



# Perceiving the agency of harmful agents: A test of dehumanization versus moral typecasting accounts <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

It is clear that harmful agents are targets of severe condemnation, but it is much less clear how perceivers conceptualize the agency of harmful agents. The current studies tested two competing predictions made by moral typecasting theory and the dehumanization literature. Across six studies, harmful agents were perceived to possess *less agency* than neutral (non-offending) and benevolent agents, consistent with a dehumanization perspective but inconsistent with the assumptions of moral typecasting theory. This was observed for human targets (Studies 1–2b and 4–5) and corporations (Study 3), and across various gradations of harmfulness (Studies 3 and 4). Importantly, denial of agency to harmful agents occurred even when controlling for perceptions of the agent's likeability (Studies 2a and 2b) and while using two different operationalizations of agency (Study 2a). Study 5 showed that harmful agents are denied agency primarily through an inferential process, and less through motivations to see the agent punished. Across all six studies, harmful agents were deemed less worthy of moral standing as a consequence of their harmful conduct and this reduction in moral standing was mediated through reductions in agency. Our findings clarify a current tension in the moral cognition literature, which have direct implications for the moral typecasting framework.

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## 1. Introduction

There is probably no moral intuition more fundamental and ubiquitous than the rejection of cruelty or the infliction of harm for purely selfish reasons (Gert, 2004; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Greene, 2012; Henrich et al., 2006; Piazza, Landy, & Goodwin, 2014; Pinker, 2012; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2009; Sousa, Holbrook, & Piazza, 2009; Sousa & Piazza, 2014; Turiel, 1983). Historically, societies have not always agreed on which actions constitute cruelty or which individuals and entities are deserving of protection from such abuses (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Piazza et al., 2014; Singer, 2011). Yet this fact does not negate the core intuition that individuals who cause unjustified harm have violated an implicit social contract to respect the basic interests of others (Baumard, Andre, & Sperber, 2013; Sousa & Piazza, 2014), or the retributive logic that harmful agents are deserving of

punishment (Ashworth, 2010; Baumard, 2011; Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Darley & Pittman, 2003).

A vast literature within psychology supports the idea that harmful agents are targets of often severe condemnation (e.g., Bastian, Denson, & Haslam, 2013; Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011; Carlsmith et al., 2002; Gray, 2014; Gray & Wegner, 2009; Vasquez, Loughnan, Gootjes-Dreesbach, & Weger, 2014). However, much less research has considered the attributions people make with regards to the underlying agency of harmful agents. Currently, there are two perspectives on the matter, each with competing predictions. According to moral typecasting theory (hereon MTT; Gray & Wegner, 2009), harmful agents should be perceived as highly agentive—indeed, *as agentive* as positive moral actors—and certainly *more agentive* than neutral or non-offending actors (see also Gray, 2010; Gray & Schein, 2012; Gray & Wegner, 2011). From this perspective, when a person commits an act of cruelty they are “transformed” (Gray, 2010) or “typecasted” (Gray & Wegner, 2009) in the eyes of those bearing witness to their actions. The result is that perceivers imbue the target with agency (see Gray, 2010), or, put another way, they are attributed the qualities befitting a “moral agent” (see Gray & Wegner, 2009). Such qualities might include, “self-control,

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morality, memory, emotion recognition, planning, communication, and thought” (Gray & Wegner, 2009, p. 506; see also Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007).

From a different perspective, however, harmful agents should not be typecasted as agents, but *denied agency*, as an extension of the human inclination to dehumanize cruel agents (Bastian et al., 2013; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Leidner, Castano, & Ginges, 2013; Viki, Fullerton, Raggett, Tait, & Wiltshire, 2012). According to work on dehumanization, harmful agents are often seen by others as lacking basic aspects of humanity or “human-ness” (Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi, & Suitner, 2008), such as civility and warmth, and at times may even be imbued with animalistic or machine-like traits (Bastian et al., 2013; Vasquez et al., 2014). Thus, currently, there exists a tension in the psychological literature regarding how harmful agents are conceptualized. In the present set of studies, we show that the moral typecasting hypothesis that harmful agents are typecasted as agentive fails to hold up to empirical scrutiny. Rather than being typecasted as moral agents, we show that harmful agents are *denied agency*, along with other aspects of their humanity.

### 1.1. Moral typecasting, dehumanization, and defining agency

MTT puts forth the provocative claim that agents that inflict harm on others, and, likewise, agents who do good deeds for others, are typecasted as “moral agents” and not “moral patients,” i.e., they are ascribed the qualities befitting an agent, such as rationality and self-control, but not the qualities befitting a patient or victim, such as the capacity to suffer (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Conversely, according to MTT, individuals who are victimized are typecasted as moral patients, but not as moral agents, and are thus ascribed the qualities befitting a patient, but not the qualities befitting an agent. In the present paper we focus empirically on the former half of the claim: the typecasting of moral agents as agentive.

One of the difficulties with interpreting the moral typecasting hypothesis involves the various ways in which agency has been operationally defined (for a thorough review, see Piazza et al., 2014). In the literature on mind perception, agency is often defined in terms of “higher” cognitive capacities, such as being able to reason, communicate, exert self-control, imagine, and plan one’s actions (see especially Gray et al., 2007; but also Gray & Schein, 2012; Gray, Waytz, & Young, 2012; Gray & Wegner, 2012; Haslam et al., 2008; Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010). Consistent with the mind perception literature, Sytsma and Machery (2012) operationalized agency in terms of higher intelligence, which includes such traits as language, creativity, and the capacity for sophisticated culture (e.g., music, poetry). Another perspective from social psychology defines agency more broadly in terms of being active, tenacious, effective at pursuing one’s goals, and having control over one’s environment (Abele, Uchrowski, Suitner, & Wojciszke, 2008; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Indeed, Gray and Wegner (2009) also suggest there are “general” aspects of agency (e.g., being “determined”, “powerful”) that might be ubiquitous to all agents (see Gray & Wegner, 2009, Study 4b). Thus, there are several perspectives on agency and its definition, with research revealing at least two important aspects: intelligence (or “cognition” broadly defined) and the capacity for effective goal-directed activity (see Piazza et al., 2014).

If we turn to the manner in which researchers from MTT have defined agency, we find a certain degree of inconsistency in the way agency is defined and operationalized. Gray and Wegner (2009) are quite clear that they see the moral typecasting hypothesis as compatible with the definition of agency coming from the

mind perception literature<sup>1</sup> (see Footnote 1 for one illustrative quotation). On the other hand, in their studies Gray and Wegner (2009) assessed moral agency using quite a limited set of measures pertaining to intentional action (intentionality) and blame and praise (culpability), as opposed to the broader, richer conception of agency identified by the mind perception literature (see also Gray & Wegner, 2011). Intentionality is only one aspect of agency among many, and, arguably, blame/praise has more to do with the potential consequences of perceiving agency rather than the direct possession of agency. Nevertheless, it has been concluded on the basis of these limited measures that harmful agents (and benevolent agents) are perceived as agentive<sup>2</sup> (see Footnote 2 for illustrative quotations). Furthermore, because Gray and Wegner did not assess agency in a comprehensive manner it is not at all clear whether perceptions of the actors’ agency within these studies are truly responsible for the attribution of blame and intentionality. Some recent research suggests attributions of intentionality and blame are, at times, separable from the activity (or inactivity) that brought about the harmful outcome (e.g., see Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013; Cushman, Knobe, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008; Knobe, 2003). Intentionality merely requires the perception that an act is goal directed (i.e., desired and intended; Malle & Knobe, 1997); it does not require the attribution of high levels of agency—for example, high levels of rationality, imagination, or self-control. Thus, perceivers may at times perceive intentionality despite a deficit of agency on the part of the agent, such as when an agent’s thoughtless actions have unintended, harmful consequences (Knobe, 2003). Likewise, neither do attributions of blame require high levels of agency (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014); a person can be held morally blameworthy for a misdeed without exerting much agency (i.e., planning, rationality, self-control, etc.), such as when someone causes harm impulsively (Critcher et al., 2013), without a good reason (Darley, Klosson, & Zanna, 1978), or as a side effect of another action (Knobe, 2003). In such cases attributions of blame may arise simply as a matter of procedural justice for causing foreseeable harm or because the agent’s lack of agency (e.g., lack of rationality or self-control) suggests a deficiency in the agent’s character which poses an ongoing threat to others (Critcher et al., 2013). It should be noted, however, that low agency may at times serve to *mitigate* blame as well—for example, when the agent is mentally impaired (Christopher & Pinals, 2010; Hart, 1968). Given the complex relationship between agency, intentionality, and blame, the use of intentionality and culpability as the methodological standard for testing the moral typecasting hypothesis is somewhat problematic. A richer and more direct test of the moral typecasting hypothesis would be to assess agency traits more comprehensively in terms of the capacity for rationality, planning, self-control, imagination, emotion recognition, and so on, after manipulating perceptions of the agent’s harmfulness.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Gray and Wegner (2009) write, “The perception of humans and other entities along distinct dimensions of moral agency and moral patiency has been observed by Gray et al. (2007). In this factor analytic study, the authors explored the dimensions of mind perception. (...) Participants compared pairs of entities on each of 18 mental qualities (e.g., the ability to feel hunger), and analyses of mean judgments revealed a two-dimensional solution corresponding in key aspects to the constructs of moral agency and moral patiency. A dimension termed Experience included many mental qualities indicating moral patiency: the abilities to feel hunger, fear, pain, pleasure, rage, and desire; to have personality and consciousness; and to feel pride, embarrassment, and joy. A dimension termed Agency included characteristics more relevant to moral agency: abilities to have self-control, morality, memory, emotion recognition, planning, communication, and thought” (p. 506).

<sup>2</sup> Gray and Wegner (2011, p. 518) write, “Previous moral agents, *whether they did good or evil*, remain typecast as agents for future misdeeds and are punished accordingly” (italics added). In discussing the results of studies testing the moral typecasting effects of good and bad deeds, Gray (2010) writes, “In Experiment 1, individuals who did good possessed more agency. Experiment 2 found that those who imagined themselves doing good or evil were more agentive than those who imagined themselves doing something neutral” (p. 257).

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