

Can Probability Shape Moral Decisions? Probability as Psychological Distance*

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The present study proposes that probability (How likely is an event X to happen) would influence how people make moral decisions. When an event is unlikely, due to their uncertain and abstract nature, psychological distance is augmented and people construe these events in terms of general moral principles rather than attenuating situation-specific considerations. On the other hand, when an event is highly likely, psychological distance decreases, leading people to consider specific situational costs and benefits. 3 studies test these assumptions. Study 1 confirms probability as one dimension of psychological distance. Building on study 1, study 2 and 3 test the effect of probability in willingness to conduct positive and negative moral behavior. As predicted, when probability is low, people are more willing to act according to moral principles, exhibiting higher willingness for positive moral behavior and less willingness in being involved with negative moral behavior.

Keywords: Psychological distance, Moral judgment, Probability, Construal level theory

When people are confronted with situations such that they are asked whether it's wrong for a brother and sister to make love secretly with a precaution, no doubt people will judge this act as morally wrong. But when people are asked again to provide rational reasons (concrete pros and cons) for their judgment, to address a reasonable grounds that entitle them to condemn this act, they are only left to say that it's wrong because it's wrong (Haidt, 2001). There are certain values such as love, life,

purity and justice that people resist trade-offs for any kind of benefit or circumstances. These values, as known as protected values, involve an overgeneralization of the no-tradeoff principle which don't allow for contextual information that may justify violation of the rule (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). When damage is done to these sacred values, people automatically respond with negative emotion and gut feeling that something is definitely wrong. According to Haidt (2001), these gut feelings,

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as known as moral intuitions, are products of a Darwinian “moral sense” that has evolved through natural selection, and are also influenced by cultural context and beliefs of the individual’s peer group. Haidt (2001) also proposes that moral judgments are typically the direct products of these moral intuitions, which reasoning comes afterwards, motivated to effortfully defend our automatic intuitions. Although our moral intuition is an effective tool enabling us to rapidly detect moral transgressions and to distinguish between the right and wrong, many of recent research in moral psychology have suggested that the reliance on general moral principles and moral intuitions are not unconditional, but rather apt to other environmental circumstances and conditions. Bartels (2008) has demonstrated that moral judgment is subject to task constraints that shift evaluative focus (to moral rules vs. to consequences) and individual thinking styles (intuitive vs. deliberate). As the consequences of choice are made more salient, and as the moral agent endorses in a deliberate thinking style, emotional reactions to moral transgressions are attenuated by consideration of costs and benefits in a given moral situation thus leading to a more rational and utilitarian moral judgment and choices. Furthermore, Greene et al. (2010) suggested that moral dilemmas themselves influence moral judgment. The more emotionally engaging a dilemma is, the more people rely on moral intuition for their judgments.

Along with this perspective, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate psychological distance as a determinant of whether or not people rely on moral principles and relatively neglect contextual information. Specifically, people would be more morally strict when psychological distance is far than when psychological distance is near.

Construal level theory

Predictions of this article are based on construal level theory (CLT, Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003), a theory of psychological distance and level of mental construal. Construal level theory explains how our cognitive interpretation and mental images are constructed depending on psychological distance. When we are trying to draw an image of an event happening 10 years later, these events are yet inexperienced, leaving specific situational factors unsure, therefore people tend to construe distant future events in holistic fashion, gist-based, focusing on global and general aspects. For example, one could imagine buying a valentine’s day chocolate for a lover in 10 years time, but this image would be rather blurry, leaving with abstract words as expensive and big. But if one had to buy a chocolate at the very moment, other situational information are relatively more clear, and there are more things to be considered such as specific place or shop to buy the chocolate, exact color of the wrapping paper, and the fact that one may not have enough money to buy one in the first place. As in this case, when we imagine an event that is in close distance, situational and contextual information that were underestimated start to come into mind. In short, in high-level construal, weight of abstract, global aspects are dominant while secondary and contextual aspects are also highlighted in low-level construal.

The evidence for the associations between psychological distance and construal level is demonstrated in visual perception, categorization and person perception. In a series of studies, when participants anticipated working on the actual task in the more distant future (Forster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004), when they thought the actual task was less likely to take place (Wakslak, Trope,

Liberman, & Alony, 2006), and when social distance was enhanced by priming of high social status (P. K. Smith & Trope, 2006), their performance improved in detecting the global pattern. In the same sense, when participants imagined objects in a distant future than a near future, they grouped objects into fewer, broader categories, suggesting when psychological distance is far, people chunk behavior sequences into broader segments (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In person perception research, as the psychological distance increases, the tendency to represent a person abstractly in terms of his or her dispositions increases whereas in near psychological distance, the interpretation of others' behavior is more situationally constrained (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

The theory of construal level is applied in various judgment and decision making research. In goal-directed activities, high-level construal is associated with desirability of the activity's end state, and low-level represents feasibility of attaining this end state (Liberman & Trope, 1998). CLT also predicts that as the point of purchase is distant, consumers would prioritize primary features of products but when the point of purchase is near, primary and secondary features are both considered (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). In the context of moral judgments, Eyal, Liberman, and Trope (2009) demonstrated that moral violations are judged more harshly and moral virtues are judged more positively from a distant temporal and social distance. In terms of CLT, protected values and general moral principles such as don't steal, don't lie are high-level constructs, due to their general and decontextualized nature. However, when a given moral situation is concrete and psychological distance is near, people would take into account of more situational constraints, thus the moral judgments in those situations would be less extreme

and rigid. Our research also applies the theory of psychological distance and construal level in moral judgments. Specifically we propose that probability, as one dimension of psychological distance would affect how people express their moral intentions.

Probability as psychological distance

According to CLT, there are multiple dimensions of psychological distance. Most widely accepted concepts of psychological distance are time, space, probability, and social distance. Furthermore, the psychological distances are interrelated. For instance, remote locations bring to mind the distant rather than near future, others than oneself, and unlikely than likely events (Trope & Liberman, 2010). This interchangeability implies that increase of distance in any of these dimensions would result in more abstract, global mental construal whereas decrease of distance would lead to lower-level, concrete mental construal. Probability, one dimension of psychological distance that this article mostly collaborates its logic with, also influences a set of distinct but related variables (e.g., identification of ends vs. means, broad vs. specific categorization, global vs. local processing) that are implicated in a general shift between abstract and concrete processing (Wakslak & Trope, 2009). When we draw mental images of improbable events, due to their uncertain and unlikely nature, are easy to be construed in high level while highly probable events are construed in terms of concrete and detailed features (Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006).

Imagine a scenario that one day an old lady approaches you asking for help with her heavy groceries. She tells you her house is just one block away and it won't take long. You are either told that it is hardly unlikely that the event would actually take place or there is a very good chance

of occurrence. Would you or would you not help the lady? When making a decision of whether or not to help an old lady given that the event is improbable, one is uncertain of the specific situation but may consider it right to help the lady, since helping is generally a good thing to do. But when the event is sure to happen and specific situation is easier to visualize, other considerations may come to mind such that one has an important appointment and there is no time to be held-up.

The aim of this article is to investigate the effect of probability as psychological distance on moral intentions. We expect that low probability cue would induce high-level construal, thus leading people to rely more on general moral principles in their decisions. In consequence, when people are given low probability cue, that the moral event is less likely to actually take place, they would exhibit higher willingness to perform positive moral behavior and lower willingness for negative moral behavior. On the other hand, when people are told that the event is highly likely to happen, people would consider given situation in a more concrete fashion, weigh the situational costs and benefits which would lead to less willingness to perform positive moral behavior and higher willingness to tolerate moral violations. Three studies test these predictions. Study 1 is a preliminary study, testing probability as one dimension of psychological distance. It verifies the prediction that several dimensions of psychological distance are interrelated, therefore people would make lower probability estimates on temporally distant actions, and high probability estimates on temporally near actions. Based on the results of study 1, study 2 and 3 assess moral intentions of low and high probable events.

Present research extends current literature on probability as psychological distance which most

works have their focus on the effect of mental construal on subjective probability estimates. Contrarily, our research investigates the effect of probability cue on construal level and subsequent decision making, specifically in the domain of morality. In addition, in study 2 and 3, rather than adopting scenarios frequently used in current moral literature such as incest and adultery which are rather extreme accompanying strong negative emotional responses, we aim to broaden the context to a more ordinary moral regulation using scenarios that people may experience at one time or another in daily lives. For this purpose we adopt the framework of Janoff-Bulman et al. (2009), which emphasizes the role of everyday self-regulation in Morality. Their work suggests that morality is facilitated by regulating personal behaviors that reflect self-interest and self-indulgence, by engaging in moral actions to attain positive outcomes while refraining from immoral actions to avoid negative outcomes. In line with this perspective, we predict low probability cue would induce relatively higher willingness to conduct moral acts and lower willingness to tolerate immoral actions than high probability cue.

Study 1

Prior to our main investigation, we conducted a preliminary study to confirm probability as one dimension of psychological distance. According to CLT, distance dimensions of psychological distance should be interrelated meaning that moving a stimulus on one dimension of psychological distance may cause people to perceive the stimulus as being moved on other dimensions as well (Liberian, Sagristano & Trope, 2002). Based on this assumption, in study 1 we examine the effect of temporal distance on probability estimates. We

predict that distant temporal distance would foster low probability estimates, while near temporal distance would foster higher probability estimates.

Method

Participants

43 undergraduate students (25 male, average age 22) from a university in Seoul participated for course credit. They were randomly assigned to two temporal distance conditions.

Procedure

Participants were presented with 3 short vignettes in Korean describing moral transgressions adopted from Eyal et al. (2008). Vignettes described a family member who cleaned the house with an old Korean flag, a sexual intercourse between siblings and a married woman who had an affair. Participants were instructed to imagine that the events would happen tomorrow (near temporal distance) or next year (distant temporal distance). After reading each vignette, participants were asked of their opinions on how likely those actions would actually take place in reality. They were to rate their likelihood on a scale ranging from 1 (not likely) to 8 (very likely).

Results and Discussion

The effect of temporal distance on probability

judgments on 3 vignettes were examined. Consistent with CLT, participants in distant future condition were significantly more likely to make lower probability estimates ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.59$) than participants in near future condition ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .90$), $t(41) = 3.631$, $p < .001$. Table 1 presents the participants' mean likelihood judgments in 3 vignettes. The findings confirmed that probability is interrelated to temporal distance, as one dimension of psychological distance. Therefore in study 2 and 3, we use probability as a cue to induce different levels of psychological distance to investigate their effects on moral intentions.

Study 2

In study 2, we examine the effect of probability as psychological distance on participants' willingness to conduct moral behavior. Current research distinguishes between two forms of morality, which positive morality is sensitive to positive outcomes, focused on what we should do and negative morality is relevant to what we should not do, sensitive to negative outcomes (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh & Hepp, 2009). In other words, in two forms of morality, one is involved in a prosocial behavior, such as doing what is right, and the other is involved in duty-based behavior, not doing what is wrong. Study 2 investigates the relationship between probability and positive morality using 3 scenarios,

Table 1. Probability estimates as a function of temporal distance

Vignette	Near future	Distant future	<i>t</i>
	Mean (Standard Deviations)	Mean (Standard Deviations)	
1 (flag)	2.96 (1.87)	1.75 (1.29)	2.49*
2 (Incest)	2.39 (1.50)	1.60 (0.75)	2.23*
3 (Affair)	4.74 (1.57)	3.75 (1.37)	2.18*
Total	3.65 (0.90)	2.82 (0.59)	3.631**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

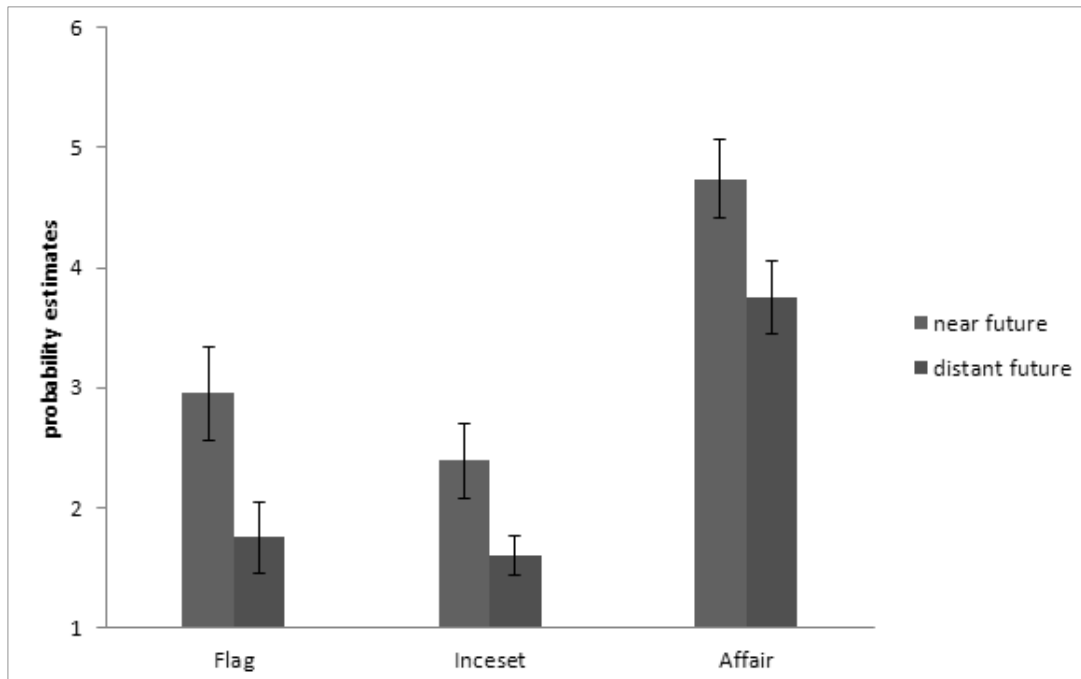


Figure 1. Probability estimates as a function of temporal distance

predicting people would rely more on general moral principles and display higher intention for positive morality in low probability condition.

Method

Participants

47 undergraduate students (31 male, average age 23) from a university in Seoul participated for course credit. They were randomly assigned to high and low probability condition.

Procedure

Participants were presented with 3 short vignettes in Korean. Each vignette described a situation which calls for a positive moral behavior as well as situational circumstances that may justify the disregard the need for help. The contents of vignettes were adopted from Janoff-Bulman et al.

(2009), partly modified to fit the purpose of this study (addition of low-level, situational information). Contents of vignettes include making a donation, helping an elderly and volunteering for school tour. Participants were instructed to imagine that the events are highly unlikely to happen (low probability condition) or highly likely to happen (high probability condition). An example of a vignette is as follows:

You are in a supermarket, where you see an elderly woman in front of you having trouble carrying her groceries. You are in a hurry and know you could just pass her by. You consider whether to help or carry on with your business.

After reading each vignette, participants reported their willingness to perform positive moral behavior on a scale ranging from 1 (definitely will not) to 8

(definitely will).

Results and discussion

The effect of probability on willingness ratings were examined across 3 vignettes. As expected, participants in the low probability condition exhibited higher willingness to perform positive moral behaviors ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.13$) than participants in the high probability condition ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.87$),

$t(45) = -4.891, p < .001$. Table 2 presents the participants' mean willingness in 3 vignettes. As predicted, when probability of events were not likely, participants showed higher willingness to act according to general moral principle, displaying higher intention for positive moral behavior while participants were less willing when probability of events were very likely.

Table 2. Willingness to perform positive moral behavior as a function of probability

Vignette	high probability	low probability	<i>t</i>
	Mean (Standard Deviations)	Mean (Standard Deviations)	
1 (donation)	4.00 (1.96)	5.38 (2.12)	-2.31*
2 (elderly)	4.43 (2.04)	5.75 (1.80)	-2.35*
3 (school tour)	2.87 (1.84)	4.50 (1.87)	-3.01**
Total	3.77 (0.87)	5.21 (1.13)	-4.891**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

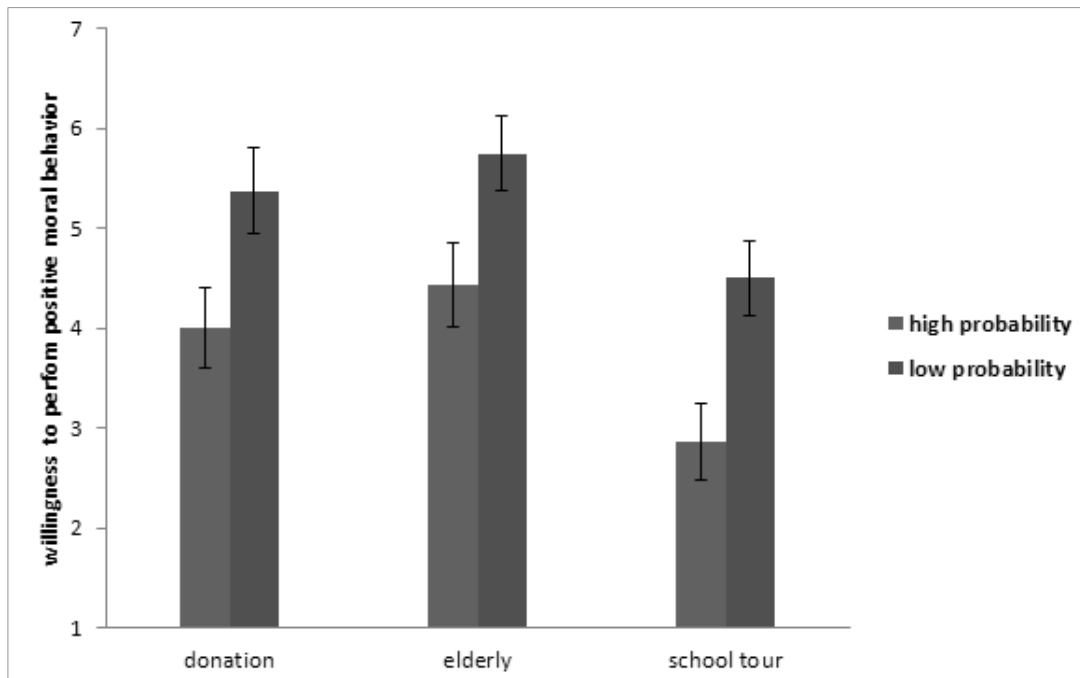


Figure 2. Willingness to perform positive moral behavior as a function of probability

Study 3

If manipulation of probability induced differences in willingness to conduct positive moral behavior, the tendency should also be observed in willingness not to conduct negative moral behavior. Not doing what is wrong requires personal control in the face of socially undesirable behaviors on issues of money, sex and alcohol (Janoff-Bulman et al. 2009). Therefore, following general moral principles would be displaying a self effort in resisting these behaviors despite temptations of self-benefit. Study 3 investigates the relationship between probability and negative morality using 3 scenarios. We predict that people would relatively rely more on general moral principles and display lower negative morality in low probability condition than high probability condition.

Method

Participants

50 undergraduate students (28 male, average age 23) from a university in Seoul participated for course credit. They were randomly assigned to high and low probability condition.

Procedure

Participants were presented with 3 short vignettes. Each vignette described a negative moral

behavior as well as situational circumstances that may justify the failure of self-restraint. Contents of vignettes include overspending despite being in debt, adding false information in resume, keeping cash from a lost wallet. Participants were instructed to imagine that the events are highly unlikely to happen (low probability condition) or highly likely to happen (high probability condition). An example of a vignette is as follows:

While walking on a street, you find a lost wallet. Inside the wallet there are enough cash and a driver's licence of the owner. It looks like the owner is affluent whereas you are recently in need of some money and there is no one around so you know you could just keep the money. You consider whether to keep the wallet or take the wallet to a nearby police station where they can return the wallet to the owner.

After reading each vignette, participants reported their willingness to perform negative moral behavior on a scale ranging from 1 (definitely will not) to 8 (definitely will).

Results and discussion

The effect of probability on willingness ratings were examined across 3 vignettes. As expected, participants in the low probability condition exhibited lower willingness to perform negative moral

Table 3. Willingness to perform negative moral behavior as a function of probability

Vignette	high probability	low probability	<i>t</i>
	Mean (Standard Deviations)	Mean (Standard Deviations)	
1 (debt)	5.13 (1.70)	3.50 (2.35)	2.81**
2 (resume)	4.13 (2.05)	2.92 (1.92)	2.14*
3 (wallet)	3.96 (1.97)	2.54 (1.94)	2.57*
Total	4.40 (1.04)	2.99 (1.21)	4.429**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

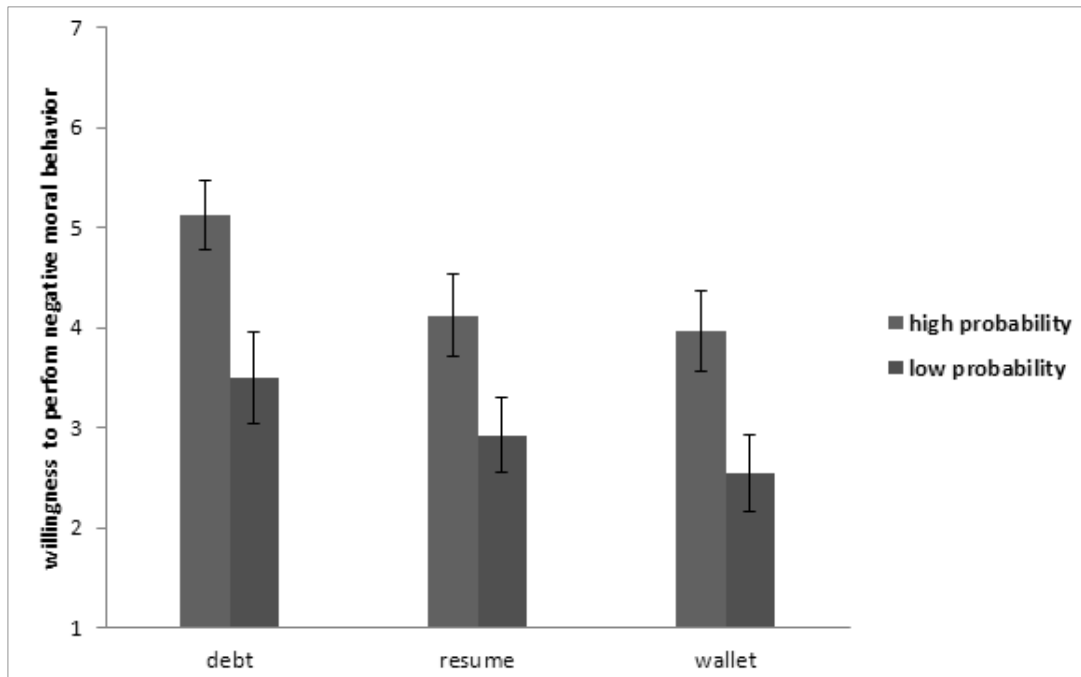


Figure 3. Willingness to perform negative moral behavior as a function of probability

behaviors ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.21$) than participants in the high probability condition ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(48) = 4.428$, $p < .001$. As predicted, when probability of events were not likely, participants showed higher willingness to act according to general moral principle, displaying lower intention for negative moral behaviors while participants were more willing when probability of events were very likely.

General discussion

Moral principles concerning issues of fairness, purity and harm are essential in human society in that they prevent and avoid dangers in the moral realm, maximize security and contribute to the social welfare. Individuals expect to be rewarded for good behavior, and to be punished for violation of these rules. But nevertheless, recent research in moral

psychology have demonstrated that applying these moral rules on judgments are subject to other influences.

The present research suggests probability (how likely is an event to occur), as one dimension of psychological distance, to affect one's willingness to act according to the moral rules. Conforming to our prediction in the framework of CLT, when people were told that the events presented were unlikely, they adopted general moral principles in their decisions thus exhibiting higher willingness to conduct positive moral behavior and lower willingness in being involved in negative moral behavior. On the other hand, when people were told that the events were highly likely, they incorporated contextual, low-level information which led them to exhibit lower willingness for positive moral behavior and more acceptance of negative moral behavior. In this case, it seems that when probability is high,

people not only consider moral principles but also to some extent consider their own situational costs and benefits.

Both strengths and limitations lie in the scenarios that we have used in our studies. Current research in moral psychology makes a distinction between personal and impersonal moral dilemmas in which personal dilemmas are intuitively up close and personal, putatively more emotional and impersonal dilemmas are less emotional. Throwing people off a sinking lifeboat would be an example of a personal dilemma and the case of keeping money found in a lost wallet is an example of impersonal (Greene et al. 2001). For the purpose of our research in reflecting moral decisions of people's everyday life moral regulation, we have used impersonal scenarios. Not everyday people encounter situations of life and death, it may be once in a lifetime that we find ourselves agonizing over whether to steal an organ in order to distribute them to five others. In this aspect, we extend current research of moral psychology which has focused more on emotional, personal dilemmas to people's daily moral judgments and choices. It is true that people generally prefer virtue over vice, and we all strive to be a good person, but when a moral event actually happens (high probability), at this very moment (near temporal distance) to oneself (near social distance), it's important to be a good person but it's also important to calculate practical utility of the situation. However, the emotions that we possess toward moral violations of life, love and purity are important elements guiding our moral decisions. Thus, we would predict that if the scenarios were to evoke strong emotional responses, for example if strong emotion of sympathy was evoked for the elderly struggling with her groceries or disgust was associated with adding false information in the resume, it is possible that being in a high

probability condition would foster more vivid and strong experience of those emotions therefore lead to higher willingness for a positive moral behavior and lower willingness for negative moral behavior. This prediction awaits future research.

Also, another limitation is that we have not directly demonstrated the level of mental construal resulting from probability manipulation in study 2 and 3. Based on current established literature on psychological distance and construal level, we have confirmed probability as one dimension of psychological distance in study 1 and assumed that probability cue would alter mental construal level. Nevertheless, to conclude definitely that the effect of probability on moral intentions were due to altered construal level, not only demonstrating that probability is one dimension on psychological distance but also directly measuring altered level of construal level using categorization and visual perception tasks would strongly supplement the results.

Our research on the effect of probability on moral judgments has its implication in that we live in an environment where we are overexposed to numerous probabilities and yet there are not enough research on the effect of probability on our cognition and judgments. Probability is widespread and closely related to our everyday life such that people are accustomed to substituting daily social issues and events into probabilities. The chance that it will rain, the chance of winning a lottery, and the chance of smokers to get cancer relative to non-smokers are some of the examples of probabilities that we normally encounter. Even when people are making decisions on public policy, subconsciously we calculate their pros and cons based on a mental simulation of how much one would actually encounter situations related to the policy. Our research suggest that probability, being a dimension of psychological distance, is an important

determinant in altering the level of our cognitive mind-sets. They are strong enough to make differences in people's willingness to engage in a certain moral behavior, which is a crucial issue in determining a society's welfare. We suggest that this effect of probability could be extended to domains regarding public policies and other social issues. Especially when decisions are made on public policies, they are important in that they aim to provide order and protection of general principles cherished by the society but also those issues are closely related to situational costs and benefits for each of the people relevant to the policy. Therefore, for decision makers of such policies, it is important to take into consideration of both higher, general values and situational, contextual pros and cons. It would help to be aware that either overestimation or underestimation of probabilities regarding these issues could lead them to fallacies in either omitting the higher principles and values or to either neglecting more realistic consequences that the policies would bring.

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Appendix

Scenarios in study 1

Scenario 1

당신의 가족 중 한 명이 장롱을 정리하는 도중 오래되고 헤진 태극기를 발견합니다. 그/그녀는 태극기를 작은 조각으로 잘라 집안 청소 용도의 걸레로 사용하기로 결정합니다. 이와 같은 상황이 1년 후/내일 일어날 것이라고 가정해 주십시오.

Scenario 2

어떤 남매가 단 둘이 집에 있습니다. 그들은 딱 한번만 성관계를 맺기로 결심합니다. 여동생은 이미 피임약을 복용 중이며 그녀의 남자형제는 콘돔을 사용합니다. 그들은 성관계를 즐기지만 다시는 하지 않기로 결정하며 서로에게 비밀로 지킬 것을 약속합니다. 이와 같은 상황이 1년 후/내일 일어날 것이라고 가정해 주십시오.

Scenario 3

행복한 결혼 생활을 하고 있는 어떤 기혼의 여성은 우연으로 만난 남자의 구애를 받아들입니다. 그녀는 그와 단 한 번 성관계를 갖습니다. 이와 같은 상황이 1년 후/내일 일어날 것이라고 가정해 주십시오.

Scenarios in study 2

Scenario 1

당신은 집에 가는 길에 불우이웃을 위해 기부금을 모집하고 있는 사람들을 지나칩니다. 그 중 한 명이 다가와 당신에게 기부금을 요청합니다. 현재 당신에게는 몇 천원이 있으며 당신은 그 돈을 기부할지, 평소 필요했던 다른 물품을 구입하는 용도로 쓸지 고민합니다. 이와 같은 상황이 실제로 당신에게 일어날 확률은 매우 높습니다 (100분의 99)/ 매우 낮습니다 (100분의 1).

Scenario 2

당신은 장을 보고 있는 도중, 짐이 많은 할머니 한 분을 목격합니다. 당신은 시간이 촉박하여 빠르게 장을 봐야 하는 상황이지만, 할머니의 짐을 들어드려야 할지 말아야 할지를 고민합니다. 이와 같은 상황이 실제로 당신에게 일어날 확률은 매우 높습니다 (100분의 99)/ 매우 낮습니다 (100분의 1).

Scenario 3

당신이 학교 캠퍼스를 내려가는 도중, 봉사동아리 소속 학생이 다가와 당신에게 다가오는 주말 2시간 동안 저소

득층 중고등학생들에게 캠퍼스를 안내하는 자원봉사 도움을 요청합니다. 당신은 다가오는 주말 동안 숙제를 하기 위해 학교에 올 예정이지만, 자원봉사를 할지 고민합니다. 이와 같은 상황이 실제로 당신에게 일어날 확률은 매우 높습니다 (100분의 99)/ 매우 낮습니다 (100분의 1).

Scenarios in study 3

Scenario 1

당신은 최근 잦은 술자리 혹은 개인 쇼핑 등으로 많은 돈을 소비하여 현재 은행 잔고가 바닥이 난 상태입니다. 얼마 전에 당신은 용돈을 받았으며 지금부터 돈을 절약할 수 있지만 대신에 최근 당신의 마음에 들었던 고가의 물건을 떠올립니다. 이와 같은 상황이 실제로 당신에게 일어날 확률은 매우 높습니다 (100분의 99)/ 매우 낮습니다 (100분의 1).

Scenario 2

당신은 최근 취업 준비에 열중이지만 아직까지 회소식이 없습니다. 당신은 보다 인상적인 이력서를 준비하는 것이 취업에 중요하다고 생각하여, 사실이 아닌 몇 개의 정보를 추가할지 고민합니다. 이를 통해 당신은 취업에 성공할 수도 있지만, 다른 자격 있는 취업후보자들에게 피해를 줄 수도 있습니다. 이와 같은 상황이 실제로 당신에게 일어날 확률은 매우 높습니다 (100분의 99)/ 매우 낮습니다 (100분의 1).

Scenario 3

당신은 길을 가다 떨어진 지갑을 발견합니다. 지갑 안에는 몇 십 만원 상당의 현금과 지갑 주인의 운전면허증이 들어있습니다. 지갑 안의 현금과 신용카드를 보니 지갑 주인은 돈이 많아 보입니다. 반면 당신은 최근 돈이 궁한 상태이며 몇 푼의 돈이라도 도움이 될 수 있습니다. 주위에는 아무도 없으며, 당신은 지갑 안의 현금을 가질지, 지갑을 주변 파출소에 맡길지 고민합니다. 이와 같은 상황이 실제로 당신에게 일어날 확률은 매우 높습니다 (100분의 99)/ 매우 낮습니다 (100분의 1).

확률에 따른 심리적 거리감이 도덕적 의사결정에 미치는 영향

정혜승 정은경 손영우

연세대학교 심리학과

본 연구에서는 확률적 지각에 따른 심리적 거리감이 도덕적 의사결정에 미치는 영향을 알아보고자 한다. 특정 의사결정 상황에 직면하였을 때, 상황의 발생 확률이 낮을수록 사람들은 상황을 추상적이고 일반적인 수준에서 표상하게 되며, 발생확률이 높아질수록 보다 구체적이고 상황위주로 해석을 하게 된다. 이와 마찬가지로, 도덕적 의사결정 상황의 발생확률이 낮을수록 사람들은 '옳은 결정' 과 같은 추상적인 수준의 도덕적 판단을 내릴 가능성이 높으나, 발생확률이 높을수록 '옳은 결정' 뿐만이 아닌, '효율적'인 결정을 위해 세부적이고 주변적인 정보들을 함께 고려하게 된다. 이에 근거하여 본 연구는, 발생확률이 낮을수록 사람들은 보다 도덕적 원칙에 근거하는 의도성을 보일 가능성이 높고 의사결정 상황의 발생 확률이 높을수록 그러한 경향성이 낮아질 것이라 가정하여 세 개의 실험을 시행하였다. 실험 1은 예비실험으로서, 확률이 심리적 거리의 한 차원임을 확인하였다. 실험 2와 3에서, 상황의 발생확률이 낮을수록 사람들은 기부 및 자원봉사와 같은 긍정적인 도덕행동을 하려는 의사가 높으며, 이력서에 거짓정보 추가하기와 같은 부도덕적인 행동을 하려는 의사가 낮았다. 이와 반대로 상황의 발생확률이 높은 집단은 긍정적인 도덕행동에 대한 의사가 상대적으로 낮았으며 부도덕적인 행동에 대해 더 허용하는 경향을 보였다. 본 연구는 특정 의사결정 상황의 실제 발생 가능성을 가정하는 것으로도, 상황에 대한 해석방식과 그로 인한 의사결정이 달라짐을 확인하고 특히 이를 도덕적 의사결정에 적용하고자 하였다. 끝으로, 연구의 의의와 제한점 및 추후 연구 과제에 대해 논의하였다.

주요어: 확률, 이해수준이론, 심리적 거리감, 도덕적 의사결정

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