

People make different moral choices in imagined versus real-life situations

16 May 2018



Credit: Association for Psychological Science

Researchers often use hypothetical scenarios to understand how people grapple with moral quandaries, but experimental results suggest that these scenarios may not always reflect real-life behavior. The findings, published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, showed that people tend to focus more on the outcome of their decision and less on absolute moral principles when faced with a real-life scenario as opposed to a hypothetical scenario.

"Our findings suggest that there is a disconnect between hypothetical moral judgment and real-life moral behavior," says psychological scientist Dries H. Bostyn of Ghent University, first author on the study. "Not only did we find that hypothetical moral judgment appeared to be largely unrelated to real-life behavior, we also found that the individual difference measures that typically predict hypothetical moral judgment did not predict real-life behavior."

The "trolley problem" has become a fundamental

paradigm in moral psychology research in which [participants](#) encounter a hypothetical [scenario](#) involving a runaway trolley that is about to hit five people on the tracks. They can take no action, in which case all five people will die; alternatively, they can pull a lever and divert the trolley to another set of tracks, in which case only one person will die.

Participants' decisions depend on whether they focus on the total amount of harm caused or on the moral principle to do no harm, and studies conducted over several decades suggest a variety of factors that are associated with the decisions people make.

Despite the ubiquity of the trolley-problem paradigm, Bostyn and Ghent University colleagues Syben Sevenhant and Arne Roets noted that few studies have investigated whether responses to such hypothetical dilemmas actually line up with people's moral decision making in real life.

In this study, 192 university student participants completed an online questionnaire containing a series of hypothetical moral dilemmas and measures assessing various individual factors, including the desire for cognitive challenge, antisocial tendencies, empathic concern, perspective taking, moral identity, and animal empathy.

A week or two later, the participants came to the research lab, where they saw an electroshock machine hooked up to two metal cages—one contained five mice, while the other contained one mouse. A laptop connected to the electroshock machine showed a 20-second countdown. The researchers told the participants that the cage with five mice would receive a very painful but nonlethal shock when the countdown ended; the participant could choose, however, to press a button to have the shock delivered to the cage with only one mouse. In actuality, none of the mice received an

electric shock.

After the experiment, the researchers debriefed the participants and asked them to explain why they made the decision they did and report how much doubt and discomfort they felt with their decision.

A separate group of 83 participants completed the online questionnaire and later responded to a hypothetical version of the mouse scenario.

The results showed that participants who responded to the hypothetical scenario were twice as likely to choose the passive option compared with participants faced with an in-person decision.

Participants who preferred outcome-based reasoning were more likely to say they would press the button to divert the shock in the hypothetical scenario, and they expressed less doubt and discomfort with this decision. But participants' decision-making preferences were not associated with actual behavior in the lab-based experiment.

"Clearly, these hypothetical dilemmas are measuring something that is closely related to real-life moral cognition and we think that research based on hypothetical judgment is still crucial to the development of the field," Bostyn says. "However, our research does suggest that a literature focused only on hypothetical decision-making might be missing out on some crucial determinants of real-life moral behavior."

Although the victims in this study were mice rather than humans, the researchers argue that the moral considerations are the same in both types of scenarios.

Bostyn notes that participants who chose to press the button in the real-life scenario often seemed apologetic about it during the debriefing session, a tendency that could shed light on the discrepancy between real-life [behavior](#) and hypothetical decision-making.

"It could be that with hypothetical judgments we are free to pick the option that is most socially acceptable as we do not have to live with the consequences of that [decision](#)," he explains.

"However, in real life, the pressure to 'do the right thing' is much bigger."

More information: Dries H. Bostyn et al, Of Mice, Men, and Trolleys: Hypothetical Judgment Versus Real-Life Behavior in Trolley-Style Moral Dilemmas, *Psychological Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797617752640](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617752640)

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

APA citation: People make different moral choices in imagined versus real-life situations (2018, May 16) retrieved 25 June 2018 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-05-people-moral-choices-real-life-situations.html>

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