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Moral Responsibility

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Synonyms

Accountability, Culpability, Fault, Liability, Obligation

Definition

Moral responsibility concerns the extent to which a person believes that another individual or group is blameworthy and ought to be accountable for violating standards of conduct by either behaving in an unacceptable manner or failing to behave in an acceptable manner.

Introduction

The perspective presented in the current entry is rooted in theories of morality that identify the general scope of moral concerns and also acknowledge that there exists considerable variability in whether or how a given individual ascribes moral relevance to a particular action or situation (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). The description of moral responsibility included below also draws from social psychological theories of responsibility and blame that identify when people are more versus less likely to judge others as culpable for their actions or omissions (e.g., Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Weiner, 1986). The sections that follow begin with a discussion of the differences between moral and non-moral responsibility judgments based on psychological theories that define the moral domain. Next, attributional antecedents of moral responsibility judgments are described. Finally, the current entry ends by discussing the consequences of moral responsibility judgments for subsequent evaluations regarding blame, praise, and others' character.

General Orientation of the Current Entry

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the general orientation in the current entry toward moral responsibility is descriptive rather than

normative (see Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Treviño & Weaver, 1994). The theories and research reviewed concern how people assign moral responsibility rather than theories of how people *ought* to assign moral responsibility. The term "moral" is also used to refer to an individual's standards regarding fundamental right and wrong (e.g., Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka, Morgan, & Wisneski, 2015) rather than "ethical," which often is used to refer to consensus standards of right and wrong within a larger community (e.g., Jones, 1991). In practice, individual morals and community standards of right and wrong often correspond (e.g., most people agree that murder and fraud are wrong). Nevertheless, many of today's most contentious public policy issues are rooted in competing visions between those with opposing moral views (e.g., people apply different moral principles to debates about healthcare system reform, levels of taxation, and relations among business, government, and society), and individuals often differ in terms of how strongly they feel about a given issue or event, even when it is categorized as (un)ethical based on community standards or normative philosophy (Skitka et al., 2005). In short, the differences between moral and ethical issues as interesting and underexplored areas of inquiry, and this brief discussion is included to draw attention to potential benefits of distinguishing between the two. That said, there also are important differences between judgments of responsibility that are and are not morally relevant for a given individual. These differences are addressed in the next section.

Moral and Non-moral Responsibility Judgments

Some judgements of responsibility are morally relevant and others are not. If, for example, Casey is responsible for bringing decorations to the company holiday party, Casey's success or failure to bring decorations is not likely to lead to moral praise or condemnation. In contrast, if Pat is responsible for delivering medicine to a child who desperately needs it, then Pat's success or failure is much more likely to evoke moral judgment. Many classic theories of responsibility do not explicitly discuss whether or how moral responsibility judgments differ from responsibility judgments in general (e.g., Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1986). However, considerable variability exists in the phenomena that people imbue with their subjective sense of moral right and wrong (Ryan, 2014; Skitka et al.,

2005; Skitka et al., 2015). Theories that attempt to explain the differences between the moral and non-moral domains therefore provide important information about the characteristics that distinguish moral from non-moral responsibility judgments (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Gray, Waytz, & Young, 2012; Skitka et al., 2005).

Theorists have taken different approaches to distinguish between moral and non-moral judgments. Some have identified psychological attributes that are more likely to accompany moral than non-moral beliefs and judgments. People experience their moral beliefs and attitudes as (1) universally applicable imperatives, (2) objective facts about the world, much like scientific facts, (3) independent of authority decisions or dictate, and (4) imbued with strong emotions (Skitka et al., 2005). Other theorists distinguish between moral and non-moral judgments by identifying categories of actions or events that people are especially likely to moralize. For example, Moral Foundations Theory predicts that people's moral beliefs stem from at least five distinct concerns: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Graham et al., 2013). People vary in the extent to which they base their personal moral sense on any one these "foundations," and behaviors seen as relating to one or more foundation are more likely to trigger moral responsibility judgments.

Still other theorists distinguish between moral and non-moral judgments by identifying relational structures that establish moral relevance. According to the Dyadic Model of morality, judgments of moral responsibility involve situations that concern "moral agents" who harm "moral patients," (Gray et al., 2012). In other words, responsibility judgments are morally relevant if the target of judgment is capable of willful action, he or she commits an act that involves inflicting "harm" (broadly defined), and the recipient of the target's actions has the capacity to suffer from that harm.

Components of Responsibility

Attributions of responsibility are the product of multiple component judgments, above and beyond the differences between moral and non-moral responsibility. The list of components has expanded and evolved over time, which has created a literature where definitions of "responsibility" are varied and at times imprecise (see Malle et al., 2014). However, there is a growing consensus that the following criteria influence the extent that people

hold actors responsible for events: causality, intentionality, the actor's role or status, and the magnitude and valence of events (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Malle et al., 2014; Treviño, 1992).

Causality. Determinations of causality attempt to establish actors' basic levels of involvement in an event (Cushman, 2008; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1986). Often, causality judgments follow a "sufficiency criterion;" that is, people conclude that a person caused an outcome if that outcome would not have occurred in the absence of that person's action (Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1986). Of course, determinations of causality also can reflect an actor's decision not to intervene in a situation (i.e., behavioral omissions). However, people treat omission and commissions differently because they differ in terms of whether they involve physical movement, the salience of alternative causes, and whether the outcome would occur if the actor were not present (DeScioli, Bruening, & Kurzban, 2011; Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1990).

Intentionality. Causality is an important component of responsibility, but people routinely differentiate between intentional and unintentional causes of outcomes (Heider, 1958; Malle, 1999; Shaver, 1985). Moreover, bad intentions sometimes are sufficient to prompt condemnation, even if a person did not successfully cause a negative event (Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Bloom, 2003; Young, Cushman, Hauser & Saxe, 2007). Judgments of intentionality are themselves multidetermined; there are five elements of intentionality: desire, belief, intent, awareness, and skill (Malle & Knobe, 1997). People are more likely to consider an action to be intentional when the actor exhibits a *desire* for the outcome to occur and *believes* that an action would lead to the outcome. The actor also needs to *intend* to perform the act by choosing to perform the action rather than acting by accident, and the actor must be *aware* of the act while performing it. Finally, people consider the actor's *skill* or ability to perform the action in a way that yields the intended outcome.

Intentionality is not a necessary condition for attributions of responsibility (actors can be held responsible for accidental, but controllable outcomes such as involuntary manslaughter), but intentionality will likely enhance perceived responsibility. For example, Malle & Knobe (1997) report a study that manipulated (a) *desire* in terms of whether Frank hates or likes George, (b) *awareness* in terms of whether Frank was aware he bumped into a blue BMW behind him, and (c) *belief* in terms of whether Frank knew the blue BMW was George's

car. They found that perceived intentionality was highest when Frank hated George, was aware that he bumped into a blue BMW, and knew that George drove a blue BMW. However, perceived intentionality was not completely absent when some of these conditions were not satisfied.

When conceptualized in this manner, intentionality subsumes and adds precision to other concepts frequently discussed in the literature on responsibility. Most notably, Weiner's (1986) influential theory of responsibility emphasized the role of controllability, where controllability referred to whether an actor could have behaved otherwise. On the whole, people are more likely to attribute responsibility for controllable than uncontrollable actions. However, not all consequences of controllable behaviors are intentional. For example, people attribute less responsibility in the case of accidents or when an actor was coerced (Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). Therefore, intentionality serves a similar function as controllability but adds specificity.

Role and Status of Actors. An actor's social role and status are important to responsibility judgments because they affect the norms and expectations that people use as the basis of comparison for an actor's behavior. For example, supervisors may be held responsible for their subordinates' behavior, but subordinates are less likely to be held responsible for their supervisor's behavior (Hamilton, 1986; Schultz, Jaggi, & Schleifer, 1987). People likely view these situations differently because the role and status of the actors affects their obligation and capacity to influence events (Malle et al., 2014). Additionally, actors' role and status also have direct influences on how people perceive behavior. People interpret ambiguous behavior as less wrong when it is committed by a high than low status actor because of halo effects that accompany high status (Polman, Pettit, & Wiesenfeld, 2013; see also Hollander, 1958). However, people are more apt to punish unambiguously bad behavior committed by high than low status actors because they perceive high status actors' behavior as more intentional (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009). Thus, actor status and the obligations that accompany status can either attenuate or amplify responsibility.

Characteristics of Events. Although many models highlight rational components of responsibility judgments (e.g., causality and intentionality), evidence suggests that these judgments include biases as well. People appear to be motivated to hold someone accountable for larger

compared to smaller transgressions (Alicke, 2000; Walster, 1966). Explanations for this effect are rooted in the instrumental value of punishing reckless behavior (Alicke, 2000) and also point to people's inherent need to view the world as a just and predictable place (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Cognitively, especially bad events can trigger motivated reasoning that can affect what people remember, what normative standards are salient, and how people process available information (Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009).

One particularly vivid demonstration of bias in intentionality judgments is the "side-effect effect." The most studied scenario describes the CEO of a company who is told that a new policy will either harm or help the environment. In either case, the CEO responds by saying that he only cares about increasing profits, not about the incidental side effect on the environment. However, participants who read the harm version indicate that the harm to the environment was intentional, whereas participants who read the help version indicate that the help to the environment was unintentional. This effect occurs even though the harm and help resulted from identical actions (Knobe, 2003). It appears that the valence of events can influence the way people process available information and make judgments (Laurent, Clark, & Schweitzer, 2015).

Consequences of Moral Responsibility

Moral responsibility judgments can have a variety of consequences. The previous section included discussions of how attributions of causality and intentionality, the status of the actor, and the severity of the outcome can all influence whether people judge someone morally responsible. This final section discusses two sets of consequences of moral responsibility judgments: (1) whether an actor is blameworthy or praiseworthy, and (2) how they affect global evaluations of others.

Blame and Praise. The judgment of an actor as morally responsible for a harmful or helpful outcome is what drives the subsequent assignment of blame or praise (Alicke, 2000; Malle et al., 2014; Mikula, 2003; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003; Shaver, 1985). In terms of blame, the impact of judgments of responsibility on blame often depends on the presence or absence of justifications or excuses (Alicke, 2000; Malle et al., 2014; Mikula, 2003; Shaver, 1985). For example, even once an actor has been judged responsible for a harmful outcome, he or she may claim that the outcome either was, in fact, helpful (i.e. deny the harmfulness

of the outcome) or that it served some broader helpful outcome (Shaver, 1985). In either case, the party responsible attempts to avoid blame by reframing the harmful outcome. Whether or not these justifications are accepted by the perceiver will determine whether the judgment of responsibility will increase the level of blame is assigned.

Compared to blame, less theory and research has been devoted to assignment of praise. Attributions of responsibility also affect assignment of praise (Weiner, 1995), but it is unclear how praise and blame might differ, especially in terms of the roles that justifications and excuses might play. One would assume that justifications or excuses for helpful behavior would be relatively rare, but people could offer justifications that attempt to call others' attention to evidence of their good intentions. Therefore, differences in how people assign praise and blame represent an important avenue for future research.

Moral Judgment Dominates Our View of Others. Trait inference is a fundamental process that underlies how people relate to one another. People routinely form impressions about actors' traits and stable tendencies based on observable behaviors (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965). Judgments of moral responsibility are likely to play a particularly influential role in how people view others. Several research programs have converged on the idea that a two-dimensional structure can account for most social evaluations (e.g., Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972; Wojciszke, 1994). One dimension reflects competence or ability including attributes of skill and intelligence (or lack thereof). A second dimension reflects interpersonal warmth or morality, including integrity and benevolence. These two components, however, do not appear to carry equal weight in determining people's global evaluations of others. Information relevant to morality, including judgments of moral responsibility, appears to have greater impact than competence (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). One reason why morally relevant information may dominate social inferences is that people are more apt to believe that behavior in moral contexts is less attributable to situational causes and is therefore more indicative of the person's disposition (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004; Reeder & Spores, 1983; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011). For example, research on trust repair suggests that

apologies that acknowledge misdeeds are less effective in the case of violations of integrity than competence (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Kim et al., 2004). In short, shirking one's moral responsibilities is especially detrimental to how others view a person and perhaps also organizations (Bauman & Skitka, 2012).

Conclusion

Judgments of moral responsibility are a product of attributions of causality and intentionality and also reflect features of the actors (e.g., role, status) and actions (e.g., valence and magnitude of outcomes). Judgments of moral and non-moral responsibility differ because moral judgments: (1) take on a distinct set of psychological characteristics (Skitka et al., 2005), (2) involve behaviors that violate or uphold fundamental moral concerns (Graham et al., 2013), and/or (3) involve a relational structure in which agents harm patients (Gray et al., 2012). Importantly, moral responsibility judgments determine who deserves blame and praise and ultimately influence how people view others. Judgments of moral responsibility contribute to appraisals of moral character, which play a primary role in people's overall impression of others and willingness to form or maintain relationships with them.

Cross-References

Administrative Responsibility, Collective Responsibility and Crisis Management in Developing States, Community Responsibility and Crisis Management, Government Responsibility, Legal Liability, Moral Reasoning of Public Administrators, Organizations as Moral Agents, Thick vs. Thin Morality

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