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## Interpersonal Consequences of Moral Judgments about Others

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### Abstract

*Perceived moral similarity or dissimilarity has profound effects on interpersonal judgement and relationships. People are apt to avoid or withdraw from relationships with those who hold divergent moral beliefs or transgress moral rules. This tendency to distance oneself from perceived moral deviants exists, in part, because morality is the primary dimension on which people evaluate others when forming impressions of them. Moreover, when people perceive a situation to involve morality, they are especially prone to attributing differences in beliefs and perceived transgressions to dispositional traits and defects of character.*

In a laboratory study reported by Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005), student participants expected to interact with another student as part of a study ostensibly about how people get to know one another. Prior to meeting this other student, participants were told that they were randomly selected to receive “inside information” about the other student and learned the other student held a strong pro-choice attitude about abortion. The experimenter then escorted participants to another room to meet and converse with the other student. Upon entering the room, participants could see a chair near the center of the room with a book bag and jacket on it, and a stack of chairs against the far wall. The experimenter acted surprised that the other student was not in the room and asked the participant to take down a chair from the stack and get settled while he looked for the other student. After giving the participant enough time to get settled, the experimenter returned, measured the

distance the participant left between their chair and the one they expected the other participant to use. Analysis indicated that after controlling for multiple measures of attitude strength recorded in class at the beginning of the semester, the extent to which participants associated their attitude about abortion with their moral beliefs (i.e., their moral conviction about the issue) predicted how much physical distance they created between themselves and where they expected the other student to sit. Greater moral conviction expressed by pro-choice participants was associated with less distance between the chairs, and greater moral conviction expressed by pro-life participants was associated with more distance between the chairs. Other researchers have since replicated this finding and observed similar effects with a pro-life target and using other commonly moralized issues (Wright et al., 2008).

Arguably, the tendency to distance oneself from those who do not share one's moral beliefs has become more pronounced in recent years. Throughout much of the world, people have become more polarized in their moral beliefs (Finkel et al., 2020; Gidron et al., 2019). Technology has provided the means to distance oneself more effectively from those who do not share one's moral beliefs and to align oneself more closely with those who do (Dylko, 2016; Merten, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed the moralization of face mask mandates, compulsory vaccination, and other public health initiatives (e.g., Prosser et al., 2020). These issues sparked moral outrage among individuals on one side against the other and prompted interpersonal divides (e.g., Chen & Rohla, 2018). In recent years, we also saw entire social media platforms created to support a particular set of moral and political beliefs over another set, creating the ultimate means of social distancing (through self-selection) by enabling people to avoid others who do not share their moral convictions. From a societal perspective, understanding the domain of interpersonal moral judgment is both timely and essential.

This chapter focuses on the way that moral judgments shape interpersonal processes and relationships. For the purposes of this chapter, we define *morality* as individuals' beliefs about fundamental standards for how people ought to conduct themselves, and we define *moral judgment* as the evaluations people formulate about the extent to which people and actions do or do not conform to their sense of morality. We adopt definitions that are psychological and descriptive, focusing on individuals' subjective determinations of morality, rather than an approach in which situations, people, or actions are assumed to possess certain inherent moral characteristics. In short, this chapter approaches morality as a phenomenon that occurs in the mind of perceivers, and one that is fundamentally attuned to interpersonal interactions (see Bauman & Skitka, 2009).

In what follows, we first discuss how morality affects person-perception, the basic foundation of interpersonal interactions. We then discuss the body of evidence documenting the effect of morality on individuals' willingness to form interpersonal relationships and on the interpersonal dynamics that shape interactions. In the second half of the chapter, we examine why morality exhibits such profound effects on interpersonal processes, exploring how the phenomenology of moral beliefs and judgments contribute to strong inferences about the character and identity of others who do or do not act in accordance with one's sense of morality. We close by considering the implications of this analysis for understanding moral processes in social discourse. A conceptual model of the processes outlined in this chapter is provided in Figure 1.

### **Morality and interpersonal perception**

Morality comprises a yet unspecifiable number of basic concerns that underlie the standards for conduct that people endorse (see Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2013). However, we identify two rough clusters of concerns that tend to emerge across different moral frameworks developed in the literature. One identifiable cluster of concerns involves social interdependence or responsibilities people have to others. The other cluster involves individual independence or autonomy. For example, domain theory differentiates between the moral and personal domains (e.g., Turiel, 1983), moral foundations theory differentiates between binding and individuating foundations (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2008), and the model of moral motives differentiates between other- or group-focused motives and self-focused motives (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). Thus, morality is primarily concerned with governing interpersonal interactions by prescribing and proscribing responsibilities and rights.

Because morality is fundamentally associated with governing interpersonal

interactions, it is perhaps not surprising that people's global judgments about the extent to which others have good or bad moral character are a core aspect of person perception, or how individuals form impressions of others. We view person-perception processes as the foundation for interpersonal relations because initial and ongoing person perceptions are the basis on which people make decisions about whether and how much to invest in interpersonal relationships. Abele and Wojciszke (2014) note that research on impression formation commonly differentiates between traits that relate to social orientation (i.e., communion, warmth) and traits related to individual efficacy (i.e., ability, competence), and that this distinction mirrors the fundamental challenges humans face: (1) to be accepted as a member of important groups, and (2) to pursue individual goals (see Lind, 2001). When evaluating others, people weigh information about social orientation more heavily than information about individual efficacy because whether a person's intentions are benevolent or malicious dramatically changes the potential consequences of how effectively a person can pursue their intentions (e.g., Bauman & Skitka, 2012; Cottrell et al., 2007). Information related to social orientation has as much as twice the impact on people's interpersonal judgments as traits related to individual efficacy (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Brambilla et al., 2019; De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000).

In recent years, general models of person perception processes have been adapted and extended to explain how moral information affects global impressions of individuals. Research shows that morality is a distinguishable and particularly impactful part of social orientation (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2019; Brambilla et al., 2011; Goodwin et al., 2013; Leach et al., 2007). For example, Goodwin and colleagues (2014) report several studies showing that people differentiate between moral traits (e.g., honest, loyal, fair) and other prosocial traits (e.g., friendly, warm, sociable), and base their global impressions of others more on moral

information than other prosocial traits. They find that morality dominates people's judgments about the suitability of others for important social relationships (e.g., close friends, romantic partners, and coworkers), whereas other prosocial traits have little added effect (Goodwin et al., 2014, Study 5). Furthermore, morality is the most important factor in determining whether people like, respect, and feel they know others, relative to information about other prosocial traits or traits related to individual efficacy (Hartley et al., 2016). People also expect that changes to their own or others' moral beliefs would fundamentally change the essence of that person's identity, in part because these changes would alter their relationships with others (Heiphetz et al., 2017). In short, individuals' moral characteristics play a major role in others' general impressions of who they are and the degree to which they are seen as good candidates for investing interpersonal resources (Helzer & Critcher, 2018).

### **Morality can unite and divide**

Several lines of research demonstrate that morality is not just important to person perception but also consequential to interpersonal judgment and behavior. A large body of research shows that, across several contexts, moral conviction consistently affects interpersonal interactions by prompting people to distance themselves from morally dissimilar others (e.g., Skitka et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2008; Zall et al., 2017). In particular, Skitka and colleagues' program of research explores the antecedents and consequences of individuals' subjective assessment that a particular issue or situation is connected to their fundamental sense of right and wrong and illustrates the effects of moral discord on interpersonal moral judgment (for a review, see Skitka et al., 2021). This work isolates the unique contribution of moral conviction to people's attitudes and behavior by measuring and controlling for attitude strength (e.g., attitude extremity, importance, and centrality) and a variety of other factors as well (e.g., religiosity, political orientation). For example, survey studies that ask

participants to report their attitudes about self-nominated or researcher-provided contemporary issues (e.g., abortion, capital punishment, legalization of marijuana, and nuclear power) find that higher levels of moral conviction are associated with lower levels of comfort interacting with people who hold different attitudes about the issue. After controlling for multiple indicators of attitude strength and several individual differences, greater moral conviction predicts a stronger desire to avoid attitudinally dissimilar others in both more intimate and more distant relationships (e.g., close friends, romantic partners, and coworkers, but also shopkeepers and personal physicians; Skitka et al., 2005).

Interpersonal consequences associated with morality can also stem from global judgments about individuals, not just differences of opinions on individual issues. Barranti, Carlson, and Furr (2016) find that discrepancies between the way individuals assess their own moral character and how acquaintances rate the individuals' moral character are associated with reduced liking and respect on the part of acquaintances. These interpersonal costs are stronger for disagreements about moral character traits than disagreements about other facets of individuals' personalities, indicating that moral impressions are a particularly influential component of interpersonal judgment.

Moreover, people are apt to draw inferences about others' traits based on the moral judgments others make, and these inferences, in turn, are likely to affect relationships and interpersonal behavior (Everett et al., 2016; Rom et al., 2017; Uhlmann et al., 2013). For example, Uhlmann and colleagues (2013) find that people perceive decision makers as lower in empathy and integrity when they choose options in moral dilemmas that are consistent with utilitarian concerns (e.g., throwing a dying man overboard to prevent a lifeboat from sinking and killing everyone on board) compared to when they choose options that are consistent with deontological concerns (e.g., refusing to throw the dying man off the

lifeboat), even though, on average, people report that the utilitarian choices these situations are more moral. Similarly, people perceive others as more moral but less competent when they choose options in moral dilemmas that are consistent with deontological concerns compared to when they choose options that are consistent with utilitarian concerns (Rom et al., 2017). Even the length of time people take to decide what to do in moral situations can have interpersonal consequences. For example, people are less critical of others who pause to deliberate rather than immediately choose an immoral course of action, such as pocketing a lost wallet (Critcher et al., 2012; see also Critcher et al., 2020). Importantly, these effects go beyond impression formation. People perceive others who make decisions about moral dilemmas that are consistent with deontological concerns as more trustworthy and find them to be more attractive social partners than those who make decisions that are consistent with utilitarian concerns (Everett et al., 2016). Moreover, people may even change their self-presentation strategies to help mitigate potential backlash they expect to face from others based on their choices (Rom & Conway, 2007). Taken together, these studies clearly indicate that people make consequential inferences about others based on their choices in moral situations.

Perceptions of morality also shape the way individuals interact with one another. When speaking with someone they perceive as immoral rather than moral, people are less likely to display nonverbal behaviors that facilitate interpersonal liking and rapport, including mimicry and synchrony (Brambilla et al., 2016; Menegatti et al., 2020). For example, Menegatti and colleagues (2020) manipulated impressions of an interaction partner to seem moral vs. immoral, sociable vs. unsociable, or competent vs. incompetent, and assessed participants' nonverbal behavior in a conversation with the interaction partner. Participants engaged in less mimicry and took a more closed off posture when interacting with partners portrayed as immoral compared to when interacting with

partners who were portrayed as unsociable or incompetent. Moreover, third party observers rated the interactions as less smooth in the immoral than unsociable or incompetent conditions, indicating the friction that moral judgments can create in interpersonal interactions.

Although the bulk of research has focused on the power of moral disagreement or moral violations to harm interpersonal processes, there is evidence that moral agreement (i.e., convergence between people on moral beliefs) facilitates interpersonal coordination. People are drawn to morally similar others, not just repelled by morally dissimilar others (e.g., Skitka et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2008). Also, moral conviction prompts others to initiate contact with others to garner social support for their beliefs; for example, activists often seek to form new relationships with likeminded others through door-to-door canvassing and hosting meetings in their homes (e.g., Skitka et al., 2017).

We also note that links between moral judgment and interpersonal processes can operate in the opposite direction, such that interpersonal closeness or warmth toward individuals can bias judgments of others' morality. The *mere liking effect* describes a tendency for people to attribute moral attributes to individuals they like versus do not like, even when the reasons for liking are unrelated to or at odds with common sense morality (Bocian et al., 2018; Bocian, & Wojciszke, 2014). Similarly, when leaders in good standing break rules, people are less apt to blame and punish others who subsequently commit similar transgressions because leaders' (bad) behavior influences observers' perceptions of relevant norms (Bauman et al., 2016). When paired with the research reviewed above, these studies suggest a self-reinforcing cycle of interpersonal moral judgment, such that esteemed (vs. scorned) others may be judged as more moral, which reinforces liking, subsequent interpersonal behaviors, and even moral judgments themselves.

**Why morality affects interpersonal judgment and behavior**

In this section, we consider why morality exerts such profound effects on interpersonal processes. We focus on the phenomenology of moral judgments—the way individuals experience their moral beliefs and judgments—to explain the interpersonal costs associated with moral disagreement. Deviations from what perceivers judge to be the morally correct course of action are not easily explained away by situational or other transitory forces. Instead, the indelible mark of a perceived moral transgression tends to come in the form of judgments of an individual's character, which carries long term consequences for interpersonal relations.

### ***Characteristics of moral judgments and beliefs***

Moral beliefs and judgments tend to differ psychologically from mere preferences or opinions in several important ways (Skitka et al., 2021). For example, people tend to experience their moral beliefs as objective—more like scientific facts than personal points of view (Goodwin & Darley 2008; Skitka et al., 2005). People also perceive their moral beliefs to be universally applicable in the sense that everyone, regardless of status or culture, should endorse and abide by them (Skitka et al., 2005; Turiel, 1983; Van Bavel et al., 2012). Moreover, people perceive morality to compel people to act on their own accord and supersede any mandates set by authorities (Skitka et al., 2009). Taken together, the sense of objectivity, universalism, and autonomy that accompanies moral beliefs carries distinct interpersonal consequences: Because people are responsible for their moral beliefs and actions, those who share one's moral beliefs are readily judged as correct and good and those who diverge from one's moral beliefs are readily judged as incorrect and bad. In short, the psychology of moral conviction prompts people to attribute others' similarities and differences to deep-seeded strengths or flaws of character, respectively. Although there are no doubt exceptions and moderators to this overarching picture, this account provides a fairly accurate description of the interpersonal gridlock that can occur when

individuals differ from one another on issues held with strong moral conviction.

### ***Violations of morality prompt person-focused attributions***

Because moral beliefs are imbued with the properties described above, morality may trigger attributional processes that crystallize perceived interpersonal differences. To understand why, consider the possibility that people perceive situations and issues concerning morality as “strong situations.” Strong situations are contexts that provide clear behavioral norms that typically constrain individual variability in behavior, resulting in behavioral conformity with relevant norms (Mischel, 1977). From an attributional perspective (e.g., Kelley, 1973), knowing that an individual acted in accordance with relevant norms in a strong situation may tell you very little about who the person is and how they differ from others; however, knowing that an individual violated relevant norms and acted contrary to the behavioral expectations set by a strong situation may prompt attributional processes aimed at trying to understand why *this* person acted in *this* way despite the demands of the situation. The most readily available explanation is that some stable characteristic of the person caused them to act contrary to the clear prescriptive norms of the situation.

Based on this analysis, we would expect that the interpersonal costs associated with disagreements about morality (in the form of attitudes, judgements, and interpersonal behaviors) will be stronger than the interpersonal benefits associated with agreements about morality. Some support for this claim comes from recent research by Guglielmo and Malle (2019), who find that interpersonal blame is both more amplified and more differentiated than interpersonal praise, holding constant the degree of the praise- or blame-eliciting behavior. This is consistent with the *negativity effect*, which has been shown to impact interpersonal processes in close relationships and social interaction more

generally (De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000; Fiske, 1980; for a review, see Baumeister et al., 2001).

### ***Moral emotions promote attributional certainty and inhibit revision***

Despite the cognitive connotation of judgment, moral judgments are widely recognized as possessing strong emotional components (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Prinz & Nichols, 2010). Perceived moral transgressions and transgressors trigger strong emotions, especially anger (e.g., Haidt, 2003; Skitka et al., 2004; 2006; Tetlock et al., 2000). Anger is associated with greater certainty, which can affect information processing in several ways, such as preempting further processing of stimuli in the manner required to revise initial impressions (e.g., Tiedens & Linton, 2001; for a review see Lerner, et al., 2015). Moreover, people who are angry are more likely to presume that harm has occurred (Gutierrez & Giner-Sorolla, 2007), which can reinforce people’s perception that a moral violation has occurred and should be punished (e.g., Malle et al., 2014; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Thus, the emotions prompted by spontaneous moral judgments of acts or actors who violate one’s moral standards can reinforce and amplify initial interpersonal impressions and perceptions. Of course, emotions involve appraisals and action tendencies that also have direct effects on judgment and behavior, independent of their effects on moral attributions (Frijda, 2007).

### ***Future directions for research***

#### ***Privileged status of moral beliefs***

One question for future research is whether one’s meta-ethical belief system impacts the tendency to assign privileged status to one’s own moral commitments, and thus moderates the interpersonal consequences associated with moral disagreement. A meta-ethical belief system refers to one’s beliefs about the nature of morality, such as whether morality is believed to be objective or absolute vs. relative and subjective (e.g., Forsyth, 1980). For example, one form of moral relativism is rooted in the belief that morality cannot be objectively determined because it is rooted in



culturally variable social practices. This perspective prompts some to adopt the normative position that others' views ought to be tolerated. Alternatively, some may simply view tolerance as a virtue in and of itself, regardless of their meta-ethical commitments. In either case, people who espouse these views may be less likely to associate their moral beliefs with objectivity, universalism, and autonomy and may therefore be less likely to exhibit differences in how they interact with others depending on moral similarity or dissimilarity. In short, future research could seek to identify boundary conditions of the interpersonal consequences of morality, especially as a means toward understanding when and how differently minded people can get along.

#### ***Attributional processes***

According to our analysis, many of the detrimental interpersonal effects of moral disagreement stem from the tendency to make negative attributions about others' character. Future research should seek to identify factors that moderate this tendency as a means to mitigate interpersonal conflict.

The tendency to form dispositional attributions on the basis of limited behavioral information is recognized as automatic and fundamental (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones, 1979; Uleman et al., 1996), but the trait inference process is subject to moderating factors. For example, research indicates that engaging in elaborate, in-depth, or systematic processing can subdue dispositional attributions in favor of more complex, enriched causal explanation (D'Agostino & Fincher-Kiefer, 1992; Fletcher et al., 1990; Forgas, 1998). Relatedly, research on construal level theory suggests that psychological proximity (versus distance) to a target can reduce the tendency to form spontaneous trait inferences based on limited behavioral information (Rim et al., 2009). The challenge is that in cases of moral disagreement, individuals' motivations to engage in systematic, elaborative processing or to attain psychological

proximity with dissimilar others may be weak or non-existent.

Additional research is needed to understand how to disrupt strong dispositional attributions in cases of moral disagreement. One promising finding from the stereotyping literature is that training individuals to consider situational explanations for behavior can diminish the tendency to engage in outgroup derogation (Stewart et al., 2009). Similarly, encouraging a growth or "incremental" mindset—seeing others as works in progress rather than fixed entities—has been shown to increase tolerance and willingness to compromise with outgroup members by reducing harmful dispositional attributions (Levontin et al., 2013). Thus, where practical, structured interventions targeting unhelpful attributions be a useful means of upsetting the processes depicted in Figure 1.

#### ***Unitary or foundation-specific consequences***

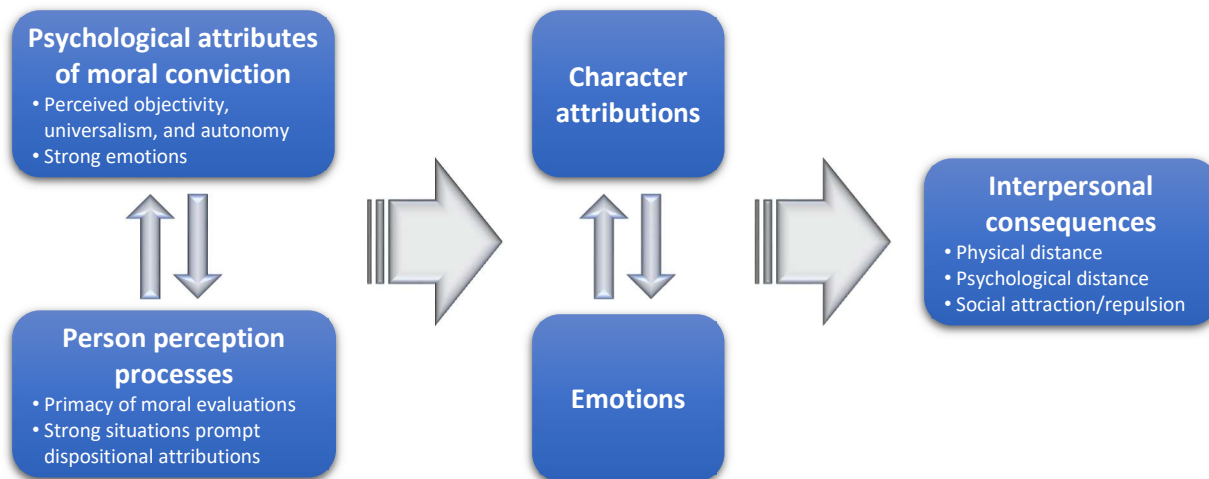
Many contemporary theories of morality can be classified as pluralistic views; they maintain that people apply multiple, distinct moral values or foundations when making moral judgments or deciding on moral courses of action (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). These theories suggest that morality itself has distinct dimensions that jointly influence people's judgment. However, other research on the psychological experience of morality suggests that, irrespective of the particular values or foundations upon which one's moral judgments are based, morality generates a common experience (e.g., Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Skitka et al., 2015). That is, the way people feel and act when confronting moral issues is largely the same, irrespective of what values or foundation of morality underpins their concern (see also Gray et al., 2012). Therefore, there is an opportunity to better understand the link between the structure of morality and the psychology of how people experience morality. Future research could systematically examine people's reactions to moral violations of different values or foundations and test whether they have different interpersonal consequences. For example,

violations of moral purity may be especially likely to elicit disgust and prompt people to disengage with transgressors whereas acts that cause unjustified harm to others may be especially likely to elicit anger and prompt people to engage and punish transgressors.

### Conclusion

Moral judgments affect interpersonal processes ranging from basic elements of person perception to decisions about with whom to engage and how to engage with people. These effects, and the mechanisms that underpin them, can easily increase polarization along moral lines: Initial moral disagreement between individuals triggers judgments, attributions, emotions, and behaviors that increase interpersonal distance and degrade or diminish subsequent interactions (Figure 1). In a pluralistic society, engagement with individuals who do not share one's moral views is unavoidable and potentially beneficial, so what are we to do? One option is to follow our intuitive psychology, which results in deeper entrenchment and greater polarization. This tendency may be exacerbated by leaders who seek to energize supporters and demonize critics by framing issues as threats to the moral order. Another option is to make deliberate attempts to understand divergent perspectives, resist the temptation to attribute moral differences to fundamental deficits in character, engage in collective sensemaking, and approach moral disagreements as pragmatic problems that may have mutually acceptable solutions.

**Figure 1:** *A conceptual model of why morality influences interpersonal interactions*



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