

Forbidden, Permissible, or Required? Task Effects in Moral Judgments of Deontic Statuses

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Introduction

It is unclear how reflective thinking affects moral judgments of sacrificial harms. Two models suggest different possibilities:

Greene et al.'s (2008) Dual Process Model (DPM) suggests that when people think more deliberately (and, reflectively), judgments should become more utilitarian.

Alternatively, Landy and Royzman's (2018) Moral Myopia Model (MMM) suggests that slow, reflective thinking will lead to more *minimalist* judgments, resulting in judgments that are neither strictly utilitarian nor strictly deontological.

We manipulate reflective thinking via elicitation task – matching tasks are considered more deliberative than choice and rating tasks (Huber et al., 2002; Tversky et al., 1988) – to test these two possibilities.

Pre-Tests

Objective: Develop a measure that correlates with participants' categorical judgments of an act as morally forbidden, permissible, or required, which can be used in choice, rating, and matching.

Method: MTurkers (total $N = 244$) were asked for judgments of deontic statuses in different ways:

- PT 1: “how likely” OR “how important” is it that this be forbidden/permissible/required in the “ideal society”?
- PT 2: “how strongly do you believe” this is forbidden/permissible/required?
- PT 3: “how much do you believe” OR “in your view, should” this be forbidden/permissible/required?
- PT 4: “how strongly do you believe” OR “how strongly do you agree” this is forbidden/permissible/required, with new scale anchors
- PT 5: “how strongly do you believe” with bipolar scale
- PT 6: “how strongly do you believe... *under these specific circumstances*”

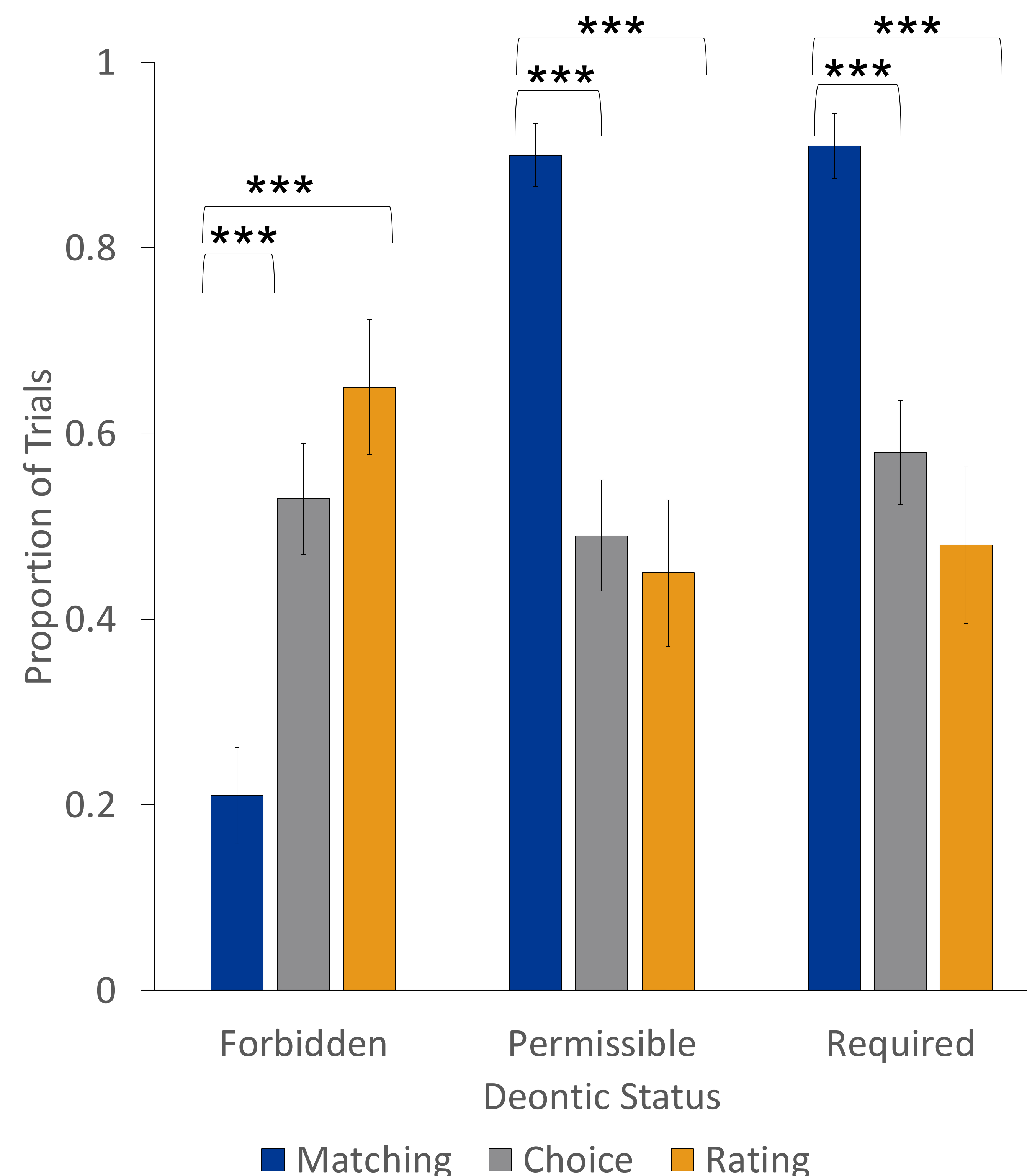
Results: The question used in Pre-test 6 showed the most consistent correlations with categorical judgments, and so was retained for the main study.

Judgments

Participants expressed deontic “preferences” (i.e., greater strength-of-belief) between two versions of six sacrificial harms (*Baby, Submarine, Cliffhanger, Nuclear Plant, Construction, Shark Attack*):

- Directly kill one person to save the lives of 100 others
- Indirectly kill one person to save the lives of five others

Results



Proportion of trials on which participants more strongly believed that directly killing one person to save 100 other lives was more [status] than indirectly killing one person to save five others, across elicitation tasks. Errors bars represent SEs.

Manipulating Reflective Thinking

MTurkers ($N = 115$) were assigned to one of three conditions:

- Matching: One number of lives saved is missing and must be filled in to produce an *equally* strong belief that the acts are morally forbidden/permissible/required.
- Rating: 9-point Likert Scale measuring strength-of belief
- Choice: Binary choice – “which do you believe more strongly...”

DV: Proportion of scenario-pairs for which participants indicate a stronger belief that directly killing one to save 100 is [status]

Conclusion

Participants' preferences fully reversed depending on the elicitation task. When participants completed a more deliberative and reflective task, they tended to make more strictly utilitarian judgments, a result that aligns more with DPM than MMM.

The full reversal of relative strength of belief across tasks mirrors other preference reversals that have been found in consumer behavior research and, more recently, in moral judgments (Landy et al., 2024).

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