The influence of desire and knowledge on perception of each other and related mental states, and different mechanisms for blame

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Knowledge and desire affect blame through different routes.
- Knowledge and desire affect perception of each other, perception of related mental states, and immorality.
- Knowledge affects perceived awareness through blame.
- Desire affects blame through judgments of agent immorality and perceived awareness.

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ABSTRACT

Two experiments (Experiment 1 $N = 350$; Experiment 2 $N = 153$), used relatively simple (Experiment 1) and complex (Experiment 2) vignettes to investigate whether two ostensibly distinct mental states that underlie intentionality judgments influence each other, related mental states, and agent morality, and also whether they affect blame through different routes. Knowledge (that a particular action can lead to a particular outcome) affected perceptions of an agent's desire by first increasing blame, which increased perceptions that the agent was aware of acting, while acting. Desire (for a particular outcome) affected blame and perceptions of agent knowledge by increasing perceptions that the agents were immoral (measured after knowledge and desire were described, but before the agents' action and the harmful outcomes were described), which influenced perceptions of the agents' awareness. The importance of these findings for mental state perception research, including the relationship of mental states to blame, is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Understanding others' mental states is a vitally important aspect of human social interactions. Not only does perception of others' mental states aid in understanding their motives, actions, and character (e.g., Reeder, 2009a, 2009b), it helps perceivers select appropriate responses to what others say and do. For example, knowing that someone wishes you harm, you may choose to avoid or confront that person. Surmising that a friend is blue, you might console or offer help. Simply put, understanding of or beliefs about the contents of others' minds shapes perceivers' reactions to and behavior toward them (Malle & Hodges, 2005).

Understanding mental states is particularly important when trying to evaluate how blameworthy an agent is for bringing about a harmful

outcome, and most theoretical models describing how people blame take this into account (e.g., Alicke, 2000, 2008; Heider, 1958; Shaver, 1985). That is, reasoning about mental states such as whether an agent wanted to cause harm, foresaw the potential for harm in an action, or acted intentionally to fulfill a goal of harming aids perceivers in determining how responsible, blameworthy, and deserving of punishment the agent is. For example, Lagnado and Channon (2008) found that relative to difficult-to-foresee harms or harms that resulted from unintentional actions, foreseeable and intentional harms were rated as more blameworthy and caused by agents' actions. Similarly, relative to negligent or reckless actions, intentional actions that lead to harm are seen as more blameworthy and deserving of punishment (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Malle & Nelson, 2003; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009; Shultz & Wright, 1985).

Intentionality judgments are complex but can be made quite quickly (e.g., Malle & Holbrook, 2012), even though many theoretical models suggest that judgments regarding several distinct mental states are required prior to an agent's action being considered intentional. For

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example, along with requisite elements such as ability/skill or effort expended, most models of intentionality include or specifically require the presence of mental states such as belief/knowledge, desire, awareness, and intent (e.g., Adams, 1986; Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Malle & Knobe, 1997; Shaver, 1985). Although research has begun to investigate the relative contributions to blame of different mental states that underlie intentionality judgments (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Nuñez, Laurent, & Gray, 2014), little is known about whether perception of certain mental states influences perception of other presumably distinct mental states. Moreover, little is known about the routes through which different mental state inferences affect blame. The current paper considers how desire and knowledge may reciprocally influence each other, related mental states, and agent morality, and the different routes by which these mental states impact blame.

2. The role of desire in blame

Desire plays an important role in intentionality judgments because intentional action typically serves agents' hopes of bringing about the outcomes they desire (e.g., Malle & Knobe, 1997). However, without the conjoint presence of other mental states such as knowledge or awareness, desire should not be particularly blameworthy. That is, desiring that harm befall someone – a feeling that many people may, in their less proud moments, admit to – does not imply an intention to act in a way that will bring it about.

Although it seems obvious that wishing someone harm should not, on its own, rationally lead to blame, there are reasons to believe that it might, particularly when the desired outcome occurs and the desiring agent plays a causal role in bringing about the outcome (e.g., Cushman, 2008). One reason for this is that desiring (or admitting to desiring) harm is non-normative (e.g., Guglielmo & Malle, 2010; Uttich & Lombrozo, 2010) and socially informative. With other factors held constant, moral people should typically not want to see others harmed, suggesting that people who wish others harm might be seen as immoral. Because social perceivers like it when bad people get their just desserts (Darley & Pittman, 2003), it becomes easier to understand why perceivers irrationally blame and punish moral transgressions (e.g., hypocrisy; Laurent, Clark, Walker, & Wiseman, 2014). In addition, because desire is implicated in antisocial *motives* for action and informs character judgments (Reeder, 2009a, 2009b), when an agent wants to see someone harmed and does something that leads to the desired outcome occurring, perceivers may label the person as "bad" and assume the agent somehow engineered the outcome.

The idea of a route from desire to blame is also consistent with Alicke's (2000) culpable control model. For example, the blame-validation hypothesis posits that when harm occurs, blame may be the "default attribution" (p. 558), leading people to process information in a biased way that results in holding a causal agent accountable. According to the culpable control model, biases in how people blame can affect their evaluation of links anywhere in the mind-to-behavior-to-consequence sequence. As one example, perceivers may have spontaneous negative reactions to a harmful action–outcome sequence based on a dislike of agents' motives or values. One way spontaneous reactions may increase blame is by altering perceptions of agents' mental states and the relation of these states to the behavior that caused the outcome. Thus, perceivers' reactions to an agent's unsavory desires, which provides a cue to motives and suggests values, might first negatively impact evaluations of the agent's character. Subsequently, character evaluations could influence perceptions of blame, leading to changes in the way people reason about an agent's volitional control (Alicke, 2000), such as by increasing the perception that the agent foresaw the risk of harm, particularly when the desired harm actually occurs. This suggests that when a desired harm occurs as a result of an agent's action, the presence of desire could influence blame through evaluations of moral character, subsequently affecting beliefs that the agent was aware of

acting, and thus possessed knowledge linking their action to the outcome, validating the impulse to blame.

2.1. The role of knowledge (and awareness) in blame

Depending on interpretation, knowledge is often loosely equated with foresight and defined as a belief that one's action will have a particular consequence (e.g., Malle & Knobe, 1997; Shaver, 1985). This definition appears to imply either a present-moment action or an intention to act and bring about a desired outcome. However, knowledge can also be conceptualized more abstractly as a simple understanding of potential causal relations between actions and outcomes. That is, to know that one's action will have a particular consequence, one must first know that certain types of actions or classes of actions have the potential to bring about certain types of outcomes or classes of outcomes. Using this definition, knowledge informs subjective foreseeability (Lagnado & Channon, 2008) at a basic level (i.e., whether an agent could plausibly foresee or have foreseen the consequences of an action); however, it does not imply that any action has been or will be taken or that any outcome has occurred or will occur. That is, although most people know that certain actions can cause harm, their possession of knowledge does not imply their performance of these actions or plans to perform them.

Whether a person should reasonably foresee or should have foreseen the potential for harm (e.g., reasonable foreseeability; Lagnado & Channon, 2008) can be shown to depend on the type of knowledge being considered, as well as on the person's level of awareness of performing a particular action linked to that knowledge. General or common knowledge subsumes knowledge that most people possess or are reasonably expected to possess. For example, a person who hates guns, has never fired one, and intends never to do so probably *knows* (and would be reasonably expected to know) that pulling the trigger on a pistol, when the pistol is loaded and aimed at someone, will probably lead to the person being injured or killed. In addition to common knowledge, some knowledge is privileged or specialized, in that not all people would be expected to possess it, diminishing reasonable expectation for some people but increasing it for others. For example, while a friend of Person P might know that P is allergic to strawberries, and would therefore have knowledge regarding the effect of feeding P strawberries, not all people would be expected to have this knowledge.

Although knowledge in this sense is not noteworthy, it strongly suggests the presence of foresight when combined with awareness of performing the action one knows is linked to the possibility of harm. However, awareness itself is a complex mental state, because actions themselves can be construed or identified at different levels (e.g., Vallacher & Wegner, 2012), and agents may or may not be aware of the full scope of their actions. Continuing with the gun example, a person might pull the trigger on a gun they think is unloaded and end up harming someone because a bullet was in the chamber. In this case, the agent may have awareness while acting of pulling a trigger on a gun, but not of pulling the trigger on a loaded gun, so no foresight should be attributed. However, it could be argued that the agent *should have* been aware of the full scope of his action (i.e., he should have taken care that the gun was not loaded before pulling the trigger if there was no intent to harm). Similarly, P's friend might be aware of innocently offering her a sip of juice purchased at a health store without being aware that the juice contains strawberries. But if the friend *is* aware the juice contains strawberries, and knowledge is also present, her awareness of acting suggests foresight and perhaps the intent to harm. Thus, only when knowledge is combined with full awareness should foresight be rationally and fully attributed. Following this line of reasoning, expectations for foreseeability can arise not only from expectations for knowledge when awareness is present (e.g., that firing guns can cause harm or that P is allergic to strawberries), but also from expectations for awareness when knowledge is present (e.g., that one is pulling the trigger on a loaded gun or that one is offering a drink containing strawberries).