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FUTURE-ORIENTED PEOPLE SHOW STRONGER MORAL CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that moral concerns weigh more heavily when people are experimentally induced to think about the distant vs. near future. The current research demonstrates that this also applies to people whose thinking is intrinsically and generally oriented toward the future rather than the present. More specifically, we show that people with a future time perspective are more condemning of others who transgress ethical rules and that they are more committed to follow ethical rules themselves. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Extant research (Eyal, Liberman & Trope, 2008; Agerström & Björklund, 2009a) has established that the temporal distance of morally charged behaviour affects how it is mentally construed and evaluated. Consistently, it has been found that people are more condemning of moral transgressions when these transgressions are imagined to happen in the distant (e.g., ten years from now) as opposed to the near future (e.g., next week). Furthermore, people are more committed to engage in pro-social behaviour when the event is temporally distant (Agerström & Björklund, 2009b). Thus, it can be concluded that *contextually* activated temporal distance increases moral concerns. However, one may ask whether individual differences in *intrinsic* time perspective (henceforth TP) are related to moral responding in a similar way? The present studies sought to address this research question. Specifically, we examined the relationship between individual differences in intrinsic future vs. present TP and moral judgment (Study 1) and moral commitment (Study 2).

CONTEXTUALLY ELICITED TEMPORAL DISTANCE AND MORALITY

According to Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2010), the temporal distance construct refers to the perceived temporal distance to an object, an event or a person, e.g., behaviour depicted in the near versus distant future. As noted above, studies have shown that people attribute more blame to morally questionable behaviour, and anticipate stronger moral

concern, when induced with a temporally distant vs. near mind set (Eyal, et al, 2008; Agerström & Björklund, 2009a; 2009b). Temporal distance has also been shown to elicit choices that serve the "should-self" rather than the "want-self", and to activate a more idealistic vs. pragmatic self (Rogers & Bazerman, 2008; Kivets & Tyler, 2007). Material self-interest, which is more concrete, has greater influence on judgments in the near future compared to pro-social values which carry greater weight on judgments in the distant future (Hunt, Kim, Borgida & Chaiken, 2010). These findings are consistent with CLT which posits that distal events (e.g., temporally or spatially) are represented more abstractly than proximal events, which tend to be represented more concretely. Greater distance makes us perceive the essence and core features of objects and events while smaller distance makes us perceive the details. This basic tenet is perhaps best illustrated by a visual analogy. From a far distance, people see the forest, but from a close distance they see the trees. Similarly, a more distant perspective allows people to see the larger implications of actions and events. To illustrate with a morally relevant example, from a distant perspective, the act of looking into another student's exam is more likely to be defined as "cheating". From a proximal perspective, however, the same act is more likely to be defined in more incidental terms, such as "peeking at another student's answers" (Eyal et al., 2008).

Distance-dependent construal differences also explain why people are increasingly governed by superordinate values and moral principles when they think about the more distant future (Eyal, Sagistano, Trope, Liberman & Chaiken, 2009; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009). When people think about donating money to charity in the distant future, for example, the abstract pro-social goal of helping others tends to be salient. However, when they contemplate donating to charity in the here and now, their focus becomes more concrete, highlighting the monetary consequences to their wallets instead. Consequently, distant-future decisions are more likely to be based on stronger moral values than near-future decisions.

INTRINSIC TIME PERSPECTIVE AND MORALITY

In the literature on intrinsic time perspective, TP refers to how human experiences are arranged into temporal dimensions (Worrell & Mello, 2007) usually including the past, present and future. Interestingly, people tend to be oriented by one of them. TP, regarded as a prevailing way of responding in different situations (Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2003; Zimbardo, Keough & Boyd, 1997), can be defined as "a cognitive operation that implies both an emotional reaction to imagined time zones [ ] and a preference for locating action in some temporal zone" (Lennings, 1996, p. 72).

The Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI) provides a quantifiable measure of TP, which is represented as five continuous temporal dimensions; *Past-Negative, Past-Positive, Present-Hedonistic, Present-Fatalistic* and *Future* (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Due to the aims of the present paper, only present-hedonistic, present-fatalistic and future TP will be described here.

Present-Hedonistic orientation implies focus on the "here and now", difficulties to delay gratification, and a tendency to give in to temptations. Here, the focus is less on abstract issues than on concrete activities which bring immediate hedonistic pleasure or obstruct pain. Present-hedonistic scores on ZTPI have been positively correlated to low ego control but negatively to consideration of future consequences (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Holman & Zimbardo, 2009).

Present-Fatalistic orientation also implies focus on the "here and now". Central to this dimension is, however, the perception that life is externally controlled and that one's life is largely determined by fate. Present-fatalistic scores have been positively correlated to aggression and anxiety, but negatively to conscientiousness and consideration of future consequences (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Holman & Zimbardo, 2009).

Future orientation implies a focus on abstract issues and overarching personal values. A future time-orientation is characterized by analytical decision making, attention to responsibility, low levels of risk taking, and an ability to delay gratification to achieve important long-term goals. Future orientation scores have been positively correlated to consideration of future consequences, conscientiousness and preferences for consistency, but negatively to lying and sensation seeking (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Holman & Zimbardo, 2009).
Of relevance to the current research, some previous studies have related intrinsic TP to environmental attitudes and morality. For example, Consideration of Future Consequences (CFC, Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger and Edwards, 1994) has been found to positively predict environmental attitudes (e.g., Joireman, Van Lange & Van Vugt, 2004) and intolerance of morally questionable actions (Agerström & Björklund, in press). Furthermore, Kruger, Reischl, and Zimmerman (2008) have shown that a future orientation is negatively related to self-reported delinquent behavior in terms of interpersonal aggression (e.g., carrying a weapon) and destruction of resources (e.g., school property). Additionally, Hershfield, Cohen, and Thompson (2012) found continuity to one´s future self to predict low tolerance of unethical business behavior.

The present research departs from previous research by specifically focusing on moral judgments, using prototypical moral judgment paradigms (Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007). Moreover, it examines moral judgments in response to transgressions of a more exhaustive set of ethical rules (deontological and utilitarian) as well as moral commitments (anticipated behaviour and guilt). It integrates previous research on contextually elicited distance with research on intrinsic temporal distance, using CLT as a unifying theoretical framework. Our research further corroborates the usefulness of CLT to explain not only why people's moral concerns vary across different temporal contexts, but also why these concerns differ across individuals who are intrinsically oriented toward different time zones.

Although previous research has specifically linked consideration of future *consequences* (Agerström & Björklund, in press) to moral judgments, the current research examines how a more *general orientation* towards the future relates to morality, using the well established ZTPI (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Unlike the CFC which measures time perspective on a single continuum, the ZTPI contains one future-subscale as well as two conceptually different subscales on present-oriented time perspective.

AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

Given the link between temporal distance and abstraction (Trope & Liberman, 2010), and the assumption that moral principles tend to be abstract in nature (Eyal et al., 2008), we argue that people who chronically tend to focus on the (abstract) future relative to the (concrete) present,

should be more likely to show moral concerns. In Study 1 the aim was to investigate how a future vs. present (hedonistic and fatalistic) TP is related to moral judgments in situations where ethical rules have been violated. It was specifically predicted that future-oriented people would be less tolerant of such transgressions. In Study 2 the aim was to examine how a future vs. present (hedonistic and fatalistic) TP relates to moral commitment. It was predicted that a future TP would be positively related to moral commitment of ethical rules.

STUDY 1

METHOD

Participants

136 subjects participated in the present study, whereof 4 were excluded due to incomplete responses. Thus, the final sample consisted of 132 participants (78 women and 54 men). Mean age was 25.57 (range = 17-62) years. The participants were recruited from an upper secondary school, a company, and from a university in the middle of Sweden. As compensation each participant received a cinema ticket.

Procedure

Participants were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could leave the study whenever they wanted. Half of the participants completed the S-ZTPI before the moral judgment task and vice versa. The two measures were introduced as pertaining to two unrelated research projects.

Measures

To measure TP, a validated Swedish version of ZTPI (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), i.e. S-ZTPI, (see Carelli, Wiberg & Wiberg, 2011), was used. It contains 56 items measuring the five TP dimensions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (very characteristic) to 1 (very uncharacteristic); for the relevant ZTPI items, see APPENDIX 1.The internal consistency, mean and SD of the relevant TPs was; Present Hedonistic; α= .80, M= 3.39, SD= 0.50, Present Fatalistic; α= .58, M= 2.60, SD= 0.49 and Future; α= .78, M= 3.19, SD= 0.55. The relatively low internal consistency of the Present Fatalistic subscale cannot easily be explained. However, other studies have also reported a low internal consistency of this subscale (see Carelli, et al., 2011; Milfont & Gouveia, 2006; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).

The scores of the S-ZTPI were calculated into the relevant TPs, i.e. three continuous variables for each participant according to “The Zimbardo Time perspective Inventory (ZTPI) Psychometrics and Scoring Key” (Zimbardo, P.G., & Boyd, J.N, 2010, October 1). Since the two present-oriented subscales differ in many respects, we computed a future vs. present hedonistic and a future vs. present fatalistic TP variable, with scores on each present subscale being subtracted from the scores on the future scale (see Anderson, 2006; Boniwell, Osin, Linley, &

Ivanchenko, 2010; Drake, Duncan, Sutherland, Abernethy, & Henry, 2008). We computed relative difference scores (future-present) on theoretical grounds, to conform to CLT which is a theory of relative distances.

Moral judgment was measured by a 9 point Likert scale, where 9 indicated 100% morally right behavior and 1 indicated 100% immoral behavior. Four deontological and four utilitarian dilemmas were used to increase external reliability (McBurney & White, 2004). Deontological judgments seem to be driven by automatic emotional responses while utilitarian judgments are driven by controlled cognitive processes (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom & Cohen, 2008). Deontological dilemmas depicted transgression of ethical rules without any description of consequences (see Agerström & Björklund, 2009a; 2009b), e.g. breaking a promise and tax evasion. However, in the utilitarian dilemmas, consequences were made explicit (see Hare, 1981), depicting actively killing one person to save five other individuals; to do so is mainly judged strongly immoral (Cushman, Young & Hauser, 2006).

RESULTS

A preliminary analysis showed that both age (r= -.19, n= 132, p= .034) and gender (r= -.22, n= 132, p= .011) were significantly correlated with moral judgment. Therefore, partial correlations were calculated, controlling for these variables. As predicted, individuals with a stronger future relative to a present hedonistic time perspective, were less tolerant of others whose behavior transgressed ethical rules, r= -.25, n= 132, p= .005. Relative differences in future versus present-fatalistic time perspectives yielded similar results, r= -.18, n=132, p= .043 (see APPENDIX 2, Table 1).

STUDY 2

METHOD

Participants

120 subjects participated in the present study, whereof 1 was excluded due to incomplete responses. This left us with a final sample of 119 participants (93 women and 26 men). Mean age was 26.2 (range = 17-67) years. The recruitment of and compensation to the participants was the same as in Study 1.

Procedure

The procedure was the same as in Study 1.

Measures

As in Study 1, we measured intrinsic time perspective using the S- ZTPI; for the relevant ZTPI items, see APPENDIX 1. The scoring of S-ZTPI was the same as in Study 1.

Internal consistency was acceptable for all subscales; Present Hedonistic; α= .74 M= 3.41, SD= .45, Present Fatalistic; α= .71, M= 2.59, SD= .59 and Future; α= .72, M= 3.38, SD= .49.

Unlike Study 1, this study measured behavioral intentions in the form of moral commitment. Four moral dilemmas were used, e.g. depicting theft and betrayal of a desperate friend. The participants were asked to envision that they encountered the dilemmas and to indicate how likely it would be that they would transgress the various ethical rules depicted in the dilemmas, on a 9 point scale, where 1 indicated "not likely at all" and 9 indicated "very likely". Also, the participants were asked to indicate on a 9 point scale (1 = no guilt at all, 9 = extreme guilt) how much quilt they would experience if they committed this ethical transgression (see Agerström & Björklund, 2009b). Since these two items correlated substantially (r= -.63, N= 119, *p*= .000) they were aggregated into a moral commitment scale.

RESULTS

A preliminary analysis showed that age (*r*= .20, n= 119, *p*= .032) but not gender (*r*= .12, n= 119, *p*= .208) correlated significantly with moral commitment. Thus, partial correlations were computed, controlling for age. As predicted, individuals with a stronger future relative to a present hedonistic time perspective showed greater moral commitment, *r*= .23, n= 119, *p*= .012. The correlation between relative differences in future versus present-fatalistic time perspectives and moral commitment fell short of statistical significance, *r*= .13, n= 119, *p*= .155 (see APPENDIX 3, Table 2).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, current studies contribute to the literature on construal levels and morality (e.g., Agerström & Björklund, 2009a, b; Eyal et al., 2008), by demonstrating that individuals whose thinking is intrinsically and generally oriented toward the future rather than the present show greater moral concerns. Specifically, it was found that future-oriented individuals were more condemning of moral transgressions (Study 1) and more likely to express moral commitment of ethical rules (Study 2) than more present-oriented. Interestingly, this difference was more pronounced when comparing future-oriented individuals with those whose time perspective tends to be oriented toward the hedonistic present.

Our findings are consistent with CLT which posits that the abstract mental construal activated by a temporally distant perspective should enable people to perceive the larger implications of actions or, in the language of CLT, the "forest beyond the trees" (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Based on the assumption that moral implications often constitute superordinate, high-level implications of actions, they should be more salient from a distance. Thus far, previous research has demonstrated that contextually elicited temporal distance increases moral concern. However, CLT would also predict that this should apply to stable individual differences in time orientation. Indeed, our results corroborate this prediction.

Although it has been suggested that future-oriented people tend to think more abstractly than present-oriented people in that they have a stronger focus on abstract issues and superordinate

goals when making decisions (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), the current studies did not directly examine whether abstraction mediates the relationship between individual differences in time orientation and moral concerns. Indeed, there is now research suggesting that abstraction partially explains why people who are concerned with future consequences of behaviour are less tolerant of moral transgressions compared with people who are more concerned with immediate consequences of actions (Agerström & Björklund, in press).

The current findings make a theoretical contribution as they speak to the explanatory power of CLT. Not only can the theory enhance our understanding of the contextual nature of moral judgments, it also helps us explain why moral concerns vary across individuals.

There are also some practical implications of our findings. For example, school interventions that train children and adolescents in adopting a broader time perspective in everyday decision making might result in more prosocial behavior. Regular training may increase the likelihood that they spontaneously consider larger and more distal implications of actions when facing moral dilemmas. Furthermore, if children are trained to delay gratification (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989) by paying more attention to distal than proximal rewards, moral desirable behavior may ensue. Such interventions could have enduring effects, with children who receive extensive training early in life being better equipped to resist moral temptations as adults.

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APPENDIX 1

The TP scales (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Carelli, Wiberg & Wiberg, 2011) used in the present study, Present Hedonistic, Present Fatalistic and Future include the following items:

Present Hedonistic items (ZTPI-numbers);
1. I believe that getting together with one's friends to party is one of life's important pleasures.
8. I do things impulsively.
12. When listening to my favorite music, I often lose all track of time.
17. I try to live my life as fully as possible, one day at a time.
19. Ideally, I would live each day as if it were my last.
23. I make decisions on the spur of the moment.
26. It is important to put excitement in my life.
28. I feel that it's more important to enjoy what you're doing than to get work done on time.
31. Taking risks keeps my life from becoming boring.
32. It is more important for me to enjoy life's journey than to focus only on the destination.
42. I take risks to put excitement in my life.
44. I often follow my heart more than my head.
46. I find myself getting swept up in the excitement of the moment.
48. I prefer friends who are spontaneous rather than predictable.
55. I like my close relationships to be passionate.

Present Fatalistic items (ZTPI-numbers);
3. Fate determines much in my life.
14. Since whatever will be will be, it doesn't really matter what I do.
35. It takes joy out of the process and flow of my activities, if I have to think about goals, outcomes, and products.
37. You can't really plan for the future because things change so much.
38. My life path is controlled by forces I cannot influence.
39. It doesn't make sense to worry about the future, since there is nothing that I can do about it anyway.
47. Life today is too complicated; I would prefer the simpler life of the past.
52. Spending what I earn on pleasures today is better than saving for tomorrow's security.
53. Often luck pays off better than hard work.

Future items (ZTPI-numbers);
6. I believe that a person's day should be planned ahead each morning.
9. If things don't get done on time, I don't worry about it. (Reverse coded)
10. When I want to achieve something, I set goals and consider specific means for reaching those goals.
13. Meeting tomorrow's deadlines and doing other necessary work comes before tonight's play.

18. It upsets me to be late for appointments.
21. I meet my obligations to friends and authorities on time.
24. I take each day as it is rather than try to plan it out. (Reverse coded)
30. Before making a decision, I weigh the costs against the benefits.
40. I complete projects on time by making steady progress.
43. I make lists of things to do.
45. I am able to resist temptations when I know that there is work to be done.
51. I keep working at difficult, uninteresting tasks if they will help me get ahead.
56. There will always be time to catch up on my work. (Reverse coded)

APPENDIX 2

Table 1. Bivariate and partial correlations of the main scales used in Study 1, n= 132.

Control variables	Variables		Moral Judgment	FutureVsPresent Hedonistic	FutureVsPresent Fatalistic	Ageyears	Gender
Bivariate Correlations							
	Moral Judgment	Correlation					
		Significance (2-tailed)					
	FutureVsPresent Hedonistic	Correlation	-.337				
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000				
	FutureVsPresent Fatalistic	Correlation	-.263	.806			
		Significance (2-tailed)	.002	.000			
	Ageyears	Correlation	-.185	.346	.278		
		Significance (2-tailed)	.034	.000	.001		
	Gender	Correlation	-.220	.299	.259	.034	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.011	.000	.003	.697	
Partial Correlations							
Ageyears & Gender	MoralJudgment	Correlation					
		Significance (2-tailed)					
	FutureVsPresent Hedonistic	Correlation	-.247				
		Significance (2-tailed)	.005				
	FutureVsPresent Fatalistic	Correlation	-.178	.77			
		Significance (2-tailed)	.043	.000			

APPENDIX 3

Table 2. Bivariate and partial correlations of the main scales used in Study 2, n= 119.

Control variables	Variables		Moral Commitment	FutureVsPresent Hedonistic	FutureVsPresent Fatalistic	Ageyears
Bivariate Correlations						
	Moral Commitment	Correlation				
		Significance (2-tailed)				
	FutureVsPresent Hedonistic	Correlation	.274			
		Significance (2-tailed)	.003			
	FutureVsPresent Fatalistic	Correlation	.161	.773		
		Significance (2-tailed)	.081	.000		
	Ageyears	Correlation	.197	.295	.170	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.032	.001	.065	
Partial Correlations						
Ageyears	Moral Commitment	Correlation				
		Significance (2-tailed)				
	FutureVsPresent Hedonistic	Correlation	.231			
		Significance (2-tailed)	.012			
	FutureVsPresent Fatalistic	Correlation	.132	.768		
		Significance (2-tailed)	.155	.000		

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