



Harmful situations, impure people: An attribution asymmetry across moral domains



Alek Chakroff^{a,*}, Liane Young^b

^a Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, United States

^b Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 May 2014

Revised 21 October 2014

Accepted 17 November 2014

Keywords:

Morality

Moral psychology

Moral foundation theory

Attribution theory

Action explanation

Social cognition

ABSTRACT

People make inferences about the actions of others, assessing whether an act is best explained by person-based versus situation-based accounts. Here we examine people's explanations for norm violations in different domains: harmful acts (e.g., assault) and impure acts (e.g., incest). Across four studies, we find evidence for an attribution asymmetry: people endorse more person-based attributions for impure versus harmful acts. This attribution asymmetry is partly explained by the abnormality of impure versus harmful acts, but not by differences in the moral wrongness or the statistical frequency of these acts. Finally, this asymmetry persists even when the situational factors that lead an agent to act impurely are stipulated. These results suggest that, relative to harmful acts, impure acts are linked to person-based attributions.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier B.V.

1. Introduction

Upon hearing about the abhorrent actions of others, such as the torture of inmates by Americans in Abu Ghraib, many people demand an explanation: why did they do it? People generate spontaneous explanations of others' behavior, which also support evaluations of the offending agents and their actions. Do people attribute the cruel acts of Abu Ghraib to the stable dispositions of the torturers, or to their extreme situational pressures? Research in social psychology indicates that people often underestimate the impact of situational influences when assessing the behavior of others (e.g., actor–observer asymmetry; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Malle, Knobe, & Nelson, 2007; Milgram, 1963; Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973; Ross, 1977). Here we investigate when and why people attribute

norm-violating behavior to the person versus the situation, taking the contrast between harmful acts (e.g., assault) and disgusting acts (e.g., pathogen exposure) as a case study.

Prior work has indicated significant variability in people's explanations of others' behavior. For example, people assign greater causal and intentional responsibility to those who commit morally wrong versus neutral acts (Alicke, 1992, 2000; Knobe, 2006; Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006). Some people pass moral judgment on many different kinds of action, from harmful acts that negatively affect others, to victimless (yet odd or disgusting) acts that people perform in the privacy of their own homes. Do people's action explanations depend on the kind of violation they are judging? Recent work suggests that people are sensitive to different sources of information when making moral judgments of actions that are primarily *angering/harmful* (e.g., assault) versus actions that are primarily *disgusting/impure* (e.g., eating taboo foods). For example, when condemning impure acts versus harmful acts, people are less sensitive to the context

* Corresponding author at: 33 Kirkland St., Cambridge, MA 02138, United States.

E-mail address: chakroff@fas.harvard.edu (A. Chakroff).

of the act and the mental state of the actor (Chakroff, Dungan, & Young, 2013; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011a; Young & Saxe, 2011), as well as any potential reasons or mitigating circumstances in explaining the impure action (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011b; Russell, Piazza, & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). These findings support theories that there are different kinds or domains of morality (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2007). Prior work has also highlighted individual differences in moral judgments across moral domains – in particular, impure acts are judged as more morally wrong by social conservatives versus liberals (e.g., Haidt, 2007). However, even among liberals, moral judgments of impure acts (e.g., suicide) are not at floor and are best predicted by purity concerns (Rottman, Kelemen, & Young, 2014). Notably, in the present work, moral judgments of impure acts were above floor in all studies (all t 's versus floor were >11 , p 's $< .001$, see Table 2 for means and SEs).

The present research tests the following hypothesis: people are more likely to explain *impure* acts using *person-based attributions*, appealing to factors internal to the person who committed the violation, but people are more likely to explain *harmful* acts using *situation-based attributions*, appealing to factors external to the person who committed the violation. This hypothesis follows from prior work indicating a dissociation between moral judgments that focus on the moral permissibility of an action and moral judgments that focus on the actor's moral character (Chakroff et al., 2013; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011; Uhlmann & Zhu, 2014). For example, participants judge “beating your girlfriend” to be a morally worse *action* than “beating your girlfriend's cat”, but they judge the cat-beater to be a morally worse *person* (i.e., to have poorer moral character) compared to the girlfriend-beater (Tannenbaum et al., 2011). Another study revealed harsher moral judgments of *impure* acts when participants focused on the moral status of the *person* but harsher judgments of *harmful* acts when participants focused on the moral status of the *action* (Chakroff et al., 2013). Here, we hypothesized that, in addition to person-based *moral judgments*, impure acts would be associated with increased person-based *attributions* as well.

Across four studies, we examine the effect of moral domain (i.e., harm versus impurity) on action explanations. Study 1 tests the hypothesis that people explain impure versus harmful acts using more person-based versus situation-based attributions and indicates (as with all studies) that the effect cannot be explained by domain differences in moral wrongness. Study 2 explores a potential mediator of the attribution asymmetry across domains: the perceived abnormality of impure versus harmful acts. Study 3 replicates the mediation findings from Study 2 and indicates further that the attribution asymmetry cannot be accounted for by judgments of the frequency (e.g., how commonly an act is performed) of impure versus harmful acts. Finally, Study 4 tests whether the domain attribution asymmetry persists even when the situational influences that led to the violations are stipulated within the scenarios (i.e., agents are *forced* to perform certain impure or harmful action).

Table 1

Harmful and impure acts used in Studies 1–3.

Domain	
Harmful	Impure
Kick someone in the shin	Lick someone's shoe
Scratch someone on the arm	Pour urine on oneself
Prick someone's hand with a needle	Pick up dog poop barehanded
Poke someone in the eye	Step in vomit barefoot
Burn someone on the arm	Taste earwax
Hit someone's finger with a hammer	Drink cow blood
Cut someone's cheek with a razor	Pick up a snot-filled Kleenex
Pinch someone hard on the arm	Pick up a used Band-Aid
Whip someone with a belt	Eat a worm

1.1. Methodological notes

For all studies, participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (www.mturk.com). All participants completed an IRB-approved online consenting process. Participants were self-reported English speakers and were excluded from analyses only if they did not complete the survey, or if they completed the survey in 1 min or less, i.e., a conservative estimate of the minimum amount of time participants could spend thoughtfully reading and completing the survey (consent, scenarios, and demographics). The stimuli used in Studies 1–3 are reported in Table 1, while the full stimuli and measures for all studies are reported in the [Supplementary Material](#). All studies were analyzed using linear mixed effects models, with item and participant as random factors, and domain and target (when applicable) as fixed factors. All results hold when modeling effects on condition averages using ANOVAs (see [Supplementary Material](#)).

2. Study 1: Person-based explanations for impure acts

Study 1 tests the hypothesis that people attribute impure acts more to an agent's disposition, and less to the situation, compared to harmful acts. We tested this hypothesis using a survey adapted from measures used in classic work on the actor–observer asymmetry (Nisbett et al., 1973). However, rather than asking participants to provide trait ascriptions (e.g., I am “energetic”, “relaxed,” or “depends on the situation”), we asked participants to indicate whether a person (either oneself or another person) was the type to engage in (or never engage in) harmful or impure behaviors, or whether a person might engage in the target behaviors depending on the situation.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

258 American participants (65% female; $M_{age} = 34.7$) were recruited in an online sample and were paid \$0.41 for their time. Sixty-two participants were excluded according to the exclusion criteria above.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7287298>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7287298>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)