



# Authority dependence and judgments of utilitarian harm



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## ABSTRACT

Three studies tested the conditions under which people judge utilitarian harm to be *authority dependent* (i.e., whether its right or wrongness depends on the ruling of an authority). In Study 1, participants judged the right or wrongness of physical abuse when used as an interrogation method anticipated to yield useful information for preventing future terrorist attacks. The ruling of the military authority towards the harm was manipulated (prohibited vs. prescribed) and found to significantly influence judgments of the right or wrongness of inflicting harm. Study 2 established a boundary condition with regards to the influence of authority, which was eliminated when the utility of the harm was definitely obtained rather than forecasted. Finally, Study 3 replicated the findings of Studies 1–2 in a completely different context—an expert committee's ruling about the harming of chimpanzees for biomedical research. These results are discussed as they inform ongoing debates regarding the role of authority in moderating judgments of complex and simple harm.

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## 1. Introduction

While most people agree that it is wrong to intentionally cause another person pain or suffering, people also recognize that there are circumstances in which harming someone may be justified. Though there may be disagreement about what qualifies as an adequate justification for harm (Gert, 2004), in general, people seem to relax their condemnation when harmful acts are performed with the intention of producing *utility*, that is, a greater good, such as the alleviating of even greater suffering (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Nichols & Malлон, 2006). But how exactly do people balance utility and the causation of pain or suffering in their judgments of utilitarian harm? Could the sanction or proscription of a

recognized authority make a difference in these judgments?

Numerous psychological studies conducted by Turiel and his colleagues have shown that adults and children consistently condemn acts that cause pain or suffering, and reject the notion that any authority figure can undo the impermissibility of such harm (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Laupa & Turiel, 1986, 1993; Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Turiel, 1978, 1993; Smetana, 1981, 1985, 1993; Tisak & Turiel, 1984; Turiel, 1983; Weston & Turiel, 1980). However, the focus of this research has been on cases of harmful actions that clearly involve injustice and rights violations, where the causation of pain or suffering is seen as motivated exclusively by selfish reasons—for example, an innocent child is pushed off a swing or is hit by another child just for fun. Such cases exemplify what we call *simple harm* (others have called these cases “prototypical” violations; e.g., Wainryb, 1991). Rarely have psychologists from this cognitive-developmental tradition investigated the way people reason about cases of *complex harm*, where

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the causation of pain or suffering is placed in conflict with other considerations, such as whether utility may be derived from the act, or whether the actor has other justifiable reasons for causing harm (however, see Turiel, Hildebrandt, & Wainryb, 1991; Wainryb, 1991, 1993, for notable exceptions). Thus, the possibility remains that the policies of relevant authorities, which do not sway judgments of simple harm, do inform evaluations of complex harm, particularly when the possibility of utility is in question.

In contrast to this developmental tradition, though consistent with an even earlier tradition pioneered by Kohlberg (1969), there is a growing interest among moral psychologists, neuroscientists, and experimental philosophers in the psychological processes involved in reasoning about cases of complex harm, where the causing of pain or suffering does not occur solely for selfish reasons (e.g., Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Greene et al., 2001; Koenigs et al., 2007; Nichols & Mallon, 2006; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006). One common case used by researchers in this tradition is Foot's (1967) *trolley dilemma*. In this well-known scenario, the rule "one should not harm an innocent person" is placed in conflict with the pursuit of a greater good (saving a number of innocent lives). In this case, most people find it permissible for a person to kill an innocent in order to save the lives of five others (Cushman et al., 2006; Greene et al., 2001; Thomson, 1985), adopting a good-maximizing (or aggregate cost-benefit) solution to the dilemma. Although there are versions of this dilemma in which most people consider it wrong to adopt a good-maximizing solution to the dilemma (e.g., the *footbridge dilemma*, where an innocent must be physically pushed off a footbridge to stop a runaway trolley; Greene et al., 2001), it has been shown that when the consequences of not adopting such a solution are catastrophic (not simply the death of five innocents but of thousands of people), most people find it permissible to kill an innocent person to obtain a greater good (see Nichols & Mallon, 2006).

For the most part, the cognitive-developmental tradition pioneered by Turiel and his colleagues and the moral dilemma tradition have pursued separate trajectories. Whereas the former probes whether the impermissibility of simple harm is considered to be independent of the permission of an authority, the latter probes whether complex harm is considered to be permissible, without concerning itself with the potential influence of an authority in modifying the perceived normative status of the harm. Recently, however, a few researchers have sought to integrate these traditions by asking whether people conceptualize the wrongness of complex harm as unchangeable by the decree of an authority or other contextual factors (Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007; Sousa, 2009; Sousa, Holbrook, & Piazza, 2009; Stich, Fessler, & Kelly, 2009). Research into this question, however, has been hampered by theoretical disagreement and methodological limitations (see Sousa et al., 2009; Stich et al., 2009). First, it was not clear whether participants who changed their judgment according to the dictates of an authority did so out of concern for the authority's ruling in and of itself, or for orthogonal reasons, such as whether the authority

possessed or lacked adequate knowledge about the probable utility of the harm (for details, see Sousa, 2009). Second, the variable of utility was not manipulated experimentally in these studies, and there was a great deal of variability in participants' understanding of whether the harmful action was likely to produce utility or not (Sousa et al., 2009).

In this paper, we present new evidence from three experiments in which we manipulated the stance of an authority towards a particular class of complex harm—utilitarian harm—while assessing judgments of the harm. In addition to manipulating the ruling of an authority towards the harm, we also probed participants' understanding of the role authority played in their judgments. We show that, unlike cases of simple harm, where the normative status of the act is understood to be unalterable by an authority, many people do not understand utilitarian harm to be completely independent of an authority's influence. Rather, under prospective conditions of anticipated utilitarian benefits, judgments of harm may be altered by the ruling of a legitimate authority.

### 1.1. The present hypotheses and studies

We surmise that, for many people, utilitarian harm situations represent a *genuine moral conflict*—that is, respondents may be truly divided in their reasoning about the harmful act. On the one hand, they may recognize that the victim's rights would be violated by the harm, while on the other hand they may recognize that there is potential utilitarian value to the harm. For such conflicted individuals, for whom the rationales for and against committing the harmful act carry equal weight, the ruling of an authority may help tip the balance toward greater disapproval of the act when prohibited, or greater approval when prescribed.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted three experiments examining the role of authority in judgments of utilitarian harm. In each study, we adopted a between-subjects experimental methodology where we manipulated the ruling of a legitimate authority towards an act of utilitarian harm. In Studies 1–2, participants were presented an adapted version of the military interrogation scenario from Kelly et al. (2007) and Sousa et al. (2009), in which a military officer performs an act of harm (in the present case, an act of physical harm) in the pursuit of utilitarian benefits (to obtain information from a terrorist suspect that could save lives). Across Studies 1–2, the stance of a legitimate authority (military law<sup>1</sup>) was manipulated, such that the authority either prescribes or prohibits the use of the harmful interrogation methods, while we held constant perceptions of the utility of the harm. In Study 3, we extended the investigation to a completely different authority context—an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee that either "approves" or "rejects" a scientist's proposal to damage the brains of healthy chimpanzee subjects as a necessary component of an experimental biomedical

<sup>1</sup> Literally speaking, "military law" is not an authority figure or social body. However, we use military law as a reasonable proxy of an authority figure.

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