



Original Articles

Is utilitarian sacrifice becoming more morally permissible?

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ABSTRACT

A central tenet of contemporary moral psychology is that people typically reject active forms of utilitarian sacrifice. Yet, evidence for secularization and declining empathic concern in recent decades suggests the possibility of systematic change in this attitude. In the present study, we employ hypothetical dilemmas to investigate whether judgments of utilitarian sacrifice are becoming more permissive over time. In a cross-sectional design, age negatively predicted utilitarian moral judgment (Study 1). To examine whether this pattern reflected processes of maturation, we asked a panel to re-evaluate several moral dilemmas after an eight-year interval but observed no overall change (Study 2). In contrast, a more recent age-matched sample revealed greater endorsement of utilitarian sacrifice in a time-lag design (Study 3). Taken together, these results suggest that today's younger cohorts increasingly endorse a utilitarian resolution of sacrificial moral dilemmas.

1. Introduction

In 1967, the philosopher Philippa Foot published an essay on an obscure ethical principle, the *doctrine of double effect*. Her essay introduced now-famous cases like the trolley problem in order to crystallize the competing mandates of deontology (never to use someone as a means to an end) versus utilitarianism (to promote the good of the many). Next, it argued that moral judgments regarding abortion and euthanasia reflect this precise tension.

In the decades since, public attitudes toward euthanasia and especially abortion have become substantially more permissive (Inglehart, 1997; Norris & Inglehart, 2011). Might these developments reflect a deeper, more systematic shift in the relative balance of deontological versus utilitarian concerns? To answer this question, we assess evidence for historical change in the way that people resolve the kinds of moral dilemmas posed by Foot fifty years ago.

Two lines of evidence motivate the prediction that utilitarian moral values are on the rise. The first concerns cohort changes in trait empathy and their predicted consequences for moral psychology. In large-scale cross-sectional studies (total $N > 70,000$) of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983)—a multidimensional measure of self-reported affect—younger participants report lower scores on the empathic concern subscale than either middle-aged or older adults (O'Brien, Konrath, Grühn, & Hagen, 2013). Meanwhile, a cross-temporal meta-analysis of 72 administrations of the IRI among United States college students revealed a general decline in self-reported

empathy between 1979 and 2009 (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). This generational trend predicts a weakening prohibition on utilitarian sacrifice, since dispositional empathy—as reported on the IRI (Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013; Patil & Silani, 2014)—is linked to deontological reactions to the trolley problem.

Second, numerous Western cultures have undergone processes of *secularization* (Norris & Inglehart, 2011), characterized by religious disaffiliation and declines in church attendance (Schwadel, 2010). In turn, studies in moral psychology reveal that religious believers are more likely to oppose utilitarian sacrifice (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Piazza & Landy, 2013)—a pattern which may arise from their more intuitive cognitive style (Shenhav, Rand, & Greene, 2012) and a corresponding preference for the intrinsic moral evaluation of acts (Hannikainen, Miller, & Cushman, 2017). Together these results provide additional grounds to suspect that utilitarian ethics may be proliferating, at least in secularizing societies.

Motivated by these existing lines of evidence, we examine the hypothesis that utilitarian moral values are spreading over time. Our methods are based on three complementary designs: In Study 1, we evaluate the relationship between age and moral judgment in a *cross-sectional* design, i.e., comparing the moral judgment of different age groups at a fixed point in time. Next, in Study 2, we examine changes in moral judgment over the human life span in a fixed panel adopting a *longitudinal* design. Finally, in Study 3, we employ a *time-lag* approach, comparing the moral judgment of similar age groups at different periods.

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Consistent effects in longitudinal and cross-sectional designs (e.g., greater condemnation of utilitarian sacrifice in older age) can be treated as indicative of a *maturation* effect—i.e., that processes of aging promote deontological views. If time-lag and cross-sectional analyses reveal consistent findings, a predominant effect of *cohort* may be assumed to be present (such as greater endorsement of utilitarian sacrifice among recent generations). Finally, convergent effects in longitudinal and time-lag studies (e.g., more utilitarian judgment in recent test administrations) would suggest the prevailing influence of a *period* effect—changes resulting from the passage of time that affect everyone alike.

2. General methods

All reported studies were approved by the institutional review board at Harvard University.

2.1. Participants

- 2007–08 wave.** Between October of 2007 and June of 2008, 4134 volunteers (1662 women, 2472 men; age IQR: 20–37), took part in the present study. Many participants were either college students (“*Some college*”: 1052 [25%]) or graduates (“*Bachelor’s degree*”: 968 [23%]), and almost half of all participants were US nationals (1898 [46%]). Many other participants came from Australia (119 [3%]), Canada (162 [4%]), Germany (233 [6%]), Poland (284 [7%]), and the United Kingdom (301 [7%]). Approximately half of the participants reported no religious affiliation (“*None*”: 2051 [50%]), and many others were of Christian denomination (“*–Catholic*”: 512 [12%]; “*–Orthodox*”: 55 [1%]; “*–Other*”: 329 [8%]; “*–Protestant*”: 409 [10%]).
- Longitudinal panel.** Between July 2016 and March 2017, we re-contacted all 752 participants from the 2007–08 administration who voluntarily provided their e-mail address to take part in future research: 166 (22%) e-mails bounced, 161 (21%) participants started the survey and, after excluding 21 incomplete participations, our re-test sample consisted of 123 participants (73 men, 50 women; retest age IQR: 34–55) born between 1930 and 1994. Further demographic information was retrieved from the first phase: United States was the primary nationality (53 [41%]), followed by Germany (13 [10%]), United Kingdom (13 [10%]), Poland (8 [6%]) and Canada (6 [5%]). Many participants reported no religious affiliation (“*None*”: 80 [49%]), and some were Christian (“*–Catholic*”: 15 [12%]; or “*–Protestant*”: 12 [10%]). Many participants held either a Master’s (36 [28%]) or a Bachelor’s (31 [24%]) degree. Tests of attrition bias are reported in [Supplementary Analysis 1](#).
- 2015–17 wave.** Between October of 2015 and March of 2017, 9337 volunteers (4825 women, 4076 men, 130 other, 156 preferred not to specify; age IQR: 19–28) took part in the present study. Most participants were either high school graduates (“*High school/GED*”: 2018 [22%]), college students (“*Some college*”: 2481 [27%]) or graduates (“*Bachelor’s degree*”: 1956 [21%]). Over half of all participants were US nationals (5314 [57%]). Many other participants came from Australia (292 [3%]), Canada (521 [6%]), Germany (214 [2%]), and the United Kingdom (608 [7%]). More than half of the participants reported no religious affiliation (“*None*”: 5397 [58%]), and many others were of Christian denomination (“*–Catholic*”: 976 [10%]; “*–Orthodox*”: 153 [2%]; “*–Other*”: 790 [8%]; “*–Protestant*”: 707 [8%]).

2.2. Procedure

Participants visited the Moral Sense Test website (www.moralsensetest.com), either voluntarily (in Studies 1 and 3) or upon receiving an e-mail request (Study 2). After providing informed consent, participants completed at least the following three sections:

- Moral dilemmas.** Participants viewed a battery of thirteen, high-conflict personal dilemmas, previously employed in numerous studies in moral psychology (see [Koenigs et al., 2007](#)). Each hypothetical situation was narrated in the second person (placing the reader in the role of actor), and presented a dilemma whether to personally sacrifice someone in order to save a larger number of lives. After each dilemma, participants were asked to rate the permissibility of the utilitarian action on a seven-point scale, anchored at (1) “*forbidden*”, (4) “*permissible*”, and (7) “*obligatory*”. We calculated a moral judgment index per participant, by averaging permissibility ratings across all thirteen dilemmas, such that higher values indicate more characteristically utilitarian moral views. The moral judgment index revealed very good internal consistency in the present studies (Cronbach’s $\alpha \geq 0.87$) and also test-retest reliability in Study 2 ($r = 0.67$).
- Interpersonal Reactivity Index.** Participants completed a widely-used assessment of self-reported empathy ([Davis, 1983](#)). The IRI contains 28 items, organized in four subscales:
 - perspective-taking*, the tendency to evaluate situations from the point of view of others (e.g., “I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision”);
 - fantasy*, the capacity to transpose oneself into the feelings and actions of characters in fictional contexts (e.g., “After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters”);
 - empathic concern*, the tendency to feel compassion and concern for others (e.g., “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me”); and
 - personal distress*, own feelings of unease and discomfort in reaction to the emotions of others (e.g., “Being in a tense emotional situation scares me”).
- Demographic information.** Participants were asked to provide information about: their gender; age (in years); educational attainment (1: “*Less than high school*” – 5: “*Graduate degree*”); religious affiliation (“*Buddhist*”, “*Christian – Catholic*”, “*Christian – Orthodox*”, “*Christian – Other*”, “*Christian – Protestant*”, “*Hindu*”, “*Jewish*”, “*Muslim*”, “*None*”, “*Other*”); and religious self-identification (anchored at 1: “*Not religious*”, and 7: “*Very religious*”).

Stimuli, data and scripts are available online at osf.io/ks3wz/.

2.3. Power analysis

Given our large sample sizes in Studies 1 and 3, our analyses were highly-powered to detect small effects ($r = 0.10$, $d = 0.20$): i.e., $\alpha < 0.001$ (consistent with [Benjamin et al., 2017](#)), and $1 - \beta > 0.99$, setting β/α ratio to 4:1. Our longitudinal study depended on a more limited sample of 123 re-test participants. With $\alpha = 0.05$, and $1 - \beta = 0.80$, our planned analysis (paired *t*-test) afforded us enough statistical power to detect effects larger than or equal to Cohen’s $d = 0.25$.

We adopt pairwise deletion throughout this report: Each statistical analysis includes *all* participants for whom the data are available, resulting in some variation in sample sizes across analyses.

3. Study 1: cross-sectional age differences

In Study 1, we examine the relationship between participants’ age and their judgments about the permissibility of utilitarian sacrifice. If either *maturation* or *cohort* effects are present, we should observe a correlation. In contrast, if only *period* effects are present, we should observe no differences in moral judgment by age.

We also seek to replicate previously reported relationships between empathic concern and both age ([O’Brien et al., 2013](#)) and moral judgment ([Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013](#)).

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