Men and Women Use Different Scales to Weigh Moral Dilemmas

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Morality refers to a set of principles that people use to distinguish between what is right and wrong, or between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Morality as a system of values, however, differs based on individual societies, cultures, and even from person to person. The following article discusses a recent study led by Rebecca Friesdorf that suggests decision-making methods can vary by gender. As you read this article, take notes on how the study's results contribute the central idea of the text.

You find a time machine and travel to 1920. A young Austrian artist and war veteran named Adolf Hitler is staying in the hotel room next to yours. The doors aren't locked, so you could easily stroll next door and smother him. World War II would never happen.

But Hitler hasn't done anything wrong yet. Is it acceptable to kill him to prevent World War II?

This is one moral dilemma that researchers often use to analyze how people make difficult decisions. Most recently, one group re-analyzed answers from more than 6,000 subjects to compare men's and women's responses. They found that men and women both calculate consequences such as lives lost. But women are more likely to feel conflicted over what to do. Having to commit murder is more likely to push them toward letting Hitler live.

"Women seem to be more likely to have this negative, emotional, gut-level reaction to causing harm to people in the dilemmas, to the one person, whereas men were less likely to express this strong emotional reaction to harm," Rebecca Friesdorf, the lead author of the study, tells Shots. A master's student in social psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Friesdorf analyzed 40 data sets from previous studies. The study was published Friday in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.

Every question in the study had two scenarios, each with slightly different consequences in order to tease out different ways of thinking about the dilemma. Some people are motivated by consequences, weighing costs and benefits to make a decision. Others dwell on the act of killing Hitler, because it defies moral norms. Philosophers would label the first group as utilitarians,¹ and the second group as deontologists.² The latter are more likely to let Hitler live.

¹ someone who believes action or conduct should be directed toward promoting the greatest benefit of the greater number of persons
² someone who focuses on the how right or wrong an action is, as opposed to how right or wrong the consequences of those actions may be
One hypothetical dilemma replaces Hitler with a man who abducts a child and holds her ransom for a week, because both philosophies would support letting the kidnapper live. Killing him defies the moral norm, so a person motivated by social norms will let him live. And killing him won't save any lives, so a person motivated by consequences would argue that the costs outweigh the benefits, and let him live as well.

Every dilemma is different, which is why the researchers used 10 scenarios. The Hitler example relies heavily on time travel, but Friesdorf worries that people won't respond properly unless they fully accept time travel. If they assume that time travel is impossible, then killing Hitler becomes irrelevant. There's a similar problem with self-interest — whether the person asked is in immediate danger. A person might be more willing to torture a prisoner if he or she is in immediate danger.

Friesdorf says that she finds the “Hard Times” dilemma to be one of the most interesting. It reads:

“You are the head of a poor household in a developing country. Your crops have failed for the second year in a row, and it appears that you have no way to feed your family. Your sons, ages 8 and 10, are too young to go off to the city where there are jobs, but your daughter could fare better.

[10] “You know a man from your village who lives in the city and who makes sexually explicit films featuring girls such as your daughter. In front of your daughter, he tells you that in one year of working in his studio, your daughter could earn enough money to keep your family fed for several growing seasons.

“Is it appropriate for you to employ your daughter in the pornography industry in order to feed your family?”

“Very few people say yes you should do it, even though it will save the rest of the family,” says Friesdorf.

She also analyzed a small subset of the data in which each subject reported how difficult it was to choose a course of action. Women tended to find it more difficult to decide, and Friesdorf hypothesizes that this is because they feel more conflict between weighing benefits and harms versus following society's moral rules.

“Women seem to be feeling more equal levels of both emotion and cognition. They seem to be experiencing similar levels of both, so it's more difficult for them to make their choice,” she says.

[15] Even though the dilemmas seem far-fetched, Friesdorf says we encounter less dramatic variations of them all the time.

For instance, a manager might need to make an employment decision that would weigh the future of one person against the fate of a group. “If these [gender] differences also hold in that context, then that could have some implications for how women and men are making those decisions,” she says.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes a central idea of the article?  [RI.2]
   A. It is impossible to know for sure how people will react to certain moral dilemmas.
   B. Women are less equipped than men to make big, hypothetical decisions.
   C. Women differ from men in their approaches to making moral decisions.
   D. Women will usually choose the more drastic option to prevent people from being hurt.

2. PART B: Which quote from the article best supports the answer to Part A?  [RI.1]
   A. “men and women both calculate consequences such as lives lost. But women are more likely to feel conflicted over what to do.” (Paragraph 3)
   B. “Women seem to be more likely to have this negative, emotional, gut-level reaction to causing harm to people in the dilemmas” (Paragraph 4)
   C. “Killing him defies the moral norm, so a person motivated by social norms will let him live.” (Paragraph 6)
   D. “Friesdorf hypothesizes that this is because they feel more conflict between weighing benefits and harms versus following society’s moral rules.” (Paragraph 13)

3. PART A: What is the author’s most likely purpose for including paragraphs 1-2 in the article?  [RI.5]
   A. to draw the reader in by asking them to consider what they would do in a moral dilemma
   B. to test the study's theory by asking readers to consider how their gender impacts their decisions
   C. to ask the reader to question whether WWII would have happened if Hitler had been killed before coming to power
   D. to draw the reader in by mentioning a controversial figure, such as Hitler, from history

4. PART B: Which of the following paragraphs produce a similar effect as paragraphs 1-2?  [RI.1]
   A. Paragraphs 3-4
   B. Paragraphs 6-7
   C. Paragraph 9-10
   D. Paragraphs 15-16
How does the author develop the idea that consequences affect decision-making over the course of the article?
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Think about the scenario the author discusses involving Hitler. What would you do? Why? Considering your gender, do your views align with the findings of the study?

2. Consider this: The factory your parents worked at just closed down and went overseas and they are out of work. There is no money coming in and few jobs available where you live. The fridge is empty and the last of the money went to keep the lights on in your house. On your walk to school, you see an unattended delivery van bringing baked goods into the corner store. The back door is opened, there are racks of pastries and loaves of bread right there and no one is around. Would you take food to help feed your family? Why or why not?

3. In your opinion, is it better to be a utilitarian or a deontologist? Why? What would you consider yourself? Explain.

4. In the context of this text, how can a person truly know what is good and right? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

5. In the context of this text, how do we define the differences between men and women? Do you think these differences are innate, or developed by social influences? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.