

Gender difference in moral judgments rooted in emotion, not reasoning, study finds

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If a time machine was available, would it be right to kill Adolf Hitler when he was still a young Austrian artist to prevent World War II and save millions of lives? Should a police officer torture an alleged bomber to find hidden explosives that could kill many people at a local cafe? When faced with such dilemmas, men are typically more willing to accept harmful actions for the sake of the greater good than women. For example, women would be less likely to support the killing of a young Hitler or torturing a bombing suspect, even if doing so would ultimately save more lives.

According to new research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, this gender difference in moral decisions is caused by stronger emotional aversion to harmful action among women; the study found no evidence for [gender differences](#) in the rational evaluation of the outcomes of harmful actions.

"Women are more likely to have a gut-level negative reaction to causing harm to an individual, while men experience less emotional responses to doing harm," says lead research author Rebecca Friesdorf. The finding runs contrary to the common stereotype that women being more emotional means that they are also less rational, Friesdorf says. The journal article was published online in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* on April 3, 2015.

In a large-scale reanalysis of data from 6,100 participants, Friesdorf, a graduate student in [social psychology](#) at Wilfrid Laurier University in

Canada, teamed with Paul Conway, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at the University of Cologne, and Bertram Gawronski, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, to examine gender differences in judgments about moral dilemmas. Participants were asked 20 questions that posed various [moral dilemmas](#), including decisions about murder, torture, lying, abortion, and animal research.

The study examined two contrasting philosophical principles that relate to ethics. In deontology, the morality of an action depends on its consistency with a moral norm. Immanuel Kant, the 18th century philosopher who was the most famous proponent of the theory, once argued that it was always wrong to lie, even if a murderer asked whether his intended victim was inside a house so he could kill him. Conversely, utilitarianism holds that an action is moral if it maximizes utility, or the greatest good for the most people. From a utilitarian view, an action could be ethical in one situation and unethical in another depending on the potential outcome.

Using an advanced statistical procedure to quantify the strength of deontological and utilitarian inclinations, the research team found that women were more likely than men to adhere to deontological principles. However, the researchers found no evidence for gender differences in utilitarian reasoning. The findings suggest that women have a stronger emotional aversion to causing harm than men. However, men and women engage in similar levels of rational thinking about the outcomes of harmful action. The findings are in line with previous research showing that [women](#) are more empathetic to the feelings of other people than men, whereas gender differences in cognitive abilities tend to be small or nonexistent, Friesdorf says.

More information: Friesdorf, R.; Conway, P.; Gawronski, B. (2015). Gender Differences in Responses to Moral Dilemmas: A Process Dissociation Analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(5).

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