

Lecture 04 Moral Psychology: The Science of Good and Evil?

s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk

0.1. Simplified Preview

1. 'Moral convictions and the emotions they evoke shape political attitudes'
3. 'liberals and conservatives possess different moral profiles'
4. 'liberals express greater levels of environmental concern than do conservatives in part because liberals are more likely to view environmental issues in moral terms'
5. 'exposing conservatives to proenvironmental appeals based on moral concerns that uniquely resonate with them will lead them to view the environment in moral terms and be more supportive of proenvironmental efforts' (Feinberg & Willer 2013)

1. Do Ethical Attitudes Shape Political Behaviours?

Claim: 'Moral convictions and the emotions they evoke shape political attitudes (Emler, 2003; Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005)' (Feinberg & Willer 2013, p. 1).

1.1. Attitudes Generally

'Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that it is considerably more likely that attitudes will be unrelated or only slightly related to overt behaviors than that attitudes will be closely related to actions' (Wicker 1969, p. 65)

'Only rarely can as much as 10% of the variance in overt behavioral measures be accounted for by attitudinal data. In studies in which data are dichotomized, substantial proportions of subjects show attitude-behavior discrepancies. This is true even when subjects scoring at the extremes of attitudinal measures are compared on behavioral indices.' (Wicker 1969, p. 65 quoted by Skitka & Bauman 2008, p. 51).

Illustration: Genthner & Taylor (1973) show a disconnect between explicit prejudice and behaviour.

Background: 'The traditional social learning model posits that a negative attitude [...] facilitates aggression toward a disliked person' (Genthner & Taylor 1973, p. 209).

Results: 'While the low-prejudiced subjects behaved in a relatively nonaggressive manner toward both the Black opponents and the White opponents, the high-prejudiced subjects aggressed equally against' both (Genthner & Taylor 1973, p. 209).

1.2. Ethical Attitudes ...

Contrast strong attitudes with attitudes that are both strong and moral: 'People's feelings about various sports teams, their musical tastes, or even their relative preference for Mac versus PC operating systems could each easily be experienced as strong attitudes (extreme, certain, etc.), but would rarely be experienced as moral. People's feelings about infanticide, female circumcision, abortion, or a host of political issues (gay marriage, the Iraq War, the Patriot Act), however, could be experienced as both strong and moral.' (Skitka & Bauman 2008, p. 31)

1.2.1. ... affect preferences for social and physical distance

Skitka et al. (2005, p. 895) 'conducted four studies that examined whether strength of moral conviction predicted unique variance beyond other indices of attitude strength, such as attitude extremity, importance, certainty, and centrality, on a number of interpersonal measures.'

Question: 'whether people prefer greater social [studies 1 & 2; and physical: study 3] distance from attitudinally dissimilar others when the attitude domain was held with high rather than low moral conviction' (Skitka et al. 2005, p. 899)

Results: 'The effect of moral conviction on social distance was robust when we controlled for the effects gender, age, attitudinal extremity, impor-

tance, and centrality’ (Skitka et al. 2005, p. 901). ‘In contrast, participants were more tolerant of having a distant than an intimate relationship with an attitudinally dissimilar other, when the attitude dissimilarity was on an issue that the participant held with low moral conviction, results that held even when we controlled for attitude strength’ (Skitka et al. 2005, p. 901).

1.2.2. ... affect voting behaviours and intentions

Do moral attitudes affect actual voting behaviour? Skitka & Bauman (2008, p. 42) found that ‘moral conviction about candidate preferences [...] uniquely increased the odds of voting, even when controlling for effects of candidate preference, party identification, strength of candidate preference, strength of party identification, and demographic variables. As strength of moral conviction about one’s candidate preference increased, so did the likelihood that one voted.’

Note also that ‘the effects of moral conviction on political engagement were equally strong for those on the political right and left’ (Skitka & Bauman 2008, p. 50)

For a review on moral conviction covering some of the research on political behaviours, see Skitka (2010).

There is a tricky question about whether we

know attempts to measure moral conviction succeed, which Skitka & Bauman (2008, pp. 36–7) discuss (‘it has been our goal to measure moral conviction without confounding this construct with other markers of attitude strength ...’). Although this is not covered in lectures, there is some overlap with the upcoming discussion of the validity of using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire for cross-cultural comparisons.

1.2.3. ... affect support for climate policies

‘individuals with strong moral concerns about climate change tend to be more likely to support climate policies’ (Doran et al. 2019, p. 622).

‘moral concerns turned out to be substantially more important than consequence evaluations, explaining about twice as much of the variance’ (Doran et al. 2019, p. 622).

Implication: ‘threat raising campaigns may not be the preferred strategy to encourage public engagement with climate change’

2. Moral Foundations Theory: An Approach to Cultural Variations

Claim: ‘Moral-foundations researchers have investigated the similarities and differences in morality among individuals across cultures (Haidt & Josephs, 2004). These researchers have found evidence for five fundamental domains of

human morality’ (Feinberg & Willer 2013, p. 2)

Aim of Moral Foundations Theory: to provide ‘a systematic theory of morality, explaining its origins, development, and cultural variations’ (Graham et al. 2011, p. 368).

Moral Foundations Theory is the conjunction of these claims (Graham et al. 2013, 2019):

1. [nativism] ‘There is a first draft of the moral mind’

‘the human mind is organized in advance of experience so that it is prepared to learn values, norms, and behaviors related to a diverse set of recurrent adaptive social problems’ (Graham et al. 2013, p. 63)

2. [cultural learning] ‘The first draft of the moral mind gets edited during development within a culture’

3. [intuitionism] ‘Intuitions come first’ – the Social Intuitionist Model is true

‘moral evaluations generally occur rapidly and automatically, products of relatively effortless, associative, heuristic processing that psychologists now refer to as System 1 thinking’ (Graham et al. 2013, p. 66)

‘moral reasoning is done primarily for socially strategic purposes’ (Graham et al. 2013, p. 66).

4. [pluralism] ‘There are many psychological foundations of morality’

Haidt & Joseph (2004); Haidt & Graham (2007) claims that there are five evolutionarily ancient, psychologically basic abilities linked to:

1. harm/care
2. fairness (including reciprocity)
3. in-group loyalty
4. respect for authority
5. purity, sanctity

It is not important to the theory that these be the only foundations, nor that these be exactly the foundations (perhaps one is wrong, and should be replaced by two different ideas). For example, the theory has some difficulties with Libertarians ... ‘Libertarians have a unique moral-psychological profile, endorsing the principle of liberty as an end and devaluing many of the moral concerns typically endorsed by liberals or conservatives’ (Iyer et al. 2012, p 21). ‘Does that mean that libertarians have no morality—or, at least, less concern with moral issues than liberals or conservatives? Or might it be that their core moral value was simply not represented among the five foundations measured by the MFQ? ... MFT’s five moral foundations appeared to be inadequate in capturing libertarians’ moral concerns, but the approach that gave birth to these foundations served us well in examining this new group, and stimulated us to consider Liberty/oppression as a candidate for

addition to our list of foundations’ (Graham et al. 2013, p. 87). (Graham et al. 2019)

2.1. Evidence for Moral Foundations Theory

‘The scale is internally consistent (both within and between two question formats)’ (between = relevance questions vs judgements)

For a clear, nontechnical intro to confirmatory factor analysis (and factorial invariance concepts, which we’ll get to later), see Gregorich (2006, pp. S78-S83) and Lee (2018). (Note that you do not need to understand this, but doing so will help you to understand the evidence supporting, and threatening, applications of Moral Foundations Theory to cross-cultural comparison.)

‘The five-factor model fit the data better (weighing both fit and parsimony) than competing models, and this five-factor representation provided a good fit for participants in 11 different world areas’ (Graham et al. 2011, p. 380).

‘[...] empirical support for the MFQ for the first time in a predominantly Muslim country. [...] the 5-factor model, although somewhat below the standard criteria of fitness, provided the best fit among the alternatives. [...] one can conclude that, at least in non-English speaking countries, the MFQ is not the ideal device to measure the theoretical framework of the MFT’ (Yilmaz et al. 2016, p. 153).

2.2. Evolution and Moral Foundations Theory

‘pathogens are among the principle existential threats to organisms, so those who could best avoid pathogens would have enhanced evolutionary fitness. Van Vugt and Park contend that human groups develop unique practices for reducing pathogen exposure—particularly in how they prepare their foods and maintain their hygiene. When groups are exposed to the practices of a foreign culture, they may perceive its members as especially likely to carry pathogens that may contaminate one’s ingroup’ (Graham et al. 2013, p. 93)

‘When controlling for GDP per capita, the pattern of correlations between historical pathogen prevalence and endorsement of moral foundations remained largely unchanged; however, contemporary pathogen prevalence was not significantly correlated with any of the moral foundations’ (van Leeuwen et al. 2012).

‘historical pathogen prevalence—even when controlling for individual-level variation in political orientation, gender, education, and age—significantly predicted endorsement of Ingroup/loyalty [stats removed], Authority/respect, and Purity/sanctity; it did not predict endorsement of Harm/care or Fairness/reciprocity’ (van Leeuwen et al. 2012)

2.3. Argument for Pluralism

Moral Foundations Theory is pluralist (it postulates more than one foundation). A monist theory would likely identify harm, or something related to harm, as the one foundation. Why accept pluralism? Because '[p]urity/degradation judgments predict important thoughts and behaviors over and above Care/harm judgments. For instance, purity concerns uniquely predict (beyond other foundations and demographics such as political ideology) culture-war attitudes about gay marriage, euthanasia, abortion, and pornography (Koleva et al., 2012). Purity also predicts opposition to stem cell research (Clifford & Jerit, 2013), environmental attitudes (Rottman, Kelemen, & Young, 2015), lawsuits (Buccafusco & Fagundes, 2015), and social distancing in real-world social networks (Dehghani et al., 2016)' (Graham et al. 2019).

'Inconsistent with Moral Dyad Theory, our results did not support the prediction that Harm concerns would be the unequivocally most important predictor of sacrifice endorsement. Consistent with Moral Foundations Theory, however, multiple moral values are predictive of sacrifice judgments: Harm and Purity negatively predict, and Ingroup positively predicts, endorsement of harmful action in service of saving lives, with Harm and Purity explaining similar amounts of unique variance. The present study demonstrates the utility of pluralistic accounts of morality, even in moral situations in

which harm is central (Crone & Laham, 2015)' (Graham et al. 2019) on (Crone & Laham 2015).

3. Cultural Variation

Claim: 'liberals and conservatives possess different moral profiles regarding the five moral foundations' (Feinberg & Willer 2013, p. 2)

3.1. Evidence for the Claim

Graham et al. (2009, p. 1032) 'tested whether the effects of political identity persisted after partialing out variation in moral relevance ratings for other demographic variables. We created a model representing the five foundations as latent factors measured by three manifest variables each, simultaneously predicted by political identity and four covariates: age, gender, education level, and income. [...] Including the covariates, political identity still predicted all five foundations in the predicted direction [...]. Political identity was the key explanatory variable: It was the only consistent significant predictor [...] for all five foundations.'

3.2. Evidence Against the Claim

3.2.1. Two Failures to Generalise

Using participants in New Zealand, Davies et al. (2014, p. 434) found that 'Although

Harm/care and Fairness/reciprocity showed significant negative correlations with conservatism, these relationships were weak, indicating that these foundations are not related to ideology. [...] the individualizing foundation results are surprising, and different to those found by Graham et al. (2011).'

'We hypothesized that the binding moral foundations would show a weaker relationship with political conservatism in Black people than in White people. Across two independent samples, we found support for this hypothesis [...] some of the current items may conflate moral foundations with other constructs such as religiosity or racial identity' (Davis et al. 2016, p. e29).

3.2.2. Is Moral Foundations Theory Unethical?

'This article [distinguishes] between subjective conceptions of morality (which are, after all, indistinguishable from mere moralizing) and morality from a more independent, objective perspective [...] the moral valuation of ingroup loyalty, obedience to authority, and purity concerns is associated with attitudes and belief systems that may be considered prejudicial and therefore morally unsavory liberal-conservative differences in the endorsement of these three 'binding' intuitions may be attributable, at least in part, to the fact that conservatives tend to be higher than liberals on authoritarianism. Fur-

thermore, liberal-conservative differences in the endorsement of fairness and avoidance of harm are attributable to the fact that liberals tend to be lower than conservatives on social dominance orientation [...] The fact that these two types of moral concerns have opposite effects on intergroup hostility and support for discrimination against foreigners and immigrants raises questions about the assumption that ‘binding’ and ‘individualizing’ (or perhaps ‘humanistic’ concerns) should be treated as operating on the same moral plane, objectively speaking’ (Kugler et al. 2014, p. 416).

3.2.3. It’s all about harm?

‘harm is central in moral cognition across moral diversity for both liberals and conservatives’ (Schein & Gray 2015, p. 1158).

We found evidence for ‘a common dyadic template than with a specific number of distinct moral mechanisms that are differentially expressed across liberals and conservatives’ (Schein & Gray 2015, p. 1158).

3.2.4. Failures of Measurement Invariance

‘A finding of measurement invariance would provide more confidence that use of the MFQ across cultures can shed light on meaningful differences between cultures rather than merely reflecting the measurement properties of the MFQ’

(Iurino & Saucier 2018, p. 2)

‘the five-factor model of MFQ revealed a good fit to the data on both WEIRD and non-WEIRD samples. Besides, the five-factor model yielded a better fit to the data as compared to the two-factor model of MFQ. Measurement invariance test across samples validated factor structure for the five-factor model, yet a comparison of samples provided metric non-invariance implying that item loadings are different across groups [...] although the same statements tap into the same moral foundations in each case, the strength of the link between the statements and the foundations were different in WEIRD and non-WEIRD cultures’ (Doğruyol et al. 2019).

‘across subscales, there were problems with scalar invariance, which suggests that researchers may need to carefully consider whether this scale is working similarly across groups before conducting mean comparisons’ (Davis et al. 2016, p. e27)

3.3. One evaluation

Leadings opponents Davis et al. (2017, p. 128): ‘It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of [Moral Foundations Theory] on psychological science because it caused a dramatic broadening in conceptualization of morality beyond narrow Western notions that have focused on individualistic virtues associated with protecting one’s rights—especially prevention of harm

(Gilligan, 1982) and unjust treatment (Kohlberg, 1969). The expansion of morality psychology to more collectivistic domains has led to substantial research into the role of morality in the political environment. More specifically, there is significant support for the moral foundations hypothesis that predicts that conservatives tend to draw on virtues associated with binding communities more than liberals (Graham et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Koleva et al., 2012). [... nevertheless] entire literatures can develop on the basis of faulty measurement assumptions.’

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