



# On the difference between moral outrage and empathic anger: Anger about wrongful deeds or harmful consequences<sup>☆, ☆☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Moral violations seem to elicit moral outrage because of the wrongfulness of the deed. However, recent studies have questioned the existence of moral outrage, because moral violations are confounded with the harm done to victims. Such harm elicits empathic anger rather than moral outrage (Batson et al., 2007; Batson et al., 2009). Thus, moral outrage is triggered by the wrongfulness of an action (i.e., a perpetrator's intention to harm), whereas empathic anger is triggered by its harmfulness (i.e., the actual harm done). Four studies ( $N = 1065$ ) in varying contexts orthogonally crossed these antecedents of anger to differentiate between moral outrage and empathic anger. The results demonstrate that anger mainly emerged from the intention to harm, rather than the actual harm done. In contrast, the actual harm elicited empathy with victims. The findings suggest that anger about moral violations emerges separately from empathic reactions, although these reactions are difficult to distinguish in most instances. Likewise, the intention to harm provoked a willingness to punish the perpetrator much more than the actual harm did. Moral violations thus elicit moral outrage independently of their harmful consequences, even though such anger may often overlap with concern for others.

## 1. Introduction

“Bus driver kills 48 children” is a shocking news headline. It almost certainly makes us feel outraged - however, what precisely are we outraged about? Being confronted with moral violations such as child murder (i.e., intentional killing) may instigate anger because the deed itself is morally wrong. However, we may also feel anger because the perpetrator severely harmed the children. Would the same scenario trigger equivalent anger if it were an accident? Or does the bus driver's intention to harm the children suffice to elicit anger even if no harm was actually done?

There are currently two competing suggestions about what precisely triggers anger when one perceives moral violations. First, the wrongfulness of a deed, such as intentional violations of moral standards may trigger anger (Haidt, 2003). Such anger would be *moral outrage*, as a prototypical moral emotion. Second, the perceived consequences to cared-for others may trigger anger (Batson et al., 2007; Batson, Chao, & Givens, 2009; O'Mara, Jackson, Batson, & Gaertner, 2011). This type of anger would be termed *empathic anger*, though it may occasionally be dubbed ‘moral outrage’ during argumentation, in order to enhance its rhetorical power (Batson, 2011b).

Moral violations often blend morally unacceptable deeds with their consequences (i.e., harm done to victims). Thus, events that elicit moral outrage confound the wrongfulness of the deed and its harmfulness. It is only by disentangling these features of moral violations that one can distinguish between the various antecedents of anger. By orthogonally crossing these features, the present studies clarify whether anger about moral violations is moral outrage or empathic anger.

### 1.1. Moral outrage and moral violations

Moral outrage is defined as the “anger provoked by the perception that a moral standard—usually a standard of fairness or justice—has been violated” (Batson et al., 2007, p. 1272). Hence, the antecedent of moral outrage is the perception of a moral violation that threatens people's moral worldview. It is subjectively experienced as the feeling of anger and the motivation to restore morality and justice (e.g., Haidt, 2003; Montada & Schneider, 1989; Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Moral outrage increases the attribution of blame to the perpetrator (Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993), the moral condemnation of an act (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2001; Sanfey, Rilling, Aronson, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2003), third-party

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punishment (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Goldberg, Lerner, & Tetlock, 1999; Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009), and retributive punishment that restores a just balance (Darley, 2002; Darley & Pittman, 2003; de Rivera, Gerstmann, & Maisels, 2002; Pagano & Huo, 2007; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007).

According to Haidt (2003, p. 855), moral outrage may be considered a “disinterested” moral emotion. This is because anger is not just a reaction to harm to the self (e.g., goal blockade), but to any unjustified harm. Such harmful consequences of a moral violation may not directly affect the self, yet also elicit anger and punishment desires on behalf of others. Other researchers indicate that moral outrage is triggered only by the immorality or wrongfulness of a harmful deed (Tetlock, 2002).

Situations that typically elicit moral outrage include beating one's spouse, stealing from the blind (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999), kicking a dog or abusing power in sexual relationships (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011b), and trading others' wellbeing for personal benefit (Tetlock et al., 2000). Moral outrage is also elicited by the politically motivated maltreatment or murder of groups of people (Pagano & Huo, 2007; Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2004), and perceptions of unjust treatment of both individuals and groups (Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998; Montada & Schneider, 1989). All of these situations feature a perpetrator who commits a moral violation, and at least one victim who suffers its consequences. Some researchers suggest that all moral violations necessarily induce the perception of a blameworthy perpetrator and a suffering victim (Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012), thus making it difficult to determine what such anger is truly about.

### 1.2. Empathic anger as an alternative explanation

As an alternative to moral outrage, personal, identity-related, or empathic anger have been suggested to explain such reactions (Batson et al., 2007; Batson et al., 2009; Hoffman, 1990; O'Mara et al., 2011). These experiences of anger emerge because the moral violations harm either the self or cared-for others (i.e., who are close to the self, and/or seen as deserving protection; e.g., Batson, 2011a).

Personal anger about moral violations emerges when their consequences disadvantage or harm the self (Batson et al., 2007; O'Mara et al., 2011). Subsequently, people engage in revenge when they feel offended in order to protect themselves (Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008; Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Gollwitzer, Meder, & Schmitt, 2011). Such anger is a self-interested emotion. Self-involvement can also emerge via empathic concern for the victims, produced by identity-based relationships (Batson et al., 2009) or empathy with the victims (Batson et al., 2007), among others. Empathic anger is a response to another person's suffering, out of concern for their wellbeing. This vicarious emotion requires the perception and assumed understanding of the other's experience (i.e., empathy; Batson, 2009; Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016). People usually feel empathy with those they can relate to, such as friends or ingroup members, or people whose distress is salient (Hoffman, 1990). Empathic anger motivates the observer to protect the victim's interests by undoing the harm, compensating the victim, and punishing harm-doers (Batson et al., 2007; Darley & Pittman, 2003; Hoffman, 1990; Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003).

Thus, anger about moral violations may be triggered not because of the wrongfulness of the deed, but because of the harm caused to either the self or a cared-for other. Batson and colleagues (Batson et al., 2007; Batson et al., 2009) even suggest that evidence for moral outrage is scarce, with the current evidence favoring personal and empathic anger. In their study, anger about moral violations was found to increase when participants were instructed to empathize with the victim, compared to when they were instructed to objectively read about the event (Batson et al., 2007). A subsequent study showed that the torture of an ingroup member elicited more anger than that of an outgroup member (Batson et al., 2009).

### 1.3. The role of intentionality and harm in moral violations

The link between the wrongfulness of an action and its harmful consequences may be obvious for some moral violations, but not all. For example, a person may intend to cause harm, but fail to actually do so. Imagine a variant of our initial, “bus driver kills 48 children” scenario, in which the driver intended to kill the children, but instead died of a heart attack before he could execute his plan. In this instance, the children remain unharmed, but his intent would still be wrong. Alternatively, the bus driver may have indeed killed the children, but in an accident that he was not responsible for. In this case, harm has been done, yet because of the lack of intentionality we may perceive what happened as a great tragedy, but not as a moral violation.

This example indicates that the intention to do something morally wrong may be a key aspect of moral violations. Intentionality refers to the desire, belief, and initiative to take action in order to produce a certain outcome (Cushman, 2008; Malle & Knobe, 1997). The knowledge of the perpetrators' intention to harm somebody is sufficient to elicit moral disapproval, with their actual, causal responsibility for harm done playing only a minor role in the assignment of blame and punishment. A person who does harm accidentally is thus judged more leniently, despite the negative consequences of their actions (Cushman, 2008; Young & Saxe, 2011).

Furthermore, an individual's intention to harm increases perceived blame even when they did not personally cause the harm (Alicke, 1992; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). The actor's intentions determine their dispositional attributions and desires for harsh punishment (Alicke, 2000; Goldberg et al., 1999; Tetlock et al., 2000). Generally, laypeople rely more on their judgments of wrongfulness than on the harmfulness of an event when suggesting sanctions for criminal or immoral behavior (Alter, Kernochan, & Darley, 2007). Likewise, legal systems distinguish criminal offenses and accidents by the perpetrator's intentions (Mikhail, 2007). Thus, the perpetrator's intention makes a harmful act a moral violation.

The perpetrator's intention may also play a major role in triggering anger about moral violations. For example, people report a higher level of anger at an individual who knowingly breaks a taboo than one who only does so out of ignorance (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011b; Young & Saxe, 2011). Anger at moral offenses can even be reduced by thinking about mitigating circumstances that exclude intentionality (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011a). These findings indicate that anger about moral violations is indeed moral outrage.

In contrast to the distinct role of intentionality in moral violations (i.e., intention makes a harmful act a moral violation), the relation between harm and moral violations is less clear. Previous research has shown that the immorality of an action depends less on its harmful consequences, and more on any observers' aversion to performing such actions themselves (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Miller, Hannikainen, & Cushman, 2014). For example, people judge hitting a corpse with a hammer as being more morally wrong than listening to somebody have a tooth extracted without anesthesia. Thus, strictly speaking actual harm done is not necessary for the perception of a moral violation.

### 1.4. Research overview

The aim of this article is to examine the antecedents of anger about moral violations. Previous studies on empathic anger and moral outrage assumed that moral violations always produce harmful outcomes to victims (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Batson et al., 2009; Montada & Schneider, 1989; O'Mara et al., 2011; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011b). The systematic manipulation of the perpetrator's intention to harm and actual harm done to victims will clearly differentiate between moral outrage and empathic anger.

The present research tests two competing hypotheses: first, according to the moral outrage hypothesis (Haidt, 2003), one would expect that a wrongful deed (i.e., intention to harm) leads to more anger

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