

Running Head: MORAL CONVICTION

In the Mind of the Perceiver: Psychological Implications of Moral Conviction

Christopher W. Bauman¹ and Linda J. Skitka²

¹ Corresponding author: Department of Management and Organization, Michael G. Foster School of Business, University of Washington, Box 353200, Seattle, WA 98195

² Department of Psychology (m/c 285), University of Illinois at Chicago, 1007 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607-7137

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Abstract

Moral conviction is a subjective assessment that one's attitude about a specific issue or situation is associated with one's core moral beliefs and fundamental sense of right or wrong. A growing body of research demonstrates that level of moral conviction reliably predicts changes in the way people think, feel, and act in situations, irrespective of whether that situation fits normative definitions of morality. Therefore, it is important to measure whether and how much individuals perceive a given situation to be moral rather than assert that a situation is moral based on philosophical criteria. This chapter compares and contrasts moral conviction and moral judgment research and argues that both approaches are necessary to develop a complete science of morality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there has been a strong resurgence of academic interest in morality. Researchers from a variety of disciplines now share an area of inquiry that philosophers and developmental psychologists dominated for a long time. This new diversity of interest in the science of morality is important because scholars' backgrounds affect both the way they formulate questions and what information they perceive to be relevant to them (Kuhn, 1962). Therefore, interdisciplinary dialogue can help identify issues that previously were either shrouded by any one set of assumptions or perceived to be untestable due to limitations of the methods any one discipline tends to use. In the case of morality, work completed over the last several years has shed new empirical light on enduring questions and has unearthed a host of fresh avenues to explore. For example, recent theoretical and methodological advances have helped reinvigorate debates over the roles of reason and emotion (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) and how people weigh means and ends (e.g., Bartels, in press; Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Skitka & Houston, 2001) when making moral decisions. Perhaps most important, researchers have begun to develop sophisticated theoretical approaches to morality that integrate previously disparate positions on these longstanding debates and explain how they can be incorporated into a single framework (e.g., Krebs, 2008; Moll, Zahn, de Oliveira-Souza, Krueger, & Grafman, 2005; Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007).

Moral judgment, however, represents only one area within the broader field of morality research that could benefit from the cross-pollination of ideas. Psychological questions about morality address "the mental states and processes associated with human classification of

good/bad” (Shweder, 2002, p. 6). Research on moral judgment has significantly advanced knowledge about the processes that drive decisions about right and wrong. Much less is known, however, about the mental states that accompany recognition that a particular action has moral significance. The purpose of this chapter is to review a distinct approach to examining moral phenomena that represents a considerable departure from the moral judgment tradition. Rather than attempting to determine how people decide whether something is right or wrong, our program of research seeks to identify the antecedents and consequences of individuals’ perceptions that something has moral implications. Building on social psychological research on attitudes, we wish to better understand the cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies associated with moral conviction.

The remainder of the chapter is divided into three major sections. In Section 2, we define what we mean by moral conviction and provide a brief overview of research that has informed our view of the construct. In Section 3, we compare and contrast moral conviction research with trends in moral judgment research by discussing four key differences between the approaches. Finally, in Section 4, we present some of our recent research that addresses the function of moral conviction.

2. WHAT IS MORAL CONVICTION?

Our research centers on the psychological experience of moral conviction, that is, the subjective belief that something is fundamentally right or wrong. People perceive the attitudes they hold with strong moral conviction to be *sui generis*, or unique, special, and in a class of their own (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; see also Boyd, 1988; Moore, 1903; Sturgeon, 1985). In this sense, the moral conviction approach is consistent with the domain theory of social cognitive development, which postulates that people act and reason differently as a function of

whether a given situation is personal, conventional, or moral (e.g., Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983). According to the theory, personal preferences are subject to individual discretion and are not socially regulated. For example, Donald Trump and Don King are entitled to choose their hairstyle, regardless of what anyone else might think of their choices. Conventions include norms and cultural standards that a social group generally endorses. Conventions apply to group members, but variability across groups is tolerated. For example, people in Japan, Great Britain, and several former British colonies drive on the left side of the road, whereas most of the rest of the world drives on the right. Although it is important to abide by these norms while driving in a particular country, the standard itself is arbitrary, and variability across cultures is well-tolerated. Morals, in contrast, consist of standards that people believe everyone ought to both endorse and obey. Morals represent basic rules of interpersonal conduct, or beliefs that there are some things that people just should not do to each other. For example, people should not physically harm another individual without extreme provocation. In sum, people apply different social rules to different types of situations, and morals represent an exclusive set that is the most psychologically imperative.

Although the moral conviction approach shares the view that people parse their social world into segments that include different sets of rules and consequences, they differ in regard to what defines morality. According to Turiel (1983), morality represents ideas about human welfare, justice, and rights. The moral conviction approach refuses to commit *a priori* to a theoretical definition of morality beyond suggesting that people can recognize a moral sentiment or conviction when they experience one. Whether this recognition always is associated with conceptions of human welfare, justice, and rights is open to empirical question and test. For example, it is likely that people's recognition that something is a moral conviction not only

comprises concerns about harm and fairness, but also duty, purity, and potentially other sources as well (e.g., Haidt, & Graham, 2007; Shweder, Much, Mhapatra, & Park, 1997). Moreover, the boundaries of moral conviction may extend beyond concerns about human welfare and also encompass concerns about the environment, animals, and so on (e.g., Clayton & Opatow, 1994). Irrespective of what factors elicit moral conviction, however, people perceive their morals to apply more universally than conventions or preferences, and they are likely to be intolerant of those who do not share their moral convictions (Bauman, 2006; Skitka et al., 2005; see also Gwirth, 1978; Hare, 1981; Kant, 1959/1785).

In summary, one way to study morality is to take an empirical approach to defining what constitutes the moral realm. Although we have a number of hypotheses about what leads people to recognize that a given attitude is connected to their sense of morality, these hypotheses are open to empirical investigation.

2.1 Psychological Characteristics Associated with Moral Conviction

The moral conviction approach posits that people confronted with moral issues typically expect that the critical features of the situation (i.e., those that are salient in their own minds) are obvious and support only one possible interpretation. In other words, people experience morals as if they were readily observable, objective properties of situations, or as facts about the world (Skitka et al., 2005; see also Goodwin & Darley, 2008). Unlike facts, however, morals carry prescriptive force. Reactions to facts typically are static, but moral judgments both motivate and justify consequent behaviors (a Humean paradox; Gwirth, 1978; Mackie, 1977; Smith, 1994). Moreover, the moral conviction approach proposes that emotions play a prominent role in how people conceptualize and react to moral stimuli. Morals are inherently linked to strong emotions that both guide cognitive processing and prompt action (Haidt, 2001, 2003; Kohlberg, 1984;

Nucci, 2001; Shweder, 2002). Non-moral issues may be associated with affect, but the magnitude (if not also the type) of affect that accompanies moral and non-moral judgments differs (e.g., Arsenio, 1988; Arsenio & Lover, 1995). For example, consider someone who strongly prefers Apple over Microsoft operating systems and has a strong moral conviction that child labor is wrong. This person's reaction to witnessing someone else boot Windows Vista is likely to be mild in comparison to the reaction to even the thought of sweatshops.

An essential feature of the moral conviction approach that differentiates it from many other approaches to studying morality is that it classifies stimuli as moral or non-moral as a function of individuals' perceptions of situations rather than according to characteristics of the situations or stimuli themselves. Moral conviction is a psychological state that resides in the mind of perceivers. The amount of moral conviction an individual experiences in a given situation is a joint function of the person and the situation. That is, one situation may be more or less likely than other situations to trigger moral conviction across individuals, but whether a specific person experiences moral conviction in a given situation depends not only on aspects of the situation, but also the person's disposition, encoding tendencies, competencies, and prior experiences, among other things (cf. Bandura, 1986; Cervone, 2004; Mischel, 1973). In short, people's psychological reality does not necessarily correspond to theoretical definitions of morality that classify situations as moral or non-moral³.

Empirical investigations of moral conviction rely on one important assumption; they assume that people are able to identify and accurately report the extent to which they associate a given action or belief with their personal conceptualization of morality. That is, when it comes to their own moral sentiments, people know when they are activated. For example, issues such as

³ This statement is not intended to represent our stance on meta-ethical issues (e.g., moral realism, cognitivism, nativism). We simply wish to explain why the moral conviction approach uses this particular empirical strategy.

pre-marital sex, drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or the Terry Schiavo case⁴ may or may not strike a chord with individuals' personal moral belief systems. However, one can directly assess the extent that a given issue engages moral conviction and then use those responses to classify whether situations are or are not moral for a specific individual. Although there are reasons to be skeptical about whether people are able to introspect and consciously access *why* they have a particular moral conviction (Haidt, 2001; Hauser, Cushman, Young, Jin, & Mikhail, 2007), people seem quite capable of identifying *whether* they perceive something to have moral implications. Consistent with this idea, moral conviction research routinely reveals differences in the way that people think about and act toward others as a function of how much they associate a given stimulus with their moral beliefs (for a review see Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008). In short, variability in self-assessments of moral convictions predicts people's subsequent judgment and behavior.

2.2 Examples of Moral Conviction

To illustrate the moral conviction approach, consider the ongoing debate over whether abortion should be legal in the United States. We have studied people's attitudes about abortion extensively, and our data always include considerable variability in the extent to which people associate their position on abortion with their own moral beliefs and convictions (e.g., Bauman, 2006; Bauman & Skitka, in press; Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka, 2002; Skitka et al., 2005). Despite the fact that activists and pundits can vividly articulate ways in which their view on abortion constitutes a moral imperative, the issue does not uniformly engage moral conviction in everyone. Given this empirical reality, the moral conviction approach does not uniformly classify

⁴ Terry Schiavo was a Florida woman with extensive brain damage and a diagnosis of persistent vegetative state. Her parents and husband disagreed over whether she would have wanted to continue to live supported by medical devices, including a feeding tube. After a protracted legal battle, her husband won the right to remove the feeding tube and let her die.

abortion as a moral issue. Instead, it first establishes who does and who does not perceive it to be a moral issue and then uses these subjective assessments of moral conviction to predict subsequent perceptions, choices, and behavior.

To date, we have examined people's attitudes about many contemporary issues, including abortion, capital punishment, legalization of marijuana, gay marriage, physician assisted suicide, gun control, immigration, the War in Iraq, building new nuclear power plants, and others.

Although each of these topics could be and often is labeled a "moral issue," we find a full range of responses when we ask individuals to indicate the extent to which their attitude about each of them is rooted in their personal sense of morality. Moreover, stronger moral conviction is associated with a greater likelihood of voting, increased physical distance between one's self and attitudinally dissimilar others, difficulty resolving conflict, and a host of other effects (see Skitka et al., 2008).

We have examined issues on which people with positions on either side of the issue could potentially moralize, and we have yet to observe instances when the consequences of moral conviction change across positions on an issue. That is, effects are driven by whether others' actions or expressed attitudes are consistent or inconsistent with the perceiver's position, but the position itself (i.e., which side of the issue the individual advocates) is relatively unimportant (e.g., Bauman, 2006; Bauman & Skitka, in press; Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka et al., 2005). In the case of abortion, for example, people with morally motivated pro-life and pro-choice attitudes focus on different aspects of the issue and invoke different moral principles (Scott, 1989). Pro-life advocates tend to focus on the unborn fetus and cite the sanctity of life, whereas pro-choice advocates tend to focus on the pregnant woman and cite individuals' rights to exert control their own bodies. Although we sometimes find differences in the frequency of strong

moral conviction as a function of issue valence (e.g., how many people are pro-choice or pro-life; Bauman & Skitka, 2005), people with moral conviction respond similarly to threats to their beliefs, irrespective of which position they hold on a given issue (e.g., both pro-choice and pro-life people pull away from those who disagree with them; Bauman, 2006; Skitka et al., 2005). In short, the similarity of how moral conviction functions across situations and across positions within situations suggests strongly that moral conviction is a coherent phenomenon rather than a hodgepodge of issue-specific reactions.

In summary, the moral conviction approach seeks to understand the psychological states that accompany the subjective recognition that something has moral implications. It also is designed to explore whether these subjective assessments explain variance in relevant judgments, feelings, and behavior, such as whether people vote in presidential elections or shun individuals who disagree with them (e.g., Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Skitka et al., 2005). Although many situations theoretically could trigger moral conviction in individuals, people do not relentlessly police the moral perimeter and react to every potentially moral stimulus. Instead, they attend to a select subset of instances that spark associations between aspects of the situation and their moral beliefs. Therefore, identifying when people perceive a situation to have moral implications is a cornerstone of the approach. In Section 4, we review the conclusions about moral conviction that our research supports. Before doing so, however, we will attempt to further clarify our approach by focusing on major differences that exist between the way that we examine moral conviction and how researchers often examine moral judgment.

3. HOW DOES RESEARCH ON MORAL CONVICTION AND MORAL JUDGMENT DIFFER?

Our conceptualization of moral conviction differs considerably from how many researchers tend to think about and study moral judgment. To a large extent, these differences reflect the fact that the moral conviction and judgment approaches are designed to address different research questions. The moral judgment approach is designed to examine how people tend to respond in normatively moral situations (i.e., situations that meet philosophical definitions of morality) in an effort to reveal essential features of morality. In contrast, the moral conviction approach is designed to examine psychological phenomena that are associated with the subjective recognition of moral relevance. Given that many readers of this volume are likely to be familiar with the moral judgment tradition, and that a major goal of this volume is to build bridges across research traditions, we believe it is useful to make direct comparisons between the two approaches. Of course, both approaches have benefits and liabilities, and we want to state explicitly that we believe that there is much to be learned by studying moral judgment. That said, we will highlight what we believe to be the merits of the moral conviction approach with the hope that doing so will help integrate the findings from our approach and the moral judgment tradition, broaden the focus of morality research, and ultimately build a more complete understanding of morality.

Moral judgment and moral conviction research differ in at least four important ways, including (a) who defines whether a situation or decision is moral – the participant or the theorist, (b) how counter-normative responses are interpreted, (c) the degree to which the approaches expect people to exhibit principle-consistent choices across situations, and (d) the

types of situations each approach tends to examine. Broader treatment of each of these issues is provided below.

3.1 Defining Moral Contexts

One major difference between the moral judgment and moral convictions approaches is who determines whether a given set of stimuli represent moral situations. When examining moral judgment, researchers typically create a situation that includes criteria that theoretically should prompt people to perceive the situation to involve a moral choice. In other words, moral judgment researchers typically assert that the situations they study are moral. In contrast, the moral conviction approach assumes that there is considerable variability in the extent to which people are likely to associate any specific situation with their personal moral worldview; unless one knows whether a given situation arouses moral sentiments, one does not really know whether the individual's response is motivated by morality or some other concern (e.g., material self-interest, social pressures). That is, the moral conviction approach is particularly sensitive to the notion that a given situation is likely to engage moral processing in some people but not others, irrespective of whether it meets a philosophical standard. To help parse the moral from the non-moral, moral conviction research capitalizes on people's apparent ability to recognize whether they perceive their morals to be at stake in specific situations.

To illustrate the difference in how moral judgment and moral conviction researchers tend to identify morality, consider the large body of work that has investigated trolley problems (e.g., Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1985). Many versions of the trolley problem have been created and examined, but the original version involved a runaway tram and a decision of whether to direct the tram onto one track that had five workers or another that had one worker on it; the tram would kill anyone working on the track it went down (Foot, 1967). Trolley problems constitute

moral dilemmas according to philosophical definitions of morality because they force people to decide whom the trolley will harm (e.g., Shweder et al., 1997; Turiel, 1983). Moreover, the trolley problem is designed to force tradeoffs between utilitarian (i.e., the right choice minimizes the amount of harm; Bentham, 2007/1789; Mill, 2002/1863) and deontic reasoning (i.e., one should not intentionally cause harm to an innocent person; Kant, 1959/1785), and therefore also put in conflict two of the most well known normative theories of morality.

Although central features of trolley problems theoretically are associated with morality, not everyone perceives the situation to involve a moral decision. In a recent study that asked participants to report the extent to which their choice in the “bystander at the switch” trolley problem was related to their core moral beliefs and convictions, only slightly more than half (58%) responded above the midpoint of the scale (Bauman, 2008). Moreover, responses varied across the full range of the scale (i.e., from 1 *not at all* to 5 *very much*; $M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.14$). Although these data clearly demonstrate that decisions about trolley problems represent moral judgments for many or even most people, it is equally clear that there is considerable variability in the extent that people perceive the dilemma to be a situation that involves a moral choice.

When viewed through the lens of moral conviction research, the standard approach to analyzing responses to moral dilemmas, such as trolley problems, leaves an important question unanswered. How often do people confronted with moral dilemmas truly weigh the moral implications of each potential choice alternative? Moral judgment researchers often manipulate aspects of scenarios to identify what flips the proportion of responses from one choice to another; they examine factors that trigger different types of cognitive or affective processes, which in turn shape judgments. However, it is relatively unusual for researchers interested in moral judgment to assess directly whether people believe that they are making moral choices (cf.

Baron & Spranca, 1997; Ritov & Baron, 1999). If people do not associate their choice with their moral beliefs, then are they really exhibiting moral judgment? As we will describe in Section 4, people think about and respond to situations differently as a function of the extent that they personally experience moral conviction about them.

3.2 Interpreting Counter-normative Responses

Another major difference between the moral judgment and moral conviction approaches is whether and how each uses normative theories to frame discussions of results. Moral judgment theory and research tends to focus on normative claims, whereas the moral conviction approach is descriptive and leaves normative implications more open for interpretation. Moral judgment research often operates from the perspective of a normative theory (e.g., utilitarianism). In most cases, moral judgment researchers use the normative theory as a comparative standard to which they compare the choices people make. In these cases, the normative theory frames the discussion, but researchers do not make their own value judgment on the appropriateness of people's choices. However, there are other instances when some researchers use normative theories in a prescriptive way and suggest that those who make counter-normative choices (e.g., those who chose not to push a fat man off a footbridge to stop a trolley from killing five workers on the tracks) are somehow deficient or "inappropriate" (e.g., Greene, 2007; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006). Curiously, people who make counter-normative trolley problem choices nonetheless often strongly associate their choice with their moral beliefs (Bauman, 2008). When asked, people were very likely to report very strong moral conviction about their choice in the bystander at the switch trolley problem when they chose *not* to divert the trolley to the track with one rather than five workers on it. Therefore, to categorize and to dismiss these people as having gotten it morally "wrong" seems to ignore a potentially important phenomenon, given that they

believe their choice was moral. That is, these atypical respondents present a puzzle. Why do some people perceive it to be morally impermissible to divert the train to the track with one rather than five people on it whereas others see it as a moral imperative to do so? Are the psychological consequences of having moral conviction about one choice or another different or the same? Taking a moral conviction approach to answer these questions would allow one to more directly investigate the psychology of what makes some choices moral and others not.

The moral conviction approach does not attempt to make normative claims about which standard of morality people ought to use in a given situation. Instead, it maintains that multiple moral standards could be justified in a given situations. Consider, for example, Gilligan's (1982) famous critique of Kohlberg's (1976, 1984) cognitive developmental theory of morality. Gilligan argued that individual rights and justice are not necessarily the standards that everyone seeks to optimize. Instead, many people focus on relationship maintenance, care, and connectedness, and these standards are as legitimate as justice. Similarly, others have demonstrated that variability exists in how people from different groups are likely to access and apply various moral standards across situations (e.g., Haidt & Graham, 2007; Shweder et al., 1997). The question of whether different standards that could be applied to the same situation gets at the heart of what our moral conviction approach seeks to examine. Irrespective of the answer, it is clear that there is as much to be learned about morality from respondents who make atypical choices that they believe to be consistent with their personal conceptions of morality as there is to be learned from those whose choices are more typical.

Taken together, the moral judgment and moral conviction approaches can complement each other by providing a more complete understanding of moral phenomena. Moral judgment research can help explain why people typically choose one course of action over another in a

situation that is normatively moral, whereas moral conviction research can help identify the psychological consequences of perceiving a situation to have moral implications.

3.3 Expectations about Principle-driven Cross-situational Coherence

The moral judgment and moral conviction approaches also differ in the extent to which they expect people to use top-down strategies to make moral decisions. As mentioned above, moral judgment research tends to operate from the perspective of a normative theory, and results often are discussed in terms of whether people exhibit rule-based consistency across situations.

Although few moral judgment researchers are likely to be surprised that they find cross-situational variability, they nonetheless emphasize deviations from the normative theory's predictions, and some even label instances of switching standards as "bias." In short, moral judgment research often implicitly suggests that to be optimally moral, people should apply a single standard consistently across situations.

Expecting people's aggregated moral choices to represent a coherent system of beliefs that directly map onto a given normative definition of morality is a straw man hypothesis that portrays people in an unnecessarily negative light. A strong parallel exists between the variability in how people apply moral principles such as utilitarianism and research that reveals considerable inconsistency in how people apply values (e.g., Rohan, 2000; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Moral principles and values represent abstract propositions or decision criteria that are selectively applied to specific situations. Although, for example, operationalizing utilitarianism seems very straightforward, there are several decisions one must make to apply utilitarian principles to a specific situation. One must determine what constitutes "the good" one is seeking to maximize, and one also must identify who is included in the population of those who stand to benefit from one's decision. Similarly, values have a very broad focus and require

that people apply them to specific contexts. The process by which people operationalize their values can generate considerable variability in the specific positions people take on issues, despite the fact that the same people might equally endorse a given value.

For example, many people are likely to list the sanctity of human life as one of their core values. This single value, however, may lead two people to take opposing positions on specific issues, such as capital punishment. For some, murder represents the ultimate violation of this value, which in turn demands an equally severe punishment. For others, taking a human life is wrong, irrespective of whether a person has committed murder. Differences in the extent to which people endorse the sanctity of life are unlikely to capture specific positions on the death penalty. Moreover, there are many instances in which people could potentially apply a given value to one issue but not another. For example, a person could endorse the sanctity of life and experience moral conviction about abortion but not physician assisted suicide. Although one could potentially construe both as expressions of the same value, people do not always have strong opinions on issues presumed to be ideologically significant, nor do they tend to have highly integrated belief systems (Converse, 1964).

The inherent ambiguity associated with abstract moral principles or values makes it difficult to use these constructs to identify factors that remain consistent across experiences with morality. Given that the goal of the moral conviction approach is to describe the psychological profile that accompanies the subjective belief that something has moral implications, it defines moral convictions as object-specific attitudes rather than as abstract values (Skitka et al., 2005). Although many discussions of morality – perhaps especially those in the media – center on underlying values (see Skitka & Bauman, 2008), being specific about the target of moral beliefs is critical for understanding what is similar across moral situations.

Moreover, moral judgment research that focuses primarily on whether choices conform to abstract principles may obscure the fact that relatively little is known about the psychological mechanisms that filter people's perceptions and elicit moral conviction. Abstract principles are not sufficient as psychological mechanisms, but they contribute to a sense that we understand what is going on when people are making choices. Although principles certainly are useful tools that researchers can use to efficiently describe patterns of choices people (in aggregate) make, they cannot explain why people (as individuals) abruptly abandon one standard and employ another based on relatively small changes in the scenario. More research needs to examine how aspects of situations direct people's attention and shift their evaluative focus (e.g., Bartels, in press), and how people's attitudes direct their attention and shift which aspects of a situation they process (e.g., Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kunda, 1990).

In sum, people do not appear to apply general principles in uniform ways across situations. Like values, principles are too abstract to accurately predict what specific positions people are likely to take or whether they are even likely to associate a given issue with their moral beliefs. Therefore, the moral conviction approach centers on selective, concrete, and object-specific expressions of commitments to a core moral value or principle (Skitka et al., 2005). This definition of moral conviction provides the precision required to identify exactly how moral motivation differs from other motives, but remains agnostic about whether consistency itself ought to be a goal people seek when expressing their moral beliefs or sentiments.

3.4 Focal Situations

Another way that moral conviction and moral judgment research differ is in the type of situation that they tend to examine. Moral judgment research often focuses on moral dilemmas.

Moral dilemmas, or ethical paradoxes, are instances when well-articulated ethical positions come in conflict and potentially break down. Perhaps the most famous examples of moral dilemmas and their potential use in research are those that Kohlberg created and used to assess moral development (e.g., Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1963). Kohlberg believed that the rationale people provide for their choices in moral dilemmas accurately reflects their understanding of deeper philosophical standards of what is right. That is, Kohlberg thought that people's responses are diagnostic of a person's capacity to understand morality (as he defined it), and he sought to document changes in moral reasoning over the course of a child's development. Although focused more on the choice itself rather than accompanying explanations, much moral judgment research also has examined moral dilemmas.

Although moral dilemmas are both intrinsically fascinating and practical for research, they may represent a special subset of moral situations, which potentially limits the extent that the results from studies of moral dilemmas generalize. One way in which moral dilemmas differ from many other moral choices people confront is that, by definition, moral dilemmas pit two moral standards against each other. For example, Kohlberg's famous Heinz dilemma forces people to choose between a person's duty to save his spouse and prohibitions against stealing. Similarly, trolley dilemmas include conflict between utilitarian and deontological concerns. In short, moral dilemmas involve choices of "wrong-versus-wrong" but many other moral decisions involve choice of "right-versus-wrong" or "right-versus-right" (Kidder, 1995).

Situations that involve "wrong-versus-wrong" and "right-versus-wrong" alternatives seem to have different psychological consequences. For example, Tetlock et al. (2000) investigated people's reactions to decisions hospital administrators made in difficult situations. In one condition, participants read that the administrator needed to choose between saving the

hospital \$1,000,000 and providing a child with an organ transplant. In another condition, participants read that the administrator needed to choose between two children who both desperately needed the same organ that recently had become available for transplant. People expressed the most moral outrage and wanted to punish most severely administrators who chose to save the hospital money over the life of the child, despite the fact that the money saved was likely to improve the hospital and ultimately allow it to provide better care (i.e., save lives) in the long run. People seem to have framed the situation as a choice of “right-versus-wrong” and were intolerant of those who made the “wrong” choice. In contrast, people were relatively tolerant of administrators who had chosen the life of one child over another, irrespective of which child they elected to save. However, people also clearly were less comfortable with either choice in the latter case than they were when the administrator chose to prioritize the child’s life over \$1,000,000. In sum, people perceive choices between competing moral claims to be upsetting but manageable; either outcome potentially could be tolerated (Tetlock, 2003; Tetlock et al., 2000). In other situations that include a clear “right-versus-wrong” choice, people react very strongly to choices with which they do not agree, and they tend to vilify the decision maker who makes the “wrong” choice. Therefore, perhaps the major difference between moral dilemmas and other moral choices is that people confronted with moral dilemmas are likely to be able to recognize and understand why others might choose alternative responses, whereas other moral choices are associated with disidentification and rejection of others who choose responses dissimilar to one’s own (Bauman, 2006).

A second unusual quality of moral dilemmas is that they seem especially likely to elicit calm examination and careful thought. People seem to try to rationally weigh the pros and cons associated with the choices in a moral dilemma. In contrast, other moral choices tend to be

heavily laden with emotions (e.g., Haidt, 2003; Mullen & Skitka, 2006). People seem to approach moral dilemmas in the same way that they approached “story problems” in their elementary school math workbook. This comparison is not meant to trivialize moral dilemmas. Rather, it is intended to illustrate the calm and highly rational manner that people tend to exhibit as they ponder which choice to make. In our experience, classroom discussions of moral dilemmas always stay perfectly civil, with people treating counter-normative respondents with curiosity more than repulsion. No one lambasts or ostracizes those who advocate pushing a fat man off the footbridge to save five workers from a runaway trolley, even if that is not what they would choose to do in that situation. In contrast, students cringe when others advocate a decision to continue to produce a lucrative but potentially harmful product, shake their heads when talking about accounting scandals, and become enraged during discussions of discrimination in the workplace. The absence of emotion people exhibit while making and discussing their choices in moral dilemmas compared to other moral situations suggests that moral dilemmas capture a different--yet certainly important--phenomenon than do many other moral choices.

In contrast to the moral judgment focus on dilemmas, moral conviction research often has focused on moral controversies. According to theories of moral politics (e.g., Mooney, 2001), all it takes to make something a moral controversy is for one side to frame their position in moral terms. However, there are many contemporary issues about which people on both sides perceive their positions to be morally obligatory. Moral controversies differ from moral dilemmas in a number of ways. For example, moral controversies are intrinsically more difficult to manage. It is one thing to resolve conflict over competing preferences, but it is something else to resolve conflict when one (or more) factions frame the issue in terms of a moral imperative (e.g., Skitka et al., 2005, Study 4). To support alternatives or possible compromises to what one side sees as

“right,” “moral,” and “good” is to be absolutely “wrong” or “immoral,” if not evil (e.g., Black, 1994; Bowers, 1984; Meier, 1994; Skitka et al., 2005; Tetlock et al., 2000). That is, people morally invested in social controversies see these issues as questions of “right-versus-wrong” rather than as “wrong-versus-wrong,” and people are likely to dismiss arguments made by the other side based on the belief that opponents fundamentally are missing the point. Moreover, people without a moral stake in a given decision may well recognize that they can get embroiled in moral controversies, and consequently choose to tread very carefully around these issues and those who are morally committed to them.

In summary, moral dilemmas and moral controversies represent different subsets of moral situations. Studying each is likely to contribute to our understanding of moral phenomena, and a general theory of morality will need to be able to explain both types of situations, as well as other more common moral choices, such as whether to lie, cheat, or steal to promote self-interest. It is important to point out, however, that the moral conviction approach can be used to examine any situation, including dilemmas; its use is not limited to contemporary social controversies. That said, research has yet to consider how and why some people do not personally feel a moral connection to either side of a controversy or a dilemma that is moral for most other people. The absence of moral conviction in normatively moral situations is not well-understood.

So far, we have attempted to describe why we believe our research on moral conviction represents a unique approach to studying moral phenomena. To help make our case, we discussed four ways in which moral judgment and moral conviction research differ and identified the value added by our approach. Nevertheless, we hope we have made clear that we believe that the two approaches are complementary rather than competing models for research. Moral

judgment and moral conviction research ask different questions, and we hope this chapter helps build bridges and ultimately leads to an integrated theory of morality.

In the final section of this chapter, we will summarize the results of several studies that we and others have conducted to better understand the psychology associated with the subjective belief that an attitude is associated with one's own moral beliefs and convictions.

4. THE CONSEQUENCES OF MORAL CONVICTION ON CHOICE AND ACTION

From an intuitive perspective, it seems obvious that people should act based on their preferences. However, the lack of attitude-behavior correspondence is a well-known conundrum across fields of social science research. One of the longest standing challenges for attitude theory and research has been the generally weak association between attitudes and attitude-relevant behavior. Wicker's (1969) classic review of the attitude literature, for example, indicated that typical correlations between attitudes and overt attitude-relevant behavior "are rarely above .30, and often are near zero" (p .75). Although researchers have identified many ways to assess attitude or preference strength that can boost the empirical association between attitudes and behavior (see Fabrigar, MacDonald, & Wegener, 2005; Petty & Krosnick, 1995), it may be important to consider the effect of attitude content (e.g., moral vs. non-moral) on the extent that attitudes drive choice and prompt action. When attitudes reflect non-moral preferences—even very strong preferences—they might easily be overwhelmed by other factors that prevent people from translating those preferences into action. In contrast, the anticipated public and private negative consequences (e.g., sanctioning, shunning, guilt, regret, shame) of failing to do something one "ought" to do may be much more severe than failing to do something one would "prefer." Similarly, the anticipated public and private positive consequences (e.g., praise, reward,

pride, satisfaction, elevation) of standing up for what is “right” may be much more uplifting than the satisfaction of doing something one would “prefer.”

We have conducted several studies that have tested and found support for the idea that measuring the degree to which people’s attitudes or preferences are rooted in moral conviction increases one’s ability to predict choices and behaviors (for a recent review see Skitka et al., 2008). For example, we conducted two studies to predict voting and voting intentions in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). The first study tested hypotheses with a national survey immediately following the 2000 election⁵. We measured whether participants voted and for whom (and among those who did not vote, which candidate they preferred to win the election), strength of candidate preferences, and the extent to which their candidate preferences were moral convictions. Other measures included participants’ political party identification and strength of political party identification. Results indicated that strength of moral conviction explained significant unique variance in voting behavior, even when controlling for candidate and party preferences, as well as strength of those preferences. That is, people who reported higher levels of moral conviction about their preferred candidate were more likely to have gone to the polls to vote, all else being equal. Moreover, moral conviction was an equally strong motivator of voting behavior for both those on the political left and the political right (see Figure 1).

⁵ The outcome of the 2000 presidential election hung in abeyance between November 7, 2000 and December 12, 2000 because the election was too close to call in Florida. The Florida State Constitution required a recount, but there was considerable ambiguity about how it should proceed, that is, whether ballots should be recounted by hand or by machine. Eventually, the Supreme Court intervened and stopped hand counts of ballots in Florida on December 12, 2000, a decision that led Florida’s Electoral College votes to go to Bush. Our survey was in the field during the first 17 days of the election impasse, several weeks before the Supreme Court ruling and the outcome of the election was known.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Although the 2000 election results were consistent with our moral conviction hypothesis, the study measured moral conviction about the candidates themselves rather than about salient political issues. Therefore, one might question whether issue-based moral conviction functions in similar way. Moreover, people were asked to report their moral conviction about their preferred candidate after they voted. Therefore, people may have inferred stronger or weaker moral conviction by referencing their voting behavior instead of their feelings (e.g., Bem, 1967). A follow-up study addressed these issues in the context of the 2004 presidential election. Specifically, it examined voting intentions rather than retrospective reports of voting to (a) conceptually replicate the 2000 election results, (b) test whether there is an issue-based, in addition to a candidate-based, moral conviction effect, and (c) rule out a self-perception interpretation of the 2000 election study results. Results indicated that moral convictions associated with various hot-button political issues of the day (e.g., the Iraq War, abortion, and gay marriage) predicted unique variance in participants' intentions to vote in the 2004 presidential election, even when controlling for participants' position on these issues (e.g., support versus opposition), the strength of their support or opposition to these issues, and their candidate preferences (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). As in the first study, results supported the moral conviction hypothesis.

Taken together, the results of these two studies indicated that knowing whether people experienced moral conviction about their candidate choice or specific issues increased the degree of correspondence between their attitudes and actions. Of considerable interest to those who

study elections was the finding that the effect of moral conviction on intentions to vote and voting behavior was the same for those on both the political right and left. That is, moral conviction motivated political engagement for both Republicans and Democrats and for people on either side of contemporary social issues. Since the late 1970's when Moral Majority successfully branded itself, many people likely associate the word "morality" with a politically conservative stance. Our research, however, suggests that moral conviction on either side of the political spectrum incites action and activism, despite the fact that the moral compasses of those on the political right and left may be set in different directions (e.g., Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Other research indicates that moral conviction about decision outcomes predicts people's willingness to accept decisions made by authorities and the degree to which they perceive these decisions to be fair. For example, Bauman (2006) presented students with descriptions of a decision their university ostensibly made regarding whether student insurance that was funded by their tuition and fees would cover abortions at the university health clinic. The decision making procedures university officials used were either maximally or minimally fair. Although procedural fairness often overrides people's non-moral outcome preferences and causes people to accept even very unfavorable outcomes (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988), results indicated that students who morally disagreed with the decision were prepared to petition, protest, withhold tuition and fees, and "make trouble" for the university administration, even when they perceived the decision making procedures to be maximally fair. Conversely, students had no ambition to protest a decision when it was consistent with their moral beliefs, even when they had explicitly acknowledged that the procedures used to make the decision were illegitimate and unfair. In other words, concerns about morality took priority over other factors that typically are central to people's perceptions of fairness and decision acceptance. Students cared about whether their

university made the “moral” decision and were willing to take rather dramatic steps to protect their sense of what was “right”, irrespective of whether the decision making procedures suggested that they were valued and respected members of the group (i.e., appealed belongingness needs; Lind & Tyler, 1988) or that they were likely to receive their just deserts over the long run (i.e., appealed material self-interest; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Therefore, moral convictions appear to provide checks on the power of authority that non-moral outcome preferences do not provide.

Similarly, Mullen and Nadler (2008) explored whether laws that violate people’s moral convictions erode perceptions of the legitimacy of authority systems and prompt retaliation. They exposed people to legal decisions that supported, opposed, or were unrelated to participants’ moral convictions. The experimenters distributed a questionnaire and a pen and asked participants to return both at end of the experimental session, after they reviewed the legal decisions that ostensibly were the primary focus of the study. Consistent with expectations, participants were more likely to steal the pen after exposure to a legal decision that violated rather than supported their moral convictions.

Of course, one could question the extent to which the results of the studies described above are influenced by a variety of other factors that are associated with type of issues and situations moral conviction research typically examines. That is, what other variables correlate with self-reported moral conviction that might account for the observed effects? To date, we have assessed and ruled-out a host of alternative explanations for the effects of moral conviction. Some of the most intriguing of these potential alternative explanations involve individual difference variables. Individual difference variables comprise demographic characteristics or stable trait-like psychological tendencies. If a given individual difference were to correlate with

self-reports of moral conviction, then one could argue that observed differences in moral conviction actually were due to characteristics of the individuals who tended to report strong or weak moral conviction rather than something about moral conviction itself.

For example, if women were much more likely than men to report strong moral conviction about abortion, then the effects moral conviction research typically detects potentially could be attributable to something about how women tend to respond to questions rather than something about moral conviction. Similarly, if political orientation were correlated with moral conviction about abortion, then the moral conviction effects we observe could be attributable to liberals' or conservatives' cognitive style rather than something about moral conviction (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Although these arguments are plausible, controlling for prominent individual difference variables—including age, gender, income, education, religiosity, political orientation, dogmatism—does not substantially diminish the unique effect of issue-specific moral conviction on both psychological and behavioral dependent measures (Bauman, Lytle, & Skitka, 2008; Skitka et al., 2005). Moreover, the relationship between individual difference variables and moral conviction is generally weak and inconsistent across issues. Therefore, it appears that the moral conviction measure accurately identifies the experience of having moral conviction rather than separates respondents as a function of characteristics tangential to morality.

In summary, a growing body of research indicates that it is important to know whether people's choices, judgments, and preferences reflect their personal moral convictions. Variance in moral conviction predicts a host of variables, including voting and voting intentions (Skitka & Bauman, 2008), intolerance and prejudice toward attitudinally dissimilar others (Skitka et al., 2005, Studies 1 and 2); willingness to sit near to an attitudinally dissimilar other (Skitka et al.,

2005, Study 3); people's ability to develop procedural solutions to resolve conflict (Skitka et al., 2005, Study 4); and willingness to accept authorities' decisions as well as the perceived fairness of those decisions (e.g., Bauman, 2006; Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka & Houston, 2001; Skitka & Mullen, 2002). The existing body of research has established that moral convictions have unique consequences that cannot be explained by non-moral characteristics of attitude strength. That is, moral convictions are more than just strong preferences. Importantly, moral conviction research also has systematically addressed and dismissed a host of alternative explanations for moral conviction, thus supporting the notion that people perceive morals as *sui generis*. Despite the apparent success of the moral conviction approach regarding these initial goals, however, one could argue that moral conviction research has not yet examined what leads people to identify that a given attitude or preference represents a moral conviction. Therefore, a major task for future research will be to empirically test hypotheses about the antecedents of moral conviction.

Although further research is required to gain a better understanding of what gives rise to moral conviction, research and theory have begun to converge on the function of morality. Morality is fundamental to coordinated social behavior (e.g., de Waal, 2006; Rokeach, 1973), and moral conviction research supports this conclusion. In particular, a desire for moral homogeneity of beliefs appears to be a foundation upon which social interactions and group membership rest. People avoid those who are morally dissimilar to them (Skitka et al., 2005), and they are willing to leave important social groups that make choices that are inconsistent with their moral beliefs (Bauman, 2006). Moreover, people's sense of morality drives who they want to represent them (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). Furthermore, moral conviction sets limits on the power of authority and affects the way that people evaluate decisions made by others (e.g., Skitka & Houston, 2001; Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

5. IMPLICATIONS

Moral conviction research supports at least two major conclusions. First, there exists considerable variability in the extent that individuals experience moral conviction, even regarding issues that could clearly be classified as moral issues based on theoretical definitions of morality. That is, the typical person on the street does not necessarily categorize their world in the same way as do intellectual elites, and it is important for researchers to consider these classification differences as they draw conclusions about the results of their studies. Second, differences in moral conviction predict reliable tendencies in the way that people respond in situations. Moral conviction affects (a) the way people process information and make judgments in moral situations, (b) the extent to which people experience emotion, and (c) the likelihood that people will take action to support or defend their beliefs. In short, self-reported moral conviction has important consequences for the way that people think, feel, and behave.

One important implication of moral conviction research is that normative theories and principles are not sufficient to explain moral phenomena. Although it is well known that people seek cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957), they do so at the level of their object-specific attitudes rather than at the more abstract level of values or principles. Therefore, it seems unlikely that any normative theory that demands perfect consistency with a single or even several principles would accurately depict people's judgments and actions in moral situations. The moral conviction approach addresses moral phenomena at a level of analysis that corresponds to the way people see their own world. It does not assume that moral judgment and behavior always is the end-product of elegant top-down arguments that stem from general propositions (see also Haidt, 2001). Although principles may be important tools that can help researchers organize and describe morality, we must be careful not to let our quest for explanatory parsimony influence

our expectations of how multifaceted people's understanding of moral phenomena is or should be.

Moral conviction necessarily is complicated because a variety of situational, social, and intrapsychic factors that determine whether people moralize specific stimuli. Much more research needs to examine what causes individuals to perceive one situation but not another seemingly similar situation to have moral implications. Similarly, research must address what causes one individual but not others to perceive the same situation to have moral implications. A complete theory of morality will describe aggregated moral tendencies as well as account for individual deviations from those tendencies. Variability in how people approach moral questions across situations represents something that needs to be understood and explained.

In conclusion, moral conviction research places primary importance on people's apparent ability to recognize a moral belief when they have one. Although there may be some degree of consensus about what kinds of attitude objects or judgments are moral, there also is considerable variance around these mean appraisals; not everyone sees the same issue, dilemma, or choice in moral terms, and knowing whether they do or do not see a given situation in moral terms predicts perceivers' subsequent judgments, choices, and behavior. In short, the moral conviction approach is designed to examine psychological phenomena that are associated with the subjective recognition of moral relevance, whereas moral judgment research typically examines how people make difficult choices in situations that fit theoretical definitions of morality. The two approaches ask complementary questions, and both are necessary to develop a complete science of morality.

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Figure 1. Moral conviction as a function of candidate preference in the 2000 presidential election ($N = 1,853$).

