

Understanding Moral Judgments: The Role of the Agent's Characteristics in Moral Evaluations¹

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Abstract: Traditional studies have shown that the moral judgments are influenced by many biasing factors, like the consequences of a behavior, certain characteristics of the agent who commits the act, or the words chosen to describe the behavior. In the present study we investigated a new factor that could bias the evaluation of morally relevant human behavior: the perceived similarity between the participants and the agent described in the moral scenario. The participants read a story about a driver who illegally overtook another car and hit a pedestrian who was crossing the street. The latter was taken to the hospital with a broken leg. The driver was described either as being similar to the participant (a student, 21 years old, the same gender as the participant) or dissimilar (a retired person, 69 years old, different gender as the participant). The results show that the participants from the increased similarity group expressed more lenient evaluations of the immorality of the driver's behavior compared to the participants from the decreased similarity group. The results are discussed within a framework which puts emphasis on motivational and protective reasons.

Keywords: moral judgments, moral appraisals, moral bias, defensive attribution theory, perceived similarity.

Introduction

Moral judgments and the processes that underlay moral decisions and the evaluation of moral transgressions represent a highly debated topic for researchers from fields like psychology (Bartels 2009; Cushman Young and Hauser 2006; Greene et al. 2008) or philosophy (Foot 1967). In the area of moral decisions (Bartels et al. 2015), and moral judgments, special attention has been paid to biasing factors that are those aspects that influence moral judgments despite the fact that they are not relevant or should matter very little (Baron 2013).

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Initially, the term 'moral bias' has been defined in relation to moral decisions when someone chooses the deontological option over the utilitarian one in moral dilemmas (Sunstein 2005). This definition was soon regarded as too restrictive, because even if people did not choose the option that implied the smallest amount of harm, their choice cannot be classified as wrong, as both choices can be justified in relation to a moral principle. The recent definitions of moral bias are broader and refer to a sum of factors that weigh in on moral judgments, although they should not (Baron 1994, 2013). In other words, a biased moral judgment is an evaluation of an agent's actions that is influenced by some irrelevant aspects of the moral scenario, such as the words chosen to describe it (the framing effect, Sinott-Armstrong 2008) or the order of presentation of moral dilemmas (Feldman et al. 1976; Petrinovich, L. 1996). Previous studies have investigated various factors that bias peoples' moral judgments. The most important biases are: the consequence bias (Baron and Hershey 1988), the omission bias (Baron and Ritov 1994), the framing effect (Sinott-Armstrong 2008), and the actor-observer bias (Nadelhoffer and Feltz, 2008). The consequence bias refers to the fact that people tend to evaluate moral transgressions depending on their consequences: if the consequences are severe, the action is seen as being more immoral, even if the agent's intentions and behavior are identical in both stories (Baron & Hershey 1988; Berg-Cross 1975; Lipshitz 1989; Mitchell and Kalb, 1981). The framing effect refers to the fact that, when evaluating moral transgressions, people are influenced by details of the scenarios, like the font with which they are written (Laham et al. 2009), the order of presentation, if there are more scenarios (Petrinovich 1996) and the phrasing of the scenarios. For example, using the word *save* versus *kill* determines participants to choose more often the utilitarian response, even though the consequences of the dilemma are identical (Sinott-Armstrong 2008). Another bias that has been extensively studied is the omission bias: people have the tendency to consider omissions as less morally wrong than actions, even if both action and omission have the same consequences and the agent's intentions are the same – for example, killing a person by poisoning is considered to be more blame-worthy than killing a person by withholding the antidote (Baron and Ritov 1994; Anderson 2003). The actor-observer bias refers to the tendency to apply different moral standards to others than we would apply for ourselves in the same situations; actions that are permissible for us were considered immoral if done by others (Nadelhoffer and Feltz 2008). Moral judgments are also influenced by personal reasons. The self-interest bias describes peoples' tendency to make less severe evaluations when they have something to gain (Bocian and Worciszke 2014).

The high number of studies in the area of moral biases and moral heuristics and the vast interest this topic receives is explained, among other factors, by a strong relation between biased patterns of thinking and real-life issues, like the legislative system. An example of a situation where current practices make people to evaluate transgressions in a biased way is the legal system, which fosters the tendency to judge situations according to the consequences of a transgression and not the severity of the transgression itself. According to the law, the gravity of a crime is established primarily depending on its consequences, and the same criterion applies for establishing the punishment (Kadish Schulhofer and Steiker, 2007). On the other hand, peoples' tendency to consider inactions as being less immoral than actions (the omission bias) is highly relevant for the real-life dilemma about euthanasia: while passive euthanasia (the withholding of standard medical treatment that results in a patient's death) is eventually tolerated, active euthanasia and assisted suicide (which involves more action) are forbidden in most countries (Baron 2013).

To summarize, people's judgments of moral transgressions seem to be influenced by the way the transgression is presented (the framing effect), the person who violates the moral rule (actor-observer bias), the characteristics of the moral transgression (the omission bias), its outcome (the consequences bias), and by motivational reasons (self-interest bias). Another factor that could bias moral judgment is related to the way in which people make attributions of responsibility.

The defensive attribution theory describes the way in which people explain accidents and attribute responsibility for them either to external, random causes like chance, or to the person who caused them. The results of the original research (Walster 1966) show that the attribution of responsibility to the person who unintentionally caused an accident increases with the severity of the consequences. The same attribution pattern was observed in the case of victims of accidents or acts of violence; the more severe the accident, the more responsibility was attributed to the victim (Coates, Wortman, and Abbey 1979). In other words, the participants found it hard to believe that accidents with severe consequences could be determined by fate or bad luck and they tried to identify someone who should bear the responsibility for the bad outcome.

There are several theoretical frameworks that tried to explain the defensive attribution tendency: the most common and widely mentioned is the motivational theory (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Walster 1966), but there are also alternative explanations, like the belief in a just world theory (Lerner and Miller 1978), the accident occurrence probability (Brewer 1977), or the legal system and practices (Kadish Schulhofer and Steiker 2007).

The theoretical framework that seems to best explain defensive attribution is based on motivational and self-protective reasons (Robbennolt 2000), when they assign responsibility to either the victim or the actor (and not to uncontrollable factors, like fate), the participants might express the wish to reduce the probability that a similar accident could also happen to them (Walster 1966). Another key element of the motivational theory is related to the predictability of future negative incidents: by assigning responsibility to predictable factors, the incident itself becomes more predictable and thus avoidable (Fiske and Taylor 1991).

The belief in a just world hypothesis, another possible explanation, states that people share the need to believe that the world in which we live in is a just world, and that, basically, everybody gets what they deserve (Lerner and Miller 1978). Based on this belief, if something bad happens, the victim must be held responsible for it because, at least to an extent, he/she deserved it; the reversed principle also applies: if someone causes an accident with severe consequences, he/she must be held responsible for them, because the idea that bad things randomly happen contradicts the belief in a just world.

Tennen and Affleck (1991) also note that the tendency to make defensive attributions increases not only with the severity of the consequences, but also with the unusualness and peculiarity of the situation. They explain this result by saying that these unusual characteristics of the situation entail a higher need of explaining them. Finchman and Jaspars (1983) propose an alternative explanation based on the participants' estimations whether other people would have acted in a similar manner as the actor who caused the accident. Participants tend to attribute less responsibility to the agent who caused an accident if they consider that most people would have acted in a manner similar to the agent. If, on the other hand, participants appreciate that the agent acted in a very specific and distinctive way, different from what most people would have done then more responsibility is attributed to him/her.

The legal system and practices also encourage and explain this type of attributions. The need to find the person responsible for a crime and to punish them accordingly increases with the severity of the consequences. From a legal point of view, the degree of damage is relevant in establishing the punishment and the damage compensation (Kadish Schulhofer and Steiker 2007). The need for justice is another psychological factor that explains the tendency to attribute more responsibility and to punish more severely the actors who cause accidents with severe consequences. By punishing them more severely, there is a sense that justice has been done and that the victim was somewhat compensated for the injustice that he/she has suffered (Galanter and Luban 1993, Carther et al. 1996).

Another alternative explanation is related to the probability of occurrence. Accidents with mild consequences occur more frequently, so the responsibility attributed to the actor would be lower; on the other hand, accidents with severe consequences occur less frequently, so it seems that the actor bears more responsibility for being involved in an accident with low probability of occurrence (Brewer 1977).

Nevertheless, after the study that first described the tendency to make defensive attributions (Walster 1966), the subsequent studies found contradictory and inconsistent evidence on the effect: in some studies, the increased severity of the consequences lead to the attribution of less responsibility (Shaver 1970, study 3), and in some cases, there was no statistical difference between the participants from the severe consequence condition and those from the less severe consequence condition (Walster 1967; Shaver 1970, study 1; Thomas and Parpal 1987).

These inconsistent results have been explained by the influence of some mediating variables, which were not taken into account in most of the previous studies, such as perpetrator culpability, self-protective motivations, and perpetrator characteristics (Nisbett and Ross 1980). For example, Shaver (1970) found that, when the participants perceive themselves similar to the agent, the effect seems to be reversed: they tend to attribute less responsibility to the agent when the consequences of the accident are severe. The perceived similarity determines people to empathize with the agent (Campbell 2002), and increased empathy makes the assigning of blame and responsibility more uncomfortable (Regan and Totten 1975; Gould and Sigall 1977). Also, when participants perceive themselves similar to the agent, specific motivational mechanisms are activated, such as harm avoidance (Shaver 1970). The increased similarity with the agent determines participants to consider that there is a high probability to find themselves in a similar situation in the future. Assigning less blame allows them to symbolically avoid future blame.

Based on the idea that increased similarity with the agent causes the participants to empathize more with him/her, a fact that triggers motivational processes like harm avoidance, we hypothesize that the same psychological mechanisms will bias participants' evaluations of moral transgressions.

The aim of the present study is to extend the defensive attribution theory in the field of moral evaluation. We test whether the participants similar to the agent who transgressed a moral norm evaluate the transgression as being less immoral, as opposed to the participants who are not similar to the agent.

Method

Participants

Fifty-seven undergraduates (7 men) from the University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, the Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences, aged 20 to 23 ($M = 21$, $SD = 0.58$) took part in our research in exchange of extra course credit.

Design, materials and procedure

The participants were assigned to one of two conditions: low versus high similarity. In each condition, the participants read a scenario which described a driver who illegally overtook another car and, as a result, hit a pedestrian who was taken to the hospital with a broken leg. The scenario was created in a similar manner to the stories previously used by Baron and Hershey (1988).

The personal similarity was manipulated by the description of the driver, in terms of age (21 versus 69), profession (student versus retired), gender (the same or different as the participant), and the place he/she was driving to (to college or to the market place). In order to ensure the success of the similarity manipulation all the participants from the high similarity group had a driver's license ($N = 31$), while the participants from the low similarity group did not ($N = 26$).

The participants from the high similarity group read the following story:

Maria is 21 years old and she is a student. She is driving to college in her personal car. She is driving within the speed limit but, because she is in a hurry, she illegally overtakes another car and does not notice a pedestrian who is crossing the street. She brakes but still hits the pedestrian who is crossing the street. The pedestrian is taken to the hospital with a leg fracture.

The participants from the low similarity group read the following story:

Maria is 69 years old and she is retired. She is driving to the market place in her personal car. She is driving within the speed limit but, because she is in a hurry, she illegally overtakes another car and does not notice a pedestrian who is crossing the street. She brakes but still hits the pedestrian who is crossing the street. The pedestrian is taken to the hospital with a leg fracture.

After reading the stories, the participants answered, on a 10 point scale, questions, about how immoral the action committed by the driver was and what punishment he/she should receive (a fine, jail time or both).

Results

In order to determine whether the perceived similarity had an effect on the evaluation of immorality, we compared the high similarity group with the low similarity group. The results of the t test showed that the effect of the similarity on the moral evaluation was significant ($t(55) = 2.75, p = 0.008$); as expected, the participants from the high similarity group evaluated the actions of the driver as less immoral ($M = 5.33, SD = 2.35$) compared to the participants from the low similarity group, who evaluated the actions as being more immoral ($M = 7.14, SD = 2.40$).

The similarity manipulation had no significant effect on the fine which the participants considered that the driver should pay ($t(55) = 1.28, p = 0.207$). The participants from the high-similarity condition appreciated that the driver should pay similar amounts of money as the participants from the low-similarity group.

Also, there are no significant differences ($t(55) = 0.71, p = 0.711$) between the high and low similarity group with respect to the number of months the participants considered the agent should spend in jail.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the influence of a new factor that could bias evaluations of morality in a specific context. We investigated whether an increased perceived similarity between the agent and the participant could lead the latter to make more permissive evaluations of the agent's actions. We used a driving scenario, similar to the ones previously used by Baron and Hershey (1988), which described a driver who illegally overtook another car, hit a pedestrian crossing the street, and caused him/her a fracture. The driver was described as being either similar to the participant (same gender, age, and occupation) or dissimilar (different gender, age, and occupation).

The results show that the participants were indeed influenced by the perceived similarity between them and the agent: an increased similarity caused them to make more permissive evaluations of the driver's actions, even though the intentions and consequences were identical in both conditions. The same psychological factors that cause the participants to make defensive attributions – self-protective reasons (Robbennolt 2000), perceived probability (Tennen and Affleck 1991), and perception of others' behaviors (Finchman and Jaspars 1983) – can also explain why the participants made biased evaluations of morality.

It appears that the motivational theory (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Walster 1966) and the self-protective reasons (Robbennolt 2000), which explain the participants' tendency to make defensive attributions, can also explain the biased evaluation of morality. The participants who were

similar to the driver anticipate that they could find themselves in a similar situation in the future. When considering the deed as less immoral, they symbolically protect themselves from future blame. In other words, the similar participants were more motivated to use harm avoidance strategies (Shaver 1970), because they feel that there is a high probability that they themselves might illegally overtake in the future. Considering the deed as less immoral helps them to reduce the guilt they might feel in a similar situation.

Finchman and Jaspars' (1983) observation that the attribution of responsibility is influenced by the degree in which the participants estimate that other people would have acted in a similar manner also explains our results: the participants from the high-similarity group had a driver's license, which probably caused them to consider illegally overtaking as occurring more frequently than the participants from the low similarity condition, who did not have a driver's license and were obviously less exposed to this type of behavior. The participants from the high similarity condition, who witness the illegal behavior more frequently, tend to consider it as a less severe transgression. The perception that this behavior is a normal practice that most people do, even if it is illegal, makes the behavior seem excusable.

The previous explanation is also in accordance with Tennen and Afflecks' (1991) observation that unusual and peculiar situations cause a higher need to explain them, which in turn leads to defensive attributions. Because they don't have a driver's license, the participants from the low similarity group are less familiarized with driving practices and violations. They have probably considered the agent's behavior as more unusual, which in turn made them feel a higher need to explain it. One of the possible explanations is to attribute negative characteristics to the agent and to consider his/her behavior as wrong and immoral.

The perceived similarity did not cause a difference in the fine the participants thought was appropriate for the agent, probably because, as previous studies have shown, the amount of punitive damages depends primarily on the legal system and on the amount of harm done (Kadish Schulhofer and Steiker 2007).

In conclusion, the increased perceived similarity between the participants and the agent influences their moral evaluations, causing them to be more lenient. Increased perceived similarity seems to activate a desire to protect oneself from possible future blame: by excusing the driver, the participants from our study reduced the possibility to feel guilt in a similar situation. The participants from the high similarity condition had a driver's license and they are thus more exposed to illegal overtakes from other drivers than the participants from the low similarity condition who did not have a driver's license. The increased exposure to this

behavior caused them to consider the driver's actions as less blameworthy because they are a rather common practice.

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