To: Niemi, Laura  
Cc: [michael.d.robinson@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.d.robinson@ndsu.edu)  
Subject: Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin - Decision on Manuscript ID PSPB-17-539  
  
28-Jan-2018  
  
Re: "Moral values pervade causal attribution: Evidence from the implicit verb causality task and explicit judgments" (MS # PSPB-17-539)  
  
Dear Dr. Niemi:  
  
I write concerning your PSPB submission titled “Moral values pervade causal attribution: Evidence from the implicit verb causality task and explicit judgments” (PSPB-17-539). I am thankful for the input from 3 expert reviewers. Each found the paper potentially interesting, but each found the presentation to be problematic. My sentiments were similar. Because there was interest in the paper, I am giving you a “major revision” decision. However, because the concerns were fairly serious, I would likely send a revision back out for review. I do not normally do this and you might wish to seek publication elsewhere because I cannot guarantee that the revision would be acceptable at this journal.  
  
The narrative was somewhat hard to follow. The introduction proper was very short (Reviewer 1) and it did not say enough about the moral values of interest and why they should matter for causal inferences (Reviewer 2). For example, I did not understand why binding values would be linked to object-based perceptions of causality. This prediction might need to be grounded to a greater extent in the moral foundations literature. I also think you need to describe the replication studies further, including issues of who these people were, whether the procedures were different than the main study, etc. There was a sense in which parts of the paper were rushed or somehow incomplete.  
  
The findings were numerous, but it was difficult to know which were of central interest or significance. Indeed, Reviewer 1 characterizes the paper as unclear and unfocused in a number of places. This is in part because the analyses seemed to address many questions, but the relevant hypotheses were not clearly stated (Reviewer 2). The footnotes and tables were also difficult to follow and the information needs to be unpacked in a more reader-friendly manner (Reviewer 3). In sum, there are major issues of presentation that would have to be tackled successfully in order for a revision to be successful.  
  
Another issue concerns the novelty of the work. The goals and actual findings of the paper seem to overlap highly with the published paper of Neimi and Young (2016). That paper, too, seemed to be focused on how individuating and binding values predict causal attributions in the case of minimal linguistic materials in which one character seems to harm another character. That paper, too, seems to have linked binding values to victim blaming processes, similar to the current paper. There may be new features or new findings to the present report, but this is not clear. This issue would have to be successfully resolved for a revision to be successful.  
  
Reviewer 3 presents some additional concerns that seem important. These causal attribution processes are heavily dependent on which particular verbs are included in the stimulus materials. To demonstrate generality, it is useful to have a fairly large sample of verbs, potentially those implicating various levels of harm or various types of action. In the present case, though, there were only 12 coercion-related verbs. Reviewer 3 is thus worried that the present findings might not generalize to a larger class of verbs that are relevant to the predictions. In fixing this problem, the reviewer would like to see a new study that includes a larger sample of these verbs and stimulus materials. The reviewer would also like you to speak about the size of the effects and the extent to which they replicate well across the three samples. The reviewer characterizes the present effect sizes as small in some cases and not fully replicable, particularly in the second replication study.  
  
In addition to the points above, I list some other concerns and suggestions:  
  
1) Reviewer 2 thinks that the explicit questions extend beyond questions of causality to questions of moral or dispositional character. He/she thinks that these factors may have influenced the results.  
2) Editor: There is right-justifying in some places, but not in others. Right justification should not be used.  
3) Editor: There seem to be two introduction sections, one of which is more conceptual and the other of which is more methodological. This is a somewhat unusual organization for an introduction section and I wonder whether the two sorts of introductions could be integrated more than they are.  
4) Editor: The footnotes should be numbered and presented on their own page. I agree with Reviewer 3 that more of this material should be integrated with the text, however (e.g., footnote G). There are also some sentences (in footnotes C and D) that seem to fall short of full sentences.  
5) Editor: There were about 6 explicit questions that were asked and you should provide more of a rationale for why they were grouped into two subscales.  
6) Editor: The introduction does not say enough about binding values – what they are, what we know about them from prior research, etc.  
7) Editor: I would prefer that the tables be presented on their own pages. Table 1 needs more of an explanation for what the dependent measure is.  
8) Editor: The analyses are hard to follow. I think there needs to be more explanation for what each analysis is testing, what was found, and how the results link up to the hypotheses (also see Reviewers 1 & 2 on this point).  
9) Editor: The Discussion header should be centered. You might also think about whether the discussion section is complete enough. More exploration of the findings and their significance could be useful. For example, were there any differences in the patterns for implicit and explicit judgments? What might these dissociations suggest about the relevant processes?  
10) Editor: p. 23, line 4 from bottom. There are 2 left parentheses.  
11) Editor: There should be a page break before the Reference header.  
12) Editor: The reference section needs work:  
- italics for all journals  
- delete issue numbers  
- the double-spacing should be consistent throughout  
- add a book title to Bott & Solstad (2014); Cham also needs a city or a country  
- the page numbers are not listed correctly for Cushman  
- Header (1958) needs a city or country of publisher  
- Hesslow needs an editor; there are other errors in this reference, too  
- city and publisher are in the wrong order for Holtgraves (2002)  
- etc.  
  
Conclusions  
  
The analysis is interesting. However, the paper was very hard to follow and there are also concerns about the novelty and replicability of the findings. Given the serious nature of the concerns, a revision would likely receive further external review. Under these circumstances, you might want to submit the paper elsewhere.  
  
Sincerely,  
Michael Robinson, AE, PSPB  
Email: [Michael.D.Robinson@ndsu.edu](mailto:Michael.D.Robinson@ndsu.edu)  
  
REVIEWER 1  
  
Review of “Moral values pervade causal attribution:  Evidence from the implicit verb causality task and explicit judgments”  
  
PSPB-17-539  
  
Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin  
  
This manuscript reports a single study examining the relationship between causal judgments and moral orientation.  Moral values were measured with the Moral Foundations Q. and Ps made (implicit and several explicit) attributions for a set of minimal sentences. There was a significant correlation between a binding orientation (emphasis on social bonds) and object attributions in the implicit task. The correlation between individualizing values (emphasis on autonomy) and performance on the implicit attributions task was not significant.  Explicit attributions were related to moral values as predicted.  Some of the findings were qualified by gender.  
  
This is a difficult paper to review.  There may be some interesting findings here but it’s difficult to tell. The paper is all over the place. There’s a whole lot of analyses and results but their significance is not at all clear. Part of the problem is that the introduction is extremely brief (less than one and a half pages), and so it’s difficult to tell what’s at stake here. Also, the relationship between binding values and victim blaming has been demonstrated previously.  So the contribution made here is not entirely clear to me.  The most interesting finding for me was the correlation between binding values and an object patient bias in the implicit task. But then the individualizing values relationship with the implicit task was not significant.   I’m not sure that there’s enough here to warrant publication in PSPB.  
  
Additional comments:  
  
It would be helpful in the introduction to provide some background on moral events and binding/individuating values and how these differing orientations might be related to attributions, both explicit and implicit.  
  
Figure 1 is confusing (it’s not clear what the right half is depicting).  
  
In sum, this is a potentially interesting paper but one that is unclear and unfocused; in my opinion the present version does not warrant publication in PSPB.  
  
REVIEWER 2  
  
The authors present a single study (with two replications) examining the impact of binding moral values on judgments of implicit and explicit causality. The experiments are well powered and present a consistent and interesting pattern of results. Moreover, the authors use of the implicit causality task is a promising new methodological tool for moral psychologists.  
  
My praise for the paper notwithstanding, I have two conceptual worries about the paper that could be addressed in a revision.  
  
First, the authors use several items to measure what they term “explicit causality” however, in addition to assessing causality related items like sufficiency and control, this item includes measures of deservingness and character. For example, Would [Amy] have been [coerced] by someone else?” and “Would [Bob] [coerce] someone else?” Both of these questions could be reasonably interpreted as inferences about the individuals’ moral character. If you ask most people “Would [Amy] have been [coerced] by someone else?” it seems like you’re asking “Is Amy a pushover? “Is she easy to manipulate?” This gets at an interesting type of victim blaming for sure, but it doesn’t speak at all to questions of causality (not at least in the way everyday people would understand them). Why not just ask: Who caused/is responsible for [event]?” Either one of these items would be a face-valid and straightforward way of testing for judgments of explicit causality.  
  
The authors argue against this approach in the general discussion, saying that: “We could also have asked more directly: “Who caused the rape? Amy or Bob?” However, we expect that such direct questioning would have been more likely to alert participants to social desirability concerns about victim-blaming” (p. 24). This argument is unconvincing as the considerable body on victim blaming research would indicate people with certain beliefs readily view victims as responsible for the harms that befall them.  
  
Second, I worry that the authors moral values measures might be measuring the same thing twice. The authors note that individuating values (care and fairness) correspond to sensitivity to victim suffering, and binding foundations (sanctity, along with authority and loyalty) correlate with viewing victims as contaminated. Insofar as the care foundation is defined by a sensitivity to victim suffering and sanctity is defined by concerns about contamination, aren’t the later two moral value measures redundant with the MFQ?  
  
Small items  
  
Surprisingly, for such a well written piece, the hypotheses are not well articulated. The authors clearly lay out the theoretical motivation for their work, and while the first hypothesis is clear, the remaining hypotheses were difficult to understand. To the authors credit they clean this up in the results section, but it would have been nice not to end the introduction with a question mark.  
  
on p 3-4 the author use an argue that: “Note that the same event (Sally shot Mary) may be immoral from the perspective of the moral dyad but morally obligatory from the perspective of binding values (Sally was ordered by her superior officer to shoot Mary, a battlefield deserter). These events are different by virtue of Sally’s different (implied) motivations. I would suggest modifying or dropping this example so that the events are actually parallel.  
  
REVIEWER 3  
  
Review PSPB-17-539  
  
The paper presents an Amazon Turk based study (N > 400) as well as two replication studies (N < 200, N > 700, respectively) employing an implicit verb causality paradigm.  
  
The most important research question addressed here is: Do causal explanations for moral events, as described by interpersonal verbs related to harmful events, differ according moral values of the participants?  
  
The author(s)’ answer to this question is: Yes.  
  
After carefully reading the paper, my answer is slightly different, that is: Yes, to a small degree (i.e., characterized by small effect sizes). To explain this point (and some other aspects of the paper), let us go into some detail:  
  
Specifically, it is hypothesized that participants endorsing ‘binding values’ to a higher degree are more likely to prefer object explanations (indicating some kind of victim-blaming); the opposite should be true for participants endorsing ‘individualizing values’. In examining this line of thought, I liked the way in which the existing literature is summarized and hypotheses derived, the denseness of the manuscript, the multitude of results generated, the (by-and- large) comprehensive data analyses, and the fact that the author(s) provide replication data.  
  
My critical remarks are as follows:  
  
Page 6, paragraph 2: Verb semantics as a predictor of implicit causality. I partially agree with the authors that “the only well-established predictor of IC is verb semantics”. However, I would like to see a more precise evaluation of the current state of affairs. First, when based on “fine-grained analyses of semantic and syntactic features”, the pertinent studies in the field typically reveal large (sometimes even more-than-large) effect-sizes. This does not imply that such effects are a characteristic of the entire population of interpersonal verbs, and it is impossible to estimate any “true” effect size concerning implicit verb causality, as such measures will always depend on verb selection effects. However, is seems noteworthy that verbs / verb groups exist which produce astounding and contrary effects (see also Rudolph in Journal Language and Social Psych, 1997; Rudolph & Forsterling, 1998). Second, starting with the seminal contribution on this field by Brown and Fish (1983), several authors attempted to identify and systematize elements of causal thinking inherent in language and guiding the causal inferences obtained in such studies (e.g., Fiedler & Semin, 1988, 1995; Rudolph & Forsterling, 1997). These concepts should be mentioned here, and it should be outlined how strong these effects typically are. As we will see, this point is crucial for some aspects of the results, as well as the conclusion based on these results.  
  
Page 8, paragraph 1: A strong disadvantage of the present study is that besides 12 filler verbs, only 12 verbs describing highly morally relevant verbs have been selected, that is, verbs involving harm and force. Also, the degree of harm and force may vary, e.g. ‘kill’ involves stronger harm than ‘manipulate’. In sum, a larger and more systematic selection of verbs would strongly improve the interpretability of results, which remains rather limited with this small sample of verbs. Given the high prestige and impact of PSPB, I believe a better (verb-) database is highly recommendable.  
  
Page 10 ff, results section:  
  
The footnotes make this paper difficult to read; I recommend integrating these into the text. The tables will benefit from revisions as well, as these are difficult to read. Changes should include consistent use of decimals (2 versus 3) and correct alignment of columns. Irrelevant information might be removed from all Tables, again, to increase readability.  
  
As Table 1 shows, Replication Study 2 does in fact (by and large) NOT replicate the effects of binding values on IC for harm/force verbs, as 10 of 12 correlations are below .10; the remaining two correlation being .14 and .105, respectively. This is the more astounding as this is the largest of the three samples. How can the authors resolve these inconsistencies between studies? Again, this problem might be addressed by analyzing larger samples of verbs. Limitation of the Amazon Turk procedure may play a role here is well?  
  
The most important impression I get from the results section, consistently across all kinds of analyses, is the observation that effect sizes are small (and often also very small). This seems to be true for each kind of statistical approach. In itself, this is not to be taken as a criticism – rather, the critical point here is that these consistent small effect size finding are not adequately represented in the paper, neither in the results nor in the discussion section. This point is the more important as we know about the large (and often: huge) effect sizes in implicit causality research, especially when being based on more fine-grained verb selections and larger samples of stimulus materials (verbs); see above.  
  
Discussion; Page 21, lines 18 – 26: The following quote is a good example of the above- mentioned argument; the authors state: “The results of the present research reveal that people who differ in how much they endorse binding values (italics by authors for the following phrase:) interpret the causal structure of events differently.” However, an adequate description of the obtained results should read as “...interpret the causal structure of events slightly differently”. I believe that these small effects are noteworthy (especially as these are by and large quite consistent, though not entirely consistent) – however, an adequate account of what the data actually tell us is needed. Several similar phrases occur throughout the results and discussion section (same is true for the concluding remark of the discussion).  
  
In sum, what is strongly needed here is a more precise and sometimes more critical way of describing and interpreting the obtained data.  
  
Overall Recommendation: I believe it is possible to address the majority of the critical issues I raised here efficiently. One major exception is the rather limited sample of verbs / events selected and investigated here. In my eyes, it seems highly desirable to perform new studies with a larger sample of verbs (including systematic variations of degree or severity of harm). In this case, I believe, a revised version of present paper (with new data) is likely to make a publishable contribution to the field.