

Moral Tipping Points

How Trait Moral Salience Moderates Judgments of Narrative Characters Along the Moral Continuum

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Abstract: We examined how morality subcultures moderate judgments of a narrative character's behavior along the moral continuum. Using the moral continuum procedure (MCP) across two studies (Matthews, 2019), we identify the point along the moral continuum where trait moral salience (i.e., one's sensitivity to different moral foundations) begins to influence moral judgments. Findings indicate that trait moral salience does not influence judgments of less immoral behaviors (i.e., behaviors that fall along the beginning of the continuum). However, trait moral salience does impact judgments of more immoral behaviors (i.e., behaviors that fall on the latter half of the continuum), in a pattern consistent with past research. Our data imply that a moral tipping point along the continuum exists, where moral judgments shift from moral consensus (i.e., a general uniformity in moral judgments) to moral disagreement (i.e., divergence in judgement caused by individual differences in trait moral salience). We posit that dynamic coordination theory's conceptualization of common knowledge helps explain the observed tipping point. Thus, the current project contributes toward extant media theorizing (Tamborini et al., 2012) by specifying how morality subcultures function along a moral continuum.

Keywords: morality, moral judgment, moral continuum procedure, morality subcultures, moral intuitions



Recent work demonstrates that conceptualizing moral behavior along a continuum helps scholars understand behavioral approbation of and disposition formation toward media characters (Grizzard et al., 2021; Matthews, 2019). Specifically, by employing the moral continuum procedure (MCP; Matthews, 2019), researchers can map behaviors along a continuum to detect where biases in moral judgments manifest. Evidence demonstrates that both character features (e.g., character-schema; Matthews, 2019; Raney, 2004) and narrative features (e.g., character interdependence; Grizzard et al., 2020; Grizzard et al., 2021) can substantially bias behavioral approbation across the continuum.

Presently, research employing the MCP has largely focused on studying the effects of *media-centric* variables on judgments across the moral continuum (e.g., character-schema, character role, character interdependence, etc.). By comparison, research has yet to exemplify how *audience-centric* traits (e.g., moral intuitions) impact such judgments. Given that research has demonstrated the effect of one's moral sensitivities on behavioral approbation, disposition formation, and media preferences (i.e., morality

subcultures; see, Bowman et al., 2012; Eden & Tamborini, 2017; Joeckel et al., 2012; Tamborini et al., 2012, 2013; Zillmann, 2000), it is likely that trait moral salience (i.e., one's sensitivity to different moral foundations) also moderates judgments along the moral continuum.

What remains to be specified is the *type* of moderation that trait moral salience elicits across the continuum (see Holbert & Park, 2020). In other words, does trait moral salience moderate judgments along the moral continuum uniformly or do distinct patterns emerge across the continuum (e.g., contributory convergent negative; see Holbert & Park, 2020 for terminology)? A visualization of these moderation types is presented in our online supplement (<https://bit.ly/3UaQomb>). Thus, the current study seeks to build knowledge by analyzing the patterns of moral judgment bias that occur from trait moral salience across the moral continuum using the MCP.

Moral Continuum Procedure

The MCP is a moral judgement evaluation methodology presented by Matthews (2019) grounded in the ordered alternatives procedure (OAP; Sherif, 1979). The MCP has participants observe a series of moral alternatives (i.e., behaviors) enacted by a mediated character and judge each alternative as right, wrong, or unsure. These responses are the moral equivalents to the OAP's latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and non-committance derived from social

judgment theory (Matthews, 2019; Sherif et al., 1965). By ordering the moral judgments of each alternative, two alternatives in the list represent polar extremes (i.e., most right/moral behavior and most wrong/immoral behavior), with all other alternatives falling between these two poles, functionally creating an ordinal ranking of moral behaviors (i.e., a continuum).

Using the MCP, Matthews (2019) demonstrated that character roles and character-schema biased approbation along the continuum. Findings indicated that, relative to average people, participants judged the same behaviors performed by heroes as more morally right. However, this only occurred for more immoral behaviors (i.e., latter half of the continuum). Likewise, people judged the behaviors of morally ambiguous characters as more moral compared to pure hero characters across the latter half of the continuum. Grizzard et al. (2021) found similar patterns when investigating the impact of character interdependence using the MCP. Audiences granted moral license to characters engaging in immoral behavior when there was a comparatively worse character present in the narrative. Both studies demonstrate the utility of the MCP for assessing where and when narrative variables bias moral judgment along the continuum. Using this approach, we can apply the same analytical framework to determine how trait moral salience moderates judgments along the continuum.

Morality Subcultures

Coined by Zillmann (2000), morality subcultures are groups of individuals who share similar moral sensitivities. Zillmann posits that, while moral judgment is “in no way uniform and monolithic,” moral scholars must “recognize the diversity of basal morality in the strata of the population at large” (2000, pp. 60–61). In other words, by identifying groups of people who hold the same moral values (i.e., morality subcultures), researchers can predict how and when different subcultures will sanction moral behavior. Moreover, researchers can compare subcultures to determine how perceptions of a single behavior (e.g., slapping someone) may change based on cultural affiliation. Guided by this logic, empirical research (Bowman et al., 2012; Eden & Tamborini, 2017; Joeckel et al., 2012; Tamborini et al., 2012, 2013) has differentiated morality subcultures using moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2008).

Drawing on the social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001), MFT proposes that five distinct moral foundations (e.g., care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity) guide one’s perception, affective response, and evaluation of different behaviors. Variation in the salience of each foundation will change how an individual sanctions various actions (e.g., care vs. fairness violations). For example, Tamborini et al. (2012, 2013) demonstrated that trait moral salience

predicted the appeal of different media content. Additional work has examined the impact of trait moral salience on various narrative processes, including disposition formation (Eden & Tamborini, 2017), media preferences (Bowman et al., 2012), and moral decision making (Joeckel et al., 2012). Given these findings, we contend that variation in one’s trait moral salience impacts perceptions and evaluations of behaviors that span the moral continuum. To date, however, no work has systematically investigated how moral intuitions moderate evaluations across the continuum. Thus, the aim of the current study is to address this gap and empirically test how moral intuitions moderate such judgments.

Current Study

The current study utilizes publicly available data collected across two studies from a previously published project (Matthews, 2019; <https://bit.ly/3eReTEP>). Both studies employed the MCP and created a moral continuum of harm behaviors (i.e., care violations). Although data on participants’ moral intuitions were collected, these data were secondary to the main goal of the parent manuscript, and, thus, were not analyzed or published. Therefore, we use these secondary data to explore how one’s moral intuitions impact judgments across the moral continuum. Importantly, given the behaviors used in the MCP were harmful immoral behaviors, we focus our investigation specifically on how harm salience moderates moral judgments along the continuum. We draw on one of the preregistered predictions of that parent project and present the following hypothesis (see H5a; <https://bit.ly/3BH2axq>):

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Those with higher harm salience will rate harm behaviors as more wrong than those with lower harm salience.

However, the current project wishes to extend knowledge beyond this preregistered hypothesis. Rather than examine whether there is simply a main effect of trait harm salience on moral judgment, we want to specify how the moderation effect of trait harm salience functions across the moral continuum. Thus, using Holbert and Park’s (2020) typology of moderation effects, we propose an additional research question:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What type of moderation is elicited by harm salience across the moral continuum?

Method

Participants and Procedure

A visualization of the narrative character priming task and the list of behaviors used in the parent studies are included

in our online supplement (<https://bit.ly/3UaQomb>). Studies 1 and 2 in the current manuscript refer to Studies 2 and 3 in the parent manuscript, respectively. Study 1 consisted of 528 valid participants collected from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and a convenience sample at The Ohio State University ($n_{\text{M-Turk}} = 269$, $n_{\text{University}} = 259$). Following consent, participants morally judged 24 randomly presented behaviors that varied in their degree of immorality. The behaviors were contextualized by a thought experiment where an average person enacted each behavior upon a criminal to save a single human life. Following the presentation of each behavior, participants rank ordered the 24 behaviors. Finally, participants completed trait moral salience measures.

Study 2 consisted of 361 valid participants collected from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and a convenience sample from The Ohio State University ($n_{\text{M-Turk}} = 267$, $n_{\text{University}} = 94$). Study 2 was similar to Study 1. Participants rated a series of randomly presented immoral behaviors contextualized by a thought experiment, ordered the severity of each behavior, and completed trait moral salience measures.

Importantly, two distinct changes were made for Study 2. First, participants were asked to rate each behavior two times throughout study, once where an average person enacts the behavior and once where a hero enacts the behavior. Second, 12 behaviors, rather than 24, constituted the MCP. Given the current study's focus on examining the effect of trait harm salience on moral judgments broadly, the two scores for the hero and the average person were averaged into a single score. Additional analyses that investigate differences in moral judgments between the hero and the average person are presented in our online supplement (<https://bit.ly/3UaQomb>).

Measures

Moral Judgment

The same measures were used in Studies 1 and 2. To assess moral judgments, participants rated each behavior as *right* (1), *unsure* (2), or *wrong* (3).

Trait Moral Salience

To assess trait moral salience, the moral foundations questionnaire was used (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011). The MFQ uses five subscales to gauge an individual's moral foundation sensitivity. Participants respond to a series of relevance and agreement items that represent each moral foundation. Both types of items are measured on a 6-point scale with relevance responses ranging from 1 (= *not relevant at all*) to 6 (= *extremely relevant*) and agreement responses ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 6 (= *strongly agree*). Descriptive statistics for each subscale are presented in our online supplement (<https://bit.ly/3UaQomb>).

Results

We conducted a series of multilevel models to assess the impact of harm salience across the moral continuum. Full descriptions of the fixed and random effects in our models are discussed in our online supplement. Furthermore, we conducted cumulative link mixed models to examine whether a more complex but statistically appropriate ordinal response model pointed to different conclusions. These models largely coincide with the multilevel linear models we conducted. Their results are also presented in our online supplement (<https://bit.ly/3UaQomb>). Four separate models were serially built to quantify the impact of each fixed predictor on the variation of our model parameters.

In Model 1, we ran an empty means model to assess the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) within the data. ICC values represent the proportion of between-subject variance to within-subject variance and indicate whether using a multilevel approach is appropriate (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). In Model 2, we ran an unconditional growth model to examine the average change between each moral judgment across the continuum. This model indicates the average moral judgment of the first behavior in the continuum (i.e., intercept) and the average change that occurred across each behavior (i.e., slope) absent of any fixed predictors (e.g., harm salience). In Model 3, we ran a conditional growth model where we entered participants' trait harm salience. This model allows us to assess whether one's trait harm salience impacts the moral judgments at the beginning of the continuum (i.e., intercept) and the trajectory of moral judgments across the continuum (i.e., slope). Finally, in Model 4, we entered participants' scores across the other four moral foundations. This model allows us to examine the robustness of any trait harm salience effects by controlling for the other moral intuitions. We conducted these four models across both studies and the results are presented in Table 1.

Across both studies, Model 1 showed that the proportion of between-subject variation was substantial ($\text{ICC}_{\text{Study 1}} = .268$; $\text{ICC}_{\text{Study 2}} = .243$) indicating that our use of multilevel models was warranted. In Model 2, we found significant intercepts, which suggests that the average moral judgment for the first behavior in the studies (e.g., threatens and shoves, respectively) was rated as right. We also found a positive significant effect of behavior in both studies indicating that as behaviors across the continuum became more immoral, the average change in moral judgment increased. In other words, participants were more likely to rate less immoral behaviors as right (i.e., values closer to 1) and more immoral behaviors as wrong (i.e., values closer to 3).

In Model 3 we found a null effect of trait harm salience on moral judgments and a significant interaction between

Table 1. Multilevel model results of harm salience on moral judgments across both studies

	Study 1				Study 2			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Fixed effects								
Intercept	1.580***	0.956***	1.051***	1.001***	1.763***	1.069***	1.031***	0.914***
Behavior	–	0.054***	0.029***	0.070***	–	0.126***	0.060***	0.096***
Harm	–	–	–0.021	–0.011	–	–	0.008	–0.015
Harm × Behav	–	–	0.005***	0.009***	–	–	0.014***	0.024***
Covariates								
Fairness	–	–	–	–0.030	–	–	–	0.025
Loyalty	–	–	–	0.029	–	–	–	0.008
Authority	–	–	–	–0.020	–	–	–	–0.020
Purity	–	–	–	0.034	–	–	–	0.048
Fair × Behav	–	–	–	–0.008***	–	–	–	–0.011*
Loy × Behav	–	–	–	0.001	–	–	–	–0.002
Auth × Behav	–	–	–	–0.008***	–	–	–	0.002
Pur × Behav	–	–	–	0.001	–	–	–	–0.009**
Random effects								
Residual	0.542***	0.352***	0.352***	0.352***	0.469***	0.232***	0.232***	0.232***
Intercept	0.198***	0.184***	0.184***	0.180***	0.151***	0.165***	0.165***	0.162***
Behavior	–	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	–	0.002***	0.002***	0.002***
Covariance	–	–0.004***	–0.004***	–0.003***	–	–0.006***	–0.006***	–0.005**
ICC, pseudo R^2 statistics, and model fit								
ICC	.268	–	–	–	.243	–	–	–
$\Delta R^2_{\text{Residual}}$	–	.350	.000	.000	–	.505	.000	.000
$\Delta R^2_{\text{Intercept}}$	–	.071	.002	.017	–	.000	.000	.019
$\Delta R^2_{\text{Behavior}}$	–	–	.021	.075	–	–	.061	.077
–2LL (df)	29,342.7 (3)	24,754.0 (6)	24,745.0 (8)	24,702.0 (16)	9,556.8 (3)	7,068.7 (6)	7,050.1 (8)	7,033.3 (16)
–2LL Δ , χ^2 (df)	–	4,588.7 (3)***	9.0 (2)**	43.0 (8)***	–	2,488.1 (3)***	18.6 (2)***	16.8 (8)*

Note. * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

trait harm salience and behavior. These findings indicate that toward the beginning of the moral continuum, one's trait harm salience did not significantly moderate one's moral judgments. Moving across the continuum, however, one's trait harm salience began affecting judgments as the behaviors became more immoral. Thus, differences in moral judgment due to trait harm salience are bounded, such that one's sensitivity to violations of care manifest toward the latter half of the continuum. Moreover, these patterns were consistent after controlling for the other moral foundations in Model 4. Visualizations of these effects are depicted in Figure 1. Taken together, these findings partially support H1. Those with higher trait harm salience rated harm behaviors as more wrong than those with lower trait harm salience, but only after the behaviors reached a certain threshold of immorality. These patterns thus represent a contributory divergent moderation effect (Holbert & Park, 2020), answering RQ1.¹

Discussion

The current study corroborates extant knowledge that trait moral salience moderates moral judgments. However, we extend knowledge by specifying how this moderation functions across the moral continuum (i.e., from less immoral to more immoral). We found that trait harm salience demonstrates a contributory divergent moderation effect on behavioral approbation along the moral continuum. In other words, trait harm salience most strongly differentiates judgments of moderate-to-very-immoral behaviors. Although this result replicates previous morality subcultures research (Eden & Tamborini, 2017; Joeckel et al., 2012; Tamborini et al., 2012, 2013), we additionally found that trait harm salience does not alter judgments of minimally immoral behaviors. We believe an alternative moral psychological framework (i.e., one aside from MFT) may provide an explanation for this finding.

¹ The moderation effect could be classified as contributory divergent positive or contributory divergent negative depending on how moral judgment responses are coded (i.e., higher scale values indicating morally wrong or morally right judgments, respectively).

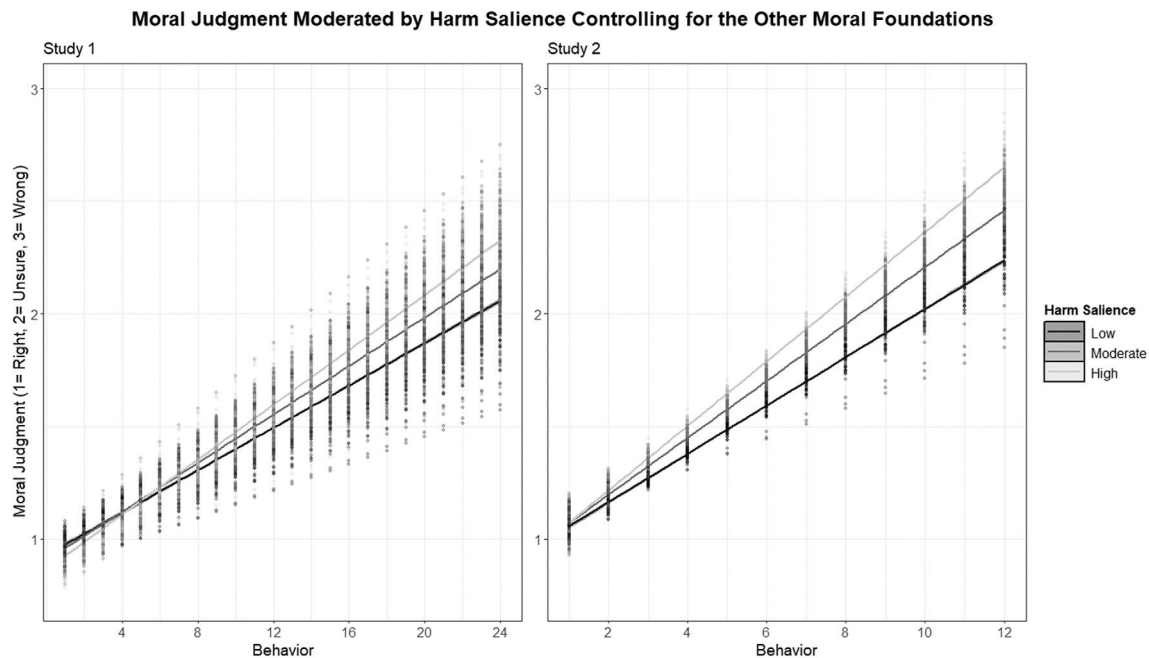


Figure 1. Visualization of the fixed predicted values from Model 4 across each study. The three harm saliency categories represent participants who fall ± 1 SD of the sample average trait harm saliency.

Dynamic Coordination Theory and Common Knowledge

Dynamic coordination theory (DCT; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013) is a moral psychological theory that explicates how side-taking processes dynamically influence how individuals condemn actions during moral conflict. Within this framework, the authors discuss the notion of *common knowledge* (Thomas et al., 2014) and how it functions during moral coordination processes. Common knowledge refers to information that an individual assumes to be shared by everyone within a social group (e.g., the rules of a traffic light; see DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013, p. 483). Common knowledge influences moral judgment by helping people better predict how immoral certain behaviors are relative to others (e.g., stealing a car vs. a laptop). Generally, better predictions help people coordinate their moral judgments and avoid the moral condemnation of others.

A possible explanation for the null effect of trait harm saliency on the first half of the MCP could be due to common knowledge. That is, if a character were to enact a less immoral behavior (e.g., shoving, threatening, slapping, etc.) on a criminal to save a human life, there seems to be common agreement that the behavior is acceptable. Even if the act might be considered immoral in the abstract, it is perceived as morally right in the interest of saving a life, regardless of one's sensitivity to harmful behaviors. However, finding that trait moral saliency moderated the latter

half of the continuum suggests that common knowledge has boundaries. In other words, the consensus that common knowledge fosters dissipates when actions become more condemnable (e.g., killing, torturing and killing, boiling alive, etc.). In these situations, one's sensitivity to harmful behavior moderates one's judgments even when enacted to save a life. In other words, the assumption that these behaviors are universally right or wrong is not shared among the members of a group and individual differences in moral perception begin to influence moral judgments.

Thus, while morality subcultures delineate differences in moral values that are held between individuals, common knowledge may indicate a perceptual space where these morality subcultures tend to *converge*. By integrating both morality subcultures and common knowledge into the MCP, scholars can begin to identify a moral tipping point along the continuum. That is, detecting when behavioral magnitude shifts judgments from moral consensus (i.e., where morality subcultures converge) to moral disagreement (i.e., where morality subcultures diverge). Detecting such a tipping point can help future researchers isolate specific contexts where differences in trait moral saliency do not extend into moral judgments.

Regarding media outcomes, the inclusion of DCT and a moral tipping point informs both character and narrative appeal. First, by identifying a moral tipping point, scholars can detect the threshold of behavior that evokes different character types. For example, if a character enacts morally

contentious behaviors (i.e., the latter half of the continuum), our findings suggest responses to this character (e.g., dispositions) would be mixed based on the individual moral sensitivities of audience members. This mixed response would likely prompt different evaluations and categorizations (e.g., pragmatic antihero, etc.) of the character in question when compared to those who enact largely uncontroversial behaviors (e.g., pure hero). Thus, by utilizing a moral tipping point, scholars could begin classifying the boundaries of different character types as they correspond to enacted behaviors along the continuum.

Second, researchers could use these boundaries to predict narrative appeal from an audience-centric perspective. As explained by affective disposition theory (Zillmann, 2000), character behavior is a central predictor of narrative enjoyment. Accounting for the threshold we propose could help scholars predict which narratives would elicit universal appeal (i.e., stories featuring characters who commit minimal moral violations) versus those with more targeted appeal to a specific morality subculture (i.e., stories featuring characters who commit more severe moral violations).

Limitations and Future Directions

Importantly, the current work is not without limitations. First, we note that the MCP preceded measurements of participants' trait moral salience. Although trait morality measurements should be stable, our stimuli/measures may have altered more naturalistic responses to the MFQ. Therefore, we recommend future research counterbalance the presentation of the MFQ and other study materials.

Second, both studies combined data from two participant populations (e.g., student sample and MTurk). Research has demonstrated that this practice can be problematic for one's conclusions given the implicit assumption of homogeneity across different subgroups (Aruguete et al., 2019; Hauser et al., 2019). To address this issue, we recommend future research examine and compare fully homogeneous participant populations (i.e., compare findings between participant pools). Particularly for morality subcultures, this work may find fruitful differences that exist across the MCP between different populations.

Conclusion

The current study provides evidence that trait moral salience impacts the judgment of behaviors along the moral continuum. However, this effect is not uniform and demonstrates that trait moral salience seems to matter most once behaviors reach a certain threshold of immorality. Judgments of the behaviors on the first half of the moral continuum are not modified by one's trait moral salience and thus may represent common knowledge as discussed

in the moral psychological literature (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; Thomas et al., 2014). Judgments of the behaviors on the second half of the moral continuum are moderated by trait moral salience and replicate research on morality subcultures. Given our pattern of results, we recommend future research at the intersection of morality and communication to consider the nature of moral tipping points to better predict moral consensus and moral disagreement.

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History

Received May 12, 2022

Revision received September 14, 2022

Accepted September 23, 2022

Published online November 23, 2022

Acknowledgments


The authors would like to thank Matthew Grizzard for his helpful feedback on directions for this article.

Open Data


The authors are willing to share their data, analytics methods, and study materials with other researchers. Descriptive statistics for each subscale, additional analyses, descriptions, and results are presented in our online supplement (<https://bit.ly/3UaQomb>; Francemone & Matthews, 2022).

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