

PROCEDURE

“Morality is doing what is right, no matter what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told, no matter what is right.”
(attr. H. L. Mencken, c.1925)



INTRODUCTION

Scholars have argued that the subset of morality related to fairness is fundamental for mutualistic cooperation and that a presumed “fairness device,” as any other kind of cognitive device, can be activated by false positive stimuli. Baumard and Chevallier (2012) have demonstrated that particular real life events may be interpreted as compensations (rewards or punishments) for good deeds or for misdeeds, showing a moral link despite missing any actual causal connections in-between them. The authors have called this effect “belief in immanent justice”. In this project, an experimental design is outlined to investigate people’s intuitions about the underlying mechanisms for the feeling of fairness and how they relate to underlying religious beliefs.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Do instances of compensation intuitions lead to overactivation of agency detection?

HYPOTHESIS

Because human social cognition is hyper-sensitive, the compensations will be interpreted as the effect of some kind of agency.

PREDICTION

Priming with scenarios evoking intuition of compensation will lead to detection of agency. Priming with scenarios not evoking the intuition of compensation will not have this effect.



INDEPENDENT MEASURE

Manipulation of the intuition of compensation – priming with vignettes.

DEPENDENT MEASURE

Measure of the activation of the agency detection mechanism - error ratio and reaction time in the animate/inanimate distinction in a categorisation task.

CORRELATIONAL MEASURE

Participant’s religiosity.

NUMBER OF CONDITIONS (levels of the IV):

5 – disproportionately good and bad, proportionally good and bad (activate the intuition of compensation for initial actions - immanent justice conditions) and neutral condition.h

DISCUSSION

If the results support the hypothesis, this would imply that indeed in life situations that elicit the intuition of compensation, people intuitively look for agency as the causal explanation of this happening. In other words, in some situations people intuitively think that they are being punished or rewarded by some agent for something they have done.

If an effect is found in the disproportionate conditions, this would mean that agency is ascribed to unfair situations. Immanent justice would thus not be the only condition where the presence of an agent is felt and thus an unfair agent would be another intuitive option available in the particular sample.

I predict that the religious beliefs of participants will have an impact on the discovered effect. I will conduct this study in Mauritius among Hinduists, Muslims and Christians, expecting that the moral deities of these religions will promote the eliciting of the intuition of compensation.

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