

Effect of Being Conscious of Others on Moral Condemnation

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Moral condemnation may guide individuals into choosing the same side as other bystanders in disputes. If this is the case, people would condemn an actor more strongly when they are conscious of other bystanders than when they are not. In this study, participants were asked to judge the unacceptability of theft and deception in hypothetical situations. Unacceptability (condemnation) scores were compared between participants in two groups: those who provided only their scores and those who estimated others' scores before providing their own. The results revealed that older participants were less willing to accept immoral behaviors than younger participants. When conscious of others' judgments, younger participants tended to reduce their condemnation while older participants tended to increase their condemnation. Additionally, condemnation was stronger in females than males. The results support the hypothesis that those who are more likely to avoid direct and physical competition are more willing to condemn, and that moral condemnation functions as a "flag".

Keywords

moral judgment, condemnation, coordination, consciousness

Introduction

Moral judgments in praise or condemnation of others' behavior are an important aspect of morality. To explain why people judge the actions of others, DeScioli and Kurzban (2009, 2013) proposed the Dynamic Coordination Theory, which argues that moral condemnation functions to guide bystanders to choose the same side as other bystanders in disputes. A conflict within a group that divides the group against itself can result in significant loss. The cost of such a conflict can be avoided if the members of the group coordinate their decision and choose the same side. That is, moral condemnation may function to coordinate side-taking decisions.

It is predicted from the Dynamic Coordination Theory that people would be expected to condemn an actor more strongly when they are conscious of other bystanders than when they are not. If moral condemnation functions as

a "flag" to coordinate the choices of bystanders, people in either side would exaggerate their opinions in order to "show the flag" to other people. An experimental method to make people conscious of the existence of others is presentation of surveillance cues. In a study of French students, Bourrat, Baumard, and McKay (2011) found moral condemnation of theft and deception in vignettes to be more intense following a brief exposure to surveillance cues (an image of eyes interposed between the description of the violation and the associated rating scale). Although Bourrat et al. (2011) focused on individuals' reputation management through their approves of moral norms, their results can be interpreted as not caused by reputation management but caused by emphasis of "flag" by being conscious of others. However, effect of surveillance cues on moral condemnation was not replicated in other studies. Sparks and Barclay (2015) observed no effect of eye images on condemnation in a study of Canadian students. Recently, Northover, Pedersen, Cohen, and Andrews (in press) conducted four moral condemnation experiments, one of which was an exact replication of the Bourrat et al. study, and found that artificial surveillance cues did not have a consistent effect on moral outcomes. Moreover, recent experimental studies found that images of watching eyes do not affect the likelihood that people will conform to local norms. For example, in studies evaluating charitable donations by participants, the presence of eye images significantly increased overall donations but did not make participants more likely to conform to the apparent local norm, as indicated by the amount of money in the donation box (Fathi, Bateson, & Nettle, 2014; Oda & Ichihashi, 2016). These results suggest that experimental manipulations other than presentation of surveillance cues should be employed to increase magnitude of condemnation.

The present study investigates the role of moral condemnation as a "flag" to indicate the moral norm to bystanders. Japanese participants were asked to judge the unacceptability of theft and deception in hypothetical situations. Unacceptability scores were compared between participants who provided only their score and participants who estimated others' scores before they judged their own. Vignettes used in previous studies utilized the participants themselves or their friends as the objects of moral judgment; this study focused on condemnation of a third party assumed to have no direct influence on the participant (i.e., the third person is the object of moral judgment). If condemnation functions as a "flag" to coordinate bystanders, this should produce higher or lower unacceptability scores in the experimental condition than the control condition.

The functional approach to moral condemnation predicts several differences in individual unacceptability scores. Immoral behavior should be condemned more harshly by those who are likely to avoid direct and physical competition, such as women. Sparks and Barclay (2015)

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reported that women condemned theft and deception more strongly than men, and this finding was corroborated by Northover et al. (in press). Age may be another factor that influences unacceptability ratings; however, this has not been considered in previous studies. It may be disadvantageous for younger people with a lower social position but greater physical ability to be bound by morality. In contrast, older people who are socially and economically stable but physically weak would be inclined to emphasize morals and to condemn deviations. This study evaluates the effects of gender and age by using a large sample of women and men spanning a wide age range.

Methods

(a) Participants

A total of 1,648 Japanese adults (824 females and 824 males, mean age: 39.6 yr, range: 20–59 yr) were recruited through Macromill, Inc. (Tokyo, Japan), a research agency that maintains a panel of more than 1,000,000 individuals who have agreed and consented to participate in web-based online surveys. Participants were recruited based on age to ensure an equal number of participants in each experimental group (206 females and 206 males in each age group: 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, and 50–59).

(b) Condemnation survey

Japanese versions of the two moral condemnation vignettes from Bourrat et al. (2011) were prepared. Subjects of the vignettes were changed from “you” and “your friend” to a gender neutral third person to investigate moral condemnation of a third party. In the control condition, 824 participants (412 females and 412 males) were asked to use a 9-point Likert scale to rate the moral unacceptability of two hypothetical actions: (1) A person N keeping cash from a lost wallet (the wallet vignette); and (2) A person K falsifying his/her credentials on a job application (the résumé vignette). In the estimate condition, 824 participants (412 females and 412 males) were asked to use a 9-point Likert scale to estimate other participants’ moral unacceptability ratings before rating the unacceptability themselves.

(c) Data analysis

A generalized linear model was used to analyze the effects of predictor variables on the condemnation rating. The predictor variables analyzed were condition (estimate: 1, control: 0), sex (male: 1, female: 0), age (year), interaction between condition and sex, and interaction between condition and age. As moral unacceptability was measured using a single Likert scale, the dependent variable was modeled as an ordinal scale using HAD software to produce an ordinal logit model (Shimizu, 2016).

Results

The median and quartile deviation values for unacceptability were 8.0 ± 1.5 and 7.0 ± 2.0 for the wallet and résumé vignettes, respectively. Unacceptability scores were significantly higher for the wallet vignette than the résumé vignette (Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $z = 10.39$, $p < .001$, $r = .181$, 95% CI [.148, .214]). The two condemnation

measures were significantly correlated ($\rho = .457$, $t = 20.83$, $p < .001$).

(a) Wallet vignette

The null hypothesis that the degree of decrease of deviance by inputting the predictor variables to the model was zero was rejected ($\chi^2 = 74.16$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$). Sex and age significantly contributed to the unacceptability score (pseudo- $R^2 = .044$; Table 1). Examination of odds ratios revealed that females tended to condemn more strongly than males, and older participants were less willing to condone the theft than younger participants. While the condition did not significantly affect the condemnation, the interaction between age and the condition was significant (Table 1). Median unacceptability scores for each age group are presented in Table 2. For participants aged 20–29 yrs, unacceptability scores were higher in the control condition than in the estimate condition; for participants aged 50–59 yrs, unacceptability scores were higher in the estimate condition than in the control condition. Post-hoc comparisons using the Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference in participants aged 20–29 yrs ($z = 2.96$, $df = 1$, $p = .003$), a marginally significant difference in participants aged 50–59 yrs ($z = 1.95$, $df = 1$, $p = .051$), and no significant difference in participants aged 30–39 yrs ($z = 0.31$, $df = 1$, $p = .756$) and 40–49 yrs ($z = 1.06$, $df = 1$, $p = .288$).

Table 1. Odds ratio of each factor on the moral condemnation ratings: Wallet vignette.

Factor	Odds ratio	95% CI
Sex	0.581 **	0.487 – 0.692
Age	1.021 **	1.013 – 1.029
Condition	0.938	0.787 – 1.118
Sex \times Condition	0.859	0.605 – 1.221
Age \times Condition	1.027**	1.010 – 1.043

** $p < .01$

Table 2. Moral condemnation ratings (median and quartile deviation) for the control and estimate conditions: Wallet vignette.

Condition	Female			
	Age class			
	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59
Control	8.0 ± 1.0	8.0 ± 1.5	8.0 ± 1.0	9.0 ± 1.0
Estimate	7.0 ± 1.8	8.0 ± 1.0	8.0 ± 1.0	9.0 ± 0.8
Condition	Male			
	Age class			
	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59
Control	7.0 ± 2.0	7.0 ± 2.0	7.0 ± 1.5	8.0 ± 2.0
Estimate	7.0 ± 1.5	7.0 ± 2.0	7.0 ± 2.0	9.0 ± 1.0

(b) Résumé vignette

The null hypothesis that the degree of decrease of deviance by inputting the predictor variables to the model was zero was rejected ($\chi^2 = 68.50$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$). Sex and age significantly contributed to the unacceptability score (pseudo- $R^2 = .040$; Table 3). Examination of odds ratios revealed that females tended to condemn more strongly than males, and older participants were less willing to accept the lie than younger participants. While the condition did not significantly affect the condemnation,

the interaction between age and condition was marginally significant (Table 3). Median unacceptability scores for each age group are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Odds ratio of each factor on the moral condemnation ratings: Résumé vignette.

Factor	Odds ratio	95% CI
Sex	0.666**	0.561 – 0.792
Age	1.026**	1.018 – 1.035
Condition	1.128	0.951 – 1.339
Sex × Condition	1.114	0.792 – 1.568
Age × Condition	1.016 ⁺	1.000 – 1.032

** $p < .01$, ⁺ $p < .10$

Table 4. Moral condemnation ratings (median and quartile deviation) for the control and estimate conditions: Résumé vignette.

Female				
Condition	Age class			
	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59
Control	7.0 ± 1.8	7.0 ± 1.0	7.0 ± 1.5	7.0 ± 1.5
Estimate	6.0 ± 1.5	7.0 ± 1.5	8.0 ± 1.5	8.0 ± 1.5
Male				
Condition	Age class			
	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59
Control	6.0 ± 2.0	7.0 ± 1.5	7.0 ± 1.5	7.0 ± 2.0
Estimate	6.0 ± 1.5	7.0 ± 1.5	7.0 ± 2.0	8.0 ± 1.5

Discussion

The results suggest that moral condemnation has an adaptive foundation. Condemnation was significantly stronger in females than males, which is in agreement with the results of previous studies (Sparks & Barclay, 2015; Northover et al., in press). Older participants were less willing to accept the immoral behavior depicted in the two scenarios than younger participants. These results suggest that people who are physically weaker and socioeconomically stable may more strongly condemn immoral acts as a third party.

Estimating the unacceptability ratings of other participants had no significant effect on condemnation; however, there was a significant interaction between age and estimation in both the wallet and résumé vignettes. That is, consciousness of others' opinion did not increase whole magnitude of condemnation but facilitated the age effect. Younger participants tended to reduce their condemnation after estimating the unacceptability rating of other participants, while older participants tended to increase their condemnation after they were conscious of others' judgment. As I predicted, younger people with a lower social position but greater physical ability (that is, in more tolerable side against immorality) emphasized their acceptability after they were conscious of others' opinion, while older people in the opposite side emphasized their unacceptability after they estimated others' scores, which supports the prediction that moral condemnation functions as a "flag". There was no effect of estimation on unacceptability ratings in participants aged 30–39 yrs and 40–49 yrs, which suggests that the "flag" function of condemnation has less effect on people in this age range. Negative results in previous studies using surveillance

cues could be explained by a failure to consider the age of participants. The interaction was stronger in the wallet vignette than the résumé vignette, perhaps because damage due to falsifying credentials is more ambiguous and less direct than the effect of cash theft. Indeed, unacceptability scores for lying were smaller than scores for theft.

A limitation of this study is that people over 60 years old were not examined. Japanese people of this age group are unfamiliar with the Internet, and that is why I was not able to obtain enough samples by web-based online survey. Another limitation is that I did not consider a possible effect of socio-economic status of participants because of lack of the data. For example, income, an important factor of socio-economic status, might correlate with age. If socio-economic status can be controlled, we can investigate effect of other aging-related factors on condemnation. Socio-cultural factors also should be considered. The specific socio-cultural environment has an effect on moral standards and, thus, the results may not be generalizable beyond the Japanese population. The high proportion of elderly people in the Japanese population combined with a cultural system that encourages respect for seniority may create a unique situation that amplifies the age effect. Further studies are needed to investigate possible socio-cultural differences and to identify factors affecting moral condemnation in each population.

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