morality are automatically associated with each other? This fundamental question about cognition of social norms seems not to have been asked before. However, it is related to a (rather loose) proposal of Kelley (1971) according to which people depend on others' behavior as the evidence of what is right and wrong and therefore "concepts of what 'ought to be' tend to drift toward conceptions of what 'is'" (Kelley, 1971, p. 298).

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Observations suggestive of a common–moral association

The possibility of a cognitive link between the descriptive and the injunctive is supported by a number of observations. First, as Hume noted, his contemporaries were in the habit of blurring the distinction. It is not difficult to find modern examples of such blurring too. For instance, parents raising children may interchangeably use expressions like the injunctive "you shouldn't do that" and the descriptive "we don't do that" (Boyer, 2012). Lapinski and Rimal (2005, p. 130) note that even researchers of norms sometimes conflate the distinction between injunctive and descriptive norms.

Moreover, a large body of research has established a general tendency of people to conform not only to injunctive norms but also to descriptive norms (e.g., Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009; Borsari & Carey, 2001; Borsari & Carey, 2003; Cialdini, 2003; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini et al., 1990, 1991; Claidière & Whiten, 2012; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). This similarity in the effects of injunctive and descriptive norms is consistent with a mental association such that both kinds of norms activate the same behavioral schemas.

The strongest evidence suggestive of a common–moral association comes from studies finding that moral judgments of socially undesirable behavior tend to be less harsh when the behavior is perceived to be common (McGraw, 1985; Trafimow, Reeder, & Blising, 2001; Welch et al., 2005), and that people seem to find fault both with singular selfishness and singular generosity in others (Parks & Stone, 2010).

In sum, several empirical observations suggest that people's ideas about the morality of a behavior are linked to their beliefs about how common it is. We shall now argue that it is plausible that this association is automatic.

The common–moral association hypothesis

There is a large literature on the formation of automatic associations. While much of this literature focuses on the formation of evaluative associations (i.e., attitudes), most theoretical assumptions are equally applicable to non-evaluative domains (Gawronski & Sritharan, 2010). It is well-established that automatic associations can come about through classical conditioning, that is, repeated co-occurrence of stimuli (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011; Olson & Fazio, 2001). Thus, the typical co-occurrence between injunctive norms and descriptive norms – when it is salient what one ought to do, most people will also be seen doing it – should tend to make people form a corresponding mental association. Hence, both observations and theory support the hypothesis that commonness and morality tend to be automatically associated with each other in people's minds. In Study 1 we test this hypothesis using the most well-established method for measuring automatic associations, the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

Note that the concept of morality is in itself multi-faceted. For instance, it encompasses both moral obligation and moral character (Kelley, 1971; McGraw, 1985). However, the conceptual difference between these aspects of morality seems very subtle compared to the conceptual difference between commonness and morality. Consequently, the hypothesized automatic association with commonness is expected to apply across the different facets of morality.

Below we describe several implications of the common–moral hypothesis, which we then test in a series of experimental studies. In order to cover the injunctive-moral spectrum from obligation to goodness, these studies used a variety of terms (obligated/up to you, OK/not OK, moral/immoral, etc.). Studies also varied the set of behavioral stimuli that these terms applied to, in order to cover both the *prescriptive* domain of socially desirable behaviors and the *proscriptive* domain of socially undesirable behaviors (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). Stimuli also covered a range of base rates and drew upon a range of different moral foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

Implication 1: explicit inferences between commonness and morality

Automatic associations have interesting downstream effects on cognition and behavior (see, for instance, the introductory paragraph of Gawronski & Sritharan, 2010). To begin with – unsurprisingly but importantly – automatic associations influence people's explicit, verbally reported evaluations. The most comprehensive model of the relationship between explicit evaluations and implicit measures of associations is the APE model of Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2006, 2011). According to the APE model, agreement between explicit and implicit measures is expected as long as the association, when made explicit as a verbal proposition, is not inconsistent with other relevant beliefs (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011, p. 63). For instance, consider a question like: "To do X is common in group G; what do you think is the moral status of doing X?" The automatic association of our hypothesis will suggest that X is a moral thing to do. According to the APE model, the cognitive process then proceeds with this suggestion being weighed against other beliefs the respondent may have about the appropriateness to verbalize that X is a moral thing to do. To the extent that no strong contrary beliefs exist, the respondent should then verbalize the moral status that is congruent with the frequency information.

In other words, the common–moral association hypothesis implies that *explicit inferences between commonness and morality should tend to be congruent*. We test this prediction in Study 2.

Implication 2: distortion of memory

Memory research has established that schema-based expectancies can cause memory distortion (Schacter, 1999, p. 194). For instance, Banaji and Bhaskar (2000) reported a study where participants read a list of African American and European American and were asked to identify names of criminals that had appeared in the media. In fact, none of the names were names of criminals. African American names were incorrectly recalled as those of criminals almost twice as often as European American names.

Information about social norms tends to be particularly well remembered according to a study by O'Gorman, Wilson, and Miller (2008). However, their study did not distinguish between injunctive and descriptive norms. We propose that an automatic common–moral association may be a source of error in recall of social norms. Reminiscent of the abovementioned effect for memory of names of criminals, we expect information about one type of norm to interfere with the memory of previous information of the other type (e.g., information that behavior X is common might cause information that X is immoral to be incorrectly recalled as X being moral). We test this prediction in Studies 3 and 4.

We also propose an even stronger type of recall error: The cognitive conflation of descriptive and injunctive norms may be so potent that information about one type of norm is misremembered as the congruent norm of the other type (e.g., information that behavior X is moral might be recalled as X being common). As far we know, this kind of recall error across associated categories has not been studied before. We test this prediction in Studies 5 and 6.

Implication 3: influence of frequency information on own moral judgments

Moral judgments largely rely on automatic evaluations (Haidt, 2001). We should therefore expect the automatic common–moral