

Compliance with Law or Conformity to Social Pressure: Evaluating Others' Choices in the Context of the Pandemic

Authors: Sun Hongri, Tian Jianchi, Xie Lihong, Sun Hongri

Date: 2020-08-02T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

During the outbreak of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), using the scenario of whether parents choose to report their son returning from key epidemic areas for quarantine as experimental material, this study explored the evaluation of behavioral choices in conflict situations between legal regulations and social pressure. The results revealed: 1) Compared to behaviors conforming to social pressure, evaluators demonstrated higher acceptance of behaviors complying with legal regulations, perceived lower psychological conflict during decision-making, assigned lower administrative penalties, and reported better post-pandemic parent-child relationships; 2) The moderating effect of behavioral choice on the influence of behavioral outcomes on evaluation was related to the type of evaluation question. The impact on acceptance evaluation and parent-child relationship change evaluation was significantly moderated by behavioral choice, whereas the impact on perceived psychological conflict evaluation and administrative penalty evaluation was not significantly moderated by behavioral choice. The effect of behavioral choice on evaluation can be understood through factors such as norm focus and the context and culture of compliance, while the moderating effect of behavioral choice on the influence of behavioral outcomes can be understood from the perspective that different evaluation questions correspond to distinct patterns composed of psychological states, behaviors, and behavioral outcomes.

Full Text

Preamble

Which Behavior is More Accepted? Evaluations of Choices Between Legal Compliance and Social Pressure in an Epidemic Context

Sun Hongri, Tian Jianchi, Xie Lihong
(School of Public Administration, Nanchang University, Nanchang, 330031)

Abstract

During the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), this study examined evaluations of behavioral choices in situations where legal requirements conflict with social pressure, using a scenario in which parents decided whether to report their son's return from a high-risk epidemic area for mandatory quarantine. The results revealed two key findings: First, compared to behaviors that conform to social pressure, legally compliant behaviors were rated as more acceptable, associated with lower perceived psychological conflict during decision-making, deserving of lighter administrative penalties, and resulting in better post-pandemic parent-child relationships. Second, the moderating effect of behavioral choice on the influence of behavioral outcomes depends on the specific evaluation dimension. The impact of outcomes on acceptability ratings and parent-child relationship evaluations was significantly moderated by behavioral choice, whereas the influence on perceived psychological conflict and administrative punishment ratings showed no significant moderation. These findings can be understood through the lens of norm focus theory and the contextual and cultural factors influencing compliance, as well as through the perspective that different evaluation questions correspond to distinct patterns constituted by mental states, behaviors, and behavioral outcomes.

Keywords: legal compliance; social pressure; epidemic context; evaluation of others' behavior; personal norms

As the 2020 Spring Festival approached, the sudden outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) prompted Chinese governments at all levels to activate Level I emergency responses for major public health emergencies, implementing "Category B infectious disease, Category A management" protocols. Based on the epidemiological characteristics of the outbreak and relevant legal provisions such as the *National Emergency Plan for Public Health Events*, authorities issued legally binding emergency measures. Among these, "isolation" was a widely adopted method to mitigate and control viral transmission. However, this measure significantly disrupted daily life routines and altered habitual ways of living. Therefore, understanding the psychological reactions of the general public toward isolation measures is crucial for effective epidemic prevention and control. From the public's perspective, isolation involves coordinating multiple interests. Complying with isolation regulations not only protects individuals from infection and avoids legal penalties but also contributes to cutting off viral transmission chains, thereby benefiting national epidemic control efforts. Nevertheless, compliance may also entail costs, including enduring interpersonal isolation ("unable to return home," "family separation," "inability to gather with friends"), potential social discrimination from reporting travel history to high-risk areas, and facing social pressure when refusing or reporting visitors from epidemic regions. For ordinary citizens, the decision to comply with isola-

tion regulations in specific contexts essentially represents a process of weighing social against personal interests. This study selected the scenario of parents deciding whether to report their son's return from a high-risk epidemic area to examine social evaluations of behavioral choices when legal requirements conflict with social pressure, thereby understanding public psychological responses to government legal measures during public health crises and providing theoretical reference for mobilizing public crisis response strategies.

1. The Influence of Norms on Prosocial Behavior

An epidemic represents a social public crisis. In facing such a crisis, individual public support for relevant government regulations provides a foundation for epidemic mitigation and control, directly reducing social losses and anti-epidemic costs. Therefore, legal compliance can be viewed as a form of prosocial behavior. In prosocial behavior research, the Theory of Planned Behavior has been widely used to explain and predict behavior. This theory posits that behavioral intention—the effort an individual exerts to perform a behavior—is the key determinant of actual behavior (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norm, defined as an individual's perception of social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior, constitutes one of three primary factors influencing behavioral intention. Initially, researchers believed social pressure primarily originated from important others within one's group, such as family, friends, and acquaintances. Meta-analyses have demonstrated that interventions targeting subjective norm variables within the Theory of Planned Behavior framework can successfully change behavior, with an effect size of 0.14 (Steinmetz, Knappstein, Ajzen, Schmidt, & Kabst, 2016). Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno (1991) argued that social pressure can also stem from typical behaviors within a group (i.e., what most people do or believe). Field research has shown that social norms activated by presenting information about typical group behaviors or beliefs can construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct behavior (Wesley-schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007; Wesley-schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2018).

Schwartz (1977) contended that prosocial behavior implies purposes based on personal value systems, making it essential to consider individual differences in personal values and norms when examining situational influences on behavior. He proposed that activated personal norms can generate moral obligations based on internal values, thereby driving behavior, whereas social norms create social obligation pressures that may prevent the activation of internal obligations by exerting external social pressure. Consequently, social pressure from others can only enhance the prediction of behavior by social pressure when individuals have not internalized others' perspectives, when personal norm formation is unaffected by them, and when individuals perceive them as potentially restricting their actions (Schwartz, 1977). A meta-analysis of pro-environmental behavior research conducted two decades after Hines, Hungerford, and Tomera's (1987) seminal study found that personal moral norms indeed represent one of three important variables predicting behavioral intention, while social norms

can indirectly predict pro-environmental behavioral intention through perceived behavioral control, attitudes, and personal moral norms (Bamberg, & Möser, 2007). Research on frugal behavior among Malaysian university students revealed that personal norms significantly explained behavioral variance, whereas social norms lacked significant explanatory power (Rizkalla, Purnamaningsih, & Erhan, 2019). Studies of environmental social movements found that personal pro-environmental norms serve as a general social-psychological variable supporting movement goals, explaining three dimensions of non-radical environmental movement support: consumption behavior, environmental citizenship, and policy support or acceptance (Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999).

Thus, norms can influence prosocial behavior at both individual and social levels. Norm Focus Theory posits that in specific situations, the effectiveness of particular norms in promoting behavior depends on the focus of attention elicited by the situation (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno's (1991) Study 9 demonstrated that when multiple normative cues coexist, the norm that is situationally focused or salient constrains behavior, even under conditions of normative conflict. Law represents an institutionalized rule derived from the state system and enforced through state coercion (郭春镇, & 马磊, 2017). Such institutionalized objective rules can directly form personal norms through internalization (Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015), thereby constraining behavior through a sense of legal obligation. During the pandemic, protecting life and health through epidemic prevention and control constituted society's primary goal. This situational characteristic likely focused individuals' attention on personal norms regarding compliance with isolation regulations, potentially leading to more positive social evaluations of others' legally compliant behavior.

2. The Influence of Behavioral Outcomes on Evaluations of Others' Behavior

Evaluating others' behavior forms the basis for interpreting, predicting, and responding to their actions (McNamara, Willard, Norenzayan, & Henrich, 2019). From a cognitive perspective, when evaluating and judging others' behavior, people consider not only the actor's behavioral tendencies and intentions but also the consequences of those behaviors. In daily life, we typically do not harshly blame individuals who "mean well but produce bad outcomes," while holding different views toward those who "mean harm" regardless of outcome. "Good intentions" refer to an individual's behavioral intentions, whereas "bad outcomes" refer to behavioral consequences. Extensive research has demonstrated that social and moral evaluations are highly sensitive to actors' internal mental states (such as beliefs and desires), behaviors, and behavioral outcomes (Cushman, 2015). Studies have found that four-year-old children can judge helpful but failed attempts as "good," and by age seven, they can judge harmful but failed attempts as "bad" (Margoni, & Surian, 2017), indicating an age-related developmental shift from outcome-based to intention-based moral evaluation

(Cushman, 2008). This shift extends beyond moral judgment; in non-direct reciprocity situations (third-party contexts), five-year-olds attend more to actors' intentions than three-year-olds when making sociomoral judgments and resource allocations (Li, & Tomasello, 2018). This suggests that the roles of outcome and intention information in evaluating others' behavior are closely related to cognitive development. Researchers explain that young children's relatively weaker ability to integrate psychological beliefs and behavioral outcomes leads them to prioritize outcome valence as a moral judgment standard when intentions and outcomes conflict (Piaget, 1932/1965). In adulthood, enhanced abilities to represent and integrate mental states and outcomes enable comprehensive consideration of both intentions and consequences (Wu, Hua, Yang, & Yin, 2018; Cushman, 2015; Cushman, Sheketoff, Wharton, & Carey, 2013). Wu et al. (2018) found that adults' evaluations of social interactions are jointly influenced by behavioral intentions and outcomes.

Similarly, legal definitions of crime consider both consequences and harmful intent (Hart, 1968). Research shows that for identical consequences, intentional harm is perceived as more severe than unintentional harm—the “harm amplification” effect (Ames, & Fiske, 2013, 2015; Darley & Huff, 1990). However, some studies indicate that certain special populations, such as terrorists and psychopaths, adopt outcome-oriented moral evaluations (Baez, Herrera, García, Manes, Young, & Ibáñez, 2017; McGuire, Brüne, & Langdon, 2017). For instance, Baez et al. (2017) found that terrorists evaluate illegal actions based on successful outcomes rather than harmful intent. Researchers explain that terrorists, particularly those in organizations, believe their ideologies or goals are morally justified, leading them to prioritize behavioral success over underlying intentions. Beyond individual cognitive maturity, cultural and environmental factors also influence the roles of intention and outcome in evaluating others' behavior. Cross-cultural research reveals that in collectivist cultures, groups prioritize public values and interpersonal relationships, often paying less attention to behavioral intentions and more to outcomes' impact on the collective (Barrett, Bolyanatz, Crittendend, Fessler, Fitzpatrick, Gurven, et al., 2016; Laurin & Plaks, 2014). Particularly when the collective is threatened, social pressure and group cohesion become primary behavioral determinants, with intentions playing a minimal role. To maximize behavioral effectiveness, people rely on directly observable outcomes rather than inferring intentions (McNamara, Willard, Norenzayan, & Henrich, 2019). This implies that in Chinese cultural contexts, when legal requirements conflict with social pressure, behavioral outcomes may influence evaluations of choices between legal compliance and social pressure.

In summary, legal regulations during the pandemic can be transformed into personal norms through individual perception, driving behavior through a sense of legal obligation. When this norm conflicts with social pressure norms, the threat to collective life and health, combined with Chinese collectivist culture's focus on public welfare, may focus individuals' attention on personal norms and make them salient as focal norms. When evaluating others' behavioral choices, actions

conforming to this focal norm are viewed as “ought-to” behaviors—acceptable and undeserving of punishment—whereas non-conforming actions are seen as “ought-not-to” behaviors—unacceptable and punishable. “Ought-to” or “ought-not-to” inherently contains moral approval or disapproval components (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), suggesting that evaluations of others’ behavior in this context follow similar psychological processes as moral judgment. Research shows that when an action produces both positive and negative moral effects, people tend to prioritize the positive effect principle (Levine, Mikhail, & Leslie, 2018), interpreting the actor’ s tendency as aiming for good outcomes. Given that the pandemic context makes personal norms salient, complying with personal norms and fulfilling legal obligations is morally “good,” whereas conforming to social pressure violates personal norms and is morally “bad.” Consequently, during the pandemic, legally compliant behavior may be more readily accepted, perceived as involving less internal conflict, deserving of lighter administrative punishment, but potentially damaging interpersonal relationships due to violating social norms, thereby worsening parent-child relationships. Additionally, although people in civilized societies often emphasize behavioral tendencies and intentions when evaluating events and behaviors (Baez, Herrera, García, Manes, Young, & Ibáñez, 2017), behavioral outcomes and intentions jointly influence evaluations (Wu, Hua, Yang, & Yin, 2018). This suggests that in evaluations of choices between legal compliance and social pressure, behavioral outcomes also exert influence. Based on this analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed for the study evaluating others’ judgments of parents’ decisions to report their son from an epidemic area: (1) Compared to choosing social pressure compliance, participants will rate legal compliance as more acceptable, involving less internal conflict, deserving of lighter administrative punishment, but resulting in worse parent-child relationships; (2) The influence of behavioral outcomes (illness with transmission vs. no illness without transmission) on evaluations will be moderated by behavioral choice.

2.1 Participants

Using G*Power 3.1 software with an effect size of $ES f = 0.25$ and significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, a sample size of 210 participants was determined to achieve 95% statistical power ($1 - \beta$). During the COVID-19 outbreak (February 28 to March 27, 2020), this study conducted an online survey via Wenjuanxing among university students quarantined at home. A total of 290 university students voluntarily participated, including 137 males (47.2%) and 153 females (52.8%), aged 18 to 25 years. Regarding residence, 164 participants (56.6%) lived in urban areas and 126 (43.4%) in rural areas. All participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups, with each group receiving a unique experimental condition combination.

The experimental design employed a 2 (behavioral choice: legal compliance, social pressure) \times 2 (behavioral outcome: illness with transmission, no illness without transmission) between-subjects factorial design. The dependent vari-

ables comprised evaluations of others' behavioral choices, including acceptability, perceived internal conflict during choice, administrative punishment, and changes in parent-child relationships after the pandemic. To eliminate order effects, the presentation sequence of statements describing legal compliance and social pressure conformity was counterbalanced within each experimental condition, with each group further randomly divided into two subgroups receiving either forward or reverse statement order.

2.3 Experimental Materials

The experimental materials utilized the scenario of parents deciding whether to report their son's return from a high-risk epidemic area during the pandemic. The materials included three components: event background, protagonists' behavioral tendencies and choices, and behavioral outcomes (illness with transmission vs. no illness without transmission). The specific content was as follows:

Background Information: In year X, City S experienced a severe infectious disease outbreak, with transmission occurring through contact with infected individuals (both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases were contagious). To control the outbreak and prevent further spread to other regions, the government issued a lockdown order for City S and required other cities to identify individuals from City S and place them in designated centralized quarantine facilities (where living needs were provided but individuals could not leave their rooms). On the day before the lockdown, Young A returned to his parents' home in another city. Subsequently, government staff conducted telephone screenings to identify residents with visitors from City S.

Behavioral Tendencies and Choices:

- **Legal compliance, rejecting social pressure:** When Young A's parents received the call, they thought: "Government regulations should be followed, regardless of whether people call us heartless." They did not conceal the information and reported their son's presence.
- **Legal non-compliance, conforming to social pressure:** When Young A's parents received the call, they thought: "Government regulations are optional; what matters is whether people call us heartless." They concealed the information and did not report their son's presence.

In the actual materials, the order of behavioral tendency statements (legal compliance vs. social pressure conformity) was counterbalanced while maintaining identical wording.

Behavioral Outcomes:

- **Illness with transmission:** Young A became ill, and subsequently family members and nearby neighbors also fell ill.
- **No illness without transmission:** Young A did not become ill, and no family members or nearby neighbors ever fell ill.

Following the event description, four evaluation questions assessed participants' judgments of the parents' behavioral choice:

- 1) **Acceptability evaluation:** "To what extent can you accept Young A' s parents' decision to conceal (or not conceal) the information?" Rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (completely unacceptable) to 7 (completely acceptable), with higher scores indicating greater acceptability.
- 2) **Psychological conflict evaluation:** "In the above scenario, how much psychological conflict do you think Young A' s parents felt when receiving the call?" Rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all conflicted) to 7 (extremely conflicted), with higher scores indicating greater perceived conflict.
- 3) **Parent-child relationship change evaluation:** "After the pandemic, how do you think the parent-child relationship between Young A and his parents changed?" Rated on a 3-point scale from 1 (worse than before), 2 (unchanged), to 3 (better than before), with higher scores indicating lighter social punishment and greater benefit from conforming to social pressure.
- 4) **Administrative punishment evaluation:** "After the pandemic, according to relevant laws and regulations, do you think Young A' s parents should receive corresponding punishment?" Rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (definitely should not) to 5 (definitely should). This item was reverse-scored, such that higher scores indicated lighter administrative punishment and greater benefit from legal compliance.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 21.0 and the Process macro, employing independent samples t-tests, two-way ANOVA, and bootstrap resampling with 5,000 iterations. Preliminary analyses including parent-child relationship, legal knowledge, information acquisition channels, perceived information quantity, and perceived information quality as covariates revealed no significant effects on acceptability evaluations, perceived conflict, parent-child relationship change, or administrative punishment across different behavioral choices and outcomes. Consequently, these variables were excluded from subsequent analyses.

Independent samples t-tests and bootstrap resampling (5,000 iterations) compared evaluations of legal compliance versus social pressure conformity. Results showed significant differences in acceptability ratings ($t(288) = 19.06$, $p < 0.001$), with a large effect size (Cohen' s $d = 2.31$). Legal compliance ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.68$; 95% CI [5.49, 6.03]) was rated significantly more acceptable than social pressure conformity ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.27$; 95% CI [2.18, 2.60]). Perceived psychological conflict also differed significantly ($t(288) = -2.76$, $p = 0.006$, Cohen' s $d = -0.33$), with legal compliance ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.50$; 95% CI [4.10, 4.57]) perceived as involving less conflict than social pressure conformity ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.47$; 95% CI [4.58, 5.07]). For punishment-related ratings, both parent-child relationship change and administrative punishment showed significant differences between conditions ($t(288) = 9.46$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen' s $d = 1.13$; $t(288) = -15.97$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen' s $d = -1.88$, respectively). Com-

pared to social pressure conformity, legal compliance received higher ratings for improved parent-child relationships ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.53$; 95% CI [2.23, 2.40] vs. $M = 1.72$, $SD = 0.54$; 95% CI [1.63, 1.81]) and lower scores for deserved administrative punishment ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.05$; 95% CI [1.90, 2.24] vs. $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.72$; 95% CI [3.66, 3.90]). These results indicate that legal compliance received more positive evaluations than social pressure conformity across all dimensions: higher acceptability, lower perceived conflict, better parent-child relationships, and lighter recommended punishment.

Independent samples t-tests examining the effect of behavioral outcomes on evaluations revealed no significant differences across the four evaluation questions. A 2 (behavioral choice: legal compliance, social pressure) \times 2 (behavioral outcome: illness with transmission, no illness without transmission) between-subjects ANOVA examined whether behavioral choice moderated the effect of outcomes on evaluations. Results showed significant interactions for acceptability evaluation ($F(1, 286) = 5.51$, $p = 0.020$, $\eta^2 = 0.019$) and parent-child relationship change evaluation ($F(1, 286) = 9.00$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.031$), but non-significant interactions for perceived conflict evaluation ($F(1, 286) = 0.38$, $p = 0.537$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$) and administrative punishment evaluation ($F(1, 286) = 0.25$, $p = 0.61$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$).

Using bootstrap resampling with 5,000 iterations and Hayes' (2018) Model 1 for single moderator main effect parameterization, analyses examined whether behavioral choice moderated the effect of outcomes on evaluations. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Moderating Effect of Behavioral Choice on the Influence of Outcomes on Evaluations

Evaluation Dimension	F(3,286)	p	F(1,286)	p
Acceptability	0.5749	<0.001		
Parent-child relationship	0.2643	<0.001		
Internal conflict	0.0270	<0.001		
Administrative punishment	0.4750	<0.001		

For acceptability and parent-child relationship evaluations, the moderating effect of behavioral choice on outcome influence reached significance, explaining 0.82% and 2.32% of variance, respectively. For perceived conflict and administrative punishment evaluations, the moderating effect was non-significant. Further analyses examined outcome effects within each behavioral choice condition. For social pressure conformity (legal non-compliance), outcomes significantly influenced acceptability ($X \rightarrow Y | (W=0.5) = 0.88$, $t(286) = 3.39$, $p < 0.001$) and parent-child relationship evaluations ($X \rightarrow Y | (W=0.5) = 0.28$, $t(286) = 3.05$, $p = 0.003$). The no-illness-without-transmission condition received higher acceptability ratings ($M = 2.77$) than the illness-with-transmission condition ($M = 1.90$), and higher parent-child relationship improvement ratings ($M = 1.84$ vs. M

= 1.56) (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper] and Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]). However, outcomes did not significantly affect perceived conflict ($M = 4.88$ vs. $M = 4.76$, $X \rightarrow Y | (W=0.5) = 0.12$, $t(286) = 0.45$, $p = 0.651$) or administrative punishment ratings ($M = 3.68$ vs. $M = 3.92$, $X \rightarrow Y | (W=0.5) = -0.24$, $t(286) = -1.49$, $p = 0.138$). For legal compliance (social pressure non-conformity), outcomes did not significantly affect any of the four evaluation dimensions (all p s > 0.264). These findings demonstrate that the moderating effect of behavioral choice on outcome influence varies by evaluation question.

Note: Error bars represent standard errors. The same applies below.

Figure 1 Moderating Effect of Behavioral Choice on the Influence of Outcomes on Acceptability Evaluations

Figure 2 Moderating Effect of Behavioral Choice on the Influence of Outcomes on Parent-Child Relationship Change Evaluations

4. Discussion

Isolation is a primary measure for blocking viral transmission and mitigating epidemic expansion during outbreaks. However, this measure affects not only daily life, work, and study but also social psychology. Therefore, understanding public attitudes toward isolation measures is crucial for grasping social psychology during pandemics and uniting the populace in epidemic prevention and control. This study, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, examined public attitudes toward isolation measures through social evaluations of behavioral choices in legally and socially conflicting situations. The results partially supported the hypotheses: compared to social pressure conformity, legal compliance was rated as more acceptable, involving less psychological conflict, deserving of lighter punishment, and resulting in better parent-child relationships. Contrary to expectations, however, legal compliance was rated as producing *better* rather than worse parent-child relationships compared to pre-event conditions.

The Normology model (Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015) posits that specific historical and environmental contexts contain various objective norms—rules, constraints, and institutionalizations—that maintain social order. These norms form subjective norms through individual perception, subsequently influencing judgments and behavior. In the present experimental scenario, the social tradition emphasizing blood ties conflicted with legal regulations prioritizing public health safety: complying with legal requirements meant violating social tradition, while conforming to social tradition meant violating legal requirements. The historical context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely threatened public health and safety, likely focused attention on subjective norms activated by legal regulations that could prevent health and life threats, making them salient focal norms in this experimental condition. Additionally, research identifies China as a typical collectivist culture (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002), where societal background encourages greater focus on collective welfare (Brewer, & Chen, 2007), thereby activating norms aligned with social interests—

namely, the personal norms examined in this study. Therefore, from both norm focus theory and value activation theory perspectives, personal norms derived from legal regulations became salient focal norms in this experimental context.

Research indicates that norm obedience and conformity are culturally value-laden (Murray, Trudeau, & Schaller, 2011). Traditional Chinese Confucian “role ethics” emphasizes virtue, guiding behavior through “family-nation” relationships and stressing “benevolence” in interpersonal relations within families and groups to achieve fulfilling lives. When managing group relationships, it emphasizes “loyalty” (doing one’s utmost) and “righteousness” (following the great path) (安乐哲, 2017). Research on obligation experiences found that compared to Western European participants, those from Confucian cultural backgrounds rated obligation-driven behaviors more positively than agency-driven behaviors. Diary and experience-sampling studies further revealed that Confucian participants showed higher consistency between agency and obligation motivations and stronger correlations between emotions and obligation-driven motivations (Buchtel, Ng, Norenzayan, Heine, Biesanz, & Chen, et al., 2018). Cross-cultural research on prosocial behavior motivations (Japan, Romania, United States) similarly found that Japanese participants adhering to Confucian role ethics and those endorsing high community ethics showed stronger relationships between agency and obligation motivations and between obligation motivation and positive affect (Gherghel, Nastas, Hashimoto, Takai, & Cargile, 2019). Researchers argue that unlike Western cultures, which view social expectations and responsibilities as coercive pressures lacking agency, Confucian responsibility-oriented cultures internalize and integrate obligations into willing commitments (Buchtel, et al., 2018) that do not produce feelings of coercion or agency loss (Miller, Das, & Chakravarthy, 2011). This suggests that internalized expectations and constraints from salient personal norms, activated by the pandemic context and collectivist values, generate integrated personal norm motivation (Thøgersen, 2006) that influences evaluations of others’ behavior, producing more positive assessments of legally compliant actions (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]). Research on Wuhan residents during the COVID-19 outbreak also found that moral obligation positively contributed to collective epidemic prevention behavior, interacting synergistically with leadership effects (Yang, & Ren, 2020). Perhaps China’s traditional culture is the key factor that, following the government’s correct pandemic response decisions, enabled the rapid mobilization and control of the epidemic.

Figure 3 Evaluation of Behavioral Choices Under Legal-Social Pressure Conflict

The influence of behavioral outcomes on evaluations of others’ behavior (including social and moral evaluations) has long attracted research attention. Single-rule studies have identified outcomes as important variables in forming evaluations and judgments (Mulvey, Gnülta, & Richardson, 2020; McNamara, Willard, Norenzayan, & Henrich, 2019). This study found that during the pandemic, the effect of outcomes (illness with transmission vs. no illness without transmission) on acceptability and parent-child relationship evaluations differed between le-

gal compliance and social pressure conditions: under social pressure conformity, the no-illness-without-transmission condition received higher acceptability and parent-child relationship improvement ratings, whereas under legal compliance, outcomes did not affect these evaluations. However, outcomes did not differentially influence perceived conflict or administrative punishment evaluations across behavioral choice conditions. This suggests that in normative conflict situations, the influence of outcomes on evaluations depends on whether the conformed-to norm is focal: for behaviors conforming to focal norms, outcome effects are minimal; for behaviors violating focal norms, outcome effects vary by evaluation dimension. This may relate to the different mental states involved in different behavioral choices and evaluation questions (Cushman, 2008). Cushman (2015) argues that to facilitate social interaction, we must evaluate interaction partners' moral character, moral rightness/wrongness, and deserved punishment to regulate our own and others' behavior. Because different moral evaluations serve distinct purposes, they involve different mental states and influencing factors. Moral character evaluation helps determine whom to trust or avoid, thus primarily influenced by intentions—whether the actor's intentions are prosocial or antisocial. Moral rightness/wrongness evaluation reflects self-regulation—“what is wrong for me”—and is thus primarily influenced by the behavior itself. Punishment evaluation depends on outcomes to determine rewards and sanctions that correct behavior, transforming “harm-doers” into “do-gooders,” and is therefore influenced by intentions, behavior, and outcomes. In this study, legal regulations constituted the focal norm, and legal compliance during the pandemic benefited society as a prosocial behavior. Thus, evaluations of legal compliance represented moral character evaluations, primarily influenced by intentions rather than outcomes, explaining why none of the four evaluation questions showed outcome effects. For social pressure conformity, which violated the focal norm, evaluations involved “wrongness assessment” and punishment evaluation. The administrative punishment question concerned violation of the focal norm (law), where any legal violation was wrong regardless of outcome. The psychological conflict evaluation assessed the mental state resulting from the wrongness of the choice itself, occurring before outcomes materialized. Therefore, for social pressure conformity, both administrative punishment and conflict evaluations represented “wrongness assessments” minimally influenced by outcomes. Acceptability and parent-child relationship evaluations, however, could use outcomes to punish harmful behaviors and correct future actions, making outcome valence an important variable for these evaluations. Thus, outcome effects were significant for these two questions. Whether this mental state-based explanation truly accounts for outcome effects on evaluations requires further verification.

Additionally, these results were obtained under specific conditions: (1) the research context was during the pandemic outbreak period; (2) the sample comprised university students with relatively high education levels; (3) experimental materials presented legal-social pressure conflict scenarios. Future research should examine different populations and scenarios, comparing evaluations dur-

ing normal times versus pandemic periods to provide theoretical support for related fields.

5. Conclusion

Based on the present study's conditions examining evaluations of parents' decisions to report their son from an epidemic area during the pandemic, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Compared to social pressure conformity, legal compliance was rated as more acceptable, involving less psychological conflict during decision-making, deserving of lighter administrative punishment, and resulting in better post-pandemic parent-child relationships.
2. The moderating effect of behavioral choice on the influence of outcomes on evaluations varies by evaluation dimension: the effect was significantly moderated for acceptability and parent-child relationship evaluations but not significantly moderated for perceived conflict and administrative punishment evaluations.

References

- 安乐哲 [美], 孟巍隆 [美], (译). (2017). 儒家角色伦理学: 一套特色伦理学词汇., 济南, 山东人民出版社, 175-228.
- 郭春镇, & 马磊. (2017). 对接法律的治理——美国社会规范理论述评及其中国意义. 国外社会科学, (03), 113-124.
- Ajzen, I. (1985). From intentions to actions: A theory of planned behavior. In J. Kuhl & J. Beckmann (Eds.), *Action-control: From cognition to behavior* (pp. 11-39). Heidelberg: Springer.
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The Theory of Planned Behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50, 179-211.
- Ames, D. L., & Fiske, S. T. (2013). Intentional harms are worse, even when they're not. *Psychological Science*, 24(9), 1755-1762.
- Ames, D. L., & Fiske, S. T. (2015). Perceived intent motivates people to magnify observed harms. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112(12), 3599-3605.
- Baez, S., Herrera, E., García, A. M., Manes, F., Young, L., & Ibáñez, A. (2017). Outcome-oriented moral evaluation in terrorists. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1, 0118.
- Bamberg, S., & Möser, G. (2007). Twenty years after hines, hungerford, and tomera: a new meta-analysis of psycho-social determinants of pro-environmental behaviour. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 27(1), 14-25.
- Barrett, H. C., Bolyanatz, A., Crittendend, A. N., Fessler, D. M. T., Fitzpatrick, S., Gurven, M., et al. (2016). Small-scale societies exhibit fundamental varia-

tion in the role of intentions in moral judgment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(17), 4688-4693.

Brewer, M. B., & Chen, Y. R. (2007). Where (who) are collectives in collectivism? Toward conceptual clarification of individualism and collectivism. *Psychological Review*, 114(1), 133-151.

Buchtel, E. E., Ng, L. C. Y., Norenzayan, A., Heine, S. J., Biesanz, J. C., & Chen, S. X., et al. (2018). A sense of obligation: Cultural differences in the experience of obligation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(1), 1-22.

Cialdini, R. B., Kallgren, C. A., & Reno, R. R. (1991). A focus theory of normative conduct: A theoretical refinement and reevaluation of the role of norms in human behavior. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 24(1), 201-234.

Cialdini, R. B., Reno, R. R., & Kallgren, C. A. (1990). A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(6), 1015-1026.

Cushman, F. (2015). Deconstructing intent to reconstruct morality. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 6, 97-103.

Cushman, F. (2008). Crime and punishment: Distinguishing the roles of causal and intentional analyses in moral judgment. *Cognition*, 108(2), 353-380.

Cushman, F., Sheketoff, R., Wharton, S., & Carey, S. (2013). The development of intent-based moral judgment. *Cognition*, 127, 6-21.

Darley, J. M., & Huff, C. W. (1990). Heightened damage assessment as a result of the intentionality of the damage-causing act. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 29, 181-188.

Gherghel, C., Nastas, D., Hashimoto, T., Takai, J., & Cargile, A. C. (2019). Culture, morality, and the effect of prosocial behavior motivation on positive affect. *Ethics & Behavior*, 30, 126-139.

Hart, H. L. A. (1968). *Punishment and Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*. (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Hines, J. M., Hungerford, H. R., & Tomera, A. N. (1987). Analysis and synthesis of research on responsible environmental behaviour: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 18, 1-8.

Laurin, K., & Plaks, J. E. (2014). Religion and punishment: Opposing influences of orthopraxy and orthodoxy on reactions to unintentional acts. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 5(7), 835-843.

- Levine, S., Mikhail, J., & Leslie, A. M. (2018). Presumed innocent? How tacit assumptions of intentional structure shape moral judgment. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147(11), 1728-1747.
- Li, J., & Tomasello, M. (2018). The development of intention-based sociomoral judgment and distribution behavior from a third-party stance. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 167, 78-92.
- Margoni, F., & Surian, L. (2017). Children's intention-based moral judgments of helping agents. *Cognitive Development*, 41, 46-64.
- McGuire, J., Brüne, M., & Langdon, R. (2017). Outcome-focused judgements of moral dilemmas in schizophrenia. *Consciousness & Cognition*, 52, 21-31.
- McNamara, R. A., Willard, A. K., Norenzayan, A., & Henrich, J. (2019). Weighing outcome vs. intent across societies: How cultural models of mind shape moral reasoning. *Cognition*, 182, 95-108.
- Miller, J. G., Das, R., & Chakravarthy, S. (2011). Culture and the role of choice in agency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(1), 46-61.
- Morris, M. W., Hong, Y. Y., Chiu, C. Y., & Liu, Z. (2015). Normology: Integrating insights about social norms to understand cultural dynamics. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 129, 1-13.
- Mulvey, K. L., Gnülta, S., & Richardson, C. B. (2020). Who is to blame? Children's and adults' moral judgments regarding victim and transgressor negligence. *Cognitive Science*, 44, e12833.
- Murray, D. R., Trudeau, R., & Schaller, M. (2011). On the origins of cultural differences in conformity: Four tests of the pathogen prevalence hypothesis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(3), 318-329.
- Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2002). Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(1), 3-72.
- Piaget, J. (1932/1965). *The moral judgment of the child*. New York: Free Press.
- Rizkalla, N., Purnamaningsih, & Erhan, T. P. (2019). A study of curtailment behaviour in the context of university students in Indonesia: The role of values and norms. *Management and Economics Review*, 4(2), 135-146.
- Steinmetz, H., Knappstein, M., Ajzen, I., Schmidt, P., & Kabst, R. (2016). How effective are behavior change interventions based on the theory of planned behavior? A Three-Level Meta-Analysis. *Zeitschrift Für Psychologie*, 224(3), 216-233.
- Stern, P. C., Dietz, T., Abel, T., Guagnano, G. A., & Kalof, L. (1999). A value-belief-norm theory of support for social movements: The case of environmental concern. *Human Ecology Review*, 6(8), 1-97.

Schwartz, S. H. (1977). Normative Influences on Altruism. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 10, pp. 221-279). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Thøgersen, J. (2006). Norms for environmentally responsible behaviour: An extended taxonomy. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 26(4), 247-261.

Wesley-schultz, P., Nolan, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V. (2007). The constructive, destructive, and reconstructive power of social norms. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 429-434.

Wesley-schultz, P., Nolan, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V. (2018). The constructive, destructive, and reconstructive power of social norms: Reprise. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 429-434.

Wu, X., Hua, R., Yang, Z., & Yin, J. (2018). The influence of intention and outcome on evaluations of social interaction. *Acta Psychologica*, 182, 75-81.

Yang, L., & Ren, Y. (2020). Moral obligation, public leadership, and collective action for epidemic prevention and control: Evidence from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) emergency. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(8), 2783.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.