

Attitude Moralization:
Probably Not Intuitive or Rooted in Perceptions of Harm

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Abstract

People vary in the extent to which they imbue attitudes with moral conviction, and this variation is consequential. Yet, we know relatively little what makes people's feelings about a given attitude object transform from a relatively non-moral preference to a moral conviction. We review evidence from two experiments and a field study that shed some light on the processes that lead to attitude moralization. These studies explored the roles of incidental and integral affect, cognitive factors such as recognition of harm, and whether attitude moralization processes can occur outside conscious awareness or requires some level of conscious deliberation. The findings present some challenges to contemporary theories that emphasize the roles of intuition and harm and indicate that more research designed to better understand moralization processes is needed.

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There was a time when abortion was not as controversial as it is today, including in the United States. There were no protests, and abortion services and drugs were marketed openly. Moreover, the earliest motivations to legally control abortion were not rooted in morality, religion, or politics, but were instead rooted in concerns from the increasingly professionalized (and male) medical community's desire to stem competition from other health care providers (midwives and homeopaths, Reagan, 1996). In short, even one of the most polarizing and moralized topics across decades of American politics—abortion—was not always seen as a moral issue.

There is also variation at the national and individual levels in how much contemporary citizens see abortion in a moral light. The Chinese public, for example, sees abortion as benignly acceptable as other forms of birth control (Osnos, 2012). There is even considerable variation among the American public about whether their positions on abortion are rooted in personal moral conviction (Ryan, 2014; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Some people's abortion attitudes are rooted in strong preferences—they simply prefer to have a backstop protection against unwanted pregnancy. Others' positions are rooted more in the stances taken by their faith communities, without any personal moral investment in the issue.

This backdrop of historical, national, and individual differences in the moralization of abortion attitudes, raises an important question: What leads to attitude moralization? Despite the call from Paul Rozin (1999) nearly two decades ago for researchers to dig into the moralization process, very little research has addressed this question. The goal of this paper is to review three recent studies designed to understand moralization and to spur more work on this topic. Before

reviewing this research, we briefly review theoretical perspectives that make different predictions about the likely psychological routes to attitude moralization.

Theoretical Perspectives on Attitude Moralization

Contemporary moral theory provides suggestions about how attitudes may become moralized. One key possibility is the strong association between morality and processes rooted in emotion. Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model (SIM) of moral judgment, for example, posits that intuition (a fast, visceral form of cognition) is the lynch pin of recognizing the moral significance of a thought, feeling, or behavior. Most tests of this hypothesis have used emotional cues to arouse moral intuitions (e.g., Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). A defining feature of an intuition is that people do not need to be consciously aware of its source (Haidt, 2001). People might be aware of the outcome of a moral judgment or recognition, but not the process itself. Even intuition aroused by an emotional source completely unrelated to a judgment (e.g., hypnotically induced disgust, Wheatley & Haidt, 2005) should be enough to produce moralization.

Other theorists, however, place more emphasis on conscious awareness of associations between emotional cues and moralization. Discrete emotions and associated cognitive appraisals (e.g., recognition of harm) are thought to increase the salience of moral concern that will in turn only affect judgments related to the source of that concern (e.g., Horberg, Oveis, & Keltner, 2011). This theoretical perspective implies intuition may be necessary, but not be sufficient, to lead to attitude moralization: Recognition of specific attitude-relevant harm, may be necessary as well. This position is consistent with agent-patient theories of morality (e.g., Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012), as well as theories that argue that morality is connected to a desire to avoid moral harms and to approach moral goods (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013).

Although some research has supported SIM predictions by demonstrating that incidental emotions (and more specifically, incidentally aroused disgust) leads to harsher blame and wrongness judgments (e.g., Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008), a recent meta-analysis of these “moral amplification” effects suggests that, if this effect exists, the effect size is very small and not robust to corrections for publication bias (Landy & Goodwin, 2015; cf. Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2015). Putting aside this debate, harsher moral judgments may not be the same thing as increased attitude moralization; judging a behavior as wrong is not the same and seeing an attitude as reflecting a personal moral conviction (Bauman & Skitka, 2009).

Other research yields findings that are more consistent with the idea that emotions integral to the attitude itself, or that recognition of harm moralizes. People who are more disgusted by smoking tobacco and who saw the practice as more harmful, for example, are more likely to see smoking as a moral issue (Rozin & Singh, 1999). Importantly, recognition of harm is generally based on more deliberative, rather than emotional forms of reasoning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If recognition of harm is the key to attitude moralization (in addition to or instead of emotions) intuitions alone are unlikely to lead to attitude moralization; more deliberative forms of cognition will be needed as well. So: Is attitude moralization based in intuition and emotion? Is it based on recognitions of harm? Our recent research provides initial answers to these questions.

Examining Attitude Moralization in the Lab

We first tested competing attitude moralization hypotheses by manipulating harm and emotions in the lab. We recruited participants for a short, computerized “recognition task” that involved displaying six pictures and six words one at a time in random order (Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). Participants were told to identify whether a picture or word appeared on the screen

as quickly and accurately as they could. Participants were exposed to the images/words at speeds that either did or did not allow for conscious awareness (14 versus 250 ms)¹. We exposed participants to disgust inducing pictures of harm relevant to the issue of abortion (photos of aborted fetuses); disgust inducing, but similarly bloody depictions of harm irrelevant to abortion (depictions of animal abuse); abortion irrelevant, non-harm but disgust inducing pictures (e.g., toilets overflowing with feces); or control images (pictures of everyday objects, such as tables, chairs). This allowed us to compare emotionally relevant stimuli (photos aborted fetuses) to harmful and emotionally irrelevant stimuli (depictions of animal abuse) and non-harmful but emotionally irrelevant stimuli (toilets overflowing with feces).

After the recognition task, participants participated in a second, “unrelated study,” that measured their position on abortion, and moral conviction they had about this issue. Participants’ moral conviction about abortion increased (relative to control) only for participants who were exposed to the abortion-relevant images at speeds that allowed them to be consciously aware of what they were seeing; attitude importance was unaffected. These findings were replicated in a second study that found that increased moralization in the aborted fetus condition was mediated by disgust and not by harm or anger. This research suggests that attitude moralization is neither intuitive nor is it rooted primarily in perceptions of harm.

Attitude Moralization in the Wild

Although studies run in the lab allow for carefully controlled tests of hypotheses, they can also be artificial. To further investigate attitude moralization, we tested the role of beliefs and emotions as predictors of attitude moralization in a real world context: about political

¹ Pilot testing revealed that participants exposed to the disgust primes at 14 ms rated abstract paintings as conveying more disgust than those exposed to the control images. In other words, disgust was successfully aroused even in the subliminal exposure condition (see Wisneski & Skitka, 2017, supplemental materials).

candidates over the course of the 2012 U.S. presidential election (Brandt, Wisneski, & Skitka, 2015). A longitudinal design allowed us to test whether changes in moral conviction associated with preferred and non-preferred major party candidates were predicted by participants' beliefs about the harmful or beneficial consequences of either candidate becoming president, their emotional reactions to the candidates, or some combination of both.

We surveyed a large U.S. sample of participants in early September of 2012 (shortly after the Republican and Democratic national conventions), and again the week prior to election day. Participants rated a range of emotions they felt when thinking about the two major party candidates, including how much the candidates made them feel hostile (e.g., angry, disgusted), fearful (e.g., afraid, frightened), or enthusiastic (e.g., enthusiastic, excited) (Watson & Clark, 1999). Participants wrote down the consequences of each candidate winning the election, and rated how harmful/beneficial they thought those consequences would be.

Results from a latent difference score analysis (McArdle, 2009) found that only participants' emotional reactions to the candidates predicted changes in moral conviction. Enthusiasm for people's preferred candidate predicted increased moral conviction about that candidate. Conversely, hostility toward people's non-preferred candidate predicted increased moral conviction about that candidate. Changes in moral conviction were unaffected by perceived harms, benefits, or fear associated with preferred and non-preferred candidates. Moreover, only emotions tied to a specific candidate (not emotions associated with the other candidate) predicted attitude moralization, a finding at odds with the SIM prediction that intuition triggered by less integral emotions can moralize. Just as our laboratory study found that integral emotion is needed to moralize people's abortion attitudes, integral emotions—and not perceptions of harm—are also needed to moralize attitudes about political candidates.

Discussion

Our laboratory and field investigations of attitude moralization converged on a common conclusion using very different methods. Attitude moralization results from integral emotion. Neither intuition nor harm were sufficient to produce moralization in our studies.

Attitude moralization may not be intuitive. If attitude moralization is an intuitive process, then people should not (a) need to recognize or be aware of the source of an emotional association with a given attitude object, or (b) require cognitive awareness for emotion to have an effect. In other words, incidental emotions aroused outside of conscious awareness should be sufficient to produce moralization via moral intuition, but we found no evidence to support this hypothesis. Our laboratory experiments found that strong but incidental disgust cues did not have the power to moralize abortion attitudes—only abortion disgust cues presented at conscious levels of awareness work—a result that replicated across two studies. Similarly, only emotions specifically tied to specific candidates predicted changes in candidate based moral convictions. Changes in enthusiasm for preferred candidates and hostility for non-preferred candidates did not spill-over to predict changes in moral conviction about the other candidate. Just as we found in the lab, the emotions that moralize are the ones tied specifically to the target of moralization.

Attitude moralization may not be based on harm. If harm is a necessary, and not just a sufficient basis for attitude moralization, then (a) recognition of harms/benefits should mediate any effects of emotionally-relevant cues on changes in attitude moralization, and (b) perceptions of harm/benefits should predict changes in attitude moralization. Our studies clearly demonstrated that attitude specific emotions, and not perceptions of harm (or benefits), were the driving force that predicted moralization. Disgust, and not harm, mediated the experimental effects we found in the lab.

Where to go? The findings we share in the current manuscript are not be the final word on attitude moralization or whether moralization processes are intuitive or harm-based. It is simply not possible to draw definitive claims from three studies about how moralization occurs under all circumstances and for all people. That said, the studies reviewed here provide clear evidence that moralization does not always result from either intuition or appraisals of harm. This claim should not be controversial. Indeed, enormous amounts of data would be needed to support any argument claiming to have found a single explanation for how an important aspect of morality functions for all (or even most) situations or individuals; a requirement that should apply not only to moralization, but to similar concepts such as moral judgment. With that in mind, we hope the current paper helps motivate more research into the important question of how various phenomena come to be imbued with moral relevance. In the remainder of the paper, we point to a few possible directions that this research could go.

First, future research could leverage research on moralization to test other theories of moral judgment. For example, do the contents of moral foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) cause people to moralize particular issues? Although prior work has linked moral foundations with support for political issues (Koleva et al., 2012), they have not been linked with changes in moral relevance. In addition, some perspectives suggest that harm intuitions (rather than appraisals like those tested in the studies we review) are particularly relevant for moral judgments (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014; Schein & Gray, in press) and it is possible they are also relevant for moralization.

Second, more research is also needed to test the generalizability of these effects across a wider array of attitude objects. For example, it is possible that intuitions (be they grounded in harm or otherwise) come into play only very early in the moralization process and serve to draw

one's attention to morally relevant aspects of the situation, and that attitude relevant emotion is then needed to carry the moralization process forward. Such a possibility would imply that moralization happens in stages (e.g., Lovett & Jordan, 2010) and that it may be helpful to distinguish between instances when an attitude acquires an initial moral association and those where that association becomes strengthened.

Finally, theoretical claims about moral intuition that have been widely accepted before being fully tested. More is needed to directly test just how much controlled, deliberative processes are needed to produce moralization. Is simply the recognition of the association between an attitude and emotion enough, or are predictions from theories based in moral reasoning closer to the truth and people, in fact, "think their way" to or out of moralization (e.g., Narvaez, 2010)? Major theories in moral psychology should make bold and risky claims, but those claims should also be thoroughly tested before they receive widespread acceptance.

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