

Space to Think: Testing the Effect of Distancing on Moral Dumbfounding

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Author Note

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee and conducted in accordance with the Code of Professional Ethics of the Psychological Society of Ireland and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Abstract

Moral dumbfounding occurs when people maintain a moral judgment in the absence of supporting reasons. Drawing on dual-process approaches to moral judgment, one possible explanation for moral dumbfounding proposes that it occurs as a result of a conflict between intuitive and deliberative processes. Consistent with this explanation, previous research has shown that under manipulations designed to lead to more intuitive thinking rather than deliberative thinking (such as increased cognitive load), people are less likely to provide reasons for their judgments, and more likely to provide dumbfounded responses in a moral dumbfounding task. Building on this work the present research examines if dumbfounded responding can be reduced through experimental manipulations designed to facilitate deliberative thinking (over intuitive thinking). Drawing on construal-level theory, and the finding that distancing facilitates deliberative thinking, we predict that including a distancing manipulation in a moral dumbfounding task will increase reason-giving, and reduce dumbfounded responding. We propose a pre-registered study to test this prediction.

Keywords: moral dumbfounding, distancing, construal-level theory, dual-processes, reasons, intuitions

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Think about any politically charged, contentious issue in your country or region and consider how this issue might be discussed in the media. In particular, imagine a TV or radio debate between advocates on either side of the issue. In such a debate, it is plausible that the speakers might defend their positions with statements related to the morality of the issue. Proponents may argue for something “because it is the right thing to do” while opponents may reject something “because it is just plain wrong”. These claims regarding morality (or immorality) are often presented as self-evident (Skitka, 2010), without providing justification or reasons for the position, and it is not always apparent if the speakers would be able to provide a justification if they were pressed. Indeed, there is good reason to expect that in at least some cases, the speakers would fail to provide reasons in support of their moral position, and present as morally dumbfounded (e.g., Haidt et al., 2000; McHugh et al., 2017; McHugh, Zhang, et al., 2023; see also MacNab, 2016; Sim, 2016).

Moral dumbfounding occurs when people maintain a moral judgment even though they cannot provide a reason in support of this judgment (Haidt et al., 2000; McHugh et al., 2017). While perhaps not as prevalent as initially thought (e.g., Royzman et al., 2015; see also McHugh et al., 2020), there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that it is a robust phenomenon (with rates of dumbfounded responding ranging from 9% to 36% depending on the scenario and the population, see McHugh, Zhang, et al., 2023).

Previous research has demonstrated that under cognitive load, dumbfounded responding can increase (McHugh, McGann, et al., 2023), providing support for a dual-process explanation of moral dumbfounding. Here we extend this finding and attempt to develop an experimental manipulation that can reduce dumbfounded responding. In line with a dual-process approach, and drawing on construal-level theory (Förster et al., 2004; Liberman et al., 2002) we aim to test whether distancing manipulations designed to facilitate abstract/analytical thinking can increase reason-giving and reduce moral dumbfounding.

Moral Dumbfounding as a Conflict in Dual-Processes

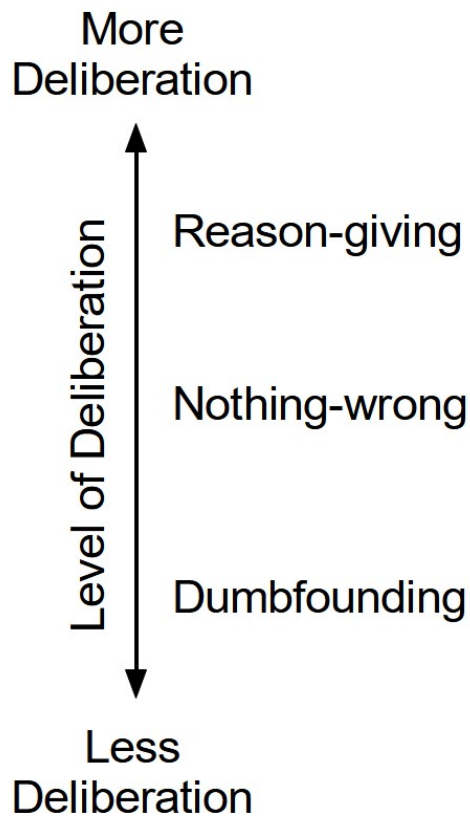
McHugh, McGann, et al. (2023) present a dual-process explanation of moral dumbfounding. Specifically, they draw on dual-process theories of reasoning and moral judgment (e.g., Bago & De Neys, 2019; Cushman, 2013; Greene, 2008), to explain moral dumbfounding as occurring as a result of a conflict in dual-processes (e.g., Bonner & Newell, 2010). Conflicts in dual-processes occur when a habitual/intuitive response is different from a response that results from deliberation (e.g., base-rate neglect Bonner & Newell, 2010; De Neys & Glumicic, 2008). For example in classic base-rate neglect studies, participants are provided with a base rate (e.g., a sample contains descriptions of 995 women and 5 men). Participants are then provided with a description apparently taken at random from the sample and asked to estimate the probability that the person described is male. In cases where the description appears to resemble a stereotypical man, the intuitive response (judgement based on the description) is in conflict with the deliberative response (accounting for the base rates, see De Neys, 2014).

Understanding dumbfounding as a conflict in dual-processes requires the responses in the dumbfounding paradigm to be mapped according their relative amount of deliberation. McHugh, McGann, et al. (2023) propose this mapping for each of the three responses, reason-giving, nothing-wrong, and dumbfounding. They propose that providing a reason for a moral judgment (reason-giving) involves the most deliberation, providing a dumbfounded response (dumbfounding) involves the least amount of deliberation, and selecting “There is nothing wrong” (nothing-wrong) involves less deliberation than reason-giving, but more deliberation than dumbfounding (see Figure 1). This mapping allows for testable predictions regarding the influence of specific experimental manipulations on the rates of these different responses in the dumbfounding paradigm.

One such prediction is that in situations where deliberation is inhibited, rates of reason-giving should be reduced and rates of of dumbfounding (or nothing-wrong) should be higher. McHugh, McGann, et al. (2023) tested this prediction and demonstrated that a cognitive load manipulation (requiring participants to attend to a

Figure 1

Hypothesized level of deliberation for each response type in the dumbfounding paradigm



Note. Reproduced from McHugh et al., (2023)

secondary task while responding to the moral dumbfounding protocol) led to reduced rates of reason-giving and higher rates of dumbfounding (McHugh, McGann, et al., 2023).

Another prediction of this approach is that under conditions where deliberative responding is more likely, rates of reason-giving should increase and rates of dumbfounding (or nothing-wrong) should decrease. We draw on research on construal level theory and psychological distance (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010), and predict that under conditions of increased psychological distance, rates of reason-giving should be higher.

Psychological distance is linked with construal level theory such that increased psychological distance is associated with higher level construals (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance is the degree to which something is removed from direct

experience. There are four dimensions of psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010): temporal distance (thinking about past/future events), spatial distance (thinking about spatially remote locations), social distance (perspective taking), and hypotheticality (thinking about hypothetical situations).

According to construal level theory, greater psychological distance is associated with higher level construals, while decreased psychological distance is associated with lower level construals. Construal level is related to abstraction, whereby higher levels of construal are associated with more abstract thinking (Bar-anan et al., 2006). Importantly for the current research, level of abstraction can be linked with the higher or lower levels of deliberation (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). Specifically, more abstract thinking is typically associated with more analytical or deliberative thinking, while less abstraction (more concrete thinking) is associated with less deliberative (more intuitive) thinking (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). We propose that manipulations that increase psychological distance and promote higher level construals, will yield more analytical/deliberative thinking, and will facilitate reason-giving in a moral dumbfounding task.

The Current Research

The current research tests the prediction that manipulations designed to increase psychological distance will facilitate reason-giving in a moral dumbfounding task. We will test two different manipulations across two domains of psychological distance, social distance and temporal distance. We predict that under increased psychological distance (social distance or psychological distance), rates of reason-giving will be higher than in a control group or under reduced psychological distance.

Method

Results

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