

Perceiving decision-makers in moral dilemmas: A study of observer personality influencing interpersonal judgment

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Abstract

Recent studies have examined the social consequences of moral dilemma judgment as well as how social consideration influences decision making in moral dilemmas. Individuals have been shown to make accurate prediction of how they will be perceived following a harm-accepting or harm-rejecting decision. Previous research however has primarily been concerned with the decision-maker, this study instead aims to examine the role of the observer in such interactions. This study investigated how people make judgments of decision-makers in moral dilemmas by measuring perceived warmth and competence. Observers' dispositions were investigated using measurements of personality. Participants personalities was measured by conducting a short ten-item Big Five questionnaire. No correlations were found between the five main types of personality dimensions and rated warmth and competence. However, participants that stated they would have made the same judgment perceived the decision-maker as more warm and participants that scored high on the Swedish Scholastic Assessment Test (SweSAT), comparable to the American SAT, perceived the decision-maker as more competent. These results seem to indicate that there are some personality traits that influence the perception of moral dilemma decision-makers.

Keywords: moral judgement; Big Five; social perception; trait-perception; observer; moral dilemma.

Introduction

Understanding what is wrong or right is not always an easy task to accomplish, yet our societies are built upon different sets of rules which have their roots in that kind of moral construction. However, moral and ethics can be very subjective and heavily influence on our actions in difficult and abstract situations.

In general, situations that symbolize a struggle between moral principles have been labeled moral dilemmas (Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004). The decisions in these moral dilemmas usually entail an act of harm-acceptance to avoid a greater deal of harm.

In these dilemmas two types of moral appears, utilitarianism which is only concerned with the consequences of the act and maximizing the amount of collective happiness and minimizing the collective amount of misery while on the other hand deontology is chiefly concerned with the act itself and not its consequences.

In the famous footbridge-dilemma one needs to decide whether to push a large person off a bridge in order to stop a moving train from running over five other people. In this scenario, the utilitarian would accept harm and push the person of the bridge in order to save five lives and minimize the casualties while the deontologist would reject harm and not push the person because the action of pushing another individual to their death is wrong, regardless of the positive and negative outcomes.

What decision is made in situations with characteristics of moral dilemmas, is not entirely based on our moral convictions.

There are a lot of factors that influence the choices made in such abstract and mentally challenging situations.

One factor that has a great deal of influence is social expectations. That is, we alter our decisions depending on what the expectations of people are, but also depending on how we want others to perceive us (Rom & Conway, 2018).

It has been shown that individuals have a good ability to predict how they will be perceived by others given a certain action, even individuals with narcissistic tendencies predict that they are seen as less warm by others (Carlson & Furr, 2009).

What is interesting now is however the observers' personalities and how personalities influence the judgments that are made about decision-makers. It has been previously shown that some personality traits affect person-judgment following a moral dilemma (Trémolière & Djeriouat, 2016). Furthermore some personality traits seem to correlate with warmth and competence (Ashton & Lee, 2005) which might influence the perception of certain moral judgments and the person who made them.

This study aims to investigate if there are any personality traits that influence an observer's perception of a decision-makers warmth and competence traits. We discuss how personality traits can affect the underlying processes of social perception and what inferences observers may draw.

Warmth and competence: dimensions of social perception

Two dimensions of personality that are frequently used to judge other people are warmth and competence. When people describe other individuals or groups, their impression formations can in almost 80 percent of the cases be mapped to these two dimensions (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011). The majority of the variance of other-perception can be categorized under the two dimensions (Wojciszke, 1994). The two dimensions have a wide range of subcategories and terms. Warm people are seen as empathic, understanding, friendly, trustworthy and kind. Competent people are seen as independent individuals who are good at leading groups and are seen as intelligent, effective and skilled.

According to Cuddy et al. (2011), the primary dimension of social perception of the two is warmth. Cognitively, people perceive information relating to warmth more saliently than competence-related information and identify that information quicker (Cuddy et al., 2011). It has been shown that personal dispositions such as social curiosity are better at making inferences about another person's characteristics in an interaction (Ashton & Lee, 2005; Hartung & Renner, 2011), suggesting that personal differences affect the social perception

of others.

Furthermore Rom, Weiss, and Conway (2017) mentions how competence correlates to utilitarianism, and describes in a second study (Rom & Conway, 2018) that people generally dislike utilitarians. Conversely, deontological decisions correlate with warmth. It has been shown that in some contexts, individuals will present themselves as less competent in favor of being seen as more warm (Laustsen & Bor, 2017).

A way of enhancing the effects of how the two dimensions are judged is to provide an explanation to the executed action. In the present study where warmth and competence are measured, we provide two different explanations to a utilitarian response to investigate the effect of this manipulation.

Judging decision-makers in moral dilemmas

There is a great deal of importance in demarcating judging the act in a moral dilemma and judging the person who acts. Uhlmann, Pizarro, and Diermeier (2015) suggests some action may contain more information about a persons poor moral character while the act itself is not as immoral. Conversely, some acts are deemed to be more immoral than the person performing it is judged to be. This act-person dissociation is important because some processes might affect the judgment of action and not the individual.

People tend to look at others' intentions when judging and that reveals a great deal of information about a persons personality. Not only do we perceive intentions of other people, we also include factors such as how long it takes for the decision-maker to come to a decision (Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013; Johar & V., 2009). Evidence also suggest that observers draw inferences of decision-maker's underlying cognitive and affective processes. This allows the observers to draw inferences about decision-maker's personality. If their decision was guided through affective processes they might seem more warm than if they were seen as a more rational thinker (Rom et al., 2017).

Other important traits such as trustworthiness and moral are perceived by observers and influence their judgment (Everett, Pizarro, & Crockett, 2016; Uhlmann, Zhu, & Tannenbaum, 2013). Observers however, are prone to some biases. For example individuals who have something to gain from the act will judge decision-makers more positively (Bocian & Wojciszke, 2014).

The processes that guides trait inferences seem to be automatic and unconscious (Winter & Uleman, 1984). There is also evidence for in-group favoritism when it comes to trait inferences (Otten & Moskowitz, 2000). If observers consider what they themselves would have done in the moral dilemma they might consider the decision-maker to be in an in-group. This would result in a bias where decision-makers are seen as more positive.

Furthermore Bocian and Wojciszke (2014) states that moral judgment might not be explained solely by moral convictions, instead it might be mediated by the opinion of the act.

Observer personality

There are several processes that dictate how we make judgments about others and these different processes results in different judgments by different individuals. Personal experience may also have some influence on the observers judgment, where for example an individual's general distaste for an action affects the judgment, regardless of principles or outcome.

Other more consistent observer-dispositions could have a prominent effect on moral judgments. Particular personality traits have been predictors for selected action in a moral dilemma (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011), but evidence shows that personality traits also indicate a difference in the judgment of moral decisions (Trémolière & Djeriouat, 2016). In the study by Trémolière and Djeriouat, they conclude that sadism has a significant effect on how moral judgments are made.

Personality research have been conducted for centuries and have combined lexical study of natural language with questionnaire studies to develop several theoretical frameworks, where The Big Five theory is a prominent one. The Big Five provides a hierarchical organization of personality, consisting of five dimensions: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to Experience (McCrae & John, 1992). The five dimensions have been found repeatedly in many studies, including cross-cultural replications (Bond, 1979; Bond, Nakazato, & Shiraishi, 1975).

Big Five has been used to investigate personality predictors for several areas, for example job performance (Rothmann & Coetzer, 2003) and judgment of art (Furnham & Walker, 2001). Relevant to the present study is whether moral judgment is affected by these personality dispositions. In the study of socially aversive traits, Trémolière and Djeriouat (2016) presented that emotional deficits in the form of sadism predicted minimizing the role of harmful intention. The evidence implies the importance of emotion in moral appreciation. In connection with Big Five, agreeableness have negative correlation with both sadism (Greitemeyer, 2015) and the dark triad (narcissism, machiavellism and psychopathy) (Cervone, Lee, & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Veselka, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2014). Further correlations (1) positively between narcissism and both openness to experience and extraversion and (2) negatively between sadism and conscientiousness, implies that the Big Five dimensions plays a role in moral judgments.

The two dimensions of social perception, warmth and competence, relate to the Big Five dimensions in several ways. Factor analysis conducted by Ashton and Lee (2005) presented two significant correlates to warmth, namely agreeableness and extraversion. In relation to competence, high conscientiousness and low neuroticism were predictors.

Method

This study was a conceptual replication based on study 7 in (Rom & Conway, 2018). We made a few changes concerning the exact moral dilemma and adding a few questions after the

original questionnaire.

One of the main changes that were made in this study was the changing of the presented moral dilemma from the crying baby dilemma to the footbridge dilemma. This will be discussed in more detail under the **Discussion of method** subsection.

It should also be noted that everything in this study was translated to Swedish because the original study used the native language of the country the test was carried out in. A pilot study revealed that the translations were adequate and participants thought they correctly represented the original words used in the original study.

Participants

The participants of this study were 131 Swedish-speaking students at a large University in Sweden (68 Male, 63 Female, $M_{age} = 23,11$ $SD = 2,36$). All of the participants were recruited on a University campus and were asked to join the researchers in a room to fill out a survey. The survey contained a description of a moral dilemma and an individual, Simon, who ostensibly had made a decision.

There were two types of surveys that were given out randomly, one that contained a logical justification for the action and one with a emotional justification. Participants were recruited during a four day period and during office hours. All participants completed the survey in a study room and were treated with cookies as a reward. Up to 6 participants were completing the survey simultaneously but were not allowed to discuss amongst each other and no participants were excluded to that end.

Procedure

The participants viewed a photo of Simon, a university student. They read a description of the footbridge moral dilemma and learned that Simon ostensibly had previously answered that he had accepted harm and chosen to push down the large person off of the bridge (utilitarian). This was followed by a brief logical or emotional justification for the action. After reading the justification, the participants were asked to judge Simon through a series of warm-related traits (warm, good-natured, tolerant, sincere) and competent-related traits (competent, confident, independent, competitive, intelligent) on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The score of the traits were later compounded to warmth and competence.

Following this we added a short 10 item Big-Five personality traits questionnaire (TIPI) as well as asking the participants if they themselves would have done the same decision as Simon and how well they scored on the SweSAT.

Discussion of method

In order to justify the change of dilemma in this study, it is good to have a better perspective on what the two different dilemmas actually are. The core of the crying baby dilemma is that the decision-maker is part of a group of civilians hiding from a group of hostile militants who want to kill all the

civilians in the the decision-maker's group. In the midst of hiding, a baby in the group starts crying and the decision-maker is presented with two choices, either cover the baby's mouth, which would lead to the death of the baby but survival of others, or not doing anything which would lead to the whole group being found and killed. The crying baby dilemma is a problematic dilemma because regardless of what the decision-maker does, the baby will die.

The footbridge dilemma is however more balanced and neutral in the sense of the outcomes. In this dilemma the decision-maker is to either push a large person off of a footbridge in order to stop a train from running over five other people which would result in loss of one life and survival of five, or not do anything because of the moral incorrectness of the act of killing a person, which would result in sparing one person's life but losing five others.

We changed the name of the decision-maker in this study from "Brad" in the original study (Rom & Conway, 2018), to "Simon". This was done in order to reduce the risk of distracting details and making the example more relatable to the Swedish language and society, since Brad is a very rare name in Sweden.

It is worth mentioning that there is a big difference between making decisions in abstract and unrealistic situations, such as reading about a moral dilemma and actually making decisions under pressure. Therefore it is safe to say that the results achieved by this study risk being unrepresentative of the decision-making and judgment passing processes in a real life crisis situation and are not absolute.

Statistical analysis

We conducted Levene's tests to examine homogeneity of variance assumptions. This assumption was not violated for warmth $F(1,127) = 0,27$, $p = 0,608$, but was violated for competence $F(1,127) = 6,08$, $p = 0,015$. Assumption of normality was not violated for warmth ($p = 0,287$), but was violated for competence ($p = 0,006$). Therefore, we conducted non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests, which are more robust to these violations (Field, 2013).

Results

A Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant difference between rated warmth in the logical and emotional justification $H(1) = 16,87$, $p < 0,001$. The test showed no significant effect on rated competence $H(1) = 0,38$, $p = 0,539$, see figure 1.

Two multiple linear regressions were conducted for warmth and competence respectively, to determine whether the Big Five personality dimensions predicted the ratings of warmth or competence. Age and gender was also included in the regression. No significant regression was found for rated warmth $F(7,121) = 0,988$, $p = 0,443$, or rated competence $F(7,116) = 0,721$, $p = 0,654$, see table 1 and table 2.

Figure 1: Rated warmth and competence for logical and emotional justifications. Confidence interval shows the standard deviation.

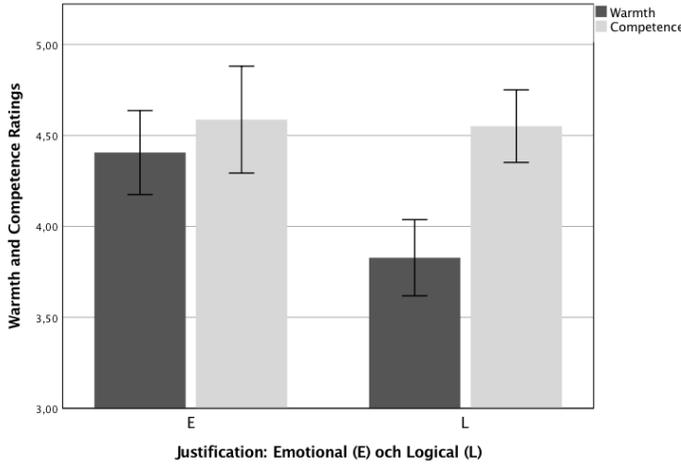


Table 1: Linear model of predictors in rated warmth, with 95% confidence interval within parenthesis.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	4,90 (2,789, 7,00)	1,06	<i>p</i> = 0,001
Openness to Exp.	0,08 (-0,10, 0,26)	0,09	<i>p</i> = 0,379
Conscientiousness	0,02 (-0,13, 0,17)	0,08	<i>p</i> = 0,812
Extraversion	0,00 (-0,12, 0,12)	0,06	<i>p</i> = 0,975
Agreeableness	-0,04 (-0,24, 0,11)	0,10	<i>p</i> = 0,713
Neuroticism	-0,12 (-0,25, 0,02)	0,07	<i>p</i> = 0,083
Man	0,33 (-0,37, 0,69)	0,18	<i>p</i> = 0,078
Age	-0,03 (-0,10, 0,04)	0,03	<i>p</i> = 0,098

$R^2=0,05$ ($ps = 0,443$)

Table 2: Linear model of predictors in rated competence, with 95% confidence interval within parenthesis.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	4,99 (2,66, 7,31)	1,18	<i>p</i> = 0,001
Openness to Exp.	0,02 (-0,17, 0,22)	0,10	<i>p</i> = 0,811
Conscientiousness	-0,07 (-0,23, 0,10)	0,08	<i>p</i> = 0,419
Extraversion	-0,04 (-0,18, 0,09)	0,07	<i>p</i> = 0,543
Agreeableness	0,00 (-0,22, 0,22)	0,11	<i>p</i> = 0,994
Neuroticism	-0,11 (-0,26, 0,03)	0,07	<i>p</i> = 0,129
Man	0,23 (-0,17, 0,62)	0,20	<i>p</i> = 0,263
Age	0,02 (-0,06, 0,10)	0,04	<i>p</i> = 0,603

$R^2=0,04$ ($ps = 0,654$)

A correlation, although weak, was found between participants rated competence of the target and SweSAT-scores, $r_s(99) = ,265, p < 0.01$.

Participants who reported that they would make the same utilitarian decision as the target rated him as more warm ($M = 4,63, SD = 0,73, N = 31$) than participants who reported that they would not make the same decision ($M = 3,96, SD = 0,90, N = 99$), $U = 815,50, p < 0.001, z = -3,69, r = -0.32$). No significant difference was found in rated competence between participants who reported that they would make the same decision ($M = 4,86, SD = 0,70, N = 29$) than participants who reported that they would not make the same decision ($M = 4,48, SD = 1,03, N = 95$), $U = 1077,00, p = 0,075, z = -1,78, r = -0,16$. No correlations was found, given emotional or logical explanation, between warmth/competence and Big Five, see table 4 and table 5.

Table 3: Correlation between warmth and Big Five given Emotional (E) or logical (L) justification.

	Warmth			
	E		L	
	r_s	<i>p</i>	r_s	<i>p</i>
Openness to Exp.	0,10	<i>p</i> = 0,413	-0,01	<i>p</i> = 0,930
Conscientiousness	-0,05	<i>p</i> = 0,671	0,03	<i>p</i> = 0,791
Extraversion	-0,04	<i>p</i> = 0,774	0,02	<i>p</i> = 0,854
Agreeableness	0,04	<i>p</i> = 0,774	-0,08	<i>p</i> = 0,554
Neuroticism	-0,16	<i>p</i> = 0,204	-0,09	<i>p</i> = 0,483

Table 4: Correlation between warmth and Big Five given Emotional (E) or logical (L) justification.

	Competence			
	E		L	
	r_s	<i>p</i>	r_s	<i>p</i>
Openness to Exp.	0,01	<i>p</i> = 0,936	0,00	<i>p</i> = 0,980
Conscientiousness	-0,19	<i>p</i> = 0,134	-0,03	<i>p</i> = 0,798
Extraversion	0,03	<i>p</i> = 0,845	-0,13	<i>p</i> = 0,298
Agreeableness	-0,21	<i>p</i> = 0,099	0,14	<i>p</i> = 0,267
Neuroticism	-0,07	<i>p</i> = 0,569	0,17	<i>p</i> = 0,188

General Discussion

This study replicates the findings of Rom and Conway (2018), where participants rated Simon as more warm given the emotional explanation, but the logical justification did not affect the competence rating for harm-acceptance. The results also suggest attributes warmth and competence correlate which is supported by previous research (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). It should be noted that the boosted warmth perception mediated by the emotional explanation was higher in the study by Rom and Conway (2018) than can be seen in the results of this study.

Our results show that none of the big-five personality traits correlate in any way with the perception of warmth and competence of decision-makers. We did however find that the measure of SweSAT correlated with observers perception of competent, also observers who were utilitarians judged Simon as more warm.

The results show no support for the hypothesis that the big-five personality traits would be a good predictor for observers warmth and competence judgment of decision-makers in moral dilemmas. This might be explained by the broad definitions of the five personality traits and that they are a broad dimension including several traits that are better predictors. This line of reasoning is supported by previous findings that unique personality traits such as sadism influence the perception of warmth and competence (Trémolière & Djeriouat, 2016). That there may be better predictors would also explain why people who had scored high on the SweSAT perceived Simon as more competent, because intelligence could be seen as a sort of personality trait that falls under competence (Cuddy et al., 2011). At the very least this supports the idea that some personalities could be more prone to judge others as more competent or warm, just that those traits were out of scope of the big five personality traits.

It might seem obvious that participants who share moral principles with Simon, utilitarians, perceive him as more warm. Indeed research suggest that we judge like-minded people differently and in a more positive way (Rausch, Karling, Dörfler, & Artelt, 2016). Furthermore research about trait

inferences suggest we judge in-groups more positively (Otten & Moskowitz, 2000). This could mean that utilitarian participants perceive Simon as closer and more of an in-group than those who are following a deontological moral principle. An easier explanation follows that of Bocian and Wojciszke (2014) who concludes that moral judgment could be explained as a matter of liking rather than moral principles. In this case utilitarian participants simply prefer Simon because they themselves would have done the same thing.

A reason why the logical explanation did not contribute to an increase in perceived competence could be because observers already draw logical inferences from the utilitarian action. That is, Simon is already doing an act that is perceived as logical (Rom & Conway, 2018), as such the logical explanation does not provide any new information for the perceiver from which to draw inferences (Rom et al., 2017). However the emotional explanation reveals other motives that were not apparent for the observer and thus following the theory presented by Rom et al. (2017), that they got new information about their emotional processing and thus judging them as more warm.

Limitations

This replication is partly limited because we do not include a deontological (harm-rejection) response in the study, as done in the original study, instead we only included a utilitarian response. This decision was made because of the need to scale down the study for the purpose of time. The reason for choosing the utilitarian response was primarily because of research highlighting the dislike of utilitarians and the researchers found it an interesting research question to investigate to what extent this is true for different observer's personalities. Especially since warmth seems to be the most important factor, and thus investigating whether utilitarians can be seen as more warm deemed to be more interesting than to see if deontologists could be seen as more warm than they already are.

Future research

Future research should aim to investigate whether other personality traits that are more narrow concepts influence the perception of warmth and competence, perhaps investigating whether the American SAT scores in any way predicts a difference in perceived competence. That would indicate that smarter individuals have a disposition for perceiving competence in others.

Research should investigate to what extent the logical and emotional justifications affect the perception of warmth and competence and to what extent the meta-insight presented by Rom and Conway (2018) is accurate. By mapping what influences the warmth and competence perception one could comment on decision-makers bias in moral dilemmas in regards to conforming to social expectations.

Furthermore it would be wise to disentangle the different factors that might influence the perception of warmth and competence given the SweSAT score. If there is a different

process of social perception that influence the perception of competence or whether there is an underlying factor, possibly smart people are more utilitarian and thus mediating an effect of boosted trait perception in regards to warmth and competence.

Conclusion

Our study confirms the findings from study seven conducted by Rom and Conway (2018) in regards to the perception of a utilitarian decision-maker (harm-acceptance). We found that the logical justification did not cause a significant effect on the perceived competence, however the emotional explanation does increase the perceived warmth. It should be noted that this effect is however not as strong as found by Rom and Conway (2018).

We were not able to identify any significant differences in perceived warmth or competence for big-five personality traits for either justification. The study did however reveal evidence suggesting that both participants who stated they would have done the same thing as the decision-maker rated him as more warm and that participants who previously received a high SweSAT score rated the decision-maker as more competent.

These results suggest that there is some process mediating and increased warmth perception depending on who likes utilitarians. It also reveals that some individual differences account for a higher competence perception, whether this is because of their categorical preference of a certain moral principle or their personality influence their social perception is unclear.

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