**Belief Change Under Conditions of Moral Conviction**

1. Can support for highly polarized positions, with strong moral conviction be ‘demoralized’?
   1. Via a pragmatic/economic argument?
   2. Via a personal benefit/hedonic argument?
2. Can we increase the effectiveness of social consensus on changing support for highly polarized positions by reducing perceived moral conviction?

Moral convictions are attitudes that are perceived as grounded in fundamental distinctions between right and wrong. Moral conviction, while often correlated with strength of belief, is fundamentally distinct from strong but non-moral attitudes/beliefs. This is because they are perceived as a universal and objective truth, which is relatively resistant to influence from equals or superiors. Thus, morally convicted beliefs are more difficult to change as compared to beliefs grounded in preference or social convention (Skitka et al., 2021). Our research question is fundamentally, how can we change attitudes that are backed by moral conviction.

Given that morally convicted beliefs are hard to change, one plausible solution would be to first ‘demoralize’ the belief, and then attempt change. However, there is mixed evidence that this is effective. Moral conviction has been successfully reduced by framing arguments using pragmatic or economic counterarguments (Kodapanakkal et al., 2022, Kutlaca, 2013), or by emphasizing the personal or hedonic benefit of a counter position (Bastian et al, 2015; Feinberg et al, 2019). In contrast, unsuccessful reduction of moral conviction has been attributed to choosing topics that are already highly politicized and polarized (e.g., COVID-19 vaccination), framings that are dependent on belief in authority influence, or flawed psychometric measurements of moral conviction itself (Aignesberger et al., 2023; Fenzi et al., 2022; Brannon et al., 2019).

For our first study, we plan on testing several methods of moral conviction reduction (pragmatic/economic argument, and a personal/hedonic benefit argument), across an array of contemporary issues that falls along the spectrum of political belief and polarization (support for universal health care, capital punishment, and desire to exercise). Additionally, we plan on using an expanded item for measuring moral conviction that is an adaption of work by Skitka et al., (2021), which is novel insofar as it will measure perceptions of objectivity and universality in belief, which has been assumed but has not been directly assessed. Our goal is to directly reduce moral conviction on these stances, any change in behavior or belief would be a useful, but incidental benefit.

As our final goal is change in attitudes, after ‘demoralization’ we would like to leverage the effects of social influence. One of the strongest findings in psychology is that people conform towards the consensus group opinion (Asch, 1956; Deutsch M, 1955). However, one aspect of morally convicted beliefs that sets them apart from simple ‘strongly held’ beliefs, is that they appear to be independent of normative/majority influence (Skitka et al., 2005). In preliminary work, we were able to successfully manipulate social consensus by presenting false survey results that were assumed to be real, presenting either an artificially high or artificially low level of agreement with a position. We plan to directly test this interaction by attempting to reduce moral conviction and then seeing if that increases conformation towards the societal consensus.

They had problems because they didn’t measure X well, why wasn’t X measured well and what did they do? What are we going to do about X? – This can be it’s own ‘study 1’ the best construct for examining this concept.

Look into more deeply ‘construct validity’ that is the primary concern with regards to this improved psychometric. Is the interpretation of this construct correct? What is it that the study had trouble with, with regards to construct validity? “Model Operation Bias” – using a single measure to assess a construct is seen as kind of a bad thing (this is what is happening with the single item moral conviction screener). Moral conviction is related to strength of belief – how do we measure them differently?

Read a SCALE development paper.

The moral recognition/amplification bit is an extra addendum. Make sure to describe at the front end the two-part process of ‘moralization’ more broadly.

ADDENDUM

According to the domain model of attitude moralization, the process of attitude moralization is a two-part process. The first part is the shift from seeing an initial attitude as being grounded in preference or opinion (e.g., Coke vs. Pepsi) to instead being seen as having moral significance. This initial step is labeled as “Moral Recognition”. Moral recognition can occur when activities previously seen as non-moral (e.g., eating meat) become connected to already pre-existing moral beliefs (i.e., ending life is immoral, eating meat requires the ending of life, thus, eating meat is immoral). This process is defined as ‘Moral Piggybacking’. Moral recognition can also occur when previously unknown moral objections to one’s preferences are made salient (e.g., learning that a brand of luxury goods is produced by slave labor). Finally, moral recognition can occur when individuals are induced to attach strong emotions (e.g., disgust or anger) to the act or concept that is being moralized (i.e., eating meat being moralized through the viewing of videos that show animal suffering inflicted by the meat industry).

The second process is the increase in moralization of already moralized attitudes, wherein a relatively less moralized attitude becomes more moralized. One aspect in which moral amplification differs from moral recognition is that people who hold weakly moralized attitudes are likely already aware of societal norms that exist both in support and opposition to their beliefs. Persuasive arguments framed using specifically moral language, centered on perception of harm, rights, and liberties have also been shown to be effective for moral amplification. Additionally, as has already been seen in the process of moral recognition, changes in attitude-specific emotions (e.g., happiness, excitement, anger, and disgust) predict parallel changes in extremity of attitude moralization. While the two concepts of moral amplification and recognition are theoretically distinct, many of the psychological factors affecting one also affect the other. However, distinguishing these two concepts opens the door to future work that delineates which factors may be more applicable to one process or the other.

One goal of our research is to be successful at ‘demoralizing’ beliefs held with moral conviction. Previous research by Brannon (2019), Clifford (2017) and other researchers were unsuccessful at finding any effect of moral conviction at all in circumstances where it would be predicted to be effective (Asadullah 2019). One shared issue that these studies hold is various forms of psychometric measurement issues with regards to the construct of moral conviction.