Moral Judgments and Attitudes Predicting Legal and Illegal Stimulant Use

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Abstract
This study examined the relationship between binding and individualizing moral domains and psychostimulant usage. Participants completed self-report measures regarding moral reasoning in decision making and legal and illegal stimulant use and attitude. Analyses indicate that increased adherence to individualizing moral reasoning domains predicts increased likelihood of recent caffeine use, while increased scores in two binding moral reasoning domains predict decreased likelihood of recent caffeine use. In addition, one binding moral domain was found to reliably predict past cocaine use. These findings lead to an expanded understanding of sociomoral influences and motivations concerning stimulant use.

Introduction

PROBLEM

• There is still overwhelming debate over the morality of stimulant drug use, ranging from everyday stimulants like caffeine to extremely illicit ones like cocaine.

• Little is known about psychological factors that can predict drug use.

SOLUTION

• Can morality factor predict stimulant use?

• Morality: “perceptual judgments of justice, rights and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to one another” (Turiel, 1985, pg. 3).

• There are two basic sub-domains of morality factors.

• Binding: Social group is basis of morality; binds individuals to rights of duties of group or institution.

• Includes foundations of: Respect for Authority (MFQAuthority), In-group Loyalty (MFQLoy), and Purity (MFQPur).

• Individualizing: Individual is basis of morality; each individual is advocate for rights or duties of other individuals.

• Includes foundations of: Fairness (MFQFair), Harm to Others (MFQHarm).

HYPOTHESIS

• The more heavily binding foundations (Auth, Loy, and Pur) are weighed when making a moral decision, the less likely it is that stimulant drug usage takes place.

• The more heavily individualizing foundations (Flat, Harm) are weighed when making a moral decision, the more likely it is that stimulant drug usage takes place.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

• 300 Participants were asked to complete a self-report survey measure through an online survey platform (the Amazon Mechanical Turk).

• 77 Participants were eliminated who did not pass at least one of two check questions, leaving a total analyzed sample of 223 participants.

MEASURES

• Self-report measures included:

• Past legal and illegal drug use.

• Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ): 30 questions spanning 5 moral domains, asking about relevance of each item in participants’ own moral decision-making.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

• SPSS for Macintosh was used for all statistical analyses.

• Each MFQ domain was run in a linear regression analysis against selected drug use data.

• Dependent variables analyzed were chosen based on significant response rate:

• Ever having used caffeine, a cognitive stimulant (such as Adderall or Ritalin), or cocaine (CaffeineEver, CogStimEver, CocaineEver).

• Having used caffeine in the 24 hours immediately prior to survey completion (unable to analyze use of cocaine or cognitive stimulant in 24 hours immediately prior to survey completion due to insignificance response rate).

• R2: Proportion of variance of specified drug usage that can be attributed to the designated MFQ domain score.

• Beta: Standardized value of predicted rise in drug use for every standard deviation increase of specified MFQ domain score, holding all other variables constant.

Results

RESULTS OF REGRESSIONAL ANALYSES:

• MFQ domain could not significantly predict ever having used a caffeine or ever having used a cognitive stimulant.

• A higher MFQPur score was shown to predict a significantly lower likelihood of past cocaine use. A higher score in the binding domains of MFQAuth and MFQLoy were shown to predict significantly higher likelihood of caffeine use 24 hours prior to study completion.

• A higher score to the individualizing domains of MFQFair and MFQHarm were shown to predict significantly higher likelihood of caffeine use 24 hours prior to study completion.

Discussion and Conclusions

• These data indicate that increased endorsement of the binding foundations of loyalty and purity can successfully predict the likelihood of caffeine abstinence in the past 24 hours.

• This indicates that perhaps caffeine intake is more readily avoided among those who value the concept of purity, due to the cognitive state modification that caffeine induces.

• The concept of purity could similarly be applied to those who value loyalty: those who do not use caffeine remain loyal to their belief that caffeine should not be used (e.g. diet or religious belief).

• These data also indicate that increased endorsement of the individualizing foundations of fairness and harm can successfully increase the likelihood of caffeine use in the past 24 hours.

• Those who are more involved in the harm and fairness aspects of decision-making may also radicate on the harm and fairness of any action more frequently, leading them to conclude through constant reasoning caffeine use is not worth avoiding for them.

• These data also indicate that no moral foundation endorsement can predict past caffeine use or past cognitive stimulant use. This could be due to three major social constructs:

• Mental persons change over time, and what could have once been deemed acceptable in one’s life (e.g. Ritalin use to study for a test once in college) may no longer have been considered at the time of study participation.

• Caffeine is so widely available that it can be difficult for us to use it. Although cognitive enhancers are illegal to use without a prescription, it can be very simple to just borrow one from a friend.

• Often, people try something just once or twice. Single use or instance is seldom a quality indicator.

• These data indicate that no moral foundation endorsement can predict past cocaine use, except for that of purity.

• Out of the five moral foundations, purity is perhaps the most culturally constructed—definitions of what is morally pure can vary from nation to nation, religion to religion, and even family to family.

• Similarly, research has indicated that the United States, most probably adhered to the American cultural construct that cocaine is bad, and is therefore not used unless you’re a drug-user—regardless of why it may actually be used for you (“harm to others is still implicitly illegal” “authority”)

• This also (and perhaps most importantly) indicates that the primary reason that people refrain from cocaine use is not because they know it’ll hurt them (“harm”), or because it’s against the law (“authority”), but because it is seen as something generally tainting and grimy. Perhaps this can suggest a different approach in encouraging adolescents and young adults to abstain from cocaine use.

Future Steps

• An experimental design controlling for caffeine intake, in order to test if it’s actually the use of caffeine itself that affects self-reported moral foundations, or vice versa (as interpreted in this study).

• Testing for variables that are more time-range-specific (used in the past week, past month, past year, etc.) in order to test if moral foundations can predict drug use in a less abstract time frame than “ever”.

• Expand the study to other countries and cultures outside of the United States, in order to better understand the construction of purity and other moral attitudes surrounding legal and illegal stimulant use.

• Perhaps individuals in a more binding cultures than the US will be more affected by and respectful of drug laws (authority) than individuals in the US culture, and MFQAuth will be a better predictor of past cocaine use than MFQHarm.

References
