



Identification, situational constraint, and social cognition: Studies in the attribution of moral responsibility

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Abstract

In three experiments we studied lay observers' attributions of responsibility for an antisocial act (homicide). We systematically varied both the degree to which the action was coerced by external circumstances and the degree to which the actor endorsed and accepted ownership of the act, a psychological state that philosophers have termed "identification." Our findings with respect to identification were highly consistent. The more an actor was identified with an action, the more likely observers were to assign responsibility to the actor, even when the action was performed under constraints so powerful that no other behavioral option was available. Our findings indicate that social cognition involving assignment of responsibility for an action is a more complex process than previous research has indicated. It would appear that laypersons' judgments of moral responsibility may, in some circumstances, accord with philosophical views in which freedom and determinism are regarded to be compatible.

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1. Introduction

The ascription of moral responsibility is ubiquitous in both everyday social interaction and institutionalized social practices. The ways in which people understand and assign responsibility have been of great interest to psychologists and cognitive scientists studying social cognition and the attribution of responsibility, as well as to philosophers working in ethical theory. However, the folk theories that social perceivers employ in ascribing responsibility remain incompletely understood.

Empirical research on folk theories addressing the assignment of responsibility has its basis in attribution theory. Jones & Davis (1965) developed their theory of “correspondent inference” to articulate the conditions under which the observer of another person’s actions would believe that those actions “corresponded” with or were indicative of the actor’s underlying intentions, attitudes, or traits. They suggested that observers make correspondent inferences only after concluding that an actor is free to choose to perform the observed act, versus being constrained to do so by external factors. Kelley’s (1972) “discounting principle” expresses the same conclusion. It maintains that attributions regarding characteristics of an actor, based on observations of that actor’s behavior, are made only when the observed behavior is thought to be unconstrained. Conversely, in cases where an act is performed under extreme constraint, inferences about characteristics of the actor are expected to be “discounted.”

The empirical research, however, has shown that observers sometimes fail to discount the informational value of behavior that is compelled or coerced. In a long run of “no choice” experiments associated with Jones (1990), participants made correspondent inferences (attributed characteristics to the actor) even when it appeared to be obvious that the actions they observed were produced by strong and visible external constraints. In subsequent research, this tendency toward “overattribution” (Quattrone, 1982) has been demonstrated for a wide variety of attitudes and traits, leading Ross (1977) to coin the now famous “fundamental attribution error” term to describe this effect (cf. Darley & Cooper, 1998; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones, 1990; Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

Recent work (e.g., Malle, 1999; McClure, 1998) has complicated the picture somewhat and has suggested that the person/situation dichotomy of causes, upon which much attribution research is predicated, is an overly simplistic framing of ordinary persons’ thinking, and recent empirical studies indicate that overattribution may be less pervasive than suggested by early demonstrations of the “fundamental attribution error” (Fein, Hilton, & Miller, 1990; Hilton, Fein, & Miller, 1993; see Gilbert & Malone, 1995, for discussion). Although this recent research suggests important qualifications regarding the nature and extent of overattribution, the cumulative weight of evidence indicates that when behavior is constrained, perceivers regularly attribute more influence to characteristics of the person, as opposed to properties of the situation, than the discounting principle would predict.

According to various psychological theories (Darley & Shultz, 1990; Shaver, 1985; Shultz & Schleifer, 1983), the personal characteristic of actors that most influences observers’ attributions is the actor’s perceived *causal role* in an outcome. Some of the more recent psychological accounts of responsibility attribution emphasize the extent to which a given outcome is in the actor’s “control” and is intentionally brought about

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