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Failing to take the moral high ground: Psychopathy and the vertical representation of morality

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Abstract

Morality is explained in metaphors that use descriptions of verticality (e.g., “an upstanding citizen”). It is unknown, however, if these metaphors simply aid communication or indicate a deeper mode of knowledge representation. In two experiments, we sought to determine the extent to which verticality is used when encoding moral concepts. Furthermore, because psychopaths are characterized by a lack of moral concern, we believed this personality dimension could act as an important moderator. Experiment 1 established that people have implicit associations between morality and vertical space. Experiment 2 extended this finding by revealing that people low in psychopathy encoded moral-related (vs. immoral-related) concepts faster if they were presented in a high (vs. low) vertical position. This effect did not occur for participants high in psychopathy. Our results indicate that morality is partially represented on the vertical dimension, but not for individuals with little concern for morality.

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1. Introduction

Morality is an abstract concept used to describe behavior or beliefs that an individual considers to be right and moral (e.g., fairness) or wrong and immoral (e.g., intolerance; Haidt & Algoe, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). When discussing morality, people make use of metaphors that tap vertical space (i.e., moral is up; immoral is down). For example, a person who is moral might be described as “high minded” or “on the up and up,” whereas a person who is immoral might be described as “down and dirty” or “underhanded” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

One reason metaphors for morality use descriptions of vertical space is likely because morality is an abstract concept. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) and Gibbs (2006) contend that abstract thought is possible because of our capacity for metaphor representation. They believe that metaphors allow people to communicate and represent (i.e., to depict or make sense of) abstract concepts that would otherwise have no reference to physicality. In many contexts, we learn about what things are like through our senses. For example, cherries are red and taste sweet, whereas snowflakes are cold and make us wet. Morality is different in that it cannot be directly perceived through the senses. Thus, to appreciate the nature of morality, it makes sense that people use metaphors when describing it.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) further contend that human thought processes are structured on metaphors. The manner in which people encode, store, and retrieve information is grounded in metaphors. Thus, metaphors are not simply communication devices, but are used to represent concepts. That is, thinking about abstract concepts is not possible without activating or simulating the sensations and perceptions relevant to metaphor.

More generally, a number of researchers argue for an embodied mode of cognition. Proponents of this view contend that cognition, rather than being abstract and amodal, is inherently linked to sensation and perception (e.g., Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, & Krauth-Gruber, 2005). In this view, cognition is not a process that is separated from bodily states, but involves the simulation of modality-specific actions.

Meier and Robinson (2004) presented evidence for an embodied mode of cognition in the affective realm. They examined the metaphor that ties affect to verticality (i.e., good is up; bad is down). For example, good things are described as being up (e.g., “thumbs up” for a good movie) and bad things are described as being down (e.g., “thumbs down” for a bad movie). Meier and Robinson (2004) found that participants evaluated words with a positive meaning faster if they were presented in a high vertical position, whereas participants evaluated words with a negative meaning faster if they were presented in a low vertical position. Participants encoded the vertical location of the words even though it was unnecessary for the task. This research indicates that people partially represent affect on a vertical dimension. That is, when encoding good and bad stimuli, people simulate perceptions of vertical space. Thus, it appears that vertical space is a perceptual cue for affect. In the current context, we seek to determine if morality is similarly represented on this same vertical dimension.

1.1. Psychopathy and morality

In addition to examining morality and vertical space, a central purpose of the current project is to explore the role of individual differences. Little if any research has examined the extent to which

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