

Context Creates Compromise: How Contextual Information and Social Distance Affect Moral Judgment in Filipino Culture

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Morally ambiguous activities bear different moral impressions across contexts and cultures. 107 college students were presented with four different vignettes of a person getting intoxicated and then asked to answer a morality-rating scale pertaining to the heavy drinker. The vignettes differed in perceived social distance (the heavy drinker being a close friend versus a stranger) and contextual information (the person drinking because of the internal trait of sensation-seeking versus the external occurrences of peer influence). Results show that a heavy drinker was rated more moral when drinking due to an external occurrence of peer influence rather than an internal trait of sensation seeking ($p=.015$), and that there was no difference in moral judgment when the heavy drinker was a close friend or a stranger. Findings help shed light on the complex interplay of culture and context when examining moral judgment formation in a Filipino context.

Keywords: moral judgment, heavy drinking, contextual information, social distance, alcohol, social psychology, judgment formation, morality

What are the factors that determine how we judge a morally ambiguous activity? Do we excuse our friends compared to strangers? How big of a role does context and culture come into play? Modern research in social psychology has seen a departure from usual individualist/collectivist dichotomies, with researchers in recent years having discovered a plethora of cultural nuances at play when looking at basic psychological processes such as motivation and morality (Miller & Boyle, 2013). This inward looking of culture and context sheds light on how the outward looking theories of psychological phenomena interact with each other. Although there have been numerous studies done on moral judgment formation, few use contextualization in a Philippine setting, juxtaposing and justifying moral behavior using a Filipino lens. Filipino culture paints an extremely colorful picture, depicting unique values of shared interpersonal relations (Magay, 1993) and highly dichotomized levels of social interaction (Pe Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

This experiment was intended to determine whether the presence of contextual information and social distance affect moral judgment formation on heavy drinkers. It seeks to nitpick sociocultural nuances by determining the interplay of culture and context and how it forms Filipinos' moral judgments on another person engaging in the act of heavy alcohol consumption.

Drinking as a Moral Grey Area

We chose heavy drinking as the morally ambiguous act to be examined due to its closeness to Filipino culture—the Filipino as the “quintessential drinker”: Almost half of our population engages in occasional drinking, and alcohol is almost always projected in media representations of day-to-day life (Labajo, 2010). Traditionally, feasts, fiestas and birthdays have always had alcohol accompanying the celebration.

Despite its portrayal as a tool for social facilitation and celebration, it also has its propensity for abuse. Studies have shown that risk-taking behaviour and alcohol consumption spans age, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment among Filipino adolescents (Alampay, Liwag, & De La Cruz, 2009). It poses real life threats: there has been a staggering 60% increase in drunk driving incidents from the year 2002 to 2006 (Department of Transportation and Communications, 2008, as cited in Labajo, 2010). It must also be noted that in recent years, laws prohibiting minors from purchasing alcohol have not been strict. With alcohol easily accessible among the younger population, more risk is at hand.

A certain stigma is also present when talking about heavy drinkers. Certain traits have been identified that are attached to individuals who heavily drink, including anxiety sensitivity, sensation seeking, impulsivity, and hopelessness (Conrod, Pihl, Stewart, & Dongier, 2000). People who drink due to anxiety issues and hopelessness do so for reasons such as avoiding social rejection and managing negative emotions, while sensation seekers and impulsive people drink to increase their positive mood (Musquash, Stewart, Musquash, Comeau, & McGrath, 2014). Within the youth in a cultural majority setting, sensation-seekers are more likely to be involved in heavy drinking episodes compared to people who possess the other internal traits (Sher et al., 2000; Conrod et al., 2006). This means that in a context such as school, where a lot of people come from similar backgrounds and are relatively similar culturally, majority of those described as heavy drinkers tend to be those who are more of sensation-seekers.

Social factors include drinking to maintain or enhance a positive mood during social events such as parties and other group settings, while conforming factors refer to drinking as a means to fit in or due to social pressure (Cooper, 1994). Cooper's study, along with O'Hara, Armeli, and Tennen's (2015) research, revealed that those who prominently showed these external factors were more likely to drink with other people and in parties, as well as associate themselves with people similar to themselves in this respect. Reasons for drinking in the college setting are mainly social (Christiansen, Vik, & Jarchow, 2002) and are done predominantly with other people who are also drinking (O'Hara et al., 2015).

To summarize the literature, drinking can be looked at with a variety of lenses and differing moral implications. On one hand, research has shown that it can positively facilitate meaningful human interaction in many social contexts; on the other hand, it has been shown to be associated with traits such as anxiety and hopelessness, and is tied to many negative behaviors such as drunk driving and other alcohol-related behaviors that society looks down on.

What determines how much weight we place in evaluating the morally ambiguous act of heavy drinking? We decided to zero in on two factors: contextual information and social distance. The study adapts the theoretical framework of Miller and Boyle (2013), who state that "context has often taken a back seat in psychology and moral studies." Historically, psychology has been known to discount culture and context in pursuit of a more universal explanation of moral phenomenon. Given the cultural boundness of moral

studies, two localized factors were selected for manipulation: contextual information and social distance.

Contextual Information and Moral Judgment. Contextual information was chosen because it is a realistic hurdle that is faced in day-to-day conversation. We believe that altering certain information about a story can lead to a significant change in perception and moral judgement formation. When talking about the morally grey area of heavy drinkers, people may be more quick to attribute certain traits in different ways based on present context. Our study contrasts the act of heavy drinking in a social and individual context. Contextual information is also culturally bound, with studies showing Eastern and Western differences in taking into account internal and external aspects when making a moral judgment (Li, et. al., 2012).

Social Distance and Moral Judgment. Cross-cultural research says that there are “differences in weight when talking about social aspects, interactions, descriptions and attributions” (Miller and Boyle, 2013), which is why social distance was the second chosen variable. How differently would you judge a person if he or she was a friend or a stranger? The degree to which Filipinos construe relationships with others is unique, and highly dichotomized (Enriquez, 1978). Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000) elaborate on this dichotomy, saying that “[i]n social situations, Filipinos assign the person they’re interacting with in two categories: *Hindi-ibang-tao* (one of us), or *ibang tao* (outsider). The two categories dictate and guide the level of interaction. *Ibang tao* (outsiders) can be treated with the basal level of *pakikitungo* (treating with civility), to a higher *pakikisama* (being along with), while *Hindi-ibang-tao* (one-of-us), can be treated with *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* (understanding & acceptance) or even further levels of *pakikiisa* (being one-with).”

Hypotheses. We proposed that the presence of contextual information or social distance affects a person’s moral judgment of heavy drinkers. In particular, 1) Contextual information will have a main effect on a person’s moral judgment of heavy drinkers; 2) Social distance will have a main effect on a person’s moral judgment of heavy drinkers; and, 3) There will be no interaction effect between social distance and contextual information.

METHOD

Sample

One hundred seven participants were sampled from students currently taking Psychology 101 in the University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City. This study employed a between subjects design with random assignments to a treatment group.

Variables

This study utilized a 2 (Contextual Information: Internal, External) x 2 (Social Distance: close friend, stranger) between subjects factorial design. The first independent variable was contextual information. The internal level refers to the personality of the character in the vignette while the external level refers to a specific real world situation. The second independent variable was social distance. The main character of the vignette is a very close friend or in the Filipino context, hindi-ibang-tao (one-of-us). The second level of this variable is socially distal or high social distance, or ibang-tao (outsider). The main character in the vignette would be someone who is not a large part of the participant's life, a distant classmate in a regular college class.

The dependent variable was judged morality: the level of morality that the participants believe the main character in the vignette possesses. This variable was measured based on a sevenpoint morality scale that was constructed based on previous research and a survey.

Materials

Vignette Construction. A two-part survey was designed to construct the scales that were used for the experiment proper. The first part of the survey asked participants to list words associated with "people who drink a lot." Thematic analysis was used to sort frequent responses and create themes that were used to write the vignettes in the experiment proper. In accordance with aforementioned literature, "sensation-seeking" and "peer influence" were chosen as variables for contextual information. Social distance was dichotomized into "close friend" versus "stranger" in accordance with literature on dichotomized Filipino relationships (Pe Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

Morality Scale Construction. To construct a morality scale, we asked participants to rate certain acts as moral or immoral along a seven-point Likert scale. Participants were presented with various moral situations such as *stealing, littering, being responsible, eating shrimp, and respecting elders*. They then placed these situations along the constructed morality spectrum, ranging from 1 being immoral, 4 being amoral, and 7 being moral. Factor Analysis was used to determine which components tested cohesively for morality. An initial 38 situations were trimmed down to four situations, which we labeled as negative morality ratings. Cronbach's alpha was then used in the remaining component to determine the coherence and reliability of the constructed morality scale (0.848).

Procedure

This study adopts the methodological framework of Eyal, Liberman and Trope's (2008) study by evaluating the process of constructing moral judgments through indirect questioning. Participants were tasked to read a vignette, depicting Sam, who engages in heavy drinking. There were four vignettes, each with restatements to differ in *contextual information and social distance*.

For contextual information, Sam was shown to engage in heavy drinking due to an external trait of peer influence (*... my friends asked me to go out with them. So last night my orgmates [orgmates: co-member in a university organization] got me drunk.*) or due to an internal trait of sensation-seeking (*I like to enjoy my youth while I can... So last night I got drunk with my friends.*) For social distance, Sam was shown to be either a close friend (*Sam is one of your closest friends in college...*) or a stranger (*Sam is your classmate in one of your GE [GE: general education] classes*). A manipulation check was then done to ensure that participants understood their relationship with Sam (friend vs. stranger) and who got Sam drunk (Sam vs. friends).

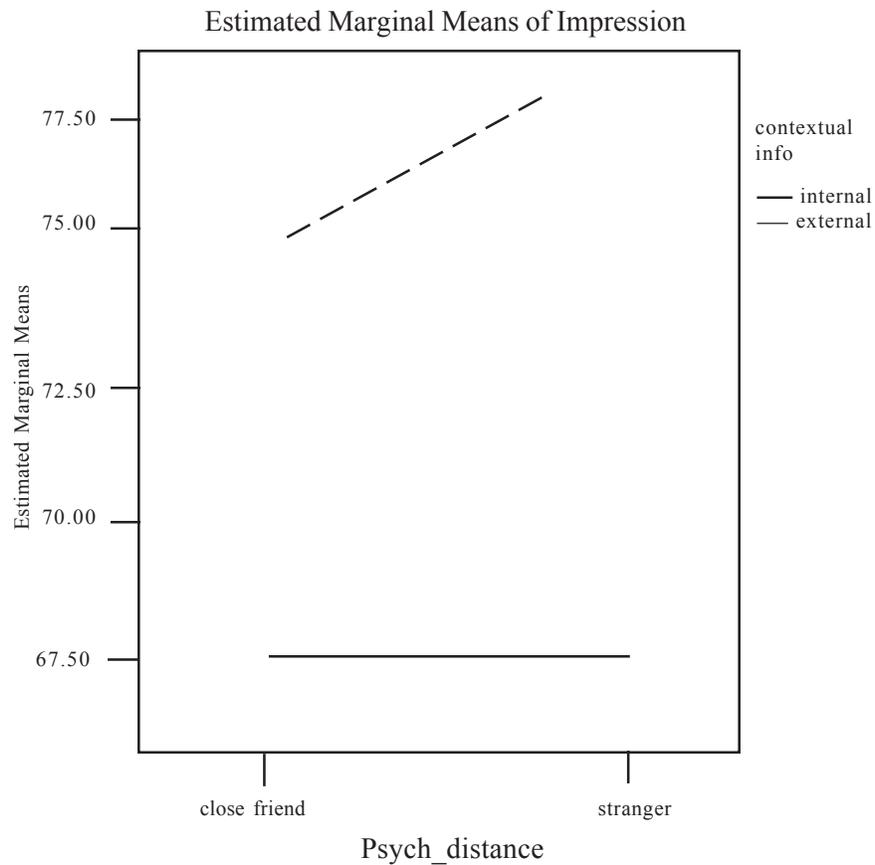
Participants were then tasked to evaluate the likeliness of Sam engaging in immoral acts. This method of indirect questioning was used because Filipinos as a culture tend to favor vocal tone when evaluating language (Ishii, Reyes & Kitayama, 2003).

Participants were first asked to sign consent forms. After reading the vignette, participants were then asked to rate the morality of the person in the vignette using the previously constructed morality scale.

The data was recorded and analyzed quantitatively using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 20. Results were analyzed using a two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with an a-level of .05.

RESULTS

In a two-way ANOVA, the moral judgments with different Contextual Information: internal factors ($M = 12.29$, $SD = 3.80$) and external situations ($M = 10.57$, $SD = 3.25$) and Social Distance: close friend ($M = 11.47$, $SD = 3.54$) and stranger ($M = 11.47$, $SD = 3.76$), as well as their interaction effect were tested for significance on the moral judgment of heavy drinkers.



Contextual Information was a significant factor when placing moral judgment on drinkers, with individuals judging Sam as “less moral” when drinking due to an internal trait of sensationseeking as compared to an internal trait of sensation seeking $F(1, 3) = 6.130, p = .015$. Social Distance was found to be an extremely insignificant factor that did not affect individuals who judged Sam. With $F(1,3) = 0.000, p = .998$, Sam being a friend or stranger did not affect individuals’ evaluation of his morality. These results show that social distance is extremely negligible in judging the morality of heavy drinkers.

There was also no significant interaction effect, with $F(1, 3) = 0.098, p = .755$. This shows that social distance and contextual information do not have an interaction effect when evaluating morality.

DISCUSSION

Modern theories and frameworks of morality look towards a more cultural and nuanced lens to create context-specific frameworks (Miller & Boyle, 2011). One hypothesis states that moral judgments are affected by several factors, and we chose to zero in on two culturally-bound variables: contextual information and social distance. Our data showed that participants evaluated the heavy drinker as more moral when drinking because of an external occurrence vs. an internal trait. Our data also showed that there was no difference in rating when the participant was socially distant vs. proximal. There was also no interaction effect between the two independent variables.

Context and Compromise: Internal Traits vs. External Occurrences

Our data showed that one is judged as more moral when one’s behavior is influenced by external occurrences such as peer pressure rather than internal dispositions such as the trait of sensation seeking. One probable cause for the differences in rating might be because there is a difference in the perceived locus of control the drinker had over both situations. Locus of control or the degree to which individuals believe they can control events affecting them, has differing implications across cultures. It has been shown that individualist and Western countries show favor towards a strong internal

locus of control, which coincides with their valuing of independence. They believe every individual should assume responsibility for their actions and they heavily focus on internal disposition as cause for behavior.

Collectivist countries such as the Philippines favor an external locus of control, which coincides with their shared sense of community. They believe that the individual is inseparable from community, and that environment and social influence play a large part in dictating behavior (Cheng, et. al., 2013). This is consistent with local research on a shared sense of strong interpersonal relations seen in several Filipino studies (Magay, 1993). Our collectivist nature as Filipinos shows that we pardon individuals whose behavior is dictated by external occurrences because we believe his or her actions are inseparable from communal influence, such as Sam getting intoxicated with his friends. This also reflects the centrality of *kapwa* in Philippine psychology: a belief that an individual is never separated from his or her community (Enriquez, 1992).

Social Distance: Friend or Stranger?

Results show that a person is not judged differently whether the person is a friend or a stranger. This highlights interesting findings to add on the unique dichotomy of Filipino relationships, in placing people as either one-of-us versus not one-of-us (*ibang-tao* vs. *hindi-ibangtao*).

Enriquez' (1978) *antas ng pagtutungo* continuum mentions the fluidity of social relations in a Filipino context. It is possible for a stranger or researcher (*ibang tao*) to transition into a friend (*hindi ibang tao*) and back depending on his or her actions and how well he or she fits into the participant's schema. One sentence can change a person's perception of another, and one vital piece of information, such as being a heavy drinker, can make a person consider another as *ibang tao* despite any previously established social distance. The fickle nature of the dichotomy may be the basis for why social distance does not have much hold in evaluating moral judgments.

Kapwa psychology among Filipinos, as mentioned again by Enriquez (1992), says that this shared inner perception is basic in a Filipino, regardless of the attained level of *antas ng pagtutungo*. In other words, there is a uniform image of human essence within every Filipino's individual moral compass.

To tie the two ideas together, a person may go from *hindi ibang tao* to *ibang tao* in two sentences. However, due to *kapwa* psychology, there is a uniform base moral regard of anybody regardless of level of interaction or *antas ng pagtutungo*. This uniform level of moral regard could be the reason why Sam was not judged differently being a friend or stranger.

Interaction Effects: Cultural Blankets

As seen from the results, there was no significant interaction effect between the two variables. In a study done relating the level at which people construe moral situations and contextual information, Eyal and colleagues (2008) found that those who were socially distal had a tendency to ignore or disregard context when it came to judging morality, while those proximal tended to incorporate context into making their judgments. Research on how individuals construe moral situations has been mainly conflicting, with repeated studies showing differing results (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008; Gong & Medina, 2012).

To further explain this seemingly contradicting data, judgment has been shown to be culturally sensitive (Boyes & Walker 1988; Snarey, 1985; Tsui & Windsor, 2001). As discussed earlier, gray areas such as drinking are behaviors that may or may not be tolerable by the moral standards of different people. Going back to the literature, Gong and Medin (2012) attributed the differences in their study with that of Eyal, Liberman, and Trope (2008) to the cultural as well. The two studies were done in two very different cultures with diverse samples, with the 2012 study being conducted in Israel and the previous one in Siberia.

These cultural highlights draw attention to Miller's (2002) call for a more nuanced, contextbased look at moral processing that draws upon culture and psychology as mutually constitutive processes. The rich processes and theories of pioneers in Filipino psychology pervade and show in our study, validating that we ascribe roles to people based on our perceptions and our mere perceptions of social distance are fluid and can vary (Enriquez, 1978).

For further study, we recommend a larger sample size for more scenarios outside of the college demographic, inclusion of a treatment condition with both external occurrences and internal traits so as to assess which reason people lean towards when making the transgression. Because the study was focused mainly on heavy alcohol consumption, it would be hard to generalize acts from drinking to moral transgressions, hence more scenarios besides drinking are recommended.

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