

Acts, Persons, and Intuitions: Person-Centered Cues and
Gut Reactions to Harmless Transgressions

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Abstract

Negative gut reactions to harmless-but-offensive transgressions can be driven by inferences about the moral character of the agent more so than condemnation of the act itself. Dissociations between moral judgments of acts and persons emerged, such that participants viewed a harmless-but-offensive transgression to be a less immoral act than a harmful act, yet more indicative of poor moral character. Participants were more likely to become “morally dumbfounded” when asked to justify their judgments of a harmless-but-offensive act relative to a harmful act. However, they were significantly *less* likely to become morally dumbfounded when asked to justify character judgments of persons who engaged in the harmless-but-offensive transgression, an effect based in part on the information-rich nature of such behaviors. Distinguishing between evaluations of acts and persons helps account for both moral outrage over harmless transgressions and when individuals are (and are not) at a loss to explain their own judgments.

Keywords: Person-centered moral judgments; moral intuitions; social intuitionist model; moral dumbfounding; informational value; act-person dissociations

Moral evaluations occur intuitively and automatically, in some cases so much so that individuals are left at a loss to provide logical justifications for their own judgments (Haidt, 2001, 2007). Such intuitions often reflect values other than not causing material harm, among these treating others fairly, exhibiting loyalty to ingroups, respecting authority, and maintaining physical and religious purity (Graham et al. 2011; Rozin et al., 1999). For example, many people have negative gut reactions to purity violations such as having sexual intercourse with a chicken carcass or eating a dead dog, yet have great difficulty articulating the reasons why (i.e., they become “morally dumbfounded” when pressed to justify their evaluations; Haidt, Bjorklund, & Murphy, 2011; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). Haidt and his colleagues propose a *social intuitionist* account of such judgments in which reasoning largely serves to construct post-hoc rationalizations for moral intuitions.

The present research seeks to better understand both gut reactions to harmless transgressions and moral dumbfounding effects by drawing on the theoretical distinction between act-centered and person-centered moral judgments (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011) and research on the informational value of social behaviors (Nelson, 2005; Nelson et al., 2010). In addition to assessing whether an act is permissible or not, people use behaviors as a source of information about the person who carried them out. The character information signaled by a behavior therefore serves as an additional factor in reactions to moral transgressions, over and above evaluations of the act itself. Theory and evidence suggest that act-centered judgments are relatively more likely than person-centered judgments to focus on the degree of harm caused. Person-centered judgments, in contrast, tend to focus on whether the behavior reflects the presence or absence of desirable traits (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011; Uhlmann, Zhu, & Tannenbaum, 2013). It is important to emphasize that

differences in the contributing factors to moral judgments of acts and persons are relative rather than absolute. The harm caused by an act of course leads to moral condemnation of both the act and the person who carried it out. But given that the harm caused is a property of the act, harmful consequences should play a *comparatively* greater role in evaluations of the act than of the agent. In contrast, informativeness about underlying character speaks to properties of the person, and informational value should therefore track person judgments *relatively* more closely than act judgments.

A key prediction made by the person-centered approach to moral judgment is that some acts suggest poor character to a relatively greater extent than they are condemned as immoral in-and-of themselves. In other words, moral evaluations of an act and the person who carries out the act can be dissociated from one another. Consistent with this idea, Tannenbaum et al. (2011) found that participants viewed aggression directed at a woman as more blameworthy than aggression directed at her cat. However, aggression toward the cat was perceived as a clearer signal the agent lacked empathy for others. In addition, Uhlmann, Zhu, and Tannenbaum (2013) show that the act of sacrificing one life to save many more lives, even when perceived as the morally necessary course of action, can lead to negative aspersions about the agent's moral character. The present studies further demonstrate the existence of act-person dissociations by showing moral judgments of acts can be dissociated from moral judgments of the person who carries them out. In doing so, they provide additional evidence for the person-centered approach to moral judgment.

We propose that part of the reason for strong gut reactions to the transgressions examined in social intuitionist studies is that they provide more diagnostic information about the personal character of the agent than do most harmful acts. Prototypical harm violations such as stealing

often have a plausible external cause (e.g., economic need). In contrast, highly unusual behaviors with no clear external motivator, such as sexual intercourse with a chicken carcass, are more likely driven by factors internal to the person and hence higher in informational value (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989; Fiske, 1980; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Snyder et al., 1979). When moral transgressions are high in informational value due to a lack of ambiguity about the underlying motive, social perceivers may find it difficult to even imagine socially acceptable reasons for the behavior. Acts such as sex with a dead chicken therefore speak unambiguously to underlying traits and are viewed as highly diagnostic of personal character. This leads to the prediction that act-person dissociations can emerge in this context, such that participants view a harmless-but-offensive act to be less immoral than a similar act that causes concrete harm, yet as a clearer indicator of poor moral character.

Distinguishing judgments of acts and persons and directly assessing perceived informational value may also shed new light on moral dumbfounding effects. Prior studies finding greater dumbfounding in response to harmless-but-offensive acts than harmful acts have only examined moral judgments of the acts themselves (Haidt et al., 1993, 2011; Haidt & Hersh, 2001). People can be left at a loss to justify negative gut reactions to harmless acts because they are difficult to defend based on “rational” quantitative metrics (e.g., the degree of monetary damage or physical harm caused by the act). In contrast, people do have logical reasons for drawing strong character inferences based on acts like having sex with a chicken carcass or eating a dead dog. Such behaviors are low in attributional ambiguity (Snyder et al., 1979), statistically rare (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989), and therefore high in informational value (Nelson, 2005) regarding personal character. Given this clear rational basis for drawing strong character attributions, individuals may in some cases actually be *less* subjectively dumbfounded by their

evaluations of a person who commits a harmless-but-offensive transgression relative to a harmful transgression. Thus, the typical moral dumbfounding pattern obtained with act judgments may in certain instances reverse for person judgments.

Study 1

Study 1 provides an initial test of our hypothesis that harmless-but-offensive acts can be seen as less immoral in-and-of-themselves than harmful acts, yet as clearer indicators of poor moral character. Drawing on prior social intuitionist research (Haidt et al., 1993), the focal harmless-but-offensive act was masturbating into a dead chicken before cooking and eating it. To minimize idiosyncratic differences between the scenarios, the comparison harmful act was stealing a dead chicken from the supermarket.

Method

Ninety-one American adults (58% female; $M_{age}=34$, range=18-68) were recruited from Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk service. Each participant read two scenarios describing male targets. In the *harmless-but-offensive transgression scenario*, adapted from Haidt et al. (1993), a man bought a dead chicken at the supermarket then masturbated into the chicken before cooking and eating it. In the *harmful transgression scenario*, a man stole a dead chicken from the supermarket. The names Walter and Frank were employed for the two targets based on prior work identifying them as similar in intelligence, age, and other connotations (Kasof, 1993).

Next, participants were randomly assigned between subjects to evaluate either whose act was more immoral ($1=definitely\ Walter's\ act$, $7=definitely\ Frank's\ act$) or who had worse moral character ($1=definitely\ Walter$, $7=definitely\ Frank$). Responses were coded such that lower scores reflected negative reactions towards stealing a chicken, and higher scores reflected negative reactions towards sexual intercourse with a chicken.

In all four studies participants further reported demographic information including their age, gender, education level, political orientation ($1=extremely\ liberal, 7=extremely\ conservative$), and religiosity ($1=not\ at\ all\ religious, 7=extremely\ religious$), which did not moderate the reported effects.

Results and Discussion

Confirming the expected pattern of act-person dissociation, a between-subjects t-test indicated that moral judgments differed reliably between the act evaluation condition and the character evaluation condition, $t(89)=4.08, p<.001$. Follow-up one-sample t-tests using the scale midpoint of four as the test value (since participants made comparative judgments of the targets) indicated that the act of having sex with a chicken was seen as a less immoral act than stealing a chicken ($M=3.29, SD=2.18$), $t(41)=2.13, p=.04$. However, the man who had sex with a chicken was seen as having *worse* moral character than the man who stole it ($M=5.10, SD=2.06$), $t(48)=3.74, p<.001$. Thus, the predicted act-person dissociation emerged with regard to moral judgments of harmful and harmless transgressions. Although having sexual intercourse with a dead chicken was seen as a less immoral act than stealing a dead chicken, sex with the chicken was perceived as a clearer indicator of poor moral character.

Study 2a

A significant limitation of Study 1 is that participants made comparative judgments of the harmful and harmless transgression. In other words, moral judgments were elicited under conditions of joint rather than separate evaluation (Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, & Bazerman, 1999). Joint evaluation promotes the use of extensional reasoning and explicit comparisons, and can elicit different judgments than separate evaluation (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Greenwald, 1976). Studies 2a and 2b therefore sought to obtain evidence of dissociated moral judgments of

acts and persons when participants evaluated *either* the harmful *or* harmless transgression. Following prior social intuitionist research, the focal harmless-but-offensive act was eating a dead dog that had been hit by an automobile (Haidt et al., 1993; Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008). We expected that eating a dog would be seen as a less immoral act than stealing, but that eating the dog would be perceived as more informative of poor character.

Method

Ninety-eight American adults (54% female; $M_{\text{age}}=33$, range=18-61) were recruited from Mechanical Turk. The study employed a 2 (harmful transgression vs. harmless-but-offensive transgression) x 2 (act evaluation vs. character evaluation) between subjects design.

Participants were randomly assigned between subjects to read one of two scenarios. In the *harmless-but-offensive transgression condition*, the scenario described a man who cooked and ate a dog that was killed by a truck. In the *harmful transgression condition*, the man stole a package of dried beef that fell off a supermarket delivery truck rather than return it.

Participants were further randomly assigned between subjects to provide either act evaluations or character evaluations. In the *act evaluation condition*, they were asked “Is this behavior morally wrong?” ($1=\text{definitely not}$, $7=\text{definitely yes}$). In the *character evaluation condition* they were asked “Does this person have poor moral character?” ($1=\text{definitely not}$, $7=\text{definitely yes}$).

Results and Discussion

Confirming the hypothesized act-person dissociation, a significant interaction emerged between transgression type (harmful or harmless) and whether the target was evaluated based on his actions or moral character, $F(1,93)=4.35$, $p=.04$. The act of eating a dead dog was seen as if

anything less wrong than the act of stealing a package of dried beef ($M_s=3.72$ and 4.13 , $SD_s=1.79$ and 1.69), although this difference did not approach statistical significance, $t < 1$. However, the target who ate a dead dog was seen as a significantly worse person than the target who stole ($M_s=4.70$ and 3.55 , $SD_s=1.75$ and 1.99), $t(47)=2.08$, $p=.04$.

Thus, Study 2a replicated the pattern of moral judgments observed in Study 1 under conditions of separate rather than joint evaluation, suggesting such act-person dissociations are robust to different elicitation procedures. Although the difference was not statistically significant, participants felt that eating a dead dog that had been killed by an automobile was if anything a less immoral act than stealing. But at the same time, eating a dead dog was associated with significantly more negative person judgments.

Study 2b

A notable shortcoming of Study 2a is that while the harmless transgression (eating a dead dog) was an act of commission, the harmful transgression (choosing to take a package of meat that fell off a delivery truck rather than return it) could be construed as an act of omission. To address this potential alternative explanation, we conducted a similar study in which the target person either ate a dead dog that had been hit by a truck or actively stole a frozen steak out of a truck that had been left unlocked on the street.

Method

Seventy-four American adults (39% female; $M_{age}=31$, range=18-70) were recruited for the study from Mechanical Turk. The same design and materials were used as in Study 2a, except that the harmless transgression was stealing a steak out of an unlocked truck.

Results and Discussion

An act-person dissociation again emerged, $F(1,70)=5.27$, $p=.03$. Stealing meat was associated with nonsignificantly more condemnation of the act itself than of the person who carried it out ($M_s=6.11$ and 5.63 , $SD_s=1.49$ and 1.57), $t < 1$. In contrast, eating a dog led to significantly *less* condemnation of the act than of the person ($M_s=3.61$ and 5.00 , $SD_s=1.98$ and 1.92), $t(35)=2.17$, $p=.04$. Importantly, both the harmless and harmful transgressions in this investigation were acts of commission, ruling out the aforementioned alternative explanation for the results of Study 2a.

Study 3

Our final study sought to distinguish moral dumbfounding based on evaluations of actions and of persons. We expected to replicate the social intuitionist finding that people are more likely to find themselves at a loss to explain their moral judgments of harmless acts than harmful acts (Haidt et al., 1993, 2011). However, we further hypothesized that this moral dumbfounding effect would reverse with regards to evaluations of moral character. Because their low attributional ambiguity (Snyder et al., 1979), statistical rarity (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989), and high informational value (Nelson, 2005) provides a logical, defensible basis for strong character inferences, individuals should not feel dumbfounded by their person judgments based on harmless-but-offensive transgressions.

Method

One hundred American adults (53% female; $M_{age}=37$, range=18-79) were recruited from Mechanical Turk. The study employed a 2 (harmful transgression vs. harmless-but-offensive transgression) x 2 (act evaluation vs. character evaluation) between subjects design.

Participants were randomly assigned between subjects to read one of the two scenarios employed in Study 1. In the *harmless-but-offensive transgression condition*, the scenario described a man who masturbated into a dead chicken before cooking and eating it. In the *harmful transgression condition*, the man stole a dead chicken from the supermarket.

Participants were further randomly assigned between subjects to provide either act evaluations or character evaluations. In the *act evaluation condition*, they were asked “Is this behavior morally wrong?” ($1 = \text{definitely not}$, $7 = \text{definitely yes}$). In the *character evaluation condition* they were asked “Does this person have poor moral character?” ($1 = \text{definitely not}$, $7 = \text{definitely yes}$). To further assess a subjective sense of feeling morally dumbfounded regarding one’s act judgments, participants in the act evaluation condition responded to the item “I can’t explain why I feel this behavior is morally wrong or not” ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}$, $7 = \text{strongly agree}$). For participants in the character evaluation condition, the moral dumbfounding item read “I can’t explain why I feel this individual is a bad person or not” ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}$, $7 = \text{strongly agree}$). Following past research (Tannenbaum et al., 2011), all participants then rated the informational value of the target’s actions based on what the behavior “revealed about who he really is and what he really is like” ($1 = \text{nothing}$, $11 = \text{a great deal}$).

Results

Moral judgments. The hypothesized act-person dissociation emerged. There was a significant interaction between whether the target engaged in a harmful or harmless transgression and whether he was evaluated based on his actions or moral character, $F(1,96) = 14.80$, $p < .001$. The act of having sex with a dead chicken was seen as less wrong than the act of stealing a dead chicken ($M_s = 4.78$ and 6.11 , $SD_s = 2.29$ and 1.09), $t(52) = 2.73$, $p = .009$. However, the target who

had sex with a dead chicken was seen as having *worse* moral character than the target who stole ($M_s=5.91$ and 4.70 , $SD_s=1.38$ and 1.55), $t(44)=2.81$, $p=.007$.

Moral dumbfounding. A significant interaction between transgression type and act vs. character evaluations likewise emerged with regards to moral dumbfounding, $F(1,96)=14.28$, $p<.001$. Consistent with prior work (Haidt et al., 1993), participants were more dumbfounded regarding whether having sex with a dead chicken was an immoral act than regarding whether stealing a dead chicken was an immoral act ($M_s=3.44$ and 1.93 , $SD_s=2.06$ and 1.17), $t(52)=3.32$, $p=.002$. As hypothesized, however, this pattern reversed for character judgments. Participants were significantly *less* dumbfounded when it came to explaining whether someone who had sex with a dead chicken was a bad person than when it came to explaining whether a thief was a bad person ($M_s=2.48$ and 3.52 , $SD_s=1.56$ and 1.83), $t(44)=2.08$, $p<.05$.

Informational value. A 2 (transgression type) x 2 (act vs. character evaluation) ANOVA using informational value as the outcome measure revealed only the expected main effect of type of transgression, $F(1,94)=7.12$, $p=.009$. Having sex with a dead chicken was seen as more informative about moral character than stealing a dead chicken ($M_s=8.06$ and 6.57 , $SD_s=2.93$ and 2.94).

The intercorrelations between perceived informational value and moral dumbfounding within each experimental condition shed further light on why participants were less dumbfounded when asked to judge the moral character of the target who engaged in the harmless transgression. Specifically, the more they saw his behavior as informative of moral character, the less dumbfounded participants felt regarding their character judgments of a man who had sexual intercourse with a dead chicken, $r(21)= -.48$, $p=.02$. In the other three conditions, there was no significant correlation between perceived informational value and moral dumbfounding. In the

condition in which the transgression was harmless and acts were evaluated this correlation was $r(26)=.31, p=.11$, in the condition in which the transgression was harmful and character was evaluated $r(21)= -.02, p=.93$, and in the condition in which the transgression was harmful and acts evaluated $r(26)=.16, p=.42$. These results suggest participants felt less dumbfounded when making character judgments based on the harmless-but-offensive transgression to the extent they viewed it as rich in information regarding moral character.

In contrast, perceived informational value predicted greater moral condemnation fairly consistently across the four conditions ($r=.72, p<.001$ for character judgments of a man who had sex with a dead chicken; $r=.70, p<.001$ for judgments of the act of having sex with a dead chicken; $r=.29, p=.19$ for character judgments of a man who stole a dead chicken; $r=.39, p=.04$, for judgments of the act of stealing a dead chicken). In addition, collapsing across the type of transgression, informational value was an equally effective predictor of act judgments and person judgments ($r_s= .51$ and $.56$, both $p_s<.001$). This was inconsistent with our expectation that informational value would correlate more strongly with character evaluations than act evaluations. However, these null results at a correlational level do not obscure the fact that (as hypothesized) the harmless-but-offensive transgression was perceived as more informative of moral character than the harmful transgression at a mean level.

In sum, Study 3 replicated the pattern of act-person dissociation found in our first three studies with regard to moral evaluations. This investigation further suggests that making judgments of acts vs. persons can moderate moral dumbfounding effects. As in past research, moral dumbfounding was more likely to be observed when participants were asked to explain their evaluations of harmless-but-offensive acts relative to harmful acts (Haidt et al., 1993, 2011). However, participants were actually *less* likely to become morally dumbfounded when asked to

explain character judgments based on harmless-but-offensive transgressions, an effect based in part on the information-rich nature of such behaviors.

General Discussion

The present studies shed novel theoretical and empirical light on the gut reactions to harmless transgressions and moral dumbfounding effects made famous in social intuitionist research (Haidt et al., 1993, 2011). At the same time, they provide empirical tests of key theoretical predictions derived from the person-centered approach to moral judgment (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). As hypothesized, outrage over harmless-but-offensive transgressions was more strongly reflected in inferences about the moral character of the agent than in condemnation of the act itself.

As in prior social intuitionist research (Haidt et al., 1993, 2011), participants were more likely to find themselves at a loss when asked to justify their judgments of the harmless-but-offensive act relative to the harmful act (Study 3). People can find themselves unable to explain negative gut reactions to purity violations like sex with a dead chicken because they are difficult to defend based on rational metrics. In contrast, however, participants were significantly *less* likely to become morally dumbfounded when asked to justify character judgments of persons who engaged in the harmless-but-offensive act. This may occur because the low attributional ambiguity (Snyder et al., 1979), statistical rarity (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989), and consequently high informational value (Nelson, 2005) of a behavior like having sex with a dead chicken provides a logical basis for drawing strong character inferences.

Implications for Social Intuitionism

The first published demonstration of an act-person dissociation found that although violence toward a human was viewed as a more blameworthy act than violence toward a cat, the

latter was viewed as more revealing of poor moral character (Tannenbaum et al., 2011). Notably this “cat-beater” effect compares different types of harmful acts that are differentially informative about moral character. In contrast, the present studies compare act and person judgments across moral domains (harm violations vs. purity violations) and thus speak to the social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001) and moral foundations theory (Graham et al. 2011).

As originally formulated, the social intuitionist model does not distinguish between evaluations of acts and character. Indeed, Haidt (2001, p. 817) defined moral judgments as “evaluations (good versus bad) of the *actions or character* of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues held by a culture or subculture to be obligatory” [emphasis added].

Theoretically integrating the social intuitionist model and the person centered approach to moral judgment suggests that part of the reason why people have strong gut reactions to harmless transgressions like sex with a dead chicken is that they are automatically drawing negative inferences about the agent’s moral character. A tendency to focus on questions of character rather than just a permissibility of acts may help explain why moral condemnation so often emerges in the absence of any concrete harm.

Our findings further contribute to research on social intuitionism by helping to identify when different moral intuitions are likely to have the strongest influence on moral evaluations. Moral foundations theory, a theoretical extension of the social intuitionist model, proposes five basic categories of moral concerns: harm, fairness, ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, and purity (Graham et al., 2011). Prior work identifies a relevant individual-differences moderator in the form of a conservative vs. liberal political orientation. Political liberals appear to primarily emphasize harm and fairness concerns in their judgments, while conservatives emphasize all five foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). The present studies contribute the further insight that

what type of moral intuition prevails is due not only to the characteristics of the social perceiver, but also the type of judgment in question. Specifically, moral intuitions based in values other than harm may affect person judgments comparatively more strongly than act judgments.

Future research should examine whether act-persons dissociations also emerge when examining harmless transgressions of other key intuitive values identified by moral foundations theory, such as group loyalties and respect for authority. In general, we expect harmful consequences to more heavily influence act judgments than person judgments, with transgressions based on ethics other than harm more heavily impacting person judgments to the extent they are informative of character. This could lead to act-person dissociations when comparing harm violations not only with purity violations, but also disloyal and disrespectful behaviors.

Implications for Moral Dumbfounding Effects

Our findings shed fresh empirical and theoretical light on moral dumbfounding, identifying a previously unconsidered moderator of such effects in the form of whether acts or persons are being evaluated. This is noteworthy in part because prior empirical work on social intuitionism and moral dumbfounding has, like most other moral judgment research, focused on evaluations of acts. For example, in their moral interviews with participants, Haidt et al. (1993)'s asked participants "What do you think about this? Is it very wrong, a little wrong, or is it perfectly OK for [act specified]?" (p. 617), and participants were subsequently probed for their justifications for their judgments. Therefore our results in no way undercut the original interpretation of moral dumbfounding, which is that people are unable to logically justify (even in a post hoc manner) condemnation of *acts* such a sex with a dead chicken and eating a dead dog (Haidt et al., 1993, 2011). Indeed, in the present research we replicate dumbfounding

regarding moral judgments of harmless-but-offensive acts using a very different methodological approach, which attests to the replicability and robustness of this phenomenon.

At the same time, we extend our investigation to further consider moral evaluations of the agent's character. We predict and find that because of the unambiguous and highly diagnostic nature of some harmless-but-offensive acts regarding underlying traits, people do not feel particularly dumbfounded about their associated character judgments. Although our research helps clarify the scope of the moral dumbfounding phenomenon, it of course does not fully explain it, and more studies are needed to better understand when and why people can be left at a loss to explain their own moral judgments.

Importantly, that individuals are not always dumbfounded by their person-centered judgments in no way undercuts the “affective primacy” thesis that moral evaluations are typically intuitive and emotional in nature (Haidt, 2001). Indeed, person centered moral judgments may help explain *why* this is so, as character evaluations have already been demonstrated to be highly intuitive and automatic (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Fiske et al., 2007; Todorov, Said, Engell, & Oosterhof, 2008; Willis & Todorov, 2006).

Limitations and Future Directions

The present research possessed significant limitations that point to exciting future directions for research on the role of person-centered moral judgments in social intuitionist effects. We chose to focus on the “chicken” and “dead dog” scenarios, two of the most famous and memorable harmless-but-offensive transgressions from research on the social intuitionist model (Haidt et al., 1993, 2011). To increase experimental control, these were compared to harmful acts that were as similar as possible (e.g., stealing rather than having sex with a dead chicken). However, an important avenue for future research is to assess the generalizability of

the present findings by examining moral evaluations of acts and persons across a broader array of transgressions. To this end, some of our more recent research demonstrates act-person dissociations in the context of acts of racial bigotry that, while offensive, do not cause direct physical harm. For example, we find that the use of a racial slur and defacing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. are seen as less immoral acts than physical assault and auto theft, yet as stronger signals of poor moral character (Uhlmann, Zhu, & Diermeier, 2013).

Another interesting question is whether person centered moral judgments are ultimately concerned with acts, in that they are made with the broader goal of anticipating the target person's future behaviors. Indeed, a functionalist account suggests that a focus on the underlying traits of those around us may stem from the social dilemmas human beings faced in ancestral environments. When one's survival depends on the behaviors of those around us, a fundamental question is whether a given person can be trusted to cooperate rather than defect in collective endeavors (Baumard, André, & Sperber, 2013; Gintis, Henrich, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2008; Miller, 2007). Accordingly, moral judgments may be aimed at determining who has desirable traits that can be used to anticipate desirable future behaviors. An agent who engages in socially aberrant acts such as having sex with a chicken carcass may send the signal they are unreliable and even a danger to others. One way to test this idea empirically would be to see if negative person judgments mediate the effects of harmless transgressions on predictions about whether the individual will engage in future harmful acts. Given the many complex motivations that shape moral cognition, it seems unlikely that person judgments are reducible to wanting to predict future behaviors. However there may be a broader sense in which many assessments of moral character— even those based on harmless transgressions— are ultimately concerned with behavior and with harm (Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Uhlmann, 2012).

Conclusion

The person-centered approach to moral judgment adds a new dimension to theories emphasizing the intuitive and nonconsequentialist nature of moral evaluations (Baron, 1994; Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2001; Schnall et al., 2008). Indeed, the present studies show that the negative gut reactions to harmless transgressions demonstrated by Haidt and colleagues can be even stronger when participants evaluate the person who carried out the act rather than the act itself. Just as importantly, these findings highlight a key reason why: such transgressions are often perceived to be a particularly rich source of information about moral character. This potent character information in turn helps explain why individuals can be less dumbfounded by their judgments of a person who commits a harmless transgression. Distinguishing between evaluations of acts and persons helps account for both outrage over harmless transgressions and when individuals are (and are not) at a loss to explain their own moral judgments.

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