

Moral Conviction and Emotion

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Abstract

People's feelings about political issues are often experienced as moral convictions, that is, as rooted in beliefs about right and wrong, morality and immorality. The authors tested and found that morally convicted policy preferences are associated with positive as well as negative emotions among policy supporters and opponents, respectively, and that positive and negative emotions partially mediate the effects of moral convictions on relevant behavioral intentions (i.e., willingness to engage in activism).

Keywords

activism, attitude strength, conviction, emotion, moral conviction, morality

People clearly feel strongly about many issues of the day, such as health care reform in the USA, the need for increased monitoring of food safety in China following scandals about tainted milk, and the fairness of election outcomes in Iran. Sometimes people's reactions reflect their self-interests, but other times, people's policy preferences reflect moral convictions, that is, fundamental beliefs about right and wrong, morality and immorality. Research indicates that knowing the degree to which a position is rooted in moral conviction predicts a host of other important variables, including people's political engagement, and their trust in political authorities to get an issue "right" (see Skitka, 2010, for a review).

People might have stronger emotional associations with and investments in policy outcomes when positions are held with strong rather than weak moral conviction. Moreover, these emotional associations may explain some of the motivational force of morally convicted attitudes. Although previous research has found strong evidence of ties between moral conviction and anger (Mullen & Skitka, 2006), the goal of the studies reviewed in this article was to test whether positive in addition to negative affect plays an important role in understanding the effects of moral convictions on various variables, such as political involvement and activism.

To further explore the ties between moral convictions and emotion, a national random sample of adults in the USA completed a survey regarding the beginning of the Iraq War in March or April of 2003 ($N = 3,534$; the USA invaded Iraq on

March 19). Participants were asked their degree and strength of (a) support/opposition to the war, (b) moral conviction associated with their position on the war, and (c) various emotional reactions to the prospect (and eventual reality) of the war. We found three distinct emotional reactions to the war: anxiety (anxious, uncertain, scared, and afraid), a form of guilty glee (pleased, glad, strong, and guilty), and anger (angry, mad). As can be seen in Figure 1, people whose support or opposition to the war was high in moral conviction (i.e., above the midpoint on the measure) had stronger positive and negative emotional reactions to the war, respectively, than those whose support or opposition was weak in moral conviction, even when attitude strength and various demographics were controlled.

Another national sample of adults ($N = 665$) was asked about their support/opposition to the legalization of physician-assisted suicide (PAS), and the degree to which they experienced various emotions when thinking about the act of PAS. This revealed two distinct factors: positive (relief, gratitude) and negative (anger, worry, fear, disgust,¹ and sadness) emotional reactions. Participants were also asked the degree to which they would be willing to engage in a number of activist behaviors in support of their position on PAS.

With this data, we tested whether positive and negative emotions mediated the effect of moral convictions on activist intentions, and whether these effects varied as a function of whether people supported or opposed PAS (a test of moderated mediation; see Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As can be seen in

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Figures 1 and 2, the effects of moral conviction on activist intentions were partially mediated through negative emotions for opponents of PAS, and were partially mediated through positive emotions for supporters of the legalization of PAS (see Figures 2 and 3).

Discussion

The results of the two studies summarized here support the hypothesis that there are strong connections between moral convictions and emotion. Supporters of the Iraq War, for example, felt strong positive emotions (pleased, glad, strong) about both the prospect and reality of the start of that war, whereas opponents had as strong or stronger

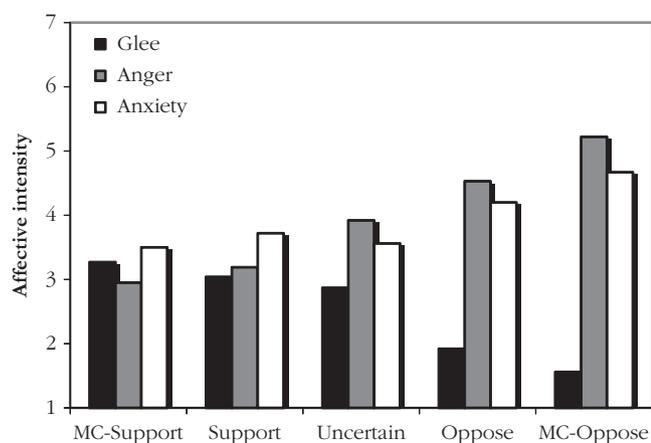


Figure 1. Affective reactions to the Iraq War as a function of attitude type, controlling for attitude strength, gender, age, education, and income.

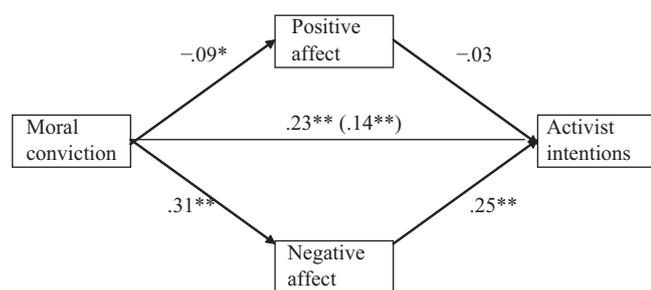


Figure 2. Path model testing affective mediation for the effects of moral conviction on activism among opponents of PAS. *Note:* Tests of the indirect effects of positive and negative affect were based on 1,000 bootstrap samples, drawn by default with replacement from the total sample of those opposed to PAS. Results of these tests indicated that the effects of opponents’ moral conviction on activist intentions were partially mediated through negative (but not positive) affective reactions to thoughts about the act of PAS.

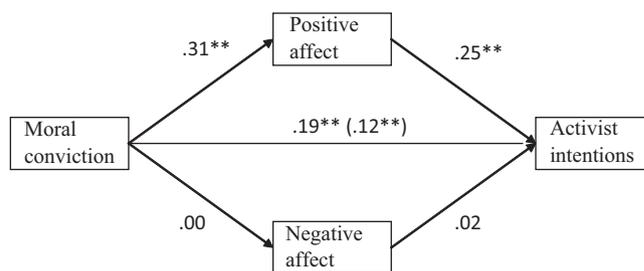


Figure 3. Path model testing affective mediation for the effects of moral conviction on activism for supporters of legalizing PAS. *Note:* Tests of the indirect effects of positive and negative affect were based on 1,000 bootstrap samples, drawn by default with replacement from the total sample of those supportive of PAS. Results of these tests indicated that the effects of supporters’ moral conviction on activist intentions were partially mediated through positive (but not negative) affective reactions to thoughts about the act of PAS.

negative emotional reactions to the war (anxiety and anger). Similarly, supporters of PAS had positive, whereas opponents had negative emotional reactions to thoughts of the act of PAS. Moreover, these emotional reactions partially mediated the effects of moral conviction about PAS on people’s reported willingness to engage in activism in support of these policy positions.

Although these results are consistent with the proposition that emotion plays an important role in informing people about whether their attitudes are moral convictions, and in explaining the motivational impact of moral convictions on behavior, it is also clear that emotion alone cannot tell the whole story. Although emotion clearly plays an important role, the fact that emotional reactions only partially mediate the effects of moral conviction suggests that other factors besides emotion, such as cognitive appraisals, are likely to play important roles as well (e.g., Greene, 2009; Lerner & Tiedens, 2006; van den Bos, 2007).

Most importantly, the results of these studies indicated that moral convictions are not just reactive responses to perceived threats or transgressions. Rather moral convictions can be proactive responses that reflect people’s desires to achieve a better world. Moral investments in policy outcomes are not just about reacting to or avoiding evil, but are also about responding to and seeking a greater good.

Note

- Disgust did not factor separately from other negative emotions in this or our other studies, even when we include multiple indices of this construct (e.g., grossed out, sickened, nauseating) and regardless of whether we include variables such as body consciousness or disgust sensitivity as moderators. Pure disgust—without other affective or informational content—does not therefore appear to be a primary or exclusive emotional foundation or consequence of moral conviction.

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