BELIEF IN IMMANENT JUSTICE: DOES THE MORAL INTUITION OF COMPENSATION ELICIT AGENCY DETECTION?
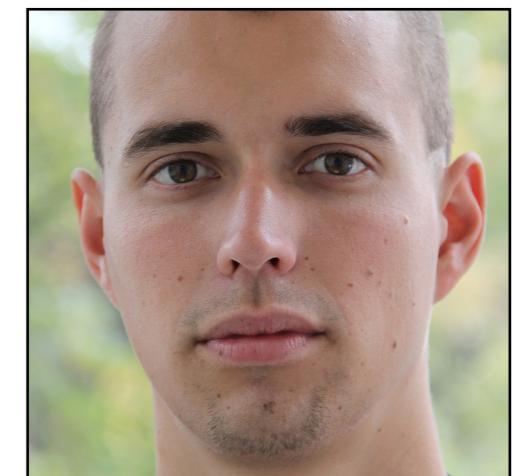
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"Morality is doing what is right, no matter what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told, no matter what is right."
(attr. H. L.Mencken, c.1925)

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.

PREDICTION

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

RESEARCH QUESTION

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

HYPOTHESIS

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.

PROCEDURE

I will use a between subjects design, whereby each participant will be assigned only to one of 5 priming conditions. Every condition will correspond to a vignette with a scenario that consists of an agent's action and a follow-up event. Events that will be proportionate to the initial actions will be interpreted as compensations. Events that will not be proportionate and events in the neutral condition will not be interpreted as compensations. Each participant will perform a categorization task before and after the priming. In this dependent measure, words will need to be placed into animate or inanimate category. My choice of words for both categories will be based on the distinction between animate and inanimate presented in Gelman and Opfer (2002). In this way I can measure the effects of priming in performing the task. Finally, I will introduce a measure of participants' religiosity and then correlate these measures with the results from the "immanent justice" experiment to investigate whether there is any association between intuition of fairness, the working of the agency detection, and participants' reported religiosity.

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

Degree of participant's religiosity.

NUMBER OF CONDITIONS (levels of the IV):

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

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.