



# How do the positive emotions affect moral decisions?

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## Background

It has become commonplace to assume that the positive social emotions—such as pride, gratitude, elevation, and mirth—are relatively indistinct in their cognitive-behavioral effects, and that their impact is unambiguously positive. However, recent evidence from the moral decision-making literature calls this view into question. Valdesolo & DeSteno (2006) found that mirth (humor) causes subjects to make less empathetic choices in footbridge-type moral dilemmas. In order to determine whether this effect was the result of the general influence of positive emotions or whether it was due to the specific attributes of humor, we expanded on this study with an additional positive social emotion, elevation. Elevation is an emotion associated with moral beauty, which is in many ways the opposite of mirth: it is associated with reverence rather than irreverence, and is uplifting rather than diminishing (Haidt, 2001; Apter & Smith, 1975). We predicted that mirth would increase permissiveness because of reduced moral engagement, and elevation would decrease permissiveness because of increased empathic concern, testing respective theories about the functions of these two emotions.

## Task

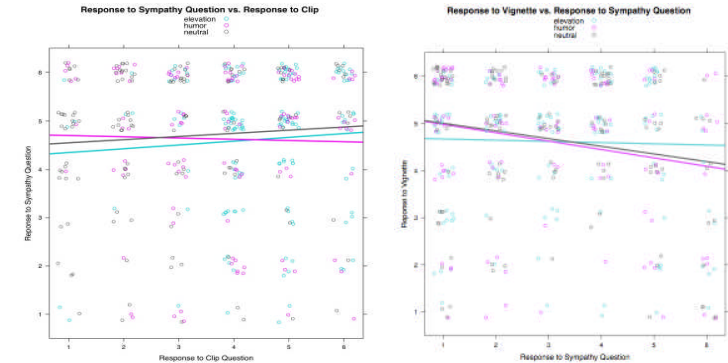
- 3 between-subjects mood induction conditions: mirth, elevation, neutral
- Mirth clips were stand-up comedians, elevation were stories of people volunteering, neutral were scientists lecturing
- Audio clips normed beforehand, and selected from a larger set using the SSS method, to ensure they were effective in eliciting the desired emotion, and that positive affect was equivalent for mirth and elevation clips
- 12 “personal” moral dilemmas (adapted from Greene et al., 2001)
- Ss heard a clip, rated it, read a vignette, answered 2 questions: permissibility and sympathy (scale 1-6)
  - “How permissible would it be for Samantha to push the stranger on to the tracks in order to save the five workmen?”
  - “How sorry did you feel for the stranger?”
- This method allowed us to measure mood induction on a trial by trial basis, ensuring even distribution of mood effects across trials, and a way to measure individual mood effects

## Predictions

*Predictions for permissibility ratings of a deontological violation in a personal moral dilemma while under the influence of different positive emotions*

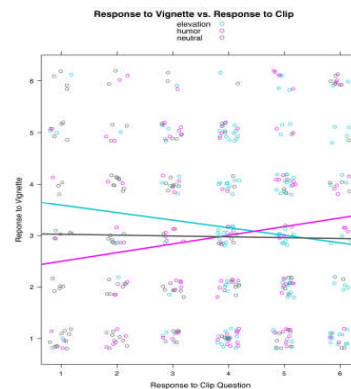
Theory	Prediction	Emotion	
		Mirth	Elevation
Positive emotions: broaden-and-build (Fredrickson, 2003; Isen 2001)	Prediction	Direction uncertain	Direction uncertain
	Explanation	Positive emotions facilitate creative problem-solving (increase), yet encourage a sense of social duty (decrease)	
Positive affect: negativity diminishment (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006) Also see the “undoing hypothesis” of Fredrickson et al., 2000	Prediction	Increase	Increase
	Explanation	Positive affect cancels out negative affect	
Humor: atmosphere effect (Bachorowski & Owren, 2001)	Prediction	Increase	--
	Explanation	Humor causes imitation of humorous scenarios	
Humor: in-group cohesion (Fessler & Haley, 2003; Terrion & Ashforth, 2002)	Prediction	Increase	--
	Explanation	Humor promotes norm violation and indifference to suffering for those outside social circle	
Humor: cognitive play (Apter & Smith, 1975; Gervais & Wilson, 2005)	Prediction	Increase	--
	Explanation	Humor promotes exploration of unusual solutions	
Elevation: imitation (Haidt, 2001)	Prediction	--	Decrease
	Explanation	Elevation amplifies adherence to standards of what is right or just	

## How is emotion mediating judgments?



- Subjects report less sympathy for the victim as they feel more mirth
- As subjects feel less sympathy, they are more likely to countenance a deontological violation
- This trend does not hold for elevation—why?

## Results: Moral Judgment & Mood



n = 55

- Data analyzed using hierarchical/multilevel linear regression
- Significant cross-over effect for mirth and elevation ( $p = .04$ )

## Summary and Conclusions

- Data are consistent with Valdesolo & DeSteno (2006), but support a functional account of individual positive emotions rather than the negativity diminishment hypothesis
- Mirth and elevation lead to different judgments in personal moral dilemmas that pit utilitarianism against deontological thinking.
- These judgments correspond with the proposed functions of these emotions
- Sympathy appears to play a role in determining permissibility of deontological violations
- These results demonstrate the need for nuanced, functional accounts of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2008) and a sophisticated account of the role of emotion in moral judgment (Greene et al., 2008)

## References

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