Social Conformity to Moral Dilemmas

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Social Conformity to Moral Dilemmas  
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BACKGROUND  
Human social behavior is often guided by moral judgments. A classic metaphor for moral principles is the “moral compass”, a set of personal principles that, if violated in response to social pressure, implies a kind of moral weakness. However, studies in social psychology have demonstrated the dramatic power that conformity pressures can have on people’s judgments and behaviors. The famous line-comparison studies by Asch (1956) demonstrated the power of conformity even when making completely unambiguous judgments. Few studies have examined how such pressures influence moral judgments. We examined how conformity pressures (giving public vs. private responses) affect reactions to unambiguous moral dilemmas (dilemmas that the vast majority of people, in general, agree on) and ambiguous moral dilemmas (dilemmas that people tend to be split on). We expected greater conformity to ambiguous moral dilemmas than unambiguous ones, and predicted that perceived difficulty, agreeableness, confidence, and desire-for-correctness would moderate conformity effects.

METHODS  
PARTICIPANTS  
Participants were 60 undergraduate introductory psychology students (34 female, 25 male, Mage= 20.467).

MATERIALS  
Participants responded to 12 moral dilemmas using an Asch-like paradigm. Each dilemma was read out loud by the experimenter (e.g., trolley dilemma, crying baby dilemma). Of the 12 dilemmas, 10 were unambiguous. Responses were made using a 7-point scale (highly impermissible to highly permissible). Participants then completed a post-session questionnaire, which included some measures of personality.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN  
The participant waited with two other “participants” (actually accomplices). In response to the 10 unambiguous moral dilemmas presented, the accomplices responded normatively to four; violated an impermissible norm in response to three, and violated a permissible norm in response to three. In response to the two ambiguous items, the accomplices responded with high high impermissibility to one and high impermissibility to the other. Responses were made either privately on paper or publically. In the public condition the participant gave his/her response last.

RESULTS  
As expected, we obtained a significant public/private dilemma-type interaction for the ambiguous dilemmas, F (1, 57) = 38.18, p < .001. When expressed privately, responses to the items did not differ (Ms = 3.62 and 3.24); but when expressed publically, responses were significantly influenced by the accomplices’ judgments (M = 2.40 vs. 4.87, for impermissible and permissible judgments, respectively). An equally significant conformity effect was found with the unambiguous dilemmas, F (1, 57) = 37.25, p < .001. In the private condition, participants responded normatively (M= 3.717 and 4.700); but were significantly influenced by the accomplices in the public condition (M= 5.100 and 3.533, for impermissible and permissible judgments, respectively.

CONCLUSIONS  
Our results demonstrate that responses to moral situations, even those that are unambiguous, are significantly influenced by conformity pressures. Despite the human tendency to believe that moral standards are iron clad and unable to be swayed by outside forces, this research shows that the opinions of strangers can greatly influence a person’s judgment. Furthermore, this study provides evidence that a conformity effect can occur with a simple two thirds majority created by only two accomplices, rather than the usual three or four. This may be unique to conformity in moral situations, however, and requires further investigations. The effects of conformity in moral situations are also moderated by confidence and perceived difficulty. Given the pervasiveness of moral systems and judgments in society, the implications of this study are important and further research is warranted.