

The Disappearance of Moral Choice in Serially Reproduced Narratives*

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Abstract

How do narratives influence moral decision-making? Our ongoing studies use serial reproduction of narratives, that is multiple retellings as in the telephone game, of morally ambiguous situations. In particular, we tested stories that include a minor misdemeanor, but leave open whether the wrongdoer will be punished by a bystander. It turns out that serial reproduction (retelling) of stories tends to eliminate the possibility of intervention by the bystander under certain conditions. We reason that this effect can be explained either by preferences of the readers or by the reader's discomfort to get involved. A second finding is that retellings of third-person narratives of moral situations lead to a higher degree of change and invention of the outcome than first-person narratives.

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1 Introduction

The large question informing our research is how narratives shape the way people think about moral issues. One aspect of this question concerns moral choice in ambiguous situations. We discuss the conditions under which narratives support moral ambiguity or moral clarity.

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The approach we use is serial reproduction of narratives [1] as in the telephone game or, in German, “Stille Post”.

Most types of narrative deal with morally relevant situations, ranging from stories involving good or bad characters to ethical dilemmas. This is true for everyday reports of events, gossip (tracking who did what and why), and also for narrative fiction, which rarely does not deal with morally charged events. In general, we assume that narratives are not neutral with regard to morality and that moral issues are at the core of story-telling [5]. One of the questions following from our assumption is whether narratives support moral ambiguity or tend toward polarized solution of moral dilemmas.

One could speculate, for example, that moral reasoning often is the product of narrative apprehension, that is induced by particular narrative structures and not necessarily by moral content per se. In this case, one could suggest that it makes for better stories if there are many sides to an event which elicit and engage moral cognition. This is in line with narratologists’ theories of the event that stress that each narrative event induces at least two different interpretations or competing contexts [2]. Such theories reach back to Goethe’s articulation of the “unheard of event” [4]. Complex moral issues without a clear solution could be seen as a form of the multifaceted nature of events. If so, effective story-tellers might overemphasize moral ambiguity for narrative suspense (to engage attention, memory, and intensity). An opposite opinion could hold that narratives provide a system to deal with and resolve moral dilemmas. This could mean that narratives display morally charged events in such a way to expose all relevant features and thereby lead toward dissipating moral tensions. In the first case, we would expect to see narratives holding on to or overemphasizing moral problems and ambiguity. In the latter case, we would expect narratives leading toward a solution and thereby resolving moral conflicts.

To test this question, we have employed serial reproductions of narratives in a set of experiments, each containing a morally charged situation. In serial reproduction, a participant reads the narrative and then attempts to reproduce it, in writing, from memory alone. The reproduced story is then given to another participant, who attempts to reproduce it for the next participant. Here we ask what happens if a story with a morally ambiguous event or character gets serially repeated. Is the moral ambiguity increased, maintained, or reduced?

Prior research dealing with serial reproduction of narratives suggests that a “minimally counter-intuitive” event in a story might be most optimal for stories and should be maintained more accurately over a series of reproductions (or periods of time in memory studies) than narratives with no counter-intuitive events or “maximally counter-intuitive” events [9]. The studies by Norenzayan et al. did not focus explicitly on moral choices and moral ambiguity. Instead they dealt with events in fairy-tales. Still, we wonder to which degree the “minimally counter-intuitive” events also present the most morally relevant situations since they involve a moral problem that begs for a plausible solution.

However, we speculate that the moral pressure to achieve a resolution can in specific situations outweigh the narrative demand of retaining complexity (or suspense). For this pressure-to-a-resolution, it is not relevant whether moral reasoning leads to a resolution or simple quick side-taking or rush decision-making. In fact, quick side-taking may be key since humans are exceptionally rapid side-takers or judgment-makers [10, 12]. Indeed, DeScioli and Kurzban [3] argued that rapid side-taking, serving to reduce the costs of conflict, is the key evolutionary force behind human morality. Hence, we reason that the tendency of preserving a “minimally counter-intuitive” and morally charged situation can be overshadowed by a different dynamic, namely quick judgment, side-taking, or preference.

We speculate that when stories get retold, the implicit side-taking, judgment, or preference by the re-teller manifest itself in various ways. This in turn will influence the next reader to reinforce the side-taking and lead to a polarization of future story generations. Hence, we predict that serial reproductions of morally ambiguous situations will lead to more clearly polarized and resolved narratives, and thereby also offer an exception to the findings of Norenzayan et al. 2006 [9].

At the same time, we also speculate that there are certain conditions in which the side-taking or preference will not be allowed to manifest itself strongly. One of these conditions could be first-person narratives in which readers are “locked into” an ambivalent event that is driven by other characters. Here the reader is bound to one perspective that remains subject to the ambivalent event. Examples will be provided below.

2 Study 1

In these studies, we asked participants to read a short story and then retell it “in your own words”. The retold story was then retold again up to a sixth version. The general design of the study of serial reproduction of narratives follows Kashima 2000, Lyons & Kashima 2006, and Kashima 2010 [6, 7, 8]. Our stories involve a morally ambiguous situation in which a moral choice is to be made by either a character in the story or by an observer. However, this choice is not expressed explicitly. In this pilot study, the same core story is presented in three forms to different participants: one time as a third-person narration with two named characters (Susan and Jessica), and twice as a first-person narrative in which either “Susan” or “Jessica” are replaced by a first-person narrator throughout the short story. The story puts one character as the agent of a minor misdemeanor, the other into the position to potentially intervene. Here is the prototype:

Jessica is working at the cash register of her university food court. She sees her friend Susan approaching the food line. Jessica knows that Susan does not have much money on her account and can only afford a very simple meal. And indeed, Susan opts for a soup and takes water to drink, just enough for her diminished account. However, close to the checkout Jessica watches as Susan conceals a small apple in her bag. Of course, this is illegal, but Jessica knows that the apple Susan had bought yesterday had a worm inside it. In fact, Jessica had teased her about the apple and had said: “Oh, you want to kiss the worm? Maybe it is a prince.” After the teasing, Susan did not eat the apple. Jessica knows that the university overprices healthy food, while junk food like French fries are held artificially cheap. Jessica knows that Susan does not have rich parents and has to work through summer and during the terms to make ends meet. Now Susan comes to the cash register and does not reveal the apple. Jessica starts to ring up the food.

We assumed that most participants would clearly notice that the actual decision (intervention or no intervention) is not made at the end of the story. Pretesting confirmed that this narrative was morally ambiguous. The response to “Do you blame one of the individuals for failing to respect other people or follow social rules?” yielded a response of nearly the perfect middle of 3.88 on a 1–7 scale ($n = 74$). Another question led to a similar response near the mathematical middle of 4. It asked, “If there was a main wrong-doer, how important is it that he or she gets punished or at least confronted?” Responses were indicated on a 1–7 scale, with 1 labeled “Not Important” and 7 labeled “Very Important”. The mean rating was 3.67 ($n = 74$).

In the following, we analyze and report only on the first retelling condition (iteration 1) since the results are already informative after a single retelling. All first iteration versions ($n = 45$) included the basic situation at the food court, the intentional concealing of the apple or fruit, and at least one of the excusing circumstances (relative poverty, the “worm”, or the overpricing). The original story ended where the potential intervener could act, but there was no indicator at that point whether or not she intended to do so. We coded the retelling for clear markers that would establish that indeed a decision was made, either to confront Susan or not to intervene. Examples of not intervening include: “Jessica lets it go because...”, “Jessica is OK with this” or “but I do not report it”. In the absence of these markers, we coded that there was no decision made (as in the original story). Typically, retellings of this kind ended in something like: “the clerk starts to ring stuff up.”

The results divided the different story conditions in a surprisingly clear fashion. Both stories with a first-person narrator tended to retain the ambiguous end as it was given in the source story. More than 75% of the retellings (23 of 30 in ongoing data collection) were coded as having an ambiguous end and only 17% (6/30) lacked ambiguity either because the situation was passed (the ringing up has already happened with no action taken by the teller) or because of a clearly marked intent of non-intervention. However, in the third-person condition, participants leaned toward not making an intervention and thus making the decision to let the misdemeanor pass (above 50%, and only 40% maintaining the ambiguous end, with 10% uncertain coding). Here is a typical result of the third-person condition, illustrating a decision to let the misdemeanor pass:

Jessica works as a cashier at the cafeteria. She saw her friend Susan coming to buy food. She knows that Susan is poor. Jessica sees Susan buying soup and water and then steal an apple by putting it in her pocket. Jessica remembers how Susan had an apple with worm in it and jokingly wanted to kiss the apple to see if it was a prince. Susan comes and Susan pays for the food. Jessica doesn't say anything.

Pretesting of the different versions according to a standard questionnaire with eight numeric questions revealed that participants also would more strongly lean toward non-intervention in the third-person condition. Among the questions with a clear leaning is: “If there was someone facing a moral choice [at the end of the story], how important is it that he or she takes action (e.g., intervenes or calls for help)?” On a scale from 1–7 (1 = not important to act, 7 = very important to act), participants in the third-person condition (Jessica and Susan) had a lower response than in the first-person as wrongdoer scenario ($n = 74$; 25 or 24 per version; participants in the pretesting were different from the 45 retellers of the study). In several other questions, however, the average was similar for all three conditions, for example, “did someone in this story display bad character?”

2.1 Discussion of Study 1

To be sure, the sample is quite small at the time of this writing. Testing is ongoing and will be reported at the CMN meeting. However, assuming that the results hold, we could reason that the first-person narratives “lock” participants into a position that makes them look toward the outcome (intervention or no intervention). This is especially true when the first-person is the one who steals the apple. Intuitively, the unresolved anticipation of possibly getting caught is quite salient when understood from the first person. From the other first-person perspective, the unresolved anticipation of having to decide whether to intervene is also quite salient. Hence, marking the end as open is an essential part of the story for either first-person perspective.

This changes in the third-person condition. Judgment of the situation by third parties is not bound by what actually happens at the end (outcome), but by what should happen. Hence, side-taking seems to be a logical possibility. In this sense, the invented statement of what Jessica at the cash register will do (namely, not intervene) seems to express the preference of the reteller [11]. Notice that this change of the narrative leads to a disappearance of the situation of moral choice, because, in the retelling, the choice is already made. This is remarkably unfaithful to the source story.

There is another puzzling aspect to this. The invented statement by Jessica always favors non-intervention. This might suggest that participants consistently lean towards non-punishment. However, this seems not be the case. Recall that the prestudies established that participants in all three story conditions deem the offender to be blameworthy near the 50%-line (on a 1–7 scale). Perhaps there is more to the disappearance of moral choice than mere preference? In the following, we will consider a second possible reason for the invented addition of non-intervention.

3 Study 2

In the pilot study to another experiment, we again asked participants to read a short story and then retell it “in your own words.” Again, it is the story of a bystander who can intervene. And once again, the story features a misdemeanor, but now the bystander does not necessarily face the choice to intervene. At the time of this writing, we only have results for third person accounts.

Original Version (1)

Max is walking to a job interview. He is a senior in college, and now it is time for him to enter the working world. He goes over all interview questions in his head. He took the train into Chicago this morning, so he feels important. It is his first time wearing his new suit. On the way to the job interview, he comes through a park. Suddenly he happens to see two kids steal the umbrella of an old man who is sitting on a park bench. The two kids run away, while the old man starts to shout at them. It is obviously a little prank since the kids throw the umbrella into a bush. The kids call something back to the old man, and do not see that Max is right behind them.

At the end of this story, Max implicitly has the option to intervene (for example scold or punish the kids) or to ignore the prank, but unlike the source story in Study 1, he does not have to engage in any action with the other characters (such as ringing the food up) and does not bear responsibility (as a teller at the food court has). We predicted that the serial reproduction would quickly lead to a polarization of the choice in the one or the other direction. We measured polarization in three ways. First, we asked control groups about their moral preferences (“How should Max act: Should he intervene or not?”). Second, we tallied a number of indicators in retellings, including omission of information between two versions, changes of word choice (“kids” become “guys”, the “umbrella” becomes a more valuable object, etc.), negatively or positively marked words and ideas, and perspective-taking. Third, we noted changes of the plot involving a punishment or acquittal of the wrongdoer within the frame of the iteration. In this example, we expected some story versions after 2 or 3 iterations to demonize the kids more and have Max intervene. And we expected some other versions after 2 or 3 iterations to make the action of the kids more harmless. Results showed that polarization did indeed occur, and detailed results will be reported at a later time.

However, after five or fewer reproductions something else occurred. Here is a typical example:

Iteration 5

Max has newly arrived in Chicago. He is walking by a park when he sees two young boys harassing the old man sitting on a bench. The boys take the old man's backpack and throw it into the bushes. Max keeps walking, but having seen this, he can't help but wonder about what kind of place he's entered.

In this retelling, the entire moral decision for Max has disappeared. Whereas Max in the original version faced a choice, iteration 5 has him as a mere distanced observer without the pressure or opportunity to engage with what he observes.

Our ongoing studies will establish the frequency of this disappearance of moral choice in serially reproduced narratives. At this point, the disappearance of the moral choice occurred in 10 of 26 cases and it occurred instead of radical polarization that also could have eliminated the pressure of choice.

There are also related ongoing experiments, which must be omitted here for lack of space. The full presentation will include these additional studies.

It should be noted that a slightly different story did not lead to the disappearance of moral choice with a high frequency. The only change to the source story was that the two kids kept the umbrella rather than throwing it in the bushes. In this condition, most retellings (12 of 14; iteration 1 only) maintained the possibility of intervention at the end, namely the fact that the kids come close to Max.

4 Interpretation

We originally predicted that the serially reproduced stories would quickly lose their ambiguity and show a more polarized description. The preliminary results partly confirm this prediction. However, another form of retelling was to drop the moral choice in its entirety, often because an invented choice was simply made within the retelling. Both Study 1, in third-person condition, and Study 2 led to a disappearance of moral choice. Still, Study 1 and Study 2 seem to suggest different tendencies. Retellers in Study 1 omitted the choice by presenting a story with an invented choice already made according to what seems to be the preferred outcome. Retellings in Study 2 suggest a discomfort to make a moral choice by displacing the observer from the situation. The interpretations are not contradictory. Perhaps some "discomfort" is a driver to make the moral choice in Study 2. And Study 1 also may express the preference of the participant since a non-intervention is desired.

A possible frame for the interpretation of these serially reproduced narratives is provided by DeScioli & Kurzban (2012) [3]. They hypothesized that the purpose of moral judgment is the coordination of bystanders of a conflict in such a way that bystanders will choose to support the same side. The purpose of bystander coordination is group coherence and the avoidance of conflict. From this perspective, it is plausible to predict that people tend to choose sides (esp. when observed, see Kurzban et al. 2007) and will aim to influence others to choose the same side. In the condition of serial reproduction, this could lead to the described radicalization ("black-and-white painting").

However, the results only partially fit this idea. Rather than painting clear black-and-white pictures, or by involving a punishment or acquittal of the wrongdoer, the serially reproduced versions tended to justify the non-intervention by the bystander in these cases of minor misdemeanors. Max, in the quoted example of iteration 5, does not have to position himself vis-à-vis some crime or harmless prank by the kids any longer. The tension of a moral choice has disappeared. In the food court story, the woman at the food court already makes the decision, especially in the third-person condition.

Whereas these findings do not contradict DeScioli & Kurzban (2012), they suggest an additional urge to bypass the moral choice in its entirety. This is itself a way to avoid conflict, which is the very motive for side taking presumed by DeScioli & Kurzban. To be sure, morality does not disappear in its entirety – Max still observes the events, the woman at the cash register makes a decision – but the pressure to make a choice or get involved disappears from the story. Hence, we speculate that narratives seek an optimal position or perspective on moral choice. This position is one of being an observer, but not a decision-maker. Morality, within narratives, is a spectator sport.

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