

# **Can primed free will beliefs have an effect on our moral responsibility appraisals of hypothetical agents?**

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Do you believe that you are in control of all your behaviours, and that the possibility of choice exists? Additionally, do you ever consider the processes that may impact how you judge behaviours from a moral standpoint?

Existing research has suggested that our beliefs regarding free will may actually have an impact on our own moral behaviours. For example, Vohs and Schooler (2008) demonstrated that individuals who were primed against free will beliefs were significantly more likely to cheat in mathematical and financial tasks. Additionally, Baumeister et al. (2009) demonstrated that behaviours like volunteering to help individuals were greater in participants who believed in free will, compared to those who did not, and they were also less likely to display various other aggressive and antisocial behaviours. These implications suggest that our beliefs about free will can sincerely impact how we behave. Although these findings are relatively scarce and undertested, they led to some pondering; might the same apply to our assessments of moral responsibility in others?

Data was collected on online study platforms from 114 participants across twenty-six nationalities. Participants were randomly allocated into two experimental conditions, and then asked to read one of two short texts corresponding to their condition; these texts were designed to prime (influence!) either for or against a belief in free will. After reading the passage, participants were then asked to use a binary scoring system to judge the perceived moral responsibility of hypothetical agents across 16 vignettes, which depicted a multitude of events and outcomes of varying severity. Various other questionnaires were included as distractors and for potential covariate analyses, including the FAD-Plus scale (Paulhus & Carey, 2011), which measured pre-existing beliefs regarding free will.

While free will condition was hypothesized to be a significant predictor of moral responsibility appraisal scores, the results of this main hypothesis were non-significant, indicating that there was insufficient evidence to suggest that any findings were not due to chance. However, FAD-Plus scores were positively correlated with moral responsibility scores, and were also a significant predictor of them. This suggests that a link between free will beliefs and moral responsibility appraisals is present, therefore illustrating that further investigation into this relationship, as well as increased development of more refined methodological designs, is needed in future research.

If you're interested, discuss with a friend or loved one about what the concepts of 'free will' and 'moral responsibility' might mean to you. They may initiate fruitful discourse and you may find yourself learning alternative perspectives about the world we live in. The beauty of these abstract and nuanced concepts is that they are personal to everyone, and this allows for an incredibly rich set of experiences, opinions, and beliefs to be discussed. These phenomena may have noteworthy implications that require further exploration in scientific research, but this exploration starts within YOU!