

How Much to Eat a Worm? Personal Perspective Influences Value

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Thorndike asked employed and unemployed volunteers how little money they would be willing to accept as compensation to suffer certain pains, deprivations, frustrations, and repulsive acts. The employed consistently demanded unreasonably more money than the unemployed. The present study attempted to account for such excessive requests by manipulating evaluator perspective: Impartial judge vs. Wronged victim. Results showed that, much like Thorndike's employed subjects, wronged victims asked for relatively huge amounts. Possible reasons for these findings are discussed.

Introduction

Thorndike reported on a study conducted in 1934 where he asked people to assess for how little money they would be willing to endure certain pains, etc.

In his words, "*The most striking fact about the reports in general is the absurd magnitude of the bids.*"

Why are amounts so high?

Thorndike's suggestions included: Subjects did not take the task seriously; general carelessness; reactions to the outrageousness of the sufferings.

Another possibility has to do with Actor-Observer effects (e.g., perceptual salience).

In fact, this is what we decided to test.

Imagining these pains to be suffered by ourselves, we see greater impact on our lives than would an observer who only sees the single instance of the person suffering.

So, to examine these different perspectives, we extended Thorndike's study by having participants take the role of either the person having to suffer the pains (SELF), or, imagine they are impartial judges asked to render a monetary compensation for the pains suffered by another person (JUDGE).

Predictions

- We expected to see that participants in the JUDGE condition would render far more "reasonable" awards than participants in the SELF condition.
- In addition, we expected to see that certain already-held beliefs (e.g., religious devotion)

would correlate with values placed on certain questions (#47 and #51).

- Finally, we expected that although absolute values might differ across groups, relative ordering (most to least costly) should be similar.

Results: Experiment I

Average Monetary Awards:

SELF: \$937,181,239.00 (n = 40)
JUDGE: \$278,072,074.00 (n = 37)

Five Most Costly Pains:

	<u>SELF</u>	<u>JUDGE</u>
1	37	37
2	51	51
3	13	10
4	47	13
5	31	31

Five Least Costly Pains:

	<u>SELF</u>	<u>JUDGE</u>
47	32	35
48	38	38
49	8	44
50	34	43
51	43	45

Results: Experiment II

Average Monetary Awards:

SELF: \$899,982,651.00 (n = 30)
JUDGE: \$582,089,200.00 (n = 34)

Five Most Costly Pains:

	<u>SELF</u>	<u>JUDGE</u>
1	51	37
2	31	26
3	13	31
4	37	13
5	49	10

Five Least Costly Pains:

	<u>SELF</u>	<u>JUDGE</u>
47	1	34
48	8	35
49	43	44
50	44	1
51	45	43

Correlations:

Question #47:

SELF (df = 29): $r = .12, p > .05$

JUDGE (df = 33): $r = .24, p > .05$

Question #51:

SELF (df = 29): $r = .17, p > .05$

JUDGE (df = 33): $r = -.15, p > .05$

Conclusions

As predicted, there was a distinct difference between SELF and JUDGE in terms of the magnitude of the monetary awards.

The lowest scored items tended to be those that did not permanently debilitate (e.g., walking down Broadway) or were recoverable (e.g., hair loss).

The highest scored items tended to be those that resulted in suffering that would be publicly known (e.g., news report of eating human flesh), or religiously based (e.g., spitting on a crucifix).

Findings could relate to why jury-compensated trials result in higher awards than judge-compensated trials.

Future Research

The present studies made use of Thorndike's original questions. Some of the questions seem odd in today's society (e.g., #41, #43). It would be interesting to ask questions that reflected some contemporary issues in American culture.

It would also be interesting to explore how the present results compare with actual legal judgments.

Another interesting approach might be to examine whether age and gender variables correlate with the amounts requested.

References

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Smith & Doe (1999). *The book of horrible questions*. New York: St. Martin.

Thorndike, E. L. (1949). Valuations of certain pains, deprivations and frustration. In *Selected writings from a connectionist's psychology* (E. Thorndike, Ed.). New York: Appelton-Century-Crofts. (Original publication, 1937, in *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 51, 227-239.)

Thorndike's Questions

- 1 Have one upper front tooth pulled out.
- 2 Have all your teeth pulled out.
- 3 Have one ear cut off.
- 4 Have your left or right arm cut off at the elbow.
- 5 Have a little finger of one hand cut off.
- 6 Have the little toe of one foot cut off.
- 7 Become entirely bald.
- 8 Have all the hair of your eyebrows fall out.
- 9 Have one leg cut off at the knee.
- 10 Have both legs paralyzed.
- 11 Have small pox, recover perfectly except, for about 20 large pock-marks on your cheeks and forehead.
- 12 Become totally deaf.
- 13 Become totally blind.
- 14 Become unable to chew, so you can eat only liquid food.
- 15 Become unable to speak, so that you can communicate only by writing, signs, etc.
- 16 Become unable to taste.
- 17 Become unable to smell.
- 18 Require 25 per cent more sleep than now to produce the same degree of rest and recuperation.
- 19 Fall into a trance/hibernating state in October every year.
- 20 Fall into a trance/hibernating state in March every year.
- 21 Be insane through July every year (manic depression insanity, bad enough so that you would have to be put in an insane asylum, but with no permanent ill effects).
- 22 Same as 21, but for two years with no recurrence again.
- 23 Have to live all the rest of your life outside of U.S.A.
- 24 Have to live all the rest of your life in Iceland.
- 25 Have to live all the rest of your life in Japan.

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| 26 | Have to live all the rest of your life in Russia. | 39 | Choke a stray cat to death. |
| 27 | Have to live all the rest of your life in Nicaragua. | 40 | Let a snake 5 feet long coil around your arms and head. |
| 28 | Have to live all the rest of your life in New York City. | 41 | Attend Sunday morning service in St. Patrick's Cathedral, and in the middle of the service run down the aisle to the altar, yelling "The time has come, the time has come" as loud as you can until you are dragged out. |
| 29 | Have to live all the rest of your life in Boston, Mass. | 42 | Take a sharp knife and cut a pig's throat. |
| 30 | Have to live the rest of your life on a Kansas farm 10 miles from town. | 43 | Walk down Broadway from 120th Street to 80th Street at noon wearing evening clothes and no hat. |
| 31 | Have to live the rest of your life shut up in an apartment in New York City. You can have friends come see you there, but cannot go out of the apartment. | 44 | Spit on a picture of Charles Darwin. |
| 32 | Eat a dead beetle one inch long. | 45 | Spit on a picture of George Washington. |
| 33 | Eat a live beetle one inch long. | 46 | Spit on a picture of your mother. |
| 34 | Eat a dead earthworm 6 inches long. | 47 | Spit on a crucifix. |
| 35 | Eat a live earthworm 6 inches long. | 48 | Suffer for 1 hour pain as severe as the worst headache/toothache you've ever had. |
| 36 | Eat a quarter of a pound of cooked human flesh (nobody but the person who pays you will ever know). | 49 | Eat only bread, milk, spinach and yeast cakes for a year. |
| 37 | Eat a quarter of a pound of cooked human flesh (and the fact that you do so will appear on the front page of all the New York papers). | 50 | Go without sugar in all forms (including cake, etc.), tea, coffee, tobacco, and alcoholic drink, for a year. |
| 38 | Drink enough to become thoroughly intoxicated. | 51 | Lose all hope of life after death. |