

Influences of Gender and Relationship on Moral Judgement

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Abstract. The morality of humanity has been discussed intensively and analyzed nowadays. Scientists believe that human beings have a natural moral standard. Plus, theories about ethics are always described into two main categories, i.e., utilitarianism and deontology. Even though people's moral judgment is deeply investigated, the influences of relationships and genders are often neglected. Recently, some articles related to relationships and genders indicated that the two factors are very influential in making moral judgments. Not only the relationship between the witness and the moral transgressor may affect people's moral judgment about the transgression, but also the relationship between the witness and the victim. Males and females sometimes respond with different moral judgments to the same situation due to gender differences, such as emotional repression and guilt-proneness. The influence of relationships also differs in genders. Existed experiments still have limitations, such as unauthenticity and division according to biological gender or gender identity. Future direction should focus on increasing the authenticity of moral scenarios and assessing the correlation between gender identity and moral judgment. For the development of curriculums regarding moral development, this review could provide some guidance.

Keywords: Moral judgment, Relationship, Gender.

1. Introduction

Most people believe that the most significant difference between human beings and other animals is that human has a sense of morality. Stealing someone's belongings, intentionally harming others, and producing rumors are all perceived as behaviors that break moral rules. And the transgressors are always viewed as immoral people. In reverse, people who help other people and give up seats for others are always admired and described as good people. The judgment people made about others' morality is called moral judgment. By studying morality, human beings could have a clearer understanding of how to make themselves better people, and how to make the world a better place in the future. Moral judgment, as an important part of morality, was also studied by many experimenters to find out any possible factor that may influence it.

A very trending topic in the field of morality these years is testing people's decisions under different moral dilemmas. These moral dilemmas, such as the trolley problem, often ask the participants whether they are willing to sacrifice a few people's interests or lives for the good of more people. Responses to these moral dilemmas are always categorized into utilitarianism and deontology. According to utilitarianism, behaviors that could increase the happiness of the total population could all be considered moral and good [1]. Thus, utilitarianism could be perceived as a kind of consequentialism in which the consequence of behaviors is the only standard to judge right or wrong. Taking one of the moral dilemmas as an example, if pushing someone off the bridge could stop the train from killing other five people, then the behavior of pushing could be viewed as moral. Moreover, deontology suggests that the morality of one action should be based on whether the action itself is moral or not under moral standards [2]. Thus, the consequence of action should not be taken into consideration when evaluating morality. From the deontological viewpoint, even though pushing someone off the bridge to save other five people are viewed as morally right behavior from a utilitarian perspective, it is considered morally wrong since the behavior itself is immoral under any circumstances.

Despite the fact that a lot of studies related to morality were conducted in recent decades, the majority of the studies were focusing on how the participants reacted to the moral violations committed by strangers [3]. Nowadays, scientists have realized the significance of studying how

relationships with transgressors influence people's moral judgment. This is because there is growing evidence suggesting that participants reacted very differently to proposed scenarios where transgressors are their friends, family, or loved ones. Two possible theories were proposed trying to explain the trending topic: the correlation between witnesses' relationship with transgressor and their moral evaluation. The first one is the theory of moral universalism. Supporters of this theory believe that there is a universal standard of morality across all races, nationalities, cultures, and religions. The alternative theory is moral partiality. This theory suggests that people have a greater inclination to help and protect close ones compared to strangers or distant others. The basis of this theory could be traced back to the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius, which emphasized the importance of family members helping and loving each other [4]. Furthermore, different genders are likely to have different social rules. Thus, the difference in social interaction is going to lead to different perspectives about problems. In this paper, studies that are related to relationships and gender would be demonstrated, and the influence of the two factors when making moral judgments will be analyzed.

2. The effect of relationship on moral judgment

2.1. The impact of closeness with perpetrator

In the case of an individual witnessing a stranger committing a crime, it is very likely that the individual would report it to the police. Nevertheless, if the individual witnessed his close friend committing a crime, he may hesitate to report the crime. The severity of the crime is also related to the likelihood of reporting. Berg and her colleagues conducted three experiments by using neural and self-report methods to assess how relationships bias people's moral reasoning [5]. After collecting the data from the experiments, researchers found that when the perpetrator with a close relationship with the participant, the likelihood of protection increases compare with distant others. Moreover, it is shown that participants are more likely to report crimes with higher severity compared with lower severity. One possible explanation of participants' inclination to protect the transgressor is that they might focus on the perpetrator instead of the crime itself if they share a close relationship with him. When crime behavior is emphasized, participants would report a more punitive response even if the perpetrator is close to them. The results of the studies support the argument that people are more likely to have a higher moral judgment toward close-relationship perpetrators and they tend to protect those perpetrators instead of punishing them.

Another possible explanation for people making higher moral judgments and protecting close others is that human beings have an intrinsic obligation to help those close to them. This kind of obligation to help may lead to covering up perpetrators' moral transgressions and favoritism when making moral judgments. In the study by McManus et al., the relationship between potential helpers and beneficiaries is the key component in the strength of the obligation to help [6]. The experiments were conducted with moral values questionnaires. In the first experiment, the result showed that participants think the obligation to help is stronger for the target agent when the beneficiaries are genetically closer under the "no choice" situation (only one potential beneficiary was presented). However, if the target agent chooses to help more distant beneficiaries compared with closer beneficiaries ("choice situation"), the target agent would be viewed as less morally good than those who choose the opposite. In the second experiment, the researchers removed the "stranger" category and only focused on cousins and siblings. It is found that the obligation is lower in helping cousins compared with helping siblings in both situations (no choice vs. choice). Participants tended to think target agents are more obligated to help friend-like relatives rather than stranger-like relatives. Furthermore, the endorsement of family values is positively correlated with the obligation of helping family members in both experiments. Therefore, people perceive themselves to have the obligation to help those that are close to them, and the helping behaviors are always reflected by a higher moral judgment after witnessing the transgression conducted by their close-relationship transgressor than strangers. The closer the relationship is, the greater the obligation and the higher the moral judgment would be.

However, even though people are likely to help and protect the perpetrators that are close to them, it does not mean that they think the moral transgression conducted is understandable and it is reasonable to protect them. Even though a lot of people are aware that they should not help the perpetrators, they choose to do so eventually. In the studies by Soter and her colleagues, responses toward others' moral transgressions were assessed through self-report [7]. The experiment asked participants to imagine a scenario in their closest and the most distant acquaintances conducting serious theft. Then the participants need to self-report what they would do and what they think they should do after witnessing the high-severity crime. It is found that participants showed more protection for close others compared with distant acquaintances. The results showed that there is a difference between what the participants think they would do and what they think is morally right. The difference is greater when the relationship between the participant and the transgressor is closer. This discrepancy indicates that relationship has a greater influence on people "would" judgment than "should" judgment. Consistent with the moral partiality theory, the results indicate that people are more inclined to help and protect close ones instead of distant others.

2.2. The effect of relationship with victim

After discussing the influence of the relationship between the witness and the transgressor, the effect of the relationship with the victim should also be taken into account. As discussed above, people who did not prioritize close perpetrators over distant perpetrators may be viewed as less morally good. Besides this, when the victim is known by the perpetrator, the tendency of harming the victim decreases. Dinić and her colleagues recruited hundreds of participants from the population in Serbia and assessed their utilitarian moral judgment in the proposed scenarios [8]. The four proposed scenarios are 1) personal (i.e., direct involvement) and unknown victim, 2) impersonal (i.e., indirect involvement) and unknown victim, 3) personal and known victim and 4) impersonal and known victim. The results suggested that levels of utilitarian judgments significantly differ among the four dilemmas. Participants have the most moral judgment in impersonal and unknown victim scenarios and the least moral judgment in personal and known victim scenarios. The result reveals that people are more resistant when asking them to harm someone they know compared with unknown others. This pattern is also due to people's tendency to protect someone they know over someone they are not familiar with. And moral judgment would be negatively correlated with the closeness with the victim, which is the opposite of the relationship with the perpetrator.

3. Gender differences in moral judgement

The other significant factor that may influence people's moral judgments is gender. Females are in general considered more emotional than males. And emotions are more likely to influence females' moral decisions than males. In the study by Armstrong et al., participants are recruited to assess the gender difference in moral dilemma judgments [9]. Dilemmas include incongruent and congruent situations. Incongruent conditions require participants to take actions that cause immediate harm and congruent situations ask participants to take actions to prevent harm. In incongruent situations, utilitarianism and deontology would lead to different judgments and congruent situations would have the same judgments for both philosophies. The results suggested that under both conditions, females have much higher scores in deontological inclination and no significant difference in utilitarian inclinations. The explanation for the discrepancy between females and males is that females have a greater action aversion and harm aversion than males. Therefore, when facing moral dilemmas, females are less willing to take action or harm other people. The aversion to behavior and harm will make females give lower moral judgments after witnessing moral transgressions committed by other people.

The harm aversion of females is in accordance with the deontological perspective of morality, which also opposes the action of harming under any circumstances, even when the consequences would be much better for the majority. In this case, when facing moral dilemmas, females would

make more deontological responses than males. In the study by Capraro et al., the evaluation of gender-specific moral protagonists and the gender difference in moral judgment were assessed by participants' reports [10]. Experimenters proposed a typical personal moral dilemma, a typical impersonal dilemma, and an intermediate dilemma (i.e., Footbridge Dilemma, Trolley Problem, and Trapdoor Dilemma). The intermediate dilemma has the same violation of Kant's practical imperative but is less emotionally salient than the personal moral dilemma. Researchers first assessed participants' evaluation of moral agents with different gender by naming the agent Adam or Amanda. It was found that the evaluation has no significant discrepancy on agents with different genders in the three dilemmas. Researchers then tested the gender difference in moral judgment under the three conditions. The results have shown that females have a greater inclination to a deontological course of action in the typical personal moral dilemma that has more emotional salience (gender difference is not significant in the typical impersonal moral dilemma and intermediate moral dilemma). The result of the first experiment suggests that the gender of the protagonist in a proposed scenario has no impact on people's hypotheses about the protagonist's response. The second experiment indicates that when facing moral dilemmas themselves, females have much more deontological response in the typical personal moral dilemma which require them to take action to harm other people. This is consistent with the argument that females are more likely to make a deontological response, but only in personal moral dilemmas.

Gender differences also play a role in decision-making. Males are always perceived as more generally rational than females. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that males are more likely to accept unfair offers under specific circumstances, for example, the Ultimatum Game. Lucchiari and his colleagues studied how gender differences may influence moral, economic, and shopping decision-making [11]. Researchers proposed three different scenarios under the same structure as the Ultimatum Game, which are the economic situation, moral situation, and shopping situation. The economic situation is about splitting salaries after completing the same amount of work with colleagues. The moral situation is about donating bonus salary in order to help colleagues in need. The shopping situation is about using a voucher at a shop. The three kinds of offers that participant had in the experiment are neutral (50%/50%), downward (participants benefited less), and upward (participants benefited more). In the shopping situation, a downward offer suggests the voucher is for an imperfect shirt and an upward offer suggests the voucher is for a more expensive shirt than the participants wanted. If the participants refused the offer, neither side would receive anything. The results of the experiment show that judges are more likely to accept offers within the moral situation of the three. The acceptance rate of the shopping situation is much higher than the economic situation. It is also found that males are more likely to accept offers in the economic and shopping situation compared with females. Moreover, males show a significantly higher acceptance rate in upward offers than in downward offers whereas the effect is not significant in females. The discrepancy of acceptance rates in economic and shopping situations indicates that males are more likely to accept offers that bring the greatest benefit to them whereas females much prefer a fair proposal. The increased acceptance rate of offers under moral situations also supports that female are more emotional and have a greater tendency to help others in need.

4. The Interaction between gender difference and closeness

Moreover, males and females have other differences such as guilt-proneness that may be influential in making moral judgments. And closeness may have different impacts on females and males. Compared with males, females are considered more caring to people that are not close to them. In the studies by Ward and her colleagues, gender differences in emotion were assessed in five experiments [12]. It was found that males had higher emotional suppression than females, and females scored higher on the guilt-proneness subscales and the shame-negative self-evaluation subscale. Rating of moral wrongness is positively related to the two subscales and negatively correlated with emotional suppression. The result suggested that females' higher attention towards emotion helps

explain their lower likelihood of taking immoral actions. When females were asked to ignore emotions, their tendency to make immoral decisions increased. Further study suggested that when considering immoral behaviors, females showed higher self-conscious moral emotions and lower positive emotions than males. Moreover, when recalling agentic transgressions (e.g., Acting immorally for promotion), females showed higher levels of self-conscious moral emotions and regret. But males and females showed similar levels in recalling relational transgressions (e.g., Doing something immoral to people with close relationships), which suggests that females may have a less contextualized notion of morality than males. The results suggest that males' higher emotional suppression and lower guilt-proneness lead to their higher likelihood of taking immoral actions and less regret when recalling past moral transgressions. Moreover, males' rationalism toward people that do not share a close relationship with them makes them feel less guilty.

5. Conclusions

Relationships and genders are influential factors in making moral judgments. The relationship with moral transgressors or victims would both influence people's reactions and their moral evaluation of the transgression. A closer relationship with the transgressor can lead to more positive moral judgment, and a closer relationship with the victim may lead to a lower moral evaluation of the moral violation. Furthermore, because of gender differences, such as different degrees of harm aversion and emotional suppression, males and females would sometimes have inconsistent responses to the same scenario. Females are more likely to have deontological responses to moral dilemmas and are more refusal for harming others. The discrepancy between genders would also interact with relationships and cause further impacts on people's moral judgment.

The studies reviewed are very rigorous, but some limitations still exist. In the experiments assessing the influence of relationships on moral judgment, the scenarios participants need to respond to are all proposed and hypothesized. The unauthenticity of scenarios has a possibility of casting unknown impacts on participants' responses. Furthermore, the studies about gender differences and moral judgment only divide the participants by their biological genders. Thus, the validity of results for people with gender dysphoria still needs to be investigated.

In future studies, instead of using proposed stories, researchers should show participants scenarios with more authenticity. For instance, experimenters could hire actors to perform moral transgressions or show participants footage of their close ones committing moral violations. For studies related to gender differences, researchers may divide participants by both biological genders and gender identities. The correlation between biological gender and moral judgment and the correlation between gender identity and moral judgment could be analyzed to determine which factor is more influential. This review could assist in the design and improvement of courses regarding moral development.

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