

Situational Pressures and the Erosion of Moral Judgement: Mechanisms and Real-world Implications

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Abstract. Moral judgment is considered the personal expression of one's values and ethics. Research in social and moral psychology has also found that the reasons for behavior are not always internal in nature. Previously, only the mechanisms of conformity, obedience to authority, and moral disengagement have been studied separately. Only a few review studies have combined the above mechanisms to build an all-encompassing system and studied how situational pressures affect moral judgment and lead to harmful behavior in all sectors of society. Based on previous studies, this paper collects relevant data on the association between situational pressure and moral judgment from social and moral psychology. The four kinds of mechanisms through which situational pressure affects behavior are: obedience to authority, role internalization and deindividuation, moral disengagement, and conformity to social norms. The above mechanisms are intertwined and reduce the ability of individuals to regulate their own behavior morally, making them more likely to act in a harmful way without such self-discipline. The result of situationally induced moral behavior can be either an individual's behavior, that of institutions, ordinary social interactions, or widespread collective violence. Overall, the results show that harmful behavior can be explained by situational factors; therefore, moral education, critical thinking, and institutional accountability all need to be strengthened.

Keywords: Moral Judgment, Situational Pressure, Obedience to Authority, Moral Disengagement, Conformity

1. Introduction

Throughout history, some serious acts of harm have been carried out by both individuals with bad intentions and by ordinary people in specific social environments. Given that events such as the Holocaust, the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and widespread bullying and discrimination have all caused significant psychological problems, people need to know why ordinary people sometimes behave in a manner contrary to their own sense of morality so that harm can be reduced to individuals, institutions, and all sectors of society.

Most Earlier theories have considered only abnormal psychology as the reason for bad behavior. More and more evidence suggests that the situation is also one of the reasons. The experiments conducted by Milgram and Zimbardo found that certain behaviors are produced under the influence

of authority figures and social roles [1, 2]. Research on moral disengagement has also found that people can justify unethical behavior and maintain a good self-image.

Although previous studies have individually examined obedience, conformity, role internalization, and moral disengagement, fewer studies have integrated these mechanisms into a single system to explain how they work together to affect moral judgment and contribute to harmful behavior in different social environments.

Therefore, a more extensive compilation of previous research is required, and this paper intends to study the impact of situational pressures on the moral judgment of ordinary people. The first two psychological reasons for the above problems will be identified through a review of existing literature, and how they present themselves in society will also be examined at various levels. Based on the above results, this paper aims to expand the existing research on the influence of context on moral behavior.

2. Introduction to key concepts

2.1. Moral judgments

Moral judgment is selecting between right and wrong in the presence of a moral problem [3]. Moral judgment is the view of what is right or wrong; thus, whether it is cognitive or emotional is unknown. The previous ideas put forward by this were all focused on the rational thinking aspect of moral judgment. Kohlberg is a typical case [4]. He proposed that people's moral development progresses through stages, and at higher levels, abstract concepts and reasoning are employed.

Recently, some scholars have put forward that intuition and emotions are relatively stronger than previously thought. Jonathan Haidt thought that the norms of society taught moral behavior [5]. Therefore, it will not be viewed as a reasoned judgment made by a person. This means the judgment in question is a quick, instinctive response without reflection. Recently, some scholars have also found that moral decision-making is an integrated system of cognition and emotion [6].

Taken together, Kohlberg's theory is relatively slow-moving and based on reason and stages. Haidt thought that it needed to be intuitive and emotionally resonant. The above reasons suggest that some moral judgments are linked to emotion and intuition, and are not solely products of reason. Therefore, it is more prone to disturbance by external situation cues and may be easily affected by the outside world. The reasons for this will also be mentioned. It is a relatively unstable state that may be caused by internal and external factors. Due to this difficulty in circumstances, some people have chosen not to act.

2.2. Situational pressure

Situational pressure refers to the outside conditions in the environment or society that influence people's behavior, decisions, and moral awareness; thus, their actions may not align with their true wishes or moral ideals [7]. The sources of this stress can be various kinds, such as authority and conformity. Authority refers to the power to have control over a person or thing [8]. Following that, conformity refers to the state of obeying or agreeing with something [9]. Finally, a series of behaviors that are recognized by society as having a particular purpose, and which link people with society, are referred to as social roles [10].

A large number of studies in social psychology have also identified the Situation as one such reason. In 1963, Milgram performed a well-known experiment that showed people would comply with the commands of an authority figure even when they knew it was wrong [1]. Several years

later, Philip Zimbardo also found in the Stanford Prison Experiment that the participants quickly accepted the roles of guards and prisoners and began behaving in ways that went against their usual sense of morality [2]. Therefore, these studies indicate that people behave differently under stress in some situations.

Situational pressures are very powerful because people's behavior is naturally affected by the surrounding environment. More people will use external references to learn about the correct behavior in a structured environment. As social beings, people are likely to give higher priority to group norms, expectations of authority, and role behavior. Experiments show that when under strong situational pressure, people may compromise their own beliefs in the interest of fitting in and obeying [1, 2]. Importantly, although there are circumstances, they do not completely eliminate moral judgments and can still regulate behavior to some extent. Therefore, people may act in a way that contradicts their moral beliefs without being fully aware of the contradiction.

The above show that morality is not absolute. It is also not determined solely by the external environment, and under such circumstances, behavioral choices can occur. It offers some reasons why people may not be moral in certain situations due to such pressures.

3. Mechanisms through which situational pressures influence moral judgment

3.1. Obedience to authority and the diffusion of responsibility

Obedience to authority is a typical situational cause of the erosion of moral consciousness. According to the above research, people are more likely to obey the instructions given by those in charge. In a first study, Stanley Milgram had some people perform what they thought were harmful electric shocks on others after being told to do so by an authority figure [1]. As a result, a large number of the participants were at the top end of the shock scales, believing that someone in power told them to do so despite feeling very uncomfortable. This phenomenon can be explained by a concept called "agentic state", where people see themselves as agents who are ordered to perform actions and thus do not take responsibility for their own behavior [11]. Recently, more research has been carried out to determine whether respect for authority and other socialisation factors lead to obedience [12]. Under such circumstances, people may be unable to think independently or make rational choices. As a result, they will not act according to their conscience.

3.2. Role internalisation and deindividuation

Role internalisation is another way of obtaining this type of behavior; it is the extent to which an individual internalises the values and expectations of a particular role in society and voluntarily performs this behavior out of an inner desire [13]. This is related to deindividuation; thus, one's own identity is less prominent in the company of others or under institutional constraints [14]. Based on a well-known experiment, Philip Zimbardo conducted a six-day simulation of power and conformity at Stanford Prison in 1971. As a result of the above experiment, those in the subordinate position of prisoners tend to be less assertive and more passive; they are often helpless and obedient to the directives given by guards.

However, those who were given the title of "guard" soon displayed authoritarian and abusive behavior without any previous tendency to do so. Therefore, it can be concluded that behavior is more likely to be determined by the demand for a role than by fixed personality traits. In line with the above trend, recent studies by Alfrey and others have shown that identity-related processes can alter behavior over time when individuals repeatedly engage in actions that belong to a certain role

[15]. Therefore, with the change in role expectations, a person may have different moral awareness and therefore be unable to conform to the demands of the situation if they conflict with their own ethics.

3.3. Moral disengagement and cognitive justification

Moral disengagement is a way that people think they can explain bad behavior without feeling any moral guilt [16]. It means that individuals can dissociate from their own sense of right and wrong by way of rationalisation, diffusion of responsibility, and the dehumanization of victims. For example, one might be less aware of the damage caused by their actions, attribute it to higher-ups, or conform to the group. Specifically, individuals may rationalize their behavior by believing that they are merely following instructions from the top, and at the same time, they may blame the victims themselves; this is a form of victim-blaming that reduces their own sense of responsibility. Worse still, they demean the victims by using contemptuous language to reduce the victims' sense of shame. Recent studies have also found that people's characteristics and the environment are related to how often they engage in moral disengagement [17]. Moral disengagement will reduce the impact temporarily, but not morality. Thus, people do not see what they are doing as wrong. Additionally, over time, there is a gradual reduction in moral awareness and more justifications for the following transgressions.

3.4. Conformity and the normalization of harmful behavior

Conformity and social norms also affect the moral behavior of people in the face of a difficult choice. People are willing to conform to the demands of a group or society and may not have the courage to speak out against those demands. Asch's conformity experiments have shown that people will give the wrong answer in line with the group consensus [18]. Therefore, many people in society follow the norms and customs of their society. However, this conformity can, under certain moral circumstances, lead to the normalization and acceptance of harmful behavior, and when many people participate, it may appear to society that such behavior is acceptable. Klenk believes that, based on the circumstances, some people may not feel morally wrong about certain behaviors [19]. Therefore, when harmful behavior becomes normalized in a group, such as workplace bullying, online harassment, or organisational misconduct, individual resistance decreases because they feel less morally abnormal, and as a result, the power of moral judgement is also diminished.

Therefore, obedience to authority, role internalization, moral disengagement, and conformity are in play to reduce moral self-regulation because none of these work independently. Together, they provide circumstances that increase the likelihood of people behaving in ways contrary to their moral beliefs under pressure. Therefore, it is necessary to consider all circumstances in the background of a person's morally unacceptable behavior when investigating why they have been committing such crimes.

4. Real-world consequences of situationally influenced moral behavior

4.1. Institutional and systemic harm

Situational pressure can have serious negative effects on people's lives, and in large organizations or institutions, the damage can be even more severe. In environments with a strong hierarchy and rigid role expectations, especially under the trend of intense conformity, individuals may be more likely to

participate in unethical or abusive behavior, even if they are morally opposed to such conduct; at the same time, they may be unable to do so. These institutions often encourage or reward obedience, and penalize or punish defiance. Thus, at this stage in moral development, people base their decisions on social conformity and the desire to maintain social order by following social norms in order to receive benefits and avoid trouble [20]. When people follow authority, and most of the people in a group have chosen one side, they are less likely to form their own moral judgments. As a result, those harmful behaviors and actions may be normalized in the organization due to herd behavior, and people may feel they are not required to consider the moral consequences of following the group. It will gradually no longer be regarded as morally wrong due to the culture that people follow, and the military is a typical case of institutional harm caused by situational pressure.

Research has found that the culture of the military often stresses and educates soldiers to be obedient and conformist, which may inadvertently create a favourable environment for abusive behavior. For example, by decreasing internal whistleblowing and promoting a culture that emphasises obedience to authority over ethical concerns [21]. In a high-power structure, loyalty to senior management and the organization takes precedence over ethical considerations for some employees. At the same time, if such behavior meets the company's requirements or orders from above, it may be tolerated.

As shown in the preceding research, this includes the following reasons: obedience to authority and diffusion of responsibility. Both reduce individual responsibility and weaken moral constraints, and the same trend can be seen in prisons and other institutions. For instance, the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib Prison has been shown to be the result of a combination of dehumanisation, conformity and authority pressure [22]. Individuals in the institution may start to believe that unethical behavior is acceptable if it is promoted by their peers, colleagues, or superiors. This is because the trend believed by most people will affect how these people feel about such events. Based on research in social psychology, group norms and role expectations can also influence a person's moral behavior to some extent in an environment with poor supervision and a low sense of individual responsibility [23, 24]. Based on the above findings, the structure of institutions is likely contributing to a decline in people's sense of moral responsibility.

4.2. Institutional and systemic harm

Situational pressures can also lead to daily instances of harm and unethical conduct, such as bullying, discrimination, and other minor moral infractions. Although these behaviors are not as serious as institutional or organizational abuse. However, they have the same underlying psychological dynamics and can cause serious long-term damage to individuals and society. Therefore, social norms, peer pressure, and the desire for acceptance among a group may motivate individuals to act in a way that contradicts their own sense of right and wrong. Thus, harmful behavior may not be intentional violence or cruelty, but also conformity to social expectations.

Bullying is a typical case of behavior shaped by situations and society. Sanders et al. have indicated that bullying is generally motivated by a wish for higher social status, acceptance by peers and other groups, or a sense of power, and it tends to be worse in environments that permit such behavior [25]. In many cases, people are not inherently fond of causing harm to others, but they may engage in bullying because they are not disciplined for it, and in some environments, such behavior is even tolerated or rewarded, thus becoming normalized in that society. Group behavior in bullying may reduce empathy for the victim and increase the pressure to conform to the group, thus perpetuating a cycle of harm. Therefore, in terms of social acceptance and belonging in one's living environment, moral considerations may be given less weight.

Thus, the pressure of the situation can also lead to discrimination and stereotypes. Regularly meet people of all walks of life to reduce prejudice. People tend to be discriminatory because someone they know is also being discriminated against or is prejudiced against other people and events. People wish to be accepted by others and are thus more likely to conform to the norms of a group to avoid being excluded. Over time, these behaviors can be incorporated into daily life and are often subtle or socially acceptable and not clearly harmful. As a result, the behavior will no longer be regarded as unusual or morally wrong by the individual, and they may remain in the group. Based on research on moral disengagement, people often make excuses for actions that violate their moral standards by reducing the severity of the consequences or blaming general societal expectations [26]. Situational Factors can alter the behavior of common people in small ways.

4.3. Escalation and normalization of violence

Under circumstances of duress, there will be more violence over time, and it will be tolerated. Prolonged exposure to a bad environment and repeated participation in aggressive behavior with peers can lead to emotional numbing, so the normal feelings of distress that people have when watching or taking part in violence gradually disappear, and these actions start to seem less serious. As harmful behaviors become normalized in the places where people live, such as families, neighbourhoods and schools, individuals may be less likely to see violence as morally wrong in their daily lives. The entire process shows the long-term impact of reduced moral self-regulation.

Research shows that young children exposed to violence in their early years are more likely to show the same behavior later on. Studies on family violence show that prolonged exposure to an aggressive environment can lead to the normalization of such behavior, and over time, a lack of empathy may be developed among children and other exposed individuals, resulting in an indifference to the suffering of others [27]. Children who have been exposed to violence in their lives may have learned that aggression is the solution to problems and therefore see no other way. Bandura's social learning theory proposes that one can learn through observation of the actions, behavior, and emotions displayed by others [28]. It will be more noticeable to children. At a young age, children learn about the world by observing how their parents, teachers, and other children react to various situations, and they imitate these behaviors when they are in a similar situation. After a certain period of time, the normalization process can reduce the sensitivity to exposure; thus, people are gradually desensitised to violent stimuli to the extent that they are no longer considered morally problematic or unusual. People who have been desensitised to violence are more likely to act aggressively at a later time. Based on the above findings, it can be seen that people's morals vary under different circumstances in life.

At a higher level in society, the same psychological reasons may lead to collective violence, such as war crimes, mob violence, and genocide. Conformity, obedience to authority, and dehumanisation often work together in these situations to reduce the impulse to resist. Once harmful behavior is incorporated into the group's or institutions' norms, a sense of right and wrong is established; then, this behavior may be perceived as necessary and thus morally justifiable. Historical cases of collective violence, such as the Holocaust (the systematic genocide of 6 million Jews) and the atrocities reported at the Nuremberg Trials. Prior studies have shown that ordinary people are also willing to commit serious harm when situational pressures systematically weaken their moral judgment [29, 30]. It can be said that it also offers some evidence for the effect of situation on moral consciousness and behavior.

Taken together, the above real-life incidents show that situational pressure can affect moral behavior in many places, such as daily interactions among people and abuse of power within an

organization or collective violence. The above results are not due to one psychological reason. Instead, obedience, conformity, role expectations, and moral disengagement interact with each other to achieve the end result of reduced moral self-regulation. The above results show that, to some extent, the environment can change a person's behavior under different circumstances, both normally and unusually.

5. Discussion and future implications

5.1. Situational influence and moral behavior

The results presented in this paper do not indicate that the causes of harmful behavior and action are solely rooted in human nature or personality. Under certain circumstances, people may not act in accordance with their own moral beliefs. The above mechanisms of obedience to authority, conformity, role internalization, and moral disengagement work together to diminish people's sense of morality and increase the risk of ordinary people engaging in harm under specific conditions. More significantly, the above-mentioned research shows that the above mechanisms can occur in all sorts of social environments, from daily life among people to institutional abuse and group violence. Therefore, moral behavior is not entirely fixed; trait-based explanations for morality may be predictive but are not the primary reasons, and they are rather sensitive to environmental and social factors. Thus, many modifications need to be made in how moral psychology is theorized and studied.

5.2. Practical implications

One of the reasons for the above results is that moral awareness and critical thinking skills have been lacking. The reason is that under pressure from the situation, independent moral thinking may not occur. Therefore, educational programmes can be introduced to promote critical thinking by teaching moral reasoning, ethical scenario analysis, and reflective discussion. At the same time, learners can be taught to scrutinize the authority and norms of a group more cautiously. Promoting moral thinking and empathy can help people be more conscious of the reasons for behavior. Teach critical thinking skills to reduce blind obedience and inspire people to question harmful social norms instead of blindly following them.

This study has also examined institutional accountability for such bad behavior. Strictly hierarchical organizations with weak supervision may inadvertently offer a platform for abuse and other unethical behavior. Therefore, the institutions of schools, prisons, and the military should build an open-door policy for moral accountability. Establish all-weather reporting channels and lead by example to reduce the normalization of bad behavior in the organization.

5.3. Future research directions

In the future, investigating the influence of situational pressure in an online environment, such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and behavior of digital groups, is also recommended. Social media platforms can promote conformity and deindividuation norms of less self-awareness by reducing personal accountability. The sheer quantity of online connections may accelerate the normalization of harmful behaviors in ways not observed in offline social environments, and algorithmically curated content presents an increased risk of homogeneity. Add to the above the cross-cultural studies mentioned above to ascertain whether there are differences in the effect of this

situation on moral cognition among different cultures and social environments. Based on the above divisions, a more complete view of the connection between morality and the situation can be achieved.

6. Conclusion

This paper studies how the environment affects a person's moral judgment and leads ordinary people to do wrong. Based on the research of social psychology and moral psychology, four main mechanisms by which situational pressure influences behavior have been identified in this study: obedience to authority, role internalization and deindividuation, moral disengagement, and conformity to social norms.

The above research indicates that the basis of moral judgment is in fact external circumstances. Under the pressure of circumstances, people may have a reduced sense of moral responsibility and thus conform to others' behavior by providing a sense of guiltlessness. Therefore, some people will behave in a way that is contrary to their moral convictions.

This review also showed that the results of situationally-influenced moral behavior are not limited to individuals. This will be shown in the form of institutional abuse, other types of poor behavior, discrimination, bullying, etc. Based on the above results, it can be seen that people in society have begun to study how circumstances affect behavioral choices.

Based on the above results, this paper believes that moral education need to be strengthened, promote critical thinking, and improve the system of public service responsibility. Education programmes and organizational protection can help people recognise and resist harmful environmental factors.

Finally, understanding the relationship between situational pressures and moral judgment is essential to learn why people behave badly and how to prevent such behavior. Identifying the influence of the situation on psychological theories and foster a more ethical society, institutions, and individuals.

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