

Morality and Conformity: A Hypothetical Experimental Design Exploring the Relationship Between Moral Standing and Social Pressure

Ziming Wang*

Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, United States

*Corresponding author: dannywang2025@u.northwestern.edu

Abstract. Morality is one of the crucial founding bricks of human society. Research has shown that even newborn babies demonstrate an innate sense of morality. However, recent studies have shown that situational factors significantly impact people's moral decisions. One study, in particular, measures the effect of social pressure on moral judgments but makes a potentially inaccurate assumption about participants' moral standing. To reexamine the results of this study, a hypothetical experiment is designed to investigate the relationship between morality and conformity. This experiment combines the methods of Asch's conformity experiments and variations of the Trolley problem and addresses the deficiencies in the previous study. The participants in the study will take part in a survey section, a seminar section, and an interview section. In the survey section, the participants answer questions regarding demographics and moral dilemmas. During the seminar section, the participants are asked to announce their answers to the moral dilemmas in front of a group of confederates. The confederates will provide their answers individually, and the participant will be the last to share his answer. Since the confederates know the participant's answer from the survey session, they will all share an answer different from the participant's. During the interview section, the participants will be debriefed. The purpose of this experiment is to see whether the participant will conform or not under the pressure of confederates. Hopefully, future scholars can improve and conduct this experiment to investigate the relationship between morality and conformity.

Keywords: Morality, Moral Dilemmas, Conformity, Social Pressure, Asch's Conformity Experiments, the Trolley Problem.

1. Introduction

Morality has long been considered an innate quality that forms the foundation of human society. Studies have shown that even newborn babies demonstrate a sense of moral instinct by preferring pro-social others over anti-social others [1, 2]. These moral views are considered inherent and unique to each person and unaffected by outside factors. However, several recent studies have found that situational factors can significantly affect moral views. One study shows that people consider actions more morally unacceptable if they experience negative emotions before making a moral decision while feeling positive emotions makes people judge actions as more morally acceptable [3]. Other studies demonstrate that there are order effects in making moral decisions. People's moral judgments are greatly influenced by their previous decisions [4, 5]. A study by Kundu and Cummins examines a situational factor that has not been examined sufficiently--social pressure. The findings suggest that people tend to make moral decisions opposite to judgments typically engendered by moral dilemmas when there is an overwhelming social pressure to conform [6]. However, since people's cultural backgrounds can significantly affect their moral standing [7], the assumption that individuals' unique moral judgments are similar to typical moral judgments may lead to inaccurate results.

To reexamine the findings of Kundu and Cummins' study, a hypothetical experiment is designed to investigate the relationship between morality and conformity. This experiment utilizes the design of the famous Asch's conformity experiments. Asch's studies are a series of experiments that examined how social pressure from the majority could affect a person's decision to conform. In his studies, Asch put one participant and seven confederates in one room for a disguised line judgment task. The participant was asked to choose one out of the three line segments shown on the screen that

matched the target line shown. The correct answer to each question was obvious to the participant. The Confederates, on the other hand, had an agreed-upon wrong answer for each question. Each time a question was posed, the confederates would unanimously announce the wrong answer one by one. The participant was always the last person to announce his answer. Asch was interested to see whether or not the social pressure exerted by the confederates' answers would force the participants to conform. The results of this study showed that 32% of the participants conformed under social pressure and chose the wrong answer that matched the majority's choice [8, 9].

This paper combines Asch's methods with the Trolley problem and its variations, a series of classical moral dilemmas, to investigate how social pressure affects moral judgments. Instead of performing the line judgment task, the participants are presented with a list of moral dilemmas with two choices. Similar to Asch's experiments, a group of confederates will unanimously announce an answer that differs from the participant's answer. To avoid assuming that the participants' moral judgments will be similar to typical moral judgments, a survey section is included that asks about participants' specific answers to each moral dilemma before the actual experiment. In this way, the confederates can give an answer that differs from the participant's answer each time and see whether or not the participant changes his answer. If their moral standing is affected by social pressure, the participants' answers during the experiment should be different than the answers they provided in the survey section.

2. Hypothetical Experiment: Design and Speculated Results

2.1. Hypothetic Experimental Design

2.1.1 Participants

A total of 50 participants from different backgrounds were recruited. It is ideal if the participants come from different ages, ethnicities, and countries.

2.1.2 Materials

Each participant is to take a survey before participating in the experiment. The survey includes a demographic section and a moral dilemmas section. The first section collects the participants' demographic information for later data analysis. This information can help researchers eliminate confounding variables when analyzing the data and help them see other potential patterns. The second section records the participants' moral standing for use in the later experiment. The moral dilemmas from this section are selected from materials used in the moral study of Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, and Cohen [10], which contains a set of variations of the Trolley problem. The survey questions are listed below: (1) Demographics: What is your age? What is your gender? What is your race/ethnicity? What religion do you most closely identify with? What is your cultural background? (2) Moral Dilemma Questions [10]: First, A trolley is headed toward five people on a set of tracks. A set of tracks branching off to the side with a single person on them. Under the current situation, the trolley will head down the tracks and hit the five people, causing them to die. You happen to be next to a switch that can turn the trolley onto the side tracks, which will cause the death of one person. Will you pull the switch? Second, A trolley is headed towards five people on a set of tracks. Between the trolley and the five people, there is a footbridge. A fat person is standing near the edge of the footbridge. Under the current situation, the trolley will head down the tracks and hit the five people, causing them to die. You happen to be next to the fat person on the footbridge. If you push the fat person off the bridge, the trolley will hit the fat person and stop. This will cause the death of the fat person but save the five people's lives. Will you push the fat person off the bridge? Third, A trolley is headed towards five people on a set of tracks. Between the trolley and the five people, there is a footbridge. A fat person is standing near the edge of the footbridge. Under the current situation, the trolley will head down the tracks and hit the five people, causing them to die. You are next to a switch that controls a trap door under the fat person. If you pull the switch, the trap door will open, and the

fat person will be dropped onto the tracks. The trolley will hit the fat person and stop. This will cause the death of the fat person but save the five people's lives. Will you pull the switch?

(1) While driving a speedboat, you see five people drowning in the distance. They will all drown if you do not drive at top speed toward the swimmers to save them. If you drive at top speed, one passenger at the back of the boat will tumble off into the water. The one passenger cannot swim and will drown, but you can speed up and save the five swimmers. Will you accelerate the boat and drive at top speed?

(2) While driving a speedboat, you see five people drowning in the distance. They will all drown if you do not drive at top speed toward the swimmers to save them. To drive at top speed, you must push one passenger off the boat to lighten the load. The one passenger cannot swim and will drown, but you can speed up and save the five swimmers. Will you push the passenger off?

(3) You are a firefighter trying to save five children from a fire scene. The only safe exit is through a heavy window that is jammed shut. There is another man in front of the window trying to escape. If you push the man into the window, it will break open. The man will fall out the window and die, but you can safely evacuate with five children. Will you push the man into the window?

(4) You received a message that the captain of a cargo ship has a deadly infectious disease. The captain is immune to the symptoms of the disease and not aware of having it. The captain is about to deliver a cargo to five people on a remote island. By doing so, he would infect the five people and cause them to die. The only way to stop the captain is to fire a missile to blow up the captain and his ship. In this way, the captain will die, and the five people will survive. Will you fire the missile?

2.1.3 Procedure

The subjects will be recruited to take part in a psychological experiment. The experiment consisted of three sections: a survey section, a seminar (experiment) section, and an interview (debrief) section. The participants will be told that the seminar section provides essential background information and the experiment happens during the interview section. In reality, the seminar section is the actual experiment section, and the interview section is the debrief section. Only one subject will participate in each seminar. The rest of the participants in each seminar are all confederates.

During the survey section, the participant will be asked to take the survey listed in the materials section along with 20 other confederates. The participant's response will be sent to the confederates before the start of the seminar section. In this way, the confederates can provide answers different from the participant's answers during the seminar section.

During the seminar section, the participants will be asked to participate in a seminar section along with the confederates. One host, who is also a confederate, will lecture on moral issues and moral dilemmas for 30 minutes. Afterward, the host will present the moral dilemma questions from the survey on the screen and ask each person to announce their answer out loud one by one. The actual participant will be the last person to share his answer. Since the participant's answers to the moral dilemmas are recorded by the previous survey questions, the confederates can provide answers opposite to the participant's answer and give the participant social pressure. If the participant provides an answer that doesn't conform with the rest of the group, the confederates will stare at him and give him social pressure. This process is repeated multiple times, and the participant's answers to the moral dilemmas during the seminar will be recorded.

During the interview section, the researcher will provide an experiment debrief for the participant and ask whether or not the participant wavered when sharing his answer during the seminar section.

A few important things to remember are that the researchers should make the participants believe that the seminar section is only an information session rather than the actual experiment and that all the other people in the seminar are also participants. This way, the researchers can observe the participants' natural reactions during the seminar.

2.2. Results Speculation

In Asch's conformity experiments, 32% of the participants conformed to the majority and provided wrong answers [8, 9]. The significant difference between Asch's experiments and this hypothetical

experiment is the nature of the experimental questions. The line judgment tasks in Asch's experiments have correct answers, while in the moral dilemmas in this hypothetical experiment, there are no correct answers. Asch's experiments forced the participants to provide a factually wrong answer. However, in this hypothetical experiment, the participants are only forced to change their moral judgment on specific issues. Therefore, the conformity rate is expected to be higher in this morality experiment.

Aside from the higher rate of conformity, researchers may also find different patterns of conformity under age groups, genders, ethnicities, religions, and cultural backgrounds. Since studies have shown that cultural differences can affect people's moral standings and likelihood of conforming to the majority [7], these demographic differences may also generate different patterns of results. It is essential to cross-examine these factors to see whether or not there are previously unnoticed patterns.

2.3. Potential Factors Affecting Results

Several potential factors affect whether or not the participants conform. One factor is social desirability (social pressure). The desire to be socially accepted is determining whether people conform. If a person does not care about social desirability, he will not conform under our experiment setting. If a person cares about other people's opinions and is afraid of being socially excluded, he will conform. Another potential factor is cultural variation (individualism & collectivism). A person raised in an individualistic environment is more independent and more likely to express his opinions regardless of social pressure. However, a person raised in a collectivistic environment is more interdependent and cares more about other people's opinions. Last but not least, the number of confederates can potentially affect whether people conform. If only a few other people (<5) express a different opinion, the participant is less likely to conform. However, if many other people (>20) express different opinions, the participant may be more likely to conform.

3. Conclusion

Morality is one of the foundation stones of human society. It regulates people's brutal nature and creates order out of chaos. Thus, it is crucial to understand what factors affect people's moral decisions. This paper proposes a hypothetical experimental design to investigate the relationship between social pressure and moral judgments. This experimental design combines elements of Asch's experiments on conformity and variations of the Trolley problem and addresses the deficiencies from previous studies.

Admittedly, there are still flaws in the design of this experiment. One of them is that this experiment does not consider the number of confederates. The findings of Asch's experiment show that the number of confederates can significantly impact the rate of conformity. Therefore, it is also essential to alter the number of confederates in each trial to see how participants' rate of conformity changes. Another flaw is the number of moral dilemmas questions. Due to the lengthy nature of moral dilemma questions, only a few questions can be included in the survey and the experiment session. The small number of responses may cause the results of this experiment to be inaccurate.

It is hoped that scholars can improve this experimental design and conduct this experiment to measure the effect of social pressure on moral decisions. By understanding what affects people's moral standing, it is possible to help institutions design methods to steer and change people's moral standing positively.

In the future, scholars can look at the other potential factors that may affect morality and conformity, such as age groups, gender, ethnicities, religions, and cultural background, and design experiments to measure how these factors affect morality and conformity differently.

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