The Psychology of Moral Conviction

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Abstract

This review covers theory and research that has studied the psychological characteristics and consequences of attitudes that are experienced as moral convictions, that is, attitudes that people perceive as grounded in fundamental right and wrong. Morally convicted attitudes represent something psychologically distinct from other constructs (e.g., strong but non-moral attitudes or religious beliefs), are perceived as universally and objectively true, and are comparatively immune to authority or peer influence. Variance in moral conviction also predicts important social and political consequences. Stronger moral conviction about a given attitude object, for example, is associated with greater intolerance of attitude dissimilarity, resistance to procedural solutions for conflict about that issue, as well as increased political engagement and volunteerism in that attitude domain. Finally, we review recent research that explores the processes that lead to attitude moralization; we integrate these efforts and close our review with a new domain theory of attitude moralization.

The Psychology of Moral Conviction

Greta Thunberg had enough. After experiencing record heat waves and forest fires in Sweden during the summer of 2018, she felt she needed to take a personal stand to wake people up about the issue of climate change. She therefore decided to single-handedly launch a school strike by showing up every day to protest outside the parliament in central Stockholm in the weeks leading up to the September Swedish election. “It is my moral responsibility to do what I can,” she explained (Crouch, 2018). Greta’s solo strike went viral on social media and inspired other concerned young people to follow her lead. Young people across the world started engaging in “Fridays for the Future” protests, where they vowed to boycott school until their countries adhere to the 2015 Paris agreement, which aims to prevent global temperatures from rising 1.5C above pre-industrial levels. On March 15, 2019, an estimated 1.6 million students from 124 different countries walked out of school to demand climate change action (Haynes, 2019).

What motivated Greta to take a stand on the issue of climate? She explains her motivations in moral terms: Her position on climate change is a reflection of her fundamental beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil with respect to this issue. These beliefs in turn create a sense of responsibility, if not a compulsion to *do something* in support of her beliefs. In other words, Greta—and no doubt many she has inspired—experiences her position on climate change with the force of moral conviction.

The goal of this chapter is to review what we know about the psychology of moral conviction and to suggest some promising areas to break new ground. We begin by reviewing the theoretical orientation of the moral conviction program of research and then turn to operationalization and measurement of the construct. We then review the domain theory of attitudes as well as research that has tested hypotheses generated from it. Next, we turn to review new research that is beginning to more deeply explore the psychological antecedents of moral conviction. We close by discussing attitude moralization and demoralization as especially ripe areas for future research and by proposing a domain theory of attitude moralization that offers some testable hypotheses going forward.

Essentialism vs. Subjectivism

Researchers often imply that morality is an inherent property of some issues, situations, choices, attitudes, judgments, etc. Stanley Milgram, for example, famously argued that his studies on destructive obedience shed light on the comparative power of strong situations versus individual commitments to morality: "[When] ordinary people…are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few have the resources to resist authority" (Milgram, 1974, p. 6). In another study, researchers concluded that people's attitudes about the Iraq War and the economy (which the researchers assumed were non-moral issues) were more important in shaping Americans' candidate preferences in the 2004 Presidential election than attitudes about abortion or gay marriage (which the researchers assumed were moral issues; Hillygus & Sheilds, 2005). In neither case, however, were participants asked whether they perceived their situation (e.g., the Milgram experiment) or any of the issues (e.g., the Iraq War) in moral terms. We argue that to know whether people are willing to sacrifice their moral beliefs to obey authorities, or whether their vote is primarily based on moral versus other concerns, one first has to ask them whether their moral concerns are relevant to the situation or issue in the first place.

Asking people whether and to what degree a given attitude is one they hold with moral conviction differs from most other contemporary approaches to studying morality that generally start with a theoretical orientation of what "counts" as a moral concern instead. Moral foundation theorists, for example, define five domains of moral concern[1] and designed scales to measure these theorized moral foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Rather than start with a definition of what counts as a moral concern, researchers working in the moral conviction program of research have instead asked people whether they see their position on given issues as a reflection of their personal moral beliefs and convictions. In other words, unlike most approaches that *a priori* define what counts as being in the moral domain, the moral conviction approach allows participants to define the degree to which their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs reflect something moral. From this perspective, the moral conviction program of research is very much bottom up rather than top down in its approach to understanding morality.

There are at least two key assumptions of the moral conviction program of research: (1) that people can access and report the degree to which their attitudes reflect their core moral convictions, and (2) that perceptions of morality are a matter of degree rather than only a matter of kind. The idea that people can access and report on moral concerns is supported by social domain theory (e.g., Turiel, 2006) and research on people's ability to distinguish between preferences, normative conventions, and moral concerns. Social conventions stretch across a continuum from arbitrary personal preferences (e.g., color preferences, musical tastes), to important and widely shared social standards subject to legitimate sanction (e.g., driving on the correct side of the street; Huebner, Lee, & Hauser , 2010). The boundaries between the moral and conventional domains may not always be perfectly sharp but are sharp enough that even very young children (e.g., 39 months) recognize and reliably distinguish between moral and conventional notions of right and wrong (Smetana & Braeges, 1990). In short, people—including young children— can reliably access conceptions of morality and can distinguish those conceptions from both preferences and normative convention.

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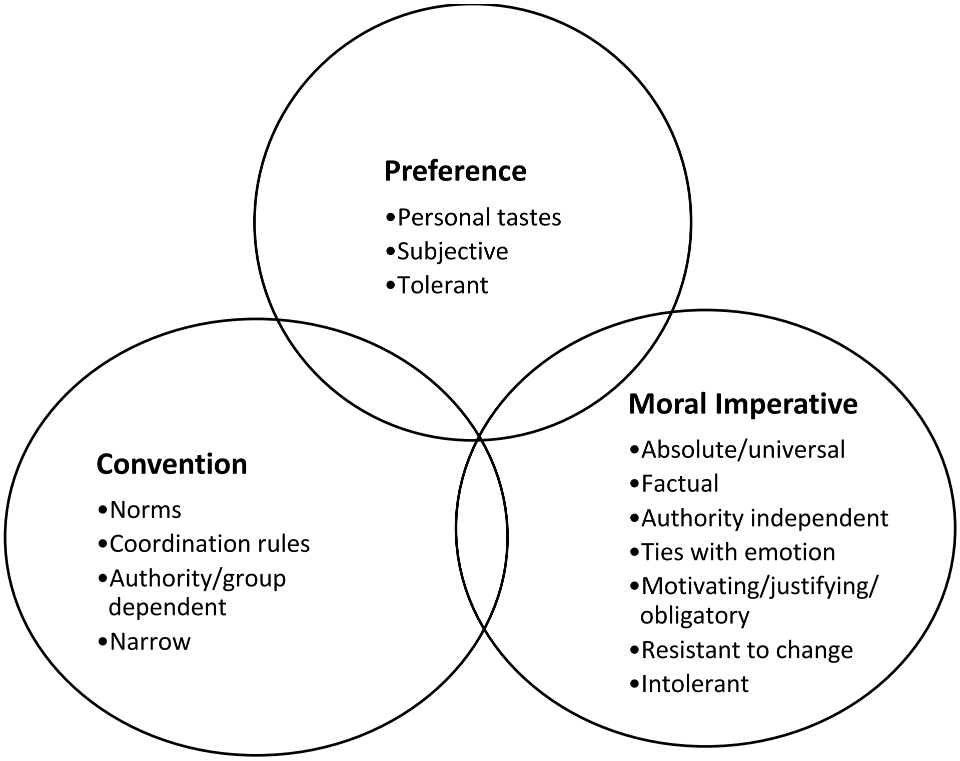
[1] At times, moral foundations theorists also acknowledge other candidates for "foundationhood," such as liberty/oppression (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012).

We also argue that morality is a matter of degree rather than strictly a matter of kind. Consistent with this premise, the moral significance people attach to different issues varies over time, cultures, and individuals. Attitudes toward smoking, for example, have changed from being a matter of preference to being increasingly moralized over time across the last 50-60 years (Rozin & Singh, 1999). In a similar vein, at one time there were no legal restrictions on abortion in the U.S. and abortion services were openly marketed. Restrictions in the U.S. on abortion were not initially grounded in concerns about morality as much as they were rooted in concerns about medical licensure and the desire of increasingly professionalized health care providers to stem competition from midwives and homeopaths (Reagan, 1996). Abortion attitudes also vary rather substantially across cultures (Osnos, 2012), as well as within cultures (Skitka, Bauman, Sargis, 2005; Ryan, 2014). For example, some people's abortion attitudes reflect personal preferences— they simply would prefer to have backstop protection against an unwanted pregnancy. Others' positions reflect their commitment to a given faith community or religious doctrine. In summary, morality is not an essential feature of some decisions, choices, judgments, or attitude domains— rather it is a meta-perception people have about some of their decisions, choices, judgments and attitude that can vary in strength.

The Domain Theory of Attitudes

The domain theory of attitudes predicts that what people subjectively experience as moral is psychologically different from what that they subjectively experience as a preference or convention (see Fig. 1, Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Skitka, 2014, Skitka et al., 2005). Attitudes that are in the domain of preference are those that are perceived as matters of taste, or as subjective and in the eye of the beholder. People are very tolerant of others who tastes differ from their own. Conventional attitudes tend to be rooted in norms, or what “people like me” tend to believe. Although conventional attitudes may lead perceivers to make claims about right and wrong, for example, that it would be wrong to drive on the left side of the road in the U.S., they would mean that it is normatively wrong, rather than essentially wrong; the act would only be “bad” because it breaks a coordination rule, and not because it is inherently bad. Conventional attitudes are often supported by authority dictates but tend to have defined boundaries. It is wrong, for example to drive on the left side of the street in the U.S., but people think it is perfectly acceptable to do so in Great Britain or Australia. Attitudes that are experienced as moral convictions theoretically differ from attitudes experienced as preferences and conventions in a variety of ways, including: the degree to which they are experienced as cultural universals and absolutes, and as facts about the world; their independence from what authorities, the law, etc. have to say about the matter; their particularly strong ties with emotion; the degree to which they are inherently obligatory and self-justifying; their resistance to change; and their association with intolerance of differing viewpoints. We will discuss each of these characteristics in turn, after reviewing measurement of moral conviction.

Figure 1. A Domain Theory of Attitudes


Preference
•Personal tastes
•Subjective
•Tolerant
Convention
•Norms
•Coordination rules
•Authority/group dependent
•Narrow
Moral Imperative
•Absolute/universal
•Factual
•Authority independent
•Ties with emotion
•Motivating/justifying/ obligatory
•Resistant to change
•Intolerant

Measurement and Operationalization

Moral conviction is generally measured by using transparent and face-valid self-report measures. Although people may not always be skilled at explaining *why* they believe a given attitude is moral, they have little problem recognizing whether and the degree to which a given attitude reflects a moral conviction (see sidebar for example items).

[Insert Sidebar on Measurement About Here]

Some research has explored whether the simple categorization of an attitude as moral is a better operationalization of moral conviction than measuring it as a matter of strength or degree (e.g., Wright, Cullum & Schwab, 2008). Knowing the strength of moral conviction and not just its classification as moral, however, explains unique variance in theoretically relevant variables such as social distancing (Wright et al., 2008).

Other researchers have used various operationalizations of moral conviction that we see as problematic. These operationalizations sometimes confound moral conviction with other concepts that moral conviction should theoretically predict (e.g., universalism or authority independence, e.g., Bloom, 2013; van Zomeren, Postmes, Spears, & Bettache, 2011), combine measures of moral conviction with measures of other dimensions of attitude strength (e.g. centrality, e.g., Garguilo, 2010), use other attitude strength indices, such as importance, as proxy measures of moral conviction (e.g., Besley, 2012: Earle & Siegrist, 2008), or average moral convictions about a host of different attitude objects rather than a specific one (Asadullah, Fayyaz, & Amino, 2019). These approaches create conceptual and empirical confusion. Moral conviction, for example, is both theoretically and empirically distinct from attitude strength dimensions, such as importance, certainty, or centrality (in fact, attitude strength indices sometimes have relationships with other variables that are the inverse of their relationship with face valid measures of moral conviction, Skitka et al., 2005). We therefore argue that researchers should use measures that explicitly assess moral content and avoid using proxies or confounds with other constructs. For these reasons, the papers we selected for this review were ones that measured moral conviction using items that captured people's meta-perceptions of the degree to which a specific attitude reflected their moral concerns, and did not include studies that used proxy measures or averages of moral concerns across different attitude objects. We also excluded studies that labeled some attitudes at moral (e.g., attitudes about social issues) without asking participants the degree to which they themselves saw the issue as a reflection of a moral one.

The domain theory of attitudes predicts that attitudes in the moral domain will be perceived as more universal and objectively true, authority independent, as more motivating or obligatory, resistant to change or social influence, and that people will be more intolerant of those who violate their morally convicted attitudes relative to their otherwise strong but non-moralized attitudes. We review evidence in support of each of these predictions next.

Perceived Objectivity and Universality

Among other predictions, the domain theory of attitudes posits that people's morally convicted attitudes are characterized by two interrelated metacognitions: perceived objectivity and universality. People tend to perceive their morally convicted attitudes as objectively true facts that are grounded in fundamental truths about reality. People also perceive their morally convicted attitudes as universally generalizable truths that apply across time, place, and culture. To test these hypotheses, Morgan and Skitka (2020) had participants report their degrees of moral conviction for a wide range of issues (e.g., abortion, capital punishment, gun control, immigration, same-sex marriage), as well as the degree to which they perceived their position on each issue as objectively true and universally applicable. Moral conviction consistently predicted perceived objectivity and universality across issues, even when controlling for indices of attitude strength. A meta-analysis of 21 issues across three studies found that strength of moral conviction was significantly associated with perceived objectivity, meta-analytic r (4,669) = .50, $p<.001$, and universality, meta-analytic r (4,773) = .44, $p<.001$.

Consistent with these findings, there is an implicit association between objectivity and moral conviction on implicit association tests (IAT, Kidder & Crites, 2014) and people make faster universality evaluations about whether other people should or should not engage in a given behavior if they first evaluated the behavior as morally right or wrong rather than pragmatically good or bad or as pleasant or unpleasant (Van Bavel, Packer, Haas, & Cunningham, 2012). Taken together, these results support the prediction that attitudes high in moral conviction are perceived much like facts and universals, something that distinguishes them from attitudes that might otherwise be perceived as a strong but not moral.

Authority and Peer Independence

Moral beliefs also appear to be authority and peer independent. 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 authorities, rules, and procedures than they do from authorities, rules, and procedures themselves (e.g., Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999, Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008). Moral beliefs are not inherently anti-establishment or anti-authority; they just are not dependent on establishment, convention, rules, or authorities. People tend to focus more on ideals and perceptions of "ought" and "should" when their moral convictions are at stake than on a duty to comply with authorities or the rules.

There is considerable support for the authority independence of moral convictions. Research that studied reactions to a Supreme Court case that upheld states' ability to decide whether to legalize physician-assisted suicide (*Gonzales vs. Oregon*), for example, found that people's strength of moral conviction about physician-assisted suicide, and not their pre-decision perceptions of the Supreme Court's legitimacy and fairness, emerged as the strongest predictor of their perceptions of post-decision fairness and acceptance of the decision. Regardless of how legitimate they thought the Supreme Court was at baseline, morally convicted opponents of physician-assisted suicide perceived the decision to be unfair and nonbinding, whereas morally convicted opponents perceived the reverse (Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009; see also Skitka, 2002, Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Wisneski, Lytle, & Skitka, 2009), results that were later replicated in the context of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that laws prohibiting same-sex marriage are unconstitutional (Hanson, Skitka, & Wisneski, 2016).

Other research has found behavioral support for the prediction that people reject authorities and the rule of law when outcomes violate their moral convictions. For example, 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 the questionnaire and pen at end of the experimental session. Consistent with the prediction that decisions, rules, and laws that violate people's moral convictions erode support for the relevant authorities and institutional systems, 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.

Attitudes that are high in moral conviction are also more resistant to normative and majority influence (Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, 2012; Conover & Miller, 2018; Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003; Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007). One of the most replicated findings in social psychology is that people tend to conform to majority group opinion (see Cialdini & Trost, 1998 for a review). People conform to majority group norms even when they individually have a contrary point of view for largely two reasons. People are often concerned that going against group norms could risk ridicule and disenfranchisement from the group and hope that going along will maintain or build acceptance and belonging (Asch, 1956). Other times, people conform because they are not confident about the right answer or the best way to behave, and they turn to peers for guidance and information (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Sherif, 1936). When people have strong moral convictions, however, they prefer to distance themselves from attitudinally dissimilar others (Skitka et al., 2005, Wright et al., 2008), and therefore have little desire to look to attitudinally dissimilar peers to discover the 'right answer.' Consistent with this idea, people's moral convictions are resistant to majority influence and consensus information (e.g., Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, 2012). People continue to uphold their moral point of view despite these well-known pressures to conform, even when their non-conformity is explicitly public and behavioral (Hornsey et al., 2003; Hornsey et al., 2007) and when controlling for a number of indices of attitude strength (Aramovich et al., 2012). In summary, moral convictions appear to inoculate people from pressures that usually lead them to defer to authorities, the rule of law, or to the pressures of normative or majority influence.

Means vs Ends

One extension of the authority independence hypothesis is that when people have moral certainty about the outcome that authorities and institutions should deliver, they judge whether the decision, the authority, and the system itself is legitimate as a function of whether they get the issue "correct"—i.e., whether the decision/outcome is consistent with the perceivers' morally preferred conclusion. "Correct" decisions indicate to perceivers that authorities and institutions are appropriate and work as they should and are therefore fair. "Incorrect" answers signal that the system is somehow broken and is not working as it should. In other words, the domain theory of attitudes posits that people use their sense of morality as a key point of reference to judge outcome and procedural fairness, as well as the basic legitimacy of the system (e.g., Skitka et al., 2009; Wisneski et al., 2009).

Consistent with these ideas, the strength of moral conviction associated with people's outcome preferences related to legal decisions, election outcomes, etc. are consistently stronger predictors of the degree to which they perceive these decisions and outcomes as fair and final than whether these decisions are made using fair or unfair procedures (Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka, 2002, Skitka & Houston, 2001; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; see Skitka et al., 2008 for a detailed review). In one study, for example, participants were either given or denied voice in a group decision on how to divide a bonus to a charity whose aims were consistent or inconsistent with participants' stance on a given issue (abortion). Participants perceived having voice as fairer than no voice in the decision about how to allocate the bonus, but whether the process was fair (i.e., whether they had voice) did not affect participants' perceptions of the fairness of the choice of charity. When participants' position on abortion was high in moral conviction, the only thing that affected their perceptions of the fairness of the decision was whether the aims of the charity were consistent or inconsistent with their moral position on abortion (Bauman & Skitka, 2009).

Support for the idea that people become more focused on ends over means when their moral concerns are at stake was also found in studies that examined participants' reactions to vigilante justice. Participants reported their responses to a criminal defendant's death who they believed was truly guilty (which was associated with a moral conviction that the defendant be punished), truly innocent (which was associated with a moral conviction that the defendant must not be punished), or whose guilt or innocence was unclear (which was associated with low moral conviction with respect to punishment). In all cases, participants learned the defendant died, half because of an act of vigilante justice before the case went to trial and the other half because of death penalty after a fair trial. Participants with strong moral convictions about defendant guilt or innocence thought the outcome (the defendants' death) was equally fair or unfair respectively, with no effect of whether the death was a consequence of vigilantism or due process of law. The comparative fairness of the procedures only affected perceptions of outcome fairness in the ambiguous defendant guilt condition (Skitka & Houston, 2001). This and other research finds that people are tolerant of nearly any means, including lying and violence, so long as they achieve morally preferred ends (e.g., Mueller & Skitka, 2017; Reifen, Morgan, Halperin, &

Skitka, 2013; Skitka, 2002; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Zaal, Van Laar, Ståhl, Ellemers, & Derk, 2011).

Obligatory/Motivational

Another way that morally convicted attitudes theoretically differ from attitudes rooted in conventions or preferences is the degree to which perceivers feel obligated to act on them. Consistent with this idea, the more morally convicted people feel about a given issue, the less they feel they have a choice when making attitudinally relevant decisions (Kouchaki, Smith, & Savani, 2018). Furthermore, stronger moral convictions are associated with perceived stronger obligations to take a stand, which in turn predicts intentions to engage in specific forms of activism and collective action (Sabucedo, Dono, Alzate, & Seone, 2018).

Three studies tested the degree to which perceived obligations explained the connection between moral convictions and activist intentions relative to a variety of other possible mediators in the contexts of a graduate assistant strike, a university faculty unionization movement, and undergraduates' reactions to comprehensive testing as a mandatory graduation requirement (Morgan, 2011). In each study, the mediational role of obligation was tested relative to people's beliefs their actions are likely to make a difference (i.e., efficacy), desire to advance their group's interests (i.e., group identification), anticipated regret at not becoming more involved in the issue, and anticipated pride at becoming involved in the issue. Obligation (in all three studies) and anticipated pride (in one study) mediated the relationship between moral conviction and intended activism; the other variables did not.

The sense that moral convictions are obligatory extends beyond people's expectations for themselves to also influence their expectations of others. People, for example, with stronger moral convictions on an issue also feel more negative emotions toward political opponents, largely because they see supporting their side (and not the other side) as a moral obligation (Zaal, Saab, O'Brien, Jeffries, Barreto, & van Laar, 2017). Taken together, the motivational potency of moral conviction appears to be explained by a sense of obligation to act in the name of one's moral beliefs, something people are also willing to project onto others.

Political Engagement

Consistent with the idea that moral convictions are experienced as obligations, considerable research also finds that moral conviction predicts political engagement. Stronger moral convictions about a given cause are associated with increased cause-related activism intentions (Morgan, 2011; Mazzoni, van Zomeren, & Cicognani, 2015), activism behavior (Sabucedo, et al., 2018, van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012, Zaal et al., 2011), and both prospective and retrospective reports of voting (Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Morgan, Skitka, Wisneski, 2010; Ryan 2014). In a study that investigated Hungarian participants' behaviors in the context of a refugee crisis, stronger moral convictions about the crisis predicted both greater political activism (e.g., participating in demonstrations, contacting government officials, expressing positions on online forums) and volunteerism (e.g., working at camps and shelters, collecting donations, providing financial support) on behalf of refugees (Kende, Lantos, Belinzsky, Csaba, & Lukács, 2017). A meta-analysis of 21 datasets including 40 issues and 39,085 cases found that greater moral conviction for given causes or candidates was associated greater political engagement (i.e., activism, voting), an effect that was equally strong for those on the political left and right (Skitka, Morgan, & Wisneski, 2015). The relationship between moral conviction and political engagement is robust even when controlling for a host of alternative explanations, including strength of partisanship (Skitka & Bauman, 2008), religious conviction (Morgan, et al., 2010), attitude strength (Morgan, 2011; Skitka & Bauman, 2008), and perceived efficacy of political engagement (Kende, Lantos, Belinzsky, Csaba, & Lukács, 2017; Morgan, 2011).

Intolerance

If people view their moral convictions as objectively correct and universally applicable, then they should view those who disagree with their moral beliefs as fundamentally wrong and in opposition to fact. As a result of this interpersonal judgement and because people view their moral convictions as motivational and obligatory, people are likely to be intolerant of those who disagree with their closely held moral convictions. Supporting this hypothesis, higher levels of moral conviction predicts intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others using a variety of both self-report and behavioral measures. For example, people with stronger moral convictions about a given issue prefer greater social and physical distance from attitudinally dissimilar others (Skitka, et al., 2005; Zaal, et al., 2017), results that replicate in both the U.S. and China (Skitka, Liu, Yang, Chen, Liu & Xu, 2013). People also physically sit farther away from an interaction partner they believe has a different (as compared to similar) position on an issue they moralize (Skitka, et. al, 2005; Wright, et al., 2008). Likewise, when children and adolescents classify an attitude as moral they are also less accepting of attitudinal differences with others (Wright, 2012). The propensity to moralize attitudes across many political issues (Moralization of Politics; Wisneski, Skitka & Morgan, 2011) also predicts greater self-reported social distance as well as prejudice, social media avoidance, anger, incivility, and antagonism toward outgroup partisans (Garrett & Bankert, 2018, cf. Bizumic et al., 2016[2]). Furthermore, the link between moral conviction and intolerance is weaker under conditions of mindfulness and stronger under cognitive load, which suggests that the association of moral conviction and intolerance is more of an automatic than controlled process (Baumgartner & Morgan, 2019).

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[2] Bizimoc et al. 2016 found no relationship between moral conviction and prejudice. Unlike other research that does find this relationship, however, Bizomoc et al. did not take into account attitude stance, that is, whether participants were similar or different in position to the targets of possible (in)tolerance. Other research finds that similarity/dissimilarity matters: Higher levels of moral conviction make people intolerant of those who take a different position on the issue than perceivers themselves do, and more tolerant of those who share their moral point of view.

Unwillingness to Compromise

People are also less likely to compromise when a moral conviction is at stake. People who moralize their attitudes on political issues view proposed compromises related to the issues less favorably and are less supportive of political candidates who are willing to negotiate on the issues than those who do not moralize their attitudes (Ryan, 2019; cf. Clifford, 2019). One intriguing line of recent research explored the effect of moral conviction on the strategies people use in economic games that were modified to reflect compromises on political issues). Across several modified economic games, participants who held their positions on the issues with moral conviction (compared to those who did not) were more likely to take aggressive bargaining positions and less likely to compromise when playing against someone they thought disagreed with them (Delton, DeScioli, & Ryan, 2019.

Moral Conviction and Emotion

The domain theory of attitudes also predicts that attitudes high in moral conviction are likely to have different and perhaps stronger relationships with emotion than otherwise strong but non-moral attitudes. Studying the connections of emotion and moral conviction, however, has revealed that the relationship is complicated and multi-faceted. Moral conviction is associated with a host of emotions, including emotions related to the morally convicted issue itself (e.g., Skitka & Wisneski, 2011); self-relevant emotions, such as anticipated pride at becoming politically engaged with respect to a morally convicted issue and anticipated guilt at failing to do so (Morgan, 2011; Skitka, Hanson, & Wisneski , 2017); as well as emotional reactions to those who either agree or disagree with one’s position on morally convicted issues (e.g., Ryan, 2014).

People had a host of emotional reactions, for example, about the beginning of the 2003 Iraq War, including anxiety (i.e., anxious, uncertain, scared, and afraid), a form of guilty glee (i.e., pleased, glad, strong, and guilty), and anger (i.e., angry and mad). People whose support or opposition of the war was high in moral conviction had stronger positive and negative emotional reactions to the war, respectively, than those whose support or opposition was weak in moral conviction, even with controlling for attitude strength (Skitka & Wisneski, 2011). Similarly, supporters and opponents of physician-assisted suicide experienced stronger positive and negative emotions, respectively, when thinking about the issue, even when controlling for attitude strength (Skitka & Wisneski, 2011). Stronger moral convictions are also associated with higher levels of physiological arousal (i.e., skin conductance) even when controlling for measures of attitude strength (e.g., attitude importance and extremity, Garrett, 2018), results that are consistent with the idea that moral convictions are associated with stronger emotional responses than equally strong, but non-moral attitudes.

People also seem to project their own experience of the connection between moral convictions and emotion onto their expectations about others. More specifically, people believe that individuals have stronger moral convictions than groups do, a finding that is explained by beliefs that individuals have a greater capacity for emotional experience than do groups (Jago, Kreps, & Laurin, 2019). Emotions also mediate the relationship between moral conviction and a host of other judgments and behavior. For example, the aforementioned finding that people use their moral convictions as guides (rather than procedures) to judge the fairness of outcomes is mediated by anger at non-preferred outcomes (Mullen & Skitka, 2006). Similarly, anticipated pride at becoming involved and regret about failing to become involved mediates the relationship between moral conviction and activist intentions (Skitka et al., 2017). Although these results establish clear ties between moral convictions and emotions, correlational findings like these nonetheless beg the following question: Which comes first—moral convictions or emotions?

The answer appears to be "both." Using longitudinal methods, one study found people's moral conviction about preferred and non-preferred presidential candidates early in the election cycle predicted greater enthusiasm and hostility toward these respective candidates later in the election cycle, as well as greater harm of electing non-preferred candidates, and benefits of electing preferred candidates (Brandt, Wisneski, & Skitka, 2015). In other words, changes in moral conviction are associated with subsequent changes in both attitudinally relevant emotions and cognitive appraisals. Longitudinal and experimental studies, however, also indicate that emotions are critical predictors of changes in moral conviction and are more reliable predictors of changes in moral conviction than cognitive appraisals, such as perceptions of harm (e.g., Brandt et al., 2015; Clifford, 2019; Feinberg, Kovacheff, Teper, & Inbar, 2019; Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). In other words, emotions are clearer antecedents of moral conviction than perceived harms or benefits, but both emotion and perceived harms and benefits are consequences of changes in moral conviction.

Taken together, the domain theory of attitudes predicts – and empirical evidence demonstrates – that moral conviction has a number of psychologically important characteristics and consequences. People experience their moral convictions as objectively and universally true, and as something that obligates action. Among other things, people's moral convictions seem to inoculate them from peer and authority influence and shape their responses to others – including their intolerance and willingness to compromise. Given how fundamental the consequences of holding moral convictions are to understanding people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior, it is important to understand the processes of how attitudes become moral in the first place, that is, the processes that lead to attitude moralization.

Attitude Moralization

Efforts to understand attitude moralization have generally explored the relative roles of emotion and reasoning in this process. The social intuitionist model of moral judgment (SIM) suggests that attitudes are likely to become moralized through flashes of moral intuition; a fast, automatic, affect laden process that is independent of conscious, deliberate reasoning (Haidt, 2001). The theory of dyadic morality (TDM) also predicts that the moralization process is intuitive, but in contrast to the SIM, makes the specific prediction that it is intuitive perceptions of harm (broadly defined) that moralizes (e.g., Schein & Gray, 2018). According to the TDM, feelings of moral conviction would come to be associated with an attitude object to the extent that harm is intuitively associated with it.

Feinberg et al. (2019) recently proposed a push-pull model of moralization that attempts to integrate these perspectives. According to the push-pull model, the moralization process starts with a particularly evocative stimulus that arouses strong emotions and cognitions that in concert signal possible moral relevance; the more strongly one experiences these emotions and cognitions, the more likely people are to perceive the stimuli as morally relevant (what Wisneski & Skitka, 2017 called the "moral shock hypothesis").

Another route to attitude moralization proposed by Rozin (1999) and incorporated into the push-pull model is the idea of "moral piggy backing," that is, that moralization can occur when people experience or acquire new information that leads to the conscious recognition of a link between something the perceiver previously viewed as unrelated to morality (e.g., eating meat) and a pre-existing moral belief (e.g., killing is wrong). Moral piggybacking occurs when people recognize the inconsistency between an existing moral belief and another belief.

In addition to positing several factors that can lead to enhanced moralization ("push" variables), the push-pull model also posits forces that should lead people to minimize moralization ("pull" variables). People may sometimes react defensively when confronted with moral shocks or explicit attempts to manipulate their moral sensibilities (i.e., they respond with reactance, Brehm, 1966), something that should lead to resistance to changing their position on the issue; consequently they may double down on their initial take on the issue instead. The hedonic benefits of persisting in a non-moralized stance could similarly constrain attempts to moralize. People may resist attempts to shift their opinion on meat consumption, for example, largely because of the pleasure they associate with eating meat. Attempts to moralize will sometimes be met with justifications and rationalizations to support people's hedonic preferences instead. The push-pull model implies that moralization happens as a joint function of moral shock (strong emotions and recognition of harm) and moral piggybacking. Although the empirical record finds consistent support for the role of emotion, there is less consistent support for the role of harm and/or moral piggybacking.

Several studies, for example, find that the experience of strong attitudinally relevant emotion increases feelings of moral conviction, whereas appraisals of harm do not. In one study, participants were exposed to either disgusting images that were directly related to the issue of abortion (e.g., aborted fetuses), unrelated to the issue (e.g., overflowing toilets, animals being harmed), or to control images (e.g., office furniture) before reporting their level of moral conviction about abortion (Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). These images were presented at speeds that did or did not allow for conscious awareness of the image's content[3] to manipulate whether participants were aware or unaware of the source of the emotion, to test the degree to which moralization could occur intuitively (outside of conscious awareness). Increases in moral conviction relative to control only emerged in the disgust (aborted fetus) condition and only when there was conscious awareness of what people had seen. The effect of attitude relevant emotion on moralization was replicated in another study and was mediated by self-reported feelings of disgust, and not by either anger or harm appraisals.

Feinberg et al. (2019), in contrast, conducted three longitudinal studies of the processes that lead to the moralization of attitudes related to consuming meat. Study 1 tested hypotheses in the context of an introductory psychology course that emphasized animal rights and welfare as a recurrent theme of the course, and collected data at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. Studies 2 and 3 surveyed community samples, who were contacted 7 times. Three sessions involved exposure to videos that highlighted the pain and suffering animals undergo during the process of meat production, and 4 sessions were devoted to data collection. The results suggested that moralization occurs largely through the two processes proposed by the push-pull model: an intensification of emotional reactions to the issue of eating meat (i.e., disgust, guilt), stronger recognition of harm, and "moral piggybacking" (i.e., making a connection between the issue and existing moral beliefs). That said, some portion of participants responded to the interventions with psychological reactance instead—in other words, exposure to the animal harm and suffering messages led them to moralize the issue of meat consumption *less*, rather than *more*, results that suggest that the hedonic benefits of meat consumption play a role in the suppression of attitude moralization in this context.

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[3] Pilot testing indicated that participants did experience higher levels of disgust in response to the disgust-eliciting stimuli relative to control images, even when the stimuli were presented at speeds too fast for conscious recognition of the photo content.

Taken together, research on attitude moralization has found support for the hypothesis that emotion plays an important role in the moralization process and mixed support for the role of harm perceptions. One reason why we see mixed evidence in support of the role of harm in the moralization process may be differences in the kinds of issues researchers have chosen to study. Some issues may require more deliberation and emphasis on harm than other issues for them to become moralized: Just as there are different routes to persuasion (a more central versus a peripheral route, e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), there may be multiple routes to moralization. If there are indeed different routes to moralization, however, it begs the question: What are the conditions when one or another route is likely to be a necessary versus sufficient pathway for attitude moralization to occur? The domain theory of attitudes provides some clues.

Previous studies of attitude moralization have focused on dissimilar kinds of issues. Studies that found a role for more deliberation and for harm perceptions focused on attitudes about meat consumption (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2019; Rozin, 1999; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997), or smoking (Rozin & Singh, 1999). Studies that did not find a role for harm, in contrast, examined abortion attitudes (Wisneski & Skitka, 2017) and candidate preferences (Brandt et al., 2015). Drawing from the domain theory of attitudes, it is important to note that meat consumption and abortion attitudes vary in the percentages of people who see each issue as a preference, convention, or moral imperative. Few people in the U.S., for example, identify as vegetarian (~2 to 6%); moreover, 60% of self-identified vegetarians report having eaten meat in the previous 48-hours (Šimčikas, 2018). Attitudes about meat consumption are therefore likely – on average – to reflect preferences or normative conventions. In contrast, only 31% of Americans say that abortion is not a moral issue (Lipka & Gramlich, 2019). One plausible reason why studies using different attitude objects arrive at different conclusions about the likely role of cognitive elaboration and harm in attitude moralization may be because they studied attitudes that are largely from different starting domains.

We suggest that moralization of abortion attitudes is more likely to be a *moral amplification* effect, given perceivers are likely to already have some basic moral recognition of cultural pre- or proscriptions related to the issue. In contrast, moralization of attitudes about meat consumption are more likely to require an initial stage of *moral recognition*, that is, the creation of a new awareness of the possible moral implications the issue (Rhee, Schein, & Bastian, 2019). Taken together, the differences between these different approaches to attitude moralization reveals that the domain of the initial attitude is likely to be an important moderator of the processes required for attitude moralization.

The Domain Model of Attitude Moralization

We propose a domain model of attitude moralization that integrates the existing domain theory of attitudes and research on attitude moralization. The domain model of attitude moralization proposes that the processes involved in attitude moralization depend on the domain of the initial attitude. When the initial attitude is perceived as a preference, the process of moralization requires an initial moral recognition stage, followed by a moral amplification stage. When initial attitudes are perceived as conventions or as weak moral convictions, moralization will not require moral recognition but will instead be primarily shaped by processes that lead to moral amplification. We elaborate these predictions next.

Moral Recognition

When one’s initial attitude is perceived as a preference or mindless habit (e.g., eating meat is okay), an important precursor to attitude moralization will be recognition of the possible moral significance of the attitude object. Moral recognition can involve recognition that one’s existing position can be reconstrued in moral rather than simply preferential terms or can involve recognition of moral objections to one’s initial preference. We suggest that persuading someone to recognize the moral significance of an existing preference will require central rather the peripheral routes to attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b), largely through a recognition of harm (Rhee et al., 2019) but quite possibly also through soliciting new emotional associations, such as disgust. Feinberg et al.’s (2019) study of attitudes on meat consumption is an excellent example of the kinds of processes likely to be involved, including repeated exposure to information-dense persuasive messages, opportunities for moral piggybacking, considerable cognitive elaboration, and recruiting new emotional reactions to the attitude domain. In short, moral recognition is more likely to be a cognitively effortful, deliberate, and elaborative even when emotions are also involved. Moral shock (e.g., exposure to disgust or anger inducing information, or intense enthusiasm), however, is unlikely to be sufficient to moralize pre-existing preferences without additional persuasive messaging about harm and moral recognition through moral piggybacking. Consistent with the push-pull model, factors that are likely to inhibit moral recognition include the strength of the perceived hedonic benefits of one’s initial preference, habit, and rationalization of the desirability of one’s initial preference (Feinberg et al., 2019).

Moral Amplification

The processes involved in the moralization of conventional or weakly moralized attitudes can be described as moral amplification[4], whereby a weakly moralized attitude becomes more strongly moralized. Someone whose attitude about abortion is rooted in conventional norms rather than a sense of moral imperative, for example, is nonetheless likely to realize that others see the issue in a moral light and perhaps some of the reasons why. In other words, people's whose attitudes are rooted in conventional norms or weak moral convictions already have some recognition that the issue can be moralized. Moralization in these cases does not require the acquisition of a new moral recognition, but instead would require amplification or strengthening of an existing but weak moral recognition.

The processes involved in the moral amplification of conventional or weakly moralized attitudes are likely to differ from those involved in moral recognition in at least four ways: (1) People with attitudes in these perceptual domains are likely to be more aware of proscriptive norms against or prescriptive norms in support of their initial attitude, which means that at least some moral recognition already exists, (2) hedonic attachment to one's existing attitude is likely to be lower than it is for preferences, so hedonic benefits are less likely to be resistance factors, (3) conformity pressures and group loyalty, however, are likely to be more salient and important resistance factors given these attitudes are be based on potentially valued group identities or conformity pressures to go along with these groups, and (4) there is greater potential for reactance that could lead to *counter-moralization* of one's initial position, that is, moralization in opposition to any attempt to change one's initial attitude. In other words, although some of the same variables are involved in both moral amplification and moral recognition, the strength of the factors are predicted to vary as a function of whether the initial position is a preference versus a convention or weakly moralized attitude. Wisneski and Skitka's (2017) study of the moralization of abortion attitudes seems to be a good example of the moralization of attitudes that were more likely to have been initially experienced as conventional or as weakly moralized, a situation in which exposure to even a very brief but vivid moral shock was sufficient to lead to attitude moralization without requiring cognitive elaboration or intense efforts at persuasion.

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[4] Moral amplification as a term is often used to describe the processes that lead to harsher moral judgments, generally in the study of the possible role of incidental emotion in people's moral judgments. The connection between incidental emotional cues and moral judgment, however, have proven to be tenuous (Landy & Goodwin, 2015; cf. Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2015). We, however, are using the term moral amplification to describe the processes involved in strengthening the moral associations people already have with a given attitude object.

Demoralization

Although there appears to be growing interest in attitude moralization, an equally important area of inquiry (with substantial sociopolitical significance) will be to understand attitude *demoralization*. Some research that has explored what predicts attitude change when attitudes are high in moral conviction suggests some directions for future research in this area. There is mixed evidence about the degree to which attitudes high in moral conviction, for example, are resistant to counter-attitudinal persuasive messages than those that are low in moral conviction (e.g., Brannon, DeJong, & Gawronski, in press; Luttrell, Petty, Briñol, & Wagner, 2016). Whether people with morally convicted attitudes are persuadable appears vary as a function of the specific persuasive message. Morally convicted attitudes appear to be resistant to non-moralized counter-attitudinal messages (e.g., those that frame arguments in terms of pragmatic concerns) or messages that emphasize consequences (e.g., harms and benefits). Moralized attitudes, however, show greater malleability in response to moralized counter-attitudinal messages (i.e., arguments that are framed using deontological or rules based messaging, Luttrell, Philipp-Muller, & Petty, 2019; Ryan, 2019) or messages that emphasize counter-attitudinal anger and disgust (Clifford, 2019).

Although none of the above studies were specifically designed to look at attitude demoralization and were instead focused on attitude change, they provide some suggestions for the processes likely to be involved in attitude demoralization, including exposure to belief inconsistent information, shifts in moral cognitions (harms, for example, that are reconstrued as neutral or even benefits instead), emotional de-escalation, and/or moralization of an alternative position on the issue. Exposure to especially evocative emotional cues inconsistent with a perceiver's standing position, however, seem especially likely to backfire and lead to reactance and counter-moralization instead. More research is clearly needed, however, to gain a better understanding of the processes that lead to both attitude moralization and demoralization.

Conclusion

One of the key insights of the moral conviction program of research is that morality is very much in the eye of the beholder. Knowing the degree to which someone sees a given issue as relevant to their personal sense of morality, moreover, has wide ranging implications, including knowing how tolerant they will be of those who do not share their point of view, their willingness to compromise or accept procedural solutions for conflict, their willingness to become politically engaged, and a host of other variables.

As this review has revealed, attitudes held with moral conviction have a psychological profile that corresponds well with the domain theory of attitudes. Moral convictions differ from otherwise strong but non-moral attitudes by being perceived as more objectively and universally true, authority independent, and obligatory. In addition to these distinctions, moral convictions predicts the degree to which people perceive that the ends justify the means in achieving morally preferred outcomes, their unwillingness to compromise on morally convicted issues, and increased political engagement and willingness to engage in volunteerism on the one hand, and acceptance of lying, violence, and cheating to achieve preferred ends on the other.

Directions for future research include learning more about when moral convictions emerge during development, how moral conviction and related processes might change over the lifespan, and the psychological functions that moral convictions serve in people's lives. An especially important step for future research will be to understand the processes underlying attitude moralization and demoralization. The field is beginning to gain some understanding of attitude moralization, but there remains much research to be done, including expanding empirical inquiry to also study attitude demoralization. Understanding the psychology of moral conviction seems to be especially important at this sociopolitical moment, when political cleavages are especially deep and we need to find consensus on how to begin to solve pressing problems such as climate change, immigration, and the maintenance of public health in the face of the current and likely future pandemics. It remains critically important to discover new ways to diminish moral cleavages that can undermine and delegitimize democratic institutions and processes, contribute to intolerance, and that give rise to an unwillingness to compromise.

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Future Issues:

> How do moral convictions develop in adolescence and early adulthood? Are there "critical periods" when people tend to develop many of their moral convictions about political or other topics?
>
> How does moral conviction and related processes change over the lifespan?
>
> What psychological functions does moral conviction serve in people's lives?
>
> What is the relative role of emotion versus reasoning predicting how attitudes become moralized or demoralized. Are these distinct or interrelated processes?
>
> Most moral conviction work is done in political contexts. Does moral conviction outside of politics look similar or different from moral conviction in politics?
>
> Are the processes involved in moral recognition and moral amplification the same or different?

Terms and Definitions

Moral Conviction – a meta-cognition about an attitude, specifically, one's belief that a given attitude is a reflection of one's core feelings or beliefs about fundamental right and wrong; morality and immorality.

Moralization – the processes by which an attitude increases in moral conviction or attains moral relevance

Demoralization – the processes by which an attitude decreases in moral conviction

Moral Amplification – the strengthening of existing moral associations with an attitude object

Moral Recognition – the creation of a new awareness of the moral implications of an attitude object

Authority Independence—a focus more on ideals and the way things ought to or should be done than on a duty to comply with or accept authority dictates

Side Bar 1.

Example Operationalizations of Moral Conviction

Hornsey, Majkut, Terry & McKimmie (2003)

To what extent do your feel your position on ________ is

…based on strong personal principles?

…is morally correct?

…is a moral stance?

9-point scale, 1 = not at all, 9 = very much, $\alpha = .76$

Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis (2005) and many others

How much are your feelings about ________

…connected to your core moral beliefs or convictions?

This item paired with

…based on fundamental questions of right and wrong? (e.g., Skitka et al., 2009; Skitka & Wisneski, 2011; Swink, 2011)

Or these two items paired with

…based on moral principle? (e.g., Ryan, 2013, Skitka et al., 2017)

5-point scale, 1 = not at all, 5 = very much, 3-item version, $\alpha = .90$-.93 across 5 issues