Introduction

An emphasis on normative judgments, and in particular on judgments of normative transgressions (i.e., judgments of wrongdoing), has created some distortion in the study of folk moral reasoning by ignoring other moral categories such as supererogation and subrogation, which are related to what is considered the discretionary (i.e., not normative). With this research, we provide the first attempt to overcome this problem. We propose a model that includes nine moral categories of commissions/omissions (see Figure 1), which we analyze in terms of the predicates right/wrong and good/bad (see Table 2; cf. MacNamara, 2006; Zimmerman, 1986). Using examples from the philosophical literature that presumably correspond to these categories, we devised a novel task to test the psychological reality of the model—that is, to probe the extent to which folk moral reasoning deploys these categories. Our results show that indeed one should expand the range of moral categories in the study of folk moral reasoning. We discuss some implications of our analysis and results for the literature on moral psychology.

Method

Ninety-eight undergraduates completed a survey containing 24 vignettes in which an agent commits or omits a target action. Vignettes were supposed to be prototypical cases of the categories (A–I) in our model (many vignettes were inspired by examples in the philosophical literature on supererogation and subrogation—see, e.g., Driver, 1992; Mellemma, 1987).

Sample Vignettes

A vignette (based on Urson, 1958) representing a prototypical case of D:

Kevin is a doctor. He heard about a natural disaster in a faraway city. Doctors were badly needed to care for the sick and injured in the affected city. However, going there would be expensive and entail leaving his friend. Kevin [helped/did not help] the disaster victims.

A vignette (based on Driver, 1992) representing a prototypical case of H:

Graham’s close friend needed a kidney transplant. Graham went in for a test and found out he was a match and could donate a kidney to his friend. Graham had two healthy kidneys. The operation would be risky for Graham but would save his friend’s life. Graham [donated/did not donate] his kidney.

Participants rated how bad or good it was that the agent did or did not perform the target action on a nine-point scale ranging from extremely bad (-4) to extremely good (4), centered at neither good nor bad (0). They also indicated whether they believed the agent’s commission or omission of the action was wrong (-1); right (+1); or neither right nor wrong (0). These responses were then coded according to our model in the manner described in Table 1.

We predicted that participants would rate the goodness and righteousness of each agent’s action according to the category (A–I) it was hypothesized to represent.

Results

Chi-square tests confirmed that predictions for responses to vignettes representing categories A through E were accurate, showing that philosophical intuitions regarding supererogation are reflected in the conceptual system of the folk. Results for vignettes representing categories F through I were less consistent with these categories, as evidenced by greater use of deontic reasoning in participants’ judgments. Detailed results by category are presented in Table 2.

The results also indicate that badness/goodness are separate judgments from wrongdoing/rightness—59% of responses fall into the patterns representing the relevant merely axiological codes: 19% were consistent with the a priori code merely good, 10% with merely bad, 20% with neutral.

Discussion

These results have methodological and theoretical implications for the literature on moral psychology: one should not operationalize questions about impermissibility by conflating wrongness with badness, as is sometimes done (e.g., Huebner, Lee, & Hauser, 2010). Instead, researchers should be detailed and explicit about which folk concepts are at stake when making claims about how the folk conceptualize the moral domain.

We also believe that the results provide stronger evidence for the existence of supererogatory categories than for the existence of suberogatory ones and that there may be more individual differences in the use of discretionary categories than in the use of normative ones. Future research will address this question directly.

References


