The morality of action: The asymmetry between judgments of praise and blame in the action–omission effect

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The omission effect is researched on scenarios with positive and negative outcomes.
- An omission effect is found for judgments of blame, not for judgments of praise.
- A concurrent causality judgment causes an omission effect on judgments of praise.

ABSTRACT

Actions leading to negative outcomes (i.e., harm) are seen as more blameworthy than omissions of actions leading to the same negative outcomes. However, whether a similar action–omission effect applies to judgments of praiseworthiness of positive outcomes is still an open question. Drawing on positive–negative asymmetries found in other domains, we hypothesized that positive events would not elicit an action–omission effect for judgments of praise, because such positive events do not by default trigger the causal appraisal processes that are central to the action–omission effect. Furthermore, we posited that when people are explicitly asked to consider causality before or during the judgment, an action–omission effect on judgments of praise could be obtained too. These hypotheses were verified in three independent studies and a meta-analytic analysis. As such, the present set of studies provides novel insights in the action–omission effect's asymmetry for negative and positive outcomes, as well as an increased understanding of the role of causality appraisal in this effect: judgments of praise are less reliant on causal reasoning than judgments of blame, and therefore also less susceptible to the action–omission bias.

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Introduction

Actions yielding negative outcomes are judged to be morally worse than omissions of actions resulting in the same negative outcomes (Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991; Ritov & Baron, 1999; Baron & Ritov, 2004; Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; DeScioli, Bruening, & Kurzban, 2011). The present research addresses whether this 'action–omission' effect is generalizable to positive outcomes.

Although there is a rich research literature on the action–omission effect, no studies that we are aware of have investigated whether judgments of praise, similar to judgments of blame, demonstrate an action–omission effect. Intuitively, it would make sense that actions leading to positive outcomes are deemed more praiseworthy than omissions leading to those same outcomes. If it is more blameworthy to 'kill' than to

'let die' (Spranca et al., 1991) then it is probably also more praiseworthy to actively 'save someone' than to 'let someone be saved'. However, there are some reasons to assume the effect may be slightly more complex and does not display this kind of symmetry.

First of all, several studies have noted that negative events tend to elicit stronger and different psychological reactions compared to positive events. Negative events and stimuli are more salient, appear to be more potent and tend to trigger more deliberative thought than positively valenced events do (Rozin & Royzmann, 2001; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). This 'negativity bias' effect has been found in a wide variety of domains spanning from loss aversion (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984) to impression formation (Peeters & Czapinsky, 1990). Given the psychological ubiquity of this negativity bias it would not be unreasonable to suppose that it might affect moral judgment as well. Indeed, some research has suggested different evaluation standards for the morality of negative versus positive actions. For instance, both adults and children tend to engage more frequently in judgments of blame than then they do in judgments of praise (Ross & den Bak-Lammers, 1998; Wiessner, 2005) and legal

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systems serve to condemn criminals but do not reward the virtuous (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009). According to DeScioli & Kurzban (2013), moral cognition seems inherently more attuned to judge blame than to judge praise and Cushman and Greene (2012) showed that the presence of negative consequences is central to our judgment of peoples' actions.

If moral reasoning is indeed strongly affected by the presence of negative outcomes, one could expect to find some asymmetries when it comes to blaming and praising behavior, including the effect of action versus omission in the moral appraisal of such behavior. In this regard, research on the action–omission effect has suggested a key role of the attribution of causal responsibility. In their seminal work, Spranca et al. (1991) already reported that individuals exhibiting an action–omission effect often referred to differences in causality when asked for an explicit justification. Building on these initial findings, Kordes-de Vaal (1996) did indeed find that actions lead to higher ratings of causal responsibility than omissions do. Finally, Cushman and Young (2011) demonstrated that the action–omission effect was especially prominent for judgments that had previously been shown to rely on an analysis of causal responsibility, that is, judgments of blame and punishment.

Importantly, research has shown that negativity bias also impacts causal judgment. In particular, negative events elicit more causal attribution than positive events do (Bohner, Bless, Schwarz, & Strack, 1988) and they trigger more counter-factual thinking (Roese & Olson, 1997). Given the assumed importance of causal attribution to the action–omission effect we expect that this might also affect whether or not an action–omission effect can be found on judgments of praise. If positive events do not trigger causal attribution processes to the same extent as negative events do, then an action–omission effect on judgments of praise is likely to be absent or at least smaller in size.

Building upon these insights from different domains, we advance the following hypotheses: First of all, negative events should trigger sufficient causal appraisal in and off themselves, hence the existence of an action–omission effect on judgments of blame should not be dependent on whether subjects are explicitly asked to reflect on causality. Even without an explicit cue to consider causality, an action–omission effect on judgments of blame should be present (as has often been demonstrated in the literature). However, when subjects are presented with a positive event, this positive event in itself may not by default trigger the causal attribution processes that are assumed to be necessary for the action–omission effect. Thus when subjects are not explicitly required to reflect on causality, judgments of praise should not be as susceptible to the action–omission effect. In contrast, if subjects are explicitly asked to reflect on causality then an action–omission effect on judgments of praise may appear (although not necessarily as strong as is the case for judgments of blame). Testing these specific hypotheses will provide insight in the action–omission effect's potential asymmetry for negative and positive outcomes, as well as advance our understanding of the assumed role of causality appraisal in this effect. These hypotheses were tested in a series of three independent studies as well as a meta-analytic analysis on the combined results making use of the full power of the combined data set to demonstrate the global pattern. For the meta-analysis we used traditional methods as well as Bayesian statistics to test the alternative and null hypotheses.

Study 1: method

Participants

Before running the first experiment, power-analyses were conducted to determine a sufficient sample size with the R package 'pwr' (Champely, Ekstrom, Dalgaard, Gill, & De Rosario, 2015). Based on previous research suggesting the action–omission effect is small to medium in size, as per Cohen (1992), we deemed that one hundred participants per condition should result in sufficient power to find the hypothesized

action–omission effects.[1] Anticipating some drop-out, a total of four-hundred-fourteen participants (49% female, Mean age: 37.7) were recruited through the online labor platform Amazon's Mechanical Turk (AMT). AMT has been demonstrated to be as reliable as traditional methods of recruiting subjects (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010; Rand, 2012). Participants were paid US$1. Participation was limited to US-citizens with an AMT approval rating higher than 95%.

Procedure and materials

After the completion of the demographic variables, participants started a judgment task in which they were presented with six scenarios and were asked to rate the behavior of the target. The experiment was designed as a 2 (Action) × 2 (Outcome) × 2 (Causality Appraisal) between-subjects design. For each of the six scenarios, four different versions were developed, each representing one of the between-subjects Action × Outcome conditions: *action-positive, omission-positive, action-negative,* and *omission-negative.* All participants were asked to rate the behavior of the target on a six point scale going from 'extremely blameworthy' (1) to 'extremely praiseworthy' (6).

Importantly, the current study uses a slightly more subtle manipulation of actions and omissions compared to previous studies. In particular, in most other studies on the action–omission effect, the target is a bystander in the omission scenarios but the main actor/cause of the outcome in the action scenarios (as is the case when contrasting 'killing' to 'letting die'). To eliminate this potential confound all scenarios were designed so the target was a bystander who could influence the outcome of the event (although he was not the instigator of the situation). An example scenario for the action-positive outcome condition reads:

> "*Joe is walking through his local fair. Joe notices a group of 3 children playing just a little bit ahead of him when all of a sudden he hears a cry. Joe turns around to see a teenager on a go cart storming in his direction. The go cart is heading straight for the group of children and there is no way it will be able to brake in time. If Joe doesn't jump in front of the go cart it will surely hit the group of children. Joe realizes that if he gets hit by the go cart he will get away with a few nasty bruises but if the go cart hits the group of children they will undoubtedly be much worse off. Joe decides to jump in front of the go cart. The outcome of this decision is that the children do not get hurt.*"

Conversely, in the omission version of the same positive outcome scenario, Joe is already standing in the path of the go-cart and he decides not to jump out of its way. In the negative outcome conditions of this particular scenario, Joe's decision leads to the children getting hurt, either by jumping out of the way (action) or deciding not to jump in front of the go-cart (omission). After rating each scenario, participants answered two easy but crucial comprehension questions to check if they had read and understood the scenario. An example question is: "Will Joe get hit by the go-cart?"

In addition to the manipulations of Action (i.e., action vs. omission) and Outcome (i.e., positive vs. negative), we also manipulated causality appraisal. In particular, participants were either only asked to provide merely a blame–praise judgment of Joe (no causality appraisal), or they were asked to additionally also rate to what extent they felt Joe caused the outcome (causality appraisal) on a four point scale anchored by: "Not at all" (1), "Maybe a little" (2), "To a considerable degree" (3), and "Completely" (4). Including Causality appraisal as a separate between subject factor allows us to investigate to what extent probing people to explicitly make a causal analysis influences their moral judgments, and whether this affects blame and praise ratings (differently). All scenarios and comprehension checks are presented in

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[1] If we assume an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.40$ one hundred participants per condition is sufficient for a power of 80.3%.