

MORAL DILEMMAS IN KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: A CONSEQUENTIALIST AND DEONTOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Kidnapping for ransom, particularly prevalent in Northern Nigeria, poses a profound moral dilemma for families and society. Families must grapple with the difficult choice of paying ransoms to secure their loved ones' release, knowing that doing so perpetuates a cycle of crime, or refusing to pay, which may endanger the victim's life. This dilemma reflects the clash between consequentialist and deontological ethical perspectives. Consequentialism suggests that while paying the ransom may save a life immediately, it causes more harm in the long run by encouraging further kidnappings. Conversely, deontology posits that individuals must prioritize the lives of their loved ones, regardless of the broader societal consequences. The problem statement centers on the gap between short-term moral obligations to protect life and long-term societal harms resulting from perpetuating criminal activities. This research seeks to explore the ethical complexities of kidnapping for ransom through the lenses of consequentialist and deontological ethics, assessing how families navigate these moral conflicts. The methodology is primarily qualitative, involving philosophical analysis and case studies of kidnapping incidents in Nigeria. Data will include interviews with affected families, security experts, and community leaders, alongside a review of existing literature on ransom policies and criminal justice approaches. The expected outcomes include a deeper understanding of the moral frameworks guiding families' decisions and the development of a conceptual model to reconcile personal and societal ethical obligations. The research aims to contribute to the philosophical discourse on moral dilemmas and inform policy decisions regarding ransom payment strategies in Nigeria.

Keywords: Kidnapping, consequentialism, deontology, moral dilemma, ransom, Nigeria.

Introduction

Kidnapping for ransom has become a major security challenge in Nigeria, particularly in the northern regions. Over the past decade, the rise in criminal activity related to kidnapping has led to significant social, economic, and psychological consequences. Criminal groups and insurgents have turned to kidnapping as a lucrative business, often targeting vulnerable individuals, travelers, and even school children. This alarming trend has led to increased fear and instability in the affected communities (Okoli & Agada, 2014). The complexity of the situation is further compounded by the involvement of multiple actors, including politically motivated groups, bandits, and local criminals (Onuoha, 2018).

This criminal phenomenon poses a moral dilemma for families and communities. On one hand, paying ransom can ensure the immediate safety of loved ones. On the other hand, it perpetuates the cycle of crime, funding further kidnappings and undermining societal stability. Many families, driven by desperation, opt to pay the ransom, but in doing so, they contribute to the sustainability of this criminal industry (Omale, 2020). The ethical implications of these decisions are significant, raising questions about personal and societal responsibility in the face of organized crime.

As kidnapping for ransom continues to threaten national security, it is crucial to examine the moral conflicts that arise from the dilemma of paying ransom. Analyzing these dilemmas through consequentialist and deontological ethical lenses provides a deeper understanding of the choices families must make, while also informing public policy on the ethics of ransom payment (Nwankwo & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). Kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria presents a profound moral dilemma for families of victims. When faced with the prospect of losing a loved one, many families must grapple with the difficult choice of whether to pay the ransom demanded by kidnappers. On the one hand, paying the ransom often ensures the immediate survival and release of the victim, providing short-term relief to families who are desperate to save their loved ones (Okoli & Agada, 2014). On the other hand, this act perpetuates a vicious cycle of criminal activity, as ransom payments incentivize further kidnappings, enabling criminal groups to expand their operations and endanger more lives in the future (Omale, 2020).

This moral conflict embodies the tension between short-term survival and long-term societal harm. While families may feel compelled to pay ransom to safeguard their loved ones, they also contribute to a system that destabilizes the nation's security and fosters lawlessness (Onuoha, 2018). The ethical implications of this decision are multifaceted: on one side, there is the deontological duty to protect family members, while on the other, there are consequentialist concerns about the broader societal impact of ransom payments (Nwankwo & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). This study seeks to explore the ethical dimensions of these decisions, offering a philosophical analysis of the moral trade-offs involved.

What are the ethical implications of paying ransom to kidnappers? The act of paying ransom involves complex moral considerations. On one hand, it fulfills a family's immediate obligation to protect and preserve the life of a loved one. However, the payment simultaneously fuels a criminal economy, perpetuates violence, and undermines societal security in the long term (Okoli & Agada, 2014). This question explores the ethical consequences of ransom payments from both consequentialist and deontological perspectives, examining whether the short-term benefit of saving a life justifies the broader societal harm caused by funding criminal activities (Nwankwo & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). How do families navigate this moral conflict? Faced with the dilemma of paying ransom, families must make difficult decisions that balance their emotional, moral, and practical concerns. This question seeks to understand how families in Nigeria, especially in the northern regions where kidnapping is prevalent, navigate the tension between protecting their loved ones and contributing to criminality. It also examines how cultural, religious, and social factors influence these decisions and the strategies families employ in responding to kidnappers' demands (Onuoha, 2018).

The objective of this study is to explore the ethical frameworks guiding decisions in kidnapping for ransom-cases. This study aims to delve into the philosophical and ethical principles, particularly consequentialism and deontology, that influence how families and society respond to kidnappings for ransom. By analyzing the moral trade-offs between paying ransom to save a life versus perpetuating crime, the study will explore how these ethical frameworks guide decision-making during ransom negotiations and their long-term effects on society (Nwankwo & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Okoli & Agada, 2014). It is also to examine how these frameworks can inform policy and criminal justice. The study also seeks to investigate how the ethical analysis of

ransom payment decisions can inform criminal justice policy and law enforcement practices in Nigeria. The research will provide insights on how consequentialist and deontological approaches can shape strategies to combat kidnapping, from prevention to legal penalties while balancing human rights and societal well-being. This objective involves recommending policy reforms that reflect both ethical considerations and practical effectiveness in addressing kidnapping for ransom (Onuoha, 2018).

Ethical Theories and Moral Frameworks

There are two theories that the paper intends to examine. The first is Consequentialism. Consequentialism evaluates the morality of actions based on their outcomes. The core principle is that an action is morally right if it leads to the best overall consequences (Mill, 1863). In cases of kidnapping for ransom, consequentialist reasoning would focus on the long-term harm caused by paying ransom. While paying ransom may save the life of a loved one, it also encourages kidnappers to continue their criminal activities, perpetuating violence and insecurity in society (Nwankwo & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). Philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argue for the greatest happiness principle, where moral actions are those that maximize overall well-being. In this case, refusing to pay ransom may prevent future harm, even if it involves a short-term personal loss (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1863).

The second ethical framework that the paper discusses is deontological ethics. Deontological ethics focuses on the morality of actions themselves, rather than their consequences. According to Immanuel Kant, moral actions are guided by duty and adherence to universal moral laws, regardless of outcomes (Kant, 1785). From a deontological perspective, the moral duty to protect one's loved ones may override concerns about the societal impact of paying ransom. Families might prioritize their duty to secure the immediate safety of the victim, considering it a moral obligation to save their lives (Onuoha, 2018). Kant's notion of duty emphasizes that some actions, like preserving life, are inherently right, regardless of their broader consequences. Thus, families may feel morally justified in paying ransom to fulfill their duty to protect their loved ones (Kant, 1785).

Incidents of Kidnapping for Ransom in Nigeria and Government Responses

Kidnapping for ransom has emerged as a major security challenge in Nigeria, particularly in the Northern regions. The practice became more prominent in the early 2000s, initially in the Niger Delta region, as a response to socio-political tensions and economic disenfranchisement. Over time, it spread to other parts of the country, especially Northern Nigeria, where armed groups have increasingly turned to kidnapping as a lucrative criminal activity (Onuoha, 2018).

The rise in kidnappings is linked to widespread poverty, unemployment, and political instability. Insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram, have also utilized kidnapping as a tool to fund their operations. Corruption and weak governance have further exacerbated the problem, making it difficult for security agencies to effectively combat the crisis (Adewale, 2020). Notable incidents include the kidnapping of school children from Chibok in 2014 and Dapchi in 2018, where large numbers of girls were abducted by insurgents. These cases drew international attention but also highlighted the vulnerability of civilians, particularly in conflict-affected areas (Duru, 2019). Families often face financial ruin as they struggle to meet ransom demands. Moreover, the psychological trauma experienced by victims and their families has long-term implications. Kidnapping also undermines community trust and social cohesion, leaving lasting scars on the affected regions (Umar, 2021).

In April 2021, armed bandits kidnapped 20 students from Greenfield University in Kaduna State, Northern Nigeria. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of ₦800 million (approximately \$2 million) for their release. Despite negotiations, five students were killed while in captivity. After several weeks, the remaining students were released, reportedly after a ransom was paid, though the amount remains undisclosed. This case highlighted the increasing frequency of kidnappings at educational institutions and the failure of security forces to prevent such attacks (Ogunmade, 2021). The incident deepened the sense of insecurity in the region and led to the temporary closure of several schools in Northern Nigeria. Families suffered both financially and emotionally, and many parents felt forced to pay the ransom, fearing the same fate as those who lost their children.

In July 2021, over 100 students were kidnapped from Bethel Baptist High School in Kaduna State. The bandits demanded a large ransom for their release. Despite government attempts to address the situation, negotiations dragged on for weeks, with students being released in batches

after the payment of ransoms. By September 2021, all remaining students had been freed, reportedly after collective ransoms totaling millions of naira were paid by parents and the school authorities (Sahara Reporters, 2021). The kidnapping sparked outrage across the country, with widespread criticism of the government's inability to secure schools. The case also reignited debates about the moral dilemma families face in paying ransom and the government's stance of not officially negotiating with kidnappers, despite reports of ransom payments being made.

In February 2021, armed men raided Government Science College in Kagara, Niger State, abducting 42 people, including 27 students. The bandits demanded ransom and negotiations ensued. The students and staff were eventually released after an undisclosed ransom was allegedly paid. This incident followed closely on the heels of other mass abductions in the region, such as the Kankara school kidnapping, demonstrating a growing trend of targeting schools (Sambo, 2022). The Kagara kidnapping further intensified fears of sending children to school in the Northern regions. It also emphasized the failure of security forces to protect vulnerable populations and led to calls for better government strategies to handle insecurity in rural areas.

The government has responded in different ways to kidnappings in Nigeria. The Nigerian government has adopted various measures, including military interventions, negotiations, and legislative reforms, to curb kidnapping. However, the effectiveness of these strategies has been limited by systemic issues such as corruption and inadequate resources (Onuoha, 2018). Security agencies face logistical challenges, such as limited personnel and technology, in addressing the vastness of rural areas where kidnappers often operate. Additionally, inadequate coordination between government institutions and communities further hampers the effectiveness of anti-kidnapping policies (Adewale, 2020).

Way Forward in Curbing Kidnapping

Cultural relativism suggests that moral values and ethics are shaped by local customs and traditions. In Nigeria, responses to kidnapping for ransom are often influenced by communal values, family loyalty, and social expectations. In many communities, there is immense social pressure on families to secure the release of kidnapped loved ones, even if it means paying the ransom, as family unity and protection are paramount in Nigerian culture (Igwe, 2019).

Additionally, local customs may prioritize the immediate safety of an individual over broader societal concerns, creating tension between personal and public interests in kidnapping situations.

In contrast, ethical universalism posits that certain moral principles, such as the rejection of criminal activity and the protection of human rights, apply across all cultures. From this perspective, kidnapping for ransom violates universal ethical standards, as it infringes on fundamental human rights, regardless of cultural context (Afolayan & Ikuenobe, 2020). Ethical universalism advocates for policies that discourage ransom payments to protect broader societal welfare, even if it conflicts with localized cultural practices. Reconciling these cultural traditions with global ethical norms remains a challenge, especially in regions where family loyalty and community obligations often take precedence over long-term societal considerations.

To navigate the moral dilemmas posed by kidnapping for ransom, a conceptual framework is necessary to balance conflicting ethical obligations. This framework would integrate both deontological and consequentialist perspectives, allowing policymakers to consider immediate moral duties—such as protecting life—while also addressing the long-term societal harms perpetuated by ransom payments (Okoye, 2022). This balance could inform new policies that recognize the moral complexities involved, ensuring that decisions prioritize both individual rights and broader societal stability.

Effective policy must also involve comprehensive reform of the criminal justice system. National security strategies should be designed to align with moral obligations, such as protecting the public without encouraging criminal behavior. This includes addressing the root causes of kidnapping—such as poverty, inequality, and corruption—through targeted interventions like economic reforms, education, and anti-corruption policies (Ajayi, 2021). Policies should aim to dissuade families from paying ransom while ensuring the government provides adequate protection and recourse for victims.

International collaboration can help local governments navigate these ethical dilemmas by drawing on global best practices and standards. International organizations can provide frameworks to guide national responses to kidnapping for ransom, helping local policies align with universal human rights norms while respecting cultural contexts (Afolayan & Ikuenobe, 2020).

Collaborative efforts can enhance the capacity of governments to implement ethical, effective strategies that prevent future kidnappings.

Conclusion

The ethical complexity surrounding decisions related to kidnapping for ransom is profound, as families grapple with the moral dilemma of paying ransom to save loved ones while recognizing the potential for perpetuating a cycle of violence and criminality (Khamis & Ayuba, 2022). This analysis reveals the necessity of balancing individual moral duties, particularly the instinct to protect the family, with the broader societal impacts of such decisions. Ethical frameworks, including consequentialism and deontology, provide critical lenses through which these dilemmas can be examined, offering insights into the ramifications of ransom payments on both individual lives and the fabric of society (Okwori, 2021).

Future research should expand the study to encompass other forms of organized crime, such as human trafficking and drug-related offenses, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of moral dilemmas in various contexts (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, investigating the role of international law and ethics in local conflicts may yield valuable insights into how global standards can inform and guide ethical responses to kidnapping and other crimes, contributing to more effective policy formulation and implementation (Rachels & Rachels, 2019).

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