Memories of good, bad deeds can alter perception of brightness

March 9 2012

(Medical Xpress) -- From sacred religious texts to books to movies, light and darkness have always symbolized good and evil.

But is it possible that abstract concepts such as good and evil can actually influence our perception of light and darkness in the environment around us?

According to University of Kansas business professor Promothesh Chatterjee, the answer is yes. In an upcoming article, Chatterjee reports that individuals who were asked to recall a time that they did a good deed judge their immediate surroundings to be brighter than individuals who were asked to recall an unethical deed from their past.

Additionally, Chatterjee finds that when offered a selection of random objects, individuals who recalled an unethical deed – and therefore perceived the room to be darker – preferred light-producing objects such as flashlights and candles, as opposed to non-light-producing objects likes crackers or apples.

"We find that when individuals think about an abstract concept – for example, a good deed – it influences their perception of a concrete concept such as brightness," said Chatterjee, an assistant professor of marketing in the KU School of Business. "Moreover, those individuals thinking about a bad deed demonstrate a preference for objects that will add light to the environment."

Chatterjee's article, "Is It Light or Dark? Recalling Moral Behavior Changes Perception of Brightness," will appear in the upcoming edition of *Psychological Science*. His co-authors are Pronobesh Banerjee from Winston-Salem State University and Jayati Sinha from the University of Arizona.

According to Chatterjee, previous researchers have found that individuals mentally link abstract concepts (like evil) to concrete concepts (like darkness). But Chatterjee's findings go further by showing that these linkages go beyond mere linguistic coupling to actually influence an individual's perception of the physical world.

"We already knew that evil makes people think of the dark," Chatterjee said. "But our research is unique because we find that evil not only makes people think of the dark, but it makes people see, feel and perceive the environment to be darker. That's a powerful finding."

How does Chatterjee explain the preference for light-inducing objects among those individuals primed with memories of unethical deeds?

Responses to moral transgression may be influenced by emotions such as guilt or shame, he said. Past research indicates that when people experience guilt, they are motivated to alleviate their prevailing negative feelings, but the instinctive response to shame is to escape or hide. Chatterjee's results are in line with responses to the experience of guilt: Participants who recalled their own past unethical deeds, which might trigger guilt, preferred products that would make the room brighter – that is, products that would reduce darkness and thereby reduce the negative feelings associated with darkness.

Chatterjee's findings open some interesting avenues for future research. For example, can experiencing brightness in an environment increase ethical behavior? And given that light and dark appear to be linked to

moral behavior, can ambient light affect the perception and evaluation of morally ambiguous behaviors?

"Those are some fun and intriguing questions," Chatterjee said. "How interesting it would be to discover that we can use light to influence people's behavior or their perception of behaviors. That could have some incredible real-world applications."

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Memories of good, bad deeds can alter perception of brightness (2012, March 9) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-03-memories-good-bad-deeds-perception.html