

What Role does Prejudice Play in Moral Decision-Making?

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Introduction

In "The Emotional Dog and His Rational Tail" Haidt (2001) challenged the traditional rational explanation of moral reasoning by proposing that moral decision-making includes an affective-intuitive process.

While the debate surrounding Haidt's (2001) theory has mainly focused on rational versus intuitive processing, (Pizarro & Bloom, 2001; Saltzstein et al., In Press) the paper also raises the issue of how social context contributes to moral decision-making. Haidt's theory implies that an individual's moral decisions are directly impacted by the context in which s/he develops. Therefore, unlike Turiel (1983) and Kohlberg (1971), who both

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claim that individuals generally possess a universal core set of moral values, Haidt's theory leaves room for cultural variation. Cultural differences in moral reasoning have been given validity by researchers like Shweder et al. (1990) and Miller et al. (1995).

In order to further examine the role contextual factors play in the moral decision-making process, such as socio-economic status (SES), a preliminary pilot study was conducted by the author (CGB). Twenty college students from New York City were asked to morally reason about a series of short vignettes, which were based on research by Miller & Bersoff (1995).

The results of the pilot study showed some preliminary evidence that prejudice may impact the moral reasoning of the respondent. This suggests that people may respond to the same situation in different ways, depending on the SES of the individuals involved. In the lower SES condition, respondents reported that the agent in the vignette has more responsibility to not engage in the moral breach and that it is more acceptable to put social pressure on the agent in order to stop the moral breach from occurring. The high SES condition suggested the opposite conclusion; respondents reported that the agent has less responsibility to refrain from the moral breach and it was more a matter of personal choice.

Allport (1954) offers clarification on the issue of the development of prejudice although he is outside the current moral psychology literature. He shows that we develop biases that impact our cognitive functioning well before we are able to reason about them.

Allport (1954) describes the labels we use as a way to categorize human beings -to help us understand each other. "Nouns that cut slices," he argues, are the most salient labels - or at least the ones we pay most attention to and give most weight to, (e.g., ethnic

labels, class and some types of disabilities). Allport argues that once a primary category is established, it carries more weight in description than it should - as it is not possible to describe a single and distinct human with an ethnic label. Allport gives an example of how a prejudice may develop from these categories once emotional value is placed on them by our family of origin, or immediate surroundings.

One little boy was agreeing with his mother, who was warning him never to play with [n_____s]. He said, 'No, Mother, I never play with [n_____s]. I only play with white and black children.' The child was developing aversion to the term '[n_____]' without having the slightest idea what the word meant. In other words, the aversion is being set up prior to acquiring a referent.

(Allport, 1954, pg. 305)

While the above example is an extreme one, and quite dated in its content, it illustrates the early development of biases in a child.

I propose to expand on the aforementioned pilot study. In addition, I will use Allport's (1954) term of "nouns that cut slices" to help define prejudice. Allport uses the term to describe the labels we use to categorize and organize groups of people. My assumption for the purpose of this study will be that every person has prejudices that are implicit in their worldview. Although the word "prejudice" often carries a negative meaning, for my purposes it is merely a way of saying that each person sees and interacts with the world in a distinct way.

Method

A questionnaire composed of four separate vignettes will be given to each respondent. There are two different versions of the questionnaire, a low SES version and a high SES version. The

versions are identical except for the occupations of the characters. In the high SES versions the characters are portrayed as doctors, lawyers and professors. In the low SES versions the characters are portrayed as dishwashers, gas station attendants, and janitors. Each vignette describes a moral breach such as an affair, taking money from an employer, lying and being thoughtless to a spouse.

The questionnaire is composed of three separate parts. Part one is composed of the 4 vignettes as described above. Part two measures the respondent's perception of the degree of harm caused by the moral breach in each vignette. Part three is a set of control questions to measure the respondents understanding of what the income and education level is for each character in the vignettes.

Half of the respondents will be given a low SES version of the questionnaire, and half will be given a high SES version.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis for the planned study is that respondents will make a moral judgment based on contextual factors of the agent (e.g. the SES of the agent in the story), and not only on moral breach.

While Haidt (2001) provides a rough sketch of a moral development model based on his "social-intuitionist theory," there is no explanation for how biases are formed and what impact they have on moral development or moral reasoning.

The proposed study will examine the effect of prejudice on moral reasoning. Do people develop prejudices and then a morality that aligns with that bias, or do people understand their prejudices through the universal moral foundation as suggested by Turiel

(1983)?

I contend that when engaging in moral reasoning, people are likely to be influenced by their pre-established ideas and act intuitively, as put forth by Haidt (2001), and such intuition is likely to be based at least in some part upon on a prejudice, or a pre-established idea.

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