

An Anomaly in Intentional Action Ascription: More Evidence of Folk Diversity

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Intentional Action Ascription

A side effect is a foreseen but not intended consequence of some intended action. Joshua Knobe has discovered that most people judge that a good side effect is not brought about intentionally, but a bad side effect is brought about intentionally. These responses are meant to indicate something about the folk concept of intentional action—namely, that goodness and badness play a role in people's ordinary ascriptions of intentional actions. Because moral goodness or badness plays a role in the ascriptions of intentional action, the argument is made that philosophical theories about intentional action need to take account of or explain away differences in intuitions about cases with morally good or bad side effects.

In a previous experiment (Feltz and Cokely, forthcoming) we discovered that the presentation of good and bad side effect cases creates an order effect. Those who received a bad side effect case first said that the person performed the bad side effect intentionally. However, when a good side effect is followed by a bad side effect, most subjects said that the person did not perform the bad side effect intentionally.

Experiment I

In our first experiment we tested whether the order effect was differentially associated with participant sex. Participants included 67 Florida State University undergraduate students who participated as partial fulfillment of course requirements. In this experiment, we found the asymmetry in judgments about the side effects. Also, we found a moderately sized significant order effect anomaly where the ratings are higher for descriptions of bad side effects when they are presented before good side effects. However, the order effect was only significant for women, and was non-significant for men. That is, it appears that only women were significantly affected by the order of presentation. Of note, power analysis based on the observed effect size suggested that the order effect might be observed in men if the sample were large enough

Experiment II

A second experiment was performed to replicate and clarify the results of the first study. Ninety-four undergraduates at Florida State University volunteered to participate in this experiment. Again, in this experiment a significant asymmetry in intentional action judgments was found along with a moderately sized order effect anomaly indicating significantly higher ratings when bad side effects preceded good side effects. Again, this effect was only significant for women, yet it was non-significant for men. Thus, it appears that in this sample only women were significantly affected by the order of presentation. Importantly, we also discovered an order by asymmetry interaction such that when help came first it differed from harm less than when help came after harm.

Conclusions

The order effect is significant because it reveals that people's intentional action intuitions are susceptible to influences that are not part of the descriptions of actions. After all, the order of the presentation of descriptions of actions are not properties of the actions described. Hence, one should be careful about making conclusions about the folk concept of intentional action based on the asymmetries reported by Knobe. But more importantly, sex predicts people who are likely subject to the order effect. Given that we can identify some of the people who are likely affected by order, an interesting question is what accounts for those people being prone to the order effect? To speculate, our favored hypothesis is that women simply represent the task differently than men. The differences in representations between men and woman can account for the observed order effect because women's representations might be more sensitive to perceived harms. Our hope is that more fine-grained methods (e.g., protocol analysis) and data on individual differences in gender related traits will help us uncover the factors that influence cognitive representations.

References

Feltz, A., & Cokely, E.T. (submitted). Paradoxical sub-process influences on folk judgments: order effects and the Knobe effect.