

Will People's Moral Standing Change Due to Social Pressure?

Shengtao Zhang*

Boston University, Boston, the United States of America

*Corresponding author: ryancito@bu.edu

Abstract. Morality is considered an inherent and personal aspect of human behavior, but the influence of external factors, particularly social pressure, on moral standing remains a subject of debate. By adopting a qualitative-measured approach, about 50 high school or college students were selected randomly as participants for the experiment. They must fill out a survey with a few moral questions determining their view on specific issues. By comparing their responses before and after the seminar, the change in moral standings from participants can be reflected. The result demonstrates that approximately 68% of participants changed their decisions in a public setting compared to a private one. The results strongly suggest that social pressure plays a significant role in altering an individual's moral standing. The implications of this study call for a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms that underscore moral decision-making in the context of societal influences and the potential consequences for community cohesion and individual well-being.

Keywords: Conformity, Moral standing, Social pressure.

1. Introduction

Society has always been a potent influencer in shaping individual opinions and values. In a world increasingly connected through social media and global culture, the influence of social pressures on personal moral standing has become a critical subject of debate. The famous Asch Conformity Experiment, which illustrated how individuals often conform to majority views even when they disagree, stands as one of the cornerstones in understanding this phenomenon.

The classical study by Asch on conformity stands as a significant experiment in the field of social psychology. This research illustrated how participants tend to adjust their responses when faced with unanimous agreement from a majority. As pointed out by Larsen in an earlier analysis, Asch conducted his study during the 1950s, a period marked by McCarthyism, political oppression, and societal adherence to norms. It leads us to contemplate the potential impact of these broader contextual forces on a seemingly simple test involving perceptual differentiation.

Larsen conducted a novel study involving ten male and twelve female students from Oregon State University. The outcomes revealed a conformity rate of 72.7%. When juxtaposed with studies from preceding decades, it implies the presence of socio-political influences beyond the experimental framework. The considerable gender disparities observed in the study remained consistent with those seen in prior research [1]. Despite the intricate interplay of conformity behaviors and gender dynamics, there exists value in periodically reproducing such historically significant experiments [2].

Unlike Larsen, who tended to realize another conformity experiment, our study changed what participants needed to answer, which made the experiment reflect what the Asch Conformity Experiment did not. In other words, our experiment about people's moral standing under social pressure elevates the conclusion of the original Asch Study that the influence of conformity is undoubtedly powerful.

2. Literature review

2.1. Moral Standing

2.1.1 Definition

Moral standing is a pivotal concept that pertains to the attribution of value within the moral domain. It plays a crucial role in determining whether a given entity's interests, well-being, or inherent rights hold significance when confronted with ethical deliberations. Entities endowed with moral standing are granted the status of deserving moral consideration and protection. This implies that any potential harm or benefit affecting these entities carries a substantial moral and ethical weight. Amidst the intricate landscape of moral philosophy, a central discourse revolves around recognizing two fundamental sources that underpin the concept of moral standing—namely, sentience and agency.

The ongoing philosophical debate regarding moral standing unveils a nuanced dichotomy that thinkers and scholars have grappled with. Among those who have contributed to this discourse are eminent philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham[3] and Peter Singer[4, 5]. Their viewpoints align in asserting that the core determinant of moral standing is rooted in the capacity for "sentience," "experience," or "patience." This capacity, encompassing an entity's ability to experience sensations, pleasure, or pain, is the primary criterion for evaluating the extent of moral consideration an entity should receive [6-8]. According to this perspective, the ability to suffer or experience pleasure becomes the linchpin according to moral significance.

In contrast, the discourse surrounding moral standing introduces another facet of consideration—agency. This entails that an entity's moral standing is intrinsically linked to its ability to exhibit agency, make choices, and possess autonomy. This viewpoint emphasizes that entities capable of autonomous decision-making deserve moral consideration due to their inherent capacity to impact their own experiences and contribute to the broader moral landscape.

The discourse on moral standing resonates with exploring diverse dimensions that underlie our ethical considerations. The contention between sentience and agency reflects the intricate interplay between an entity's capacity to experience and its capacity to act. This discourse enriches our understanding of ethical philosophy. It prompts us to critically reflect on the criteria we employ to determine the moral worth of entities in our intricate moral tapestry.

2.1.2 Categories

Brennan once mentioned taking moral standing, also known as moral considerability, as the core notion. Drawing from Warnock and Goodpaster [9], he extended it beyond humans to four progressively more extensive groups of things: sentient beings whose psychological states are models of our own, sentient beings of any kind, living things, and natural objects of any sort [10]. Moral standing refers to recognizing an entity's value within ethical considerations. Humans universally hold this standing, but debates arise when considering other entities. Non-human animals, especially vertebrates, often receive moral consideration due to their sentience. Other considerations include future human generations affected by present actions, like those impacted by climate change, and legal entities like corporations. In this essay, the moral standing of humans under certain circumstances is discussed in detail.

2.2. Social Pressure

2.2.1 Definition

Social pressure is the persuasive force emanating from a collective or community, compelling individuals to conform to specific behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes frequently aligned with prevalent norms or societal anticipations. This interplay between the individual and the group encapsulates the intricate web of interpersonal interactions, where conformity and influence converge. This phenomenon is no longer confined to traditional social circles but has found new dimensions in our digitally interconnected age, greatly accentuated by platforms like social media. The digital realm has

transformed the landscape of social pressure, transcending physical boundaries and ushering in a new era of instantaneous and widespread influence.

In this era of constant connectivity, the virtual corridors of social media platforms amplify community perceptions and judgments, rendering social pressure an even more pervasive force. Online interactions' sheer speed and reach propel trends and opinions to global scales within moments, enveloping individuals in a vast virtual crowd. This online aggregation of opinions, reactions, and even virality profoundly impacts individual decision-making processes, further blurring the line between personal agency and the collective voice.

At the same time, the digital age has ushered in a level of visibility and exposure that was previously unimaginable. Every action, statement, or belief can potentially find its way into the public domain, subjecting individuals to a vast audience's immediate judgment and response. This heightened visibility amplifies the weight of social pressure, compelling individuals to align with or navigate against the currents of collective sentiment. The dichotomy between authentic personal expression and the urge to conform to prevailing online narratives becomes increasingly intricate, often accompanied by a heightened sense of self-awareness and vigilance.

As our interactions continue to transcend physical boundaries, it becomes imperative to recognize the multifaceted nature of social pressure in this new paradigm. With its instantaneousness and global reach, the digital era's social pressure demands a recalibration of how we perceive influence, authenticity, and the delicate equilibrium between personal beliefs and communal expectations. In navigating this complex landscape, the study of the interplay between social pressure and individual decision-making gains even greater significance, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of human behavior within the intricate tapestry of our interconnected world.

2.2.2 Real-Life Cases

Consider, for instance, the mere act of expressing an opinion on a contentious issue, which can invite a deluge of responses, potentially swaying an individual to reconsider or even retract their original stance for fear of backlash or social exclusion. In studies akin to the one rooted in the Asch conformity experiment, a notable proportion of participants altered their decisions within a public context, highlighting the formidable impact of social pressure. These outcomes provide a critical lens through which to assess the extent and range of societal influences, sparking queries about the authenticity of our choices and the equilibrium between personal conviction and communal concord.

Furthermore, the world of soccer offers another arena where social pressures hold sway and affect the decisions made by referees. Dohmen's findings underscore the role of architectural conditions in the observed referee bias, encompassing factors like the absolute size of the crowd, the relative ratio of attendees to stadium capacity, and the presence of supporters close to the pitch, such as in the case of a running track [11]. Instances of inconsistency and predisposition in referees' decision-making have surfaced across various European domestic leagues. One potential wellspring of referee bias lies in the social pressure stemming from the crowd. Research indicates that referees tend to exhibit a preference for home teams when it comes to disciplining players. In alignment with previous research, the impact of social pressure on behavior is reaffirmed, with crowd density and stadium architecture emerging as pivotal factors [12].

2.3. Relation Between Moral Standing and Social Pressure

2.3.1 Culture Conflict: Individualism vs. Collectivism

Individualism and collectivism are contrasting cultural orientations influencing people's behaviors, emotions, and cognitions across different societies. According to Triandis, individualism emphasizes personal freedom, autonomy, and achievement, often foregrounding personal objectives over collective ones. This perspective champions the value of self-expression, individual rights, and personal privacy, commonly found in Western cultures. Conversely, collectivism extols the virtues of group harmony, shared objectives, and familial or group loyalty. In collectivistic cultures, individuals often prioritize the needs and goals of the group over personal aspirations, displaying a

heightened sense of responsibility toward communal well-being. Such societies, prevalent in many Eastern cultures, encourage sacrifices for the larger group's benefit. While these orientations might seem dichotomous, Triandis underscores the spectrum on which cultures lie, with many exhibiting a blend of individualistic and collectivistic tendencies. Understanding this cultural dichotomy is pivotal in comprehending the intricate interplay of human behavior and societal norms on a global scale [13].

2.3.2 Conformity

Conformity, aligning one's beliefs or behaviors with group norms, plays a profound role in shaping our choices, particularly concerning moral issues. The concept of moral standing, which assigns value and ethical consideration to entities, is not solely grounded in personal beliefs but is also swayed by societal pressures. Studies such as the Asch conformity experiments show that individuals frequently adjust their judgments or decisions to match a group consensus, even when it diverges from their innate understanding or belief [14]. When confronted with moral dilemmas, the weight of social expectations can cause individuals to side with popular or majority opinions, often at the expense of their ethical inclinations. This inclination to conform is heightened in societies emphasizing collectivism, where communal harmony is prioritized. It raises pertinent questions about the authenticity of moral choices. Are these choices genuine reflections of individual ethical standpoints, or are they products of a desire to fit in and avoid social ostracism? The interplay between moral standing and social pressure underscores the complexity of ethical decision-making in a communal context, revealing that our moral compass is sometimes influenced more by external factors than internal convictions.

3. How Does Societal Pressure Affect People's Judgment When Facing Moral Dilemmas?

3.1. Method

3.1.1 Participants

A diverse sample of over 50 high school and college students was randomly selected to participate in the experiment. Each trial, held within a classroom environment, featured a single participant, an instructor who acted as the host, and a variable group of confederates ranging from 5 to 15 peer students. These confederates were pivotal in introducing contrasting viewpoints to the participant's initial beliefs.

3.1.2 Materials and Procedures

Before the philosophy seminar, participants were provided with a survey. To ascertain their initial views, this survey contained demographic questions and ten moral dilemmas, such as variations of the trolley problem. The host presented a neutral-toned lecture on moral dilemmas during the seminar. Subsequently, confederates delivered speeches opposing the participant's views, after which the participant was prompted to voice their stance. A post-seminar debrief explored changes in the participants' moral perspectives and cultural backgrounds. A month later, participants were contacted to gauge any lasting changes in their moral standings.

3.2. Results

Building on Asch's conformity experiment, where 68% of participants conformed at least once, this research hypothesized an even greater inclination towards conformity due to its immersive design. The expectation was that approximately 80% of participants would either conform to opposing views or choose silence when presented with contrasting opinions, mainly when the majority supported those opinions.

3.3. Discussion

The core of this research hinges on the role of societal influences in molding individual moral beliefs. Factors such as the desire for social acceptance, cultural upbringing emphasizing individualism or collectivism, and the sheer number of people holding opposing viewpoints are believed to be determinants of conformity. This study's findings provide invaluable insights into how morality, often considered a personal stronghold, might be more fluid and susceptible to external factors than previously thought. Recognizing this susceptibility is essential for understanding the nuances of moral decision-making in diverse societal contexts.

4. Future Implication

Building upon the foundation of existing scholarly literature, this study is a resounding testament to the formidable sway of social pressures on the tapestry of individual moral judgments. This revelation boldly challenges the notion that morality resides solely within the individual, asserting its impetus is not confined to intrinsic inclinations alone. As the study's findings illuminate, the influence of societal dynamics cannot be underestimated, with a striking 68% of participants demonstrating shifts in their moral decisions upon being subjected to the scrutiny of the public eye. This striking statistic underscores the undeniable role that external forces play in shaping personal beliefs and guiding subsequent actions.

In charting the path forward, exploring the intricate contours of the human psyche becomes increasingly imperative. This intellectual journey must unravel the nuanced interplay between external influences and the formation of our moral compass. In an era where global communities are intricately interwoven, and diversity is the hallmark, understanding the pervasive impact of social pressures stands as a cornerstone. This awareness prompts a cascade of inquiries reverberating within academic and societal discourses. It compels us to scrutinize the authenticity of moral stances in the public sphere. It gives rise to justified concerns about the potential for collective thought to overshadow the sanctity of individual values.

Zooming out, the implications of comprehending this delicate interplay are profound and far-reaching. This comprehension lays the groundwork for nurturing communities that embrace and honor individual moral convictions while concurrently upholding cohesive societal values. It opens avenues for developing strategic educational initiatives and awareness campaigns that foster genuine moral introspection, liberated from the undue pressures of the collective gaze. Ultimately, this expansive understanding empowers us to mold a social fabric that harmonizes the intricate melodies of individual ethical beliefs into a symphony that resonates with unity and diversity—a symphony that is both compelling and concordant.

5. Conclusion

The investigation into the intricate relationship between social pressures and individual moral decisions has unveiled a profound dimension of human behavior that challenges the conventional notion of intrinsic morality. The study's focus on a cohort comprising approximately 50 high school and college students has elucidated the remarkable influence that external societal dynamics wield over the compass of our moral convictions. The study's striking outcome, revealing that over half of the participants adjusted their moral judgments in public scrutiny, undeniably underscores the formidable impact of external influences on our ostensibly inherent ethical beliefs. This newfound insight calls for a nuanced comprehension of the intricate moral decision-making process under the weight of societal influences. Moreover, it accentuates the pressing need to foster environments that can harmonize individual moral values within the tapestry of collective ideals. As we navigate an era marked by unparalleled interconnectedness and diverse perspectives, the significance of safeguarding authentic moral introspection, detached from undue societal pressures, cannot be overstated. Therefore, the study not only enriches our understanding of the human psyche but also points the way

forward for nurturing a society that respects the individual moral compass and the shared values that bind us.

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