

The Relationship Between Social Pressure

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Abstract. Whether a person's belief or action is the result of nature or nurture is a classical debate in the realm of psychology. The source of morality is one of the most heated topics of this grand debate. Some philosophers and psychologists argue that morality is the result of nature and instinct. Although many of their arguments are sound, one cannot neglect the role played by society regarding the shape of one's morality. This research aims to take a close examination of the relationship between the moral position of an individual and social influence. To accomplish this end, this research combines the methods of psychology and the duality of moral dilemmas. More specifically, this research reviews, modifies, and combines Asch's conformity experiment, the Third Wave Experiment, and the trolley problem. Currently, this experiment remains at the designing stage and specific details future may be altered.

Keywords: Conformity, Moral standing, Peer pressure, Social pressure, Authority.

1. Introduction

The source of morality is one of the most heated topics in the grand debate of nature or nurture. Scholars argued that people are born with morality. In a 2007 empirical report, Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom demonstrated first evidence that preverbal infants at six and ten months of age prefer third parties with helpful actions over hindering actions. They created a cartoon, a climber puppet tried but could not climb a steep hill. After a few failed attempts, a Helper puppet bumped the climber up the hill; then a Hinderer puppet bumped the climber back down. After seeing the events, both 10- and 6-month-olds chose to reach and play with the helper instead of the hinder [1] From this experiment, some philosophers and psychologists argue that morality is the product of nature and instinct.

Although these findings are significant, history is full of atrocities the entire society performs, such as the Holocaust and Rwandan Genocide. In these cases, people like to blame the leaders of the society, like Adolf Hitler and Felicien Kabuga, but Hitler did not personally force Jews into gas chambers and Kabuga didn't chop any Tutsis with his own hands. These atrocities are performed tens of thousands of people who are likely to prefer the helpers over hindered when they were 6–10-month-old. It is clear that society and culture are essential factors in a person's moral standing.

The aim of this paper is to explore how social influence can affect people's moral standing by combining and modifying Asch's Conformity Experiment, Milgram's Shock Experiment, The Third Wave experiment, and the trolley problem. In this experiment, instead of comparing line segments, the participant and accomplices would give answers to the trolley problem, a classical moral dilemma. The trolley problem have no generally accepted right option and everyone can generate their own answer. This experiment would create an environment that strongly favors one side of the trolley problem that is opposite with the participants' side. The research question is, will the participant hold on and express their original view despite the social pressure?

1.1. Definitions

Conformity: The behavior of an individual changed due to real or imagined group pressure. There are two types of conformity: compliance and acceptance [2]. Compliance is publicly following the social request while privately disagreeing. Acceptance means the individual acts and agrees with the social request [3].

Moral position: There are plenty of branches and doctrines of morality, such as utilitarianism and consequentialism. Currently, there is no universal consensus to which doctrine is the best. Because of

this, every individual has their standings on morality. Furthermore, although an individual's moral decision can be classified under a specific doctrine, an individual does not have to use the logic of the doctrine on every matter strictly. In other words, an individual can choose to be a utilitarianism on one matter and no-utilitarianism on another. In this experiment, the moral position is defined as the individual's personal choice of the trolley problem.

Social Influence Theory: the society can insert pressure and influences that affect an individual's behaviors and beliefs. Such pressure can be taken in the form of norms, customs, laws, social recognition, etc. [4].

Peer Pressure: An individual may alter their behavior to conform to the norms and expectations of the peer group due to its influences.

Authority: An individual exerts influence on others due to either a legally recognized position or high rank in a long-established but not legally codified hierarchy. For example, a teacher has authority over their students and such authority may extend after the students graduate [2]

1.2. Individual, Society, and Morality

Contrary to popular belief, individualism and collectivism are not at odds with each other. As Aristotle observed long ago, humans are social animals. Despite a few anti-social samples, people generally depend on each other. This often includes, but not excludes, learning from each other, relying on each other's strengths, and covering each other's weaknesses. However, entirely depending on each other can be potentially perilous. If a selfish individual lives in a selfless society, then the individual could acquire the resources of the entire society without offering anything in return. Furthermore, the selfish individual could acquire even more resources by hurting other members. Here comes a dilemma, if all members are selfish, people cannot benefit from the society; if all members are selfless, then a selfish individual could destroy the entire society. Thus, human society requires some kind of balance and morality is one of many tools for this goal. By establishing the concept of moral and immoral, a system of reward and punishment, societies encourage their members to practice prosocial behaviors instead of antisocial behaviors.

Unlike the law that issues punishment for specific behaviors, morality punishes people with a more varied approach. In certain parts of the world, mobs would lynch those that the mob deemed immoral. However, in most places, the punishment for immoralities that are not illegal is carried out in the form of social pressure. Most people have a desire for companionship. This desire drives people to seek others' approval or for the very least avoid others' disapproval. From an evolution perspective, such desire is self-explanatory. After all, the continuation of genes requires two people. If the entire society disapproves of a specific individual, then it would be difficult for the individual to acquire the necessary resources for survival and reproduction. Moreover, societies tend to classify certain actions to be honorable or dishonorable. Such distinctions appeal to people's egos and they are more willing to perform selfless deeds despite such deeds often harm the performer's self-interest. For example, during 9/11, fire fighters rushed to the twin towers despite the danger. Many fire fighters died or suffered significant injuries due to their bravery, but many did not regret their actions. Similarly, although dishonorable actions could lead to an increase in one's self-interest, individuals that pursue honor may choose not to perform such actions for example, some students are unwilling to cheat on exams, even when doing so can significantly improve their grade, and they could cheat without being caught. The two examples show that society can manipulate a person's action through the concept of honor and dishonor.

2. Research Design

2.1. Asch's Conformity Study

US psychologist Solomon E. (Elliot) Asch introduced the famous Asch's conformity experiment in 1951. In Asch's experiment, a group of people (usually vary from seven to nine) were seated around a table and told that they were to take part in a visual discrimination experiment. They were shown

18 pairs of cards, and in each case were asked to say out loud, one at a time, which of the three lines on one card was the same length as the comparison line on the other. The difference of each line segment was deliberately made distinct to ensure no real perception error. There was only one actual participant per trial and the others are confederates of the experimenter. During the experiment, the confederates gave the same wrong answers on 12 critical trials out of the 18. On all the critical trials, about 37 percent of judgements were conforming responses—the actual participant following the judgement of the incorrect unanimous majority. It is also worth noting that there is a positive correlation between the chance of conformity and the unanimous group size, but only up to a majority of 3 against one. Any increase above three generates no significant increase [5].

This experiment demonstrated that peer pressure can make an individual to question his senses. This experiment design was not mundane, but it has already demonstrated that individuality can be threatened by a minimal social pressure.

2.2. Milgram's Shock Experiment

Milgram's Shock Experiment is one of the most famous and controversial psychology experiment. There was one participant and two confederates. The participant was led to believe of participating a study of learning and memory and the participant played as the teacher. One confederate played as a stern experimenter in a white lab coat and the other confederate played as the student. The experimenter told the participant that each time the student made a mistake, the participant would flip a switch and shock the student. Each mistake would lead to a voltage increment of 15 volts. The total range of the voltage is 14-450 volts. If the participant complied with the experimenter's request and flipped the switch, the participant would hear the student's grunt, shouts, and eventually silence as the voltage increase. The participant would also hear the students' pleas to leave at certain voltage level. If the participant demonstrated hesitance, the white coat confederate would tell the participant to continue. All the participants continued to 300 volts and 65% of the participants progressed to 450 volts [6].

Milgram's shock experiment revealed the power of authority. The participants that Milgram recruited were ordinary American citizens. Although almost all the participants demonstrated certain degrees of unwillingness, they complied to the authority figure. This experiment showed compliance to authority can supersede morality.

2.3. Third Wave Experiment

In 1967, Ron Jones, a high school teacher, found it difficult for his students to understand why German people welcomed the ruthless Nazi ideals in the 1920s. So, he created a class activity that emulated fascism. In the next 5 days, Ron Jones became the authority figure of the class. He invented a series of gestures and courtesies that emphasize discipline and community. One of these gesture is known as the third wave, the students would use one of their arm to simulate the pattern of sea wave. This gesture corresponds to the Hitler salute. He also stressed the importance of discipline, honor, and unity. Jones' students were very enthusiastic toward the third wave movement and spread it rapidly across the school. Soon, hundreds of students joined the third wave movement. Before it completely went out of control, Jones took action. He told the students that there is a rally of the third wave movement. This rally would be televised across the nation. When the students gathered at the schools' meeting hall, they were shown with a blank screen. Jones informed his students that there was no third-wave movement and showed a documentation of the Nazi party. Many students who attended gathering denied their participation [7].

This experiment is a combination of Asch's Conformity Study and Milgram's Shock Experiment. It combines both peer pressure and authority figure. The participants complied and accepted the value of the Third Wave Movements. They even spreaded the value across the school. The result was shocking.

2.4. Trolley Problem

Trolley Problem is a philosophy thought experiment. In this thought experiment, five people are tied to one branch of a railroad, one is tied to another branch. A train is coming, and the train would kill 5 people if it remains its current course. One individual can control a lever and direct the train to kill 1 person. Should the individual pull the lever and choose 5 lives over 1? There is no universally accepted answer for the trolley problem. Although the trolley problem is simple, it bears great importance in the realm of philosophy. It has been used to explore the validity and limitations of different doctrines of moral philosophy [8].

2.5. Combination and Modification

Both Asch's conformity experiment and The Third Wave contain the element of social pressure. Asch focused solely on peer pressure; Milgram focused primarily on authority figure; and Ron Jones combined the power of authority figure and peer pressure. This experiment would use the basic structure of Asch's conformity experiment while adding an authority figure and using a larger group size. Since this experiment would create an environment that is high pressure, the experiment would last from 30-45 minutes. A teacher would play as the authority figure and 5-30 confederates would play as the overwhelming opposition. It is necessary to adopt the technique of deception. Before the experiment begins, the participants would fill out a survey that asks the participants' position on several moral dilemmas. One of the dilemmas is the trolley problem. The survey also asks how strongly does the participant feel about their position. This is the answer that is needed and the position of the confederate group would be contrary to the participant's answer. The participants cannot know they are participating in an experiment before the conclusion. After the experiment is concluded, the participant would be briefed and introduced to free counseling services if they feel they need to. The measurements of this experiment include the participant's demonstrated position and the level of support they have toward their answer.

2.6. Experiment Procedure

(1) The participants are asked to participate in a philosophy seminar. (2) The participants would fill out the survey. (3) The teacher confederate would introduce the trolley problem and demonstrate fervent support to the side that is contrary to the participants. (4) The confederates would give a 2-minute speech that contrasts the participant's view. After each confederate finished, other confederates would give a round of applause. (5) After all the confederates give their answers, the participant is asked to express his/her position. (6) After the seminar, the researchers would give a debrief of experiment for the participant. During this stage, the researcher would also ask about the participant's cultural background and whether or not the participant wavered in his/her moral standing during the seminar. (7) One month after the experiment, the researchers would contact the participant and ask whether or not the participant's moral standing has changed.

3. Result Speculation

In Asch's conformity experiment, only 5% of participants never conformed. 75% of participants conformed at least once, and 5% conformed all the time [5]. In Milgram's experiment, all of the participants went to 300 voltage and 65% went all the way to 450 voltage with some level of protest. [6] In the Third Wave experiment, every member of the class was converted and are willing to spread the movement across the school. From these three experiments, one can see a negative correlation between individuality and social pressure [7]. As social pressure increases, individuality rapidly decreases and eventually diminishes. This experiment does not contain the same level of social pressure as the Third Wave experiment but has higher social pressure than Milgram's shock experiment. Thus, it can be speculated that almost all the participants would comply, a few would even accept, and only a small portion would resist.

4. Confounding variables

There are several factors that could affect the possibility of conformity. First is the participants' desire for social acceptance. 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 tends to consider independence a moral trait [2]. Like Japan, people in a collectivistic culture tend to view conformity as a form of tolerance, self-control, and maturity [9]. They are more interdependent and care more about other people's opinions than people in an individualistic culture. 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 [10].

5. Conclusion

Asch's Conformity Study shows that people tend to conform instead of staying true to their belief. Milgram's shock experiment revealed the power of authority; The third wave experiment demonstrated how fast it is to turn a group of high school students into Nazis. Even though this experiment has not been performed yet, it is still plausible to speculate that most participants would comply while some even accept. From these lessons, it can be concluded that morality is not fully the result of nature or instinct, but nurture also plays a critical role. This leads to another question: What is morality. If the entire society deemed a specific behavior to be moral, while people outside of the society would deem such action to be immoral. Then does that make the behavior moral or immoral?

In horror movies and novels, evil results from a few bad individuals. In real life, people like to believe specific villains, such as Adolf Hitler and Felicien Kabuga, are to be blamed for atrocities caused by the entire society. But they only gave the orders and the specific actions are carried out by tens of thousands of individuals. One conclusion of this research is that society has the ability to suppress individual beliefs and even transform individuals into monsters.

This paper is not advocating for the dismantlement of society and return to the state of nature. Even if society can propel atrocities, it also prompts art, science, philosophy, music, and other beautiful achievements. Society is a group project. The first step in avoiding danger is to recognize danger, and is this research aims to recognize the potential harm of social pressure and conformity.

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