
Social roles and the moral judgement of acts and omissions

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Abstract

Three experiments investigated how moral judgements of harmful acts and omissions are affected by information about social roles. Subjects were given vignettes in which the relationship between an actor and victim was varied along the dimensions of solidarity (e.g., friends versus strangers) and hierarchy (e.g., superior versus equal; the terms are from Hamilton & Sanders, 1981). Subjects were asked to judge the morality of the actor in each case, both for a harmful omission (e.g. intentionally withholding the truth) and for an equivalent act (e.g. actively lying). Subjects judged the behaviour worse in the act than the omission. Judgements were also affected by social relationships. The act omission difference was also greater in the low-responsibility roles. Responses to the high-responsibility roles reflect in a consequentialist perspective, focusing on outcomes rather than prohibitions.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper explores how moral judgements are affected by the role relationship of the people being judged. We manipulate the role relationship between two people in the context of a harmful action and, in the context of an equivalent harmful omission of action. We suggest that judged responsibility for harmful omissions, more than acts, depends on social role. Little moral responsibility is assigned to omissions when the victim is a stranger, for example, because the obligation to prevent harm to strangers is seen as limited. The obligation to avoid active harm, on the other hand, is seen as more universal, and less dependent on social role.

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People often judge acts to be worse than omissions with the same consequences. Often, this is because the two cases differ in the intention of the actor. But Spranca, Minsk, and Baron (1991), found that many people persist in making this distinction even when intention is held constant. In one case, for example, subjects were told about John, a tennis player who thought he could beat Ivan Lendl only if Lendl were ill. John knew that Ivan was allergic to cayenne pepper, so, when John and Ivan went out to the customary dinner before their match, John planned to recommend to Ivan the house salad dressing, which contained cayenne pepper. Subjects were asked to compare John's morality in different endings to the story. In one ending, John recommended the dressing. In another ending, John was about to recommend the dressing when Ivan chose it for himself, and John, of course, said nothing. Subjects rated John's behaviour significantly worse in the act ending, despite the fact that his harmful intention was equivalent in the two cases.

This general bias toward omissions has been found repeatedly, even when intention is held constant or when a choice must be made between a harmful act and a more harmful omission. For example, when a hypothetical vaccine with some risk of death from side-effects can prevent a disease with a much larger risk of death, many subjects prefer not to vaccinate (Ritov and Baron, 1990; Baron, 1992). Subjects in these studies often justified the omission bias by arguing that actors were not responsible for the results of omissions. This argument, although amenable to philosophical criticism (see Kuhse, 1987, Ch.2), may still help to explain why harmful omissions are favoured.

Social roles and moral judgement

The Anglo-American legal tradition recognizes no general legal obligation to prevent harm (Feldbrugge, 1966). In most jurisdictions, people are not responsible even for failing to throw a life preserver to a drowning stranger, even when they understand the situation and when the cost to them is trivial. Although other legal systems (and some local American jurisdictions) recognize responsibility for omissions, such responsibility is typically far less than that resulting from otherwise identical actions. In this regard, legal systems reflect — and perhaps influence — common moral intuitions.

The law, however, does assign responsibility for harmful omissions when the injurer stands in certain role relationships to the victim (Feldbrugge, 1966, p.649; Hart, 1968, p.212; Kleining, 1986, p.161; Weinrib, 1980, p.247). For example, parents are responsible for omissions that affect their children, and sea captains are responsible for failures to prevent harm to their passengers. Justifications of this responsibility are often made in terms of implicit contracts or reasonable expectations. Hart (1986) calls these responsibilities 'role responsibilities' and notes that they require certain positive actions.

What kinds of social roles engender such responsibilities? To answer this, we need a taxonomy of roles. In one such taxonomy, Hamilton and Sanders (1981) propose that social roles vary along two dimensions that are important for moral judgement: The vertical dimension of 'hierarchy' and the horizontal dimension of 'solidarity'. Hierarchy distinguishes symmetric and equal dyads, such as friends or coworkers, from dyads in which one member has greater rank or stature, such as parent-child, or boss-employee. Its poles are 'authority' and 'equal'. People in positions of authority have 'diffuse obligations to act, to exercise foresight, and to oversee or advise others' actions' (Hamilton, 1978). There are never complete job descriptions for a company president, a doctor, a general, or a parent. But in exchange for the power to guide and control situations, authorities are held liable for their consequences. Hamilton's concept of hierarchy is similar to Fiske's (1991) concept of Authority Ranking, one of a small set of culturally universal relationship concepts, (Haslam, 1992, provides further evidence for this account).

Subordinates in an authority relationship, however, are often held to a minimum set of relatively explicit job standards. As long as soldiers follow orders, or children obey their parents, they stay out of trouble. A subordinate's duty is to follow the directions of the superior, who often insulates the actor from the outcome. At the other pole of this dimension, equality, responsibility is divided more evenly between the actors. Hamilton and Sanders's (1981) second dimension, 'solidarity', refers to the closeness of a relationship. At the pole known as 'status', social ties are extensive, permanent, and individually unique (e.g. family). At the other extreme, 'contract', relationships are limited, temporary, voluntary, and interchangeable (e.g. salesperson, police officer). In everyday language, status relations can be thought of as personal relations, while contract relations are more anonymous. Relationships of high solidarity correspond to those that Fiske (1991) describes as Communal Sharing, a type of relationship found in all cultures (Clark and Mills 1979) and Haslam (1992) present additional evidence for the existence of this type of relationship as a social category.

Hamilton and Sanders (1981) constructed four vignettes varying in hierarchy and solidarity. They asked subjects to judge the 'responsibility of the actor for what happened' and the appropriate sanction that should be applied. Hamilton and Sanders found: (1) authorities were held more responsible than equals; (2) more responsibility was attributed in contract than in status situations; and (3) the difference between authorities and equals was greatest at low mental state levels, i.e., when action is fully intentional, judgements about authorities can be blamed for harmful omissions (e.g. not thinking of something that they should think of) as well as for their acts. Even if the harm was completely accidental, the authority should have seen it coming. The other findings suggest that social roles affect judgements of responsibility for harmful actions.

These conclusions must be considered especially tentative, however, because Hamilton and Sanders used a different vignette for each of their four role conditions, and the results could be due to other properties of the vignettes than those of interest. In particular, their finding that more responsibility is attributed to actors in contract (anonymous) relationships than in status (personal) relationships runs counter to the analyses of social roles we have presented above. Role responsibilities within a family, for example, should require more care and protection than between strangers. We predict, therefore, that if role is manipulated within a single vignette, that the 'pure' effect of increasing solidarity will be that actors in status (personal) roles will be held more responsible than actors (anonymous) roles. We test this hypothesis in Experiment 1.

Consistent with notions advanced by Hamilton and Sanders and Fiske we propose that moral responsibility for harmful omissions will depend on whether the actor is in a position of authority. Authorities are perceived to have bigger spheres of responsibility, within which they are held accountable for anything that happens (or
at minimum anything that they could have foreseen). This suggests that authorities will be judged by standards that we shall call consequentialist. That is, they will be judged by the expected outcomes of their actions. The essence of consequentialism is that intended outcomes matter, not actions. A sin of omission is exactly as blameworthy as a sin of commission, if the motivation, intention, and expected outcomes are the same in both cases.

Subordinates, however, often have no sphere of responsibility; as long as they follow the established rules, they are not held accountable for bad outcomes and unanticipated events. They will therefore be judged by the propriety of their actions, or their conformity to rules. Such nonconsequentialist standards might be deontological, in Nagel’s (1986) sense of referring to agent-relative moral rules, or legalistic, extending legal principles of responsibility to moral judgement. Equals can be judged by either consequentialist or nonconsequentialist standards, depending, in part, on solidarity.

Regarding solidarity, status (or Communal Sharing) relationships are marked by personal knowledge, interaction, and often affection. In the most personal of personal relationships — lovers and kin — there is a blurring of boundaries between self and other. Each person takes on, to some extent, the personal projects of the other. Each one takes on the positive responsibilities of doing whatever is best for the other. In other words, to the degree that relationships are personal, people are expected to act, and are judged, by consequentialist standards.

In the more anonymous relationships at the contract pole, however, the focus is on rights, not responsibilities. The principle of autonomy implies that others have obligations not to hurt an individual but have no obligations to help. People in contract relationships do not, generally, take a consequentialist attitude towards one another. Smoking is dangerous, but telling strangers about the evils of tobacco violates their rights of autonomy and non-interference. The responsibility rules of contract relationships are: ‘Respect autonomy’ and ‘don’t directly harm anyone’. There is no corresponding responsibility to ‘do what is best for X’, or ‘prevent any harm from befalling X’. People in contract relationships are judged nonconsequentially, by their conformity rules, not by the end results they try to bring about. Thus the distinction between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist judgement emerges in this analysis as an important issue related to both the hierarchy and the solidarity dimensions.

Hypotheses

The general hypothesis of the present study is that moral judgements are made in the context of one’s expectations about social relationships, and will be affected by a direct manipulation of those expectations. More specifically, the following predictions are made.

1. Main effect of solidarity

In a vignette depicting intentional harm done for selfish reasons, an actor in a personal (status) relationship will be judged more immoral than an actor in an anonymous (contract) relationship.

2. Main effect of hierarchy

In a vignette depicting an actor’s negligence leading to harm to a victim, a superior will be judged more immoral than a subordinate.

3. Main effect of act–omission

When a distinction is made between omissions and acts, harmful acts will be judged more immoral than otherwise equivalent omissions.

4. Interaction of solidarity and act–omission

The difference between omissions and acts will be judged smaller when the actor and victim are in a personal relationship than when they are in an anonymous relationship.

5. Interaction of hierarchy and act–omission

The difference between omissions and acts will be judged smaller when an authority is being judged than when a subordinate is being judged.

EXPERIMENT I

Method

Subjects

All subjects were undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania. The first experiment involved 91 students, (42 male, 49 female, mean age: 19) who were handed a questionnaire upon entering an introductory psychology class. All questionnaires were anonymous, asking only the subject’s age and sex. The questionnaire took less than 10 minutes to complete. None of these subjects was paid.

Materials and procedures

Subjects were asked to read one of six versions of the following story:

Nick is moving to Australia in two weeks, so he needs to sell his 1984 Mazda MPG. The car has only 40,000 miles on it, but Nick knows that 1984 was a bad year for the MPG. Due to a manufacturing defect particular to that year, many of the MPG engines fall apart at about 50,000 miles. Nevertheless, Nick has decided to ask for $5000, on the grounds that only one-third of the 1984 MPG’s are
defective. The odds are two out of three that his car will be reliable, in which case it would certainly be worth $5000.

Kathy, one of Nick's best friends, has come over to see the car. Kathy says to Nick: 'I thought I read something about one year of the MPG being defective. Which year was that?' Nick gets a little nervous, for he had been hoping that she wouldn't ask. Nick is usually an honest person, but he knows that if he tells the truth, he will blow the deal, and he really needs the money to pay for his move to Australia. He thinks for a moment about whether or not to tell the truth. Finally Nick says: 'That was 1983. By 1984 they got it all straightened out.' Kathy believes him. She likes the car, and they close the deal for $4700. Nick leaves the country, and never finds out whether or not his car was defective.

Subjects were then asked to 'rate Nick's goodness, or virtue, in this situation on a scale from -100 to +100 where −100 means "extremely bad", as reprehensible as a person could ever be; 0 means "neutral", neither good nor bad; and +100 means "extremely good", as commendable as a person could ever be.' Thus subjects were expected to give negative ratings. The positive range of the scale was included only so that the same scale could be used to evaluate two other vignettes of good actions, which are not reported here.

Half of the subjects first read the act version (where Nick actively lies, given above), gave their rating of Nick's action, and were then asked to imagine the following change to the story:

Nick is trying to decide whether or not to respond truthfully to Kathy's question, but before he can decide, Kathy says 'Oh never mind, that was 1983. I remember now. By 1984 they got it all straightened out.' Nick does not correct her, and they close the deal, as before.

This change converts the story into the omission version. Subjects were then asked to rate Nick's action in the altered scenario.

The other half of the subjects were given the omission version first, asked for their rating, then given a brief passage that converted the story into the act version. All subjects were then asked: 'Is there a difference between the two cases described above? Please explain why, or why not, in just a few sentences.'

The other manipulation consisted of altering the solidarity of the relationship between Kathy and Nick, across subjects. In the 'personal' condition, subjects were given the above version, in which Kathy is 'one of Nick's best friends'. In the 'intermediate' condition, subjects were told that Kathy is 'a woman Nick knows from the neighbourhood'. And in the 'anonymous' condition, subjects were told that Kathy 'saw Nick's ad in a newspaper'. Within each of these three role conditions, the omission-first and act-first conditions were counter balanced, and each of these six groups was approximately evenly divided between males and females.

Results

As shown in Table 1, Nick was given lower ratings when he and Kathy were friends than when they were strangers. The effect of solidarity (anonymous versus personal) on the mean of the omission and act ratings was significant ($t(62) = 2.81$, $p = 0.007$, as was the effect on omission ratings ($t(62) = 3.28$, $p = 0.002$), but not the effect on act ratings ($t(62) = 1.77$). Thus hypothesis 1 (main effect of solidarity) was supported for omission ratings.

Act ratings were significantly lower than omission ratings in all three role conditions at $p = 0.011$ or better. (Wilcoxon tests were used because many act-omission differences were zero, violating the assumptions of parametric tests). The variable 'act-worse', in Table 1, shows the percentage of subjects who rated the act worse than the omission. It is apparent that most subjects rated the act worse, and almost none rated the omission worse. Hypothesis 3 (main effect of act omission) was thus supported.

Subjects made significantly smaller distinctions between omissions and acts in the context of a personal relationship than in the context of an anonymous relationship ($p = 0.024$, one-tailed Mann-Whitney $U$ test on the rating differences; again a nonparametric test was used because many act-omission differences were zero, violating an assumption of parametric tests). Moreover, the proportion of subjects who rated acts as worse was higher in the anonymous relationship than in the personal relationship ($p = 0.038$, one-tailed Fisher exact test). Hypothesis 4 (interaction of solidarity and act omission) was thus supported.

**EXPERIMENT 2**

The first experiment manipulated role across subjects, so that subjects did not know that the experiment concerned social roles. The second experiment manipulated role within subjects, in order to tap subjects' explicit beliefs about social roles and their interactions with omissions and acts.

**Method**

**Subjects**

The second experiment involved 48 undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania (24 male, 24 female, mean age: 19), solicited by sign-up and
telephone, and paid $3 for completing a set of two questionnaires that generally required 20 to 30 minutes. An additional sample of 21 subjects was obtained from the first year class at New York University Law School (13 male, eight female, mean age: 23), solicited personally by a fellow student, and not paid.

Materials and procedures

Experiment 2 also used the Mazda story, but with three modifications. First, in the omission version of Experiment 1, a few subjects pointed out that Nick might have told the truth if Kathy had not interrupted him. This ground for a distinction was eliminated here by explicitly stating, in the omission version, that Nick decides to lie to Kathy, but before he can say anything, Kathy says ‘Oh never mind, that was 1983’. Second, the judgement task was simplified by asking subjects, ‘Please rate Nick’s morality in this situation on a scale from 0 (morally neutral, neither good nor bad) to 100 (the most immoral thing a person could ever do)’. Third, to accomplish the within-subject design, the questionnaires were laid out as follows: on the first page, subjects read the first two-thirds of the story, including the information that Kathy and Nick are either strangers or close friends from high school. They were then asked to ‘consider the following endings to the story’, and were given two short paragraphs embodying the act and the omission endings. Subjects were asked to rate Nick’s behaviour for each of the two endings, using the scale described above. They were then asked to explain their answers, paying special attention to why the two cases are rated the same, or differently. On the second page, subjects were told to imagine a new relationship between Kathy and Nick: ‘they live in the same neighbourhood, and have been casual acquaintances for six months. Everything else in the story is the same’. The two endings were reprinted, and subjects were asked to ‘rate Nick’s morality in this new version of the story’. Then they were asked, ‘Does the new relationship between Kathy and Nick have any effect on your ratings? Please explain why, or why not’. The third page was identical to the second, except that subjects were asked to consider the relationship that they were not given on the first page. In other words, half of all subjects were asked to consider the relationships in the following order: friend, acquaintance, stranger. The other half were asked to consider the reverse order. Within each condition, half the subjects were asked to rate the omission first, half were asked to rate the act first.

Experiment 2 used a second story to investigate the effects of hierarchy manipulation on moral judgement. The ‘Crate story’ concerns two construction workers, Jack and Ted, where Jack is either Ted’s boss (authority), Ted’s co-worker (equal), or Ted’s employee (subordinate). Ted is operating a crane to move a load of bricks, and although he is an experienced construction worker, he does not seem to notice that if he moves the bricks all the way to their destination, the crane will become overextended and might collapse. Jack notices the danger. The two endings are as follows:

**Omission version:** Jack is sitting 30 yards away from the crane, eating his lunch. He is watching Ted move the bricks, and he thinks to himself: ‘This looks dangerous. I’m not sure if the crane can make it all the way. Should I tell him to stop?’ But then he thinks ‘No, why bother? He probably knows what he’s doing’. Jack continues to eat his lunch. A few yards short of its destination, the main arm of the crane collapses, and the crane falls over. One of Ted’s legs is broken.

**Act version:** Jack is standing 30 yards away from the crane, helping Ted by calling out signals to guide the bricks to their destination. Jack thinks to himself: ‘This looks dangerous. . . . [Same thoughts]. Jack motions to Ted to continue on the same course. . . . [Same ending].

Jack’s mental state and the outcome of the story are held constant across the two endings. The act-omission manipulation concerns whether or not Jack, through his physical actions, was part of the causal chain that led to the accident.

The Crane story questionnaire was laid out with the same structure as the Mazda story. Half of the subjects rated Jack first as an authority, then as an equal to Ted, then as a subordinate. The other half encountered the reverse order. Within both groups, half the subjects rated the act before the omission, half did the reverse.

All subjects were given one version of both questionnaires, stapled together in counterbalanced order, with a cover sheet explaining the use of the rating scale.

Results

**Judgements**

The two groups of subjects did not differ significantly on any measures (or interactions), so their results were combined (but, in fact, each major result was significant for each group).

**Mazda story** The mean ratings for the Mazda story are shown in Table 2. As the relationship between Nick and Kathy was varied from anonymous to personal, ratings of Nick’s morality became more severe (all conditions differed at \( p < 0.01 \) by Wilcoxon tests; many role distinctions were zero, so parametric tests could not be used). These differences were also significant for omissions and acts separately. Hypothesis 1 (main effect of solidarity) was thus supported.

In each of the three role conditions, acts were rated worse than omissions \((p < 0.001 \text{ for all, by Wilcoxon tests})\). The line labelled ‘act-worse’ shows that the majority of subjects favoured the omission in the Anonymous and Intermediate conditions. Hypothesis 3 (main effect of act-omission) was thus supported.

Table 2. Mean ratings, and percentage of subjects who rated act or omission worse, Experiment 2, Mazda story \((N = 67)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Anonymous</th>
<th>Solidarity</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>-49.2</td>
<td>-54.9</td>
<td>-63.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act-worse</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omit-worse</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Mean ratings, and percentage of subjects who rated act or omission worse, Experiment 2, Crane story (N = 68)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subordinate</th>
<th>Hierarchy Equal</th>
<th>Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>-41.2</td>
<td>-42.4</td>
<td>-51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission</td>
<td>-30.4</td>
<td>-31.8</td>
<td>-44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act-worse</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omit-worse</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The act–omission difference was greater in the anonymous condition than in the personal condition (p = 0.001, Wilcoxon test). And the number of subjects who rated acts worse was also greater in the anonymous condition than in the personal condition (10 subjects rated the act worse only in the anonymous condition; none rated the act worse only in the personal condition; p = 0.001, sign test). Hypothesis 4 was therefore supported. Forty-seven out of 67 subjects, however, maintained the same act–omission differences across the three roles (20 of these with differences greater than zero). The intermediate condition differed significantly from the personal condition but did not differ from the anonymous condition.

Crane story Table 3 shows the results of the Crane story, in which hierarchy was manipulated within subjects. Authorities were judged more harshly than equals (p = 0.000, Wilcoxon test, for both omission and act) and equals were judged more harshly than subordinates (p = 0.004 for omission, p = 0.031 for act). (The small mean difference for equal versus subordinate resulted from most subjects giving equal ratings to these.) Hypothesis 2 was thus supported. Acts were rated as worse for all three roles (p = 0.000, Wilcoxon tests), supporting hypothesis 2.

The act–omission difference was greater for subordinate than authority (p = 0.002, one-tailed Wilcoxon test on the rating differences). Seven subjects rated the act worse than the omission for the subordinate but not for the authority, while only one subject did the reverse (seven versus one, p = 0.035, one-tailed sign test). The equal condition differed significantly from authority (both by Wilcoxon and sign tests) but not from subordinate. Hypothesis 3 (interaction of hierarchy and act–omission) is thus supported. However, 40 out of 68 subjects maintained the same act–omission difference across the three roles (10 of these with differences greater than zero).

A consistent order effect

In Experiment 1, half the subjects read the omission version first, rated Nick’s action, then read the act version. The other half read the versions in the opposite order. This counter balancing was done as a matter of course, to control for an order effect, although none was predicted. Unexpectedly, a large order effect was found. Eighty per cent of subjects in the omission-first condition rated the act worse than the omission, while only 50 per cent of subjects in the act-first condition made such a distinction (χ² = 7.32, p < 0.01, 1 df). This order effect does not affect the interpretation of Experiment 1, since all effects were in the same direction in both orders.

We initially dismissed this order effect as a puzzling but harmless quirk. However, it reappeared in a systematic way in Experiment 2. In the Crane story, 66 per cent of subjects in the omission-first condition gave the act a lower rating in at least one version of the story, while only 39 per cent of subjects in the act-first condition made such a distinction (χ² = 0.50). Thus there seems to be a general tendency for subjects to make later ratings more severe than earlier ratings. (Again, the predicted effects of role and of act–omission went in the same direction in both order conditions.)

The same sort of order effect was found for the manipulation of roles within subjects. In the Crane story, 78 per cent of those who first rated Jack as a subordinate lowered their ratings when Jack became the foreman, while only 56 per cent of those who first rated Jack as the foreman raised their ratings when he became a subordinate (χ² = 2.91, p < 0.05, 1 df). In the Mazda story, 88 per cent of subjects lowered their ratings as Nick changed from stranger to friend, yet only 66 per cent of subjects raised their ratings as Nick changed from friend to stranger (χ² = 3.25, p < 0.05, 1 df).

In sum, subjects show a general bias towards increasing blame. When making a second moral judgement, having already made the first, subjects find it easier to say 'this is worse' than to say 'this one is not so bad'. In other words, subjects who rated the omission first had no difficulty giving the act an even lower rating. But subjects who rated the act first found it more difficult to 'pull back', and partially excuse the omission. Likewise on the role manipulation, subjects found it easy to increase blame as solidarity or hierarchy increased, yet they were reluctant to decrease blame when solidarity or hierarchy were decreased. We know of no discussion in the literature of such a bias towards increasing blame. It may reflect the operation of a general bias in which blaming is easier than excusing. But, even if this bias exists only on questionnaire studies of moral judgement, it may be of interest to psychologists working in this area. Sixteen per cent of the subjects in Experiment 2 made neither role distinctions nor act–omission distinctions, thus giving the same rating in all conditions. The remaining 84 per cent made distinctions knowingly, because they were given all conditions. Their justifications shed light on the reasons for observed effects.

Subjects who ignored the act–omission distinction (whether or not they also ignored the role distinctions) commonly re-phrased the story to emphasize the equivalence of consequences: 'In both situations, Jack neglected to tell Ted about the danger, resulting in Ted’s injury', or 'Nick withheld or gave misleading information that improved his own well-being while possibly hurting someone else'.

Conversely, subjects who made the act–omission distinction often avoided talking about consequences, and focused instead on the behavioural differences between the omission and act: 'In the first case he lied to her. In the second case he never actually lies to her'. Other subjects pointed to contributory negligence, or shared responsibility in the case of omissions. In the Mazda story, several subjects cited Kathy’s responsibility as a consumer to educate herself, and to find out for herself which year of the car was defective. When she volunteered the wrong information, she contributed to the harm-done; 'She screwed herself', said one subject. In the act case of the Crane story, Jack’s direct participation gives him greater duties than when he was passive observer.
Subjects who did not make role distinctions either appealed to consequences or argued that rules should apply independently of roles. In the Mazda story, these justifications tended to stress the equivalence of all business relationships, e.g., 'When selling something, one should be equally obligated to the buyer-as-friend as the buyer-as-stranger. The level of honesty I endorse should not be a right exclusive to one's friends'. Those who made no role distinction in the Crane story usually stressed the consequentialist obligation to warn or to prevent physical injury: 'The relationship shouldn't matter when danger is present. Ted is a human being and the danger is present'. Some subjects explicitly considered and rejected a legalistic approach. Comparing the authority version to the equal version, one subject wrote, 'Legally, Jack has less responsibility, but morally, he is in just the same boat.'

Role distinctions, when made, were often justified in terms of responsibility, e.g., 'As foreman, Jack should be looking out for these things. He's probably paid more money to do just that'. Other subjects focused on the greater difficulty, or embarrassment, that Jack would have as a subordinate in telling Ted to stop: 'It's hard to approach one's boss and tell him he's doing something wrong'. This greater difficulty in the subordinate version is explained by Sabini and Silver's (1982) notion of 'standing' in moral reproof. Sabini and Silver point out that interventions in a situation of harming amounts to a moral reproof—one person saying to another 'you are doing something wrong'. But one of the prerequisites of making such a reproof is that the actor must stand in the proper relationship to the harmed. He or she must either be the victim of the harmed's action or be in a position of authority over the harmed. One who intervenes without such standing is seen as a meddler. Thus Jack-as-foreman has the authority to reproof Ted; to say, in effect, 'you are being reckless and negligent', and subjects gave Jack very low marks for failing to make this reproof. But when Jack lacked this standing, as either a subordinate or an equal, many subjects were more understanding of his hesitance to intervene. This might explain why the equal and subordinate versions were rated so similarly.

In the Mazda story, the most common reason given for role distinctions was the betrayal of a friend's trust, e.g., 'He knows Kathy and there are more personal feelings. He still goes against those feelings. I think friendship, if nothing else, is trust, and Kathy trusts Nick not knowing he would be dishonest... Nick is completely self-centered and gives no consideration to the consequences'. Note the explicit mention of consequences in the friendship version. Extending Hart's notion of role responsibility beyond its bureaucratic origins, we could say that the role of 'friend' carries special responsibilities in addition to those that are common to all people. Friends have special duties of honesty and protection, so Nick-deceiving-friend breaks a larger set of moral rules than Nick-deceiving-stranger.

Many people who distinguished omissions and acts for Jack-the-subordinate thought that the difference vanished for Jack-the-foreman, e.g., 'Yes, this relationship does have an effect. First of all, if Jack is the foreman he is in charge of everything and this means safety. No matter what Jack is doing on the construction site it is his job to let everyone know of possible dangerous situations, even while eating lunch'. In the Mazda story, it was the extra duties of friendship that seemed to motivate the convergence of omissions and acts. People who perceived a moral difference between lying and failing to tell the truth to a stranger, even when the intention was identical, often denied the distinction in a friendship, as indicated by the following subject, who essentially stated hypotheses 1 and 4.

A person has a greater moral responsibility to those he is closest to... Along with the increased responsibility, the difference between [the omission] and [the act] should converge. The closer you are to a person the less a difference it makes whether or not the other person explicitly relies on you. Part of being close to someone is depending on them to tell you when you are wrong.

**EXPERIMENT 3**

In Experiment 3 we extend and improve upon the previous experiments in three ways. First, the previous experiments used only two stories, so their generalizability is open to question. Experiment 3 uses eight new stories. Second, in the previous experiments we manipulated act-omission within subjects, and found that many subjects knowingly demonstrated a bias towards omissions. In Experiment 3 we manipulate act omission between subjects, to determine if our prior results can be replicated when the distinction is not made salient. Third, in an effort to determine why moral judgement is affected by social role expectations we include a number of additional probe questions.

**Method**

**Subjects**

Two hundred and three subjects were recruited by a sign placed on a prominent walkway of the University of Pennsylvania, offering $6 per hour for filling out psychological surveys. Only persons with a University of Pennsylvania identification card were admitted to the laboratory, and the great majority of these subjects were undergraduate students.

**Materials and procedures**

Eight new stories were written for this experiment, designed in such a way that act-omission and social role could be manipulated independently (full text available from either author).

**Lifeboat** A person in a crowded lifeboat (the captain or a passenger) either fails to throw a rope to a drowning person, or else pulls a rope away from a drowning person.

**Stoke** A stroke patient has little hope for recovery. A medical student (the patient's grandson or unrelated) either 'pulls the plug' on her life-support machine, or else fails to switch the machine on when it has accidentally been switched off.

**Train** A train is heading for Henry's and Al's cars, and Sam fails to switch the train so that it is heading for his own car, or else the train is heading for Sam's car,
and he switches it so that it is heading for Henry's and Al's cars. Sam is either the brother of Henry and Al or unrelated to them.

**Grocery** A customer either fails to correct an error made by a store owner (a friend or a stranger) or else actively misleads the store owner in order to gain $10 in extra change.

**Book** A student either fails to tell another student (friend or stranger) where a needed book is located in the library, in order to get the book for himself, or else he lies when asked where the book is located.

**Accident** A person is involved in a car accident due to her own negligence. But the police assigned the blame to the other driver (a friend or a stranger), and the woman either says nothing, or else concurs when the police ask her if she agrees with their reading of the events.

**Baseball** A boy either fails to warn another boy (friend or stranger), allergic to bees, about bees in the woods, or else actively encourages the other boy to enter the woods. The boys are competing for a place on a baseball team.

**Mission** A soldier either fails to recover a message, accidentally blown into the wastebasket, ordering him to replace another soldier (a subordinate or peer) on an unpleasant mission, or else he blows the message into the wastebasket.

As indicated in these summaries, social role was manipulated in the description of the relationship between the protagonist and his or her 'victim'. In the high role condition relationships involved a higher degree of role responsibility than in the low role condition. To use Hamilton and Sanders's (1981) terms, high role relationships involved either superior roles on the authority dimension, or status role on the solidarity dimension. Low role relationships involved either equality or contract. In the lifeboat story (given above), the actor is either the captain of the boat that sunk (superior, high role) or else he is a regular passenger (equal, low role). In the stroke story, the medical student is either the woman's grandson (status, high role) or else he is unrelated (contract, low role). Two stories manipulated the authority dimension and six stories manipulated solidarity. Each story came in four versions, crossing act-omissions with social role.

Each story was printed at the top of a separate page, followed by a number of probe questions. Because of certain idiosyncrasies of the stories not all probes were appropriate for all stories. The probe questions that were asked for all eight stories were as follows: (1) How immoral was the actor's behavior? (2) How responsible was the actor for the victim's loss? (3) How much did the actor cause the victim's loss? (4) How many people in the actor's situation would have done the same thing? In seven stories (excluding the stroke story, where the victim was unconscious), the following questions were asked: (5) How responsible was the victim for his or her own loss? (6) How much did the victim cause his or her own loss? Seven stories (excluding the stroke story, which did not involve a conflict of interests) also asked the following: (7) Did the actor have a right to put his own interests ahead of the victim's? Several other probe questions asked about rights or responsibilities specific to a particular story. All probe questions required the subject to circle a number on an 11-point scale on which the zero was labeled *not at all, no right, or no obligation*, and the 11 was labeled as *completely, or strong obligation*. The question about the percentage of people who would have done likewise was answered on an 11-point scale running from *nobody to everybody*, with percentages labelled at intermediate points.

### Table 4. Mean immorality ratings in Experiment 3, and effect sizes of role and omission manipulations, and their interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low role</th>
<th></th>
<th>High role</th>
<th></th>
<th>Role effect</th>
<th>Act-omit effect</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Omit</td>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Omit</td>
<td>Act</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifeboat</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>0.82*</td>
<td>1.08**</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroke</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>−1.15*</td>
<td>1.29**</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>−0.59</td>
<td>1.25**</td>
<td>−0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocery</td>
<td>7.80</td>
<td>9.04</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.07**</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>5.82</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>7.80</td>
<td>2.05**</td>
<td>1.61**</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>7.13</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>8.43</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>9.24</td>
<td>7.48</td>
<td>8.54</td>
<td>−0.59*</td>
<td>1.17**</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>7.02</td>
<td>7.80</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.63*</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>7.44</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>0.34*</td>
<td>1.05**</td>
<td>0.37*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

All subjects received the eight stories in the order given above, but the subjects were divided into four groups depending on the versions of the stories they were given. Group 1, for example, got the high-role omission version of the first story, followed by the high-role act version of the second story, followed by the low-role omission version of the third story followed by the low-role act version of the fourth story. This order was then repeated for the fifth through eighth stories. The other three groups were given different orders of the four versions.

A ninth page asked subjects whether they had noticed that some stories involved actions and other stories involved omissions, and then asked whether this difference should be taken into account.

### Results and discussion of Experiment 3

Table 4 shows the mean immorality ratings (question 1) for each story, and overall. The main effect of omission versus act is significant overall (t(196) = 7.98, p < 0.001) and for seven of the eight stories. This is, we believe, the first demonstration of a between-subjects omission bias.

The main effect of role is significant overall (r = 2.22, p < 0.05), in the predicted direction, but it is clearly not consistent across the eight stories. In fact, the effect of role was significant in the opposite direction (low-role worse than high-role) in two of the stories. The largest reversal occurred in the stroke story, where subjects said that it was worse for a stranger to 'pull the plug' on the old woman than it was for her own grandson to do so. This reversal may have occurred because many subjects did not perceive pulling the plug to be a form of harm-doing. This conclusion is supported by the eight stories. Subjects who favor euthanasia may have perceived the grandson's action (or inaction) to be morally praiseworthy. (The smaller reversal of the role effect in the baseball story is more difficult to understand).

Experiment 3 thus confirms the findings of the previous experiments: harm-doing by a person in a high role is generally worse than the same action by a person in a low role. However, Experiment 3 adds the caveat that there may be some exceptions to this rule. Moral judgement is affected by social role manipulations, although the nature of this interaction may be complex, and is not yet fully understood.
Despite the reversibility of the role effect, it still makes sense to test the main hypothesis that role interacts with act-omission. This hypothesis holds simply that the act-omission distinction is greater in low-role conditions than in high-role conditions. The interaction between act-omission and role is significant ($r = 1.65$, $p < 0.05$) overall and it is in the predicted direction for seven of the eight stories. Even the two stories that showed a reverse-role effect (stroke and baseball) showed an interaction in the predicted direction. For example, in the stroke story, there is little difference between act and omission for the patient's grandson. However, when the medical student is a stranger, the difference becomes quite large. It is particularly bad to pull the plug actively when one has no special relation or responsibility to the patient.

Comments, requested at the end of the questionnaire, were not as enlightening as in other studies because subjects were typically not simultaneously aware of the manipulation of role and act-omission, although most who commented did indicate an awareness of the act-omission distinction across the stories. However, they were generally consistent with the comments reviewed elsewhere, e.g. 'When life is involved, you must look towards responsibility. The captain of the boat had no obligation to the victim', 'The student had no right to pull the switch', 'The soldier should've been shot for fucking with the chain of command'. One comment of particular interest provided a rationale for reversing the usual act-omission distinction: 'My reactions toward omitted actions were perhaps harsher because of the suspicion that omitted actions can be disguised with bogus innocence'. Although such reversals have not been found on the average in any study, a few subjects do consistently rate harmful omissions as worse in some studies (Spranca et al., 1991).

Several analyses were carried out on the additional probe questions asked after each story. One analysis concerned the mediation of omission bias by causality. Spranca et al. (1991) reported that, for the one story examined, the actor's causal role was less in omissions than in acts (even though the outcome was within the actor's control in both cases) and that this difference in judged causality was correlated across subjects with the omission bias. We replicated this result here for the eight stories. The following pattern was found in a multiple regression analysis carried out for each story (except where noted): act-omission affected morality ratings significantly across subjects (except for accident), causality ratings correlated with morality ratings, causality ratings correlated with morality ratings even when act-omission (as an indicator variable) was partialled out, but act-omission did not correlate significantly with morality ratings when causality ratings were partialled out. This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that judged causality is a mediator of the act-omission effect. That is, act-omission has no effect on morality judgements except through its effect on judged causality. Undoubtedly this is too strong a statement to hold generally, but the results do indicate the importance of perceived causality. (Role was not correlated with causality judgements for most stories.)

The null hypothesis for the $t$ test is that the interaction term is zero. In a within-subject design, this term can be computed for each subject. However, the four conditions differed significantly in the magnitude of this interaction and other effects, so the error term for the $t$ test includes this systematic variance. When the within-condition variance is used as the error term in an analysis of variance, slightly better significance levels (lower values of $p$) are achieved.

To condense the data, we carried out factor analyses of each group of ratings (separately by story). These analyses indicated two main factors in each group, except for stroke. Varimax rotation suggested that, in each story except stroke, the factors corresponded to properties of the actor (responsibility, causality, number of others who would do the same, right to decide, right to put one's interest ahead of someone else's) and properties of the victim (responsibility, causality, obligation to look out for one's own interest). For stroke, a single factor was sufficient, which is consistent with the victim being in a coma. In every case with two factors, the morality rating loaded on the first factor and not on the second.

CONCLUSION

The difference between omissions and commissions was found in all studies, including the between-subject design of Experiment 3. Omissions were also found to be more sensitive than acts to role manipulations. For actors in high solidarity or authority roles, the moral distinction between acting and omitting was at its minimum. As role was varied towards low solidarity or low authority, the bias towards favouring omissions grew. We note that this effect may be somewhat culture-specific. Miller, Bersoff and Harwood (1990) examined the attitudes of Indian and U.S. students toward harmful omissions. Although U.S. students' judgements were affected by role relationships, as found here, Indian students' judgements were largely unaffected by role relationships.

In addition, the general claims of Hamilton and Sanders (1981) were supported, namely that moral judgement is sensitive to social role expectations. Authorities were judged more harshly than equals and subordinates. However, contrary to the findings of Hamilton and Sanders (1981), actors in close personal relationships (status) were generally judged more harshly than actors in more anonymous (contract) relationships. Thus the 'pure' effect of increasing solidarity within a vignette appears to be an increase in moral condemnation.

We have found, then, that, at least in some cultures, some social roles are distinguished more in the obligation to avoid harmful omissions than to avoid harmful acts. Put another way, the prohibition against harmful acts tends to be more universal, applying to everyone. The consequentialist prohibition against harmful omissions may tend to be limited to certain role relationships. Perhaps this is how we avoid the apparently unlimited obligations that would appear to arise from a general prohibition on harmful omissions (Singer, 1979). We are at every moment failing to help strangers, and it would be difficult to maintain a positive moral self-image if all such omissions were seen as equivalent to harmful acts.

Hamilton and Sanders (1981) may have reached their opposing conclusion by using four different stories to contrast the four roles of role relationships. However Hamilton and Sanders (1992) speculate that the 'pure' effect of increasing solidarity within a single story would be as we found it to be: increasing responsibility.
REFERENCES


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Asymmetrical evaluation of ingroup versus outgroup members: a look from an information integration perspective

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Abstract

In evaluating ingroup versus outgroup members two types of information can be used: 'categorizing information' related to the target's group membership and 'individuating information' related to pieces of information specific to the target to be judged. Information integration theory (IIT; Anderson, 1981) is applied as a formal tool for predicting the judgement resulting from these different pieces of information. It is further assumed that due to a general positivity bias in evaluating own affairs judges tend to evaluate ingroup members more positively than outgroup members. By applying IIT ingroup favouritism on the level of individual targets can be predicted. More importantly, an interaction concerning an asymmetrical impact of ingroup versus outgroup membership information dependent on the individuating information's valence can be predicted: the enhancement of ingroup members should be stronger for negative individuating information, whereas the devaluation of outgroup members should be stronger for positive individuating information. Further a negative correlation between intragroup differentiation and intergroup differentiation on the level of individual judgements is assumed. In a two (judge's group membership: overestimator versus underestimator) by three (target's group membership information absent, target's group membership information present as either ingroup, or outgroup member) by three (valence of the individuating information: positive, neutral, negative) factorial minimal group design with repeated measures on the last two factors the targets' likability had to be rated. The findings are in accord with predictions. Theoretical conclusions with respect to social judgement - and to intergroup theories as well as with respect to general approaches to context effects in social judgement are discussed.

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