PSYC 235: Research Methods in Psychology
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Angela Choi

Effect of Excuses on Making Moral Judgments

by Angela Choi

Abstract

We wanted to determine if excuses would affect moral judgments. We hypothesized that participants would consider a man's failure to help a stranger to be less wrong if this man had an excuse than if he did not have an excuse. We also hypothesized that reading excuse and no excuse omission scenarios would prime participants to make consequence-based and rule-based decisions respectively in a subsequent and unrelated dilemma. Participants were randomly assigned to read an excuse or no excuse version of an omission scenario. They were then asked to respond to a subsequent moral dilemma vignette using consequence-based or rule-based decision-making processes. Results showed a significant effect of excuse on judgments of moral wrongness in the omission scenarios, but no effect of excuse on the decision-making process in the moral dilemma vignette. The theory that excuses can affect subsequent moral judgments remains inconclusive and requires further exploration.

Effect of Excuses on Making Moral Judgments

With the exception of five states, the United States adheres to the common law that asserts that a person's failure to assist a stranger in a perilous situation will not result in criminal liability. Even if the form of assistance means doing something as simple as calling 911, a

person's failure to act would not be considered legally wrong (McIntyre, 1994). Despite the common law, most people would consider this person's failure to assist to be morally wrong.

Here are two versions of an omission scenario that illustrate the point above. Imagine a man who passes a stranger choking on a piece of food. This man can either perform the Heimlich maneuver or continue on his way. In the first version, the man continues on his way because he is rushing to the hospital to be with his dying mother. In the second version, he continues on his way because he does not want to become involved with a stranger's affairs. In both versions, the choking person dies and the man's failure to help is not legally wrong. However, do you believe what the man did is *morally* wrong? If so, in which version of the omission scenario and why?

We are not certain how people will answer these questions because there has been little research on how moral judgments are affected by different acts of omission. Instead, there is extensive research that compares how moral judgments are affected by acts of omission and commission. Omission is the failure to act to prevent harm and commission is an act that causes harm.

Kordes-de Vaal (1996) conducted a study to determine if omission and commission scenarios would influence judgments on immorality. Participants were assigned to read either omission or commission scenarios, or a combination of both. Results indicated that participants thought that characters in omission scenarios were less responsible for outcomes than characters in commission scenarios. Participants also perceived a character's intentions differently in omission and commission scenarios. In an omission scenario, a character's failure to act was seen more as a non-decision and less as an intention to harm whereas in a commission scenario, a character's actions signified his intention to harm.

We believed that the comparative nature between acts of omission and commission can explain why an act of omission is legally permissible. An act of omission is legally right because despite the fact that a person fails to help a stranger in need, this person did not intend or cause the stranger to be in that situation. Because he did not cause the situation to occur, the person is not legally liable to help the stranger (Robinson, 1984). However, perhaps the same act of omission could be considered morally wrong. We speculated that people may think that the fact that the person did not intend or cause the stranger to be in a perilous situation should not preclude this person from helping the stranger. Furthermore, a person should help a stranger in a grave situation because if the person were in the same position, he or she would want to be helped. For these reasons, failure to help may be perceived to be morally wrong.

We wanted to expand on the existing research, focus solely on acts of omission and determine if judgments of moral "wrongness" can vary depending on the circumstances in omission scenarios. In other words, we wanted to test if different types of omission scenarios would affect judgments of moral "wrongness." Because research has shown that intentions influence participants to perceive omission and commission scenarios differently, we wanted to find out if intentions would affect how participants perceive omission scenarios. More specifically, we wanted to see if excuses in omission scenarios would affect people's judgments of moral "wrongness."

We first hypothesized that the extent that one finds another person's omission to be morally wrong depends on whether this person has an excuse. We predicted that participants would view the omission scenarios as such: If a person has an excuse for ignoring a stranger's need for help, then the excuse would be seen as a mitigating circumstance that justifies the person's omission. On the other hand, a person who ignores a stranger without an excuse would be seen as having

acted immorally. We tested this hypothesis by presenting participants with either an excuse or no excuse version of an omission scenario similar to the one mentioned in the beginning of this report.

To further explore the effects of excuses, we wanted to determine if excuses could be used to prime moral judgments on a subsequent and unrelated dilemma. Psychology studies over the past 25 years have shown that different factors can prime people's "psychological concepts and processes" without their awareness (Bargh, 2006). In psychology studies, priming occurs when exposure to a stimulus affects a participant's performance in a subsequent task, unbeknownst to the participant. More specifically, many psychology studies have shown that various factors can prime people's moral judgments. For example, DeSteno and Valdesolo (2006) used a comedy clip to prime participants to provide different answers to the footbridge dilemma. Compared to participants who received a neutral prime, participants who watched the comedy clip were more likely to find it acceptable to push a heavy man off a footbridge in order to prevent a trolley from killing five people tied to the tracks.

If a comedy clip, something that is seemingly unrelated to the study, can subconsciously affect participants' answers to a dilemma, we hypothesized that excuses, which *are* related to intentions and moral judgments, would prime participants' answers to the subsequent moral dilemma vignette. In the dilemma, participants had to decide whether a girl should keep a promise to her best friend by helping her study or console an emotionally unstable new girl at school.

We then honed our second hypothesis based on Lammers' and Stapel's research on moral judgments (Lammers and Stapels, 2009). According to Lammers and Stapel, rule-based decisions and consequence-based decisions are drawn from two different lines of moral

reasoning. A rule-based decision maker considers whether or not an action is intrinsically right or wrong, regardless of the circumstances. For example: A rule-based decision maker would consider a man who steals to be wrong even if the man steals to prevent his family from starving. On the other hand, a consequence-based decision maker would consider the mitigating circumstances that led the man to steal and find his actions not to be wrong.

Lammers and Stapel explored the priming effects of power on moral reasoning. In one study, they asked participants to read a moral dilemma. Next, participants completed a word-search puzzle that either had high-power words (control, influence) or low-power words (subordinate, powerless). These word-search puzzles primed participants to be in high-power and low-power mindsets, respectively.

Lammers and Stapel believed that high-power participants care about maintaining stability and status quo because doing so allows them to exert their power and control resources. Hence, they predicted that high-power participants would make rule-based decisions because rules maintain status quo and reinforce the position of power. On the other hand, they hypothesized that low-power participants would focus on the fairness of an act. The researchers believed that low-power participants would make consequence-based decisions because they would judge the fairness of an act based on its consequences. The results supported these hypotheses.

Because Lammers and Stapel successfully used power to prime participants to make different moral judgments, we wanted to test whether excuses would have a similar priming effect on moral judgments. We hypothesized that participants who were primed with an excuse would make consequence-based decisions while participants who were not primed with an excuse would make rule-based decisions. In the excuse version, the man has a good excuse not to assist the stranger—he needs to get to the hospital as soon as possible to be with his dying

mother. We hypothesized that the excuse would prime the participants to transfer this line of reasoning to the moral dilemma vignette. The new girl's emotional state of mind would be a good excuse for Anna to break her promise to her friend, despite the fact that breaking promises is wrong. On the other hand, we hypothesized that participants who were not primed with an excuse would make a rule-based decision. In the no excuse omission scenario, the man does not have a legitimate excuse not to assist the stranger. We hypothesized that the absence of an excuse would prime the participants to transfer this way of thinking to the moral dilemma vignette and cause them to believe that the girl does not have a good excuse to break her promise to her best friend. Hence, these participants will make rule-based decisions and think that a promise should be kept, regardless of the circumstances.

Method

Participants

Fifty Yale students, 17 male students and 33 female students, completed the study during regular class hours as a requirement for a psychology research methods course. Five participants were excluded from the data because they did not complete the study. Hence, this report contains data for the remaining 45 participants. Twenty-two participants were randomly assigned to read the excuse version of the omission scenario while 23 participants were randomly assigned to read the no excuse version of the omission scenario. Because the participants were college students, it is reasonable to assume that their ages ranged from 18-22.

Materials and Design

We created an excuse and no excuse version of an omission scenario. In both scenarios, Jacob passes a stranger who is choking on a piece of food. Jacob can perform the Heimlich maneuver or continue on his way. In the excuse version, Jacob continues on his way because he

is rushing to the hospital to be with his dying mother (See Appendix A). In the no excuse version, Jacob continues on his way because he does not want to become involved with a stranger's affairs (See Appendix B). In both versions, the choking person dies.

We were interested in measuring two dependent variables in this study. The first dependent variable was a participant's answer (scale of 1-5) to the question "Do you think what Jacob did was wrong?" (See Appendix A and Appendix B). The answer "Yes" was operationally defined as a rating of 1 or 2, with 1 as the strongest indication. A rating of 3 represented a participant's indifference between a "yes" and "no" answer. The answer "No" was operationally defined as a rating of 4 or 5, with 5 as the strongest indication.

The second dependent variable was whether participants used rule-based or consequence-based reasoning after reading the moral dilemma vignette. In the dilemma, Anna made a promise to her best friend to help her study for her math final. On the day that they are supposed to study, Anna is approached by the new girl in school. The new girl is emotionally unstable and asks Anna if she would be willing to talk with her. The participants were asked to rate from a scale of 1-7 whether Anna should keep her promise to her best friend (1) or console the new girl (7) (See Appendix C). A rule-based decision was operationally defined as any rating between 1-3, with 1 as the strongest indication. A rating of 4 represented a participant's indifference between a rule-based and consequence-based decision. A consequence-based decision was operationally defined as any rating between 5-7, with 7 as the strongest indication.

The omission scenarios and moral dilemma vignette were presented on two separate sheets of paper in order to prevent the participants from knowing that they were part of the same study. Moreover, both versions of the omission scenario and the moral dilemma vignette were printed with different sets of instructions and in different fonts.

Procedure

We randomly assigned participants to read either the excuse or no excuse version of the omission scenario. Next, they answered the corresponding question. As soon as they were finished, the participants were presented with the moral dilemma vignette and asked to answer the accompanying question. After the participants answered the dilemma question, they were debriefed about the real purpose of the study.

Results

We hypothesized that participants who read about Jacob in the excuse omission scenario would find him to be less wrong than participants who read about Jacob in the no excuse omission scenario. We also hypothesized that participants who read the excuse version of the omission scenario would make consequence-based decisions for the dilemma while participants who read the no excuse version of the omission scenario would make rule-based decisions for the dilemma. In order to test these hypotheses, an independent t-test was conducted. As predicted, participants who read the excuse version of the omission scenario believed that Jacob was less wrong than participants who read the no excuse version of the omission scenario. There was a significant difference in the answers for the excuse (M=3.05, SD=1.17) and no excuse (M=2.00, SD=.95) omission scenarios, $t(43)=3.29$, p=.002, such that participants who read the excuse omission scenario thought that Jacob was less wrong than the participants who read the no excuse omission scenario (See Figure 1). Contrary to the second hypothesis, there was no significant difference in the answers to the dilemma for the participants who read the excuse (M=2.05, SD=1.00) and no excuse (M=2.39, SD=1.20) omission scenarios, $t(43)= -1.05$, p=.30.

Discussion

The results confirmed the first hypothesis that participants judged a bystander's failure to help a stranger to be less wrong if he had an excuse than if he did not have an excuse. The results supported our belief that the extent to which one finds a person's actions to be wrong can change with the person's circumstances. In this study, the presence of an excuse led participants to think that the bystander was less wrong. These results indicate that participants may see an excuse as a mitigating circumstance that justifies the "immoral" nature of an act of omission.

On the other hand, the results did not support the second hypothesis that judging a bystander who has an excuse would increase consequence-based decisions on a subsequent moral dilemma. Although the second hypothesis was not confirmed, we do not believe that there is enough information to conclude that the second hypothesis is false. Instead, we believe that we were unable to confirm the hypothesis due to design flaws in the study.

In the dilemma, Anna has to choose between keeping a promise to her best friend by helping her study and consoling an emotionally unstable new girl at school. Although we tried to phrase the dilemma in a way that would cause the participants to be swayed in both directions, the majority of participants gave a rating between 1-3 for the dilemma, regardless of which omission scenario they read. These results indicate that the wording of the dilemma may have caused the participants to believe that the new girl did not need the consolation as much as the best friend needed help studying. In the dilemma the new girl asks Anna to meet her at Starbucks to finish their conversation. The participants might have thought, "If she is willing to go to a *public* place to talk about her problems at a *later* time, then she does not require immediate attention. On the other hand, Anna's best friend cannot delay her preparation for her exam." As a result, participants may not have even perceived Anna to be in a dilemma and it was clear to them what Anna should do.

If the participants did not consider the situation to be a dilemma, then they did not need to make a consequence or rule-based decision. The participants would have thought that Anna should keep her promise to her best friend because it is the most logical thing to do. Why should Anna forsake her best friend to help the new girl when the new girl does not require immediate attention and when Anna is certain that her best friend is relying on her? In other words, the participants answered the dilemma question based on their outcome preference for Anna to help her best friend instead of using consequence or rule-based decision-making processes. If participants made their decisions based on a preferred outcome, then there are limitations to the validity of the operational definition of the second dependent variable. We used a scale to 1-7 to determine how participants would resolve the dilemma, when in actuality; participants may not have even perceived a dilemma. Moreover, we decided that each rating from 1-7 represented either a consequence or rule-based decision, when in actuality, these ratings could have simply represented participants' preferred outcome. Additionally, we did not ask participants to state the reasons for their answers.

One way to reduce the limitation in validity is to rephrase the dilemma in a way that will cause the participants to be torn between Anna keeping her promise to her best friend and helping the new girl. For example, the new girl could say that she has suicidal thoughts. This new sense of urgency may cause participants to view the situation as a dilemma. If the situation is perceived as a dilemma, participants may no longer have a preferred outcome. Imagine this: There is a chance that if Anna keeps her promise to her friend and does not help the new girl, the new girl will hurt herself. In this case, Anna should help the new girl. Alternatively, there is a chance that if Anna keeps her promise to her friend and does not help the new girl, the new girl won't hurt herself. In this case, Anna should keep her promise to her friend. However, due to the

ambiguity of the dilemma, participants cannot be certain what will happen. With the dilemma rephrased, it will be harder to make a decision. Hence, they may have to rely on rule-based or consequence-based decision-making processes to determine what Anna should do.

Despite the limitations in validity, the results suggest that this study may have good reliability. Thirty nine out of the 45 participants gave a rating between 1-3. If the overwhelming majority of participants decided that Anna should keep her promise to her friend regardless of which version of the omission scenario they read, the participants most likely did not sense the new girl's urgency for help and could not understand why Anna would want to help the new girl over her best friend. With more than 80% of participants voting for Anna to keep her promise, the results support our belief that participants did not perceive Anna to be in a dilemma. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that if the same study were conducted, other Yale students would give similar answers. However, to ensure that we would get the same results each time we run the study, it would be necessary to test-retest.

Despite the likelihood of having good reliability, there are limitations to the generalizability of this study. For many Yale students, academics is one of their highest priorities. Yale accepts students who have demonstrated academic achievements in high school. It is very likely that students who choose to matriculate at Yale continue to strive for academic success. They know that academic achievements qualified them to attend Yale. They also know that academic achievements will qualify them for future opportunities. Hence, when Yale students were asked to read the dilemma, the repercussions of Betty failing her class might have automatically influenced them to decide that Anna should keep her promise to Betty and help her study for her math final. Students from other colleges and non-college students may not be as concerned with academic success and may consider the new girl's situation to be more pressing. Because Yale

students show a history of prioritizing academics, the results of this study are not representative of that of other people.

However, because Yale students do have other concerns and priorities besides grades, it would be erroneous to say that they are different from the general population and that it was this difference that caused the null result. To counter the claim in the previous paragraph, we want to point out that academics is not the only thing that Yale students care about. Students would not be able to get into Yale if they only had academic achievements. According to Yale's admission website, admissions officers are looking for "applicants with a concern for something larger than themselves" (http://admissions.yale.edu/what-yale-looks-for). Therefore, instead of assuming that the majority of Yale students answered similarly due to their concern for academics, we should consider other factors that could have attributed to the similar answers. As previously mentioned, based on the wording of the dilemma, the participants may not have perceived the situation as a dilemma. They may not have perceived the new girl's problem to be urgent and as a result, had an outcome preference for Anna to help her friend study.

Instead of attributing the null results to the Yale students, we believe that the null result was caused by design flaw. As previously mentioned, the moral dilemma vignette was phrased in such a way that caused participants to fail to perceive the situation as a dilemma. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that participants had an outcome preference for Anna to help her best friend because they did not perceive a dilemma. We believe that this explanation can account for the null result. In future studies, if we rephrase the dilemma to demonstrate the new girl's urgent need for help, more participants may perceive the situation as a dilemma and use either consequence-based or rule-based decision-making processes.

Furthermore, because we used an independent variable (excuse v. no excuse omission scenario) that has never been used in previous psychology studies to manipulate a dependent variable that has been used in a previous psychology study, it is still inconclusive as to whether the manipulation can affect the dependent variable. If further exploration confirms our second hypothesis, this study could expand on Lammer's and Stapel's current research on consequence or rule-based decisions. Confirmation of the hypothesis could demonstrate that another factor besides power can influence whether people make consequence-based or rule-based decisions.

Although we did not confirm our second hypothesis, our results did support our first hypothesis that excuses would affect how a person perceives the moral "wrongness" of an act of omission. We believe that confirmation of our first hypothesis has real-world implications in the legal field. As previously mentioned, five states do not adhere to the common law regarding omissions liability. For example, the statute in Vermont states,: "A person who knows that another is exposed to grave physical harm shall, to the extent that the same can be rendered without danger or peril to himself or *without interference with important duties owed to others*, give reasonable assistance to the exposed person" (McIntyre, 2004).

In this study, participants believed that Jacob's failure to act was less wrong when he had an excuse. It is possible that participants believed that helping the stranger would interfere with Jacob's *important* duty to his mother. However, what if other people do not consider Jacob's visit to his mother to be an *important* duty? If people have opposing views, does the Vermont statute truly reflect what society expects people to do when they see a stranger in a perilous situation? If not, how can legislators change the wording of this statute? On the other hand, because participants thought that Jacob's failure to act was more wrong when he did not have an excuse, is it possible for Vermont statute to spread to other states?

Additionally, this study could have real-world implications in the court system. Depending on personal preferences and decision-making processes, jury members can choose to consider the circumstances leading up to a crime or they can choose to ignore the circumstances and view a crime as being intrinsically wrong. How they construe the crime can, in turn, determine if they make rule-based or consequence-based decisions regarding the verdict. Hence the outcome of a case may simply reflect jury members' decision-making processes. It can be unsettling to know that people's futures rest in the hands of ordinary citizens who make decisions based on facts and circumstances that they choose to consider or ignore. Because rule-based and consequence-based decision-making processes can have this magnitude of impact on our judgments, we believe that it is worthwhile to determine other factors and priming effects that can influence us to make rule-based or consequence-based decisions.

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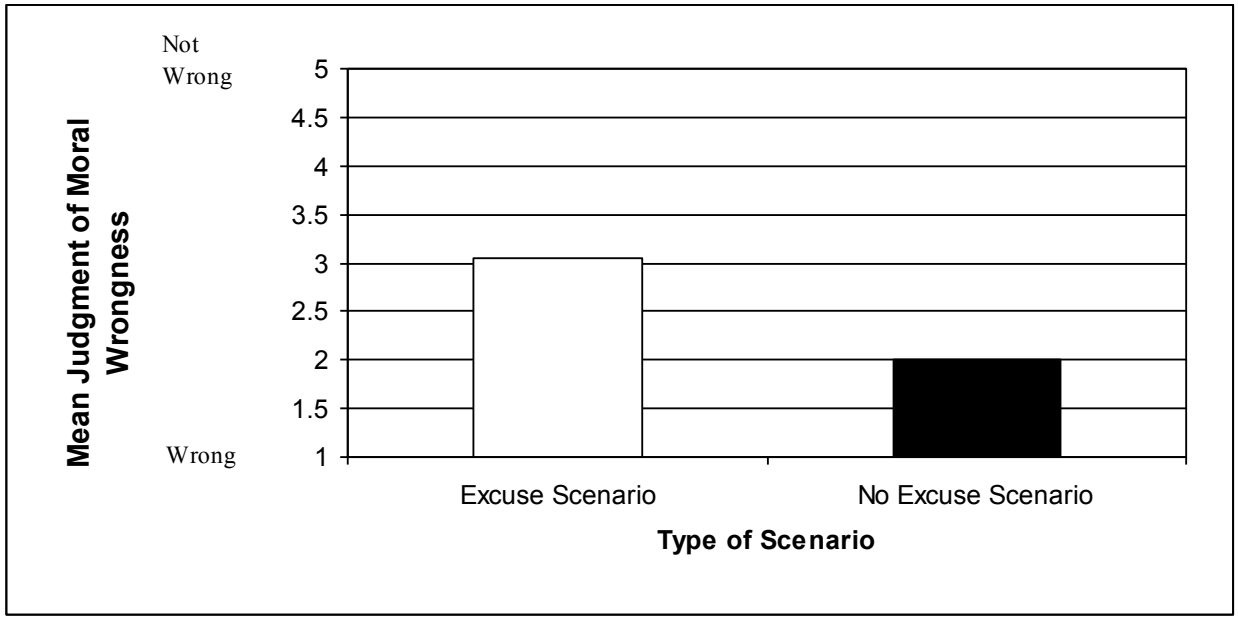
Figure 1. Ratings for judgment of moral wrongness in the excuse and no-excuse omission scenario



Appendix A: Excuse Scenario

Please read the following scenario and answer the question below.

Jacob is rushing to the hospital because he found out that his mother just suffered a life-threatening heart attack. As he is running to the hospital, he spots a person who is choking on a piece of food. He only has 2 options:

A. He can stop and perform the Heimlich maneuver on the person.
B. He can continue on his way to the hospital.

Jacob chooses Option B because it is more important for him to be with his mother at the hospital. As a result, the choking person dies.

According to the common law in Connecticut, a bystander does not have the duty to assist another person in a perilous situation unless the bystander caused the situation to occur or the bystander has a special relationship to the person. (ie: The bystander is the person's parent)

Do you think what Jacob did was wrong? (Circle ONE number.)

Absolutely Yes Absolutely No

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B: No Excuse Scenario

<u>Please read the following scenario and answer the question below.</u>

Jacob is walking down the street and he spots a person choking on a piece of food. He only has 2 options:

A. He can stop and perform the Heimlich maneuver on the person.

B. He can continue on his way.

Jacob chooses Option B because he does not know the person and does not want to get involved in another person's business. As a result, the choking person dies.

According to the common law in Connecticut, a bystander does not have the duty to assist another person in a perilous situation unless the bystander caused the situation to occur or the bystander has a special relationship to the person. (ie: The bystander is the person's parent)

Do you think what Jacob did was wrong? (Circle ONE number.)

Absolutely Yes Absolutely No

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix C: Dilemma

Please read the following story carefully. When you are finished, answer the following question.

Anna made a promise over two weeks ago to help her best friend Betty study the night before her calculus final. Betty has been doing terribly in the class. If she doesn't receive a grade of 90+ on her final, she will fail the class. Betty specifically asked Anna to help her study because she knows that Anna has the highest average in the class. Betty also knows that she can count on Anna.

On the day before Betty's exam, Anna sees a girl named Caroline crying in the school hallway. She is worried about her so she walks over and asks her what's wrong. Caroline tells her that she's new to the school. She transferred because she was a social outcast in her old school. Now that she's in her new school, she doesn't feel like anything has changed. Furthermore, she is caught in the middle of her parent's vicious divorce. Before Caroline can continue with her story, the bell rings and she runs off to her next class. However, before she leaves she says, "Sorry, I have to run. But it's been really nice talking to you. Actually, you're the only nice person that

I've met in a long time. I've been really stressed out and there are some other things that I really need to get off my chest or else I'm going to explode. If you're free tonight, it'd be great if you could meet me at my hangout spot, the Starbucks across the street and we could finish this conversation."

What should Anna do?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Definitely keep her promise to her best friend Betty and help her study for her calculus final.						Definitely meet the new girl Caroline at Starbucks, talk to her and make her feel better.