Group Effects on Perceptions of Morality

Marlena R. Fraune*

As robots become increasingly autonomous, questions of who is liable for the consequences of a robot’s actions will arise. Eventually, laws or judges will determine who (e.g., the robot, its manufacturers, its programmers) is responsible for its actions. However, before making a decision on who is responsible, it is wise to understand how the general population will interpret responsibility for its actions. In this way, laws can coincide with what people view as ethical— or if this is not the case, the apparent disparity can be explained. To understand typical moral decision-making regarding robots, researchers can conduct experiments. However, in designing these experiments, it is critical to not only examine one-on-one human-robot interaction scenarios, but group situations. This is because groups give rise to intergroup dynamics, which are shown to affect moral decision-making—as this abstract outlines below.

A. Stereotypes about groups

Perceptions of group members’ morality are affected by stereotypes people hold about the group. For example, in one study, participants expected robots to behave with a more utilitarian moral code than humans, and blamed the robot when they did not [1]. Thus, it is important to examine and understand how stereotypes about robots versus the manufacturers or programmers will affect moral expectations of them.

Other stereotypes that will affect expectations of moral behavior are perceptions of mind—in particular, perceptions of agency and experience.

High-agency entities (i.e., that have the ability to control their actions) are typically thought to have more moral responsibility than low-agency entities. This means that people expect moral behavior from adult humans, but not animals [2]. People will not consider robots to be morally responsible unless they perceive the robots as agentic. Although social cues (e.g., humanlike appearance) influence how agentic people view robots [3], robots are typically perceived as less agentic than adult humans [4, 5]. When considering who is to blame, it is important to remember that people may not perceive robots as morally responsible.

High-experience entities (i.e., that have the ability to feel pain or emotions) are typically thought to have more moral rights than those with low experience [2, 6]. Because people typically consider robots to have low experience [5, 7], they express lower moral responsibility toward robots than toward humans [4, 8]. However, if people view robots as having more experience, they may call for action when they perceive a robot to be harmed. Because of this, it is important to consider how much experience people believe robots to have before putting robots in harm’s way.

B. Benefits and ingroup status

Group members often follow the group’s moral obligations, rather than their individual moral obligations or preferences [9], and engage in “morality shifting” to justify the actions of ingroup members. For example, participants expressed higher importance of ingroup loyalty and lower importance of not harming others when an ingroup member harmed an outgroup member but not when an outgroup member harmed an ingroup member [10]. People also downplay the responsibility of ingroup members for negative consequences and emphasize the responsibility of outgroup members. If robots are considered outgroup members, people may place more responsibilities on robots and humans. However, people treat robots like ingroup members when they share gender [11], race [12], or even minimal groups with the robots (i.e., groups that were arbitrarily assigned) [13]. In cases in which humans consider robots to be ingroup members, they may decrease blame of the robots and increase blame on other agents (e.g., companies).

C. Overall

Group effects have the potential to influence what behavior people consider to be moral and how responsible they consider robots to be for immoral behavior or accidents. Before making official decisions about humans versus robots holding responsibility, it is important to empirically examine how people will perceive the responsibility of all parties. This can help lawmakers be aware of their own group-based biases before making decisions. It can also help them create decisions that make intuitive sense to people or, if they make decisions people do not intuitively agree with, to further explain their decisions. This will help ease tensions between humans and robots as robots become more prevalent in everyday life.

Word count: 687
II. REFERENCES


