

## The Social and Political Implications of Moral Conviction

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*Scholars often assume that some issues globally evoke moral reactions, whether these issues are presented as moral dilemmas (e.g., trolley problems) or as controversial issues of the day (e.g., the legal status of abortion). There is considerable individual variation, however, in the degree that people report that their position on specific issues reflects a core moral conviction. This chapter reviews theory and research that explores the role moral conviction plays in predicting people's political thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Variance in moral conviction associated with specific issues has important social and political consequences, such as predicting increased political engagement (voting, willingness to engage in activism), inoculation against the usual pressures to obey authorities and the law, and greater acceptance of violent solutions to conflict. The normative implications of these and other findings are both reassuring (moral conviction can protect against obedience to potentially malevolent authorities) and terrifying (moral conviction is associated with rejection of the rule of law and can provide a motivational foundation for violent protest and acts of terrorism).*

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### The Social and Political Implications of Moral Conviction

Political debates are often conflicts between opposing moral visions. Consider, for example, the current debate about same-sex marriage. Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee (2013) claimed, "Much of the argument for and against gay marriage has revolved around the morality of the issue. Each side feels intensely that its position is more righteous than the other side's." Consistent with this idea, the U.S. House of Representatives explained that its 1996 decision to ban federal recognition of same-sex marriage was intended "to reflect and honor a collective moral judgment" and to express "moral disapproval of homosexuality" (U.S. House of Representatives, 1996). Proponents of same-sex marriage, in contrast, assert that it is "morally abhorrent" to discriminate against same-sex couples (Levy, 2010). People similarly invoke morality as the basis for their positions on policies as varied as gun control (McBride, 2013), abortion (McFarland, 2013), health care reform (Zeleny & Hulse, 2009), and taxation (Cohn, 2010), to name only a few.

The goal of this chapter is to review theory and research about the interplay of morality and politics. In particular, we review the now considerable body of research that distinguishes between people's strong but nonmoral attitudes and attitudes that they vest with moral conviction. We begin by reviewing the theoretical foundation, operationalization, and measurement of moral conviction.

We then review the ties between moral conviction and a number of politically relevant variables. We conclude the chapter with a discussion of the normative implications of moral conviction research as well as directions for future research.

### *Moral Conviction*

Attitudes are positive or negative evaluations of people, places, things, events, or ideas (i.e., attitude objects; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Moral conviction is a meta-cognition that people may have about a given attitude, that is, that the attitude is grounded in core beliefs about fundamental right and wrong (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Attitude researchers and theorists have historically focused on various meta-cognitions about attitude strength or structure, such as evaluative extremity, importance, certainty, and centrality, rather than attitude content. Regardless of how attitude strength is operationalized, stronger attitudes are more predictive of behavior than weaker ones (Krosnick & Petty, 1995 for a review). From the perspective of typical attitude strength research, any strong attitude should have the same implications for people's attitudinally relevant thoughts, feelings, and behavior as any other strong attitude, regardless of its content.

Skitka et al. (2005) proposed that knowing whether an attitude is held with moral conviction might bring something new to our understanding of attitudes on the one hand and politics on the other. Borrowing concepts and ideas from social domain theory (e.g., Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Turiel, 2002), and moral philosophy (e.g., Hare, 1981; Kant, 1786/1947; Mackie, 1977), they proposed several major ways that attitudes high in moral conviction (also referred to as "moral mandates") are likely to be different from otherwise strong, but nonmoral attitudes, including universalism, objectivism, and emotion, which together with more recent predictions and refinements, is referred to as the domain theory of attitudes<sup>1</sup> (Skitka, in press). In short, this theory proposes that attitudes that represent the domains of preference, normative convention, and moral imperative differ in their psychological characteristics and that these differences have implications for attitude-relevant thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

One domain of attitudes is personal preference. Personal preferences represent attitudes that people see as subject to individual discretion and as exempt from social regulation. For example, one person might support legalized abortion because she prefers to have access to a backstop method of birth control and not because of any normative or moral attachment to the issue. She is likely to think others' preferences about abortion are neither right nor wrong; they may just be different from her own. Her position on this issue might still be evaluatively extreme, personally important, certain, central, and so on, but it is not one she experiences with moral conviction. Her neighbor, however, might oppose legalized abortion because this practice is inconsistent with church doctrine or because the majority of his friends and family oppose it. If church authorities or his friends and family were to reverse their stance on abortion, the neighbor probably would as well. Attitudes that reflect these kinds of normative beliefs typically describe what "people like us" believe, are relatively narrow in application, and are usually group- or culture-bound rather than universally applied.

Yet a third person might see the issue of abortion in moral terms. This person perceives abortion (or restricting access to abortion) as simply and self-evidently wrong, even monstrously wrong, if not evil. Even if relevant authorities and peers were to reverse positions on the issue, this person would nonetheless maintain his or her moral position. In addition to having the theorized characteristic of

<sup>1</sup> Although the domain theory of attitudes borrows the categories proposed by the developmental domain theory of social judgment (Turiel, Nucci), it does not similarly adopt a top-down theoretical approach that a priori defines what "counts" as being a part of the moral domain. Instead, the domain theory of attitudes takes an empirical approach to understanding the moral domain and treats what distinguishes moral from nonmoral attitudes as an empirical question. Possible characteristics of moral convictions are therefore proposed as testable propositions rather than defining properties of how moral and nonmoral attitudes differ.

authority and peer independence, moral convictions are also likely to be perceived as objectively true, universal, and have particularly strong ties to emotion.

The proposed differences between attitudes perceived as a moral imperative, preference, or normative convention, suggest a number of provocative hypotheses and have already generated considerable research. Before turning to the specifics of these hypotheses and relevant empirical tests, however, we briefly review conceptual and methodological approaches used to study the psychology of moral conviction and the importance of studying moral conviction as a distinct construct.

### *Conceptualization and Measurement*

The idea that there may be something important about morality and politics is not new (see, for example, Frank, 2005; Haider-Markel, 1998; Hillygus & Shields, 2005; Mooney, 2001; Tatalovich & Daynes, 2011). What is relatively novel about the moral conviction program of research, however, is its empirical approach to defining morality and its level of analysis. Most previous research on morality and politics operationalizes morality at the level of issues. For example, Hillygus and Shields (2005) classified attitudes about the Iraq War and the economy as nonmoral and found that these were more important in shaping people's voting preferences in the 2004 Presidential election than presumed moral attitudes, that is, their position on abortion and same-sex marriage. This classification scheme, however, is problematic. Among other things, there is no way to be sure that people's attitudes about the Iraq War or the economy are less moralized than their attitudes about abortion or same-sex marriage without asking people the degree to which they have a moral stake in these issues. Not only are the classifications of some issues as moral and nonmoral based on normative rather than empirical foundations, this strategy masks the fact that there often is considerable variation across people in the degree to which they see a given issue—even "usual suspects" such as same-sex marriage and abortion—as something that resonates with their personal sense of morality (see for reviews Skitka, 2010; in press).

Another theoretical and empirical limitation of previous theory and research on the role of morality and politics has been the tendency to conflate morality and religion (e.g., Mooney, 2001; Mooney & Schuldt, 2008; Mooney, Transue, & Schuldt, 2009). To a considerable degree, this approach assumes that religion is the primary or sole source of people's values and conception of morality. Whether morality and religious beliefs are psychologically equivalent or identical constructs, however, is an empirical question, and one that cannot be addressed if these variables are conceptualized or operationalized as one and the same thing.

And there are good theoretical reasons to expect moral and religious convictions to be distinct constructs. For example, Kohlberg (1981) argued that religiosity and moral reasoning constitute two nonoverlapping areas of human concern. He contended that people grounded their conceptions of morality in rational arguments about justice and that cognitive development (e.g., maturation, education) and exposure to sociomoral experiences (e.g., socialization, role-taking opportunities) influenced people's sense of morality. Kohlberg maintained that religious knowledge represents the inculcated doctrine of religious authorities, whereas conceptions of morality are revelations about inherent characteristics of situations that one recognizes through experience.

Consistent with the proposition that morality and religion are distinct constructs, even though some people claim that their political attitudes on normatively "moral" issues are influenced by their religious beliefs, the vast majority of people do not (Mooney & Schuldt, 2008). There are also only weak correlations between people's self-reported moral and religious convictions about various issues, and moral and religious convictions associate quite differently with other variables, such as voting intentions or willingness to engage in activism (e.g., Morgan, Skitka, & Wisneski, 2010; Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009; Wisneski, Lytle, & Skitka, 2009). Research investigating the connections between morality and politics should therefore measure rather than assume people see

various issues as moral and should be careful not to confound measurement of moral conviction with other constructs, such as religiosity or religious conviction, or (as we elaborate in a moment) indices of attitude strength.

### *Operationalization*

Moral conviction is generally measured by relying on very straightforward and face-valid measures. Although people may sometimes think through issues carefully and judge right and wrong based on reasoning, recent research indicates that people instead can identify whether something is moral or immoral, right or wrong, based on strong, intuitive, and visceral reactions to stimuli (Haidt, 2001; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005), and they persist in labeling some behaviors as morally wrong even when they cannot articulate reasons for why it is wrong (e.g., eating the family dog after it is killed by a car; see Haidt et al., 1993). In other words, people may not be as adept at explaining why they perceive a particular attitude as reflecting their moral beliefs as they are at recognizing whether a given attitude is a moral one. Building on this logic, most moral-conviction researchers favor a measurement approach that directly asks people whether their attitudes or choices are moral, and they avoid using normative or top-down theories to explain what should “count” as a moralized position.

For example, Hornsey and colleagues (Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003; Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007) operationalized moral conviction using three items prefaced with the stem, “To what extent do you feel your position . . .” and the completions, “is based on strong personal principles,” “is a moral stance,” and “is morally correct,” (average Cronbach’s alpha = .75 across three studies). Other researchers have used similar operationalizations, typically using either a single face-valid item (“How much are your feelings about X connected to your core moral beliefs and convictions?” e.g., Brandt & Wetherell, 2012; Skitka et al., 2005), this item paired with the item, “To what extent are your feelings about X deeply connected to your fundamental beliefs about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?” (e.g., Skitka et al., 2009; Skitka & Wisneski, 2011; Swink, 2011), or these two items paired with an item assessing the degree to which an opinion is “based on moral principle” (Ryan, 2013, Study 1, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging between .90 and .93 across five issues). Morgan (2011) used a combination of the Hornsey et al. (2003, 2007) and Skitka et al. (2009) items to create a single and highly reliable scale measuring moral conviction (alphas ranged from .93 to .99 across three samples).

Some have wondered whether the simple categorization of an attitude as moral captures moral conviction better than conceptualizing moral conviction in terms of strength or degree (e.g., Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). In other words, moral conviction might be better conceived of as a nominal than a continuous variable. The results of several studies, however, reveal that knowing the strength of moral conviction, and not just the classification of an attitude as moral, explains unique variance in downstream variables (Wright et al., 2008).

Researchers have sometimes studied moral conviction using operationalizations that are problematic. These operationalizations 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; Zaal, van Laar, Ståhl, Ellemers, & Derks, 2011), use items that have no explicit references to morality (e.g., “X threatens values that are important to me”; Siegrist, Connor, & Keller, 2012), conflate moral conviction with other dimensions of attitude strength (e.g., centrality, Garguilo, 2010), and/or measure other constructs as proxies for moral conviction, such as attitude importance or centrality (e.g., Besley, 2012; Earle & Siegrist, 2008). These strategies introduce a host of possible confounds and obscure rather than clarify the unique contribution of moral conviction independent of other characteristics of attitudes. Attitude importance and centrality, for example, have very different associations with other relevant variables

than those observed with unconfounded measures of moral conviction (e.g., including effects that are the reverse sign of moral conviction items; e.g., Skitka et al., 2005). To avoid these problems, we encourage researchers to use items that (1) explicitly assess moral content, (2) do not introduce confounds that capture either the things moral conviction should theoretically predict (e.g., perceived universalism) or other dimensions of attitude strength (importance, certainty, or centrality) and (3) avoid using attitude strength indices or other variables (e.g., religiosity) as proxies for moral conviction.

There has now been considerable research that has investigated the construct validity of moral conviction, and most importantly, whether there is something value-added about knowing whether an attitude is one held with strong moral conviction above knowing whether an attitude is strong, partisan, and so on. Put simply, there is. Moral conviction does not reduce to attitude extremity, importance, certainty, or centrality (e.g., Ryan, 2013; Skitka et al., 2005), religious conviction or generalized religiosity (e.g., Morgan et al., 2010; Skitka et al., 2009; Wisneski et al., 2009), or strength of partisanship (e.g., Skitka & Bauman, 2008), to name only a few examined alternative explanations for moral conviction effects.

We turn next to a review of research that tests some of the defining characteristics of attitudes held with moral conviction (e.g., they are perceived as more objectively and universally true than other kinds of attitudes) and to research that reveals the important connections between people's moral convictions and their political thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

### *Objectivism and Universalism*

One of the most important ways that attitudes rooted in moral conviction theoretically differ from other attitudes is that people perceive their moral beliefs to be objectively and universally true. In other words, people do not accept or expect that their conceptions of morality are or should be contextually contingent or situationally variable, and they are offended at the very idea that morality could be relative (e.g., Darwell, 1998; Pope, 2013; Simpson, 1974; Smith, 1994). Even philosophers who reject the idea of moral objectivism (e.g., Mackie, 1977) nonetheless accept that people's commitment to the idea that there are objective moral truths is absolutely central to folk metaethics (i.e., the way real people in the real world experience morality).

Because beliefs rooted in moral conviction are perceived as objectively true, they should also be perceived as universally applicable. Someone who understands the fact of gravity, for example, would expect that any stone dropped into a well would fall regardless of whether the well is in Chicago or Timbuktu. Similarly, when people have a moral conviction that X is wrong, they should expect it to be similarly wrong regardless of context.

To test the objectivism and universalism hypotheses, Morgan, Skitka, and Lytle (under review) measured participants' endorsements of a universalistic moral philosophy, their positions on the issue of legalized abortion, and moral conviction about abortion at least 24 hours before an experimental session. Later in the lab, participants were primed to think about abortion by writing an essay explaining their position on abortion, which they thought would be shared with "another participant," and subsequently read the "other participant's" pro-choice or pro-life essay (essays were modeled after real participants' essays on this topic). After reading the essay, participants completed the same universalistic moral-philosophy measure they had completed at pretest. Strength of moral conviction about abortion was associated with increased postexperimental endorsement of a universalistic moral philosophy, regardless of whether participants read an essay that affirmed or threatened their own position on the topic. In other words, people see moral rules in general as more universally applicable when an attitude held with moral conviction is brought to mind.

The universalism and objectivism hypotheses were further tested by asking research participants the degree to which their attitudes about a number of issues (e.g., legalized abortion, same-sex

marriage, mandatory administration of the HPV vaccine to girls in middle school) reflected moral convictions at least 48 hours before they reported the degree to which they perceived their position on each issue as universally generalizable (e.g., that this position would be correct in another country, or in a different culture) and factually true (e.g., Imagine someone disagreed with your position on X. To what extent would you conclude the other person is surely mistaken?). Stronger moral convictions about these issues was associated with greater perceived objectivity and universal generalizability of them, results that held even when controlling for attitude strength (Morgan et al., under review, Study 3).

Finally, in another study, participants were asked to nominate a claim that represented an example of a preference (a like or dislike), moral imperative, or piece of scientific knowledge (Morgan et al., under review). A manipulation check confirmed that self-nominated moral claims were rated as higher in moral conviction than nominated preferences or scientific facts. Moreover, self-generated moral and scientific claims were perceived as similarly and more objectively true and universally generalizable than nominated preferences.

In summary, these studies support that a key way that attitudes held with moral conviction differ from otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes is that the former are perceived to be more objectively true and universally applicable than the latter. These characteristics of moral attitudes have a number of important implications for people's political thoughts, feelings, and behavior. As we will describe in more detail below, variance in moral conviction predicts (1) higher levels of political engagement relevant to that issue (e.g., cause-related activism, voting, and voting intentions), (2) greater social intolerance, and in some contexts, greater political intolerance of attitude dissimilarity, (3) greater inability to generate procedural solutions to resolve disagreements about moral issues, (4) greater distrust of otherwise legitimate authorities, such as the U.S. Supreme Court, to get the issue "right," (5) rejection of nonpreferred decisions and policy outcomes, regardless of whether they are associated with exemplary fair or legitimate procedures and authorities, and (6) greater acceptance of vigilantism and violence to achieve morally preferred ends.

### *Political Engagement*

Knowing whether an attitude is held with strong moral conviction should increase one's ability to predict behavior and behavioral intentions, including political engagement and activism. In support of this hypothesis, stronger moral convictions about salient issues or political candidates predicts voting intentions and behavior, a result that has been replicated across three Presidential election cycles in the United States (Morgan et al., 2010; Skitka & Bauman, 2008) and one Prime Minister election in Canada (Conway, Cheung, Maxwell-Smith, & Seligman, under review). Moreover, the predictive effect of moral conviction on voting intentions and behavior are robust even when controlling for strength of candidate preference and partisanship.

Moral conviction is also a strong predictor of people's willingness to engage in different kinds of activism. Several studies have found evidence that moral convictions about various causes, such as tuition increases (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012, Study 1), the use of genetically modified meat in consumer products (van Zomeren et al., 2012, Study 2), gender discrimination (Zaal et al., 2011), unionization and strike votes (Morgan, 2011 Studies 1 and 2), and mandatory testing as a university graduation requirement (Morgan, 2011, Study 3) predict people's willingness to engage in activism.

### *Authority Independence*

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 rules, procedures, and authority dictates,

than from the rules, procedures, or authorities themselves (Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008; see also Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Moral beliefs are not by definition antiestablishment or antiauthority; they just are not dependent on establishment, convention, rules, or authorities. Instead, when people take a moral perspective, they focus more on their ideals and the way they believe things “ought” or “should” be done than on a duty to comply with authorities. Therefore, when people have a moral stake in a decision, we predict that their fairness reasoning and compliance is less likely to be based on authorities’ and institutions’ legitimacy and more likely to be based on their moral beliefs about right or wrong.

One study tested the authority independence in the context of people’s reactions to a Supreme Court case (*Gonzales vs. Oregon*) that upheld state’s ability to decide whether to legalize physician-assisted suicide. A nationally representative sample in the United States completed measures several weeks before the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in this case and then again after the Court rendered its decision. People’s moral conviction about physician-assisted suicide, and not their predecision perceptions of the Supreme Court’s legitimacy and fairness, emerged as the strongest predictor of whether they perceived the decision to be fair and whether they accepted it as binding, even when controlling for the degree to which people’s attitudes on the issue was based on religious conviction. 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, and morally convicted opponents perceived the reverse. Moreover, people’s perceptions of the legitimacy of the Supreme Court rose or fell as a function of whether it ruled consistently with people’s morally convicted outcome preferences. Evidence in the support of the authority-independence hypothesis was also found in a longitudinal investigation of people’s reactions to the Elián González custody case and his return to Cuba (Skitka & Mullen, 2002a), in reaction to a range of hypothetical U.S. Supreme Court decisions (Skitka, 2002), and other contexts (e.g., Skitka & Houston, 2001).

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 postexposure 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 authorities and institutional systems that decide these things, 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.

### *Means Versus Ends*

When people have moral certainty about what outcome authorities and institutions should deliver, they do not need to rely on standing perceptions of fairness or legitimacy as a proxy to judge the fairness of the system. In these cases, they can simply evaluate whether authorities get it “right.” “Right” decisions indicate that authorities and institutions are appropriate and work as they should. “Wrong” answers signal that the system is somehow broken and is not working as it should. In short, another domain theory of attitudes hypothesis is that people use their sense of morality as a benchmark to assess outcome and procedural fairness, as well as the basic legitimacy of the system (the litmus-test hypothesis; Skitka et al., 2009).

In one test of the litmus-test hypothesis, participants were given an opportunity to earn a \$30 bonus that they could donate to a charity of their choice. All participants were informed that their group earned the bonus and that one group member had been randomly selected to decide which charity should get the bonus. Half the participants were given an opportunity to share their view

about which charity should get the bonus money with the decision maker (the high procedural-fairness condition), whereas the other half were not (the low procedural-fairness condition). All participants also received programmed feedback that the “allocator” had chosen to donate the bonus to the “Prolife Action League,” and read a message that said, “i [sic] chose this group b/c they organize protests against abortion.” Morally convicted pro-life participants perceived the outcome and the procedures used to decide the charity as more fair than morally convicted pro-choice participants (who no doubt objected to the choice of charity). Moreover, the fairness of the procedures used to decide the charity did not soften the blow for pro-choice participants, who saw the outcome as similarly unfair, regardless of whether they had voice in the process. In other words, even though participants perceived having voice as more fair than not having voice in the decision, whether the process was fair did not affect participants’ perceptions of the fairness of the decision to give the money to the pro-life charity (Bauman & Skitka, 2009, Study 1).

In a second study, participants in one condition were told that “The anonymous comments and responses you provide in this survey will be sent to your congressional and senatorial representatives, to the U.S. Supreme Court Justices, and the President, to ensure you have some voice in how these decisions are made.” The other half of the participants did not receive this information. Participants considered one of two outcomes: Half were asked to imagine that the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, making abortion illegal in the United States. The other half were asked to imagine that the Supreme Court reaffirmed its support for *Roe v. Wade*, keeping abortion legal and solidifying its legal foundation. Participants subsequently rated the fairness of the decision outcome and the procedural fairness of the Supreme Court. Results indicated that voice only affected perceptions of fairness when moral conviction was low and had no effect on outcome or procedural fairness judgments when moral conviction was high. In support of hypotheses, the only thing that mattered to those with strong moral conviction was whether the Court got it “right.” Whether the Court got it “right” also affected participants’ subsequent perceptions of the procedural fairness of the court—it was seen as more procedurally fair when it yielded a morally preferred decision (Bauman & Skitka, 2009, Study 2).

Taken together these studies and others (e.g., Skitka, 2002; Skitka & Mullen, 2002a; Skitka et al., 2009) provide consistent support for the litmus-test hypothesis. When people have strong moral conviction about what outcome procedures and authorities should deliver, they do not appear to care about factors that usually lead to higher perceptions of procedural fairness and acceptance of authorities’ decisions. Instead, they care more that processes and authorities deliver the “right” decision or outcome than whether they arrive at it through fair means. Morality is imperative; justice is normative and negotiable. Therefore, when morality and justice norms come into conflict, there is no contest: Because people’s moral beliefs and convictions are perceived as psychological universals and matters of objective truth, morality overrides justice.

### *Peer Independence*

Moral conviction not only inoculates people from authority influence but from peer influence as well. People typically conform to the majority when faced with the choice to accept or reject the majority position. This occurs because those who oppose the majority risk ridicule and disenfranchisement, whereas those who conform expect acceptance (Asch, 1956). In addition, people may conform when they are unsure about the appropriate way to think or behave; they adopt the majority opinion because they believe the majority is likely to be correct (Chaiken & Stangor, 1987; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Therefore people conform both to gain acceptance from others as well as to be “right.”

Feeling moral conviction about a given issue should weaken the typical motives for conformity and therefore make people more resistant to majority influence, in part because people should be less



concerned about being liked by those who do not share their moral beliefs, and because when people do have moral convictions, they believe they know the right “answer” to the question. To test this idea, Hornsey and colleagues presented student participants with feedback that their position on same-sex marriage was either the majority or minority view on campus. Surprisingly, stronger moral conviction about this issue was associated with greater willingness to engage in activism when students believed they were in the opinion minority, rather than majority—an example of counter conformity (Hornsey et al., 2003, 2007).

Another study had participants engage in what they believed was a computer-mediated interaction with four additional (though, in fact, virtual) “peers” (Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, 2012). All participants were pretested for their positions on the use of torture in interrogations of suspected terrorists, and only those opposed to the use of torture (the majority of the subject population used for this study) were recruited to participate in the lab portion of the study. The study was scripted so that each participant was exposed to a majority of peers who supported torture. Participants were told that they would engage in a computer-mediated get-to-know-you exercise. During this exercise, they were asked to share their opinions about the use of torture against suspected terrorists with the group one at a time. Participants were always prompted to share their opinion last, after the other four “participants” revealed their opinions and they had been shown to the group. Results supported the hypothesis: Stronger moral conviction was associated with lower conformity rates, even when controlling for a number of indices of attitude strength (Aramovich et al., 2010). In summary, moral conviction not only inoculates people from pressures to accept authority dictates or the rule of law, it also inoculates people against even the very powerful effects of majority influence.

### *Social and Political Intolerance*

Moral conviction not only insulates people from peer influence from those who disagree, it also leads people to avoid attitudinally dissimilar others altogether. People do not want to work with, live near, or even shop at a store owned by someone who does not share their moral opinions. For example, in one study, participants from a community sample nominated the most important issue facing the United States today (Skitka et al., 2005, Study 1). They then rated the degree to which they would be happy to have someone who disagreed with them about that issue in a number of different social roles, such as a neighbor, a friend, someone who married into their family, a teacher of their children, and so forth. Even when controlling for a host of attitude strength measures, the degree to which people felt strong moral conviction about their nominated issue predicted greater intolerance of those with a different point of view. Similar results emerged in other closely related studies that tested hypotheses across a host of different issues (e.g., Skitka et al., 2005 Study 2; Wright et al., 2008), that tested whether similar effects emerged in another cultural context, specifically mainland China (e.g., Skitka, Liu, Yang, Chen, Liu, & Xu, 2012), and in laboratory studies that tested whether people similarly maintain greater physical distance from those with whom they morally disagree (Skitka et al., 2005, Study 3; Wright et al., 2008). The results of all these studies converged on the conclusion that people want to keep distance between themselves and those who do not share their morally convicted point of view.

Other research tested the degree to which moral conviction leads people to not only be socially intolerant but politically intolerant as well. Although people in the United States and Mainland China are equally socially intolerant of those who do not share their moral convictions, moral conviction does not predict political intolerance similarly across these cultural contexts. Moral conviction predicts greater willingness to withhold political freedoms from those with different points of view in China, but not the United States (Skitka et al., 2012). These results reveal one possible boundary condition on the association between moral conviction and intolerance. It may be the case that

cultures can create conditions such that a commitment to a higher moral ideal, such as political tolerance, that can overwhelm people's distaste for those who do not share their other cherished moral beliefs.

### *Conflict Management*

As this review indicates, people do not like to associate with those who do not share their moral points of view, and they distrust authority and institutional procedures to get these issues "right." Together, these findings suggest that people will similarly find it difficult to negotiate procedural solutions to conflict when they have a moral stake in the outcome. To test this idea, Skitka et al. (2005) asked small groups to negotiate a procedure to resolve a conflict about an assigned issue (i.e., the legal status of abortion, the death penalty, or mandatory testing as a university graduation requirement). Participants were pretested to assess their attitudes about and degree of moral conviction for each issue. Participants were then recruited to the laboratory portion of the experiment in four-person groups that were either attitudinally homogenous (all group members had the same position on the topic) or attitudinally heterogeneous (groups members were two supporters and two opponents). Some groups were assigned to discuss a morally mandated topic, others were assigned to discuss a nonmorally mandated topic, and others discussed a topic for which they had a strong but nonmoral position (all groups that discussed mandatory testing fell into this latter category). Group discussion ended when the group unanimously agreed on a procedure, unanimously agreed that they would never come to consensus about a procedure, or after 30 minutes.

Moral conviction had a profound effect on group dynamics and whether the group came to consensus about a procedure to resolve their assigned issue. Compared to all other groups, members of attitudinally heterogeneous groups that discussed a morally mandated topic reported the lowest levels of cooperativeness and good will toward their fellow group members. Participants in attitudinally heterogeneous and morally mandated groups were also rated by third-party judges (who were blind to condition) as the most tense and defensive. Moreover, groups with members who were morally convicted about the target issue (regardless of whether the group was homogeneous or heterogeneous) were least likely to come to consensus on a procedure to resolve it. In contrast, attitudinally heterogeneous groups that discussed mandatory testing (the strong but nonmoral attitude condition) were the most likely to come to consensus. These effects emerged despite the fact that no groups were informed about other group members' attitudes prior to the exercise. Although all group members eventually disclosed their positions on their assigned issues, those in the attitudinally heterogeneous morally mandated groups took the longest time to do so.

By way of contrast, the groups that discussed procedures to resolve something they felt strongly—but not morally—about reported the greatest degree of cooperation and good will and were also seen by third-party observers as the least tense and defensive of all the groups. Attitude dissimilarity therefore appears to be interesting and even fun when people feel strongly but do not have any particular moral conviction about the issue under consideration. In contrast, attitude dissimilarity is stressful and difficult when people bring competing moral convictions to the negotiation table (Skitka et al., 2005). People not only do not like morally objectionable policies or decisions: They do not trust democratic processes to decide these issues in the first place (see also Wisneski et al., 2009).

### *Violence*

The finding that people reject legitimate authorities and established procedures that fail to deliver morally "correct" outcomes suggests that people may be willing to step outside of usual normative boundaries against violence or vigilantism in the name of their moral beliefs. Even

nonnormative and extreme means may be justified if it achieves a morally mandated end. Consistent with this idea, people who had a strong moral conviction that a defendant in a criminal case should be convicted or acquitted rated the death of the defendant as equally just or unjust, respectively, regardless of whether he died as the result of vigilantism or due process of law (i.e., he was legally executed). Participants only rated due process as more just than vigilante justice when they did not have a moral conviction about the defendant's guilt or innocence (Skitka & Houston, 2001). In a similar vein, people higher in moral conviction about gender-pay equity reported support for various forms of illegal forms protest in the name of this cause, including sabotage and violence (e.g., Zaal et al., 2011).

In summary, although moral conviction motivates any number of normatively positive behaviors (e.g., voting, political engagement), moral conviction appears to also have a potential dark side (see also Skitka & Morgan, 2009; Skitka & Mullen, 2002b). The terrorist attacks on 9/11, the Weatherman bombings in protest of the Vietnam War, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, or the assassination of abortion providers, may be motivated by different ideological beliefs but nonetheless share a common theme: The people who did these things appear to be motivated by strong moral conviction. Although some argue that engaging in behaviors like these requires moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), we find instead that they require maximum moral engagement and justification.

### *Emotion*

The domain theory of attitudes also makes the prediction that moral convictions should have especially strong ties to emotion. People should respond more emotionally to policies that have moral implications, and emotions may also play a key role in how people detect that an attitude is a moral conviction.

People do use emotions as information when making moral judgments. People make harsher moral judgments, for example, when they are in a dirty lab room or when exposed to foul odors than they do when they are in a clean lab room or exposed to pleasant odors (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008). One might, therefore, argue that people might similarly generalize emotional reactions and moralize attitudes more strongly after exposure to disgust cues as well. That said, there are some important distinctions between moral judgments and moral attitudes. Unlike judgments, attitudes tend to be stable, internalized, and treated and experienced much like possessions (Prentice, 1987). Many attitudes, especially strong attitudes, are linked with other cognitive elements in memory, such as other attitudes, personal values and goals, and concepts of self (a phenomena known as embeddedness; e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993 Pomerantz et al., 1995) that makes them relatively invulnerable to context effects (Lavine, Huff, Wagner, & Sweeney, 1998). Unlike moral mandates, moral judgments tend to be single-shot reactions to a given behavior, actor, or hypothetical that are easily influenced by even small changes in context cues (e.g., Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Liu & Ditto, 2012).

Consistent with these distinctions between judgments and attitudes, there is little evidence that moral convictions are affected by incidental affect (Skitka, unpublished data). For example, we have manipulated whether data is collected in a clean versus dirty lab; in the context of pleasant versus disgusting smells; when participants have had their hands and forearms placed in an unpleasant concoction of glue and gummy worms versus feathers and beads; and having participants write retrospective accounts of times they have felt anger, happy, sad, or disgusted. Although manipulation checks supported that each of these manipulations successfully affected people affective states, none of them led to changes in moral conviction.

One possible explanation for these null results is that integral (i.e., attitude-specific) emotions tied to the attitude object itself may be trumping the potential informational influence of incidental emotions. Once a moral conviction comes to mind, so too might all the emotional associations with

it, which could overwhelm and replace incidental affect in people's current working memory. Attitude-specific emotions might therefore play a more important role than incidental emotions in how people identify whether a given attitude is one held with moral conviction.

To test this idea, participants were exposed to one of four categories of pictures as part of a bogus "recognition task." The images varied in relevance to the issue of abortion: pictures of aborted fetuses (attitudinally relevant disgust/harm); animal rights abuses (attitudinally irrelevant disgust/harm); pictures of nonbloody, disgusting images, such as toilets overflowing with feces (attitudinally irrelevant disgust, no harm); or neutral photos (e.g., office furniture; no disgust/harm). Pictures were presented at either subliminally (14 *msecs*) or supraliminally (250 *msecs*). Participants' moral conviction about abortion increased relative to control *only* after supraliminal exposure to the abortion pictures. Moreover, this effect was unique to moral conviction and was not observed with attitude importance. A second study replicated this effect and tested whether it was mediated by disgust, anger, or perceived harm. The effect was fully mediated by disgust (Wisneski & Skitka, 2013). Taken together, these results suggest that emotions play a key role in how people form or strengthen moral convictions, but these processes—although fast—nonetheless require some conscious processing.

In summary, it is clear that moral convictions have ties to integral emotion. The relationship between emotions and moral convictions, however, appears to be complex. Future research needs to manipulate other kinds of integral emotions, including positive emotions, to discover whether other emotional cues can also cause changes in moral conviction. Emotions not only serve as an antecedent to moral convictions, but also appear to be consequences of them as well (e.g., Skitka & Wisneski, 2011). Although more research is needed to further tease apart the complex connections between moral convictions and emotions, one thing is clear: Emotions are clearly a key part of the story.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

Research to date has revealed considerable insight into the psychology of moral conviction. Knowing the degree to which an attitude is a moral conviction predicts a wide range of social and political phenomena and has the potential to contribute to our understanding of especially deep and entrenched political conflict. When people think their positions on issues of the day are based in something they experience as akin to a fact, they are very unlikely to be moved on the issue, much less compromise. It will be important in future research to therefore study not only how attitudes become moralized, but also how they can be demoralized.

There are a number of approaches that could be fruitfully taken here, including developmental research that examines the degree to which moralized attitudes are shaped by family socialization, and at what stage of development these kinds of attitudes begin to develop; longitudinal research that examines what predicts attitude moralization and demoralization over time, such as over an election cycle; as well as experimental studies that test factors that could lead to increased attitude moralization, for example, by exposing participants to various persuasive arguments that emphasize concepts thought to be closely tied or foundational to psychological conceptions of morality.

Understanding the motivational underpinnings of moral conviction will also be an interesting area for future research. Recent theorizing in moral psychology, for example, argues that there are two forms of moral regulation—a proscriptive motivation oriented toward avoidance of harm and a prescriptive motivation oriented toward promoting the good or ideal (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). Moral motives theory also predicts that liberals' and conservatives' moral motivations differ. Liberals tend to be prescriptively, whereas conservatives are proscriptively, motivated. Although a recent meta-analysis reveals no evidence of ideological differences in the tendency to report that attitudes across a wide range of issues reflect moral conviction

(Morgan, Skitka, Tagar, & Halperin, 2012), it may nonetheless be the case that there are ideological differences how and why moral conviction motivates liberals' and conservatives' behavior.

### Conclusion

U.S. President Ronald Reagan once declared, "Politics and morality are inseparable. . . ." (Gailey, 1984), a claim consistent with the wide-reaching political implications of attitudes held with moral conviction reviewed in this chapter. Among other things, moral convictions are perceived as akin to facts about the world and as positions that should be universally adopted. The social and political implications of moral conviction are on the one hand, potentially reassuring, but on the other, starkly frightening. For example, one way to interpret these results is in terms of moral courage and people's willingness to stand up for what they believe is morally right. Moral conviction can act as a check and balance against mindless and potentially destructive obedience, and principled convictions are generally seen as signs of strength of character and essential components of good citizenship and leadership. Moral conviction is certainly implicated in and motivates people's willingness to fight for a more just and humane society, even when it is costly to do so (e.g., when it requires going against majority opinion or current law) and otherwise facilitates political and civic engagement.

Although one can identify how moral conviction can be seen as a normative good, one can also look at the psychology of moral conviction through a more negative lens. Moral conviction is also associated with increased intolerance of political differences, difficulty in negotiating procedural solutions to conflict, and blindness to due process and the rule of law. Moral conviction can also fuel backlash against the legitimacy of political systems and authorities and is associated with greater acceptance of any means—including violence—to achieve preferred ends. It is not difficult to make the leap to the conclusion that moral conviction is a contributor to many of the world's greatest ills, including acts of terrorism, genocide, and war. The deep importance and complexity of these different positive and negative implications underscores the importance of continued theory and research designed to understand the psychology of moral conviction.

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