

Why I Didn't Do it... Can Other People Reduce Individual Responsibility for Action?

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ABSTRACT

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All known human societies hold individuals responsible for the impacts of their action on others. Therefore, experiencing responsibility for consequences of one's own actions is a key psychological event with implications for society as a whole. Little is known about how the brain generates the experience of responsibility. I will report two laboratory experiments using simple experimental paradigms that aim to measure the subjective feeling of one's own control over an external outcome. I will show that this experience is strongly related to the social context of action and decision-making. First, I will show that experience of control is reduced when someone orders one to do something, as opposed to when one freely chooses for oneself to do it. Second, I will show that, even when one freely and fully chooses what to do, the mere presence of another potential agent leads to a reduced experience of control. The proximate cause of actions lies in the motor system of the individual brain. However, humans live in large and complex societies, with hierarchical structures and divisions of labor. These social contexts mean that responsibility for action can partly transfer beyond the individual to others. The motivational and cognitive system of one individual can effectively gain access to the motor system of another. This arrangement creates great potential advantages, but also grave existential risk for societies as a whole.

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