

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).

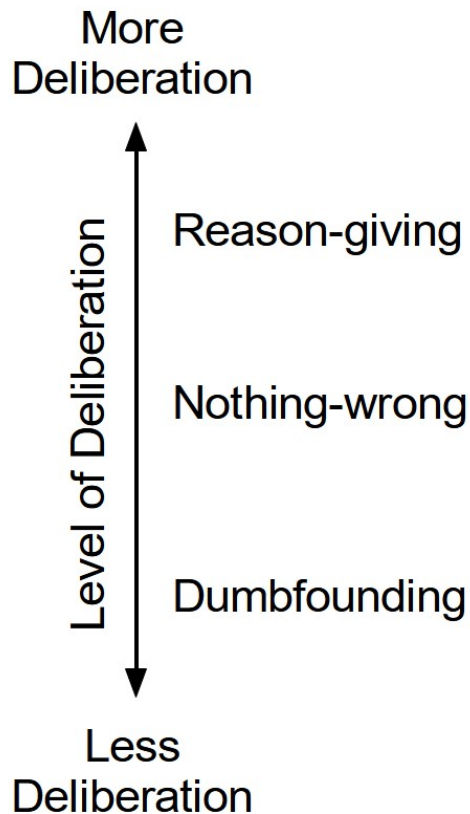
Moral dumbfounding occurs when people maintain a moral judgment even though they cannot provide a reason in support of this judgment (Haidt et al., 2000; McHugh et al., 2017). While perhaps not as prevalent as initially thought (McHugh et al., 2020; see Royzman et al., 2015), there is a growing body 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.

A Dual-Process Perspective on Moral Dumbfounding

McHugh, McGann, et al. (2023) 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). McHugh, McGann, et al. (2023) map the responses in the dumbfounding paradigm according to the relative amount of deliberation involved (see Figure 1). According to this view reason-giving involves the most deliberation, while dumbfounding involves the least (with nothing-wrong somewhere in between).

Figure 1

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



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

A key prediction of this approach 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 increased. McHugh, McGann, et al. (2023) tested this prediction and demonstrated that a cognitive load manipulation (requiring participants to attend to a secondary task while responding to the moral dumbfounding protocol) led to reduced rates of reason-giving and higher rates of dumbfounding.

Method

Results

{r child="sample_and_simulated_data_PDF.qmd"}

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