

Moral Conviction

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Moral Conviction

A theme that cuts across many societal debates is that at least one side defines its position in moral terms. For example, some people's positions on legalized abortion, same-sex marriage, or healthcare reform are vested with moral conviction (i.e., these positions are based on beliefs about fundamental right and wrong, good and bad). The recognition that some attitudes seem to be imbued with particular moral fervor led to a program of theory and research designed to investigate whether there is anything special about attitudes held with strong moral conviction ("moral mandates"). This encyclopedia entry will briefly review theory that distinguishes moral mandates from otherwise strong but non-moral attitudes (the Integrated Theory of Moral Conviction, or ITMC), and research that clarifies some potentially unsettling and reassuring implications of moral conviction for peace and conflict.

The Integrated Theory of Moral Conviction

Moral mandates have a number of defining characteristics that theoretically distinguish them from otherwise strong but non-moral attitudes, including perceived universality, perceived objectivity, autonomy, and ties to strong emotions. These factors provide moral mandates with considerable motivational force, and therefore higher degrees of consistency between attitudes and behavior.

Perceived Universality

People perceive their moral mandates as more universally applicable than other kinds of attitudes such as preferences or normative conventions. In contrast to moral mandates, personal preferences are subject to individual discretion and are not socially regulated; one's preference to vacation at the beach instead of the mountains is a matter of taste. Attitudes rooted in normative convention reflect socially or culturally shared notions about the way things are normally done in

one's group, and differ from moral imperatives because people outside of the group are not required to adhere to them. For example, people will say it is "wrong" to drive on the left side of the street in the U.S., but that it is perfectly fine to do so in the U.K. In contrast to preferences and conventions, moral mandates are absolute standards of truth that people perceive as applying to everyone: right is right and wrong is wrong. People may realize that there are differences of opinion on issues they see as moral, but seem to believe that if they could explain the "facts" to those who disagree, these others would certainly see the light and adopt the "correct" point of view.

Perceived Objectivity

Closely related to the proposition that moral mandates are perceived as universals, people also perceive their moral mandates as objective facts about the world. For example, if one asks a person with a moral mandate about female circumcision to explain why it is wrong, that person is likely to declare, "Because it's just wrong!" The "fact" that female circumcision is wrong is as psychologically self-evident as $2 + 2 = 4$.

Autonomy

Moral mandates represent something different from and independent of people's concerns about authority or group acceptance. When people's moral convictions are at stake, they are likely to believe that duties and rights follow from the greater moral purposes that underlie rules, procedures, authority dictates, or group norms rather than from these things themselves. Moral mandates are not by definition anti-authority or anti-group; they simply reflect personal and autonomous concerns rather than authority or group dependent concerns.

Motivation and Justification

Another characteristic that distinguishes moral mandates from otherwise strong but non-moral attitudes is the degree to which the former motivate behavior. Non-moral preferences—even very strong preferences—may be easily overwhelmed by factors that prevent people from translating those preferences into action. In contrast, the anticipated negative consequences of failing to live up to one’s own moral beliefs (e.g. shame, guilt, and regret) may be more severe than failing to do something one would prefer. Similarly, the anticipated positive consequences of taking a stand for what is “right” (e.g., pride, gratification, elevation, and self-affirmation) may be more uplifting than the satisfaction of doing something one would prefer. People experience emotions in conjunction with moral mandates more strongly than they do with preferences or conventions—people do not become angry when others disagree with their vacation tastes but may become enraged by those who violate their moral mandates. In short, the emotional intensity of moral mandates is associated with stronger motivations to take action.

In addition to having a strong motivational component, moral mandates are self-justifying. People tend to describe their moral mandates with statements such as “It’s just right!” or “It’s just wrong!” The question, “Why is it right or wrong?” is perceived as odd: The notion that one’s position is simply right or simply wrong *is* sufficient justification for taking a stand.

Implications of Moral Mandates for Peace and Conflict

The psychological characteristics of moral mandates have both negative and positive implications for peace and conflict. On one hand, our understanding of moral mandates provides some insights into when and why people sometimes become mired in intractable conflict. When people hold a moral mandate, they (a) are more intolerant of and likely to discriminate against attitudinally dissimilar others, (b) experience difficulty developing or agreeing to procedures to resolve conflict, (c) are more resistant to the power of authority or rule of law, (d) are inoculated

against majority group influence, and (e) are more willing to accept any means, including violence, to achieve preferred ends. On the other hand, moral mandates also provide the courage for people to stand up for what they believe is right and provide the motivational impetus for pro-social behaviors and activism.

Moral Conviction as a Potential Barrier to Conflict Resolution

Intolerance. When moral mandates are at stake, tolerance of differing view-points has little or no room at the table: right is right and wrong is wrong. Accordingly, stronger moral convictions predict increased intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others. People do not want to live near, be friends, share resources with, or even sit too close to someone who does not share their moral convictions (e.g., Skitka, Bauman & Sargis, 2005; Wright, Cullum & Schwab, 2008).

Barriers to conflict resolution. Moral mandates impede people's ability to find procedural solutions to conflict. For example, Skitka et al. (2005) examined the interactions of people within attitudinally heterogeneous and homogenous groups who were asked to develop a procedure to resolve an assigned issue. Some groups had members with strong but non-moral attitudes whereas other groups had members with moral mandates about the issue-at-hand. Results indicated that group processes and climate were strikingly different in these types of groups. Compared to other groups, attitudinally heterogeneous groups that discussed procedures to resolve a morally mandated issue were (a) lowest in reported good will and cooperativeness toward their fellow group members, and (b) perceived as most defensive and tense by third party observers who were blind to details about group composition. Furthermore, groups that worked to develop procedures to resolve a morally mandated issue (regardless of whether groups were attitudinally heterogeneous or homogenous) were the least likely to successfully develop a procedure to resolve their assigned issue. Many forms of social conflict are rooted in deep moral

cleavages and different assumptions about fundamental questions of right and wrong; these results reveal some of the inherent barriers that moral mandates pose for conflict resolution.

Resistance to authorities and majority group influence. People often do not know the “right” answer to various decisions or conflicts and therefore frequently rely on authorities, rules, or laws to provide solutions. However, when people have a moral mandate about what outcome authorities and institutions should deliver, they become much more invested in decision outcomes than whether decision-making authorities or institutions are legitimate or procedurally fair. “Right” decisions indicate that authorities are appropriate and work as they should. “Wrong” decisions signal that the system is somehow broken. In short, when moral mandates are at stake, people are less concerned about complying with authorities or the law, and they use whether authorities “get it right” as an important test of the authorities’ fairness and legitimacy. Consistent with the authority independence hypothesis, whether decisions are consistent or inconsistent with people’s morally convicted outcome preferences has repeatedly emerged as a stronger predictor of outcome fairness judgments and decision acceptance than whether procedures were fair or authorities were perceived as legitimate (see Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008 for a review).

People may also appeal to majority opinion to resolve conflict. Nonetheless, when a morally mandated issue is at stake, people are relatively immune to majority group pressure (e.g., Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, under review) and consensus information (Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007). Even under substantial pressure to conform, people with moral mandates persist in defending their point of view.

Violence. Finally, people also are more willing to accept violence when it supports a morally mandated end. Skitka and Houston (2001) presented participants with newspaper articles

that were ambiguous about defendant guilt or innocence, or indicated whether a defendant in a capital murder case appeared to be truly guilty or truly innocent. The articles also indicated whether the defendant was executed by the state following a fair trial or killed by a vigilante before the trial began. When participants lacked moral clarity about defendant guilt or innocence, participants' fairness judgments were shaped by whether the outcome was the result of a fair process: the defendant's death was fair if it was a consequence of a full trial and unfair if it was a result of vigilantism. However, when people had moral clarity about guilt or innocence, they perceived the death of a guilty defendant to be fair and the death of an innocent defendant as unfair regardless of whether the death was the outcome of a full trial or an act of vigilantism. The defendant's death—regardless of how it occurred—was perceived as morally right if he was guilty and morally wrong if he was innocent.

Moral Convictions Could Promote Peace

Much of our research on moral mandates has revealed a potential “dark side” of moralized attitudes. That said, moral mandates have prosocial implications as well. For example, moral convictions provide people the courage to stand up for their ideals, and to work for a better and more just world. Likewise, moral conviction motivates civic participation (which is generally seen as a social good). For example, people with stronger moral convictions about issues of the day or political candidates are consistently higher in intentions to vote and actual voting behavior (e.g., Morgan & Skitka, under review). Moreover, moral mandates are equal opportunity motivators of political engagement for those on the political right and left—liberals and conservatives are equally likely to express moral mandates about preferred candidates and societal issues, and these moral mandates similarly predict voting intentions and actual voting behavior. Some of our on-going research indicates that moral mandates are also associated with

other constructive forms of political activism such as willingness to collect signatures for petitions or to donate money to a cause. Accordingly, morally convicted activists for peace and other pro-social agendas are more likely to become politically engaged and active in these causes. In sum, moral mandates motivate constructive political engagement and willingness to fight for one's conception of the good.

Conclusion

There is considerable individual variation in the degree that people report that their attitudes on specific issues reflect their core moral convictions. Knowing whether someone vests their position with moral conviction has a number of positive and negative implications for peace and conflict. On one hand, moral mandates facilitate intolerance of those with different positions, encourage rejection of the rule of law, and provide a motivational foundation for the acceptance of violence. On the other hand, moral mandates provide people with a willingness to stand up for what is perceived as right and motivate pro-social behaviors such as activism and civic engagement. In short, moral convictions act as double-edged swords—both as a barrier to conflict resolution and provide people with the courage to work for more just world. Just as having too much moral conviction can lead to potentially horrific consequences (e.g., suicide bombings), too little can lead to inaction and apathy rather than a willingness to take a stand for peace and justice.

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Key Terms

moral conviction, moral mandates, attitudes

Biography

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