Moral Spillover: Understanding Biases in the Judgment of Moral Trajectories

Russell Ackoff Doctoral Fellowship, 2011 Application

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Judgment and decision making experiments have recently flourished in the burgeoning field of moral psychology, as evidenced by the increasing amount of research that applies normative models to moral choices. The result is consistent evidence indicating ways in which factors such as omissions and luck often color moral beliefs and attitudes in ways which deviate from a normative model. Both within the JDM model and moral psychology at large, a great deal has been discovered about moral judgments relating to discrete actions — e.g. what sorts of actions are seen as good, bad, right, wrong, permissible or impermissible. Typically, studies have focused on judgments that people make of behaviors in tightly-circumscribed contexts. Therefore, while a great deal has been learned about moral actions, moral trajectories have largely been ignored. However, in the real world, moral judgments are rarely made in a vacuum. Our judgments are colored by what comes before them and shade what follows them. Thus, understanding moral judgments within the greater context of moral trajectories is of enormous importance in understanding the complex world of moral judgment and choice. The present project aims to understand the specific factors of moral trajectories that lead to changes in discrete moral judgments.

One difficulty with moral trajectories within the JDM framework is that it is difficult to specify a normative model. However, both our own prior work and work on moral licensing (e.g. Effron & Monin, 2010) has indicated that past moral actions influence wrongness judgments of current actions. This spill-over effect allows us to understand the impact of moral trajectories on moral judgments. In our own work, we have found that descriptions of a person's behavior can create an impression of character, and this impression spills over to judgments of that person's behavior in another situation — even when the two situations are quite different. For example, when a person is described as having previously committed an immoral act (e.g., kicked a dog), a subsequent immoral action (e.g., tax cheating) by the same individual is rated as significantly more immoral than the same act by someone who did not commit a previous immoral act. Conversely, when an individual previously committed a moral act (e.g., adopting a stray dog), a subsequent immoral action by the same individual is rated as significantly less immoral than an individual who did not commit a moral act. In this work, we explicitly describe the actor's intentions for the second action, and yet the difference remains robust. In the studies done so far, we have presented the character vignette (e.g. kicking a dog) at the top of the page, followed by the behavior description (e.g. tax cheating) on the same page. This allows us to examine many spill-over effects in one study, in a within-subject design. We can thus examine individual differences in the structure of character. By counterbalancing order across subjects, we can also test between subject effects for the first presentations of each item (e.g., the same behavior preceded by good or bad character vignettes).

We are further able to use differences in judgments of the same action to understand the extent to which prior misdeeds change judgments of current actions. This method allows us to examine the phenomenon in two distinct ways. We can examine both the properties underpinning the distortion and properties which
make actions immune from distortions. In the present project, we are specifically interested in understanding the bias driving the spill-over effect. Currently, it is unclear what differs between the two identically described actions, and thus what is being learned or carried over between the two actions also remains unclear. The bias could be due to a number of potential factors. We seek to examine the mechanism through varying the content of the first action and thus changing what the subject can learn through the first action. Through using established biases in moral psychology, such as outcome bias, we can systematically rule out various explanations of what may be occurring and influencing the biases. For example, in the outcome bias scenario, the intentions, goals and action of actor are the same; however, due to chance, the outcome is different. We systematically vary each of these factors to understand what is contributing the biased judgments. Specifically, we aim to understand what type of prior information "spills over" into subsequent moral judgments.

Time Table

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Bias and/or paper</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 1: valence</td>
<td>Does the valence of prior information change subsequent moral judgments?</td>
<td>Halo effect (e.g. Asch, 1946)</td>
<td>IV - Whether 1st act is (positive and negative) x (moral or non-moral information)</td>
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<td>Study 2: omission bias</td>
<td>Does the way in which an immoral action is committed influence subsequent moral judgments?</td>
<td>Omission bias (e.g. Spranca Minsk &amp; Baron, 1991)</td>
<td>IV - Whether 1st act is an omission / omission DV - wrongness of 2nd act</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study 3: outcome bias</td>
<td>Does the outcome of immoral action influence subsequent moral judgments?</td>
<td>Outcome bias (e.g. Baron &amp; Hershey, 1988)</td>
<td>IV - Whether 1st act is has a bad or neutral outcome DV - wrongness of 2nd act</td>
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<td>Study 4: goals</td>
<td>Do the actor’s goals behind an immoral action influence subsequent moral judgments?</td>
<td>Identification (Woolfolk, Doris, &amp; Darley, 2006)</td>
<td>IV - Degree to which actor identifies with the action DV - wrongness of 2nd act</td>
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<td>Study 5: emotions</td>
<td>Do the actor’s emotions associated with their immoral action influence subsequent moral judgments?</td>
<td>Metadesires (Pizarro, Uhlmann, &amp; Salovey, 2003)</td>
<td>IV - Emotions felt while committing first act (guilt, nothing, content) DV - wrongness of 2nd act</td>
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The generous financial support which I am seeking will be used for two purposes with regard to this research project: (1) to fund data collection; and (2) to share the results of my research at a conference.
Data will be collected in series of experiments online using a representative panel. The data obtained through this panel will be of higher quality, allowing for more appropriate and rigorous tests of hypotheses and increasing the generalizability of any findings. However, the panel can be expensive to use. A conservative estimate is approximately $5 a subject. Assuming 100 subjects (including pilot work) a study, for each of the five studies, the total cost in subjects is $2500.

In addition, I anticipate that this research may be of interest to both the JDM community and the psychology community. I hope to present my results at SJDM. The Psychology Department limits graduate student travel funds to $300 annually, and thus any incurred expenses that the Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship does not cover will thus be paid out of pocket. I therefore am asking for an addition $400 dollars to help defray expenses. The total cost of proposal is $2900.

If you have any questions, or if there is any further information I can provide, please do not hesitate to call or email me. I greatly appreciate any support the Ackoff Fellowship can provide. Thank you for your consideration.

References


