

Psychologists study perception of mind

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U.S. psychologists have determined people perceive the minds of others using two distinct dimensions, rather than one as previously believed.

Harvard University psychologists, in an online survey of more than 2,000 people, found most people understand the minds of others by agency (an individual's ability for self-control, morality and planning) and experience (the capacity to feel sensations such as hunger, fear and pain).

The findings, say the researchers, provide a framework for understanding many moral and legal decisions and highlight the subjective nature of perceiving mental attributes in others.

"Important societal beliefs, such as those about capital punishment, abortion and the legitimacy of torture, rest on perceptions of these dimensions, as do beliefs about a number of philosophical questions," said co-author Kurt Gray, a doctoral student.

Gray, who worked with psychologists Heather Gray and Daniel Wegner on the study, added: "Respondents, the majority of whom were at least moderately religious, viewed God as an agent capable of moral action, but without much capacity for experience. We find it hard to envision God sharing any of our feelings or desires."

The study appears in the journal *Science*.

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