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## The Psychological Foundations of Moral Conviction

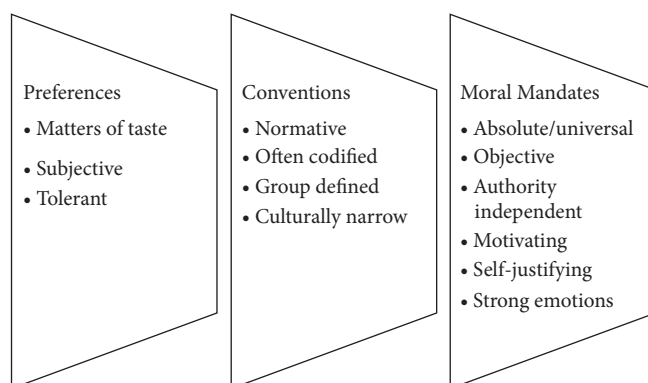
Linda J. Skitka\*

In a letter to the editor of the *Mercury News*, one reader explained his views on the death penalty as follows: “I’ll vote to abolish the death penalty . . . and not just because it is fiscally imprudent with unsustainable costs versus a life sentence without possibility of parole. More importantly, it’s morally wrong. Making us and the state murderers—through exercising the death penalty—is a pure illogicality akin to saying ‘two wrongs make a right’” (Mercury News 2012). In short, this letter writer believes murder is simply wrong, regardless of whether it is an individual or state action, and for no other reason than because it is simply and purely wrong.

Attitudes rooted in moral conviction (or “moral mandates”), such as the letter writer’s position on the death penalty, represent a unique class of strong attitudes. Strong attitudes are more extreme, important, central, certain, and/or accessible, and are also more stable, enduring, and predictive of behavior than attitudes weaker on these dimensions (see Krosnick and Petty 1995 for a review). Attitudes held with the strength of moral conviction, even if they share many of the same characteristics of strong attitudes, are distinguished by a sense of imperative and unwillingness to compromise even in the face of competing desires or concerns. Someone might experience their attitude about chocolate, for example, in extreme, important, certain, and central terms, but still decide not to order chocolate cake at a restaurant because of the calories. Vanity, or other motives such as health or cost, can trump even people’s very strong preferences. Attitudes rooted in moral conviction, however, are much less likely to be compromised or vulnerable to trade off (cf. Tetlock et al. 2000).

To better understand how attitudes that are equally strong can nonetheless differ in their psychological antecedents and consequences, we need to understand the psychological and behavioral implications of the content of attitudes as well as their structure (e.g., extremity, importance). Social domain theory (e.g., Nucci 2001; Nucci and Turiel 1978; Turiel 1998; 2002), developed to explain moral development and reasoning, provides some useful hints about key ways that attitudes may differ in substance, even when they are otherwise equally strong. Using domain categories to describe how attitudes differ represents a useful starting point for understanding the foundations of moral mandates (Skitka et al. 2005; Skitka et al. 2008<sup>1</sup>; Wright et al. 2008). As can be seen in Figure 8.1, one domain of attitudes is personal preference. Personal preferences represent attitudes that people see as subject to individual discretion, and as exempt from social regulation or comment. For example, one person might support legalized abortion because she prefers to have access to a backstop method of birth control, and not because of any normative or moral attachment to the issue. She is likely to think others' preferences about abortion are neither right nor wrong; they may just be different from her own. Her position on this issue might still be evaluatively extreme, personally important, certain, central, etc., but it is not one she experiences as a core moral conviction. Her neighbor, on the other hand, might oppose legalized abortion because this practice is inconsistent with church doctrine or because the majority of people he is close to oppose it. If church authorities or his peer group were to reverse their stance on abortion, however, the neighbor probably would as well. Attitudes that reflect these kinds of normative beliefs typically describe what "people like me or us" believe, are relatively narrow in application, and are usually group or culture bound rather than universally applied. Yet a third person might see the issue of abortion in moral terms. This person perceives abortion (or restricting access to abortion) as simply and self-evidently wrong, even monstrously wrong, if not evil. Even if relevant authorities and peers were to reverse positions on the issue, this person would nonetheless maintain his or her moral belief about abortion. In addition to having the theorized characteristic of authority and peer independence, moral convictions are also likely to be perceived as objectively true, universal, and to have particularly strong ties to emotion.

AQ: Please note that figure 1 has been changed to figure 8.1 please confirm.



**Figure 8.1** A domain theory of attitudes.

The goals of this chapter are to review recent developments in understanding the psychology of moral conviction and related research. These developments include research on operationalization and measurement as well as testing a wide range of hypotheses about how moral convictions differ in form and implication from otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes.

## Measurement and operationalization

Research on moral conviction has generally opted to use a bottom-up rather than top-down empirical approach to study this construct. Instead of defining the characteristics of what counts as a moral mandate *a priori* (e.g., that it be seen as universal in application or resistant to trade-offs), researchers use face-valid items<sup>2</sup> to assess strength of moral conviction, and test whether variation in strength of moral conviction yields predicted effects (e.g., differences in perceived universal applicability). Avoiding confounds with other indices of attitude strength is important to ensure that an individual's response is motivated by morality, rather than by some other concern such as attitude importance, extremity, and so on. For this reason, moral conviction researchers see the distinction between moral and nonmoral attitudes as something that is subjectively perceived, rather than as an objective property of attitudes, decisions, choices, or dilemmas.

Although people do not always seek to maximize principled consistency when making moral judgments (Uhlmann et al. 2009), they nonetheless

appear to have a strong intuitive sense of when their moral beliefs apply to a given situation (Skitka et al. 2005). People can identify when situations engage their moral sentiments, even when they cannot always elegantly describe the processes or principles that lead to this sense (Haidt 2001). The assumption that people have some insight into the characteristics of their own attitudes is one shared by previous theory and research on the closely related concept of attitude strength. Researchers assume that people can access from memory and successfully report the degree to which a given attitude is (for example) extreme, personally important, certain, or central (see Krosnick and Petty 1995 for a review).

Hornsey and colleagues (Hornsey et al. 2003; 2007) provide one example of this approach. They operationalized moral conviction with three items, all prefaced with the stem, “To what extent do you feel your position . . .” and the completions of “is based on strong personal principles,” “is a moral stance,” and “is morally correct,” that across four studies had an average Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.75$ . Others have operationalized moral conviction in similar fashion, most typically using either a single face-valid item: “How much are your feelings about \_\_\_\_ connected to your core moral beliefs and convictions” (e.g., Brandt and Wetherell 2012; Skitka et al. 2005), or this item accompanied by a second item, “To what extent are your feelings about \_\_\_\_ deeply connected to your fundamental beliefs about ‘right’ and ‘wrong?’” (e.g., Skitka et al. 2009; Skitka and Wisneski 2011; Swink 2011). Morgan (2011) used a combination of the Hornsey et al.’s (2003, 2007) and Skitka et al.’s (2009) items to create a 5-item scale, and found  $\alpha$ ’s that ranged from 0.93 to 0.99 across three samples. The reliability scores observed by Morgan suggest that either all, or a subset, of these items work well, and will capture highly overlapping content.

Some have wondered, however, if moral conviction is better represented as a binary judgment: Something that is or is not the case, rather than something that varies in degree or strength. Measuring the categorization of an attitude as moral and the relative strength of conviction both contribute uniquely to the explanatory power of the variable (Wright et al. 2008; Wright 2012). For this reason, as well as the parallelism of conceptualizing moral conviction similarly to measures of attitude strength, we advocate that moral convictions be measured continuously rather than nominally.

Other ways of operationalizing moral conviction are problematic because they confound moral conviction with the things that moral convictions should

theoretically predict (e.g., Van Zomeren et al. 2011; Zaal et al. 2011), use items that have no explicit references to morality (e.g., “X threatens values that are important to me,”<sup>3</sup> Siegrist et al. 2012), conflate moral convictions with other dimensions of attitude strength (e.g., centrality, Garguilo 2010; Skitka and Mullen 2006), and/or measure other constructs as proxies for moral conviction, such as importance or centrality (e.g., Besley 2012; Earle and Siegrist 2008). These strategies introduce a host of possible confounds and do more to confuse than to clarify the unique contribution of moral conviction independent of other characteristics of attitudes. Attitude importance and centrality, for example, have very different associations with other relevant variables than those observed with unconfounded measures of moral conviction (e.g., including effects that are the reverse sign, e.g., Skitka et al. 2005). To avoid these problems, researchers should therefore use items that (a) explicitly assess moral content, and (b) do not introduce confounds that capture either the things moral conviction should theoretically predict (e.g., perceived universalism) or other dimensions of attitude strength (importance, certainty, or centrality).

Moral philosophers argue that moral convictions are experienced as *sui generis*, that is as unique, special, and in a class of their own (e.g., Boyd 1988; McDowell 1979; Moore 1903; Sturgeon 1985). This status of singularity is thought to be due to a number of distinguishing mental states or processes associated with the recognition of something as moral, including (a) universalism, (b) the status of moral beliefs as factual beliefs with compelling motives and justification for action, and (c) emotion (Skitka et al. 2005). These theoretically defining characteristics of attitudes (which taken together represent the domain theory of attitudes) are testable propositions in themselves, and have a number of testable implications (e.g., the authority independence and nonconformity hypotheses). I briefly review empirical research testing these core propositions and selected hypotheses that can be derived from them next.

## Universalism and objectivism

The domain theory of attitudes predicts that people experience moral mandates as objective truths about the world, much as they do scientific judgments or

facts. In other words, good and bad are experienced as objective characteristics of phenomena and not just as verbal labels that people attach to feelings (Shweder 2002). Because beliefs rooted in moral conviction are perceived as operationally true, they should also be perceived as universally applicable. The author of the letter to the *Mercury News*, for example, is likely to believe that the death penalty should not only be prohibited in his home state of California, but in other states and countries as well.

Broad versions of the universalism and objectivism hypotheses have been tested and supported. For example, people see certain moral rules (e.g., Nichols and Folds-Bennett 2003; Turiel 1978) and values (e.g., Gibbs et al. 2007) as universally or objectively true, and that certain moral transgressions should be universally prohibited (e.g., Brown 1991). There is some evidence that people also see ethical rules and moral issues as more objectively true than, for example, various violations of normative conventions (Goodwin and Darley 2008), but other research yields more mixed results (Wright et al. 2012). Until recently, little or no research has tested the universalism hypothesis.

To shed further light on the objectivism and universalism hypotheses, Morgan, Skitka, and Lytle (under review) tested whether thinking about a morally mandated attitude leads to a situational increase in people's endorsement of a universalistic moral philosophy (e.g., the degree to which people rate moral principles as individualistic or relativistic, versus as universal truths). Participants' endorsements of a universalistic moral philosophy, their positions on the issue of legalized abortion, and moral conviction about abortion were measured at least 24 hours before the experimental session. Once in the lab, participants were primed to think about abortion by writing an essay about their position that they thought would be shared with an "another participant." They were then given an essay presumably written by the "other participant," that was either pro-choice or pro-life (essays were modeled after real participants' essays on this topic). After reading the essay, participants completed the same universalistic philosophy measure they had completed at pretest. Strength of moral conviction about abortion was associated with increased post-experimental endorsement of a universalistic philosophy, regardless of whether participants read an essay that affirmed or threatened their own position on the topic. In short, people see moral rules in general

as more universally applicable when they have just thought about an attitude held with moral conviction.

A second study tested the universalism and objectivity hypotheses more directly by having participants rate the perceived objectivity (e.g., “Imagine that someone disagreed with your position on [abortion, requiring the HPV vaccine, same sex marriage]: To what extent would you conclude the other person is surely mistaken?”) and universality (“To what extent would your position on [abortion/the HPV vaccine, same sex marriage] be equally correct in another culture?”) of these attitudes, in addition to providing ratings of the degree to which each reflected a moral conviction. Strength of moral conviction was associated with higher perceived objectivity and universalism of attitudes, even when controlling for attitude extremity.

Finally, in a third study, participants were asked to generate sentences that articulated their own beliefs or positions with respect to “a piece of scientific knowledge,” “something that is morally right or wrong,” and “that you like or dislike.” Participants then completed the same objectivity and universalism measures used in Study 2. Scientific and moral beliefs were rated as equally objectively true and universal, and as more objectively true and universal than likes/dislikes. In sum, these three studies demonstrated that moral convictions are perceived as indistinguishable from scientific facts in perceived universality and objectivism.

## **Motivation and behavior**

Attitudes rooted in moral conviction are predicted to also be inherently motivating, and therefore should have stronger ties to behavior than those not rooted in moral conviction. A moral conviction that voluntarily terminating a pregnancy (or alternatively, interfering with a woman’s right to choose whether to sustain a pregnancy) is fundamentally wrong, for example, has an inherent motivational quality—it carries with it an “ought” or “ought not” that can motivate subsequent behavior. Moral convictions are therefore theoretically sufficient in and of themselves as motives that can direct what people think, feel, or do (Skitka et al. 2005).

Implicit in this reasoning is the hypothesis that people should also feel more compelled to act on attitudes held with strong rather than weak moral



conviction. In support of this hypothesis, stronger moral convictions about salient social issues and/or presidential candidates predict intentions to vote and actual voting behavior, results that have now replicated across three presidential election cycles in the United States (Morgan et al. 2010; Skitka and Bauman 2008). The motivational impact of moral conviction was robust effect when controlling for alternative explanations, such as strength of partisanship and attitude strength.

In an ingenious study, Wright et al. (2008, Study 2) put people's self-interests into direct conflict with their moral convictions. Participants were pretested for their moral convictions on various issues. During the lab portion of the study they were shown "another participants" essay about an issue (manipulated to be inconsistent with the real participants' attitudes). People almost always divide the prizes equally in this kind of economic game (e.g., Fehr and Fishbach 2004). People with stronger moral convictions about the essay issue, however, kept most of the raffle tickets for themselves (on average, 8.5 out of 10 tickets) when dividing the tickets between themselves and the "participant" who had a divergent attitude from their own. Those who did not see the issue as a moral one, conversely, divided the tickets equally between themselves and the other "participant" (Wright et al. 2008). In summary, people are usually motivated by fairness in these kinds of economic games, but their moral convictions and disdain for someone who did not share their moral views trumped the any need to be fair.

## **Emotion**

The domain theory of attitudes also makes the prediction that moral convictions should have especially strong ties to emotion. For example, Person A might have preference for low taxes. If her taxes rise, she is likely to be disappointed rather than outraged. Imagine instead, Person B, who has a strong moral conviction that taxes be kept low. He is likely to respond to the same rise in tax rates with rage, disgust, and contempt. In short, the strength and content of emotional reactions associated with attitudes rooted in moral conviction are likely to be quite different than the emotional reactions associated with otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes. Emotional responses to given issues might also play a key role in how people detect that an attitude is a moral conviction, or in strengthening moral convictions.

### ***Emotion as consequence***

Consistent with the prediction that moral mandates will have different, and perhaps stronger ties to emotion than nonmoral mandates, people whose opposition to the Iraq War was high rather than low in moral conviction also experienced more negative emotion (i.e., anger and anxiety) about the War in the weeks just before and after it began. In contrast, supporters high in moral conviction experienced more positive emotions (i.e., pleased and glad) about going to war compared to those low in moral conviction, results that emerged even when controlling for a variety of attitude strength measures. Similar positive and negative emotional reactions were also observed in supporters' and opponents' reactions to the thought of legalizing physician-assisted suicide (Skitka and Wisneski 2011).

### ***Emotion as antecedent***

Other research has tested whether people use emotions as information in deciding whether a given attitude is a moral conviction. Consistent with this idea, people make harsher moral judgments of other's behavior when exposed to incidental disgust such as foul odors or when in a dirty lab room, than they do when exposed to more pleasant odors or a clean lab room (Schnall et al. 2008). People generalize disgust cues and apply them to their moral judgments. It is important to point out, however, that moral judgments are not the same thing as moral convictions. Attitudes (unlike judgments) tend to be stable, internalized, and treated much like possessions (e.g., Prentice 1987). In contrast, moral judgments are single-shot reactions to a given behavior, actor, or hypothetical, and share few psychological features with attitudes. Learning that incidental disgust leads to harsher moral judgments, therefore, may not mean that incidental disgust (or other incidental emotions) would also lead people to have stronger moral convictions.

Consistent with distinctions between judgments and attitudes, research in my lab has found no effect of incidental emotion on moral convictions (Skitka, unpublished data). We have manipulated whether data is collected in a clean versus dirty lab; in the context of pleasant (e.g., "Hawaiian breeze,") versus disgusting smells (e.g., fart spray or a substance that smelled like a dead rat); when participants have their hands and forearms placed in an unpleasant concoction of glue and gummy worms, versus feathers and beads;

having participants write retrospective accounts about a time when they felt particularly angry, sad, happy, or disgusted; or using a misattribution of arousal paradigm. Although manipulation checks revealed that each of these manipulations had the intended effect, none led to changes in moral conviction.

One possible explanation for these null results is that integral (i.e. attitude-specific) emotions tied to the attitude object itself may be trumping the potential informational influence of incidental emotions. Once a moral conviction comes to mind, so too might all the emotional associations with it, which could overwhelm and replace incidental affect in people's current working memory. Attitude-specific emotions might therefore play a more important role than incidental emotions in how people identify whether a given attitude is one held with moral conviction.

To test this idea, participants were exposed to one of four categories of pictures as part of a bogus "recognition task." The images varied in relevance to the issue of abortion: pictures of aborted fetuses (attitudinally relevant disgust/harm); animal rights abuses (attitudinally irrelevant disgust/harm); pictures of non-bloody, disgusting images, such as toilets overflowing with feces (attitudinally irrelevant disgust, no harm); or neutral photos (e.g., office furniture; no disgust/harm). Pictures were presented at either subliminally (14 *msecs*) or supraliminally (250 *msecs*). Participants' moral conviction about abortion increased relative to control *only* after supraliminal exposure to the abortion pictures. Moreover, this effect was unique to moral conviction and was not observed with attitude importance. A second study replicated this effect, and tested whether it was mediated by disgust, anger, or perceived harm. The effect was fully mediated by disgust (Wisneski and Skitka 2013). Taken together, these results suggest that emotions play a key role in how people form or strengthen moral convictions, but these processes—although fast—nonetheless require some conscious processing.

In summary, it is clear that moral convictions have ties to integral emotion. The relationship between emotions and moral convictions, however, appears to be complex. Future research needs to manipulate other kinds of integral emotions, including positive emotions, to discover whether other emotional cues can also cause changes in moral conviction. Emotions not only serve as an antecedent to moral convictions, but also appear to be consequences

of them as well. Although more research is needed to further tease apart the complex connections between moral convictions and emotions, one thing is clear: Emotions are clearly a key part of the story.

## The authority independence hypothesis

A core premise of the domain theory of attitudes is that people do not rely on conventions or authorities to define moral imperative; rather, people perceive what is morally right and wrong irrespective of authority or conventional dictates. Moral beliefs are not by definition antiestablishment or antiauthority, but are simply not dependent on conventions, rules, or authorities. When people take a moral perspective, they focus on their ideals and the way they believe things ought to or should be done rather than on a duty to comply with authorities or normative conventions. The authority independence hypothesis therefore predicts that 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 rules, procedures, and authority dictate than from the rules, procedures, or authorities themselves (see also Kohlberg 1976; Rest et al. 1999).

One study tested the authority independence hypothesis by examining which was more important in predicting people's reactions to a controversial US Supreme Court decision: people's standing perceptions of the Court's legitimacy, or people's moral convictions about the issue being decided (Skitka et al. 2009). A nationally representative sample of adults rated the legitimacy of the Court, as well as their level of moral conviction about the issue of physician-assisted suicide several weeks before the Court heard arguments about whether states could legalize the practice, or whether it should be federally regulated. The same sample of people was contacted again after the Court upheld the right of states to legalize physician-assisted suicide. Knowing whether people's support or opposition to physician-assisted suicide was high versus low in moral conviction predicted whether they saw the Supreme Court's decision as fair or unfair, as well as their willingness to accept the decision as binding. Pre-ruling perceptions of the legitimacy of the Court, in contrast, had no effect on post-ruling perceptions of fairness or decision acceptance.

Other research has found behavioral support for the prediction that people reject authorities and the rule of law when outcomes violate their moral convictions. 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 them at the end of the 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 with their personal moral convictions.

People's moral mandates should affect not only their perceptions of decisions and willingness to comply with authorities, but should also affect their perceptions of authorities' legitimacy. People often do not know the "right" answer to various decisions authorities are asked to make (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). When people have moral certainty about what outcome authorities and institutions should deliver, however, they do not need to rely on standing perceptions of legitimacy 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, one could hypothesize that people use their sense of morality as a benchmark to assess authorities' legitimacy. Consistent with this idea, the results of the Supreme Court study referenced earlier also found that perceptions of the Court's legitimacy changed from pre- to posting ruling as a function of whether the Court ruled consistently or inconsistently with perceivers' morally vested outcome preferences (Skitka et al. 2009).

### The nonconformity hypothesis

Moral convictions might inoculate people from peer as well as authority influence. People typically conform to the majority when faced with the

choice to accept or reject the majority position. This occurs because those who oppose the majority risk ridicule and disenfranchisement, whereas those who conform expect acceptance (Asch 1956). In addition, people may conform when they are unsure about the appropriate way to think or behave; they adopt the majority opinion because they believe the majority is likely to be correct (Chaiken and Stangor 1987; Deutsch and Gerard 1955). Therefore, people conform both to gain acceptance from others and to be “right.”

Feeling strong moral convictions about a given issue should weaken the typical motives for conformity—making people more resistant to majority influence. To test this idea, Hornsey and colleagues presented student participants with feedback that their position on same-sex marriage was either the majority or minority view on campus. Surprisingly, stronger moral convictions about this issue were associated with greater willingness to engage in activism when students believed they were in the opinion minority, rather than majority—an example of counter-conformity (Hornsey et al. 2003, 2007).

Another study had participants engage in what they believed was a computer-mediated interaction with four additional (though, in fact, virtual) “peers.” The study was scripted so that each participant was exposed to a majority of peers who supported torture (pretesting indicated that none of our study participants did). Participants were shown the other participants’ “opinions” one at a time before they were asked to provide their own position on the issue to the group. Results supported the hypothesis: Stronger moral convictions were associated with lower conformity rates, even when controlling for a number of indices of attitude strength (Aramovich et al. 2010).<sup>4</sup> By contrast, people do show strong conformity effects in an Asch paradigm when making moral judgments about moral dilemmas, such as the trolley problem (Kundu and Cummins 2012), providing further evidence that moral judgments and moral attitudes are not the same things.

## Conclusion

Theorists in recent years have proposed a number of ways that attitudes rooted in moral conviction differ from otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes. The research reviewed here supports the hypothesis that moral

mandates represent a special class of strong attitudes that do not reduce to other dimensions of attitude strength. Moreover, moral mandates differ from strong but nonmoral attitudes in ways that are predicted by a domain theory of attitudes. They are perceived as akin to facts about the world, positions that should be universally adopted, have particularly strong ties to emotion, are motivational, and predict a host of behaviors and reactions including authority independence, political legitimacy, anti-conformity, and civic engagement. With some exceptions, most research on the concept of moral conviction has focused on determining whether and how moral mandates differ from nonmoral attitudes. The challenge for future research will be to begin to gain a greater understanding of how moral mandates are developed in the first place and, once established, whether people are capable of demoralizing an attitude. Given moral mandates have the potential for motivating great good (e.g., civic engagement, willingness to fight for justice), as well as motivating acts many would label as evil (e.g., terrorism, vigilantism; see Morgan and Skitka 2009), learning more about the attitude moralization process represents an important area of inquiry going forward.

## Notes

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- 1 Skitka et al. (2008) initially labeled this theoretical perspective as an "integrated theory of moral conviction" or ITMC.
- 2 Face validity refers to the degree to which one can infer from test items the target variable is being measured.
- 3 Not all values are perceived in moral terms. For example, fewer than 20 percent of participants perceived the Schwartz values associated with power, achievement, hedonism, and stimulation as moral, and fewer than 30 percent rated more than one of the self-direction items as moral (Schwartz 2007).
- 4 Having another dissenter in the group did not change the results of moral conviction.

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