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It's not what you do, but what everyone else does: On the role of descriptive norms and subjectivism in moral judgment

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ABSTRACT

How do people evaluate moral actions, by referencing objective rules or by appealing to subjective, descriptive norms of behavior? Five studies examined whether and how people incorporate subjective, descriptive norms of behavior into their moral evaluations and mental state inferences of an agent's actions. We used experimental norm manipulations (Studies 1–2, 4), cultural differences in tipping norms (Study 3), and behavioral economic games (Study 5). Across studies, people increased the magnitude of their moral judgments when an agent exceeded a descriptive norm and decreased the magnitude when an agent fell below a norm (Studies 1–4). Moreover, this differentiation was partially explained via perceptions of agents' desires (Studies 1–2); it emerged only when the agent was aware of the norm (Study 4); and it generalized to explain decisions of trust for real monetary stakes (Study 5). Together, these findings indicate that moral actions are evaluated in relation to what most other people do rather than solely in relation to morally objective rules.

1. Introduction

In 2008, the United States and the world entered one of the worst recessions since the 1930s. One of the principle causes for the recession (at least in the U.S.) was a pervasive pattern of financial firms misrepresenting the quality of struggling investments and then “betting” that the investments would fail. In the wake of the financial collapse, many members of the public were morally outraged at such widespread deception. At the same time, many in the financial industry defended the behavior as having unfortunate consequences in this case, but being commonplace in the industry and therefore permissible.

This mismatch in moral perception mirrors a longstanding debate in moral psychology and philosophy. In many cases people hold a common intuition that standards of moral behavior are objective. That is, actions can be considered right or wrong regardless of culture or what others may believe or do. In line with this view, some moral beliefs—for example, prohibitions against killing—are so strongly ingrained in human morality that people adjudge them as if they were facts (Goodwin & Darley, 2012; Theriault, Waytz, Heiphetz, & Young, 2016). Contrastingly, some theorists argue that morality is largely subjective—that actions can only be morally evaluated according to the standards of the agent's culture. Considerable research on moral

diversity supports this view, as many moral beliefs vary widely across, and even within, cultures (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987).

However, one limitation of most research on moral objectivism and subjectivism is that it often relies on cultural contrasts to derive evidence for either viewpoint (c.f., Goodwin & Darley, 2008). For example, Horvath and Giner-Sorolla (2007) demonstrate evidence for quasi-subjective moral judgment examining people's moral and legal judgments of extremely age-discrepant relationships (i.e., older men dating female minors). People exhibit strong moral and legal condemnation of these relationships, and specifically, of the senior partners in the relationship; however, this effect was moderated by whether both of the dating partners were from a country “where girls typically get married at 13”. In this case, people sharply discounted blame and were reluctant to recommend severe legal punishment.

Some recent research suggests that moral-subjectivism can be studied without appealing to cross cultural differences. Recent developmental research suggests that people start out as moral objectivists (Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003), but they begin to endorse more subjectivist views as they age (Heiphetz & Young, 2017). Similarly Goodwin and Darley (2008) demonstrated that adults typically view morality as occupying a middle position between objective, factual

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statements (e.g., the Earth is spherical) and subjective opinions.

More broadly, numerous accounts of moral judgment argue that human morality emerged to facilitate group functioning (Haidt, 2007; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2012; Rai & Fiske, 2011), and therefore propose that many moral rules correspond to localized prescriptions regarding how members of a group should treat each other (Baumeister, 2005; Chudek & Henrich, 2011; Greene, 2013). Indeed behavior is often judged as worthy of blame or praise based on community taboos (Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012), group values (Graham et al., 2011), and descriptive social norms (Sripada & Stich, 2006).

Thus, the present studies seek to examine whether people adopt moral-subjectivist patterns of judgment while holding culture constant. To test this possibility, we examine people's moral judgments of objectively negative and positive behaviors, but we vary the descriptive norms (i.e., what members of a community commonly do or believe) surrounding these behaviors. In this way, we examine whether descriptive norms are sufficient to explain moral-subjectivist patterns of judgment.

Several prominent perspectives imply that descriptive norms do not matter for people's moral judgments. Although the details of their accounts differ, many scholars suggest that moral judgments reflect considerations about actions themselves and about the consequences of actions (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Cushman, 2013; Greene, 2013). For example, in the widely studied trolley dilemma, participants consider the moral permissibility of diverting a trolley from its current track, where it will kill five workers, to a side track, where it will kill one worker (Foot, 1967; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). People can morally disapprove of a behavior because they perceive the act itself to be inherently wrong (i.e., a deontological judgment) or because they perceive that the act has negative consequences (i.e., a consequentialist judgment). Notably, neither type of judgment should be sensitive to descriptive norms. Deontological judgments track whether an action was good/bad, while consequentialist judgments track how good/bad the action's consequences were; neither judgment tracks how the action relates to other people's typical behavior.

However, recent research suggests that even these types of sacrificial moral dilemmas are susceptible to descriptive norms and conformity effects. Bostyn and Roets (2017) demonstrate that people's endorsement of deontological or consequentialist moral decisions is strongly influenced by descriptive norms, whereby they favor the response they believe is consistent with the majority's view. Kundu and Cummins (2013) show similar results using an Asch conformity paradigm; participants reversed their decisions regarding which behaviors were (im)permissible to match the descriptively normative response in the room.

Descriptive norms provide information about what is common or expected within a group (Pettit & Knobe, 2009; Uttich & Lombrozo, 2010), and recognizing that a person has violated a norm of conduct is a first important step in activating people's moral judgments (Hitchcock & Knobe, 2009; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). In fact, the emphasis on descriptive norms may reflect the process by which morality entered into human affairs. Tomasello (2016) proposed that morality began with dyadic concern and mutual obligation and only gradually superimposed cultural morals based on abstract principles on top of what he calls "second-person morality". Hence the basic mental structures for morality may have evolved initially to follow norms.

We therefore expect that descriptive norms will guide people's moral judgments, and we hypothesize two such pathways of influence. First, descriptive norms directly affect moral judgments by providing a behavioral standard that people use as a basis for judging a questionable act (Alicke, Rose, & Bloom, 2011; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). Second, descriptive norms affect moral judgments by revealing morally-relevant mental states (Guglielmo & Malle, 2010; Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002; Uttich & Lombrozo, 2010). Moral acts often provide diagnostic information about an agent's desires and

intentions, and these mental state inferences, in turn, guide moral judgments about the agent (see Reeder, Monroe, & Pryor, 2008).

Five experiments tested the hypotheses that descriptive norms influence moral judgments both directly and indirectly (via mental state ascriptions). Study 1 sought to show that social norms regarding both positive and negative behavior shape moral judgments and mental state ascriptions. Study 2 disentangled the extremity of the agent's behavior from its norm-violating status by holding the agent's behavior constant and manipulating the content of the social norm. Study 3 provided a conceptual replication of Study 2's findings by comparing similar behaviors in different contexts—specifically tipping in the USA and UK, in which normative expectations differ. Study 4 assessed a potential boundary condition under which social norms may no longer influence moral judgment: when an agent lacks knowledge of the social norm. Last, Study 5 employed a behavioral economics paradigm with real monetary stakes to examine how descriptive norms shape a behavioral correlate of moral decision-making—namely, people's willingness to trust an interaction partner.

For all studies, we report all of our manipulations and measures. Each study's sample size was determined prior to data collection, and data analyses were always conducted following the completion of data collection. Materials and data for the experiments are available via OSF: <https://osf.io/j5zyf/>.

2. Study 1

Study 1 tested two predictions. First, that social norms would guide moral judgments for both positive and negative behavior: In both cases, exceeding a norm should elicit the most severe moral judgments (praise and blame), and falling below a social norm should elicit the weakest judgments. Second, that inferences about the agent's desires would mediate the relationship between norm-adherence and moral judgment. This prediction follows from research indicating that people use situational information to make inferences about the minds of others (Monroe & Reeder, 2011; Reeder et al., 2002, 2008), and that these mental state inferences, in turn, shape moral evaluations (Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013; Inbar, Pizarro, & Cushman, 2012).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

We recruited 360 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (60 per condition). Sixteen participants were omitted from the analyses for failing to complete the study. Of the remaining participants, 61% were female. Average age in the sample was 32.8 years ($SD = 12.5$). All studies were approved by local IRBs. After data collection was complete, we conducted a sensitivity analysis with G*Power. The analysis showed that our sample size was sufficient to detect effect sizes of $\eta^2 = 0.028$ or larger with 80% power.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) \times 3 (norm condition: below, at, above) between-subjects design. They read a vignette that described an agent who performed either a morally positive behavior (donating to charity) or a morally negative behavior (cheating on his taxes), the magnitude of which differed relative to a known social norm.

2.1.2. Morally positive condition

John Smith lives in one of the 50 U.S. States. One morning, John sits down at his kitchen table to do his monthly paperwork. He notices a reminder about the upcoming charity drive.

John knows that most people donate about \$4000 of their pay to charity. John donates [\$1000/\$4000/\$7000] to charity.

2.1.3. Morally negative condition

John Smith lives in one of the 50 U.S. States. One morning, John sits down at his kitchen table to do his monthly paperwork. He notices a

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