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AUTHOR Narvaez, Darcia F.
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ABSTRACT

What leads to the blatant incongruity between reality and perception with which individuals and groups perceive moral events in the world? This paper focuses on a few of the elements involved in the interpretation of the events that may lead to different perspectives, suggesting a new construct--moral perception. Rest (1983) expanded the psychological notion of morality by proposing a model of moral behavior based on four psychological processes--moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and ego strength. The paper explores the nature of the first component, moral sensitivity, by reformulating it into two parts, moral perception and moral interpretation. The paper also presents findings of a study that examined whether or not there are encoding differences for moral, social, and nonsocial perception. The study tested the hypothesis that moral interaction and social interaction enhance encoding of events. A total of 556 volunteers from introductory psychology classes responded to slides that depicted people engaged in either nonsocial, social, or moral interactions. Based on responses, the sample was divided into a high- and a low-recall group. Low recallers best remembered the moral interactions, followed by the social interactions, and then by the nonsocial interactions. However, the high-recall group, who had better memories for everything, best remembered the nonsocial interactions, followed by the social, and then by the moral interactions. (Contains 12 references.) (LMI)

MORAL PERCEPTION: A NEW CONSTRUCT?

Darcia Narváez, University of Minnesota
College of Education and Human Development
206 Burton Hall, 178 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455[1]
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In the video tape involving Rodney King and Los Angeles police officers, the viewer's immediate conceptualization, based on perceptual cues and background knowledge, is that the police are beating up Mr. King. In contrast, the jury in the State case found the officers not guilty of excessive violence and other charges. The two groups of viewers had different mental models (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978) of the situation. Why this discrepancy in viewpoints? What led to the difference? What leads to the blatant incongruity with which individuals and groups perceive moral events in the world? This paper will focus on a few of the elements involved in the interpretation of the events that may have led to different perspectives, suggesting a new construct, moral perception. A first attempt at empirically exploring these dimensions will also be described.

Research in the area of automatic, unconscious processes is a frontier in cognitive science (Azar, 1996) and is demonstrating that the mind responds to environmental cues automatically before they are consciously processed (Uleman & Bargh, 1989) in both social and nonsocial situations (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Priming studies indicate that people are unconsciously influenced in their actions and reactions by previous stimuli (ibid.).

Rest (1983) has expanded the psychological notion of morality by proposing a four-component model of moral behavior which postulates four psychological processes that must have occurred prior to the completion of a moral action. The first is moral sensitivity, the

[1] For a more detailed paper with a review of literature, please write the author.

interpretation and conceptualization of events insofar as actions possible, interested parties and their reactions to the potential actions and their outcomes. The second component is moral judgment, the determination of which action among potential actions is the most moral. The third component is moral motivation, the prioritization of the moral action above all other personal values and needs at the time. And the last component is ego strength and implementation skills to carry out the prioritized moral action. All four components must reach completion in order for moral behavior to obtain.

In this paper, I propose to explore the nature of the first component, moral sensitivity, especially to move beyond its conscious and intentional aspects. The proposal here is to reformulate moral sensitivity into two parts, moral perception and moral interpretation. Moral interpretation will be viewed as a mostly conscious and controlled processing of events which takes place once a person has established that a moral decision must be made or that a moral situation is at hand. Moral perception, concerns the largely preconscious and unconscious processing of events prior to moral interpretation or 'moral realization', i.e., the conscious realization that a moral situation has arisen which requires a moral judgment. It entails the perceptual processing critical to the processes of moral interpretation and to eventual moral behavior. It represents the 'intitial conditions' (as in chaos theory) in the perceiver that can determine the ultimate reaction to an event.

For example, here is a fictitious scenario: a man, Jaime, is walking down a sidewalk. There is a child playing in the street. There is a truck speeding toward the child. What occurs in the next few seconds is the content of moral perception. There are several processes that are postulated to be essential for moral perception. A few of them are

outlined below.

Fundamental to moral processing is **attention**. In order to process stimuli well, a person must attend to it. Certain kinds of information, such as noise and movement, orient externally-based attention (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Self-report studies of internally-based attention have revealed that people tend to maintain conscious concern about unmet goals---trivial or otherwise, difficulties in significant relationships, and value dilemmas (Klinger, 1978). Our man, Jaime, must not be preoccupied internally and must attend to the external information from both the truck and the child in order for him to eventually take any action.

Configuration integration concerns the relations between elements within an event, at a moment in time. It involves the binding of elements and events within the situation, gauging one's place in the configuration, the perceptual pick up of the Gestalt--the whole, and the relations and meaning of the elements that are registered simultaneously on the senses. Jaime must realize that the movement in the corner of his eye is a child; he must see the truck; he must compute his relationship to the child and others present and, additionally, is susceptible to the bystander effect (Staub, 1978).

Closely related to configuration perception is the perceiver's **affective-biochemical response** to both the events and the participants. Some of these processes are attraction, empathic response, and mood. Jaime will be more likely to move toward intervention if he has a positive reaction to the child and is in a pleasant mood (Morris, 1989).

Deliberative causal processing falls mostly into the realm of moral interpretation since much of it occurs after initial processing. For instance, conscious causal inferences must be made, between Jaime's role in the immediate situation and potential outcomes, as well as

concerning the truck bearing down on the child, the possible outcomes and actions of the child and the driver. However, it is postulated that a more **primary causal processing** occurs automatically in adults. The perceiver, in making the quick initial assessment of the situation, infers the goals and trajectories of the others involved in the situation. The perceiver quickly assesses how the configuration of events will change over the next few moments or relevant time interval.

Concurrent processing concerns how particular situational variables impinge on processing such as the timing and type of information available, the ease of processing the events and the nature of the interaction. For example, if Jaime is preoccupied with a fire going on down the street, he may not notice the unfolding scenario before him. Or, if it is dusk, it may be too difficult to interpret the situation.

There are many limitations on the parameters and depth of morally-relevant perception. These constraints may be categorized into three groups, human physical constraints such as working memory limitations, individual differences such as level of expertise, and socio-cultural constraints. Aspects of culture will affect what is perceived by influencing such things as the causal field (context) of perception (Shweder, 1991), attributions (Lerner, 1980), and communication interactions and expecations.

In our scenario, as the few seconds of moral perception pass, our subject in the street has a string of inferences and activations which might include, for example: 'something of interest is happening; a child is unsupervised; a situation of danger involves the child and a truck: it involves me since I am the only adult who can respond to the cues; I feel care for the child and the energy to respond; the child looks like my little brother.' At this point, the

'moral alarm bell' sounds and the processes of moral interpretation, specific forward inferencing and the application of moral norms (McNeel, 1991), are set in motion. Jaime considers what could be done--which actions are afforded by the circumstances, the potential outcomes, and the possible reactions by interested parties to the potential actions. For example, Jaime could think: "I could yell for the child to get out of the way. But is he big enough to understand and listen to me? Or, I could run and pick him up. He might get scared and cry but that would still work. Or, I could yell at the truck driver but he might not see me and it might be too late." The simple scenario intentionally has a short time course, requiring a fast pace through moral perception and the other components of moral behavior. The aspects of moral perception in this scenario are compressed in contrast to many real-life situations, where there is considerably more time for the facets to activate and interact.

Moral perception concerns the early, largely unconscious and unintentional, processing of environmental events. Some initial questions that research should explore are the following: Do morally-relevant interactions draw attention? Do morally-relevant interactions enhance recall? Is there a special kind of 'binding' that occurs during morally-relevant perception?

In order to begin to test the construct of moral perception, the author has performed an exploratory study to examine whether or not there are encoding differences for moral, social and nonsocial person perception. The hypothesis to be tested is that moral interaction and social interaction enhance encoding of events.

Method

Participants. Participants were 56 volunteers from beginning psychology classes who received course credit in exchange for their involvement. There were 12 males and 44 females.

Materials. Slides of two types were taken. One type was shoes from different pairs and the other was people. In all trial slides there were two shoes or two people next to each other.

People slides were primarily taken from the waist up. Slides were taken of the pair in three general conditions: 1) Nonsocial/non-interactive. In this condition, the people either were each reading a newspaper or looking away from each other (as were the shoes in their non-interactive condition). 2) Social. In this condition, the people either shook hands or touched an arm or around the shoulders. The shoes touched their tips. 3) Moral. In this condition, the pair of people either exchanged a dollar or one helped the other up from the floor. In the shoe slides, one shoe was 'stepping' on another.

The test slides were groups of three people or shoes ("A", "B", "C"), one of whom was novel ("C") (not seen anywhere else in the experiment). The ABC pattern was taken in all six possible positions and selected randomly for each trial slide.

Procedure. The procedure took about 25 minutes and was as follows. After instructions explaining the task and an example of a trial slide and its test slide, participants were shown six groups of twelve slides and tested after each group. The slides were equal numbers of two types in three kinds of interaction (conditions). The conditions were randomly ordered. In the first five trials, the types were alternated (shoe, people, shoe, etc).

In the last trial, only people were shown. Each slide was viewed for five seconds. In order to balance the number in each type and in each condition, six nonsocial and six social people slides were eliminated before the analysis. These were selected on the basis of having a more salient member than other groups. As a result, there were 30 people and 30 shoe slides, 10 of each condition per type in the final analysis.

The participants were tested after each group of twelve slides. The test slides were in the same order as the trial slides. The placement of the novel person or shoe was randomly selected from a pool of slides with all six possible configurations. The test slides were shown for 10 seconds. As the participants watched the test slide, they marked off on an answer sheet which of the three they had not seen previously.

The focus of the study is on the effect of different person-interaction stimuli on recall. If participants more often correctly identify the novel person with morally-relevant interaction pairs, it suggests superior encoding of morally-relevant stimuli. The same is true for social interaction pairs. If there is no increased recall of morally-relevant interactions or social interaction, it suggests that the brain is not wired to give more attention to moral interaction over social or nonsocial people perception.

Results

Only recall for people will be discussed here. For the group as a whole, the results were nonsignificant for people (but, surprisingly, significant for shoes between conditions).

However, when the group is broken into high recallers (above the total recall mean of 40 out of 60 items) and low recallers (mean and below), there are some interesting findings. The groups had different patterns of recall (see Figure 1). The lower half of the group

(n=28) performed as predicted for people recall. There was a significant difference between moral and social interaction recall favoring moral interaction (for moral interaction, $\underline{M}$=5.89 (SD=1.5); for social interaction, $\underline{M}$=5.18 (SD=1.9), $\underline{t}$=1.81, $\underline{p}$<.04). The trend for a difference between moral and nonsocial interaction ($\underline{M}$=5.25 [SD=1.9]) was also there ($\underline{t}$=1.51, $\underline{p}$<.07). The lower group remembered the shoes ($\underline{M}$=18.36 [3.25]) better than people ($\underline{M}$=16.32 [3.7]).

The high recall group performed differently. The nonsocial person interaction was recalled best ($\underline{M}$=7.93 [1.10]) and was recalled significantly better than the moral ($\underline{M}$=7.39 [1.13]), $\underline{t}$= -2.15, $\underline{p}$<.04. There was no significant difference between the recall of shoes and people.

Discussion

The results were unexpected. Low recallers performed in the predicted manner. They recalled best the moral interactions, followed by the social interactions and then the nonsocial interactions. Perhaps they represent a more normal, 'less attentive' mind. Whereas the high recallers, having better memories for everything, remembered the nonsocial interactions better, then the social and lastly the moral. Overall, the group as a whole did not perform as expected.

This was an exploratory study that is testing both method and materials. There appears to be some promise. The task here is more 'conscious' than the construct of moral perception supports. In order to measure more unconscious processes, it is necessary to use a more on-line task such as reaction time for verification of previous viewing. As it is, it appears that the recall task may have been too easy (too much time, too few slides in a

group) since slides were presented and then immediately tested in groups of twelve in which six of the slides were of shoes and six were of people (male and female).

The materials will have to be reviewed. Some of the social and all of the moral interactions were sideways views whereas the nonsocial interactions were frontal views. This may have helped the high recallers who remembered more of the nonsocial. In addition, there may have been memory enhancement effects of hair, skin color, etc. Furthermore, all the social and moral interactions in the slides were positive. Previous research has demonstrated a 'pop-out' effect for angry faces in a sea of faces (Kosslyn, 1987). This research should examine whether there is an memory enhancement effect for negative (angry) as well as positive interaction.

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