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Counterfactual Thinking and Victim Compensation: A Test of Norm Theory

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Norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) identifies factors that determine the ease with which alternatives to reality can be imagined or constructed. One assumption of norm theory is that the greater the availability of imagined alternatives to an event, the stronger will be the affective reaction elicited by the event. The present two experiments explore this assumption in the context of observers' reactions to victims. It was predicted that negative outcomes that strongly evoked positive alternatives would elicit more sympathy from observers than negative outcomes that weakly evoked positive alternatives. The ease of counterfactual thought was manipulated in the first experiment by the spatial distance between the negative outcome and a positive alternative, and in the second experiment by the habitualness of the actions that precipitated the victimization. Consistent with norm theory, subjects recommended more compensation for victims of fates for which a positive alternative was highly available. Implications of the results for various types of reactions to victims are discussed.

Consider two victims: a soldier who is killed on the last day of a war, a victim of a plane crash who switched to the fatal flight only minutes before take-off. If your reactions are similar to ours, the fates of these victims seem more "poignant" or "tragic" than those of the following two victims: a soldier who is killed six months before the end of a war and a victim of a plane crash who was booked on the fatal flight for three months. The outcome is clearly the same in these two sets of events, so why do they produce different reactions?

An explanation of this difference was proposed recently by Kahneman and Miller (1986). These authors contend that the affective impact of an event is influenced by its normality, which they define as the ease with which an alternative event can be imagined. The more strongly events evoke alternative

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outcomes, the more *abnormal* the events are, and the stronger is the emotional reaction that they elicit.

The normality of an outcome differs importantly from its probability. Judgments of probability are precomputed, whereas judgments of normality are postcomputed and reflect not what was expected but what the event itself evokes. In the airplane crash scenario, for example, it is not precomputed probability estimates that differentiate the two versions: the probability of being killed in a plane crash is unaffected by whether or not one switches flights. What differentiates the two versions is the postcomputed availability of a more positive alternative (Turnbull, 1981).

Kahneman and Miller (1986) proposed a number of principles that determine the abnormality of events as well as the affective reaction they elicit. One principle focuses on the distance (temporal or spatial) between the outcome and an imagined alternative outcome: the shorter the distance, the more abnormal the outcome. In the example of the soldier's death, it is easier to imagine the passage of 24 hours than 6 months and thus a death occurring 24 hours before the end of a war is more abnormal than one occurring 6 months before the end. A second principle is that outcomes that follow unusual actions are easier to undo mentally or imagine otherwise, than outcomes that follow routine actions. This principle is illustrated in the example involving the plane crash victims. Because it is unusual to switch flights, a death that follows this action is abnormal, and will evoke a stronger reaction than the identical outcome preceded by a more typical sequence.

The present two experiments explore the relevance of norm theory for an understanding of observers' reactions to victims of negative events. The rationale guiding these experiments is that the more abnormal a victim's fate, the more sympathy the victim will elicit from observers. Each experiment presented subjects with descriptions of negative fates and elicited their recommendations for victim compensation. The experiments differed in the means by which abnormality was manipulated.

EXPERIMENT 1

Kahneman and Miller (1986) proposed that it is easier to imagine alternatives to abnormal or unusual actions than to normal or routine actions. They further argued that consequences that follow from abnormal actions are themselves more abnormal than consequences that follow from normal actions. Kahneman and Tversky (1982) tested this hypothesis by asking subjects to predict the degree of regret that victims of two different car crashes would experience. In one case the victim had taken his usual route to work and in the other case he had taken an atypical route. Subjects were virtually unanimous in their anticipation that the latter (abnormal) victim would experience more regret. The present experiment attempted to extend Kahneman and Tversky's (1982) findings to the domain of sympathy. Specifically, it was predicted that negative outcomes that

follow abnormal actions would generate more sympathy in observers than ones that follow normal actions.

Method

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURE

Subjects were 164 volunteers recruited from an introductory psychology class. The study was described as being concerned with the factors that influence recommendations for victim compensation. Ostensibly, the goal of the experiment was to establish the amount of monetary payment that the public considers reasonable for various types of victims. Subjects were instructed to read a brief description of a victim who had recently applied for compensation and then decide upon monetary payment.

Subjects were provided with one of three descriptions that differed only in the abnormality of the outcome depicted. In all three conditions, the male victim was described as having lost the use of his right arm as a result of a gunshot wound. He had been shot when he walked in on a robbery occurring in a convenience store in his neighborhood. Further, they read that there were two convenience stores located near the victim's home, one of which he frequented more regularly than the other. In the normal outcome condition ($n = 58$), subjects read that on the night he was shot, the victim had gone to the store he most commonly frequented. We included two abnormal outcome conditions. In the first ($n = 48$), subjects read that on the night he was shot the victim had gone to the store that he rarely frequented for a "change of pace." In the second abnormal outcome condition ($n = 57$), subjects learned that the victim had gone to the store he rarely frequented because his usual store was temporarily closed for renovations. We employed two abnormal versions to assess whether the origins of the abnormal action (self-produced versus other-produced) would affect the sympathy evoked by the victim.

After reading the description, all subjects indicated on an 11-point scale how much money they believed the victim should receive in compensation for his loss (from zero dollars, 0, to one million dollars, 10). They were informed that the typical award was \$500,000 (5).

Results

A preliminary analysis revealed no significant difference between the two abnormal conditions ($t < 1$); thus, these conditions were collapsed for the subsequent analysis.

It was hypothesized that subjects would assign greater compensation to an individual whose victimization was preceded by abnormal actions than to one whose victimization was preceded by normal actions. This prediction was confirmed. Subjects assigned the victim who was shot at a store he rarely visited significantly more compensation, $M = 5.37$, than the victim who was shot at his regular store, $M = 4.52$, $t(162) = 2.17$, $p < .03$.

Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 supported the hypothesis that victims whose negative fates follow abnormal actions receive more sympathy than victims whose negative fates follow normal actions. The negative fates in the two cases were identical, as were the prior probabilities of the two actions leading to the outcome in question. According to norm theory, the fate elicited stronger reactions when it stemmed from abnormal actions than when it stemmed from normal actions because it is easier for observers to imagine the event not happening in the former than in the latter instance. The fact that it almost did not happen appears to have made the fate worse and the sympathy for the victim greater.¹ A similar mechanism would appear to generate the strong reaction to the fate of the victim of the plane crash who switched flights at the last minute. It is so easy to imagine this individual not switching, and thus not being on the fatal flight, that his or her death seems especially tragic.

EXPERIMENT 2

This experiment tested the hypothesis that the less distance that needs to be covered in order for a negative fate to be avoided, the more abnormal the fate will be and the more sympathy the victim will receive. Kahneman and Tversky (1982) also tested a variant of this principle in their investigation of emotional scripts. Subjects were presented with a description of two individuals (Mr. C and Mr. D) who had missed their respective planes because the limousine they had shared from a downtown hotel had been delayed in traffic. Both men arrived at the airport expecting their plane to have departed 30 minutes earlier, but Mr. D discovered that his plane had been delayed and had departed only 5 minutes earlier. Subjects were asked to indicate whom they thought would be more upset. The virtually unanimous response was that Mr. D would be more upset. Here, then, is a case in which two fates that differed from one another neither in surprise (both parties expected to miss their flight) nor in consequence (both parties did miss their flight) elicited differential predictions of frustration. From the perspective of norm theory, this occurred because it is easier to imagine how 5 minutes might have been saved than 30 minutes. Mr. D, in effect, came closer to avoiding his fate than did Mr. C. The present experiment tested the hypothesis that the closer a victim is to a more positive alternative, the more sympathy the victim will generate in observers.

Method

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURE

Subjects were 25 volunteers recruited from an upper level psychology class. The rationale presented to subjects was identical to that in Experiment 1. Subjects read one of two descriptions that varied in terms of the abnormality of the outcome. In both conditions, subjects read about a man who died when the

small plane on which he was a passenger crashed in a remote northern area. Having received only minor injuries, the man had attempted to walk to safety. In the normal outcome condition ($n = 13$), he was described as having died from exposure 75 miles from the nearest town. In the abnormal outcome condition ($n = 12$), he was described as having died $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from the nearest town. After reading the description, subjects were asked to assign compensation to the victim's family (a wife and two children) using the same scale as that employed in Experiment 1.

Results and Discussion

Again, we hypothesized that subjects in the abnormal outcome condition would recommend greater compensation than subjects in the normal outcome condition. This hypothesis was confirmed. The victim who died $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from safety was assigned significantly greater compensation, $M = 7.0$, than the victim who died 75 miles from safety, $M = 5.38$, $t(23) = 2.48$, $p < .02$.

The results supported the hypothesis that the closer a negative event is to not happening, the stronger is the reaction provoked by the event. This principle presumably also accounts for the poignancy of the death of a soldier on the last day of a war. Because the war was almost over, the death was almost avoided and hence was particularly tragic.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

According to norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), the more strongly outcomes evoke alternatives, the stronger will be any emotional reaction elicited by them. In support of their theory Kahneman and Miller described subjects' responses to questions about the degree of regret that various types of victims might be expected to experience. Consistent with their predictions, the more easily undone or imagined otherwise an event was, the more regret subjects expected it to generate.

The present studies extended the empirical scope of norm theory in a number of respects. Previous tests of the theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) have focused exclusively on subjects' predictions about how recipients of differentially abnormal fates would react. Moreover, subjects' intuitions were probed in within-subject designs that presented subjects with two contrasting fates. The present studies, on the other hand, employed between-subject designs and elicited subjects' personal reactions to the victim, not their predictions of the victim's reaction. Finally, the present studies employed a socially relevant dependent measure: recommendations for victim compensation. The current results supported the guiding hypothesis that the sympathy generated by the victim of a negative event increases as the abnormality of the event increases. Abnormal fates elicited higher recommendations for compensation than normal ones, although they were objectively neither more severe nor more probable.

The present results suggest that norm theory may have considerable

relevance for our understanding of reactions to victims. As a final illustration of norm theory's application to this domain, consider an incident that occurred some years ago in France. The incident was a bomb attack on a synagogue during which a number of people were injured. France's Prime Minister, Raymond Barre, publicly denounced the attack and expressed his sympathy for both the Jews who were inside the synagogue and the innocent passersby. Barre's differentiation of the victims into Jews and innocent passersby provoked considerable controversy because many interpreted it as implying that Barre did not consider the Jews to be as innocent as the passersby.

Certainly, the term "innocent" has a strong moral connotation, but should we assume that Barre's remarks reflect anti-Semitism? Not necessarily. According to norm theory, his failure to apply the term "innocent" to the Jews inside the synagogue may simply reflect the fact that their fate is less abnormal than that of the passersby. It is easier mentally to remove the passersby from the immediate vicinity of the synagogue than the Jews. This analysis might also account for the special public sympathy that injured tourists received when a bomb went off in London's Harrods department store some years ago. Tourists and passersby are not entailed by the department store and synagogue scripts (Abelson, 1981), respectively, and as such their presence in these contexts is abnormal. The foregoing example suggests that one reason that the abnormality of a victim's fate affects the sympathy that he or she receives is because it affects the perceived innocence of the victim. Judgments of guilt or innocence may follow from, as well as influence, affective reactions to the suffering of others. Thus, not only may victims perceived to be innocent provoke strong affective reactions, but victims whose abnormality provokes strong affective reactions may be viewed as innocent.

In pursuing the implications of norm theory in the victim domain it is important to realize that it is not a theory of justice—it is a theory of emotional amplitude (Abelson, 1983). Norm theory makes predictions about the factors that influence the intensity of people's reactions to events, not their direction. In the present study, greater abnormality was associated with greater sympathy, but future research may find that in other situations greater abnormality is associated with greater blame or derogation. Further tests of the hypothesis might profitably include measures of blame, responsibility, and victim evaluation. More direct assessments of counterfactual thinking should also be included in future research.

NOTE

¹A possible alternative explanation of this finding deserves comment. Subjects may have believed that the victim in the normal condition was deserving of less compensation because he should have foreseen potential dangers. This account suggests that the condition difference occurred because the description in the normal condition suppressed sympathy rather than because the description in the abnormal condition facilitated

sympathy. To rule this possibility out decisively it would be necessary to show that the observed effect occurred even when it was made explicit that the victim had no reason to expect that the commonly frequented store was any more dangerous than the less preferred store. This feature was not included in the present experiment, although it does not seem highly plausible that subjects believed that the victim would customarily frequent a store he knew to be more dangerous, especially when there was a readily available alternative store. In any event, the design of Experiment 2 avoided this interpretational problem.

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