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The Psychology of Moral Conviction

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Abstract

This paper reviews current theory and research that indicates that attitudes held with strong moral conviction ('moral mandates') represent something psychologically distinct from other constructs (e.g., attitude strength, partisanship, or religiosity), and that variance in moral conviction has important social and political consequences, such as increased intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others, difficulties in conflict resolution, increased political participation, willingness to accept violent means to achieve preferred ends, strong ties to positive and negative emotions, and inoculation against the usual pressures to obey authorities, obey the law, or to conform to majority group influence. The normative implications of these findings are both reassuring (moral convictions can protect against obedience to potentially malevolent authorities) and terrifying (moral convictions are associated with rejection of the rule of law, and can provide a motivational foundation for violent protest and acts of terrorism). Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

The Psychology of Moral Conviction

A common theme that cuts across many controversial issues of the day is that at least one side in each case defines its position in moral terms. Controversies such as abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, capital punishment, and health care reform each seem to have advocates and opponents who see these issues in terms of self-evident and fundamental truths about right and wrong. To support alternatives to what is 'right,' 'moral' and 'good' is to be absolutely 'wrong,' 'immoral,' if not evil (e.g., Black, 1994; Bowers, 1984; Mooney, 2001).

Issues people see in a moral light are more likely to be closed to compromise and are especially tied to people's motivations to become politically engaged to either proactively stand up for what they believe is right, or reactively fight against what they believe to be fundamentally wrong. For example, Norman Morrison immolated himself within sight of Robert McNamara's window at the Pentagon in protest of the Vietnam War. His friend John Roemer explained Morrison's behavior this way, 'He fought the war more and more deeply…he played it out in his mind, I think, in terms of being a moral witness' (DeRaymond, 2006). Other examples of people's willingness to take a stand in the name of their beliefs exist as well, that range in scope from the non-violent sit-ins at lunch counters in the southern US to protest racial discrimination in service, turning to the streets to protest election outcomes in Iran, standing up to tanks in Tiananmen Square, displaying a bumper sticker to articulate one's position on an issue of the day, to bombing a Federal building in Oklahoma City (e.g., Timothy McVeigh), assassinating abortion providers (the recent murder of Dr George Tiller in Kansas), flying airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, or bombing public transportation targets in London and Madrid.

The recognition that some attitudes seem to be imbued with particular moral fervor and passion led to the development of a program of research designed to investigate whether there is in fact anything special about attitudes held with strong moral conviction

that could not be explained by other well-known attitude constructs, such as attitude strength (e.g., attitude extremity, importance, or certainty). The answer to the question of whether measuring moral convictions brings something new to our ability to predict behavior has been a resounding 'yes.' The goal of this paper is to review (i) the theoretical framework that has been guiding this program of research, (ii) the measurement and construct validity of moral conviction, (iii) research that has tested hypotheses about moral conviction, and (iv) some of the many areas that are still ripe for future research.

The Theoretical Foundations of Moral Conviction

Attitudes consist of positive and negative evaluations of attitude objects (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), whereas moral convictions consist of evaluations based on perceptions of morality and immorality, right and wrong (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Building on insights from theory and research on moral development, we have proposed that there are important distinctions between whether people's attitudes reflect subjective preferences, normative conventions, or moral imperatives (e.g., Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 2002).[1] Personal preferences are subject to individual discretion and are not socially regulated. For example, one family's preference to vacation at the beach instead of the mountains is a matter of taste. Others' preferences about the same object are not right or wrong; they are simply different. Conventions, in contrast, are socially or culturally shared notions about the way things are normally done in one's group. Authorities, rules, and laws often formally sanction conventions. Although everyone within the group boundary is supposed to understand and adhere to matters of convention, people outside of the group boundary need not. Matters of moral imperative, however, generalize and apply regardless of group boundaries: right is right, and wrong is wrong (e.g., Turiel, 2002).

There is individual variation, however, in the degree that people view the same attitude object as a preference, convention, or a moral imperative. Although many people seem to see the abortion issue in a moral light, for example, other people's attitudes may reflect preferences or conventional beliefs or norms. For example, one woman may have a pro-choice position on abortion because she would prefer to have a last resort form of birth control. Another person might have a pro-choice position because it is currently legal in his state and country, but would think it was wrong if it were against the law; alternatively, he might support or oppose abortion because his neighbors do, but would change his mind if the opinion of the majority changed.

Attitudes that reflect moral convictions (also referred to as 'moral mandates,' e.g., Mullen & Skitka, 2006a; Skitka & Mullen, 2002) theoretically differ from attitudes based more on preferences or normative conventions in a host of ways, which we have recently spelled out in an integrated theory of moral conviction (ITMC, Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008). For example, moral mandates are experienced as more objectively and universally true than preferences or conventions. Moral mandates also are inherently more motivating and self-justifying, are more autonomous, and have different and potentially stronger ties to affect than preferences or conventions, each of which have implications for the degree to which people, for example, are willing to tolerate differences of opinion. Each of these characteristics of moral conviction is explained in more detail below.

Universality

Unlike preferences or conventions, people tend to believe that their personal moral standards ought to apply to everyone. If one has a strong moral conviction that female

circumcision is wrong, for instance, one is likely to believe that the practice is wrong not only in one's culture-of-origin, but in other cultures as well. For example, some western activists vehemently object to the practice of female circumcision in Middle Eastern and African nations where the practice is normative and culturally valued (Dorkenoo, 1994). People experience attitudes held with moral conviction as absolutes, or universal standards of truth that others should also share, and are therefore more likely to project their moral beliefs on others. People may realize that there are differences of opinion on issues they see as moral imperatives, but seem to believe if they just could explain the 'facts' to those who disagree, these others would be certain to see the light and come around to the perceivers' point of view.

Objectivity

In a related vein, we posit that another distinguishing feature of people's self-identified moral convictions is that people experience these beliefs as if they were readily observable, objective properties of situations, or as facts about the world (see also Goodwin & Darley, 2008). For example, if one asks people with a moral mandate about female circumcision why it is wrong, they probably would be somewhat confused by the question and likely would respond by exclaiming, 'Because it's wrong!' The 'fact' that it is wrong is psychologically as self-evident to morally motivated perceivers as 2 + 2 = 4. Consistent with this notion, when you push people to explain why behaviors like incest are wrong even in circumstances in which a couple used multiple forms of birth control, both parties consented, and neither person was psychologically damaged (i.e., there is no harm), people continue to insist it is 'wrong' even if they cannot generate reasons why it was wrong (Haidt, 2001).[2]

Autonomy versus heteronomy

The ITMC also predicts that moral convictions represent something different from, and independent of, people's concerns about being accepted or respected by authorities or groups; in other words, people's moral mandates are more autonomous than heteronomous (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1997; Turiel, 2002; cf. Durkheim, 1925). When people's moral convictions are at stake, they are more likely to believe that duties and rights follow from the greater moral purposes that underlie group norms, procedures, and authority dictates, than from the group norms, procedures or authorities themselves (Mullen & Skitka, 2006b; Skitka et al., 2008; Skitka & Mullen, 2008; see also Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Moral beliefs are not by definition anti-establishment or anti-authority or anti-group, they just are not dependent on these externalized sources. Instead, when people take a moral perspective, they focus more on their ideals, and the way they personally believe things 'ought' or 'should' be done, than on a duty to comply with authorities or to conform to group norms. In short, moral concerns originate more from autonomous concerns than they do concerns about authorities or group identities.

Emotion

Our integrated theory of moral conviction predicts that the intensity of emotion that people experience in conjunction with moral convictions is stronger than the intensity of emotions people experience in association with non-moral but strong attitudes (see also

Haidt, 2001, 2003a; Kohlberg, 1984; Nucci, 2001; Shweder, 2002). For example, moral transgressions represent especially strong attacks on people's basic worldviews and sense of moral order (e.g., Tetlock, Kirstel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000), whereas violations of preferences or conventions do not cut quite so deep into people's core conceptions of the way the world works. Although violated preferences or normative expectations may lead to disappointment or even anger, the magnitude of these reactions is likely to pale in comparison to the outrage, contempt, and disgust associated with a violated or threatened sense of basic right and wrong (e.g., Haidt, 2003b; Lazarus, 1991; Skoe, Eisenberg, & Cumberland, 2002; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007).

Although more research has examined reactions to actions that subvert rather than sustain the moral order, people's affective reactions in response to validated moral convictions may similarly differ from validated preferences or conventions. For example, people may feel particularly proud and strong when they act in support of their moral convictions (e.g., displaying a bumper sticker in support of a given cause), feelings that might not come from supporting a strong but non-moral preference (e.g., displaying a bumper sticker declaring one's preference for a given sports team). These emotional reactions could well provide moral convictions with part of their motivational force.

Motivation and justification

Moral convictions are also experienced as motivational guides (a Humean paradox; see Mackie, 1977; Smith, 1994; for detailed discussions). Recognition of fact is generally presumed to be independent of any kind of motivational force (Hume, 1888). For example, recognition that water molecules are two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen has no motivational corollary or mandate. Recognition that trees photosynthesize or that 13 is a prime number inspires no action, nor justification for action. In contrast, a judgment that voluntarily terminating a pregnancy (or alternatively, interfering with a woman's right to choose whether to sustain a pregnancy) is fundamentally wrong is experienced as a fact and has an inherent motivational quality – it carries with it an 'ought' or 'ought not' that can motivate subsequent behavior. The presence or absence of another motivation (e.g., hunger, self-interest) has little impact on the action potential of moral conviction – moral convictions are sufficient in and of themselves as motives that can direct what people think, feel, or do. Moreover, moral conviction does not only motivate one's response or subsequent actions, it provides an inherent justification for one's response or actions. People tend to express their attitudes about issues they see in moral terms, such as abortion, incest, or cannibalism, by saying 'It's just wrong!' The question of 'why is it wrong?' in these cases will be perceived as odd: The answer that it is simply wrong – fundamentally wrong, very wrong, even monstrous – *is* the justification for one's position (Prinz, 2007). Therefore, moral convictions, unlike otherwise strong but non-moral attitudes, appear to be experienced as a unique combination of factual belief, compelling motive, and justification for action.

Measuring Moral Conviction

One thing that distinguishes the moral mandate program of research from many other programs of research designed to test questions about morality, is that we explicitly measure rather than assume that perceivers see a given issue as morally relevant to them. Many moral theories are top-down, that is, theorists define what is and is not a moral concern, trait, or judgment (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Kohlberg, 1976, 1984; Nucci,

2001; Turiel, 2002). For example, Hillygus and Shields (2005) concluded that attitudes about the Iraq War and the economy (presumed non-moral attitudes) were more important in shaping candidate preferences and voting behavior in the 2004 election than attitudes on abortion or gay marriage (presumed moral attitudes). Even if one could argue that attitudes about the Iraq War and the economy were less likely to be rooted in moral concerns than attitudes about abortion or gay marriage, there is no way to be sure without actually asking people about whether their attitudes on these issues were or were not morally vested. For example, some people might support or oppose the Iraq War because of deep moral concerns about the oppression of the Iraqi people under Saddam Hussein, or because they see a military response in the absence of an attack or explicit provocation as morally suspect.

In addition, assumed moral attitudes might differ from assumed non-moral attitudes for reasons other than their potential associations with morality. For example, the issues selected as representing 'moral' issues might also be especially partisan ones, or ones that people feel especially strongly about, but not ones necessarily seen in a moral light. In short, it is impossible to attribute the source of different consequences of specific attitudes (e.g., abortion vs. the Iraq War) to differences in moral sentiment without measuring the extent to which people see these specific attitudes as reflecting their moral beliefs.

In a somewhat related vein, many researchers create situations based on philosophical criteria that theoretically should prompt people to perceive those situations to involve a moral choice (e.g., trolley problems; Foot, 1978). The definitional rigidity often found in the philosophy literature regarding what constitutes a moral situation, however, is inconsistent with the definitional flexibility that seems to exist in the minds of most individuals. In summary, theorists and researchers seem to fall prey to part of the psychology of moral conviction – that is, theorists seem to believe that these constructs are universally recognizable and are (or could and should be) shared interpretations of the world when in reality, whether these issues are seen as morally relevant is more subjectively interpreted and individually variable.

Although we certainly rely on theory to guide our research, we think it is more appropriate to treat what is or is not a morally relevant issue, judgment, trait, etc., as something that is very much in the eye of the perceiver. We therefore advocate measuring whether people have a morally vested perspective on given issues, judgments, etc., and testing whether variance in the degree to which they do so explains something more than other well-known variables, such as attitude strength. Because our approach is still relatively new, however, it is important to say a few words about measurement and the construct validity of the moral mandate construct.

To avoid confounding our measure of moral conviction with other aspects of attitudes, such as attitude importance or centrality, we have generally used a single-item and face valid measure of moral conviction.[3] Specifically, we ask people their agreement with an item such as 'My feelings about X are a reflection of my core moral beliefs and convictions,' or 'To what extent is your attitude about X a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions?' where X refers to a given attitude object. Skitka et al. (2005, Study 2), for example, measured various markers of attitude strength in addition to a moral conviction item with respect to four contemporary social issues in a community sample of adults: abortion, capital punishment, the legalization of marijuana, and building new nuclear power plants. Results indicated that variability in moral conviction was (i) positively correlated with attitude extremity and certainty across all 4 issues [average r (80) = 0.39 and r (80) = 0.28, respectively], (ii) modestly correlated with attitude importance in 2 of 4 issues [average r (80) = 0.20], (iii) modestly correlated with strength of left-right political

orientation [average r (80) = 0.17] and (iv) uncorrelated with strength of directional political orientation [average r (80) = −0.07; in other words, political liberals and conservatives were equally likely to have moral convictions about these issues]. These results indicated that moral conviction was somewhat associated with traditional indicators of attitude strength, but did not reduce to these other constructs given that shared variance ranged only from 0% (directional political orientation) to 15% (extremity).

As will be reviewed shortly, and in further support of the discriminant validity of the moral conviction construct, numerous studies have now been conducted that have tested whether unique variance in moral conviction is associated with a large variety of downstream consequences (e.g., intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others, willingness to accept various policy decisions, resistance to majority group influence, and voting) when controlling for attitude extremity, importance, certainty, strength of partisanship, and a host of other possible alternative accounts for the effects of moral conviction on these various outcome measures, with positive results. Given that these other characteristics of attitudes do not reduce to a common factor and contribute uniquely to understanding attitude strength (Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006), the finding that moral conviction represents yet another unique but correlated facet of attitude strength is perhaps not surprising.

In addition to the tests of discriminant validity described above, we recently tested the convergent validity of our usual measure of moral conviction by testing how well it predicted a similarly face valid measure of moral conviction, that is, the degree that participants indicated that their attitude on a given issue was 'connected to their fundamental beliefs about right and wrong' in large national sample and with respect to people's feelings about legalizing physician-assisted suicide (PAS). We also measured issue-specific religious conviction in the context of this study,[4] which provided a preliminary examination of the degree to which moral and religious convictions were similar or different. In support of the construct validity of the moral conviction measure, people's strength of moral conviction and beliefs about right and wrong in the issue-domain of PAS were highly correlated, r (650) = 0.82, $p < 0.001$. Additionally, the right and wrong item correlated substantially more strongly with the moral conviction item than it did with any of the other measures assessed, including strength of political orientation, r (650) = 0.18, $p < 0.01$, attitude extremity r (650) = 0.49, $p < 0.01$, importance, r (650) = 0.61, $p < 0.01$, centrality, r (650) = 0.67, $p < 0.01$, frequency of church attendance, r (650) = 0.26, $p < 0.01$, general religiosity, r (650) = 0.29, $p < 0.01$, or PAS-specific religious conviction, r (650) = 0.32, $p < 0.01$. Even more important, the partial correlation between moral conviction and the right-wrong item remained robust, even when controlling for all of these other variables, r_p (650) = 0.62, $p < 0.01$ (Skitka, Bauman, Lytle, Morgan & Wisneski, unpublished data).

We recently replicated these results using similar methods with a student sample and across a broader array of issues (e.g., the use of 'stress' interrogation techniques when interviewing suspected terrorists, increasing efforts to curb illegal immigration, the continued use of capital punishment in the United States, and instituting a mandatory testing requirement to graduate high school). The correlation between the moral conviction and right and wrong measure remained robust when controlling for religious conviction, general levels of religiosity, attitude strength measures, and strength of political orientation (i.e., all r's > 0.65; Skitka et al., unpublished data).

In addition to demonstrating evidence of the discriminant and convergent validity of moral conviction, we tested the reliability of the 2-item measure of moral conviction (i.e., a measure that included both the 'moral conviction' and the 'right/wrong' item) by examining test-retest correlations of moral convictions associated with 13 different issues

across 1 and 3-month intervals in a large community sample (Skitka et al., unpublished data). Not only were average test-retest correlations consistently high, these test-retest correlations were as high or higher than the test-retest correlations of measures of attitude importance, certainty, extremity and other measures of attitude strength. In summary, people's moral convictions demonstrate clear evidence of discriminant and convergent validity and long-term stability.

We turn next to review research that has tested hypotheses that were derived from the ITMC. This research has tested the degree to which moral convictions (i) are associated with intolerance of attitude dissimilarity, (ii) provide people with greater resistance to authorities as well as majority group influence, (iii) act as a barrier to conflict resolution, (iv) are associated with greater acceptance of violent means to achieve preferred ends, (v) are associated with positive forms of political engagement, such as voting, and (vi) are associated with affect.

Intolerance

One implication of the ITMC is that tolerance of differing points of view has little or no room at the table when moral convictions are at stake: right is right and wrong is wrong. Consistent with this idea, people do not want to work with, live near, or even shop at a store owned by someone who does not share their morally mandated opinions. For example, we asked a community sample of adults to nominate what they thought was the most pressing problem facing the nation (Skitka et al., 2005; Study 1). Participants then rated how strongly they felt about their nominated issue using traditional indices of attitude strength (i.e., attitude extremity, importance, and certainty), and our measure of moral conviction. Last, participants indicated how happy or unhappy they would feel about having someone who did not share their view on their nominated issue as a neighbor, someone who might marry into their family, someone they might work with, or other possible social relationships (a measure of social distance and prejudice; see Byrnes & Kiger, 1988; Crandall, 1991).

Our results indicated that the strength of moral conviction people felt about their nominated issue explained unique variance in their preferred social distance from attitudinally dissimilar others. This result was robust even when controlling for indices of attitude strength. Moreover, these same findings emerged in other studies that tested the intolerance hypothesis using a number of researcher nominated issues, for example, the legalization of marijuana, abortion, capital punishment, and building new nuclear power plants in the US (Skitka et al., 2005), a combination of 41 political and non-political attitude objects (e.g., children playing violent video games, cheating on exams, masturbation, Wright et al., 2008), and college students' relative tolerance of moral as compared to demographic diversity (Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003).

People with moral convictions about a specific issue also maintain greater physical distance from attitudinally divergent others than do those who do not see the same issue in a moral light (Skitka et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2008). One study even found that people behaviorally discriminate against those who do not share their moral beliefs on specific issues. For example, when given the opportunity to divide a set of 10 raffle tickets for desirable prizes between themselves and another student with a divergent attitude on an issue of the day, participants who saw the issue as a moral one kept most of the raffle tickets for themselves (on average, 8.5 tickets), whereas people who did not see the issue as a moral one tended to divide the tickets equally between themselves and the other participant (Wright et al., 2008).

In summary, research indicates that as people's moral convictions in a given attitude domain increases, so too does their intolerance of attitude divergence within that domain. Moreover, people are less willing to share and more willing to behaviorally discriminate against those who do not share their moral point of view.

Inoculation against Obedience to Authorities and Majority Group Influence.

People often do not know the 'right' answer to various decisions or conflicts (e.g., what is best for the group, whether a defendant is really guilty or innocent), and therefore they frequently rely on cues like procedural fairness and an authority's legitimacy to guide their reactions (Lind, 2001). However, when people have moral certainty about what outcome authorities and institutions should deliver, they do not need to rely on standing perceptions of legitimacy or procedural fairness as proxy information to judge whether the system works – in these cases, they can simply evaluate whether authorities get it 'right.' 'Right' decisions indicate that authorities are appropriate and work as they should. 'Wrong' answers signal that the system is somehow broken and is not working as it should. In short, when people have strong moral convictions they should theoretically feel released from a tendency to obey legitimate authorities' decisions, and may use whether authorities get it right as an important litmus test of whether the system is legitimate and fair instead.

We recently tested the hypothesis that people become more independent of authorities and procedures when they have strong moral convictions about outcomes in the context of reactions to a US Supreme Court ruling (*Gonzales vs. Oregon*) to decide whether states have the power to legalize PAS. We conducted a survey of a national sample shortly before the Court heard arguments in the case and then again after the Court made its ruling in support of state's rights to decide this issue (Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009). Results indicated those who were morally mandated in favor of PAS felt the ruling was fair and final, and their perceptions of the Court's procedural fairness and legitimacy increased from pre- to post-ruling. However, those who were morally mandated against PAS thought the decision was unfair and not final, and their perceptions of the Court's procedural fairness and legitimacy decreased from pre- to post-ruling. Pre-ruling perceptions of the procedural fairness or the legitimacy of the Court did not moderate the effects of moral conviction on any of these variables.

The latter finding is particularly interesting, because one of the most widely replicated findings in social psychology is that fair procedures (e.g., procedures free from bias, that provide opportunities for constituency voice, or that treat involved parties with appropriate dignity and respect), generally lead people to accept non-preferred outcomes (a phenomena called the 'fair process effect,' e.g., Folger, Rosenfeld, Grove, & Corkran, 1979). An equally widely replicated finding, however, is that the fair process effect does not emerge when people have a moral stake in outcomes (see Skitka et al., 2008 for a review). For example, people see vigilantism to be equally fair as due process of law in leading to the death of a defendant in a murder case if they have strong moral clarity about the defendant's guilt (Skitka & Houston, 2001).

Other research has found behavioral support for the prediction that people reject authorities and the rule of law when outcomes violate their moral convictions. For example, Mullen and Nadler (2008) exposed people to legal decisions that supported, opposed, or were unrelated to their moral convictions. The experimenters distributed a pen with a post-exposure questionnaire, and asked participants to return the questionnaire and pen at end of the experimental session. Consistent with the prediction that decisions, rules, and laws that violate people's moral convictions erode support for the authorities and authority systems

who decide these things, participants were more likely to steal the pen after exposure to a legal decision that was inconsistent rather than consistent their personal moral convictions.

People's moral convictions not only inoculate them from the usual pressure to comply with legitimate authorities or to accept non-preferred outcomes if they are decided by fair procedures, but inoculate people from the usual effects of majority group influence as well. That people usually conform to majority group opinion is well known (see Cialdini & Trost, 1998 for a review). The reasons why people conform to majority group norms even when they individually have a contrary point of view stems in part from fears that going against group norms risks ridicule and disenfranchisement, and hopes that going along will maintain or build acceptance and belonging (Asch, 1956). Other times, people conform because they are not confident about the right answer or the best way to behave, and they turn to peers for guidance and information (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Sherif, 1936). When people have strong moral convictions, however, they prefer to distance themselves from attitudinally dissimilar others (as reviewed earlier) and should therefore have little need to look to peers to discover the 'right answer.' Consistent with this idea, people with moral mandates are more likely to resist majority influence (e.g., Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, 2009) and consensus information (Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003; Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007), and continue to uphold their autonomous point of view, despite these well-known pressures to conform.

A barrier to conflict resolution

The evidence in support of the conclusion that people are less likely to defer to authorities or to group norms when they have a strong moral conviction about the issue at hand suggests that people may be particularly unlikely to accept compromises or risk that procedures or authorities could get issues 'wrong.' To test this idea, Skitka et al. (2005) examined the interactions of people within attitudinally heterogeneous and homogenous groups who were asked to develop a procedure to resolve an assigned issue. Some groups had members with strong but non-moral attitudes whereas other groups had members with moral mandates about the issue-at-hand. Group processes and climate were strikingly different in these types of groups. Compared to other groups, attitudinally heterogeneous groups that discussed procedures to resolve a morally mandated issue were lowest in reported good will and cooperativeness toward their fellow group members, and perceived as most defensive and tense by third party observers who were blind to details about group composition. Furthermore, groups that worked to develop procedures to resolve a morally mandated issue (regardless of whether groups were attitudinally heterogeneous or homogenous) were the least likely to successfully develop a procedure to resolve their assigned issue.

By way of contrast, the groups who discussed procedures to resolve something they felt strongly but not morally about reported the greatest degree of cooperation and good will, and were also seen by third party observers as the least tense and defensive of all the groups. In summary, trying to develop procedural solutions to resolve diversity of moral opinions was difficult, awkward, and painful, whereas trying to develop procedural solutions to resolve diversity of strong but non-moral opinions was experienced as interesting and even fun (Skitka et al., 2005).

Political engagement

The ITMC also predicts that knowing whether an attitude is held with strong moral conviction should increase one's ability to predict behavior and behavioral intentions,

including political engagement and activism (cf. Lodewijkx, Kersten, & Van Zomeren, 2008). For example, three studies tested this hypothesis in the context of predicting whether people voted or intended to vote in the last three presidential elections (Morgan, Skitka, & Wisneski, in press, Skitka & Bauman, 2008). The degree to which people's candidate preferences reflected moral convictions predicted voting intentions and behavior, even when controlling for the predictive power of strength of partisanship and other variables. Moreover, the association between moral convictions and voting behavior was equally strong for those on the political right and left – results that refuted the common assumption that moral concerns might be a stronger motivator of political engagement for those on the right than on the left.

People are also more willing sacrifice their self-interests by paying more for consumer goods and boycotting businesses like Wal-Mart when they ethically object to business practices, that is, when they believe Wal-Mart harms communities or does not treat their employees well. These effects were fully mediated by a combination of moral conviction and anger, but were not mediated by attitude strength (Cronin, Reysen & Branscombe, unpublished data). In summary, moral convictions motivate people to act in the name of their beliefs in the form of both voting and engaging in activism, even when these behaviors are costly to them.

Emotion

All major theories of morality predict that there should be strong associations between moral concerns and emotion. Consistent with this idea, there are strong connections between having moral convictions about issues and having correspondingly strong emotional reactions to these issues. For example, as mentioned earlier, when people have a moral stake in outcomes, their subsequent judgments of fairness and decision acceptance are shaped more by whether outcomes are inconsistent or consistent with their moral preferences. These effects are mediated either fully or partially by emotional reactions, such as anger and relief (Bauman, 2006; Mullen & Skitka, 2006a). Similarly, we consistently find stronger emotional reactions to either thoughts of various acts (e.g., the act of PAS) or policies (e.g., legalizing PAS) as a function of whether people's attitudes reflect strong versus weak moral convictions (see Figure 1), even when we control for variables such as religiosity and attitude extremity. As predicted, people have stronger positive and negative emotional reactions when they think about the act of PAS or legalizing it as a function of whether their support or opposition to the practice is a moral mandate. We have observed similar findings in other domains as well, such as more intense positive and negative emotional reactions to the Iraq War as a function of whether people's support or opposition to the war were high versus low in moral conviction. Although more research is needed to explore how moral convictions and emotion relate, it seems clear that strong emotions are part of what provides moral convictions with their motivational force.

Discussion

Although the moral mandate program of research has demonstrated the value of studying moral conviction as a unique characteristic of attitudes there is considerable room for additional research. Research to date has focused primarily on (i) the question of whether moral convictions yield new insights and variance explained in behavior that could not be accounted for by other well-known aspects of attitudes, such as their strength, importance,

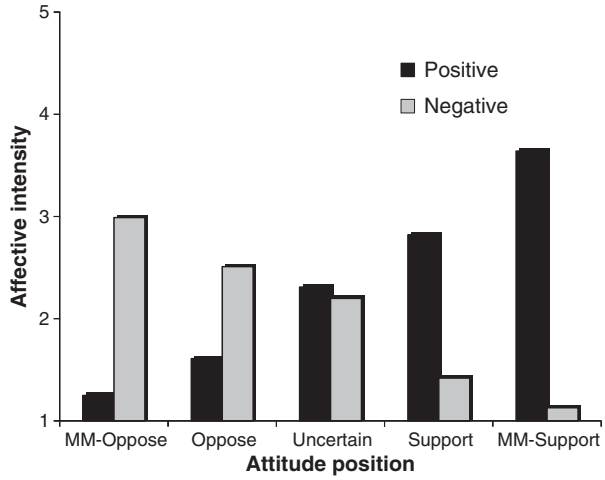

Figure 1 Intensity of emotional reactions to thinking about the act of physician-assisted suicide as a function of whether attitudes were morally mandated (MM) controlling for attitude extremity, religiosity, and demographics.

and so on, (ii) ruling out a number of other alternative explanations for findings associated with moral conviction, and (iii) testing predictions about the likely consequences of moral convictions. There is no end, in principle, to the search for nonmoral properties of attitudes that could explain away the effects of morality. For example, one could argue that perhaps moral conviction effects reduce to the absence of ambivalence or are due instead to various forms of moral immaturity. Like all researchers, we can make only limited claims based on the research conducted thus far. That said, existing research suggests that moral mandates do not reduce to some combination of nonmoral content and structural attributes of attitudes (such as extremity, importance, etc.) or to various individual difference variables (e.g., a tendency to see all issues in a moral light). Further attempts at reductionism, therefore, would seem low on the list of interesting possible avenues for future research. Much more interesting areas will be to continue to explore not only the consequences of having strong moral convictions, but to more deeply explore the antecedents of moral conviction as well. For example, how do people recognize when their feelings about an attitude says something about their moral convictions, rather than something about their strong but non-moral preferences or senses of convention?

Many other areas are open for future research as well. For example, how easy or difficult is it to get people to moralize their position on a given issue and how does one go about moralizing it? Of equal importance, how easy or difficult is it to get people to de-moralize their position on an issue, and how does one go about accomplishing this end?

It will also be interesting to explore 'moralizers,' that is people who tend to have stronger moral convictions across more issues than others do. Most theory and research has tended define the tendency to moralize as a characteristic of right wing authoritarianism, or of the protestant work ethic, and other variables that would assume that moralization is more likely to occur on the political right than it is on the political left (see Altemeyer, 1996; Furham, 1984 for reviews). Using our measure of moral conviction, and summing strength of moral convictions across issues, allows for the creation of an ideologically neutral measure of moralization – that is, one that could theoretically be as sensitive to moralization on the left as it is on the right. Although our examination of moralizers is still very much in its infancy, we have already discovered some intriguing

findings – for example, moralizers are information seekers and are higher in need for cognition, regardless of whether they are on the political right or left (Wisneski, Morgan & Skitka, unpublished data).

Conclusions

It is increasingly clear that knowing the degree to which people view issues through a moral lens is an important predictor of a wide range of behavior. Gaining an increased understanding of the psychology of moral conviction would seem to be important if we want to better understand when people are willing to take a stand and fight for their beliefs. For example, Robert F. Kennedy once said, 'moral courage is … the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change. Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (s)he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.' Moral convictions appear to provide people with the courage and motivation they need to become involved in creating a better and more just world. Learning more about the psychology of these variables therefore has considerable promise to enhance our understanding of constructive civic engagement and involvement.

That said, history is also replete with atrocities that were justified by invoking the highest principles and that were perpetrated upon victims who were equally convinced of their own moral superiority. Justice, the common welfare, universal ethics, and God have each been used to justify any variety of forms of oppression, murder, and genocide (Mischel & Mischel, 1976). Given that strong moral convictions are associated with accepting any means to achieve preferred ends, gaining more insight into the psychology of how and why moral convictions promote constructive, but potentially also quite destructive forms of political involvement, is a critical agenda for continued scientific investigation.

Short Biography

Linda J. Skitka's research bridges a number of areas of inquiry including social, political, and moral psychology. Her work in these areas has been funded by numerous grants from the National Science Foundation and other funding agencies, and she serves as an editor, in addition to serving on numerous editorial boards including the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Journal of Personality and Social psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and *Political Psychology*. She is a former president of the International Society for Justice Research, and is currently a professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Endnotes

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[1] Domain theorists specify the content of what counts as a personal, normative, or moral belief. We use these domain distinctions as a useful heuristic for classifying different kinds of possible attitudes but do not posit that moral attitudes are necessarily based on attributions of harm or injustice (for example), or that rights belong in the domain of preference. Instead, we posit that people recognize when their attitudes are morally convicted, and that it is an empirical question whether perceptions of harm, injustice, or relevance to rights are necessary criteria for when or how people recognize an attitude position as moral one.

[2] Our approach is agnostic, however, about whether morality is better understood in terms of moral realism or ethical subjectivism. Our theory only makes the claim that people experience their moral convictions like objective facts rather than subjective interpretations of the world, and makes no claims about whether morality is in fact real and knowable rather than subjectively interpreted.

[3] Other researchers have measured moral conviction by assessing whether people classify their attitudes as moral, and then measuring the degree to which they do so (strength of moral convictions) separately (e.g., Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). Given that cognitively categorizing an attitude as a moral one and the degree to which it is experienced as moral jointly influence downstream variables (e.g., tolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others), we support a measure that captures both categorization and evaluative strength of moral convictions. Hornsey and colleagues (e.g, Hornsey et al., 2003) measure moral conviction with a three item measure: 'To what extent do you feel your opinion is morally correct?', 'To what extent do you feel your position is based on strong personal principles?', and 'To what extent do you feel your position on gay law reform is a moral stance?' (1 = not at all, 9 = very much; a = .73), which we also think is acceptable and unlikely to be confounded with other measures of attitude strength.

[4] The religious conviction item asked participants' relative agreement/disagreement with the item, 'My position on the issue of physician-assisted suicide is closely connected to my religious beliefs and convictions.'

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