The Regulatory Function of Empathy, Shame and Guilt Proneness in Moral Judgement in Organizational Life

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Abstract. *Moral judgment and moral dilemmas are a pervasive part of organizational life and every decision-maker can and will encounter them at some point. Whether people make the utilitarian decision (preferring to maximize overall welfare) or the deontological one (choosing to adhere to moral rules), depends both on the contextual aspects, as well as on individual traits such as empathy and so-called moral emotions - guilt and shame. This paper aims to study the differences between the utilitarian and the deontologists employees in relation with empathy, guilt and shame proneness. In order to discriminate the two categories (utilitarian and deontologist), the well-established "Trolley problem" was used. In the Switch version, the task can be accomplished by using a lever to switch the train track, such that the train only kills one person. On the other hand, in the Footbridge version, pushing a very fat man off a bridge, using his body to stop the train, can save the five. The following questionnaires were used on a sample of 61 participants (47 females and 14 males, aged between M=20,88, AS=1,81): Interpersonal Reactivity Index, and The Guilt and Shame Proneness scale. Results showed a significant difference between the utilitarian and deontologist on the fantasy and empathic-concern scales for the Switch version. However, no significant differences were observed for guilt or shame proneness. As for the Bridge version, the differences were identified only on the empathic-concern scale and on the Guilt-Negative-Behavior-Evaluation scale of GASP.*

Keywords: empathy; shame and guilt proneness; moral dilemma.

Introduction

Kvalnes (2015) stated that one can understand moral judgment at work as the activity of judging and deciding what is morally right and wrong in an organizational context. Moral dilemmas can be encountered everywhere in organizational life. Situations might vary from real and acute dilemmas to false, so-called pseudo-dilemmas. False moral dilemmas are instances where it is clear what a person ought to do, but he or she is either tempted or pressured to do something else (Kidder, 2005, p.7). In a business environment, the distinction between these types of situations has also been labeled as one between dilemmas and temptations (Brinkmann, 2005, p.183).

In an organizational context, a moral dilemma is typically a situation where the decision-maker must choose between options that represent some moral requirement. The decision affects a range of stakeholders, and some of them can have reasonable moral claims to make on the decision-maker, but some of them will be disappointed or frustrated (Kvalnes, 2015). A moral dilemma is a choice between wrong and wrong.

There really is no choice available that is less wrong than the other choice. The situation is one where moral wrongdoing cannot be avoided (Gowans, 1994).

It is also believed that solving moral dilemmas would provide the principles guiding morality (Greene et al., 2001), principles that would apply to actual real issues such as the one of self-driving machines (Wallach & Allen, 2008).

From the theoretical point of view, a moral dilemma implies the existence of a conflict of a moral nature. The basic condition of a moral dilemma is the choice that causes contradiction within the subject. He or she is forced to have a choice between two actions that both have negative consequences; in both situations, there is a kind of loss but the subject is forced to choose. This type of moral dilemma was presented in the well-known movie "Sophie's Choice" (1980) directed by Alan J. Pakula, which proposes an even tougher choice that, seems virtually impossible to do. A woman with two children caught in a concentration camp in World War II is forced by a Nazi officer to choose life for one child, and death for the other, and in the situation where Sophie does not choose, the SS officer will kill both of them. Despite her plea of "Don't make me choose. I can't choose", Sophie's words fall on deaf ears and when a young Nazi is told to take both children away, she releases her daughter, shouting "Take my little girl!"(www.imdb.com) In this situation, Sophie is embroiled in a profound ethical conflict that triggers negative moral emotions, especially guilt (Greenspan, 1983).

There are two main directions in moral philosophy and they differ in their perspectives on what people can go to in order to maximize the best possible outcome for the people affected by their decisions and actions. First, utilitarianism state that the morally right option is the one that will create the best overall outcome while duty ethics or deontological ethics, claims that the morality of an action should be based on whether that action itself is right or wrong under a series of rules, rather than based on the consequences of the action (Kvalnes, 2015).

The definition of utilitarianism implies that the action taken in any moral dilemma leads to the achievement of the highest level of collective happiness with happiest people. In our case, a utilitarian action in both moral dilemmas implies pulling the switch and saving the five lives even if we sacrifice one of them, and also pushing the subject onto the rail to save the five lives. Reducing suffering and increasing collective happiness is the main concern of utilitarianism. What counts is the collective level of happiness rather than the individual. If there is an action that increases the common happiness but decreases the individual happiness, the subject in question has to execute that action according to utilitarianism (Mill & Scher, 2001).

On the other hand, deontology comes from the Greek word meaning duty, and its ethical essence lies in the fact that the action is not justified by consequences. If utilitarianism says the purpose excused the means, deontology says that means are important. The deontological principles are of Kantian origin and are very much like the religious ethics that state one has to behave with others as to themselves (Kant, 1996). Within the chosen dilemmas, the deontological conception would have had an answer in not sacrificing a person's life to save the other five lives. Therefore, the answer noted with NO (not pulling the switch/not pushing the fat person off the bridge) is considered deontological. Regarding the moral dilemmas selected for this research (trolley),

previous studies showed that more utilitarian answers were obtained to the first dilemma and deontological answers for the second dilemma (Greene, 2014). The participants tested by Greene tend to approve the action of pushing the shifter in the case of the first moral dilemma (the shift), because the brain imaging results show that emotion zones (the amygdala or the medial gyrus) are not activated. In the second moral dilemma (the bridge), the situation changes radically, since getting closer to the person who becomes a (potential) victim automatically activates an emotional, deontological type response. Greene has also tested other moral dilemmas in his study and obtained the same results, namely activation of emotional areas in the brain (activating m PFC-medial prefrontal cortex and amygdala) in a situation where there are personal involvement and proximity (Greene et al., 2001).

Recent findings in psychology and neuroscience suggest that moral judgment is more a matter of emotion and affective intuition than deliberate reasoning (Greene & Haidt, 2002). Zahn-Waxler and colleagues (1992) consider that there are different emotional conditions that can influence moral decisions. Among the most discussed we can find guilt, shame, distress, sympathy, and empathy. Empathy is regarded as the ability to feel the same as the other and to understand and share his or her emotions (Molchanov, 2014, p.90). It consists of different components: physiological, cognitive, emotional and behavioral (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992).

Human's empathy has a social-cultural nature and it develops through several stages starting from childhood (Hoffman, 2000). The role of family education for empathy development is very high. The parent's attitude determines the child's ability to recognize emotions and feelings and to be able to share them and feel with others in childhood (Molchanov, 2014). Empathy is the basis of all pro-social behaviors and underlying the manifestation of compassion. Nevertheless, empathy is different from the feeling of pity. When you feel pity, there is a sense of separation from the other, you are sorry for him or her but you are not affected, you feel separate, while empathy involves a sense of compassion and feeling in communion with the other. But, as a mechanism for the observer to experience the affective state of the observed person, empathy provides direct feedback to the observer about how the consequences of an event are affecting or will affect the observed person, therefore we envisage significant difference on some empathy scales between utilitarian and deontologist participants.

Self-conscious emotions show how we feel when we reflect on our own experiences, especially regarding the possible consequences of our actions (Tangney, 1990). According to previous studies (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), self-conscious emotions considered to be at the same time moral emotions are shame and guilt. Events that cause shame, as well as guilt, are of a social nature. The main difference between shame and guilt refers to the fact that shame involves a negative assessment of the whole being, while guilt is triggered in direct relation to a specific situation or behavior (Tangney, 1990; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Shame and guilt offer contrasting motivations, namely in shame, the effect is to conceal, deny or escape from shameful places, while in guilt, the effect is mainly to repair the wrongdoing.

Moral emotions motivate ethical behavior; they encourage people to act in accordance with accepted standards of right and wrong. As stated by Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek (2007) moral emotions provide the motivational force to do good and to avoid doing

bad. Guilt proneness is a personality trait indicative of a predisposition to experience negative feelings about personal wrongdoing. Guilt proneness is associated with empathic concern, perspective-taking, and a subscription to conventional morality (Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Tangney, 1991).

Although previous studies have stated that moral emotions are critical for deterring unethical and antisocial behavior (Haidt, 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek 2007), there is still a disagreement about how those moral emotions - guilt and shame - should be defined, differentiated, and measured (Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002; Tangney, 1996; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Wolf, Cohen, Panter, & Insko, 2010). Both guilt and shame are self-conscious emotions evoked by self-reflection and self-evaluation, and they both aid in self-regulation (Tracy & Robins, 2004; Tangney, 2003).

Guilt and shame can be differentiated via a self- behavior distinction (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1996; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robins, 2004). With guilt, the focus is on one's behavior ("I did a bad thing"), whereas with shame the focus is on one's self ("I'm a bad person"). According to this view, guilt arises when one makes internal, unstable, specific attributions about one's actions, which lead to negative feelings about specific behaviors that one has committed. Shame, on the other hand, arises when one makes internal, stable, global attributions about one's self, which lead to negative feelings about the global self (Tracy & Robins, 2004).

Guilt and shame can also be differentiated also via a public-private distinction. According to this distinction, transgressions or failures that have not been publically exposed (i.e., private misdeeds) are likely to elicit feelings of guilt, whereas transgressions or failures that have been publically exposed are likely to elicit feelings of shame (Ausubel, 1955; Combs, Campbell, Jackson, & Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2002). From this perspective, guilt is associated with a private sense of having done something wrong or having behaved in a way that violated one's conscience. Shame, on the other hand, is the negative feeling that arises when one's failures and shortcomings are put on public display. Likewise, empathic concern is a construct that is theoretically more closely linked to guilt proneness than shame proneness (Stuewig et al., 2010; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Methods

Starting from those empirical findings, the current study aims at finding answers to the following research questions:
RQ1: are there any differences regarding empathy between utilitarian and deontologist employees?
RQ2: are there any differences regarding guilt and shame proneness between utilitarian and deontologist employees?

Participants were 61 employed master students from a Romanian public university, aged between 19 and 27 years (M = 20.88, SD = 1.81), 14 males and 47 females. They were invited to fill in a set of questionnaires compiling the following measures: *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (IRI, Davis, 1980), which measures empathic concern,

perspective-taking, and personal distress and *The Guilt and Shame Proneness scale* (GASP, Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011), which measures individual differences in the propensity to experience guilt and shame across a range of personal transgressions. The GASP contains two guilt subscales that assess negative behavior-evaluations (Guilt-Negative-Behavior-Evaluation; Guilt-NBE) and repair action tendencies following private transgressions (Guilt-Repair), and two shame subscales that assess negative self-evaluations (Shame-Negative-Self-Evaluation; Shame-NSE) and withdrawal action tendencies following publically-exposed transgressions (Shame-Withdraw).

In order to discriminate the two categories (utilitarian and deontologist), the well-established "Trolley problem" was used (Thomson, 1985; Fischer & Ravizza, 1992). It proposes a set of moral dilemmas, which involve trade-offs between causing one death and preventing several more deaths. In both dilemmas, there is a runaway train that will kill five people unless another person is sacrificed.

In the Switch version (Foot, 1978) the task can be accomplished by using a lever to switch the train track, such that the train only kills one person. So, on the one hand, the utilitarian decision requires an ostensibly inoffensive action, and the death of the one is collateral damage. On the other hand, in the Footbridge version (Thomson, 1985), the five can be saved by pushing a very fat man off a bridge, using his body to stop the train. Here the utilitarian option requires a typically harmful action that involves personal physical contact, this death being instrumental.

Although one can be skeptical of the practical dimension of the trolley problem, we have decided to use it because it provides a clear-cut example, which makes it possible to isolate and discriminate particular features of moral reasoning. We may not expect to encounter a trolley problem in real life, but the moral intuitions and reflections generated by it are nevertheless relevant for how people respond to less dramatic everyday situations (Greene et al., 2009).

Results

Descriptive statistics for the measures are presented in Table 1 and the results of the Mann-Whitney two independent sample tests are displayed in Table 2 to 5.

As shown in table 1, the data respect the normal distribution with the exception of the *guilt repair* scale (skewness = -1.325). The results also show that *guilt_repair* scale had the highest score (M=22.78, SD=3.61), followed by the *guilt_NBE* (M=22.55, SD=3.80) and *shame_NSE* (M=21.55, SD=4.44). The *shame_withdraw* scale has the lowest score (M=14.32, SD=4.66).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for measures

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Perspective taking	61	23.7377	4.24225	-.444	.306	-.139	.604
Fantasy	61	25.3279	4.47110	-.168	.306	-.435	.604
Empathic concern	61	26.1803	3.70364	-.048	.306	-.592	.604
Personal distress	61	22.9344	4.30065	.212	.306	-.886	.604
Guilt NBE	61	22.5574	3.80142	-.410	.306	-.896	.604
Guilt repair	61	22.7869	3.61531	-1.325	.306	1.837	.604
Shame NSE	61	21.5574	4.44794	-.638	.306	-.111	.604
Shame withdraw	61	14.3279	4.66448	.235	.306	-.908	.604

In order to be able to respond to the previously mentioned research questions, a series of Mann-Whitney two independent sample tests were performed.

The first aim of our study was to investigate the possible differences regarding empathy between utilitarian and deontologist employees (RQ1). The results for the *shift problem* presented in table 2, showed a significant difference only on the following empathy scales: *fantasy* - tendencies to imaginatively transpose into the feelings and actions of others (U=177,50, p<0.05) and *empathic concern* - "other-oriented" feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others (U=190,50, p<0.05), deontologists employees having significantly higher scores than utilitarian ones.

Table 2. The Shift problem – Empathy Test Statistics[a]

	Perspective taking	Fantasy	Empathic concern	Personal distress
Mann-Whitney U	313.500	177.500	190.500	350.500
Wilcoxon W	1303.500	1167.500	1180.500	503.500
Z	-.976	-3.172	-2.961	-.380
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.329	.002	.003	.704

a. Grouping Variable: MD_shift

As for the *bridge problem*, the results presented in table 3 showed a significant difference between utilitarian and deontologist employees only for *empathic concern* scale (U=248,00, p<0.05), deontologists employees having significantly higher scores than utilitarian ones.

Table 3. The Bridge problem – Empathy Test Statistics[a]

	Perspective taking	Fantasy	Empathic concern	Personal distress
Mann-Whitney U	350.500	290.000	248.000	312.000
Wilcoxon W	1340.500	443.000	401.000	465.000
Z	-.379	-1.356	-2.033	-1.002
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.705	.175	.042	.317

a. Grouping Variable: MD_bridge

The second aim of our study was to investigate the differences between utilitarian and deontologist employees in guilt and shame proneness (RQ2). The results for the *shift problem* showed no significant differences between deontologists and utilitarian employees in none of the guilt and shame proneness scales ($p>0.05$).

Table 4. The Shift problem – Guilt and Shame Test Statistics[a]

	guilt_NBE	guilt_repair	shame_NSE	shame_withdraw
Mann-Whitney U	374.000	354.000	374.000	369.000
Wilcoxon W	527.000	1344.000	527.000	1359.000
Z	.000	-.324	.000	-.081
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	.746	1.000	.936

a. Grouping Variable: MD_shift

Regarding the *bridge problem*, one significant result was observed, namely on the *Guilt-Negative-Behavior-Evaluation* scale ($U=242,50$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, the results presented in table 5 the deontologist employees are prone to experience bad feelings about how they have acted (pushing the fat man off the bridge) significantly higher than the utilitarian ones.

Table 5. The Bridge problem - Guilt and Shame Test Statistics[a]

	guilt_NBE	guilt_repair	shame_NSE	shame_withdraw
Mann-Whitney U	242.500	342.000	326.500	360.000
Wilcoxon W	395.500	1332.000	479.500	513.000
Z	-2.124	-.518	-.769	-.226
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.034	.604	.442	.821

a. Grouping Variable: MD_bridge

Conclusions

As seen on the performed analyses, the results are in line with previous studies that have stated that, when people are presented with the trolley problem, a majority answer that they would have used the switch to put the trolley onto the side-track (Greene et al., 2009). The dominant responses in the trolley dilemma are that people appear to be utilitarian when solving *the switch dilemma* and deontologists when solving *the bridge dilemma*. The main differences between the shift and the bridge problem could be seen first and foremost in the number of participants that have to

choose to pull the switch (n=44) and those that have to choose to push the fat man off the bridge (n=17).

Previous studies (Greene et al., 2001; Hauser, 2006; Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007) have also assumed that the shift dilemma reflects mainly the utilitarian thinking, whereas the bridge dilemma reflects the deontologist type of thinking. Waldmann and Dieterich (2007) also argued that throwing the switch in the shift dilemma is in line with the utilitarian view, whereas the bridge dilemma is in line with the deontologist perspective (Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007, p.247).

Previous studies have shown that certain types of moral judgments involve strong emotions (Greene et al., 2001; Haidt, 2001; Majdandžić et al., 2012; Ugazio et al., 2012). For instance, it has been shown that empathic concern is positively related to harm aversion in moral judgments (Crockett et al., 2010). Similarly, Gleichgerrcht and Young (2013) found that utilitarian moral decisions in moral dilemmas similar to the trolley dilemma were negatively correlated with the level of empathic concern (the lower the level of empathic concern, the more utilitarian judgments were made). Moreover, mirrored by our results, utilitarian moral judgment was determined uniquely by levels of empathic concern, independent of other aspects of empathic responding including personal distress and perspective taking (Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013).

Despite a series of limitations such as the reduced number of participants or the self-reported nature of questionnaires, the current study supports previous research illustrating the fact that, when people encounter an *impersonal* dilemma, which lacks salient emotional content (e.g., would you *turn a trolley* away from five people and onto one person?), most people endorse harming the one person for the greater good, thereby delivering the *utilitarian* response. By contrast, when people are presented with a *personal* dilemma (e.g., would you *push a man* in front of a trolley so that his body stops the trolley from hitting five people?), emotions are engaged, leading the majority of responders to reject the harmful act, thereby delivering a *non-utilitarian* response (Cushman, 2012; Greene et al., 2009).

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