



FlashReport

Feeling socially connected increases utilitarian choices in moral dilemmas

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Feeling socially connected increased utilitarian choices in high-conflict moral dilemmas.
- Social motivations impact moral judgment.

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ABSTRACT

The current research explores the relationship between feeling socially connected and decision-making in high-conflict moral dilemmas. High-conflict moral dilemmas pit utilitarian outcomes, where one person is directly harmed to save five others, against people's social intuitions and values, e.g. "Do not harm others." Drawing on sociality motivation research, we predict that feeling socially connected increases utilitarian choices in high-conflict moral dilemmas. We support this prediction in three studies. Our studies manipulated social connection, independent of the dilemma context, using live social interactions (Studies 1–2) and a recall task (Study 3). Across studies, those induced to feel social connection made more utilitarian choices in a high-conflict moral dilemma.

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Introduction

"It is often affirmed that utilitarianism renders men cold and unsympathizing; that it chills their moral feelings towards individuals."
[Mill, 1879]

Utilitarian choices promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Bentham, 1789/1948; Mill, 1879). In moral dilemmas that sacrifice one to save five, utilitarian outcomes clash with moral values, such as proscriptions against harming others (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Kant, 1785). High-conflict moral dilemmas are a particular type of dilemma in which the utilitarian outcome requires the decision-maker to directly harm another person (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). For example, the utilitarian choice in the footbridge dilemma requires physically pushing someone to their

death to stop a runaway trolley from killing five others farther down the track. High-conflict dilemmas elicit aversive moral emotions and typically up to 90% of respondents forego the utilitarian choice (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006).

As John Stuart Mill lamented, people who endorse utilitarianism are perceived as socially disconnected and having minimal moral concern. Although this may resonate with specific populations, e.g. psychopaths (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011; Koenigs, Kruepke, Zeier, & Newman, 2012), recent empirical evidence suggests that social connections may actually encourage utilitarian choices in moral dilemmas.

For instance, Kurzban, DeScioli, and Fein (2012) looked at people's willingness to endorse the utilitarian choice of sacrificing a brother, a friend, or a stranger, to save five people of the same type in the footbridge dilemma, e.g. sacrifice a brother to save five brothers. They found that participants made more utilitarian choices when the dilemma involved brothers (47%) or friends (41%) compared to when it involved strangers (28%). Another study found that participants were the most willing to make utilitarian tradeoffs when their choices involved saving in-group members (Cikara, Farnsworth, Harris, & Fiske, 2010). These studies suggest a positive relationship between social connection and utilitarian

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choice. However, these studies manipulated participants' social relationships with those in the moral dilemmas (e.g. kin versus non-kin, in-group versus out-group members). This makes it difficult to distinguish the influence of feeling socially connected from other relational elements (e.g. social stereotypes) and obligations. In the current research we manipulate social connection outside of the dilemma context and predict that feeling socially connected increases utilitarian choices in high-conflict moral dilemmas.

Aversion to harm and moral judgment

The prospect of directly harming another person is psychologically aversive and elicits strong moral affect (Cushman, Gray, Gaffey, & Mendes, 2012; Haidt, 2001; Turiel, 1983). Milgram (1974) found that people were less willing to deliver a painful electric shock when doing so required physically touching the victim's hand compared to delivering the shock from a distance. Likewise, utilitarian choices that require directly inflicting harm (e.g. physically pushing a man to his death in the footbridge dilemma) receive far less endorsement than dilemmas that deliver harm indirectly (e.g. killing a man from a distance by flipping a switch in the switch dilemma). The dual-process theory of moral judgment (Greene, Nyström, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004) suggests that the direct harm in high-conflict dilemmas activates social and moral affect that competes with utilitarian reasoning to impact judgment. In support of this theory, factors that bolster the processing of moral affect reduce utilitarianism and factors that mitigate its impact increase utilitarianism, e.g. visual imagery and incidental positive affect, respectively (Amit & Greene, 2012; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006). To explore the question of how feeling socially connected might influence people's willingness to harm one to save five, we consider work on social motivation and social neuroscience.

Humans fundamentally desire social connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Having positive social connections brings cognitive, emotional, and health benefits (Cacioppo, Hawkey, & Berntson, 2003; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Relevant to the current investigation, research finds that feeling socially connected promotes the regulation of aversive affect (Beckes & Coan, 2011). In one study, women who held the hand of a spouse, compared to the hand of a stranger or no hand-holding, reported less unpleasantness and showed less neural threat response to expectations of receiving a painful electric shock (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). In another study clinically anxious youths were exposed to threat-related words and those who completed the task in the presence of their caregiver displayed less emotional reactivity than those who completed the task without their caregiver present (Conner et al., 2012). These studies suggest that, in moral dilemmas, feeling socially connected may reduce the moral affect that typically inhibits willingness to harm one person to save five and increase utilitarian choice. Consistent with this logic, one study found that the presence of a close compared to a distant other increased people's willingness to endorse using harmful interrogation tactics on a detained terrorist (Waytz & Epley, 2012).

We conducted three studies to test whether feeling socially connected increases utilitarian choice in high-conflict moral dilemmas. In each study we manipulated social connection and observed its effects on utilitarian choice a high-conflict moral dilemma. Importantly, we manipulated social connection outside of the moral dilemma context. In doing so we strip away other elements of social relationships (e.g. kin versus non-kin categorizations) and test whether the psychological experience of social connection significantly impacts moral judgment.

Study 1

In Study 1 we manipulated whether participants engaged in a social interaction or solitary activity. We predicted that those who engaged in social interaction would feel more socially connected and make more utilitarian choices. Our primary dependent measure was the footbridge

dilemma. For comparison, we also included the switch dilemma, a logically equivalent low-conflict variation of the footbridge dilemma in which the utilitarian choice involves indirectly killing a man by flipping a switch (Thomson, 1986). The switch dilemma tends to evoke less moral affect and, consequently, results in more utilitarian choices (Cushman et al., 2006). Because moral emotions are a more central determinant of choice in the footbridge, compared to the switch dilemma, we expected social connection to increase utilitarian choices in the footbridge to a greater extent than in the switch dilemma.

Participants/procedure

Ninety-four White undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.27$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.39$; 62% women) came to the laboratory in groups of 4–10 and were compensated \$15 each. Data from three participants who guessed the hypothesis were excluded from analysis, leaving a final sample of 91.

Stage 1 of the experiment asked participants to complete filler tasks in a breakout room for 15–20 min either by themselves (*no-interaction* condition) or with a randomly assigned partner (*interaction* condition). To promote positive interactions in the interaction condition, partners were matched on race (i.e. Caucasian) and gender. Additionally, the first task was an "ice-breaker" in which partners discussed their personal interests; *no-interaction* condition participants wrote about their personal interests by themselves.

For Stage 2, participants were separated and privately responded to the switch and the footbridge trolley dilemmas, in that order. They made binary choices, *Yes* (pull the switch or push the man) or *No* (do not pull the switch or do not push the man). To measure social connection, participants indicated how much they felt socially connected, accepted, and lonely (5-point scales; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much so; $\alpha = .69$). Given previous research linking positive affect and utilitarianism (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006), participants also completed the PANAS to allow us to test for possible effects of positive ($\alpha = .86$) and negative ($\alpha = .83$) affect.

Results/discussion

Social connection manipulation check

Those in the interaction condition ($M = 3.92$, $SD = .59$) reported feeling more socially connected than those in the *no-interaction* condition ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .91$), $t(89) = 3.01$, $p = .003$, $d = .63$.

Utilitarian choice

Chi square analyses revealed a significant effect of condition in the footbridge dilemma but not in the switch. In the footbridge dilemma, the odds of endorsing the utilitarian choice in the interaction condition (14/45; 31%) was 3.01 times greater than in the *no-interaction* condition (6/46; 13%), $X^2 = 4.33$, $p = .037$. In the switch dilemma, the odds of endorsing the utilitarian choice in the interaction condition (41/45; 91%) was 2.16 times greater than in the *no-interaction* condition (38/46; 83%), $X^2 = 1.44$, $p = .231$.¹

Mediation analysis

Next we tested whether feelings of social connection mediated the relationship between interaction condition and utilitarian choice. In this case, because the operationalization of the independent variable diverges sufficiently from the underlying construct (social connection is operationalized as social interaction), mediation can be a valuable way to demonstrate that the main effect occurred through the intended process.²

¹ Including the 3 excluded participants, $X^2 = 3.01$, $p = .08$ in the footbridge and $X^2 = 1.53$, $p = .22$ in the switch.

² We tested the mediating effect of social connection in Studies 1–2 because they manipulated social connection indirectly through interactions. Because Study 3 directly manipulates social connection, we do not test for mediation by the social connection manipulation check.

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