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Authors

Niemi, Laura
Young, Liane

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The space and time of contamination: Complete, continual, spreading effects

Laura Niemi
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

Liane Young
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA

Abstract: People sometimes report feeling "totally" different (complete affectedness) and that "they'll never be the same again" (continual affectedness) after negative events. It's been proposed that complete, and continual negative effects characterize contamination or impurity. Meanwhile, whether impurity is a legitimate moral domain apart from harm has been debated in moral psychology. We address these matters using novel approaches from cognitive linguistics. First, according to a prominent theory of verb semantics, verbs that convey impurity (contaminate, taint) belong to a class that implies complete affectedness (the "fill" class), such that contaminated entities are seen as completely contaminated. Second, people rated perpetrators equally, and highly, "contaminated", "contaminating", and "injuring", whereas victims were rated straightforwardly "injured" (Turk; n=126, replicated twice). For "contaminated" perpetrators, the taint carried on – they were continually "contaminating". In sum, impurity is distinct from harm: the process underlying impurity, contamination, involves inferences of complete, continual negative effects that spread.