Reviewer’s report

Title: The living dead? Perception of persons in the unresponsive wakefulness syndrome in Germany compared to the USA

Version: 1 Date: 31 Jan 2018

Reviewer: Luigi Trojano

Reviewer’s report:

The authors revised their manuscript following Reviewers' comments and suggestions.

I believe that the present version of the paper is actually improved with respect to the original one. In particular, the authors reported some novel analyses about the possible relationships of demographics with participants' responses (age but not gender was significantly related to responses), and addressed some of the issues raised by the comparison of their data with those gathered in a similar previous study on a sample of US people.

I am still convinced that following the approach of the previous US study did not allow focusing analyses and interpretation on the data available in the present German sample. In this sense, the comparison with the US study informed by Hofstede's theoretical model posed several constraints that limited exploiting study's potential.

For instance, the effect of age on consideration of UWS (higher mind ascription in younger participants) is indeed interesting, and might be related to higher religiosity in younger people, or easier access to media information about UWS, or higher cultural and socio-economic background. The authors did not focus on these aspects, but only pointed out that their sample was younger than that reported in the US study, thus excluding that the different responses in the two studies could be accounted for different mean age of the samples.

Another aspect that seems to warrant more attention is the discussion about possible shortcomings of assessing mind ascription via written vignettes. Indeed the authors commented on the possible role of wording, particularly in comparison with the US study, but did not comment on the fact that 72/991 participants failed the manipulation check (i.e. did not understand David's conditions). This figure seems to be quite high, if one considers that the sample was composed by relatively young, educated healthy people. The authors might assess whether failures on the manipulation check were equally distributed across conditions, and comment on this finding.

The authors might discuss to a greater extent the role of participants' religion (not considered in the present version) whereas the authors only considered a ‘religiosity index’ in analogy with the US Study. It would be interesting to constrain atheists vs. followers of any religion, a comparison that could provide cues about the possible role of religion on ethic choices when dealing with patients in UWS (incidentally in Table 1 I suggest replacing 'Religiosity' with Religion' to avoid ambiguities).
A last but not secondary aspect is the personal experience with a patient in UWS. This is a particularly delicate issue, as patients' caregivers are in the special position of deciding what is best for their relatives, and therefore their opinion is of paramount importance. Recent evidence (Moretta et al., Rehabil Psychol 2017) would demonstrate that caregivers tend to ascribe more interaction abilities to their relatives than physicians do. I believe that these findings are relevant for the discussion of the role of contact with the patients in increasing the likelihood of ascribing them mental capacities.

In synthesis, I understand that the authors are willing to maintain the general structure of their paper in which a close parallelism is made between the present and the US study. Even though they do not want to reduce emphasis (and dedicated space) on cross-cultural issues, they might nonetheless enrich the discussion section by taking more advantage from their own data, and addressing some interesting questions elicited by the present study.

A last comment about the sentence on Yu et al.'s data (page 20). I wonder whether UWS patients' response to other people's cries of suffering, can be really considered 'consistent with signs of empathy'. I suggest a more cautious interpretation such as 'thus revealing some kind of emotional responses.'

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