Original Articles

Meta-ethics and the mortality: Mortality salience leads people to adopt a less subjectivist morality

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ABSTRACT

Although lay notions in normative ethics have previously been investigated within the framework of the dual-process interpretation of the terror management theory (TMT), meta-ethical beliefs (subjective vs. objective morality) have not been previously investigated within the same framework. In the present research, we primed mortality salience, shown to impair reasoning performance in previous studies, to see whether it inhibits subjectivist moral judgments in three separate experiments. In Experiment 3, we also investigated whether impaired reasoning performance indeed mediates the effect of mortality salience on subjectivism. The results of the three experiments consistently showed that people in the mortality salience group reported significantly less subjectivist responses than the control group, and impaired reasoning performance partially mediates it. Overall, the results are consistent with the dual-process interpretation of TMT and suggest that not only normative but also meta-ethical judgments can be explained by this model.

1. Introduction

The dual-process model of the mind claims that our mind is governed by two separate but interacting systems called Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 corresponds to the processes that are deployed quickly, automatically and are intuitive and evolutionarily older. Type 2 processes, on the other hand, are those that are analytic, controlled and evolutionarily more recent (Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Frederick, 2005; Morewedge & Kahneman, 2010; Stanovich & West, 2000). As a computational system, the mind is designed by default to make decisions using the least energy consuming processes (Toplak, West, & Stanovich, 2014). This is usually achieved using the automatic and intuitive Type 1 resources. For example, we use Type 1 processes when we orient toward the source of an unexpected sound (Kahneman, 2011). The computationally expensive Type 2 processes, on the other hand, consume energy to override the automatic activation of Type 1 processes when needed. For example, we use Type 2 processes when we need to focus on a specific person's voice in a crowded and noisy room (Kahneman, 2011). The dual-process view of the human mind, concomitant with its underlying "cognitive miser" assumption (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), has been the dominant view in the last couple of decades in the field of social cognition (see Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Deutsch, & Strack, 2006). One such example is its use to explain the effect of mortality salience.

1.1. Mortality salience and thinking styles

In the Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), the deepest fear in humans is the fear of death and all human striving is motivated by this fear (Becker, 1973). Furthermore, political and religious leaders assume social power by offering remedies for this fundamental fear. Reminding people of their own death, therefore, may lead to stronger adherence to their political beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1997). This effect is supposed to be due to an implicit and unconscious knowledge of mortality rather than a conscious awareness of it (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Although mortality salience has since been interpreted from various perspectives, the dual-process model is currently the best empirically supported explanation (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999; Trémolière, De Neys, & Bonnefon, 2012, 2014). In the dual-process account of mortality salience, people try to avoid thoughts of death when they are reminded of their own mortality and they use effortful cognitive processes to do that. Consistent with this account, Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Simon (1997) found that people reminded of mortality have more difficulty avoiding thoughts related to death when their cognitive resources (i.e., Type 2 processes) are depleted through manipulation of cognitive load (see also Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Baumeister, 2006). Similarly, people perform more poorly during a syllogistic reasoning task given after their mortality has been made salient, presumably because they are implicitly trying to

avoid thoughts of death at the same time and thus consuming limited Type 2 resources that are also required to perform well in the reasoning task (see also Trémolière, et al., 2012, 2014). Taken together, these results suggest that mortality salience produces some sort of cognitive load and influences judgments and performance by suppressing analytic (Type 2) processes. Mortality salience manipulation has been frequently used in moral and political psychology and was shown to create a shift in moral foundations (Vyver et al., 2016), in political outlook, making participants more conservative (Landau et al., 2004), and in normative moral judgments, making participants less utilitarian (Trémolière et al., 2012). Furthermore, making moral judgments under mortality salience is a more ecologically valid way of studying moral psychology (compared to counting backwards or keeping meaningless items in mind) since moral judgments in everyday life are sometimes made when lives are at stake and when mortality is salient in the judge's mind. Therefore, the present study specifically examines the effect of mortality salience on moral judgments within the framework of the dual-process model.

1.2. Morality and the thinking styles

An important distinction in moral psychology is between normative and meta-ethical judgments. The two prominent and rival views in normative ethics are deontology, which emphasizes rights and duties, and utilitarianism, which emphasizes how much the consequences of an action promote general well-being. In Greene's, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, and Cohen (2001) two-system account, utilitarian moral judgments rely on analytic processes whereas deontological judgments rely on emotional or intuitive processes. In this view, activating analytic processes should promote utilitarian judgments (but see Kahane, 2012; see also Aktas, Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2017). Kvaran, et al. (2013) exposed participants to mathematical problems to activate analytical thinking and indeed observed an increase in the rate of utilitarian responses to moral dilemmas. Trémolière et al. (2012), on the other hand, observed a decrease in utilitarian judgments under mortality salience and demonstrated that this is due to the high cognitive load, which presumably suppresses analytic thinking, created by mortality salience. These results are consistent with the predictions of Greene et al.'s (2001) dual-system view and the dual process interpretation of the TMT.

1.3. Psychology of meta-ethics

Another aspect of morality, the focus of this study, is meta-ethics. Meta-ethics is concerned with the metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic aspects of ethical claims. One prominent question in meta-ethics is whether the truth of moral claims is objective or subjective. Objectivity, as used here, refers to truths that are universal and independent of the opinions of individuals whereas subjectivity refers to truths that are dependent on the opinions of people or on the contingent norms of particular societies.

Empirical work on the psychology of meta-ethics has been relatively scarce. In one of the first studies, Nichols and Folds-Bennett (2003) showed that 4–6-year-old children can distinguish moral claims from personal preferences, finding the former more objective. Another study revealed that college students adopt objectivist or subjectivist morality depending on the nature of the moral transgression (Nichols, 2004). Similarly, Goodwin and Darley (2008) found that, although people see moral claims as more objective than conventions and personal tastes, ratings of objectivity vary depending on the person and the moral scenario. In this study, objectivity was operationally defined as the belief that, in the case of a disagreement over a moral issue, at least one of the disagreeing sides has to be wrong since there is a single objectively right answer to the issue. Three predictors of adopting an objectivist morality were (1) seeing morality as based on God; (2) seeing the moral principle in question as indispensable for being a "good

person", and (3) seeing the moral principle in question as indispensable for the well-being of the society.

According to Goodwin and Darley (2012), judgments regarding the moral status of physical harm are seen as more objective than judgments about positive moral acts. Another factor determining objectivity judgments was whether the majority of people think the same way (see also Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe, 2011). One consequence of objectivist morality is closed-mindedness and prejudice since someone who disagrees with you on a moral issue is necessarily wrong and immoral. Thus, Goodwin and Darley (2012) found that objectivists are more likely to refuse to share an apartment with someone who has divergent moral views. Another meta-ethical view, the belief that morality is founded on a divine authority (known as Divine Command Theory), is also highly related to lay belief in objectivism. Piazza and Landy (2013) showed that the belief that morality is founded on a divine authority explains the association between religiosity and several normative moral judgments (e.g., non-utilitarian moral judgments) to a significant extent. Thus, in addition to normative ethical views, the meta-ethical views must be taken into account in order to better understand the lay notions of moral judgments.

1.4. Meta-ethics and the thinking styles

Although empirical research in the domain of meta-ethics is rather scarce, there are several preliminary findings to suggest that meta-ethical judgments can also be influenced by the thinking styles. For instance, Goodwin and Darley (2012) reported that one consequence of objectivist morality is closed-mindedness. Unlike objectivist morality, adopting a subjectivist morality is correlated with improved performance on a disjunctive reasoning task (reported in Goodwin and Darley, 2010). This finding is consistent with the idea that closed-mindedness occurs under conditions where analytic thinking is suppressed for various reasons (e.g., time pressure or being under cognitive load; see Kruglanski, 2004). On the other hand, priming moral subjectivism increases cheating (Rai & Holyoak, 2013) whereas priming moral objectivism increases prosociality (Young & Durwin, 2013). The latter finding can also be seen as related to thinking styles because a recent finding suggests that people who are more capable of cognitive control (i.e., those who are more adept in initiating Type 2 processes) show less prosociality in economic games (Yamagishi et al., 2016; see also Rand et al., 2014). Lastly, priming subjectivism has been found to decrease religious belief (Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2015). Although the exact mechanism of this effect is still untested, one possible mechanism is subjective morality activating analytic thinking, thereby decreasing religious belief. In other words, since most participants are moral objectivists in most of the moral scenarios (Goodwin and Darley, 2008), priming subjectivism might lead them to have a greater change of moral outlook compared to priming objectivism, thereby activating their analytic thinking. Given the prevalence of findings regarding a negative relationship between analytic thinking and religious belief (Bahçekapili & Yilmaz, 2017; Pennycook, Ross, Koehler & Fugelsang, 2016), the relation between subjective morality and religious belief can also be interpreted within the framework of different thinking styles. However, to the best of our knowledge, the cognitive mechanisms that lead to different meta-ethical judgments have not been experimentally investigated so far.

1.5. The current study

In the present paper, we primed mortality salience, shown to impair reasoning performance in previous studies (see Trémolière et al., 2012, 2014), to see whether it inhibits subjectivist moral judgments in three separate experiments. Based on the assumption that mortality salience leads to impaired reasoning performance, we specifically hypothesized in Experiment 1 and 2 that people under mortality salience would be less likely to adopt a subjectivist meta-ethical view. We did not predict