

Moral Dilemma: The Exam Dilemma

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Abstract. In daily life, it is widespread for people to encounter numerous moral dilemmas, which is, in fact, a decision-making process—in which people often make different choices for a variety of reasons, making it a "moral dilemma" that is hard to decide rather than a "fact" that everyone agrees on. Thus, a specific moral dilemma (the exam dilemma) is demonstrated: a girl named Lisa found that her best friend cheated in a critical exam while her sister took part in it. The question is whether or not to report the friend, as reporting the friend could cause everyone to retake the exam (which could be harsher). In this case, two experiments are designed to obtain data from different influencing variables, including age, cultural context, marital status, etc. Based on this situation, this article will elaborate on some hypothetical factors and different theoretical perspectives that could be argued to be responsible for the deviation of the results of the two experiments, including (a) Morality as Cooperation; (b) age; (c) cross-cultural effects; (d) Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development; (e) marriage; and finally the aspect of (f) deontology and utilitarianism. This article will analyse what they are from these perspectives and why they can be a possible factor in the final result.

Keywords: Moral dilemma, Morality as Cooperation, cross-cultural effects, Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development.

1. Introduction

Here is one brief summarisation of this moral dilemma. Lisa accidentally discovered that her best friend cheated in every subject during exams. Reporting her friend to the authorities could cause the results of all candidates in this test centre to be invalidated, so all other innocent candidates in this test centre would have to take a retake exam to cover this disqualified result, where the new exam could be harsher than the original exam. However, Lisa is not participating in any of these exams, but her sister does. Moreover, as the retake exam could be more complex, the probability of her sister performing worse on the new exam than the original one increases, and hence she may get a worse grade. Thus, the problem arises: should Lisa report her friend?

Two responses would be collected: report or stay silent, and facts have shown that most people would have conflicts about whether or not to report their friend. From one perspective, Lisa reporting her friend can promote the equality of the exam, as "equality" is believed as the fundamental value of exams, so everyone would have an equal chance to achieve their goals. However, from another perspective, remaining silent indicates Lisa's loyalty to her friend, and everyone, including her sister, would not have to retake the exam. In this case, as people would generally hesitate about what to choose between the two options, a moral dilemma, therefore, has arisen. This article will analyse and discuss possible factors that may be causing the various decisions between the subjects.

2. Morality as Cooperation (MAC)

The conflicted mindset mentioned above quickly makes people hesitate to decide which side to choose. Nevertheless, this makes the actual theory underlying here become explicit—as people could all argue from different perspectives, cooperation would predict various domains of morality [1]. In this case, our issue can be discussed in this theory of morality, including seven problem-centred domains, where three are involved in this moral dilemma: mutualism, kinship, and division as the basic underlying theory. These three dimensions will be introduced briefly in the forthcoming paragraph.

Initially, mutualism here can be referred to as loyalty—being loyal to that friend, suggesting that the subject should not report the friend. Secondly, kinship means helping family members, whereas it refers to the sister in the moral dilemma here. It also encourages the subject to remain silent from this perspective. However, division indicates the fairness of the test, supporting the subject to report the friend. As a result, using these three principles in the concept of Morality as Cooperation (MAC) makes it easy to understand that these principles conflict with each other, creating a moral dilemma. To explain this more detailedly, several examples are demonstrated below. For instance, loyalty to the friend cannot be maintained while not simultaneously breaking the rule of equality of the exam; also, the person cannot be honest (report the friend) or help their sister (kinship). All of the ideas have indicated that once principles become conflicted with each other, the possibility of the presence of a moral dilemma would somehow increase.

The most underlying mechanism is the “selfish replicators” when lives replicate themselves as they would try to promote their own replication [2]. These principles arise to promote cooperation for the highest chance of survival. Therefore, the different perspectives on cooperation could be considered a factor in people’s daily life when deciding. At the same time, the diversity of human thoughts should be maintained and protected.

3. Results and Discussion

Ninety-six responses are collected in total from the questionnaire. The results (come from Professor Curry) are demonstrated in the pie chart below. From the graph, it is easy to know that the percentage of choosing both answers is quite similar, for reporting friend equals 55.2%, whereas 44.8% of participants choose to stay quiet, indicating it as a moral dilemma as the statistics have already reflected the participants’ conflicted mindset in the question of “which to choose”.

Surprisingly, the results in this questionnaire deviate from the previous discussion in class, while previously, almost all participants tended to keep quiet rather than report their friends. In this case, several factors below are likely to affect people’s decisions, including age, culture, marriage and emotions and theories such as Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development and deontology.

Firstly, age is an important variable that has to be considered. During the micro investigation in class, most participants were adolescents or young adults aged between 18-29; however, in the new questionnaire, the number of participants above 29 increased to 44.9%. The increase in the proportion of participants with older age comes with an increase in the percentage of participants choosing to report their friend, where it can be inferred that older people may be more traditional than young people. Hence, they may pay more attention to the traditionally more important thing—the integrity of the exam, so they may tend to report their friend, compared to the young participants. It can be discussed from a similar dimension, which will be introduced in detail in the following paragraphs.

Secondly, cultural difference also exists as the sample in the newly generated questionnaire includes Chinese (a typical collectivistic culture) and American (a typical individualistic culture) participants. In contrast, in the class discussion, most of the participants were Chinese (Indian subjects are not discussed in this article due to two factors: 1) India is a country with a diverse population, 2) the sample size was too small). Therefore, the cultural difference between, for instance, individualism and collectivism could affect people’s opinions as well. It is worth noting that the proportion of participants from an individualistic culture increases in the new questionnaire, from almost none to about 83.3%, while the rest of the subjects are from a typical collectivistic culture. In this case, the assumption is that subjects who live in collectivistic countries such as China may view collective harmony as more important than personal benefits compared to those who live in individualistic countries such as the US, where they may focus more on personal achievements. Thus, as it is considered that collectivistic participants may view interpersonal relationships and holistic harmony as more significant, this may be a reason why Chinese participants would choose to remain silent—to maintain this harmony while not hurting anyone’s benefits and relationship with others. By contrast, the participating subjects from the US are likely to view individual achievements and personal

benefits more essentially and, therefore, choose to report the friend to maintain the integrity of the exam, ensuring each individual's rights of the equality of the test is not being invaded. The participants, mainly Chinese, tended to remain quiet instead of reporting their friends from the micro investigation compared to the American participants in the new questionnaire, as their participation could be causative for the overall result change. Thus, it could probably be a piece of evidence supporting this hypothesis.

Thirdly, as the age factor is presented in the prior paragraph, this moral dilemma can also be explained in terms of Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, which is closely related to age. For instance, in the previous class discussion, most of the participants in the sample are in the stage of young adults aged between about 18-25. In this case, Erikson has demonstrated that, in the young adult stage, the main task is to develop intimacy and close relationship with others to avoid the sense of loneliness. Therefore, it can be interpreted similarly in the pre-mentioned moral dilemma. Because subjects in the early adult stage aim to build and hope to avoid ruining any relationships with others, they may choose to cover everything up for their friend to maintain their relationships for this reason, as intimate relationships could be considered one of the essential things in this stage of young adult, which dovetails with the results of previous surveys. Likewise, the results in the newly generated questionnaire that is entirely different from the previous one can be illustrated by using Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development as well, which suggests that people in middle age stage generally focus on developing a sense of fertility and hope to take good care and guide the next generation; moreover, this is also the stage when a person's care and creativity for the next generation peaks. Thus, in the latest questionnaire devised, the number of participants in the middle age stage (about 25-50 years old) in the sample increased significantly; In this case, it can be considered that people in this stage may pay more attention to the next generation's education and development, hence may believe that the integrity and honesty of the test is more crucial for the child's moral development rather than the outcome of the exam. Therefore, it indicates the positive correlation between the proportion of middle-aged participants and the proportion of participants choosing to report the friend.

Furthermore, there are 55.2% of the participants in total chose "yes" to the question "Do you have children?" Among the sample in the new investigation, where this statistic is quite similar to the percentage of those who chose "married" (54.2%) and those who are in their middle age stage (44.9%). Consequently, as previously mentioned, subjects who raise offspring (mostly in their middle-aged stage) may be more likely to report this friend to ensure the integrity of the test and thus would better shape the child's person and morality. In this case, these statistical results and data have both become a strong support for Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development.

One interesting fact in the statistics is that more people are married in the sample, which finally leads us to the significant effect of marriage as a possible factor affecting the final results gained. As 54.2% of the participants claim that they are married while the rest of them are not, it is noticed that the percentage of married participants increases rapidly compared to the pre-run results, with a corresponding rise in those who decide to report their friends. The idea is that once a person gets married, they tend to pay more attention to family as families are considered to be created by marriage from a traditional point of view. In this case, these participants may prioritise their family members' benefits, which means that they may prioritise the benefit of their sister over other candidates as a representation of the principle of kinship. Thus, it is inferred that the married participants would choose to remain silent. However, it somehow deviates from the actual results, where there is a positive correlation between the number of married participants and the participants who choose to report the friend. Nonetheless, the cause of this could be considered from individual differences as the sample size is relatively small. It hence may fail to achieve high generalizability in representing the target population.

Finally, the concept of deontology is considered necessary in moral psychology. A short definition of deontology is that it focuses on whether the action itself is right rather than the possible consequences of the action. However, utilitarianism is also worth mentioning while having a contrasting meaning, with itself defining morality as it depends on the outcome of action [3]. Thus,

from the aspect of deontology, it is morally wrong to report the friend as this action itself is a betrayal to the friend due to, for example, social norms, so it could be influencing those participants who chose to stay silent by paying more attention to the essence of the moral dilemma. However, from a practical point of view, if the main goal is to maximise overall well-being, the friend should not be reported as, in this case, not only the probability of the sister obtaining a worse result decreases, but all other candidates also do not need to retake the exams. Trust in both views could lead to a choice to report the friend, although from two opposite points of view.

Nevertheless, because different subjects in this study may choose to believe in various views due to the diversity of, for instance, culture, it may be a causative factor influencing the final results [4-6]. Hence, how these two theories would affect people's moral decisions should be considered in more depth in the future. On the other hand, the definitions of the two theories advocate opposites. Thus this should indicate the presence of a moral dilemma theoretically if the two theories are contrary. Yet, the mounting evidence discussed above has proven that the moral dilemma pre-mentioned exists validly, suggesting that in future research, this moral dilemma can continue to be explored and investigated to obtain a more accurate answer [7-10].

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of Morality as Cooperation, three factors, including mutualism, kinship, and division, are highly related to the moral dilemma. In contrast, mutualism and kinship encourage people to stay silent, whereas division suggests that people should report this friend to promote test integrity. Moreover, since the results of the second experiment are different from those of the first experiment, the factors affecting the sample are considered causative, where the participants are of different ages, cultural backgrounds and social backgrounds, resulting in them making different decisions. Primarily, the increase in the number of middle-aged participants promotes the speculation that older participants may be more traditional and pay more attention to the fairness of the exam, so they choose to report their friends; secondly, some subjects in the second experiment have different cultural backgrounds compared to those who gave taken part in the first one: the subjects in the collectivist culture (Chinese subjects) may be biased to decide to remain silent due to their aim in achieving holistic harmony. In contrast, the subjects in the individualistic culture (American subjects) may tend to choose to report their friend to ensure each candidate's rights of the equality of the test is not invaded. At the same time, Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development is also introduced, explaining that people have different tasks at different stages. The participants in the young adult stage are more likely to pay more attention to their relationship with others, so they may tend to choose not to report the friend; however, the participants in the middle age stage would focus more on education and upbringing of offspring and hence may choose to report the friend for the better individual development of the sister. Plus, marriage is a reasonable factor in influencing people's choices.

In contrast, married people may be more likely to focus on family relationships than individual benefits, although it still needs more evidence to prove the validity of this view. Finally, the theories of deontology and utilitarianism are taken into consideration. Deontology focuses on the correctness of the action itself, whereas utilitarianism emphasises consequential well-being, and they should be contrary to indicate the existence of a moral dilemma. Although this is not fully achieved via the current moral dilemma, statistical evidence has shown that this moral dilemma exists while hinting that it may still require more investigations from this aspect.

In the future, it would be fascinating to investigate how gender and linguistics can be the possible factors contributing to people's decision-making process. For example, it is pretty interesting how gender difference can be a factor that affects people's choices in a forthcoming moral dilemma, to be more specifically, whether or not they will choose to report their friend. Moreover, further investigations can dive deeper into the pre-mentioned factors, where their underlying mechanisms still seem vague in this article, so solutions should be given from subsequent research.

It is believed that investigations into morality would promote the development of humanity and the diversity of culture in the future while hoping for a better world with more understanding and happiness for each other.

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