

Reluctance to Downplay Harm: Asymmetric Scope Sensitivity in Moral Condemnation

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OVERVIEW

Moral judgments are often comparative. In general, when evaluating one moral transgression in comparison to another, people should be sensitive to scope (e.g., harming three people should be condemned more than harming two). However, we propose that because people are reluctant to downplay harm, they are less willing to scale *down* condemnation of a lesser transgression than they are to scale *up* condemnation of a greater transgression. This results in asymmetric scope (in)sensitivity: people prescribe more similar amounts of condemnation for two transgressions (1) when they evaluate the greater transgression first (vs. the lesser transgression first), and (2) when they judge which transgression is “less” (vs. “more”) wrong.

METHOD

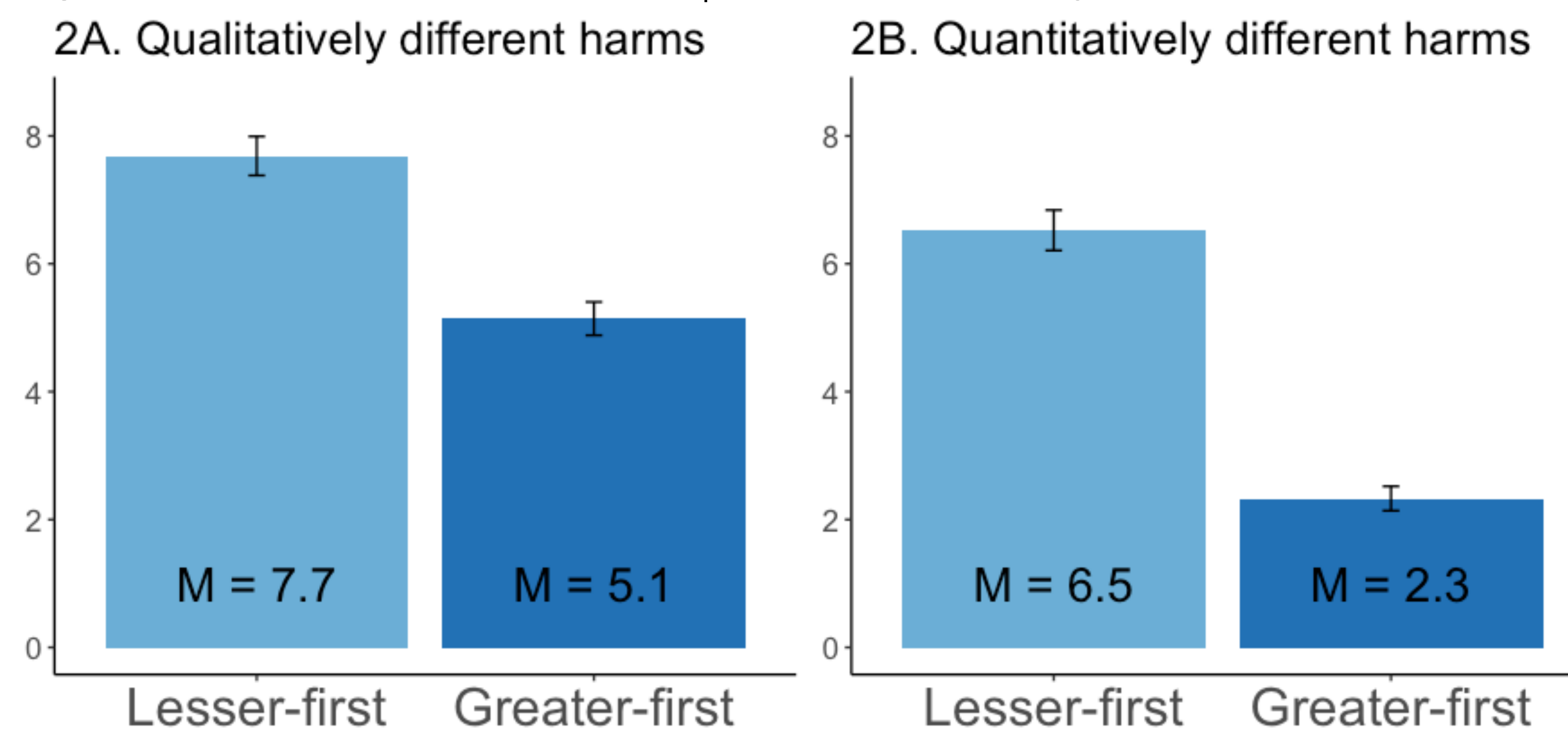
In four preregistered experiments ($N = 2,931$, Prolific), we investigated how order of evaluation and the framing of comparative judgments influences scope sensitivity in condemnation of moral transgressions:

- Real-world transgressions ($N=1168$):** Examined the effect of order (lesser-first vs. greater-first) on condemnation of sexual misconduct committed by Louis CK (lesser) and Harvey Weinstein (greater).
- Order effects on punishment across a wider variety of moral transgressions and outcome measures:**
 - Qualitatively different harms ($N=585$):** Employed scenario pairs in which the two transgressions differed *qualitatively* in how much harm they caused (e.g., harming an adult vs. a child).
 - Quantitatively different harms ($N=585$):** Employed scenario pairs similar to those in 2a, except transgressions differed *quantitatively* in how much harm they caused (e.g., harming 2 vs. 3 children).
- Direct comparisons ($N=593$):** Participants evaluated pairs of transgressions simultaneously, judging which is “more” vs. “less” wrong (between-subjects).

STUDY 1 RESULTS: Participants prescribed more similar amounts of punishment for Louis CK and Harvey Weinstein when they evaluated Weinstein’s actions first.



STUDY 2A-2B RESULTS: Participants prescribed more similar prison sentences for pairs of transgressions when they evaluated the greater transgression first, $ps < .001$. Figures below show the difference in prison sentences (in years) as a function of order.



EXAMPLE STIMULI

Study 2A	
Lesser transgression	Greater transgression
Joe punched an elderly man and left him with severe but non-life-threatening injuries .	Alex attacked an elderly man with a knife and left him with severe and life-threatening injuries .
Study 2B	
Lesser transgression	Greater transgression
Joe attacked an elderly man with a knife and left him with severe and life-threatening injuries.	Alex attacked an elderly man and an elderly woman with a knife and left them with severe and life-threatening injuries.
Study 3	
Which case should be punished MORE [LESS] severely? (CASE 1 / CASE 2 / EQUAL)	
CASE 1: Person A struck and killed three people while drunk driving.	CASE 2: Person B struck and killed one person while drunk driving.

STUDY 3 RESULTS: Participants were more likely to prescribe equal punishment for a pair of transgressions when they judged which deserves “less” (vs. “more”) punishment, $p < .001$.

