Moral Convictions, Collective Action, and Concern for Future Generations

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Abstract

In September of 2022, the death of a young Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, mobilized people from all over the world to participate in different forms of collective action, such as joining protests and cutting off their hair in solidarity with the women of Iran. In the context of those events, the present study investigates the relationship between moral convictions and collective action. Because participating in collective action involves investing one's time and effort to potentially improve conditions in the future, we propose the individual difference in social generativity (the concern for future generations) to moderate this relationship. We tested our hypotheses with a correlational study (N= 227) and found a significant association between moral conviction and collective action. Furthermore, we found that generativity was significantly positively related to collective action. However, the evidence did not show a significant moderating effect of generativity. The findings of this study successfully replicate previous research on the relationship between moral conviction and collective action and make the association applicable to the context of the 2022 Iran protests.

Keywords: moral conviction, collective action, social activism, generativity, individual differences

Moral Conviction, Collective Action, and Concern for Future Generations

"I would like to see a future where Iranian women are recognized as human beings with human rights and citizenship rights, as well as an established position in society, instead of being seen as tools for meeting men's sexual desires and bearing children." stated Iranian activist Mahnaz Parakand about her life-long fight towards creating change for women's rights in Iran (OHCHR, 2022). In September of 2022, the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the Iranian 'morality police' almost immediately sparked protests all over the world. Since that day, we have been witnessing worldwide collective action, such as student-led movements, petitions, and protests, standing in solidarity with the women of Iran who are facing harsh persecution for expressing their dissent from the current political regime. Looking at the protests, the women cutting off their hair in solidarity, and the overall mass response, we can observe that the situation appears to be morally charged. To Mahnaz Parakand, the issue at hand has a very clear right and wrong. To the protesters, the answer to the question if Iranian women should possess basic human rights is an absolute and resounding 'yes'.

Attitudes of this nature are examples of moral convictions. Moral convictions, or the absolute beliefs about right and wrong (Skitka, 2005), were shown to be closely related to collective action (actions taken in order to improve a group's conditions, e.g. Van Zomeren et al., 2012). Previous studies have continuously shown that people who hold stronger moral convictions are more likely to engage in political action and activism (Van Zomeren, 2013, Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021), however little is known about which conditions strengthen this relationship. With this study, we aim to conceptually replicate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action and apply it to the context of the 2022 Iran protests. Furthermore, because participating in collective action to create change involves investing

one's time and effort to potentially improve conditions in the future, we propose that individual differences in the concern for future generations may moderate this relationship.

Moral Conviction

Moral convictions are defined as attitudes which reflect one's core beliefs about right and wrong (Skitka et al., 2005). Research has proposed multiple explanations for how non-moral attitudes gain a moral component. Attitude moralization is likely to be an intuitive process which can occur separately from conscious reasoning (Haidt, 2001, Feinberg et al., 2019) or in tandem with it through processes such as relating a new matter to an existing moral belief (Rozin, 1999).

There are two specific identifying characteristics which differentiate moral convictions from other types of attitudes. The individual holding a morally convicted attitude believes it to be: (a) objectively true, as well as (b) geographically, historically and culturally universal. In other words, attitudes high in moral conviction are perceived as universal facts which sets them apart from other strong but non-moral attitudes (Skitka et al., 2021).

Moreover, while non-moral attitudes can be rooted in personal tastes, social norms or authority-imposed imperatives, moral convictions differ from non-moral attitudes in that they are absolute, self-justifying, independent of authority, resistant to change, and inherently motivating (Skitka et al., 2021). Because of the absolute nature of moral convictions, one may see those who disagree with them as inherently wrong. Although people tend to be inclined towards conforming to majority-group norms, they will reject them if they perceive them as violating their moral convictions (Aramovich et al., 2012). Holding a moral conviction, consequently, goes hand in hand with intolerance towards opposing views (Skitka et al., 2005), which can lead to polarization (Garrett & Bankert, 2020).

Because the individual believes their moral attitudes to be objective and universal, moral convictions have an inherent motivating function (Skitka et al., 2005). The perceived absoluteness leads the individual to feel obligated to act in accordance with their conviction. Morgan (2011) found that the stronger one's moral attitudes, the more obliged one feels to act upon them. We can see the effect of these feelings of obligation when observing political participation and voting tendencies. Skitka and Bauman (2008) found that stronger moral convictions towards running political candidates predicted voting participation and that stronger moral attitudes towards political issues predicted higher intention to vote. Moral convictions have also been shown to predict actions such as the signing of petitions and intentions to participate in protests (Van Zomeren et al., 2012). Moreover, according to Kende et al. (2017), moral convictions are not only related to political activism but also long-term prosocial behavior.

Moral Conviction and Collective Action

Unsurprisingly, moral conviction has been considered as one of the main motivators of collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2012, Van Zomeren, 2013). Research on the relationship between moral conviction and collective action has proposed multiple factors which drive this process. As identifying with a group has been shown to predict actions which benefit said group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a significant body of research focuses on the social identity approach to collective action.

According to the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA, Van Zomeren et al., 2008), one's social identity, especially when politicized, is a significant predictor for collective action. The model suggests that when individuals perceive an injustice towards the group they identify with, especially if that triggers group-based anger (Van Zomeren et al., 2004, Furlong & Vignoles, 2021), they are more likely to participate in collective action.

SIMCA is later extended to encapsulate the importance of moral convictions, proposing that shared moral convictions promote an establishment of a group identity (Van Zomeren, 2013).

Van Zomeren et al. (2018) illustrate that the perception of violated moral beliefs, along with politicized identity, is at the core of motivating collective action. When people perceive that their moral principles have been violated, they are motivated to defend what they stand for, and what they identify with. It is this consistency with one's politicized and moral beliefs, which drives individuals to participate in collective action against the source of perceived injustice. With our study, we aim to replicate this relationship between moral convictions and social activism.

The Moderating Role of Generativity

Although the above-mentioned evidence shows that moral convictions can motivate collective action, less is known about the conditions which can facilitate this process. Duncan (2012) proposed that integrating individual difference variables into models of collective action could provide a better understanding of this motivation and possibly explain why certain individuals become more politically active than others. Based on the idea that participating in collective action requires sacrificing one's leisure time in the present for the chance of improving the future (Shavit, 2014), we propose that a high level of concern for future generations strengthens the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

The concern for future generations, or generativity, was most notably described by Erikson in his theory on the eight stages of development (1963). Generativity versus stagnation, according to Erikson (1963), is the seventh developmental stage of which the successful resolution results in the individual developing a concern for their contribution to future generations. Although generativity is most often expressed in conjunction with parenting, it can also apply to a general sense of responsibility for the future of one's

community as a whole. For example, this new concern can be expressed through actions such as teaching, mentoring, or community involvement. On the contrary, generativity is juxtaposed against stagnation. Representing the unsuccessful realization of the said life stage, stagnation is characterized by self-centeredness and self-indulgent behavior. In more recent studies, low generativity has been linked to higher rates of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO, Morselli & Passini, 2015), which fittingly reflects an aspect of Erikson's definition of stagnation.

Multiple studies have shown the link between generativity and political involvement. Duncan (2012) proposed that highly generative people might be more likely to lean towards explanations for social problems which are based on larger overarching systemic causes and are therefore more inclined to join collective actions which target those injustices. Cole and Stewart (1996), found high correlations between generativity and political efficacy beliefs, linking generative concern with a higher likelihood of participating in collective action. Peterson and Duncan (1999) show that generativity is positively correlated with political interest, regardless of ideology. In their studies, generative adults were more likely to contribute to political causes by investing their time and resources. In the same study, students who scored high on generativity were more likely to participate in on-campus protests and meetings.

Next, generativity has been linked to more inclusive attitudes and low SDO (Morselli & Passini, 2015). Individuals showing high rates of SDO, tend to defend inter- and intra-group hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and are more likely to act in their own personal interest rather than in the interest of the future of the community (Morselli & Passini, 2011). We predict that this could translate to less generative individuals with strong moral convictions being less likely to help disadvantaged groups if they are not personally affected,

while more generative individuals might still see themselves as responsible even if not personally affected.

Furthermore, generativity is closely related to one's moral identity. Pratt et al. (2009) found that in young adults, higher endorsement of moral values was a significant predictor of high generativity. Similarly, unlike less generative individuals, more generative people tend to emphasize their moral commitments in the construction of their personal life narratives (McAdamds et al., 1992). They are also more likely to see themselves as morally courageous and more inclined to create self-narratives which include accounts of acting courageously during moral dilemmas and standing up for others (Pratt et al., 2009). This self-perceived courage could lead highly generative individuals who hold strong moral convictions to be more likely to support those who have been treated unjustly, by participating in actions that require courage (e.g. public protests).

Moreover, generativity has been linked to higher community involvement (e.g. Hart et al., 2001, Pratt et al., 2009). Being involved in a community may foster group-based processes such as social identification and the development of a politicized group identity (Cole & Stewart 1996), which have been associated with a higher likelihood of participation in collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2012). Because generative individuals tend to be more community involved, they could be more likely to see the well-being of that community as part of their care and responsibility. Therefore, we predict that when holding strong moral convictions, more generative individuals may be more motivated to participate in collective action to create change - not only for the benefit of themselves but also for the future benefit of their community. On the other hand, less generative individuals with the same moral conviction might not act upon it, especially if the injustice does not affect them directly.

Overview of the Present Study

The present study investigates the relationship between moral conviction and collective action in the context of the Iran protest in 2022 and examines whether generativity moderates this relationship. We will evaluate this model by testing the following three hypotheses (pictured in Figure 1). Hypothesis 1: moral conviction is positively associated with collective action, Hypothesis 2: there is a positive correlation between generativity and collective action, and Hypothesis 3: generativity moderates the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

Figure 1

Research model

Generativity

Moral conviction

Collective action

H2

H3

H1
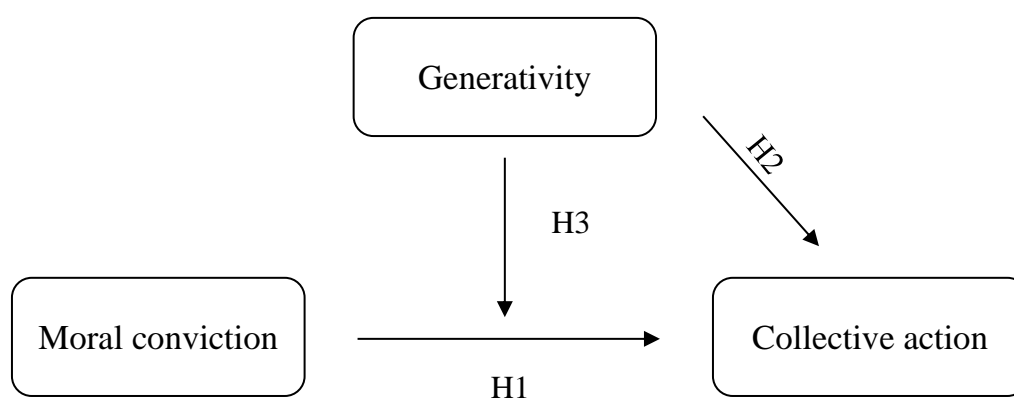
Method

Participants and Design

Two hundred twenty-seven first-year psychology bachelor students at the University of Groningen participated in an online study via Qualtrics. Participants received 0.4 SONA credits for their participation. Our sample consisted of 52 males, 171 females, and 4 participants indicating 'other'. Participants could choose whether to disclose their age. One participant's answer was removed due to it being a number over 9000. The valid answers (N=224) ranged in age between 17 and 35 years old (M= 20.08, SD= 2.11). Of the 227 students who participated in this study, 139 were from the Dutch bachelor program, 83 were from the English bachelor program, and 5 attended other programs. This study was a

correlational study design in which we used moral conviction as the independent, collective action as the dependent, and generativity as the moderating variable.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Social and Behavioral Science of the University of Groningen. Participants were recruited via SONA, an internal participant database of the University of Groningen. All questions were answered in English and were collected and analyzed according to General Data Protection Regulations after consent was given by the participants.

In the first part of the study, we asked the participants about their attitudes towards three current societal issues; gender inequality, human-made climate change, and racial inequality. Only the questions about gender inequality were of interest to this study, while the rest served as filler questions to make the aim of the study less apparent. In the second part of the study, participants were told they were assigned to one of the three issues, although they were all assigned to answer the same subsequent questions. They were shown a brief paragraph summarizing the 2022 Iran protests, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini. Next, they were asked about their willingness to participate in different types of collective action in the context of the Iran protests. This part also included questions about helping behavior, which is not relevant to our current hypothesis. Furthermore, the participants completed a generativity measure, as well as a few measures of other individual differences which will not be used for testing our hypotheses. After completing all the questionnaires, participants were asked for some basic socio-demographic information (i.e. gender, age) and debriefed about the intentions of the study.

Measures

Moral Conviction

We first measured the participants' general attitude towards gender equality. They

indicated their support by using a 7-point Likert scale *(1= Strongly oppose 7 = Strongly support)* (*M*= 6.56, *SD*= 0.96). To measure moral conviction, participants indicated how much their opinion on gender equality was: "a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions", "connected to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong", and "based on moral principle" (Skitka et al., 2005, using a 7-point Likert scale *(1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much)*. Cronbach's alpha for moral conviction was *α*= .875 (*M*= 5.67, *SD*= 1.18). Furthermore, to measure the strength of the attitude, participants were asked "How much is your opinion important to who you are as a person?" and "How strongly do you feel about racial inequality?" using the same 7-point Likert scale.

Collective Action

The measure for participants' willingness to engage in collective action was adapted from Leal et al. (2020). Participants were asked to respond to four questions, asking whether they would be willing to "participate in an upcoming protest to support gender equality for Iranian women", "share some information about ongoing gender inequality issues in Iran on my social media", "change my profile picture on my social media to raise awareness about women's rights in Iran", and "sign a petition to support gender equality in Iran". The responses were given along a seven-point Likert scale *(1=Not at all, 7=Very much)*. Cronbach's alpha for collective action was *α*= .827 (*M*= 4.32, *SD*= 1.45).

Generativity

Generativity was measured with all six items of the Social Generativity Scale (SGS, Morselli & Passini, 2015). The scale asked the participant to indicate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*. The items include statements such as "I carry out activities in order to ensure a better world for future generations" and "I commit myself to do things that will survive even after I die". The SGS showed internal reliability of *α* = .784 (*M*= 3.36, *SD*= .71).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

First, we checked that our variables met the necessary assumptions for the regression analysis. The P-P plot (see Figure 1 in the Appendix) indicates that the residuals are normally distributed as the values follow a straight line. The scatterplot (see Figure 2 in the Appendix) suggests that the data are indeed homoscedastic and that the relationship between the variables is linear. The Durbin-Watson test showed that the residuals were independent as the value was close to 2 (1.99). Furthermore, the VIF values were all below 5, and tolerance above 0.1 (see Table 1 in Appendix), which indicated that there was no multicollinearity among the variables.

Next, we conducted a preliminary descriptive analysis and examined the existing relationships between the variables with a correlation analysis (see Table 1). The results showed a moderate positive correlation between moral conviction and collective action. Generativity was also positively correlated with collective action and with moral conviction.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	M(SD)	1	2	3
1 Moral conviction	5.70(1.17)	1		
2 Collective action	4.32(1.45)	.481**	1	
3 Generativity	3.36(.71)	.141*	.306**	1

Note: Range Likert scales= 1-7

**p<. 01, *p<. 05

Hypothesis testing

Our hypotheses define moral conviction as the independent variable, collective action as the dependent variable, and generativity as the moderating variable. We centered the independent and moderating variable and calculated a new variable for their interaction. To test the hypotheses, we conducted a simple linear regression, entering moral conviction, generativity, and their interaction as independent variables, and collective action as the dependent variable. Overall, the model was significant, with the explained variance being 29% ($F(3,223)= 30.563$, $p< .001$). As we predicted with Hypothesis 1, we found a significant main effect between moral conviction and collective action ($\beta= .447$, $t(226)= 7.843$, $p< .001$). Moreover, in line with Hypothesis 2, the regression showed a significant effect between generativity and collective action ($\beta= 0.238$, $t(226)= 4.145$, $p< .001$). However, contrary to Hypothesis 3, the interaction effect between moral conviction and generativity was not significant ($\beta= .045$, $t(226)= 0.794$, $p= .428$).

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate if moral convictions relate to collective action and whether generativity moderates this relationship. In line with previous studies, we predicted a positive relationship between moral conviction and collective action. Our findings showed support for this hypothesis. We also found evidence in line with our second hypothesis, showing a link between generativity and collective action. However, as the interaction effect was not significant, we could not support our third hypothesis which predicted generativity to moderate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this research have several theoretical implications for the existing literature on moral conviction and collective action. To begin with, the study successfully conceptually replicated the findings of previous studies (Morgan 2011, Van Zomeren, 2013,

Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021, etc.), providing additional evidence for the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

Secondly, the present research applies the existing literature to a new context. In the present study, collective action was measured in the context of the 2022 Iran protests, and the moral conviction we measured was specifically gender equality. This distinction provides a unique insight into how the previously established relationship can be observed within a specific new context.

Lastly, although the study provides additional support to the existing literature (e.g. Cole & Stewart 1996, Peterson & Duncan 1999) on the association between generativity and social activism, it did not show sufficient evidence for the moderating role of generativity. The possible reasons why this characteristic did not appear to strengthen the relationship between moral conviction and collective action will be discussed in the following section.

Limitations and Future Research

Although our study produced some valuable new insights, we must take into account the limitations as well. To begin with, the sample for our research included predominantly Dutch and German female psychology students. This bias is likely to have influenced the findings. For example, first-year students are increasingly more likely to participate in protests (Eagan et al., 2015) which could have skewed the results of this study and made them less generalizable to other demographic groups. We propose future research to include a more diverse sample, to solidify the external validity of the findings.

Furthermore, the study was framed around a very specific context. As previously mentioned, collective action was measured in the context of the Iran protest, and the moral conviction we observed was gender equality. This makes the present results applicable only to these specific conditions, which is at the same time a strength and a limitation of this

study. Further studies should be done in a variety of different contexts, to reinforce that the relationship between moral convictions and social activism is context independent.

Moreover, when measuring collective action, our study measured solely behavioral intention, not the actual behavior. Because intention doesn't always translate to action (e.g. Sheeran, 2002), this might have resulted in higher rates of collective action than if we were to measure actual behavior. Future research could incorporate a measure of actual behavior, for example providing an option to sign a petition, to bridge the gap between intention and behavior and obtain a more accurate measurement of collective action.

Lastly, with regard to generativity, there could be a few possible explanations as to why it does not moderate the relationship between moral conviction and social activism. Firstly, the societal issue at hand might have been too urgent to be seen as a concern affecting future generations. Although Iranian activists have been fighting injustice towards women for decades, the current protests are focusing on bringing light to the exacerbated violence women are suffering under the new political regime (OHCHR, 2022). Therefore, the collective action was first and foremost aimed at improving the well-being of women living in Iran in the present day. Secondly, the situation in Iran, although alarming, might have been too geographically distant to be considered impactful on students' immediate environment. Consequently, they might not perceive it as a threat to *their* future generations. Future research could be done to examine generativity in the context of issues which more explicitly affect future generations, such as climate change or environmental pollution.

Conclusion

With this study, we have set out to investigate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action, and the conditions which may strengthen it. We proposed that concern for future generations, or generativity, could affect this relationship. We found that holding a strong moral conviction about gender equality was linked to higher potential

participation in actions and protests against the mistreatment of women in Iran. This leads us to believe that moral convictions do in fact motivate change through participation in collective action, and that holding concern for the well-being of future generations could motivate us to partake in activism.

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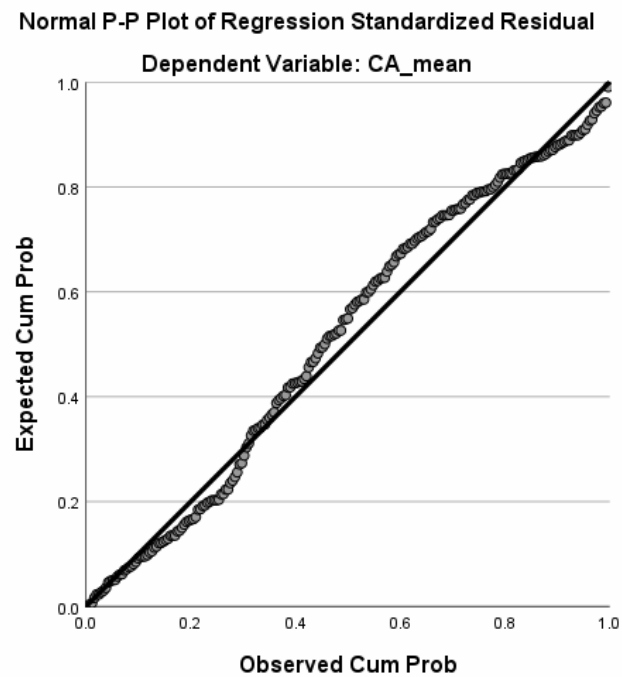
Appendix

Figure 1

P-P plot

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual
Dependent Variable: CA_mean

Figure 2:

Scatterplot of Standardized Residuals

Scatterplot
Dependent Variable: CA_mean

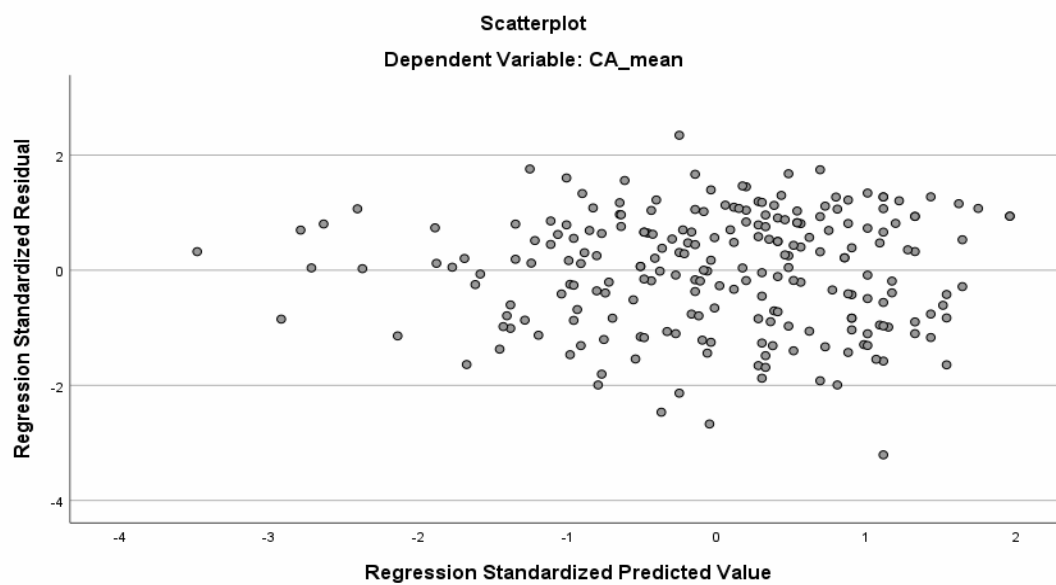**Table 1**

Tolerance and VIF values

	Tolerance	VIF
Moral conviction	.980	1.020
Generativity	.967	1.034
Interaction (Moral Conviction x Generativity)	.986	1.014