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The Dynamics of Moral Judgment and Emotional Disposition regarding Characters in Narrative Fiction

Ruben Ellinghaus
1014927

Eerste begeleider: Dr. Ard Heuvelman
Tweede begeleider: Dr. Piet Kommers

Abstract

English: According to the disposition theory of drama, a consumer's emotional affiliation towards a fictive character when being exposed to narrative fiction is always and necessarily caused by a rational moral judgment of that character's behavior. Based on Raney (2004), the present study questions this basic assumption of the theory by hypothesizing that emotional disposition towards a character can also precede and subsequently influence any moral judgment of the character's behavior. Therefore, an experiment was conducted in which participants' emotional disposition towards a fictive film character was manipulated by selective exposure to different scenes, and moral judgment of the character's behavior in a subsequent scene was measured later on qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Results indicate that participants formed emotional dispositions towards the character without the need for former moral evaluation. Results also indicate that participants used certain cognitive strategies to justify condemnable behavior. Furthermore, compared to male participants, females tended to judge the morally questionable behavior as more condemnable. However, results did not indicate that participants' moral judgments had been influenced by emotional disposition. Theoretical implications of the findings are discussed, as well as reasons for the present study's failure to confirm the hypothesized link between emotional disposition and moral judgment.

Nederlands: Volgens de *disposition based theory of drama* wordt de emotionele dispositie tegenover een fictief karakter bij het consumeren van narratieve fictie altijd veroorzaakt door een rationeel moreel oordeel betreffende het gedrag van het karakter. Gebaseerd op Raney (2005), betwijfelt het actuele onderzoek dit grondaanname van de theorie door te veronderstellen dat een emotionele dispositie tegenover een karakter ook aan elke vorm van morele beoordeling kan voorafgaan en het morele oordeel aansluitend kan beïnvloeden. Hiervoor werd een experiment uitgevoerd waarin de emotionele dispositie tegenover een fictief filmkarakter werd gemanipuleerd door proefpersonen selectief bloot te stellen aan verschillende filmscènes, en werd het morele oordeel m.b.t. controversieel gedrag van het karakter in een aansluitende scène kwantitatief en kwalitatief gemeten. De resultaten tonen aan dat proefpersonen inderdaad een emotionele dispositie tegenover het karakter konden vormen zonder behoefte aan een voorafgaand moreel oordeel. De resultaten tonen ook aan dat de proefpersonen bepaalde cognitieve strategieën gebruikten om moreel verwerpelijk gedrag te rechtvaardigen. Uit de resultaten blijkt verder dat mannelijke proefpersonen het moreel controversiële gedrag minder verwerpelijk achtten. Echter, de resultaten tonen niet aan dat het morele oordeel van de proefpersonen werd beïnvloedt door hun emotionele dispositie tegenover het karakter. Theoretische implicaties van de uitkomsten worden besproken en tevens eventuele redenen van het actuele onderzoek voor het niet kunnen aantonen van de vermoede link tussen emotionele dispositie en moreel oordeel.

Introduction

In our contemporary society, media consumption for the sake of entertainment is highly prevalent. People spend high amounts of their spare time watching television, listen to music not only at home but also while exercising or travelling, and millions of dollars are expended for the production of spectacular movies drawing thousands of people into the cinemas each year. So, why do we invest such tremendous amounts of time and money for the consumption of media? To a certain extend, the answer might be as simple as this: Because it's fun and we enjoy it and by its very definition, we like having fun and enjoying things a lot. The question, however, *how* we come to like certain media contents such as our favorite movies and series that much whereas we are hardly touched or even disgusted by other products is a very interesting question to ask and, regarding the considerable significance of media exposure in nowadays society, it is also an important one.

Several theories exist attempting to explain how people come to like what they like when it comes to media consumption. A group of theories that has been quite successful in this regard is referred to as disposition-based theories of media entertainment (Raney, 2003), originally developed by Zillmann and Cantor (1972). These share the basic assumption that the amount of enjoyment while being exposed to narrative fiction such as stories, jokes, movies and series can be described as a function of the consumer's emotional affiliation towards the narrative's characters and the relative pleasantness of events that happen to those characters during the story. Put simply, enjoyment is expected to be high when liked characters experience positive events or disliked characters experience negative events, whereas enjoyment is expected to suffer when liked characters experience negative events as well as when disliked characters experience positive events.

The disposition theory of drama (in the following simply referred to as *disposition theory*), devised by Zillmann and Cantor (1976) contends that the extend and quality of emotional affiliation towards a character (in terms of the theory referred to as *emotional disposition*) in dramatic fiction such as movies and series is assumed to lie somewhere on a bipolar continuum of affective valence ranging from highly negative (a hated character) via neutral to highly positive (a beloved character). According to the theory, viewers arrive at this emotional disposition through morally judging the characters in case, thereby forming positive dispositions towards characters whose behavior is perceived to be morally acceptable while forming negative dispositions towards characters whose behavior is perceived to be morally reprehensible. Thus, the viewer functions as a moral surveillant that constantly monitors and evaluates the moral integrity of characters and then bases his emotional affiliation towards a character on those moral judgments. Once an emotional disposition is formed, the viewer can empathize with liked characters while at the same time 'counter-empathize' with disliked characters and hence he hopes for those characters to experience good or bad events respectively. As long as these hopes are fulfilled, enjoyment will be high, whereas enjoyment will suffer as soon as the viewer's hopes are not being met.

It is important to note that in the classic version of disposition based theories, moral evaluations necessarily and always precede as well as cause subsequent emotional dispositions which then in turn, combined with perceived outcomes for characters, determine the final amount of enjoyment.

Interestingly, Raney (2004) questions this very basic assumption of disposition theory. According to him, the temporal and causal relationship between emotional dispositions and moral evaluation might not be as clear cut as suggested by Zillmann and Cantor. That is to say, he proposes that emotional reactions towards characters can sometimes a) precede moral judgments and b) subsequently influence and govern moral evaluations. Both propositions seem reasonable if one allows for the following considerations, some of which Raney mentions himself:

In support of his first proposition, viewers of narrative fiction tend to develop so called *story schemes* over time which can be described as abstract knowledge structures about interrelationships of narrative elements, allowing for fast, heuristic understanding and categorization of narrative information (Biocca, 1991). What this means in English is that a viewer watching the first episode of a new series might be able to immediately identify the (anti-)protagonists, the good guys and the bad guys based on former exposure to similar fiction. For example, he might instantly perceive a policeman as 'one of the good guys' and at the same time perceive the drug dealer as 'one of the bad guys' and so go with liking the former while disliking the latter. In this way, the viewer is able to arrive at a strong emotional disposition towards a character without the need to carefully and constantly scrutinize the moral acceptableness of a character's deeds. Besides this, people are generally found to very often form impressions of persons they encounter within seconds or even fractions of a second based on their physical appearance, especially with regard to basal personality traits such as trustworthiness, aggressiveness and attractiveness (Willis & Todorov, 2006). When at the same time one considers that people are often found to interact with media characters in much the same way as with real persons (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991b), it seems quite justified to assume that viewers of dramatic fiction display this instant reactions toward a narrative's characters as well.

Furthermore, regarding Raney's second proposition, it seems illuminative to adhere to a phenomenon that in the psychological literature has come to be known under the name *cognitive dissonance,* introduced by Festinger (1957). Since people have a general strive for mental consistency, a feeling of dissonance will be experienced as soon as an inconsistency between attitudes, believes, behaviors or between any combination of those arises. According to the theory, people are highly motivated to elude and avoid this state of dissonance by adjusting the attitudes, believes or behaviors until a feeling of mental consistency is established. Applying this principle to the dynamics of emotional dispositions and moral judgments in narrative fiction, one can imagine cognitive dissonance to be caused in a viewer's mind by watching a liked character doing something morally objectionable or in the same way by watching a disliked character doing something be morally commendable. In order to avoid this dissonance, the viewer may adjust his emotional bond towards

the corresponding character (i.e. start disliking a character that was formerly liked and vice versa) or he may adjust his moral evaluation of the character's action in case, i.e. he might, for example, somehow justify an otherwise condemned action. The latter seems much more reasonable, since a lot of modern psychological research is indicating that emotional reactions are primary to and automatically influence and guide cognitive evaluation processes (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic et al., 2000; Damasio, 1994; Kahneman, 2003; Zajonc, 1980).

In this way, the moral judgment of a character a viewer finally arrives at is not the outcome of careful and constant moral monitoring but rather a mere justification of a before-hold emotional attitude. Bandura (2002) illustrates four categories of strategies people regularly apply to justify morally unacceptable behavior for the purpose of maintaining a positive image of their own and of persons being liked or being perceived as members of one's group. That is to say, people may engage in minimizing the rule ('I didn't know it was wrong, 'it's not that big a deal..'), minimizing responsibility ('I had to do it', 'I acted on order'), minimizing the consequences ('They will get over it', 'other things are much worse') or minimizing the victims (i.e. attributing intrinsic inferiority and unworthiness to a victim).

To sum up, we have indeed reason believe that 1) emotional reactions towards media characters can sometimes precede moral judgments since viewers form impressions of characters instantly by applying story schemes and engage in rapid, automatic impression-formation processes and 2) that once held emotional dispositions can influence subsequent moral judgments of characters' actions, likely for the reason of dissonance reduction by means of attitude-defense strategies.

Since empirical evidence for those two refinements of disposition theory is still missing (Raney, 2004), this shall be the aim of the present study. The following two hypotheses shall be tested in this regard:

H1: The emotional disposition towards a media character can precede any moral judgment of the character

H2:The emotional disposition towards a character influences subsequent moral judgment of the character's actions, that is, a more positive emotional disposition is associated with a more positive moral evaluation.

H3: In order to justify their approval of morally unacceptable behavior, people use the 'minimizing strategies', illustrated by Bandura (2002)

Method

Design and participants

In order to test the hypotheses, we conducted an experiment with two conditions. 50 students from the University of Twente (29 females and 21 males) recruited through an online students subject pool were randomly assigned to two different conditions. In that way, 15 females and 10 males ended up in condition 1, whereas 14 females and 11 males arrived at condition 2.

Participants in both conditions first were confronted with the same video clip in which a fictive character is presented in a totally neutral framework. Second, we manipulated the emotional disposition towards the character as either positive (condition 1) or negative (condition 2), respectively, by selectively exposing participants in the two conditions to different clips. Third, participants in both conditions again were confronted with the same clip and then gave moral judgment on the character's behavior in this scene. Thus, an experimental design was used with one dependent variable (moral judgment), and one independent variable (emotional disposition) that was manipulated.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the experiment started and participating was rewarded by granting course credits. Preceding the experiment, permission by the ethical commission was obtained

Operationalisation

Independent Variable (emotional disposition)

In order to create and manipulate participants' emotional disposition towards a fictive character, 3 different scenes from Martin Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver* (1976) were used to confront participants with the film's main character, *Travis Bickle*, played by Robert De Niro. In these scenes, the character is respectively framed positively ('good guy'), framed negatively ('bad guy'), or presented in a 'neutral' framing.

In the 'neutral' scene, one simply sees Travis walking through a crowd in close up for about 20 seconds. For the theoretical reasons explained above, this was expected be enough for the viewer to form an emotional disposition with the character. The good guy framing contains a scene in which Travis approaches a woman in a very polite, charming and gentle way and was thus expected to cause participants to form a strong positive affiliation with Travis. The bad guy frame, on the other hand, contains a scene in which Travis behaves very aggressively, impulsively and threateningly and thus was expected to cause participants to form a strong negative affiliation with Travis.

Participants in both conditions first saw the neutral framing. Since the scene does not contain any course of action that could be used for a rational moral judgment, we regard any emotional disposition towards Travis the viewer holds after having seen the clip as necessarily being caused by a process different from moral evaluation. Later on, the two conditions were selectively exposed to the other two scenes, i.e. participants in condition 1 saw the good guy framing but not the bad guy framing whereas participants in condition 2 saw the bad guy framing but not the good guy framing. In that way, we hypothesized , participants in condition 1 finally would end up with a much more positive emotional disposition towards the character than participants in condition 2.

We tried to measure the emotional dispositions by means of the Self Assessment Manikin Scale, developed by Lang, Bradley and Cuthbert (1997). The SAM-Scale (Self Assessment Manikin Scale) is a non-verbal device to measure 3 dimensions of an emotional reaction, namely arousal (i.e.

how emotionally exciting something is in physiological and psychological sense), dominance (i.e. in how far one feels dominated/controlled as opposed to having a feeling of being in control) and valence (i.e. how emotionally positive or negative something is perceived).

Each of the 3 dimensions is represented in a row of pictorial manikins arrayed along a bipolar 9-point scale, and allows for indicating one's feeling with regard to the dimension in case by selecting a 'manikin' that best represents one's perceived inner state, reaching from the 'lower' extreme (i.e., for example, the lowest possible valence, indicated by point 1 on the scale) through indifference (i.e., for example, neither positive nor negative valence, represented by point 5 on the scale) to the 'higher' extreme of the dimension (i.e., for example, the highest possible valence, indicated by point 9 on the scale).

Since we predicted participants to having formed an emotional disposition towards Travis after having watched the neutral clip, we expected the ratings on all 3 subscales to differ significantly from 5 (since 5 would mean 'emotional indifference'). Furthermore, we expected participants in condition 1 to score higher on the valence and lower on the dominance dimension after having seen the good guy framing than participants in condition 2 after having seen the bad guy framing. This prediction was made on the basis of Valdez and Mehrabian (1997), who connected the terms of emotional states like *antagonistic, belligerent, hostile* etc. to high perceived arousal and dominance, accompanied by low perceived valence. Those emotional terms, in turn, fit well in our conceptualization and framing of Travis as a 'bad guy'. With reference to the arousal dimensions, however, no specific predictions were made since both emotionally joyful as well as emotionally unpleasant experiences can be accompanied by high levels of arousal (Lang, Bradley & Cuthbert 1997; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1997). Therefore, data analysis is exploratory in this regard.

Dependent Variable (moral judgement)

After having seen the scenes described above, participants were exposed to the scene that features the character's morally controversial behavior. That is, participants in both conditions saw a scene in which Travis enters a convenience store, greets the shop owner in way that suggests they know each other and have a 'matey' relationship. A few moments later, while being busy with shopping in the back of the store, Travis witnesses a man entering the store and trying to rob it, thereby threatening the shop owner with a gun. Hereupon, Travis shoots the robber down. The shop owner then takes responsibility and Travis leaves.

This scene was chosen because of its moral ambiguity: On the one hand, Travis acts in a way considered extremely unethical by most people in our society (i.e. he kills another person), but, on the other hand, he thereby also can be perceived to have the intention to save the life of an innocent and befriended person. Furthermore, Travis' victim does something plausibly considered by most to be morally wrong, too, as he robs the store using gun violence, which also opens a new point of view regarding Travis's deed. Thus, the scene contends behavior plausibly perceived as condemnable by

nearly every viewer (i.e., the violent killing of another person) but, at the same time, leaves room for diverse moral reasoning and 'justifications' which we expected to be at least partly dependent on the emotional affiliation participants had formed with Travis before, as outlined above.

Participants' moral judgment regarding Travis' behavior was measured is two ways. First, participants had to indicate how morally wrong they found Travis' behavior by making a slash mark on a 10 cm long visual analogue scale, reaching from "not morally wrong at all" to "extremely morally wrong". The slash marks were measured later on with a ruler and then converted into numeric values between 1 and 100. This manner of measuring moral judgment has successfully been applied before by Haidt and Wheatley (2005).

Second, participants were then asked to "briefly explain their standpoint in a few words". We hereby expected participants in condition 1 to score lower on the visual analogue scale (i.e. to rate Travis's behavior as less condemnable) and to also use the minimizing strategies of Bandura (2002) outlined above to justify their decision.

Procedure

The experiment sessions were conducted in an office room in the faculty of behavioral sciences at the University of Twente. Participants were greeted by the researcher and asked to take a seat behind a laptop screen before informed consent was obtained.

The experiment then carried out consisted of 3 parts: First, participants in both conditions were instructed to set on the 'neutral scene', watch it concentrated and the turn around and complete the questionnaire (i.e. a version of the SAM-scale featuring a small instruction, see appendix a) that had been laid down beside the laptop before by the researcher. Second, this procedure was then repeated with the second clip, i.e. the good guy framing for condition 1 and the bad guy framing for condition 2 and the same version of the SAM-scale with a slightly different instruction in order to measure the "updated" emotional disposition (see appendix b). Third, the same procedure was then repeated in both conditions with the 'controversial scene' and the moral judgment questionnaire (see appendix c) afterwards.

Results

Emotional Disposition

In order to clarify if ratings on all dimensions of the SAM-scale completed after the neutral scene differed significantly from 5 (remember that a rating of 5, which is the middle of the 9-point scale, indicates emotional indifference with regard to the particular dimension), we first calculated the values of the difference between each participants rating and 5 for each of the three subscales. We then carried out a t-test to check if the mean values of the differences each differed significantly from 0. This was the case for both valence, $t(49)=11.32$, $p<.001$ and arousal, $t(49)=10.48$, $p<.001$ as well as

for dominance, $t(49)=7.49$, $p<.001$.   Thus, in line with H1, participants formed an emotional disposition with the character after having seen the neutral scene.

Furthermore, the 2 conditions differed significantly from each other on all SAM-scale dimensions after having seen the different framings. As expected, participants in the positive condition scored higher on valence ($M=7.48$, $SD=.96$) than participants in the negative condition ($M=3,28$, $SD=1.51$), $t(48)=11.70$, $p<.001$, whereas participants in the negative condition scored higher on dominance ($M=5.68$, $SD=1.68$) than participants in the positive condition ($M=4.60$, $SD=2.06$), $t(48)=2.03$, $p=.048$. Also, participants in the negative condition scored higher on arousal ($M=7.00$, $SD=1.12$) than participants in the positive condition ($M=4.92$, $SD=1.85$), $t(48)=4.82$, $p<.001$.

To sum up, the SAM-scale data is indicating that, in line with our expectations, participants instantly formed an emotional disposition towards the character presented in a neutral framework, and later on, depending on whether they saw the good guy framing or the bad guy framing, ended up with a positive or negative emotional disposition towards the character, respectively.

Moral Judgement

Another t-test was carried out to compare the two conditions with respect to the moral judgment ratings on the visual analogue scale. Contrary to our prediction derived from H2, participants' ratings in the negative condition ($M=55.9$, $SD=30.91$) did not differ significantly from participants' ratings in the positive condition ($M=66.44$, $SD=19.61$), $t(48)=1.44$, $p=.156$.   However, a significant sex difference was found in this regard, since female participants scored higher ($M=68.22$, $SD=24.32$) on the visual analogue scale than male participants ($M=51.43$, $SD=26.03$), $t(48)=2.340$, $p=.023$,i.e. female participants judged Travis's behavior to be more morally condemnable than male participants. Participants' written answers were checked for different kinds of argumentations that respectively paralleled a high or low perceived moral damnability, some of which were expected to match Bandura's (2002) categories of *minimizing strategies*. Accordingly, participants were categorized as either making use of at least one of the different minimizing strategies or not. 12 of the 50 participants (6 male, 6 female) engaged in this kind of moral justification. Usually, they justified Travis' behavior by disclaiming alternative courses of action and attributing his reaction to situational pressures, thereby *denying his responsibility*: "Het is natuurlijk niet goed dat hij de jongen meteen neerschiet, maar zoals ik me in travis inleef had hij geen andere keuze…" (participant 10), "het is een momentopname waarin hij niet nadenkt en het gewoon doet. Later beseft hij dat het niet goed is wat hij heeft gedaan" (participant 2), "zodra het pistool op hem gericht werd leek zelf schieten het logische gevolg" (participant 19). Two participants justified Travis' behavior by pointing out the fact that the victim is a criminal, who can be seen as a form of *denying the victim*: "De man werd dood geschoten doordat hij een overval pleegde. Daarom was het eigenlijk zijn eigen schuld" (participant 42), "Hij treedt op tegen een misdadigen, daarom vindt ik het niet verwerpelijk" (participant 27).

These 12 participants accounted for 80% of the 15 participants who scored lower than 50 on the visual analogue scale, and, with M=32.54 SD=13.85 they scored significantly lower than the rest of the participants (M=70.21, SD=22.36), t(48)=5.49, p<.001. However, participants that later on made use of the minimizing strategies to justify Travis' behavior had not developed a more positive emotional disposition towards Travis before, which is indicated by the fact that, after having seen the two clips, neither did they significantly score higher on the valence dimension (M=6.08, SD=2.39) than the rest of the participants (M=5.16, SD=2.48), t(48)=1.14, p=.261), nor did they significantly score lower on the dominance dimension (M=4.58, SD=2.15) than the rest of the participants (M=5.32, SD=1.86), t(48)=1.15, p=.258. With reference to the arousal dimension, the difference between the minimizing-strategy-users (M=6.50, SD=1.31) and the other participants (M=5.79, SD=1.96) is non-significant, too, t(48)=1.17, p=.248.

In sum, regarding participants' moral judgment, the data is *not* indicating that participants in the positive condition either perceived Travis' behavior as less condemnable or justified his behavior more often or in a different manner than participants in the negative condition. However, a considerable amount of participants tended to judge Travis as not very condemnable (i.e., they scored lower than 50 on the visual analogue scale) and when they did, in most cases they made use of the minimizing strategies (i.e. denying responsibility, denying the victim) to morally justify Travis' behavior, but, again, this was not related to the emotional disposition towards Travis participants had formed before (after having seen the two clips).

Discussion

The present study addressed the relationship between emotional reactions towards media characters (emotional dispositions) and moral judgment of these characters' actions in the context of disposition based theories (Zillman & Cantor, 1972). The latter make up a group of theories about media entertainment that perceive the emotional affiliation a consumer forms towards a media characters as being the result of constant moral evaluation of the character's deeds and actions in a rational manner. In that way, moral judgment is conceived as a necessary and sufficient condition for emotional dispositions to evolve.

Based on theoretical considerations accentuated by Raney (2004), the present study questioned this basic assumption of disposition based theories regarding the temporal and causal relationship between emotional dispositions and moral evaluation in fictive drama series and movies. That is to say, it was hypothesized that a) emotional reactions towards media characters can sometimes precede moral judgments since consumer form impressions of characters instantly by applying story schemes and engage in rapid, automatic impression-formation processes and b) that once held emotional dispositions can influence subsequent moral judgments of characters' actions, likely for the reason of dissonance reduction, by means of attitude-defense strategies (i.e., the *minimizing strategies,*

developed by Bandura, 2002). In the following, a few questions regarding the interpretations of our results, theoretical implications, plans for further research as well as limitations of the present study shall be discussed.

In how far can emotional dispositions towards a fictive character precede moral judgment?

In line with the first hypothesis, the data of the experiment conducted in the present study indicate that viewers of narrative fiction do arrive at an emotional disposition towards a fictive character rapidly and instantly, without a need to morally evaluate the character's behavior previously. This is suggested by the fact that participants were non-indifferent on all three subscales of the SAM-scale, namely valence, arousal and dominance, after having seen the neutral framing. This scene does not leave the possibility for a moral judgment of the character's behavior, since there simply is no behavior present that plausibly could be imputed to have a moral dimension. Thus, the emotional disposition participants ended up with necessarily are the result of a process different from moral evaluation.

Which process could be thought of as being crucial in this regard? Two candidates seem reasonable, each of which shall be outlined in the following. The first is immediate impression formation based on physical appearance with regard to basic traits such as likeability, trustworthiness, attractiveness etc. In a study of Willis and Todorov (2006), when confronted with pictures of unfamiliar faces, participants' judgments with regard to these basal personality traits given after 100 ms correlated highly with judgments given without any time constraints. This suggests that impression formation and the 'decision' to like or dislike a person is the outcome of a fast, intuitive, effortless and non-reflective process and simply does not require 'higher' cognitive processes such as evaluating a person's behavior in the light of moral standards. To quote eminent psychologist Robert Zajonc, it means that "preferences need no inferences" (Zajonc, 1980).

A second plausible explanation is the concept of story schemes which can be described as abstract knowledge structures about interrelationships of narrative elements, allowing for fast, heuristic understanding and categorization of narrative information (Biocca, 1991). By applying story schemes, a viewer of narrative fiction might be able to instantly categorize a newly introduced person as a 'good guy' or 'bad guy' and then go with liking the former and disliking the latter, without further evaluation. If we take that one step further, since most of narrative fiction we encounter during our life time, be it fairy tales, Walt Disney Movies or modern drama series, consist of a 'good guy-bad guy-dichotomy', we may simply *cannot* be emotionally indifferent towards a character. During the course of our life as a consumer of narrative fiction, through development of our story schemes we may have learned to automatically and always decide whether to side with a character (i.e., to like him) or to take against him (i.e., to dislike him), thereby searching for information to base our decision upon that functioned as a successful discriminator between good guys and bad guys in the past, such as certain outward appearance, certain body language, certain scene settings etc.

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Since those two phenomena, namely the development and application of story schemes and rapid impression formation are not mutually exclusive, it does not seem implausible to impute that the final emotional disposition is a mixture of both of these processes. However, this finding clearly goes against the classic version of disposition based theories, since they share the basic assumption that an emotional disposition is necessarily based on a former moral judgment (Zillmann, 2000). To use the terms of dual process theories (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Kahneman, 2003), disposition theory pictures the formation of emotional dispositions more as a slow, deliberate, explicit system 2 process , whereas the present study, in line with current research does find that fast, intuitive and non-reflective, system 1 processes are also involved. However, this is not to say that disposition theory is wrong in this regard, it only is to say that the presumed course of events, namely that emotional dispositions are always, necessarily and only caused by a former moral judgment is not the whole story.

In how far do existing emotional dispositions influence subsequent moral judgment?

Although participants in the positive condition formed a much more positive emotional disposition towards the character than participants in the negative condition, they did not judge his behavior in the controversial scene as less condemnable. This is indicated by the fact that no significant difference between the two conditions could be found with respect to the scores on the visual analogue scale construed to measure participants' perceived 'moral damnability' of Travis' deed. This in turn means that hypothesis H2 is not confirmed.

One possible explanation for this might be that the participants' exposure to the character Travis Bickle was simply not long and intense enough for a meaningful emotional affiliation to develop. What was caused by the two clips, then, may have been more of a 'first emotional impression', which could be picked up by the SAM-scale but was not enough to really change participants' perception and evaluation of the character. Thus, maybe the global affective response of liking and disliking that was manipulated in the present study has to be accompanied by other (para)-social-cognitive processes to be sufficient for a meaningful relationship towards a fictive character to arise. As a result, the emotional disposition held by participant towards Travis might not have been powerful enough to cause the hypothesized mechanism of Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance.

Another plausible reason for the failure of the present study to confirm H2 might lie in the manner of measurement of participants' moral judgment. The influence of a viewer's emotional disposition on his moral evaluation of a fictive character is best thought of as an implicit, non-reflective and, by definition, non-rational process. However, by being asked to explicitly morally evaluate Travis' behavior, it may be the case that participants were provoked to think in a rational, deliberate way, thereby overwriting their 'emotional bias'. To reintroduce the vocabulary of Dual Process Theories (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Kahneman, 2003), a viewer's emotionally biased moral justification of a fictive character's behavior is best thought of as a fast, intuitive system 1 process,

while the explicit manner of measurement of the moral judgment in the present study may have triggered participants' system 2 and, in that way, induced participants to get rid of their emotional bias.

Furthermore, the significant difference between male and female participants with respect to scores on the visual analogue scale is interesting, since there is discussion ongoing about sex differences in moral reasoning (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000). Gilligan (1982), for example, argued for a conceptualization of moral reasoning that encompasses two general orientations with regard to moral reasoning, namely an orientation of care as well as an orientation of justice. The latter can be characterized as predominantly being focused on motives of justice, fairness and individuality, whereas the latter is mainly concerned with a sense of maintaining relationships, responding to the needs of others and not hurting another person. According to Gilligan and Attanucci (1988), males mainly engage in justice reasoning and females mainly engage in care reasoning. Although empirical evidence is rather mixed in this regard (Skoe & Diessner, 1994; Sochting, Skoe, & Marcia, 1994), a meta study by Jaffee and Hyde (2000) still offers some support for the hypothesized gender difference.

How do the two proposed orientations in moral reasoning apply to the moral controversy participants in the present study had to face? Participants whose moral reasoning is anchored in a justice orientation might have considered the fact that, because the person who gets shot does something wrong, too, (I.e. he robs a shop by threatening the owner with a gun), in some way 'deserves the retribution' caused by Travis. By the same token, participants who handle a care approach might have been much more concerned with the needs and the physical integrity of the offender, and, in that way, perceived Travis' behavior as more condemnable. If at the same time it is true that males predominantly handle a justice approach whereas females predominantly handle a care approach, this might explain the gender difference with regard to moral judgment found in the present study.

In how far did participants use cognitive strategies to morally justify controversial behavior?

A considerable amount of participants tended to judge Travis' behavior as not very condemnable (i.e., they scored lower than 50 on the visual analogue scale) and when this was the case, 80% of participants made use of cognitive minimizing strategies, namely denying responsibility and denying the victim (Bandura, 2002) to morally justify Travis' behavior. Denying responsibility was realized by putting towards the situational pressures Travis finds himself in. That is, the causes of Travis' deed were attributed to the situation itself, which offers a possibility to believe that Travis had no choice at all and therefore no responsibility.

This style of attribution is consistent with Hamilton (1998) who argued that the impression we already hold of a person determines our way of attributing the causes of the person's behavior. That is to say, when a liked person behaves in an appropriate way and/or is successful, we tend to attribute the causes of behavior to internal characteristics, such as personality, motivation etc. when a liked person,

however, behaves in an inappropriate way or fails, we tend to attribute the causes to external characteristics, such as the situation the person finds himself in. By means of that, we can remain the positive image of a person we like, thereby avoiding the cognitive dissonance that would result from accepting a beloved person to fail or to behave in an inappropriate way.

However, participants in the two conditions did not differ with regard to justification and attribution styles and participants who tended to morally justify Travis' behavior did not indicate to have formed an especially positive and intense emotional disposition towards the character. Thus, regarding the present study, the attribution and justification strategies used by participants fit well into the mechanisms described by Bandura (2002) and Hamilton (1998) to maintain a positive image of a beloved person, but, important to note, the occurrence of these mechanisms seemed unrelated to the emotional affiliation formed with the character beforehand.

What might account for the seeming absence of a relation between emotional disposition and participants' manner of attribution and justification? One possibility is that the difference between fictional characters and persons in real life is significant in this regard. One could, for example, imagine that, compared to fictional characters, a more 'intense' liking of a person is required in real life to give the person moral amnesty. Since inappropriate, immoral and violent behavior is a rather common thing in narrative fiction such as movies and series, people may handle moral standards that are less strict compared to moral standards handled in real life. Raney (2005) found individual differences with respect to attitudes and ideas about vigilantism and punitive punishment to be predictive of moral judgment in the context of crime-based drama. Therefore, these factors might also explain the occurrence of some incidences of justification argumentations. For example, an argumentation like "De man werd dood geschoten doordat hij een overval pleegde. Daarom was het eigenlijk zijn eigen schuld" (participant 42) might not only be seen as an incidence of 'denying the victim' as a result of a positive emotional affiliation with the character, but may representative of a person who scores high on vigilantism and has a positive attitude towards punishment.

An alternative explanation that points out a weakness of the present study lies in the fact that the 'controversial scene' is not emotionally neutral and may have caused some participants to 'revise' their emotional judgment while watching the clip. Accordingly, it may be the case that they subsequently arrived at an emotional disposition that is strong and positive enough to cause the described attribution and justification strategies.

What are limitations and weaknesses of the present study, and what might further research address?

Limitations and weaknesses regarding both internal and external validity are associated with the present study and shall be discussed in the following.

Several weaknesses of the present study's operationalisation imply threats to its internal validity. First of all, in the present experiment it is assumed that the process of forming an emotional

disposition towards the character is completed after participants having seen the first two scenes, since the emotional disposition is measured at this point in time. However, it is not completely implausible to presume that the third scene (i.e., the morally controversial scene) does also influence a participant's emotional disposition. If this is true, then the emotional disposition measured and related to subsequent moral judgment is not the emotional disposition participants really end up with in the end, and, by the same token, measurement of the emotional disposition is unreliable and therefore invalid.

Second, a problem arises from the explicit manner of measurement of moral judgment as applied in the present study. Remember that the present study aimed at finding out in how far people are *implicitly* influenced by their emotional disposition towards a character when engaging in moral reasoning about the character's actions. However, after having seen the three clips, participants were explicitly asked to morally evaluate Travis' behavior and one can imagine that in this way participants were provoked to think in a deliberate and rational manner, thereby 'overwriting' or ignoring their emotional disposition. To reintroduce the vocabulary of Dual Process Theories (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Kahneman, 2003), a viewer's emotionally biased moral justification of a fictive character's behavior is best thought of as a fast, intuitive system 1 process, while the explicit manner of measurement of the moral judgment in the present study may have triggered participants' system 2 and, in that way, induced participants to get rid of their emotional bias. This problem is exaggerated by the fact that, given the low amount of time 'spent' with the character, the emotional disposition towards the character might not have been strong enough to foster against being overwritten by participants' system 2.

Furthermore, one has to admit that the persons who participated in the present study might not be representative for the general population, especially when it comes to emotional bias in moral reasoning. All of the present study's participants are university students, and so it is plausible to assume that most participants are higher educated than the general population and might also already have spent some time on thinking about moral philosophy and ethics, which, in turn, might make participants make less susceptible to emotional bias in moral reasoning than the general population.

Also, since individual differences with reference to attitudes and ideas about vigilantism and punitive punishment affect moral judgment in the context of crime-based drama (Raney, 2005), controlling for these variables might help to identify effects of emotional disposition on moral judgment with greater precision.

To conclude, when replicating the present study, five changes can be made to achieve a higher internal validity. Those changes consist in 1) exposing participants to a character for a longer amount of time, thereby allowing for strong and stable emotional dispositions to arise, 2) measuring emotional disposition at the appropriate point in time, i.e. when further adjustment of a participant's emotional disposition is not possible or at least seems highly implausible, 3) measuring moral judgment in an implicit manner, 4) using a sample that is representative for the general population regarding

education level and exposure to moral philosophy and ethics and 5) controlling for individual differences found to affect moral judgment.

Moreover, one has to be careful about the drawing conclusions from the results of the present experiment to the genre of narrative fiction in general, since the present study used a *certain* fictive character, embedded in *certain* scenes from a *certain* movie which in turn is part of a *certain* medium, i.e. television. One can imagine that the dynamics of moral judgment and emotional disposition may be different from what is suggested in the present study when it comes to different media and different characters. As a concrete example, the fast and intuitive process of person judgment based on visual features of character's faces that is suggested in the present study cannot possibly play a role in exposure to content of narrative fiction presented auditory or lexically. This is so because the medium does not allow for character's faces to be visually presented directly but only indirectly through verbal descriptions. Clearly, follow up research is needed in order to determine in how far different processes play a role in different types of media.

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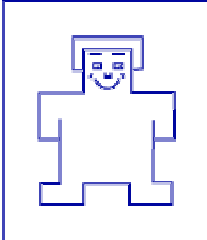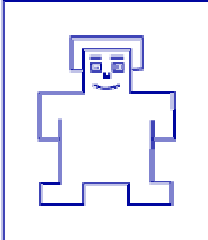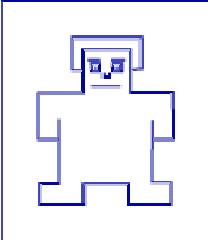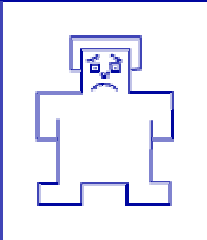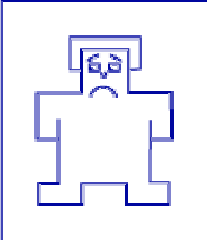
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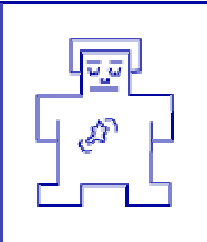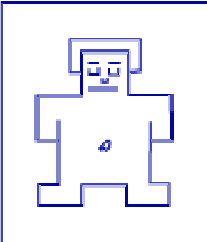Kahneman, D. (2003).A perspective on judgment and choice. *American Psychologist*, 58, 697–720.
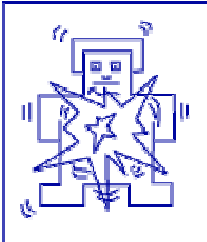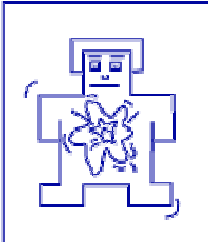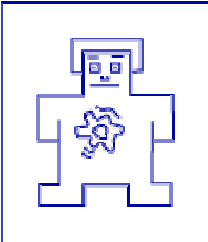
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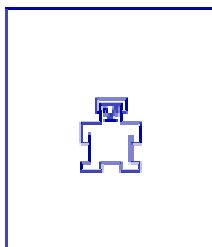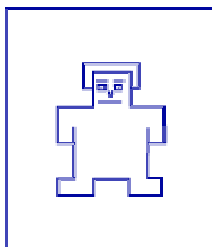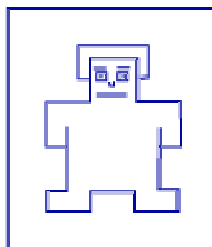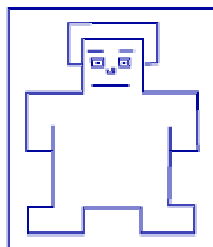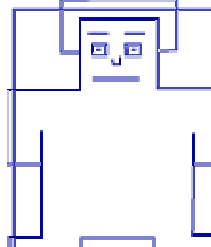
Appendix

In de net bekeken scène werd je geconfronteerd met de filmkarakter *Travis Bickle*. Hieronder zie je drie verschillende schalen (onplezierig-plezierig; kalm-opgewonden; beheerst worden- beheersen), bedoeld om je gevoelens (emoties) in kaart te brengen. Geef voor elke schaal aan welke figuur het best weergeeft *hoe je je voelt ten opzichte van Travis* (d.w.z. welke gevoelens hij in je opwekte tijdens deze scène). Daarvoor kruis je bij elke schaal een van de negen rondjes aan.

plezierig   onplezierig

opgewonden   kalm

beheerst worden   beheersen

In de net bekeken scène werd je nog een keer geconfronteerd met de filmkarakter *Travis Bickle.* Hieronder zie je weer de drie verschillende schalen (onplezierig-plezierig; kalm-opgewonden; beheerst worden- beheersen), bedoeld om je gevoelens (emoties) in kaart te brengen. Geef voor elke schaal aan welke figuur het best weergeeft *hoe je je nu voelt ten opzichte van Travis* (d.w.z. welke gevoelens hij in jou opwekte tijdens deze scène). Daarvoor kruis je bij elke schaal een van de negen rondjes aan.
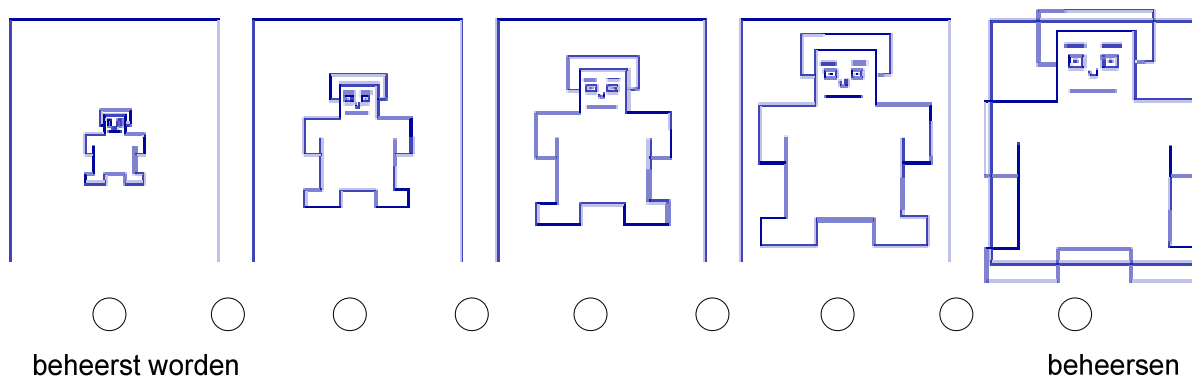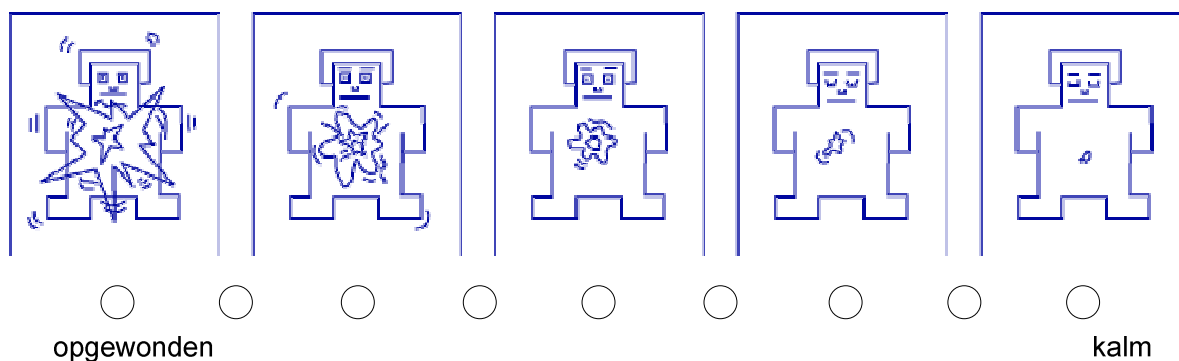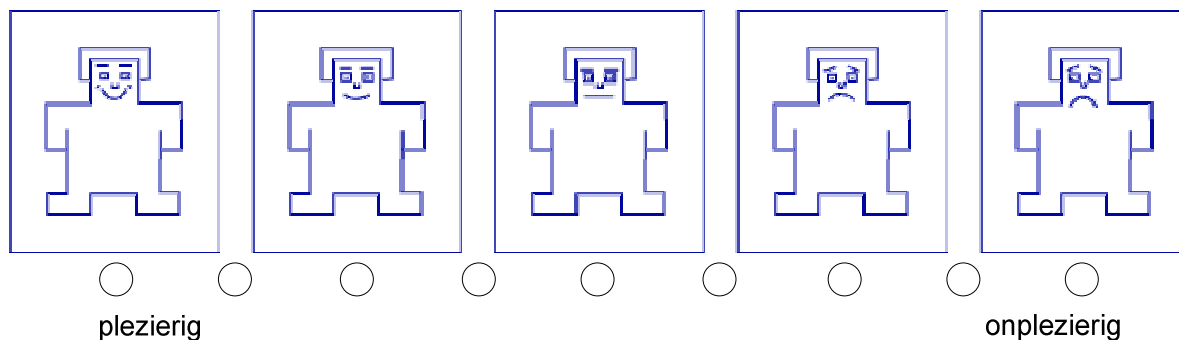
plezierig   onplezierig

opgewonden   kalm

beheerst worden   beheersen

*Onderstaand vind je vragen die betrekking hebben op de **laatst bekeken scène**. Er zijn geen goede of foute antwoorden, want het gaat hierbij om jouw eigen individuele mening. Lees zorgvuldig en probeer je positie zo goed mogelijk duidelijk te maken.*

a) Hoe moreel verwerpelijk vind je Travis' gedrag in de net bekeken scène? Markeer op de onderstaande lijn een punt die het best jouw standpunt weergeeft.

| helemaal niet verwerpelijk | ————————————————— | Extreem verwerpelijk |

b) Kun je jouw standpunt ook in enige woorden uitleggen?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____