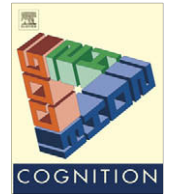




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cognition

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

Brief Article

“End-of-life” biases in moral evaluations of others

George E. Newman^{a,*}, Kristi L. Lockhart^b, Frank C. Keil^b^a School of Management, Yale University, 135 Prospect St., New Haven, CT 06511, United States^b Department of Psychology, Yale University, 2 Hillhouse Ave., New Haven, CT 06521, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 October 2009

Revised 21 December 2009

Accepted 22 December 2009

Keywords:

Moral reasoning

Moral evaluations

Death

Heuristics

Biases

ABSTRACT

When evaluating the moral character of others, people show a strong bias to more heavily weigh behaviors at the end of an individual's life, even if those behaviors arise in light of an overwhelmingly longer duration of contradictory behavior. Across four experiments, we find that this “end-of-life” bias uniquely applies to intentional changes in behavior that immediately precede death, and appears to result from the inference that the behavioral change reflects the emergence of the individual's “true self”.

© 2010 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

“Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. . . . But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change” – Ebenezer Scrooge, (*Dickens, 1843*).

How do we evaluate the moral virtue of another person's life? Though subjective impressions of what constitutes “good” may vary, one reasonable way of answering this question may be to simply add up all of the good and bad actions that a person has engaged in over the course of his or her life. We might attach appropriate weights to the degree of goodness or badness of each action, the importance of the event involved, or the number of others affected. But in the end, a person's net impact on the world would seem to be simply the sum of those appropriately weighted positive and negative actions, and indeed, that final score may be a reasonable way of assessing how “good” or “bad” that person was overall.

Yet, we may not follow this seemingly reasonable strategy for assessing the overall morality of others. In fact, history and conventional wisdom seem to be filled

with countless anecdotes that would suggest quite the opposite. We constantly hear stories of people who “turn over a new leaf” late in life, engaging in many generous actions in their final days. Such changes, even when they represent only a small fraction of a person's total life, are often described as acts of redemption that now cast the person's entire life in a much more positive manner. For example, *Dicken's (1843)* Ebenezer Scrooge seemed to have lived most of his life as a selfish, insensitive tyrant and yet his few acts of kindness at the end of his life make us feel that overall Scrooge was basically a good person. Similar positive interpretations are made of Dr. Seuss's Grinch (*Geisel, 1959*), or perhaps, various corporate titans such as Andrew Carnegie who turn from ruthless selfishness to charity in their final years (*Sonnenfeld, 1988*).

This “end-of-life” bias resonates with several related findings. For example, people rate a longer unpleasant experience that ends positively as better than a shorter negative experience that has no positive end (e.g., *Fredrickson & Kahneman, 1993; Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, & Redelmeier, 1993*). Such duration neglect is hypothesized to result from a more general peak-end memory bias whereby individuals form a global evaluation of an experience based on the most extreme “peak” event and the most recent event (*Kahneman, 1999; Kahneman et al., 1993*).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 2034321046.

E-mail address: george.newman@yale.edu (G.E. Newman).

Peak-end effects have also been documented in evaluations of others' wellbeing. For example, people rate intensely happy lives that ended abruptly as preferable to intensely happy lives that were longer, but ended with mildly happy years, the "James Dean effect" (Diener, Wirtz, & Oishi, 2001). Finally, death itself appears to play a unique role in solidifying evaluative judgments. Evaluations of individuals who are believed to be dead are more resistant to change than are evaluations of the living, the so-called "Frozen in Time effect" (Eylon & Allison, 2005).

Taken together, previous research suggests that we are biased in how we aggregate across the events that make up our own experiences, and in how we form evaluations of others. Moreover, it appears that the ends of people's lives may have a special status in such evaluations. At the same time, prior work has not specifically focused on the question of whether people will override a relatively long period of one kind of behavior with a relatively short period of another kind just because it occurred at the end of one's life. Yet, in many ways this may be the most striking bias of all. If a person causes unrelenting misery for others for much of one's life and engages in beneficial activities only at the end, why would we think of them as being a good person?

The four studies described here explored this bias and the possible reasons for it. Study 1 demonstrates the basic effect while the remaining studies establish boundary conditions. Specifically, Study 2 demonstrates that this bias uniquely applies to changes in behavior that occur at the end-of-life, Study 3 demonstrates that the changes must be seen as "genuine" (i.e., both intentional and intrinsically-motivated), and Study 4 demonstrates that effect is unique to inferences surrounding a death. Additionally, the final study helps to identify potential mechanisms by examining whether individual differences in essentialism, belief in an afterlife, belief in the "outing" of hidden personality traits, or religiosity interact with this particular bias.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

Eighty-five adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 33$, 29% male) were recruited while attending a state fair. Participants read one of four short scenarios involving a hypothetical individual named Jim (see Appendix A for all stimuli). Half of the participants read that for most of his life, Jim was extremely selfish and greedy. Participants in the "change to good" condition then read that Jim changed in his behavior and became generous 6 months before he died. Participants in the "all bad" condition read an identical scenario, except that the sentences describing the change to good were omitted. The other half of participants read scenarios in which Jim's dominant behavior was generous. Participants in the "change to bad" condition then read that Jim changed in his behavior and became selfish 6 months before he died, while for participants in the "all good" condition, the change to bad was omitted. At the end of the scenario, participants in all conditions read that Jim unexpectedly suffered a heart attack and died, which controlled for any

judgments linked to changing one's behavior in anticipation of death.

After reading the story, participants were instructed to "consider Jim overall as a person" and rated him on a series of nine-point scales along the dimensions "mean-kind, uncaring-caring, bad-good, immoral-moral, and selfish-generous," where higher numbers indicated more positive attributes.

2.2. Results and discussion

Items measuring Jim's moral character were highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.96$) and were averaged to produce a single measure of perceived morality. Participants judged Jim to be significantly more moral when he briefly became generous at the end of his life ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.79$) compared to when he remained selfish throughout ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(42) = 7.06$, $p < 0.001$. Conversely, participants judged Jim to be significantly less moral when he briefly became selfish ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.64$), than when he remained generous throughout ($M = 7.93$, $SD = 1.59$), $t(39) = 6.09$, $p < 0.001$.

This result provided initial support for the end-of-life bias. Responses in the "all good" and "all bad" conditions established that people readily judge the generous and selfish behaviors presented here as occupying opposite extremes of moral valence, $t(36) = 15.02$, $p < 0.0001$. However, when Jim briefly changed his behavior (either to good, or to bad), he was rated as nearly the same, $p > 0.77$. This result is striking given that these changes were explicitly described as representing a small fraction of Jim's total lifetime (6 months), and in fact, subjects even showed a slight trend to judge a change to good as better than a change to bad – a pattern more robustly documented in subsequent studies.

3. Study 2

Results from Study 1 provided initial support for the end-of-life bias. However, perhaps these patterns were driven by the presence of any contradictory behavior. Study 2 controlled for the total duration of good and bad behavior by presenting the brief amount of contradictory behavior either at the beginning of Jim's adult life, or at the end. Additionally, the durations of both the majority behavior and the contradictory behavior were made explicit so that they could be more easily calculated – thereby providing a stronger test of the bias.

3.1. Method

A new group of 128 adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 35$, 33% male) were recruited through a Web service that hosts online studies for academic purposes. Participants read one of four scenarios. Two of the scenarios were nearly identical to the previous study: "good at end" (Jim was selfish for 29 years, then generous for one) and "bad at end" (Jim was generous for 29 years, then selfish for one). Two additional conditions were added: "good at beginning" (Jim was generous for one year, then selfish for 29), and "bad at beginning" (Jim was selfish for one year, then generous for 29). Partic-

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/927007>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/927007>

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