ABSTRACT

People make deontological decisions when confronted with “up-close and personal” dilemmas but make utilitarian decisions to other types. Utilitarian and risky decisions both involve cost/benefit assessment in an uncertain environment. Priming studies in decision making show that decisions are influenced by previously occurring events. We investigated how prior exposure to risk influences decisions to personal dilemmas across different factors (action/outcome and harm). In three experiments we show that prior exposure to risk increased utilitarian type decisions for different type of action/outcome (experiment 1 & 2) and different type of harm (experiment 3).

BACKGROUND

Utilitarianism proposes that morally right action is that which maximizes benefits and minimizes harm. Deontology proposes that action in itself is morally right or wrong irrespective of outcome. Utilitarian moral reasoning constitutes computing right or wrong as a function of costs and benefits (Fisk & Rai, 2014).

Methods: All participants in the risk condition were presented with a risky gambling task followed by a moral dilemma. Participants in control condition were only given the moral dilemma.

Experiment 1

- N=160 IIT GN students participated in this experiment.
- 2 (groups: control vs. risk) X 2 (type of decision: personal accidental vs. personal instrumental) between subjects design.
- General procedure was followed by a question: 1. Do you take the suggested action or not? (Y/N)

Experiment 2

- N=80 IIT GN students participated in this experiment.
- 2 (groups: control vs. risk) X 5 (Type of decision: Self beneficial, intentional, inevitable harm, side-effect, passive action) between subjects design.
- General procedure was followed by 3 questions:
  1. Do you take the suggested action or not? (Y/N)
  2. Is it morally acceptable for you take this decision? (Y/N)
  3. How morally acceptable is it for you to take this decision? 7 point rating scale.

Experiment 3

- N=20 students participated in this experiment.
- 2 (groups: control vs. risk) X 5 (Type of decision: death, job loss, financial loss, property damage, emotional distress, limb loss) between subjects design.
- General procedure was followed by 4 questions:
  1. Do you take the suggested action or not? (Y/N)
  2. Is it morally acceptable for you take this decision? (Y/N)
  3. How morally acceptable is it for you to take this decision? 7 point rating scale.
  4. Please explain why you decided to take this action. Open ended box.

RESULTS

- Morally Acceptable utilitarian choice: Significant difference between risk & control: \( \chi^2 \) (1,226)=4.690, p=0.030. (Fig.3).
  - Risk: 50% of choices judged as morally acceptable
  - Control: 27% of choices judged as morally acceptable
  - Morally Unacceptable utilitarian choice: No difference.

Experiment 3

- Choice (Fig.4)-preliminary results
  - The overall pattern is that more participants in Risk group than in control group made utilitarian choice.
  - Utilitarian reason (Fig.5)
  - The overall pattern follows that of choice data; more participants in Risk group than in control group gave utilitarian reasons for their choices.

DISCUSSION

- We found that prior exposure to risk resulted in a general overall increase in utilitarian type decision making for different type of actions/outcomes and different types of harm.
- More Participants gave utilitarian reasons for their utilitarian choices. This suggests that cost benefit analysis (as decision mode or heuristic) was being used for assessing moral decisions and their outcome.
- More participants in risk group judged their utilitarian choices as morally acceptable as compared to controls. This suggests that judgements were consistent with actions.
- Consistency between utilitarian choice and utilitarian judgement suggests that prior exposure to risk made the “decision to kill” in personal dilemmas “less conflicting”.

REFERENCES

1. Aamir, E. & Green, J. D. (2012). You see, the ends don’t justify the means: visual imagery and moral judgment. Psychological science, 23(8), 866-869.