From artifacts to human lives: Investigating the domain-generality of judgments about purposes

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People attribute purposes in both mundane and profound ways—such as when thinking about the purpose of a knife and the purpose of a life. In prior research, these seemingly very different kinds of purpose attributions have been investigated separately. One very plausible hypothesis is that people have fundamentally different ways of attributing purposes in these different domains. Yet, it is also possible that people use the same criteria when attributing purposes in a wide range of domains. If so, then this would reveal an important and surprising connection between programs of research that otherwise seem unrelated. In three studies (total N = 13,720 observations from N = 3,430 participants), we examined purpose attributions in six domains: artifacts, social institutions, animals, body parts, sacred objects, and human lives.

Study 1 manipulated what items in each domain were originally created for (original design) and how people currently use them (present practice). Results revealed that information about the intentions of the original designer and the intentions of the present users each influenced purpose attributions across all six domains. Yet, the sizes of these effects differed across domains. For artifacts and animals, original design and present practice had very similar effect sizes. However, for institutions and human lives, present practice had a larger effect than original design. The reverse pattern held for sacred objects and body parts.

Study 2 manipulated whether items in each domain are good at achieving a goal (effectiveness) and whether the goal itself is good (morality). The results were strikingly similar across domains. People are more inclined to think that a use is an item's purpose if it is highly effective (versus ineffective) for that use. Moreover, people are more inclined to consider morally good uses to be items' purposes than morally bad uses. But, this effect was very small.

In short, Study 1 provided some evidence for domain-specificity in purpose attributions, whereas Study 2 provided evidence for domain-generality. Thus, we ran a third study to test whether the Study 1 results might somehow be compatible with the hypothesis that purposes are attributed in the same ways across domains. We speculated that the impacts of the intentions of the original creators and present users might depend on the kinds of entities that play the roles of creator and user. For example, if the creator of a sacred object is a supernatural being, then perhaps people give greater weight to the creator's intentions because he is a god and not because he is the creator. If so, then, if we reversed which entities play each role (e.g., making a human the creator and a god the user), then we should also reverse the effect sizes for the original design and present practice manipulations.

Following this rationale, Study 3 used a similar design to Study 1 but with an additional experimental factor, "roles," which flipped the kinds of entities that play the roles of original designer and present user. Results revealed that, in most domains, the role-reversing manipulation substantially changed the effects of the original design and present practice

manipulations. Thus, the most striking differences that we observed across domains in Study 1 appear to result from details about which agents usually act as the creators versus users of the items. This suggests that the differences we originally observed don't reflect differences in the importance of original design and present practice across domains. Instead, they reflect inter-domain differences in the kinds of entities that usually play the roles of designer and user.
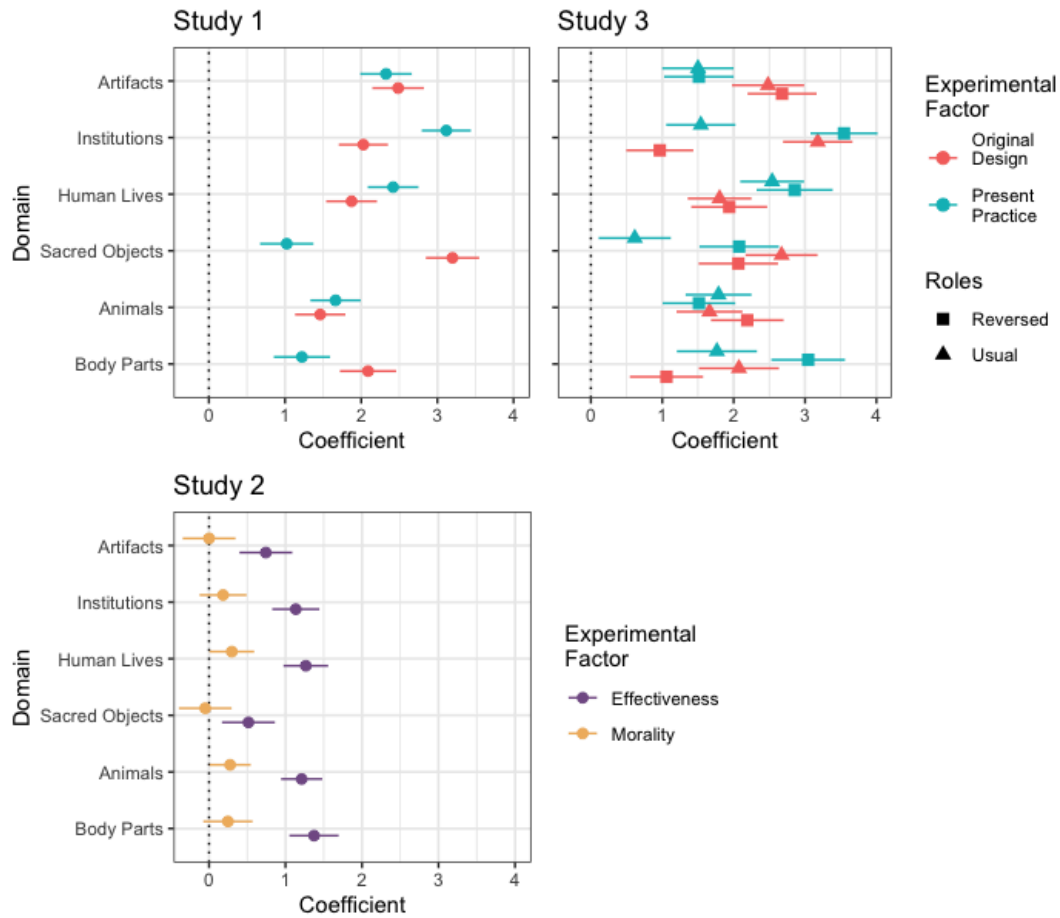

Figure 1: **Effects of experimental factors across domains.** Points and error bars indicate regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals.

These studies suggest that the factors that influence purpose attributions are strikingly similar across domains. We found that the criteria people use when thinking about the purpose of an ordinary artifact like a chair or a knife are very similar to the criteria they use when thinking about the purpose a body part like a hand or a heart, or even when they are thinking about more deeply meaningful questions such as the purpose of a person's life. If this conclusion is correct, it would have dramatic implications for future research. Whereas reasoning about the purposes of ordinary artifacts seems relatively straightforward, reasoning about religiously or philosophically significant purposes seems complex and impenetrable. Yet, if the criteria for purpose attributions are domain-general, then insight into the more philosophically significant forms of teleological reasoning might be gained by considering findings from research on more mundane forms of teleological reasoning. To understand how people reason about the purpose

of a life, perhaps one should begin by considering how people reason about the purpose of a knife.