Decisions Between Action and Inaction Across Generational Status: A Study of Moral Judgments

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The current study was designed as an extension of prior research of Briggs (2013) through exploring the principle of the double effect; that is when individuals are faced with a moral dilemma they will show preference to harm is indirect as opposed to harm that is direct. Participants were provided with two scenarios that called participants to decide whether the protagonist’s actions in the given scenario were permissible. Results revealed no significant interaction between generational immigrants status and type of harm on moral judgment ($F(2) = 1.20, p > .05$). In addition, there was no significance found for relation between type of harm and moral judgment. Moreover, there was no significance found for the interaction between generation immigrant status and moral judgments. The results were discussed in terms of interaction between 2nd generation Canadian, 1st generation immigrant and immigrant and the permissibility of direct verse indirect harm.

The inquisition of morals has been explored throughout the centuries, expanding from its philosophical roots to areas such as law, sociology and psychology. Within the domain of psychology recent studies explore the processes evolved in moral judgment making, and the extent to which these processes that operate within an individuals consciousness are reasoned or intuitive (Cushman, Hauser & Young, 2006). In other words the extent to which these decisions operate on a controlled or automatic process (Cushman, Hauser & Young, 2006).

Consequently there is an ongoing debate as to how individuals transition from the controlled and automatic process when faced with varying moral dilemmas. Cushman, Hauser & Young examined the three principles believed to guide moral judgments: the *action principle*: harm caused by action is worse then harm cased by omission, the *intention principle*: harm as a means to a goal is worse then harm caused as a foreseen side effect of a goal, and lastly the *contact principle*: harm involving physical contact is worse then harm that involves no physical contact. Cushman et al. (2006) belief was that some moral principles are available to conscious reasoning.
whereas others are not, as the moral principles used in judgments can be direct compared with those articulated in the justification process. They investigated this with the use of online questionnaires in which participants were presented with a series of 16 moral dilemmas that dealt with life and death trade-offs and varied with respect to each of the principles. Participants were asked to rate the protagonist actions on a seven-point scale; as to how morally wrong they believed the action was, with one as “forbidden” and seven as “obligatory”. Participants were then asked to give justifications for their ratings for five scenario pairs. They found evidence in support of the three principles that guide judgment as participants rated the scenarios as moral or immoral in accordance with the three principles. The also found that participants justifications for their ratings differed greatly by principle and that participants struggled the most to articulate sufficient justifications for the intention principle. Thus suggesting that some moral principles are more difficult to articulate than others and thus appear to operate on intuitive processes.

Another contributor to this debate is Baron and Royzman’s (2002) extension of the action principle, in which individuals tend to favor harmful omissions over harmful acts. Baron and Royzman (2002) predicted that individuals would favor indirect harm over direct harm regardless of associated outcomes, intentions or self-presented concerns. Participants were presented with eight scenarios, each scenarios contained two different endings one with direct harm, in which the harm was a direct result of an action and the other indirect harm, in which the harm resulted as a side-effect of an action. Participants were then instructed to pick the ending they preferred and offer a justification. Baron and Royzman (2002) findings where in accordance with the action principle, in that individuals favored outcomes in which the harmful act was indirect, harm as an result of omission as opposed to direct harm that would involve harm as a direct result of an action.

Furthermore, Cushman et al. (2007) offers another contribution to this debate in the notion of the double effect – harm caused to an individual may be permissible for the greater good if the
harm is not the necessary means to the greater good but, a foreseen side effect. This principle is believed to be a part of the human appraisal system that generates moral judgments. Therefore Cushman and colleagues sought to uncover if this principle operates on an intuitively or consciously. Participants completed a series of web based questionnaires that consisted of four scenarios, involving moral dilemmas asking as to whether it is permissible to harm an individual to help save lives as well as include a justification for their decision. The participants could choose to act or not to act but either would result in lives saved or lives lost. The findings of the study concluded that individuals showed consistency with the principle of the double effect, however the majority of participants failed to provide justifications, thus indicating the double effect may operate on an intuitive process as it seems to be difficult for participants to articulate reasoning for their decisions.

In addition a recent study by Briggs (2013) explored the principle of the double effect in males and females, such that females are more likely to make care based decisions and thus prefer indirect harm as apposed to direct harm more so then their male counter parts (Briggs, 2013). Participants were given two questionnaires, each consisted of three moral dilemma scenarios and asked the participants to respond to whether or not the protagonist decision was morally permissible. The two questionnaire’s differed with respect to type of harm employed for all three of the scenarios, one for direct harm and the other for indirect harm. Briggs (2013) concluded there was little evidence of the double effect as there was little variation in preference for direct or indirect harm. However, sex did have an impact as females considered directly harmful scenarios as less permissible then males did on average, hence suggesting a prevalence of the double effect in females (Briggs, 2013).

As an extension of Briggs (2013), the current study seeks to explore the principle of the double effect, in a similar model utilized by Briggs (2007) participants were presented with a series of scenarios designed to target the double effect. Participants however were asked to include a
justification for their choice similar to Cushman et al. (2006). In general it was hypothesized that participants would depict the double effect, in which participants would report indirect harm as permissible more so than the direct harm. Although in previous studies there has been little variation across sex, age and ethnicity, there have been few that have specifically looked into the variables of first generation immigrant; an individual whom is the first generation of their family to be born in the county of migration, in other words an individual who is born of one or both parents who are an immigrant, 2nd generation; and individual who parents were also born in the migration country, thus they are not the first of their family to be born in the migration country and lastly immigrant, an individual who has migrated from their country of birth. In addition the current study calls for written justifications after each of the scenarios, similar to Cushman et al. (2006) study to explore whether or not these principles are available to conscious reasoning or operate more intuitively (Cushman, Hauser & Young, 2006).

Method

Participants

Participants included, 10 immigrants, 10 1st generation immigrants and 10 2nd generation immigrants, for a total of 30 subjects. Participants came from a variety of races, income levels and cities within Ontario, Canada. Approximately even ratio of males to females and the age ranged from 13 years to 60 years of age, with a mean duration of approximately 35 years of residency in Canada for immigrant participants.

Materials

Participants were initially provided with an informational consent form, which included a general idea of the purpose of the study and what their participation would involve. Participants where then provided with two questionnaire’s, they differed in that one contained scenarios that solely pertaining to indirect harm [see Appendix A] and the other scenarios pertained solely to
direct harm [see Appendix B]. Moreover, there was no attempt made to ensure the reliability or validity of the measures.

Procedure

Prospective participants were initially given an informational consent form, which informed the participants of the nature of the current study and their participation was voluntary, and as such we able to opt out of the study at any point, also that their participation would be completely confidential, as the consent forms would not be attached to the questionnaires. Participants were also warned of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in the scenarios. Upon signature of consent form, participants then received the first of the two questionnaires, all participants receive both sets of questionnaire's, in no particular order. The questionnaires contained two scenarios, involving moral dilemma that required the protagonist to either choose action or inaction to resolve a conflict of life and death, however death resulted in either choice. In order to avoid gender biases the scenarios protagonist remained disclosed and a gender-neutral name was given. The two questionnaires differed in that one consisted of indirect scenario's, meaning the scenario involved indirect harm that was not a direct cause of an action. The other questionnaire scenario's involved direct harm; harm cause by directly by action. The scenarios were completely fabricated in order to avoid any possible personal overlap or familiarity between the individuals and the scenarios. Participants were also instructed to include whether or not they are a first generation immigrant or if they were born with in Canada or abroad, if born abroad they were asked to include years lived in Canada. Participants were also instructed to include a brief justifications provided below each scenario, verbal instructions where given that if they could not come up with an explanation they could leave the area blank.
**Results**

*Figure 1* depicts the average number of scenarios deemed permissible by 2nd generation Canadians, 1st generation immigrant and immigrant for direct harm scenarios and indirect harm scenarios. 2nd generation Canadians revealed very low permissibility for both direct harm and indirect harm, however there was a slight increase in permissibility for indirect harm. 1st generation immigrants found indirect harm scenarios to be more permissible than direct harm scenarios, 1st generation participants scored similarly in permissibility to 2nd generation Canadians with respect to direct harm however, indirect harm scenarios 1st generation participants scored similarly to immigrant participants. Immigrant participants found indirect harm scenarios to be more permissible on average then direct harm, however immigrant participants found the most for permissibility among all other groups for indirect harm scenarios, however for direct harm scenarios immigrant participants found least permissibility among all other groups.

An analysis was conducted to compare generational immigration status with respect to direct harm and indirect harm moral dilemma scenarios. Results of a 2x3 ANOVA found no statistical significance between generational immigrants status and type of harm on moral judgment (F (2) = 1.20, p > .05). In addition, there was no significance found for relation between type of harm and moral judgment, (F (1) = .63, p > .05). Furthermore, their was no significance found for the interaction between generation immigrant status and moral judgments ( F (2)= .71, p >.05) [see Table 1].

**Discussion**

The finding of the present study failed to support the notion of the double effect, as the results of scenarios that involved indirect harm where considered no more permissible across all three groups than scenarios evolving direct harm and thus deemed insignificant. However, 1st generation immigrants and Immigrants scored similarly on permissibility for indirect harm
scenarios, scoring permissibility for indirect more so then the 2nd generation Canadian participants. Moreover, the 1st generation immigrants scored identically to the 2nd generation on average involving the direct harm scenarios, both scoring permissibility in direct harm scenarios more so then the immigrant group. However, the interaction been type of harm and moral judgment and generation immigrant status and moral judgment were insignificant.

Therefore these insignificant out comes are similar to findings of Briggs (2007), in which they conflict with Cushman et al. (2007) significant findings in support of the double effect as well as Baron and Royzman (2002) in preference for direct harm. The current studies out come maybe attributed to sever factors, for instance variability issues. Baron and Royzman (2002) utilized a seven-point scale for permissibility the current study followed Briggs (2013) in which only a yes or no response was permitted. The sale allowed for more expression of opinion by participants. Also Briggs (2013), questionnaires contained three scenarios, which allowed for greater evaluation, hence altering the number of mean scores and increasing potential for evidence in favor of the double effect, as it gave participants more opportunity for response.

Moreover, the present study did not vary the order in which direct harm or indirect harm questions appeared, previous studies by Cushman et al (2007), Cushman et al. (2006) and Baron and Royzman (2002), varied the order in which they appeared. In addition the current study used paired scenarios for direct and indirect as did Briggs (2013), these similarities may have influence subjects decisions.

Several control issues took place in the current study, for instance participants were not all tested under identical conditions, in addition the only control variable was to ensure equal amounts of immigrant, 1st generation immigrant and 2nd generation Canadian participants. Also their was no attempt made to insure reliability or validity of the test, therefore it can not be certain that the test produced results are consistent or measure what it is intended to measure.
Future studies should attempt to make scenarios as realistic as possible as this would allow participants to potentially take the study more seriously; also many of the responses given by participants in the current study would make comment to the unrealistic aspects of the scenario. In addition future versions of the current study include more scenarios to increase variability, as well as provide a potential scale as appose to yes or no response similar to that of Baron & Royzman (2002).

The findings in the current study although limited can still be applied to other areas of thought, including arrears such as law, immigrant and education. First generation immigrants are a topic of interest in educational studies and hence cultural influences on behavior and motivation may help uncover more on the issue concerning the effect of migration and the changing of our culture in present day Canada and the subsequent effects on individual behaviors and life course.

In closing, results of the current study failed to indicate a significant interaction between generation immigration status and type of harm. Also the effect of direct verses indirect on judgment did not produce significant findings. However with respect to generational status there was some difference in permissibility to both direct and indirect scenarios, although insignificant. Future research should employ suggestions for change as well as improve techniques for control, reliability and validity.
References


Figure 1. The average number of direct and indirect scenarios found permissible by 2nd generation Canadian, first generation immigrant, immigrants.
Appendix A
Indirect Harm Questionnaire

Moral Judgments Questionnaire

Please answering the following:

Where you born abroad or within Canada? (If born abroad please also indicate how many years you have resided within Canada)

Are you a first generation immigrant? (Meaning you where born in Canada but one or both parents were born outside of Canada)?

Please read each scenario carefully, and answer the associated yes or no question based solely on the information provided for each scenario as well as a brief reasoning as to why you chose a certain response on the space provided.

**Scenario 1:** Hunter is waiting for the train into the city; Hunter takes this train at least once a week and is standing on the outside platform by the tracks. Hunter soon hears the train whistle; however, it goes on several times and the sound of the train is louder and it is traveling faster than usual. Hunter looks down the tracks and sees the train is going extremely fast and is out of control. Hunter looks around for help but no one can be found. Hunter knows the best option would be for the train to hit something heavy enough to stop it. Not to far from the station a road crosses the tracks. Hunter notices a large truck approaching, the truck is moving so quickly the driver seems completely unaware of the approaching train. Hunter could warn the truck driver or Hunter could let the large truck hit the train, killing the driver, or Hunter could let passengers on the train die.

Is it morally permissible for Hunter to refrain from warning the truck driver? YES NO

Please briefly explain your reasoning in the space provided:

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__________________________________________________________________________

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__________________________________________________________________________
Scenario 2: Tristan is walking out of a store and notices a group of children on the opposite side of the street; they are talking and laughing loudly. Tristan arrives at the crosswalk at the same time as the children and is waiting to cross to their side. Tristan looks behind and notices a car speeding down the road, on course to hit the children crossing. However, Tristan notices a biker speeding down the road, who is on course to intercept the speeding car, hitting it before the car could hit the children. Tristan could warn the biker and yell at him to stop but the driver would hit the children or Tristan could refrain and let the biker and driver collide.

Is it morally permissible for Tristan to not warn the biker?  YES  NO

Please briefly explain your reasoning in the space provided:
Appendix B
Direct Harm Questionnaire

Moral Judgments Questionnaire

Please answering the following:

Where you born abroad or within Canada? (If born abroad please also indicate how many years you have resided within Canada)

Are you a first generation immigrant? (Meaning you where born in Canada but one or both parents were born outside of Canada)?

Please read each scenario carefully, and answer the associated yes or no question based solely on the information provided for each scenario as well as a brief reasoning as to why you chose a certain response on the space provided.

Scenario 1: Jessie is walking to school. To save time, Jessie decides to cut across the train tracks. As Jessie comes to the tracks, Jessie sees a passenger train approaching; however Jessie notices there is a large and heavy metal object on the tracks, possibly something that fell off a previous train caring cargo. Jessie notices the driver of the approaching train waving, and soon realizes that the driver cannot stop in time, and this object will cause the train to derail. Jessie notices a switch box that could change the train to a different track. As Jessie runs towards it Jessie notices a few meters ahead there is a worker picking up debris along that other track. The worker is facing the opposite way so Jessie yells trying to get his attention, but it’s no use as the worker has earplugs in. Jessie is now faced with a decision. Jessie could switch the track saving the 50 passengers and driver, but killing the one worker or Jessie could refrain from switching the track, letting the 50 passengers and driver die, sparing the workers life.

Is it morally permissible for Jessie to switch the train to the sidetrack?    YES         NO

Please briefly explain your reasoning in the space provided:
Scenario 2: Taylor was walking to a friend's house one afternoon. A group of children pass Taylor going in the opposite direction. Taylor comes to the middle of the street and stands behind a large man with headphones in, who also is waiting for an opportunity to jay-walk across. Taylor can still hear the group of children waiting to cross at the far end of the street, however there is a large sign someone had placed that makes it difficult to see people standing at the cross walk. Taylor then hears a car racing; Taylor looks in the other direction and observes a car speeding towards her and eventually the children. The car races through the first set of lights, Taylor knows that the children are too busy with each other to notice and the driver wouldn't see them because of the sign. The car is quickly approaching; Taylor could push the man in front out into the approaching car. This would kill the man and driver but it would stop the racing car in time to spare the children.

Is it morally permissible for Taylor to push the man ahead into the car? YES NO

Please briefly explain your reasoning below:
Table 1

*The differences in the permissibility of moral judgments scenarios with respect to direct and indirect harm in relation to 1st generation immigrant, immigrant and 2nd generation Canadian.*

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