Egocentric judgements of moral character: Mechanisms, individual differences and debiasing strategies

Contrary to the widespread belief in the objective nature of moral judgements, social and moral psychology gathered strong evidence suggesting that this belief is mistaken. First, people judge the world through their preferences, values, background, and expectations because their point of view is easily and automatically accessible. In contrast, taking others' perspectives requires effort, cognitive resources, and motivation. Second, dual-process models distinguish two different modes of information processing: automatic and controlled. While the first process is fast, effortless, and unconscious, the second process is slow, analytical, and might be recruited when needed. Finally, it has been argued that people rather produce moral judgments based on fast and automatic intuitions than rational and controlled reasoning. The automatic side of moral judgements makes them prone to different biases. Based on this rationale, we proposed that egocentrism can serve as a default mechanism biasing moral judgements because of its automatic, affective, and strategically motivated nature. However, past research has focused mainly on how egocentrism biases fairness and justice judgements despite a solid theoretical and empirical rationale for egocentric biases in moral psychology. Therefore, our knowledge about mechanisms underpinning the influence of egocentric biases on moral judgements is strongly limited. The current project addresses this critical gap in knowledge by focusing on egocentrism as a factor shaping moral character attributions. Specifically, we will investigate potential mechanisms, debiasing strategies, and individual differences of the impact of egocentrism on moral character attributions.

We will conduct nine experiments and test eight hypotheses in the current project. First, we will explore the question of the relative strength of egocentrism on moral character judgements. Second, we will answer the question of the mechanism (automatic vs. controlled) underpinning the influence of egocentrism on moral character judgements. Precisely, we will experimentally manipulate factors that inhibit controlled processes (e.g., lack of cognitive resources, time pressure). We also plan to manipulate factors facilitating controlled processes (e.g., priming, accuracy motivation). Third, we will test whether such debiasing strategies as education, accountability or accuracy rewarding reduce the egocentrism of attributions of moral character and, in consequence, help people cast more objective judgements of moral character. Finally, we will investigate to what extent individual levels of moral identity, narcissism and greed shape the impact of egocentrism on moral character judgements. Apart from questionnaire measures, we will use behavioural trust measures towards others. We will also test mechanisms underpinning the primary effect of egocentrism on moral character judgments by using the BIOPAC® station, which records human physiological changes.

Moral judgements and impressions are tremendously important. They profoundly influence interpersonal attitudes in everyday situations, determining whom people approach and whom they avoid. Moral experiences (and judgements) are also surprisingly frequent, as discovered in a large sample of adults studied with momentary ecological assessments. Out of 13 thousand assessed events, 29% involved acts interpreted in moral terms, with participants involved in the acts either as agents or targets, witnessing them in person, or learning about them from others. Therefore, understanding how egocentrism shapes moral character attributions is crucial for explaining the nature of human morality. In turn, it could help in clarifying moral controversies as an increasing number of contemporary societies experience cultural wars concerning abortion, capital punishment, same-sex marriages, immigration, or climate change.