



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

The mere liking effect: Attitudinal influences on attributions of moral character

Konrad Bocian^{a,*}, Wieslaw Baryla^{a,1}, Wojciech M. Kulesza^{a,2}, Simone Schnall^b, Bogdan Wojciszke^{a,1}^a SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poland^b University of Cambridge, Department of Psychology, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Moral judgments
Moral character
Attitudes
Attribution

ABSTRACT

People believe that their moral judgments are well-justified and as objective as scientific facts. Still, dual-process models of judgment provide strong theoretical reasons to expect that in reality moral judgments are substantially influenced by highly subjective factors such as attitudes. In four experiments ($N = 645$) we provide evidence that similarity-dissimilarity of beliefs, mere exposure, and facial mimicry influence judgments of moral character measured in various ways. These influences are mediated by changes in liking of the judged persons, suggesting that attitudinal influences lay at the core of moral character perceptions. Changes in mood do not play such a role. This is the first line of studies showing that attitudes influence moral judgments in addition to frequently studied discrete emotions. It is also the first research evidencing the affective influences on judgments of moral character.

Moral experiences and judgments are surprisingly frequent, as uncovered in a large sample of adults studied with ecological momentary assessments (Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014). Out of 13 thousand assessed events, 29% involved acts interpreted in moral terms, with participants involved in the acts either as agents or targets, witnessing them in person, or learning about them from others. Moral judgments and impressions are therefore of critical importance. In everyday situations, they heavily influence interpersonal attitudes, thereby determining whom to approach and whom to avoid (Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). In extreme situations they can decide about life or death – convicted murderers perceived as untrustworthy based on their facial appearance are more frequently sentenced to death, whereas those perceived as trustworthy receive a lesser sentence of imprisonment (Wilson & Rule, 2015).

Given such serious consequences of moral judgments, it is no wonder that people perceive their own judgments, especially negative ones, as objective and more socially shared than is really the case (Goodwin & Darley, 2012). Participants in one study assessed the objectivity of moral judgments (e.g. “Cheating on a knowledge section of a lifeguard exam, to obtain a job for which one is not qualified is morally wrong”) as equally high as that of factual statements (“Mars is the smallest planet of the solar system”). Both these assessments were much

higher than those concerning judgements of tastes (“Classical music is better than rock music”) or conventions (“Wearing pajamas and bath robe to a seminar is wrong behavior”) (Goodwin & Darley, 2008). There are probably two reasons for this belief in the objectivity of one's own moral judgments. Due to this belief, good or bad are experienced as objective characteristics of the judged persons or phenomena, not as a perceiver's own responses (Skitka, 2014). This is conducive for subjectively justified and strongly motivated actions, such as political activism (Skitka, Hanson, & Wisneski, 2016). The second reason has to do with avoiding moral dissonance. Many people believe that relying on logic and facts when forming and evaluating beliefs is a moral virtue, while relying on less rational processes is a moral vice (Stahl, Zaal, & Skitka, 2016). Therefore, they are motivated to rely on rational premises of their judgments or at least to believe that the premises they use are objectively true. However, despite the widespread belief in the objective nature of own moral judgments, the dual-process account of judgments suggests that this belief is mistaken. We present four experiments showing “the mere liking effect” – that moral judgments are influenced by interpersonal attitudes, an exemplary case of subjective preferences.

* Corresponding author at: SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty in Sopot, ul. Polna 16/20, 81-745 Sopot, Poland.
E-mail address: kbocian1@swps.edu.pl (K. Bocian).

¹ SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty in Sopot, Poland.

² SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty in Poznan, Poland.

1. Dual-process account of moral judgment

The main debate on the nature of moral judgment has centred around the relative importance of reason versus intuitions, and in particular affect (Haidt, 2001). According to the *rationalist tradition*, moral judgment relies on reasoning postulated to be context-independent and to involve several steps in conscious, language-based thinking. In effect, forming a moral judgment is the process of uncovering a moral truth in a deliberate way. In contrast, according to the *intuitionist approach* (Haidt, 2001), moral judgments resemble instant perceptions rather than deliberate inferences, and the effect of these perceptions on judgment is often mediated through affective experience. Like other kinds of evaluations, moral judgments are frequently based on emotional intuitions (“gut feelings” of right or wrong) that emerge without intention or effort, and they do so much quicker than the assumption of a deliberate multi-stage processing could allow for. Support for the claim that numerous moral intuitions or judgments do not involve elaborate thinking comes from experiments showing that moral intuitions appear in pre-verbal infants (Hamlin, 2013). Similarly, studies show that moral judgments can emerge instantly (in a quarter of a second – Decety & Cacioppo, 2012), even when it is hard for a perceiver to supply any rule-related justification (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006).

Although these two views of the nature of moral judgments are utterly disparate, both enjoy substantial empirical support. There are several reasons for this paradox, the most important being that they involve two psychological processes (Greene, 2007; Haidt, 2012). Whereas moral reasoning draws on conscious, slow, and effortful information-processing, intuitive responses tend to draw on processes that are automatic, fast, and effortless (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008; Haidt, 2007). There are many instantiations of dual-process theorizing in social psychology, and most agree that automatic processes are always active, while deliberative processes occur only in conducive conditions – when the individual is both motivated to engage in and capable of deliberate responding. Under the influence of such theorizing and findings, there is emerging a consensus that moral judgment and behaviour can be best accounted for by a dual-process model (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Greene, 2007; Haidt, 2007). However, the recently growing body of research suggests that dual-process models or typology is more consistent with single-process or multi-process (Ferguson, Mann, & Wojnowicz, 2014; Kruglanski & Gigerenzer, 2011; Melnikoff & Bargh, 2018; Osman, 2004). Therefore, instead of using dual-process typology of two separate systems we can frame intuitive and deliberative processing as one system which can influence moral judgments. Typically intuitive processing dominates moral judgments (though the deliberative processing can also influence judgments if there is a motivation to do so). This makes intuitions crucial to the understanding of moral judgments. Because intuitions are highly idiosyncratic (Wojciszke, Parzuchowski, & Bocian, 2015), and can be influenced by cues of similarity and liking (Haidt, 2001), explaining their nature is vital for clarifying moral controversies and the resulting social divisions that can be disruptive in modern societies.

2. Affective processes and morality

Most intuitions are affective in nature and may result from three types of affect: discrete emotions, mood, and attitudes (for a review, see Clore & Schnall, 2005). Discrete emotions are specific, short-lived affective states, having a clear referent, consisting of arousal (which involves valence and intensity), cognitive appraisals, as well as bodily symptoms, expressions, and action tendencies. In contrast, moods are longer-lived affective states that are mild and diffuse in nature, lack a clear referent, and result from ongoing, mostly automatic, evaluations of recently appearing stimuli. Attitudes are summary evaluations of objects, formed on-line or stored in long-term memory, which can influence current affective states and information processing. Because all

three involve feelings with negative or positive valence, they all may give rise to affective intuitions.

Of these three types of affect, only discrete emotions received substantial attention as a source of moral intuitions. Several authors (Haidt, 2012; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999) posited that specific emotions are linked to violations of particular moral concerns. Early on anger was said to be linked to concerns about personal harm and justice; disgust to concerns about purity, contempt to group loyalty and fear to authority. Of these, especially disgust has been the subject of numerous studies testing three hypotheses: elicitation, amplification, and moralisation (Pizzaro, Inbar, & Helion, 2011). The *elicitation hypothesis* assumes that the act of moral condemnation (finding out that somebody has violated a rule) evokes disgust. This hypothesis has found strong support – violations of purity (degradation due to the misuse of the human body, inappropriate sexual acts, breaking food taboos) arouse disgust and the same is true for violations of other moral concerns like distributive justice and harm (for reviews, see Avramowa & Inbar, 2013; Landy & Goodwin, 2015). The *amplification hypothesis* inverts the causal relation assuming that incidentally induced disgust can increase condemnation of unrelated moral violations. Numerous studies have showed that disgust induced in a variety of ways can increase condemnation of a range of immoral acts (for a review, see Schnall, 2017). Although a recent meta-analysis (Landy & Goodwin, 2015) suggested that these effects have been inconsistent, it found especially pronounced effects for gustatory/olfactory modes of disgust inductions. For other inductions moderating factors such as bodily sensitivity need to be taken into account (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008), as shown on a number of occasions (e.g., Ong, Mullette-Gilman, Kwok, & Lim, 2014; Petrescu & Parkinson, 2014; Schnall et al., 2008; but see also Johnson et al., 2016). The *moralization hypothesis* assumes that experiencing disgust results in moral condemnation of acts which would otherwise remain morally irrelevant. In the first demonstration of this effect, participants had been induced (via a post-hypnotic suggestion) to experience disgust in response to a neutral word (e.g. ‘frequently’). Encountering this word in subsequent vignettes led the participants to condemn the described protagonists, even when his actions were void of any immoral content (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). Although direct support for the moralization hypothesis remains overall scarce, there is supportive evidence for it (Landy & Goodwin, 2015).

Both the elicitation and amplification hypotheses tend to assume exclusive correspondence between moral content and specific emotions, such that harm is linked to anger (but not disgust) and purity is linked to disgust (but not anger). Although such correspondence has been found in some studies, others did not necessarily show exclusive relations between specific kinds of moral content and discrete emotions, although such comparisons might have been not fully conclusive due to methodological issues (Cameron, Lindquist, & Gray, 2015; Schnall, 2017). Disgust, for example, has been shown to not only influence considerations of purity violations, but also fairness violations (Cannon, Schnall, & White, 2011; Chapman, Kim, Susskind, & Anderson, 2009). Homicide (harm violation) and suicide (purity violation) both elicit anger and disgust to a similar degree (Rottman, Kelemen, & Young, 2014), and numerous studies found anger and disgust to be very highly correlated, sharing up to 67% of variance during moral judgment concerning violations of different sorts (e.g. Giner-Sorolla, Bosson, Caswell, & Hettinger, 2012). It is therefore possible that various affective cues can contribute to moral considerations, in particular when making moral character attributions, given that the stakes are especially high and global, stable inferences are particularly useful in predicting future behavior of another person.

If pure affect more broadly drives moral judgment, then the previously mentioned moods and attitudes can also be expected to influence moral condemnation and approval. Indeed, a large amount of research has shown that diffuse moods influence a variety of evaluative judgments, such as life satisfaction, performance appraisals, mundane and important decisions, and evaluations of persons and products

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