

Understanding intentionality attribution in autism: Exploring the Knobe effect across domains

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Abstract

This is a comprehensive investigation of whether the influence of the moral valence, as highlighted by Knobe, remains a predominant factor in subjects' attributions of intentionality across diverse domains. In addition to examining the moral dimension, our research explores the potential presence of this effect in other domains, more specifically, assessing whether there is a comparable influence on attributions of intentionality for cases with aesthetic or alethic collateral effects.

Participants were presented with three sets of vignettes, each set consisting of one critical vignette with a specific valence (i.e., moral, aesthetic, or alethic; with either a positive or negative effect) and two additional filler vignettes. The internal order of the vignettes in blocks was randomized. The valence of the critical vignette was also randomized. Each participant received one critical vignette from each domain. Results revealed a striking imbalance in attributions of intentionality to positive and negative side effects within the aesthetic and alethic domains. This supports the existence of the side-effect effect in these two domains.

Regarding the comparative study between neurotypical and autistic subjects –and despite the fact that significant differences in attributed intentionality were observed in both groups of subjects, when comparing attributed intentionality for positive vs. negative collateral cases for the three domains–results show relevant differences in the effect size for the aesthetic and alethic domains, being higher in the aesthetic domain for autistic people and conversely higher in the alethic domain for neurotypical people.