

UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Expectations bias moral judgments

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4s18z2sb>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 44(44)

Authors

Powell, Derek

Schotsch, Brittany

Mikell, Justin

et al.

Publication Date

2022

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Expectations bias moral judgments

Derek Powell

Arizona State University, Phoenix, Arizona, United States

Brittany Schotsch

Arizona State University, Phoenix, Arizona, United States

Justin Mikell

Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States

Zachary Horne

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Abstract

People's expectations play an important role in their reactions to events. There is often disappointment when events fail to meet expectations and a thrill to having one's expectations exceeded (e.g. Mellers et al., 1997). Here, we examined how expectations influenced people's reactions to events with serious moral consequences, and their moral decisions concerning such situations. Participants judged pairs of events where a victim experienced a similar harm, but where victims were at different prior risk of being harmed (e.g. someone killed by a drunk driver on a Friday night versus a Saturday morning). People found unexpected harms to be more upsetting and they were more likely to choose to prevent an unexpected harm than an expected one. Further studies explored other factors that might have influenced judgments beyond expectations. This bias may have pernicious moral consequences, potentially leading to reduced concern for victims in most need of help.