



The role of responsibility and fear of guilt in hypothesis-testing

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Abstract

Recent theories argue that both perceived responsibility and fear of guilt increase obsessive-like behaviours. We propose that hypothesis-testing might account for this effect. Both perceived responsibility and fear of guilt would influence subjects' hypothesis-testing, by inducing a *prudential* style. This style implies focusing on and confirming the worst hypothesis, and reiterating the testing process. In our experiment, we manipulated the responsibility and fear of guilt of 236 normal volunteers who executed a deductive task. The results show that perceived responsibility is the main factor that influenced individuals' hypothesis-testing. Fear of guilt has however a significant additive effect. Guilt-fearing participants preferred to carry on with the diagnostic process, even when faced with initial favourable evidence, whereas participants in the responsibility condition only did so when confronted with an unfavourable evidence. Implications for the understanding of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The idea that obsessions and compulsions are a consequence of undue scrupulousness and an exaggerated tendency towards feeling guilty is a longstanding one. Taylor (as cited in Insel, 1990), who first gave a medical description of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), indeed suggested that the disorder could depend on an overweening moral sense. Freud, when speaking of the “rat man”, attached considerable importance to guilt feelings in determining OCD, just as McFall and Wollersheim (1979), Rachman (e.g. 1993, 2002) and Salkovskis (e.g. 1985; Salkovskis & Forrester, 2002) stressed the importance of the sense of responsibility. Van Oppen and Arntz (1994) compared OCD to other anxiety disorders, depression, and resentment and concluded that OCD is characterized by fear of guilt. Moreover, Ladouceur et al. (1995) induced responsibility in non-clinical subjects by telling them that the errors they made during the experimental task would lead to harmful and undeserved outcomes. Experimental subjects displayed a greater number of hesitations and checks and reported more guilt feelings than control subjects. There thus exists a longstanding and important tradition of relating OCD to undue moral concerns.

In a previous paper (Mancini & Gangemi, 2004a) we argued that the mental state generating obsessive activity is not so much a sense of responsibility, but the fear of guilt of behaving irresponsibly, namely the fear that one’s behaviour may not be up to the level of one’s duties. In a previous study (Mancini, D’Olimpio, & Cieri, 2004) we also showed that inducing in normal subjects the responsibility for the outcome of a task implies that the subjects perform the task with greater uncertainty, checking and hesitations, etc. than normal non-responsible subjects. In other words, the responsible subjects perform the task in a more “obsessive-like” mode than non-responsible subjects. In the same study we also showed that the task is performed in an even more “obsessive-like” way by responsible subjects who are fearful of committing errors.

But what cognitive ingredients shape the mind of responsible persons and those who are fearful of feeling guilty for behaving irresponsibly?

For an agent to feel responsible the following ingredients must be active in his mind (Conte & Castelfranchi, 1995):

- he must assume a duty exists that prescribes a given outcome
- he must assume that this duty is incumbent upon him
- he must deem that fulfilling this duty is one of his goals
- he must assume that a causal link exists between an action/omission of him, even when only potentially present in his domain of competence, and the outcome. If he assumed the absence of a causal link he would no longer feel responsible, as “*ad impossibilia nemo tenetur*”
- he must assume he is free to act or to omit to act. If he were to assume he was prevented from acting or compelled to act or to omit, he would not feel responsible for the outcome. It should be noted that

“Sometimes we say that we really cannot do a certain action X. Actually we could do it materially, but we choose not to do it because the costs of doing X would be very high; that is, the costs would entail the thwarting of numerous other goals, or goals of greater importance than the discarded X” (Poggi, 1994).

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