# Conclusions, Interpretations, and Recommendations

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand and change polarized beliefs. To do this, we created a set of experiments directly testing the effectiveness of increasing or decreasing social consensus on support for a variety of polarized topics (Study 1). We clearly showed that across a variety of topics, a social consensus manipulation can both increase and decrease support. We found significant support for our first Study 1 hypothesis (H1: high social consensus would lead to more positive support for highly polarized issues). There was a significant time x condition interaction, such that there was a greater increase over time in support for all three polarized issues that were manipulated (UHC, capital punishment, climate change) in our high social consensus condition as compared to our low social consensus condition. We also found mixed evidence supporting our second Study 1 hypothesis (H2: utilitarian and deontological orientation would be significant predictors of [topic] support). Deontological orientation was a significant predictor for support of UHC, but not for capital punishment or climate change. Furthermore, there was no effect of utilitarian orientation on final support for any [topic].

We then executed on another series of experiments to understand the effects of moral conviction manipulation on an expanded set of polarized and non-polarized topics (Study 2). We found mixed evidence supporting our first Study 2 hypothesis (H1: the moral conviction manipulation would be a significant predictor of support for our [topic], compared to the control condition). There was no main effect of our moral conviction manipulation on support for any of our four Study 2 topics (UHC, capital punishment, climate change, exercise). However, there was a significant interaction with our moral conviction manipulation and openness to belief change, such that being assigned to the ‘pragmatic’ moral conviction manipulation reduces the impact of ‘openness to belief change’ on support for [topic]. We did not find evidence supporting our second Study 2 hypothesis (H2: the two ‘moral’ interventions would increase, and the pragmatic and hedonic interventions would decrease, moral conviction relative to the control). There was no main effect of moral conviction manipulation on perceived moral conviction for any of our four topics.

Study 1 & 2 covered the impact of moral conviction and social consensus individually, and in doing so, laid the groundwork for Study 3, an experiment testing the joint interaction of social consensus and moral conviction on support for a polarized [topic]. We did not find evidence supporting our first Study 3 hypothesis (H1: High social consensus would lead to more support for issues). There was no main effect of our social consensus manipulation on support for any of our three Study 3 topics (UHC, capital punishment, usage of AI in the workforce). However, we did find a significant pre-post intervention increase in support for [topic] in all conditions. Additionally, we did not find evidence supporting our second Study 3 hypothesis (H2: increased moral conviction will reduce the effect of social consensus and decreased moral conviction will increase the effect of social consensus). There was no significant interaction between the effects of our social consensus and moral conviction manipulations.

In light of the full set of results, some preliminary conclusions seem reasonable to draw. We were not successful at empirically replicating the finding that moral conviction inoculates individuals from the effects of social consensus (Skitka, 2021). One plausible explanation is that our moral conviction manipulations were improperly designed. While previous literature has indicated that framing arguments using moral terms (e.g., freedom, liberty, etc.) or centering on perceptions of harm (e.g., harmful, dangerous, contaminated, etc.) increases perceptions of moral conviction (Kodapanakkal 2021; Clifford, 2019), we were unable to successfully replicate this pattern in Study 2 or 3. Plausibly, this is due to the fact that the topics covered in prior literature were generally seen to be unpolarized, or at least not explicitly polarized (e.g., hiring algorithms, fish farming), whereas in Study 2 and 3, the majority of our topics were explicitly polarized (UHC, capital punishment, climate change, etc.).

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