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# Active Transgressions and Moral Elusions: Action Framing Influences Moral Behavior

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## Abstract

Are certain methods more effective for eliciting altruism than others? If so, what are the factors that stimulate moral behavior? Although past research has suggested that “passive” transgressions are more acceptable than “active” transgressions, it is unclear whether this bias translates to actual behavior. The goal of this research was to investigate the role of active or passive framing in prescriptive and proscriptive moral situations. In Study 1, participants were more likely to help a student with a disability if they were asked directly than if they were passively presented with the opportunity to help. In Study 2, participants completing a math task cheated less when cheating involved an action on their part rather than an omission. This research indicates that individuals are less likely to transgress if the transgression is explicit, a finding that has practical applications, informing how people and organizations can foster prosocial behavior and increase giving.

## Keywords

morality, judgment and decision making, altruism, decision making, helping, prosocial behavior

How can charitable organizations increase giving? What is the best way to foster prosocial behavior? In theory, work in the field of moral psychology has the potential to inform these types of questions. After all, research in this tradition has outlined the various mechanisms that underlie moral judgments (e.g., Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Haidt, 2001). Judgments and predictions, however, do not always match actions and behaviors (Teper, Inzlicht, & Page-Gould, 2010). The moderators of moral predictions, in other words, may not moderate actual moral behavior. We wonder if this is the case with the moderators of prosocial behavior, where current practices seem to diverge from what research on moral judgment-making suggests is optimal.

For instance, according to a Google search with the keyword *donate*, only 3 out of the first 30 websites for charitable organizations used an active approach for soliciting donations.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, these three websites positioned their donation link in the middle of the webpage, in a clear and noticeable way. The remaining 90% of the organizations situated their link at the side of the page, often making it difficult to locate. This is a “passive” approach to soliciting donations and is inconsistent with research on the “omission bias” (Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991), which implies that it is easier for people to “overlook” an opportunity for prosociality (i.e., not actively looking for the donation link) than it is to explicitly deny prosociality (i.e., actively ignoring the prominent donation link). The goal of the current research is to investigate the role that active versus passive framing plays in real-life moral decision making.

Research in the field of moral psychology has previously explored the idea of active versus passive transgressions

from a variety of angles. For instance, the “omission bias” has become a well-established phenomenon. This is the belief that transgressions caused by omission or inaction are less severe than those that are caused by action (Ayanian & Berwick, 1991; Baron & Ritov, 2004; Feinberg, 1984). Also referred to as the “action principle” (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006), research suggests that it is easier for people to refrain from engaging in moral behavior than it is for people to explicitly refuse acting morally, thus actively transgressing.

Why are active transgressions seen as more culpable than passive transgressions? Spranca et al. (1991) suggest that although passive transgressions are often products of ignorance, this is rarely the case for active transgressions. In addition, active transgressions are often fueled by malevolent intentions and involve more motivation and effort than do passive transgressions. Thus, it is no surprise that active and passive transgressions are treated differently by the law (Feinberg, 1984) and are evaluated differently by observers (e.g., Baron & Ritov, 2003). Interestingly, it seems that even when the aforementioned distinctions between active and passive transgressions do not hold true, many individuals continue to treat the two differently (e.g., active vs. passive euthanasia). Such

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overgeneralizations occur because individuals apply heuristics nondiscriminately to moral dilemmas (Baron, 1985) and because such reasoning allows individuals to limit their moral responsibility to others (Singer, 1979).

One line of research that is consistent with our reasoning is work on the “status quo bias.” The status quo bias states that individuals are likely to stick with their current state or decision or follow the status quo (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). This bias may make individuals less inclined to actively transgress. For instance, one study showed that individuals were more likely to predict enrolling in an organ donation program when they were asked if they wanted to “opt out” than if they were asked if they wanted to “opt in” (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003). In this case, opting out (going against the status quo) constitutes an active transgression, whereas choosing not to opt in constitutes a passive transgression.

At this point, it is important to note that the large majority of research on active versus passive transgressions has relied on individuals’ judgments of hypothetical moral transgressions (Baron, 1992; Baron & Ritov, 1993, 1994, 2004; Haidt & Baron, 1996; Petrinovich & O’Neill, 1996; Royzman & Baron, 2002). Although this research has significant societal implications, it does not address how active versus passive framing maps onto actual behavior. The goal of the current research, therefore, was to examine the role that active versus passive framing may play in real-life prescriptive (Study 1) and proscriptive (Study 2) moral situations. Prescriptive morality is centered on what we should do and is approach based, whereas proscriptive morality focuses on what we should not do and is thus avoidance based (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). Since both are given significant moral weight, we felt that it was important to investigate both types of moral scenarios as a function of active and passive framing.

Research by Cushman and colleagues (2006) suggests that people are conscious of their own “omission bias” when making judgments in hypothetical moral dilemmas. In other words, this research suggests that individuals are aware that the active–passive dimension of a moral dilemma influences their moral judgments. If people consciously consider the active–passive factor when making moral judgments, it is quite plausible that individuals’ actual moral behavior might also be affected by this bias. We examine this issue directly by manipulating the active–passive dimension of a moral situation and then measuring actual moral behavior.

For Study 1, we predicted that participants who would be asked to volunteer their time in a direct manner would be more likely to do so than if they were asked passively. For Study 2, we hypothesized that participants would be less likely to cheat on a math task if the cheating would require an explicit action on their part rather than an omission.

## Study 1

### Method

In exchange for additional course credits, 88 participants (69 females; age  $M = 19.53$ ,  $SD = 3.88$ ) took part in an online

study at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Participants were led to believe that they had signed up for a two-part study, Part 1 being online. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the active transgression condition or the passive transgression condition. Participants were informed that upon completion of Part 1, they would be asked to sign up for Part 2, which would take place at a psychology lab on campus. In reality, Part 2 did not exist, something explained to participants during debriefing.

Participants were asked to provide demographic information after which they completed several questionnaires, which served as filler. Upon completion, participants were informed that they had finished the online portion of the experiment and were then presented with the following message:

Part 2 of this experiment will involve a problem-solving component. As required by AccessAbility Services, several students with learning disabilities will be taking part in this experiment.

We require several volunteers to partner up with these students and provide help in completing the problem-solving portion of the experiment. If you choose to volunteer, it is likely that the experiment might take you up to 30 minutes longer to complete. Unfortunately, we will not be able to compensate you with additional credits for this time.

Participants in the active condition had to click on one of two buttons to continue: “Yes, I would like to volunteer” or “No, I would not like to volunteer.” Participants in the passive condition were presented with a link at the bottom of the page that read “Click here to volunteer.” Otherwise, they could press “Continue” to move on to the next page. As such, participants in the active condition would have to explicitly and actively deny their help (by clicking “No”) if they did not want to volunteer, whereas participants in the passive condition could simply avoid the volunteering link and click “Continue.” Although, in both cases, participants are indeed performing an “action,” pressing “Continue” allows for individuals to refrain from volunteering without feeling like they committed an explicit moral transgression by denying their help directly.

## Results and Discussion

For Study 1, we predicted that participants who had to click either the “Yes” or the “No” button would be more likely to volunteer their time than if they were provided with a link they could follow. The results confirmed our hypothesis: Participants in the active solicitation condition were 5.30 times more likely to press the “Yes” button (48.15% of participants volunteered) than participants in the passive solicitation condition were likely to click on the volunteering link (9.09% of participants volunteered),  $\chi^2(1, N = 88) = 8.18, p = .005, \phi = .30$  (see Table 1). This should be considered a very large effect.

These results suggest that it is significantly more difficult for individuals to explicitly deny their help than it is for them to elude doing “the right thing.” Although the main distinction

**Table 1.** Study 1 Examined the Effect of Active Versus Passive Framing on Volunteering Rates

	Active solicitation	Passive solicitation
Participants (n)	40	48
Committed to volunteering (%)	48.15	9.09

between the active and passive conditions was a mere difference in labeling (“No” vs. “Continue”), it seems that these labels have very clear heuristics attached to them. Specifically, although clicking “No” is conceptualized as an active transgression, clicking “Continue” is seen as a passive transgression. Our results suggest that the active–passive factor significantly affects how individuals respond to prescriptive moral situations.

## Study 2

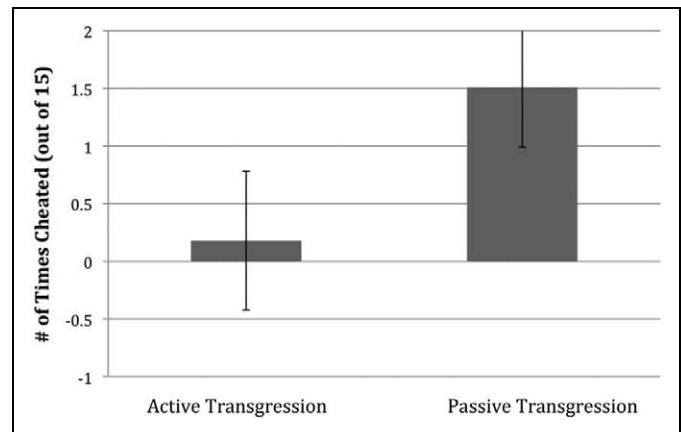
In Study 1, we found that participants were much more likely to volunteer if they had to choose between a “Yes” and “No” option than if they were given an optional link to follow. This suggests that in prescriptive moral situations, it is easier for individuals to simply avoid prosocial opportunities than it is for them to explicitly transgress. In Study 2, we examine the role of active versus passive framing on participants’ moral actions in a proscriptive moral situation.

## Method

A total of 84 participants were recruited from University of Toronto Scarborough participant pool to take part in a study for course credits. Because they were extreme outliers, 5 participants were excluded from all analyses.<sup>2</sup> This left 79 participants in the sample (46 females; age  $M = 18.84$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: active transgression or passive transgression. After providing demographic information, all participants were instructed to complete a math task, on which they had the opportunity to cheat.

## Math Task

Participants were required to complete a math task on the computer, consisting of 15 simple but tedious arithmetic problems (von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005). Next, participants were informed of a glitch in the program. In the active condition, participants were told that the answer to each question would appear on the screen upon pressing the space bar. In the passive condition, participants were told that the answer would appear on the screen within 5 seconds of the question appearing, *unless* they pressed the enter key. Specifically, participants in the active transgression condition were asked *not* to press the space bar, whereas participants in the passive transgression condition were asked to press the enter key to avoid seeing the answers. Finally, we informed participants that they would be rewarded with \$5.00 if they answered 10 or more questions

**Figure 1.** Study 2 examined the effect of active versus passive framing on cheating behavior

correctly. Participants were further informed that we would have no way of knowing whether or not they revealed the answers.

## Results and Discussion

The primary goal of Study 2 was to explore the role of active versus passive transgression in a proscriptive moral situation. To correct for violations of normality, we applied a square root transformation to “times cheated,” but we present untransformed means for ease of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> We conducted a univariate ANOVA and found a main effect for active versus passive transgression, such that participants in the active condition cheated significantly less ( $M = 0.18$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ), than participants in the passive condition ( $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ),  $F(1, 77) = 19.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .95$  (see Figure 1). These results suggest that it is more difficult for individuals to cheat when the cheating involves an action on their part as opposed to an omission. As such, it seems that active–passive framing plays an important role in influencing individuals’ behaviors in proscriptive moral situations.

## Discussion

For both a prescriptive and a proscriptive moral situation, our data indicate that individuals are more likely to transgress when the transgression does not require an explicit action on their part. In other words, it is more difficult for people to directly deny their help or to actively break rules than it is for them to simply avoid acting prosocially. Although the concept of active and passive framing has been previously studied within the field of moral psychology, the current research adds to the existing literature by showing that active–passive framing has profound consequences on real-life moral behavior and not just predictions of behavior. This research is also novel in that it employed moral situations that allowed for participants to behave either morally or immorally as opposed to choosing a “lesser of the two evils,” as is currently common within the moral psychology literature (e.g., Cushman et al., 2006; Greene et al., 2004).

Psychologists have argued that the omission bias is an inherent part of society's moral framework (Aquinas, 1274/1947; Quinn, 1989). As such, theorists have proposed a variety of mechanisms that may play a role in fueling this phenomenon, including motivation and intention (Spranca et al., 1991). However, we suspect that this is only part of the picture. Specifically, we feel that there is good reason to believe that emotionality may play an important role in accounting for the difference in responses to active and passive moral dilemmas.

Psychologists have long emphasized the role of emotion in motivating moral behavior (Bell, 1982; Pfister & Böhm, 2008; Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Pieters, 2008). In addition, recent research by Teper and colleagues (2010) has shown that emotional arousal is paramount in driving moral behavior and that the presence and intensity of this arousal are what ultimately determine the likelihood for individuals to do the "right thing." This research has the potential to inform the results of the current work.

We suspect that active–passive framing influences behavior in moral contexts because moral behavior is driven by emotion that is either more pronounced (active framing) or less pronounced (passive framing). In Study 1, we found that it was more difficult for participants to click "No, I would not like to volunteer" than it was for them to click "Continue," thereby avoiding the volunteering link. It is likely that although clicking "Continue" is not conceptualized as an explicit moral transgression, clicking "No" is. We wonder if the emotions that individuals experience before clicking "No" might be more intense than the emotions elicited by clicking "Continue." It is these more intense emotions, moral emotions such as guilt and shame, that we suspect are driving people to press the "Yes" button instead. The same explanation can be applied to Study 2, in which participants found it more difficult to press the space bar than to refrain from pressing the enter key. Once again, although pressing the enter key to reveal the answer is likely preceded by moral emotions such as guilt and fear, these same emotions may not be so pronounced while passively waiting for an answer to appear on the screen. Thus, this may explain why individuals are less likely to press the enter key than they are to refrain from pressing the space bar.

### Future Directions

Future research using online measures of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system (e.g., Teper et al., 2010) would be needed to further explore the role of emotion in active versus passive transgressions. It would be particularly interesting and worthwhile to investigate the role of active–passive framing on emotional arousal during a moral situation. We suspect that participants involved in "active" moral situations would experience greater physiological arousal than those engaged in "passive" situations. In addition, it may be beneficial to explore the mechanism by which moral emotions drive moral behavior. In other words, are current emotions, such as guilt and shame, fueling moral behavior, or is it the anticipation of these emotions that is responsible in driving individuals to

do the "right thing"? One way of investigating this question would be to ask participants after the fact to reflect on their motivation to act morally. Finally, future researchers may benefit from investigating the role of active versus passive framing in situations outside of the moral domain, as conclusions about the generalizability of this phenomenon cannot be drawn from the current studies.

### Reconciling the Current Research With Past Theories

The idea of an active–passive dimension within the domain of morality is certainly not a new one. As cited, work on the omission bias and status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) has explored this idea from two separate angles. The goal of the current work, however, was not to introduce a new "bias" but rather to explore the active–passive factor from a broader perspective, encapsulating both prescriptive and proscriptive moral dilemmas.

For instance, the results of Study 1 are related to previous work on the status quo bias, which states that individuals are likely to stick with their current state or decision or follow the status quo (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). This bias tends to make individuals less inclined to actively transgress because this involves changing their current state. Although the mechanics of Study 1 definitely speak to this concept, there are some differences that make it more compatible with a broader concept of active–passive framing. Specifically, this study did not present a clear "status quo" for participants to be guided by, given that they had to choose between "yes" and "no" in the active transgression condition. The results of this study suggest that there may exist another factor that motivates people to do the "right thing." Specifically, we suspect that individuals are driven by an aversion to committing an explicit moral transgression by explicitly saying "no" to someone in need.

### Real-World Applications

The results of this research are directly applicable to various organizations. Bryant, Slaughter, Kang, and Tax (2003), for example, found that 85% of respondents to the Independent Sector Survey on Giving and Volunteering reported donating to charities following a solicitation. Such findings seem to imply that presenting people with the opportunity to behave prosocially increases the likelihood that they will do "the right thing." However, as our analysis of charitable websites attests, many organizations generate suboptimal levels of prosociality by taking passive approaches to charitable giving. The large majority of charity websites employ a passive approach to soliciting donations. Our work suggests that a more active approach to online solicitation—for example, a prominent "Donate Now" button or a pop-up that makes visitors choose between "yes" and "no" options for donation—might be more effective for eliciting prosocial behavior. Ultimately, the results of both studies suggest that simply manipulating the active–passive framing of a task has considerable effects on whether people decide to behave in a prosocial manner or not.



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## Notes

1. We performed the Google Internet search on March 16, 2010.
2. Outliers were determined by calculating extreme studentized deviate (ESD) scores and using Grubbs's test to test for significance. All five scores were significant outliers,  $p < .05$ .
3. The distribution was positively skewed since the majority of participants did not cheat at all.

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## Bios

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