Live or Die? Effects of Anonymity on Moral Decisions

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Do morals change due to a specific situation? Thirty undergraduate students solved a series of moral dilemmas under one of two conditions. Participants were led to believe they were going to discuss their answers in public or believed that their answers would be kept private. Each participant was also given both non-emotional and emotional dilemmas. Results indicated that neither the different conditions (public versus private) nor the type of dilemma (emotionally versus non-emotionally engaged) produced significant differences. However, significant differences were found for many of the individual questions. Future research is discussed.

There are two basic ways in which people make moral decisions (Lapsley, 1997). In the first method, people decide what is morally right by gauging the consequences of each decision. For example, if choosing Action A results in the best consequences for everyone involved, then Action A is the morally right choice. In the second method, people decide what is morally right by applying some socially defined template of moral rules for behavior, social desirability (Frankena, 1973). It is important to find other influences on moral decision making. For example, does emotional involvement in the dilemmas cause significant changes in responses? Morality based dilemmas are a constant in everyday life, therefore further research in this area is imperative. If research can find what influences how individuals make moral decisions, certain outcomes could perhaps be controlled to limit harm and increase good for society.

Psychologists have been studying moral dilemmas for many years now, trying to understand the development of moral reasoning in individuals. Piaget (1932/1965) cited the four stages of a child’s cognitive development, where the child develops an ability to think abstractly and to make rational judgments about concrete or observable phenomena. When younger, a child needs to manipulate the information physically to understand it. As the child continues development, he/she no longer requires concrete objects to make rational judgments; he/she is capable of hypothetical and deductive reasoning. Kohlberg (1969) continued this line of research by identifying stages of moral development. He found that some decisions originated from the child’s desire to do what will gain the approval of others (social desirability).

Klein (2002) demonstrated that when participants were given information about morality based behaviors performed by their peers, including information that challenged their prior beliefs, they appeared to have reconstructed their selves. More specifically, participants convinced themselves they were willing to perform or were capable of performing additional behaviors. Keasey (1974) further supported that finding, when he found that opinion agreement strongly affected the evaluation of moral judgments. In other words, if one believed that his/her responses were going to be shared (made public), it would ultimately affect the way in which he/she would respond. Therefore, individuals were more likely to be unsure of their responses to moral dilemmas when other people could find out about their opinions. The current study was designed to further the findings of previous research and how social desirability affects peoples’ responses to moral dilemmas. It was hypothesized that participants were more likely to be morally neutral when they believed they were going to have to explain their answers to others (public) than when the answers to the moral dilemmas were kept private.

Emotional engagement to the moral dilemma has also been a focus of research. Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, and Cohen (2004) suggested that some moral dilemmas engage emotional processing to a greater extent than others and these differences affect people’s judgments. One possible factor may be the relationship the individual has to the person in the dilemma. This in turn can then redefine each dilemma as serious or non-serious. Bjorklund (2003) found that participants used justice reasoning to justify their decision to a greater extent.

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when faced with a non-serious (non-emotionally engaged) moral dilemma than when faced with a serious (emotionally engaged) dilemma. It may have been that the greater concern of harm in the serious dilemmas was what elicited care oriented reasoning, which showed the goal to prevent persons cared for from being harmed. Gilligan (1982) conducted numerous studies on justice and care orientations in moral reasoning in which she criticized Kohlberg’s paradigm as being gender biased. Gilligan (1982) constructed her own theory of gender differences in ego and moral development. She claimed that men were more “justice” oriented while women were more "care" oriented. A justice orientation was motivated by logic and reason and required the moral actor to treat others impartially and objectively. Moral decisions were based on abstract principles of justice that could be universalized to every person and every situation. A care orientation allowed the actor to use subjective feelings and sentiments when making moral judgments. The caring decision was motivated by empathy. It recognized particular relationships between people and extenuating circumstances in each situation. In the present study, it was hypothesized that the non-emotionally engaged questions would elicit responses towards the ends of the spectrum (responses near 1 or 6) regardless of whether the participants believed their answers were made public or kept private.

Since there were many subcategories (relatives vs. strangers, social monsters vs. animals, relatives vs. valued individuals, and comparisons of different numbers of people, e.g. 1 vs. 5) added within the emotionally engaged questions, they created several other variables. The Trolley dilemma was used to investigate the subcategories. It states: “A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path is a fork where it can either move down the left track or right, each having consequences. Fortunately, you can make the decision as to which track the trolley takes by flipping a switch” (Indick 2000).

Burgess, Gordon, Shevlin, and Morgan (2004) demonstrated that when people were related, they were more likely to save the person in a harmful situation. Therefore, the current study hypothesized that participants would save their relatives versus the strangers, regardless of whether they believed their information was going to be made public or kept private. It was believed that most people would not care if anyone knew that they were choosing to save a loved one over a stranger, because it is deemed socially acceptable.

Vollum, Buffington-Vollum, and Longmire (2004) researched violence towards animals. Something particularly noteworthy in their research was where they identified that over half the people in the study believed that the courts should take cases of animal cruelty as seriously as they do cases of violence against humans. In other words, people care as much for animals that are assaulted as they do for humans who are assaulted. Consequently, it was hypothesized that the participants would be more favorable to saving the animals on the track rather than the human who has committed a socially undesirable crime. In this case, the act of cruelty would be done towards the animals by the participant, forcing them to take responsibility for their actions rather than the convicted social monsters, who took action upon themselves towards another human. Here, whether or not the participants believed their answers would be made public should also produce significant differences in favor of the public condition.

Since relatives and valued individuals (such as a Supreme Court Justice and a paramedic) are both groups of people that would be highly cared for by the individuals, the current study predicted no significant differences between the two groups. Burgess et al. (2004) supported this hypothesis when no significant differences were found between a high care relative and a high care non-relative. A high care relative is a relative who is highly care for by the participant such as a family member and a high care non-relative is a person who would be highly cared for by the participant, but is not directly related, such as an influential teacher.

Since it is known that people are more likely to save a greater number of people, rather than a lesser number of people in any given situation, this was used as a manipulation check in the present study. To be congruent with previous research, it was expected that participants would be significantly more in favor of saving a greater number of people rather than a lesser number, regardless of the public or private conditions.

In this research there are several different types of moral dilemmas investigated. The first ones investigated were emotionally engaging dilemmas (described as dilemmas that elicit an emotion from the participant) and non-emotionally engaging dilemmas (those that do not emotionally connect the participant to the dilemma). Secondly, the emotionally engaged dilemmas were further investigated by the extent to which the participant would be emotionally involved in the dilemma. This was demonstrated by the degree of the relationship the participant had to the people in the problem. The categories explored were relatives vs. strangers, social monsters (such as murderers and robbers) vs. animals, relatives vs. valued individuals (such as a Supreme Court Justice and a paramedic), and comparing numbers of people (such as 1 vs. 5).

To summarize, the hypotheses of this study were that people would respond significantly in favor of saving relatives over strangers, animals over social monsters, and a greater number of people over a lesser number. It was also hypothesized that participants would be more likely to be morally neutral when they believed they were going to have to explain their answers to others (public) than when the answers to the moral dilemmas were kept private.

Method

Participants

There were thirty participants (21 females and 9 males) from a public northeastern university, ranging in age from 18 – 47 years. Recruitment of participants was achieved by posting a sign up sheet on the research bulletin board. Participants received either one credit towards fulfilling their research participation requirement or extra credit in their respective courses.
Materials

The first independent variable was the public versus private condition. Two different sets of directions were given, emphasizing the differences between public versus private answers (see Appendix A). There was also a statement at the bottom of each page reminding the participants of their particular directions. Two different types of hypothetical moral dilemmas were also used to elicit moral judgments: emotionally engaged and nonemotionally engaged. The first set was emotionally engaged dilemmas that were posed in the trolley dilemma situation where there would be consequences for each decision. The consequential implications for each response were pointed out explicitly - i.e. ‘‘flipping the trolley switch would result in the death of one candidate and saving the life of the person/people on the other track’’ (see Appendix C). The non-emotionally engaged problems were the second set of dilemmas, where the situation was built into the problem (see Appendix B).

Procedure

An informed consent was given at the beginning of the study letting participants know the study’s purpose and description. Students were notified that participation was voluntary; they could stop at any time without penalty, and all information was anonymous. Participants were presented with hypothetical moral dilemmas in questionnaire format and randomly assigned to either the public or private condition. Each dilemma was answered based upon a 6-point Likert scale, 1 being strongly agree and 6 being strongly disagree. They were also asked to disclose their age and gender on the data collection instrument. When evaluating each group in the emotionally engaged condition, such as relatives vs. strangers, there were three to five questions that were combined to determine the overall significance of the moral decision.

Results

Between-and-within subjects ANOVAs were conducted to determine the significance of the public versus private main effect. In an overall test, results indicated that there were no significant differences between the public and private groups and the means were not represented in the neutral area on the 6-point Likert scale, \( F (8, 21) < 1 \).

Between-and-within subjects factorial were also used to examine the non-emotionally engaged questions. Ratings were significantly different for most questions with the means represented at opposite ends of the agreement spectrum. See Table 1 for means, \( F \) values, and significance levels as well as Appendix B for specific dilemmas. Again, the 6-point Likert scale represented a 1 as strong agreement and a 6 as strong disagreement.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Average agreement ratings for non-emotional dilemmas</th>
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The emotionally engaged dilemmas also produced some significant differences. In the relatives versus strangers condition, participants were significantly more likely to save their relatives rather than strangers in the trolley dilemmas. The participants averaged a 1.92 (SD = .91) rating when saving their relatives compared to a 5.01 (SD = .61) when saving a stranger, \( F (1, 28) = 188.79, p < .05 \).

When the contrast between relatives and valued individuals (such as a Supreme Court Justice and a person holding the cure to cancer) was evaluated, results indicated a significant difference between the two. Participants were still more likely to save relatives (\( M = 2.30, SD = .89 \)) even when compared to a valued individual (\( M = 4.49, SD = .66 \)), \( F (1, 28) = 111.70, p < .05 \).

The animal versus social monster condition was the only emotionally engaged dilemma that did not produce significant differences. The average agreement rating for saving social monsters was 3.50 (SD = 1.21) and for saving the animals it was...
3.45 (SD = 1.18). This was the only situation that was almost split evenly down the middle, F < 1.

A repeated measures factorial was used as a manipulation check to see if the greater versus lesser number of people killed produced significant differences. Results indicated a significant difference, with an average agreement rating of 2.12 (SD = 1.2) for saving a greater number of people and 4.92 (SD = .86) for a lesser number of people, F (1, 28) = 84.54, p < .05.

Another interesting finding reported by a between-subjects factorial was that participants were significantly more likely to save a 6-month-old baby (M = 1.67, SD = .88) than a terminally ill patient (M = 4.97, SD = .89), F (1, 28) = 157.72, p < .05. When asked about a female and a male, participants significantly chose to save the female (M = 2.87, SD = .94) over the male (M = 4.00, SD = 1.02), F (1, 28) = 16.61, p < .05. When questioned about an 85-year-old man (M = 1.77, SD = 1.38) and $200,000 dream car (M = 5.20, SD = 1.06), participants significantly chose to save the 85-year-old man, F (1, 28) = 66.31, p < .05.

Discussion

The results from this study suggest that people will answer with conviction, on morality based dilemmas, regardless if they believe their answers will be made public. Despite the fact that Keasey (1974) identified that opinion agreement strongly affected moral judgments, the present study did not factor in conversation about each dilemma with other participants to form opinion agreement, it was an individual task.

Most of the individual topics (relatives vs. strangers, relatives vs. valued individuals, and greater numbers vs. lesser numbers), regardless of the public versus private condition, produced significant differences. Previous research done by Burgess et al. (2004) supported the findings that when people were related, they were more likely to save the person in a harmful situation. However, disconfirming evidence by Burgess et al. (2004) was found when comparing relatives and valued individuals. They found no significant differences between a high care relative and a high care non-relative, which was in direct conflict with the results of the present study. Reasons for this discrepancy could be that the Burgess et al. participants required participants to imagine having to risk their own lives to save the lives of the questioned individuals.

The only emotionally elicited dilemmas that did not produce significant differences were the social monsters vs. animals dilemmas. The findings of attitudes towards animals versus humans are consistent with the attitudes found by Volum et al. (2004) in that, people had equal attitudes toward the cruelty of animals and the cruelty towards humans.

Further, the results supported the hypothesis that non-emotionally engaged questions would elicit responses towards the ends of the spectrum (strongly agree and strongly disagree) regardless of whether the participants believed their answers were made public or kept private. This significant result was consistent with the Greene et al. (2004) findings that some moral dilemmas engage emotional processing to a greater extent than others and that these differences affect people’s judgments. This research demonstrated that emotional investment into the dilemma can create different outcomes.

Due to a lack of significant results in the public versus private condition, future research could investigate further whether answers to moral dilemmas would change as a result of an actual discussion about each dilemma with another participant.

References


Appendix A

Directions for the Public versus Private Conditions:

Public: Read each dilemma carefully and answer them to the best of your ability. Be sure to answer each question and do not leave any blank. When you finish, you will be expected to share your answers with others in the room, comparing and contrasting your responses to each dilemma.

Private: Read each dilemma carefully and answer them to the best of your ability. Be sure to answer each question and do not leave any blank. Answer them as honestly as possible.

Appendix B

Samples of Non-Emotionally Engaged Dilemmas:

Turnip Dilemma: You are a farm worker driving a turnip-harvesting machine. You are approaching two diverging paths. By choosing the path on the left you will harvest ten bushels of turnips. By choosing the path on the right you will harvest twenty bushels of turnips.

A) You choose the left path with ten bushels of turnips (and the twenty bushels of turnips won’t get harvested)
B) You choose the right path with twenty bushels of turnips (and the ten bushels of turnips won’t get harvested)

Scheduling Dilemma: You are in charge of scheduling appointments in a dentist’s office. Two people, Mr. Morris and Mrs. Santiago have called to make appointments for next Monday. The only available times for next Monday are at 10:00 AM and at 3:00 PM. Mr. Morris’s schedule is rather flexible. He can have his appointment either at 10:00 AM or at 3:00 PM. Mrs. Santiago’s schedule is less flexible. She can only have her appointment at 10:00 AM.

A) You schedule Mrs. Santiago at 10:00 (and Mr. Morris will have his appointment at 3:00)
B) You schedule Mr. Morris at 10:00 (and Mrs. Santiago will have her appointment at 3:00)

Pharmacy Dilemma: You have a headache. You go to the pharmacy with the intention of buying a particular name-brand headache medicine. When you get there you discover that the pharmacy is out of the brand you were looking for. The pharmacist, whom you’ve known for a long time and in whom you have a great deal of trust, tells you that he has in stock a generic product which is, in his words, “exactly the same” as the product you had originally intended to buy.

A) You trust your pharmacist and buy the generic brand (and stop looking for the name-brand).
B) You keep searching further for the name-brand (and don’t choose to buy the generic brand on your pharmacist’s recommendation).

Brownie Dilemma: You have decided to make a batch of brownies for yourself. You open your recipe book and find a recipe for brownies. The recipe calls for a cup of chopped walnuts. You don’t like walnuts, but you do like macadamia nuts. As it happens, you have both kinds of nuts available to you.

A) You follow the recipe and add the chopped walnuts (and don’t add the macadamia nuts).
B) You substitute for the macadamia nuts (and don’t add the recommended chopped walnuts).

Driving Dilemma: An old friend has invited you to spend the weekend with him at his summer home some ways up the coast from where you are. You intend to travel there by car, and there are two routes that you can take: the highway and the coastal road. The highway will get you to your friend’s house in about three hours, but the scenery along the highway is very boring. The coastal route will get you to your friend’s house in about three hours and fifteen minutes, and the scenery along the coastal road is breathtakingly beautiful.

A) You take the highway (and forgo taking the coastal road).
B) You take the coastal road (and don’t take the highway).

Exercise Dilemma: You intend to accomplish two things this afternoon: going for a jog and doing some paperwork. In general you prefer to get your work done before you exercise. The weather is nice at the moment, but the weather forecast says that in a couple of hours it will start to rain. You very much dislike jogging in the rain but you don’t care what the weather is like while you do paperwork.

A) You do your paperwork first (and then jog).
B) You jog first (and then do your paperwork).

Vegetables Dilemma: You are preparing pasta with fresh vegetables, and you are deciding on the order in which you will do the various things you need to do. You are in a big hurry. At the moment you have a slight urge to cut vegetables. If you first start the water boiling and then cut the vegetables you will be done in twenty minutes. If you cut the vegetables and then start the water boiling you will be done in forty minutes.

A) You start boiling the water (and then cut the vegetables).
B) You cut the vegetables first (and then start boiling the water).
Showering Dilemma: You are planning to attend a luncheon this afternoon, but before you go you will need to take a shower. You have some yard work that you would like to do before then, and doing this yard work will cause you to perspire a fair amount. If you shower before you do your yard work you will have to take another shower before the luncheon. At the present time you could enjoy taking a shower. At the same time, you have a very strong commitment to lowering your water bill and to showering no more than once a day.

A) You shower before you do your yard work (and again after the yard work is complete).
B) You shower just once after the yard work is complete (and don’t shower before).

Appendix C

Examples of Emotionally Engaged Dilemmas:

Relative vs. Stranger:
If at the end of the left track is your Grandfather, while at the end of the right track is a stranger.

A) You save your Grandfather (and the stranger gets killed)
B) You save the stranger (and your Grandfather gets killed)

Greater number of people vs. less number of people:
If at the end of the left track is 5 innocent strangers, while at the end of the right track is 25 innocent strangers.

A) You save 5 innocent strangers (and the 25 innocent strangers get killed)
B) You save the 25 innocent strangers (and 5 innocent strangers get killed)

Social Monster vs. Animal:
If at the end of the left track a convicted child molester, while at the end of the right track is a bunny rabbit.

A) You save the convicted child molester (and the bunny rabbit gets killed)
B) You save the bunny rabbit (and the convicted child molester gets killed)

Relative vs. Valued Individual:
If at the end of the left track are your parents, while at the end of the right track stands a person who has the cure to cancer.

A) You save your parents (and the person with the cure to cancer gets killed)
B) You save the person with the cure to cancer (and your parents gets killed)