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Making It Moral: How Morality Can Harden Attitudes and Make Them More Influential

BY ANDREW LUTTRELL

Don't miss the responses at the end of the article:

- [Sonia Chopra](#)
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People can have an opinion about nearly anything. In social psychology, these are “attitudes”. An attitude is a person’s positive or negative evaluation of something, and that “something” can be anything from a person to an object to an abstract idea. For example, someone who says that she dislikes lawyers has a *negative attitude* toward lawyers. Someone who supports law enforcement has a *positive attitude* toward law enforcement.

These attitudes can be important in a variety of circumstances because they can be used to communicate something about the person who holds the attitude (Katz, 1960), and they can be used to predict a person’s behavior (see Glasman & Alabracin, 2006). As an example of the latter point, the person with a positive attitude toward law enforcement would be more likely to vote in favor law enforcement systems than a person with a negative attitude.

Although attitudes can be informative in a variety of ways, sometimes just knowing a person’s attitude is not enough. There are many other qualities of people’s attitudes that shed new light on how likely they are to act on their opinions and change them when faced with new information. These qualities are known as indicators of “attitude strength”, and they include things like how certain a person is of the attitude, how important a person thinks the attitude is, how conflicted a person feels about the topic, et cetera. (Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006).

The Consequences of a “Moral” Opinion

One quality of people’s attitudes that has important consequences is whether the attitude has a *moral basis*. This can depend on the topic, and it can depend on the person. One person might think his attitude toward fast food does *not* have a moral basis, but he might think that his attitude toward the death penalty *does* have a moral basis. Another person, though, might think her attitude toward the death penalty is *not* based in morality.

Plenty of research has now converged on a key insight: the more a person thinks that his or her attitude has a moral basis, the more that person's behavior aligns with that attitude, and the less likely it is to change in the face of pressure (Skitka, 2010).

First, moral attitude bases are associated with more attitude-consistent behavior. In one study, for example, Skitka and Bauman (2008) found that the more people thought their choice for president reflected their moral beliefs, the more likely they were to vote in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Another study found that the more people think that their position on a specific issue is a matter of morality, the more they say they will vote in upcoming elections (Morgan, Skitka, & Wisneski, 2010).

Second, consider the finding that people are less likely to revise their opinion if they see it as a matter of morality. People are constantly faced with pressures to change their opinions. They read new information, have surprisingly good and bad experiences, and learn the opinions of friends and family. All of these things could lead them to update their opinions. In one study, Aramovich, Lytle, and Skitka (2012) created social pressures to get people to rethink their opinion of torture. Their results showed that the more participants thought that their initial opinions were a matter of morality, the less likely they were to change in the face of group pressure.

The Mere Perception of Morality

The previous research clearly shows that the more people say they have a moral basis for their attitude, the more their behavior aligns with that attitude, and the less likely they are to change it. This research relies on people simply indicating how much their opinion has a moral basis, which means it is not yet clear whether these effects happen because people *truly* have moral reasons for their attitude or because people simply *think* they have moral reasons.

There has been plenty of research recently suggesting that the *perceived* qualities of one's attitude matter just as much as—if not more than—the actual qualities. For example, studies have long established that people's behavior aligns with their attitudes more if they have taken considerable time to think about and form that attitude (e.g., Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). New evidence, however, shows that when people merely *believe* that they have thought carefully about a topic—whether that is true or not—that is all it can take to increase the correspondence between the attitude and subsequent behavior (Barden & Petty, 2008).

Because perception plays such a strong role for other qualities of people's opinions, it seems that the same may be true for morality. That is, regardless of whether a person's attitude is actually grounded in their core moral beliefs and convictions, perhaps merely perceiving a link between an attitude and morality can be enough to make the attitude stronger.

My colleagues and I recently tested this possibility in a series of experiments (Luttrell, Petty, Briñol, & Wagner, 2016). In each experiment, we employed a procedure that would lead some people to perceive a moral basis to a particular opinion of theirs. Half of the participants in a study would be assigned to a condition in which they were led to perceive a moral attitude basis, and the other half would be assigned to a condition in which they were led to perceive a non-moral (but equally important) attitude basis. Importantly, participants were assigned to these conditions at random, which means that people had an equal chance of being in either condition, regardless of whether they *truly* had a moral basis for their attitude. In other words, these procedures ensured that any differences between conditions can be attributed only to differences in *perceived* moral bases and not actual moral bases.

Experiment 1: Acting on Attitudes

Recall that one of the key findings in past work on moral attitude bases is that people are more likely to behave in line with an opinion if that opinion is founded upon moral beliefs and convictions. In this study, we aimed to replicate that effect by leading some people to perceive a moral basis to their attitude, whether or not there was already such a basis in place.

We chose to assess people's attitudes toward a fabricated university policy. The participants included 138 undergraduate students who were told the study was about a proposed policy at their school that would require seniors to pass a set of comprehensive exams in order to graduate. Everyone began the study by reading a written description of this proposed policy and writing down the thoughts they had pertaining to it.

In this study, we used two slightly different procedures to get people thinking about how their attitudes toward this policy had a moral (vs. a non-moral) basis. Each method was based on the thoughts that people wrote down in response to the policy description. First, we asked some of the participants to reflect on their thoughts. Half of these people were asked to think about how their thoughts related to their core moral beliefs, and the other half of these people were asked to think about how their thoughts related to the important value of equality (an important basis that is not necessarily "moral"). Second, however, we presented other participants with feedback about their thoughts. We told them that a computer program was able to analyze patterns of text and that they could see the results of the analysis. For half of these people, the results of the program said that their thoughts clearly reflected moral concerns, and for the other half of these people, the program said that their thoughts clearly reflected the important value of tradition. In reality, the feedback people received was decided before they began the study. At this point, then, half of the participants had come to see their attitudes as morally based and half had come to see their attitudes as based on values other than morality (even though the *way* in which they came to these perceptions differed).

Following this procedure, everyone indicated their attitudes toward the policy. Importantly, the attitudes themselves did not depend on the experimental condition. The participants also indicated how willing they would be to engage in pro-policy behaviors. These questions asked people how willing they would be to sign a petition in favor of the policy, to put their name on a list of students who favor the policy, and to vote favorably on the exam policy.

The critical question in this study was how well-aligned people's behavioral intentions were with their attitudes toward the policy. Not surprisingly, these two variables were correlated overall. The more people said they were in favor of the policy, the more they said they would engage in pro-policy behaviors. Most importantly, though, this correlation was stronger among the people who were led to see their attitudes as moral. In other words, the participants in the moral condition showed more correspondence between their opinion of the issue and their willingness to take actions in line with that opinion, compared to participants in the non-moral condition. It also did not matter whether people came to see their attitude as moral because they directly reflected on its moral basis versus simply being told that their thoughts reflected moral concerns more than other concerns.

In sum, this study provided an important insight—that simply *perceiving* that one's attitude has a moral basis makes people more likely to behave in line with that attitude. It is worth reiterating that people's attitudes did not differ by experimental condition. That is, perceiving a moral basis does not automatically change the opinion itself; people who came to see their thoughts as moral supported the policy to the same degree as people who came to see their thoughts as founded upon non-moral bases, on average. Rather, seeing one's attitude as moral makes that attitude a stronger predictor of subsequent behavior.

Experiment 2: Resisting Persuasion

The previous study established that mere perception of a moral basis can make attitudes stronger in that they correspond more with behavioral intentions. In the second experiment, we tested whether the power of perceived moral bases could apply to another outcome: resistance to persuasion. We also changed the topic in this experiment to see whether these effects extend beyond a fabricated university issue. Instead, we examined people's attitudes toward recycling.

The participants included 73 undergraduate students, and as in the previous experiment, everyone began by reading a brief description of recycling programs, and they listed the thoughts that they had about recycling. In this experiment, we chose to stick with just one way of leading people to view their attitudes as being founded upon moral beliefs. Everyone received the "computer program's analysis" of their thoughts that either suggested that the person's thoughts reflected moral beliefs or reflected practical concerns.

Then they indicated their attitudes toward recycling, which again was not affected by the type of feedback they received. Following this, everyone read a persuasive essay containing arguments *against* recycling. Because all of the participants initially had positive attitudes toward recycling, this essay was a clear counterpoint to their initial opinions.

After reading the essay, everyone indicated their attitudes toward recycling one final time, and the question was: how much did people change their attitudes after reading the new information? The results show that the people who were told that their attitudes had a moral basis ended up changing those attitudes *less* following the message, compared to the people who were told that their attitudes had a practical basis.

Once again, this study showed that simply perceiving one's attitude as being grounded in morality made it less susceptible to change. As in the previous study, perceiving a moral basis did not affect the attitude itself; instead, it made that opinion—whatever it was—better able to withstand the forces of persuasion.

Experiment 3: Clarifying the Persuasion Effect

There was one issue in Experiment 3 that needed to be addressed. It was possible that our anti-recycling message accidentally appealed specifically to practical concerns. Previous research in persuasion has shown that people can be more susceptible to persuasion when the message contains elements that are consistent with qualities of their attitude (e.g., Maio et al., 2014; See, Petty, & Fabrigar, 2008). That is, in the previous experiment, people who were told that their attitudes were based on practical concerns might have been more persuaded by the message just because the message spoke directly to those practical concerns.

Therefore, this experiment used a revised persuasive message that spoke to both practical and moral concerns. In this way, we were able to more strongly test the hypothesis that perceiving a moral basis makes people resist persuasion, even if the message speaks to those moral concerns.

We also used this experiment as an opportunity to address the fact that the prior two studies relied on college students as participants. In this experiment, we recruited 100 participants using Amazon.com's *Mechanical Turk* program (54% male, mean age of 39). The experiment was nearly identical to Experiment 2 except that it used a persuasive message that spoke to moral concerns as well as practical ones.

The results mirrored those of Experiment 2. The people who were told that their attitudes were based on morality changed their attitudes less following the message, compared to the people who were told that their attitudes were based on practical concerns. Thus, even when there is some consistency between one's perceived attitude basis and the persuasive strategy used in a message, perceiving a moral basis still prompts greater re-

sistance to persuasion.

Conclusions and Implications


Three studies established that opinions do not need an actual moral basis in order to guide behavior and resist change. When someone merely *thinks* that he or she has a moral reason for holding a particular opinion, that opinion becomes a stronger predictor of behavior and more difficult to change.

One might be tempted to view these results as evidence for a compelling persuasion strategy, but this would not be warranted given the data. Throughout these studies, when we led people to view their attitudes as having a moral basis, it did not change their attitudes *per se*. For instance, in Experiment 2, one person could come to view his attitude as morally based, and another person could come to view her attitude as non-morally based, but they could nonetheless be equally pro-recycling. Thus, rather than being a method to *change* people's opinions, getting people to see something as moral is a way to get them to commit more strongly to a position they *already* hold.

Similarly, note that we did not necessarily use "moral arguments" or frame an entire issue as moral. Instead, we focused on getting people to view their own attitudes as being based

upon moral beliefs and convictions. Although the former approaches may achieve similar outcomes, it is simply worth reiterating that our experiments speak more directly to what happens when people come to perceive a moral basis for an attitude that they already hold.

These results have several implications for legal contexts, particularly in situations when it is desirable to have someone commit to a position, not waver, and even act in line with that position. On the one hand, it can be useful to distinguish people who are naturally inclined to see the issues of a particular trial as moral or not. As in the previous research, one can simply ask people whether their attitudes toward a particular person, group, or issue are based on their core moral beliefs and convictions. This information can help predict whether they are likely to be swayed by new evidence and act according to those attitudes.

On the other hand, it might be possible to use the findings of these three experiments as strategy. By telling a jury, for example, that their reactions are a reflection of their core moral principles, it could harden their existing beliefs, attitudes, and predispositions, protecting them against subsequent information that comes to light and prompting them to advocate for their position. 

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Sonia Chopra responds:

Understanding jurors' attitudes and attempting to determine when those attitudes are most likely to influence behavior is the bread and butter of what we do as litigation consultants. It makes sense that people who think their beliefs are based on core moral values would be more steadfast in those beliefs. The interesting aspect of this research is that the authors have demonstrated that one need only be told that their opinions are based on moral reasoning to engage in attitude consistent behavior and have those beliefs be resistant to change.

What troubles me in thinking about how to apply this research to our work, is the question of what does it mean to have a "moral" basis for one's opinions? The term "morals" is inherently subjective and arguably some of the variables used in the research could be perceived as having a basis in morality. For example, in Experiment 1 the authors had half the respondents think about how their responses reflected core moral beliefs, and the other half was told to think about how their answers reflected the value of equality. There is an argument to be made that believing in the importance of equality could come from a moral framework. The same could be true when comparing "traditional values" to "moral values," which are the variables used in the second phase of Experiment 1. The current presidential election comes to mind. For many people, support of "traditional values" are based in religious beliefs about things like abortion, or same sex marriage, which are arguably morality based opinions.

In the litigation arena I see the strongest application of the research to death penalty work. Beliefs for and against capital punishment are frequently based on core moral frameworks such as "an eye for an eye," "a life for a life" or "thou shall not kill," "only God can take a life." Those who have worked on capital cases know that jurors who espouse morality based sentiments to explain their death penalty views are the most steadfast in their beliefs and unlikely to be swayed. Litigators' arguments about why the death penalty should or should not be given often contain pleas to jurors' moral judgements about right and wrong, good and evil, retribution and justice. This research suggests that perhaps telling jurors that a life sentence is a moral decision, or that a death sentence is the moral choice, might influence voting behavior of those who already support the sentence the attorney is advocating for.

I like the author's suggestion about asking jurors whether or not the opinions they express in jury selection are based on core moral beliefs. I find that judges are more open to granting challenges for cause when the attorney is able to establish that the juror's opinions are strong, long-held beliefs that are resistant to change. Some examples of morality based attitudes that are relevant to civil litigation are the belief that "accidents are the result of fate or God's will," or that it is morally wrong to sue for money damages over the loss of love, companionship, and affection of a family member. Morality based thinking could also factor into jurors' thinking about punitive damages.

In California, the punitive damages jury instruction references "despicable conduct," which is "conduct that is so vile, base or contemptible that it would be looked down on and despised by reasonable people." The content of the instruction itself calls for a judgement on the morality of the defendant's actions. Moral appeals to award damages to jurors who already favor punitive damages might cement their willingness to do so.

An important takeaway from this series of studies is that being told that one's position was based on morality or on something else did not change peoples' opinions. Perceptions that one's beliefs have a moral component only makes those beliefs more resistant to change.

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Charlotte A. Morris responds:

IF YOU ONLY SKIMMED THE RESEARCH ARTICLE, YOU MUST READ THIS NOW

Boy oh boy! I've said before my favorite empirical research is the kind that affirms the litigation strategies and practices I've been recommending for decades now. And this one nails it!

Not only does the author deserve a lot of credit for conducting solid social science research on the issues of attitude formation, intention, behavior and persuasion, but he also writes it just as plainly as it can be written and now all I have to do is say how I plan to incorporate the ideas in the work I do for attorneys and their clients.

First, let's revisit the important findings and conclusions of the research:

- A) Attitudes that have a moral basis are stronger and more resistant to change than attitudes that do not.
- B) Even if people don't know their attitudes have a moral basis, we can tell them that they do and it still works (i.e., the attitudes are stronger and more resistant to change).

And here's my favorite because it reminds us that there is no EASY BUTTON for litigation:

- C) It is not a matter of simply labeling your OWN arguments as moral so that people will believe them strongly, and be resistant to opposing counsels' efforts to change those beliefs. This only works on attitudes that people brought with them when they walked in the door^[1].

So how does this work in our cases?

1. Use pre-trial research (or hire consultants who have already done a ton of them on cases like yours) to figure out which case facts or themes are closely linked to attitudes and beliefs which have a moral basis.
2. Develop the themes, arguments, evidence and testimony that will be linked to those experiences, attitudes and beliefs that will be pre-existing in your jury pool. Do this during discovery by running pre-trial research early in the case.
3. In voir dire, ask prospective jurors about those experiences, attitudes and beliefs and in follow-up questions find a way to suggest their pre-existing beliefs have a moral component (e.g., It sounds like you've thought a lot about your idea on this topic and feel pretty strongly; am I hearing you right that it may even be an issue of moral importance to you?).
4. Deploy your case themes, opening statement, direct and cross-examinations, demonstrative exhibits and closing

arguments which are consistent with these moral beliefs so that jurors may more readily accept your theory of the case and resist attempts by the opposition to persuade them of anything else.

Now, go back and read the whole article (if you didn't) because the experiments he conducted are well-crafted, and the results are fascinating. He ran three different trials to make sure they were getting it right (including one with folks who weren't college sophomores) and the bibliography references the work of many other accomplished and credible social scientists who have studied attitude formation and persuasion for decades.

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[1] See Also Morris articles on [voir dire](#).