Research Project

Moral Character Matters. How Act, Actor, and Victim (Facial) Characteristics Impact Moral Judgments

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First encounters are known to strongly influence how individuals perceive others; the power of "first impressions" is even part of collective wisdom represented in proverbs (e.g., "You never get a second chance to make a first impression") and fiction. One particular prominent source affecting first impressions is the human face. Individuals use facial information to instantly and spontaneously build first impressions about the personality of others (e.g., Bruce & Young, 1986; Ito & Urland, 2003; Willis & Todorov, 2006). These persistent personality inferences can be mapped in a 2D space defined by the two fundamental dimensions trustworthiness and dominance (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008). Trustworthiness and dominance are unique dimensions in that they are informative about whether a person has good or bad intentions (i.e., trustworthiness) and whether he or she is able to act on these intentions (i.e., dominance).

Interestingly, a person perception perspective suggests that individuals have a strong desire to infer other's moral character from whatever cue might be informative, whereas in moral psychological research, moral character plays aănegligible role. Building on normative philosophical theories of morality, Moral Psychology focuses on acts rather than actors in assessing the morality of an action (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011; Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015). Accordingly, it suggests that the morality of a moral action is evaluated based on the assessment of the actors' intentions and goals in this given situation as well as the outcome of the action. Thereby, Moral Psychology disregards the fundamental social psychological finding that perceivers tend to overestimate stable actor characteristics and underestimate characteristics of a given situation in explaining actions (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977) and the strong motivation of individuals to keep track on the moral character of others, for example by inferring it from their appearance (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008). This project aims to bridge this gap by investigating the impact of moral character (derived from facial appearance) on the evaluation of moral actions comprehensively.

Keywords moral judgments, face modeling, faces

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