The Positivity Effect in Attributions of Praise and Blame

Jamie Hughes and Daniel Krohn

New Mexico State University
Abstract

Contradictory findings have been found with regard to attributions of praise and blame. In some cases, research points to a negativity effect whereby attributions of blame are greater for immoral behaviors than attributions of praise for similar moral behaviors (Knobe, 2003; Malle, 2006). Other researchers have demonstrated the opposite effect (Pizzaro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003). In the current paper praise and blame attributions are investigated using Kant’s morality distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Participants were asked to respond as fast as possible to forty-eight positive and negative perfect and imperfect duty words by indicating whether the target word was blame or praise worthy. Results indicated that participants were faster to respond that positive behaviors were praiseworthy than that negative behaviors were blameworthy.
The Positivity Effect in Attributions of Praise and Blame

The negativity effect, or the tendency for people to assign more weight to negative information, is a pervasive phenomenon in psychological literature. It is evident in research ranging from trait attributions to stereotyping and stigmatization (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Fickenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Recently, it has been implicated in moral judgments as well. Specifically, some researchers find that attributions of blame are higher following the performance of a negative behavior than attributions of praise following the performance of a similar positive behavior (Knobe, 2003; Malle, 2006). For example, Malle (2006) found that an unfriendly behavior was seen as more blameworthy than a similar friendly behavior was seen as praiseworthy.

Contrary to Malle’s (2006) findings, Pizarro, Uhlmann, and Salovey (2003) demonstrated that positive behaviors receive more praise than similar negative behaviors receive blame. For example, Pizarro and colleagues (2003) gave participants vignettes describing behaviors that were either positive or negative, and the target person either performed the behavior deliberately or impulsively. Participant assigned less blame for impulsive negative acts than deliberate negative acts, but assigned similar praise to impulsive and deliberate positive acts.

Malle’s studies suggest a negativity effect in the assignment of praise and blame, whereas Pizarro et al.’s (2003) research points to a positivity effect. To resolve this apparent contradiction we draw on research regarding trait attributions. In one set of studies, Trafimow and Trafimow (1999) found that certain types of negative behaviors carried more attributional weight than other types of immoral behaviors. Specifically, perfect duty violation carried more attributional weight than imperfect duty violations. Trafimow and Trafimow (1999) had drawn from Immanuel Kant’s ethical duty distinction.
Kant believed ethical agents must perform perfect duties, regardless of other considerations. In contrast, one’s morality is irrelevant with regard to the performance or violation of imperfect duties. To illustrate, Kant suggested that honesty and loyalty are perfect moral duties and that friendly and charitable behaviors are imperfect moral duties. One must be consistently honest and loyal if one wishes to be ethical. However, one is not at risk for immorality if one chooses to be uncharitable or unfriendly.

Interestingly, Trafimow, Bromgard, Finlay, and Ketelaar (2005) later found that violations of perfect duties produced more negative affect than imperfect duty violations. Trafimow and his colleagues (2005) research implies that the type of behavior that is performed confounds the negativity effect in trait attributions—perfect duty violations elicit negative affect whereas imperfect duty violations do not. Trafimow et al.’s (2005) findings also have implications for the current discussion. First, if negative affect is important for trait inferences, then it may also influence attributions of praise and blame. Second, Kant’s duties can be used to efficiently categorize moral behaviors. Researchers interested in moral attributions may benefit from such a categorization, especially if certain behaviors, such as violations of perfect duties, produce greater negative affect than imperfect duty violations.

The present study sought to examine the asymmetry in attributions of praise and blame by examining response time. Individuals’ were asked to respond as fast as possible to a series of forty-eight behavior words by determining whether the behavior was praise or blameworthy. Half of the behaviors were positive (moral) and half of the behavior words were negative or immoral. Further, perfect and imperfect duties were counterbalanced across trials. Two different findings were possible. On the one hand, if immoral acts are weighed more heavily than moral actions, negative affect should influence the speed with which people attribute blame. On the
other hand, if there is a positivity effect in attributions of praise and blame, individuals should be faster to respond that moral behaviors are praiseworthy. Finally, if perfect duty violations, or negative behaviors such as dishonesty and disloyalty, produce greater amounts of negative affect than imperfect duties, then we would expect people to respond faster that violations of perfect duties are, in fact, blameworthy.

Methods

Participants

Eleven New Mexico State University students (8 female) participated as part of a psychology course requirement.

Apparatus and Materials

A dell computer was used to display the simulation. Stimuli were presented on a 15” Dell CRT monitor. The computer program, E-Prime version 1.0, was used to program the stimuli. Participant’s responded to a series of forty-eight slides. The slides each contained a target word, centered on the screen, and written in 22 Point Arial style fonts. In addition, below the target word, two choice words, “Praise” and “Blame” were located in far left or far right corner of the screen. The choice words were written in 18 Point Arial style font. Across each trial, the choice display words (praise and blame) were counterbalanced to eliminate a handedness confound. Further, the presentation of target words was randomized across participants. Reaction times were recorded in milliseconds.

Procedure

Participants responded to twenty-four words, displayed twice, to total forty-eight trials. Participants were instructed to read the target word and then, as quickly as possible, determine whether the target word was more strongly associated with “Praise” or “Blame”. The selection
was made by pressing the ‘e’ key to select the choice word on the bottom left hand corner of the screen or the ‘i’ key to select the choice word on the bottom right hand of the screen. Participants were provided with four practice slides with neutral target words and neutral choices. They were instructed to choose the word most closely associated with the neutral target words. For example, participants received the target word “court” and two choices such as “Basketball” and “Judge”. During the test trials, participants were presented with positive, moral words or negative, immoral words. Further, within the valence condition, participants responded to perfect and imperfect duties. Table 1 displays a full list of the target words.

**Results**

Preliminary analyses revealed that 75% of the participants correctly responded to target words across trials. However, participants who selected an incorrect response to a target word on a particular trial (indicated that a negative behavior was praiseworthy) were removed from the analyses for that trial. Further, since each target word was presented twice, data were averaged across the two target word trials. Data were analyzed by combining participant response times within each trial. In other words, analyses proceeded with trial as a between subjects factor. Finally, data were streamlined by classifying each target word as either a perfect or imperfect duty and as either positive or negative. In sum, there were two within-participant factors of importance for analysis: duty type (perfect duty vs. imperfect duty) and valence (positive vs. negative) with trial as a between-participant factor.

A two-way analysis of variance was conducted to examine response times by duty and valence. A significant main effect of valence emerged, $F(1,20) = 7.28, p = .014$, indicating that participants were faster to respond that positive words were praiseworthy ($M = 1260, SD = 204$) than that negative words were blameworthy ($M = 1580, SD = 394$), (see Figure 1). Significant
differences were not found in response times to perfect ($M = 1343, SD = 230$) versus imperfect duties ($M = 1497, SD = 432$), $F(1,20) = 1.69, p = .21$. However, the interaction between word valence and duty type was marginally significant, $F(1,20) = 3.94, p = .06$ (see Figure 2). Specifically, participants were slower to respond to violations of imperfect duties ($M = 1775, SD = 438$) than to violations of perfect duties ($M = 1385, SD = 242$). However, the mean response times for assignment of praise between perfect ($M = 1300, SD = 234$) and imperfect duties ($M = 1219, SD = 182$) did not differ.

**Discussion**

The tendency to weigh positive information more heavily than negative information is termed the positivity effect. This effect is not very common in psychological literature—individuals tend to focus on the negative characteristics of other people in stereotyping, and are often suspicious of the negative motives of dissimilar others in intergroup relations. The current paper provides good news for those who have grown weary of the negativity effect in psychological research.

Participants in the current study were faster to respond that positive words were praiseworthy than that negative words were blameworthy. The increased response time to positive behaviors can be explained in at least two ways. First, behavioral saliency may explain the result. For example, people may be more likely to encounter positive, praiseworthy behaviors in their daily lives, and therefore may be primed to respond to positive words. Another explanation is provided by Pizzaro and his colleagues (2003). The researchers suggest that individuals assume that people have positive higher order motives. That is, negative behaviors may receive less blame than similar positive behaviors because people assume that a person acted negatively due to circumstance, and that the person ‘real’ higher order desire is to act
morally. Thus, response times may be faster for positive behaviors because they are consistent with peoples’ assumption regarding an agent’s second order desires.

Further research is needed to examine the asymmetry between positive and negative moral actions and praise and blame judgments. Additional research is also needed to explore the effect of perfect and imperfect duty behaviors on subsequent judgments. The current research supports the distinction between violations of perfect and imperfect duties and raises an important question. That is, in the current study individuals were faster to respond to both positive and negative perfect duties than negative imperfect duties. Thus, it is possible that Trafimow, Bromgard, Finlay, and Ketelaar (2005) distinction between perfect and imperfect duty behaviors is only relevant for negative behaviors where individuals respond to perfect duty violation with negative affect. However, it also possible that people judge positive perfect and imperfect duty behaviors differently, which points to the limitation of power in the current study. Further research should investigate potential differences in attributions of praise and blame using the perfect and imperfect distinction.
References


Table 1.

Target words by valence and duty type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Valence</th>
<th>Negative Valence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perfect Duties</td>
<td>Imperfect Duties</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Charitable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devoted</td>
<td>Sociable</td>
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<td>Faithful</td>
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<td>Disloyal</td>
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<td>Unfriendly</td>
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<td>Ungenerous</td>
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<td>Cold</td>
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Figure 1. Reaction time by behavior valence.

Figure 2. Reaction time by behavioral duty and assignment of praise or blame.