

**The Moderating Role of Social Connectedness in the Association Between Moral  
Conviction and Collective Action**

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### **Abstract**

Previous research showed that moral convictions are a key predictor for collective action. However, the condition under which this occurs, are less studied. In this study, we investigated whether moral conviction was positively associated with collective action. Furthermore, we hypothesized that social connectedness was positively associated with collective action. Lastly, we hypothesized social connectedness would moderate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action. We conducted a correlational study in the context of the “Iran Revolution” movement. We recruited 227 first year psychology students who filled out an online survey. In line with our first hypothesis, we found that moral conviction was positively associated with collective action. In contrast to our second hypothesis, we found that social connectedness was not associated with collective action. Furthermore, social connectedness did not moderate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action. Theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

*Keywords: moral conviction, collective action, social connectedness, Iran Revolution*

## **The Moderating Role of Social Connectedness in the Association Between Moral Conviction and Collective Action**

In September 2022, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini was arrested in Tehran after not wearing her hijab properly. When she was placed in detention she was reportedly beaten into a coma and she died three days later on September 16<sup>th</sup> 2022. The Iranian government insisted that Mahsa died from a heart attack, despite reports stating she died from a skull fracture caused by multiple blows to the head. The suspicious circumstances under which she died raised a lot of questions and angered people all over the world. Since Mahsa's death, an uprising of protests has started in solidarity with Mahsa Amini. People all over the world started burning their hijab and cutting their hair to demonstrate the treatment and rights of women in Iran (Women's Voices Now, n.d.). Protests like these ones are usually fueled by notions of morality, such as *moral convictions* (Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2011,2018). Moral conviction can be described as strong attitudes that people hold about right and wrong (Skitka et al., 2005), and when violated (e.g., the death of Mahsa Amini), motivate people to undertake collective action to defend their moral convictions (Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2018). Thus, in this research, we aim to investigate whether and under which conditions moral conviction may be related to collective action. Particularly, we focus on whether social connectedness may moderate this relationship.

### **Moral Conviction**

Moral convictions are a special class of strong attitudes that refer to a strong belief about right or wrong, moral or immoral, and are expressions of core values (e.g., "I strongly support gender equality because it's a matter of moral imperative to me and the right thing to do"; Skitka et al., 2005). According to the domain theory of attitudes, strong attitudes that are rooted in moral conviction differ from attitudes rooted in preferences and conventions (Nucci 2001, Nucci & Turiel 1978, Skitka 2014, Skitka et al. 2005). Attitudes that are rooted in

preferences are perceived as subjective tendency or matters of taste, and people tend to be very tolerant towards others who have different preferences (e.g., “I strongly support gender equality because that’s how I feel like”). Conventional attitudes are often rooted in norms, and tend to be supported by authority dictates or governments (e.g., “I strongly support gender equality because all my friends and family do so”; see Skitka et al., 2021 for a recent review).

However, attitudes grounded in moral convictions are psychologically experienced as a matter of moral imperative and have unique characteristics of their own (Skitka et al., 2005, 2021). For example, they tend to be perceived as objective and universal (Wright et al., 2008). People with strong moral convictions are more likely to be intolerant towards other who have different attitudes (Wright et al., 2008). Moreover, individuals with strong moral convictions are more likely to avoid changing their attitude by distancing themselves from other people who do not share the same attitude. They are also more likely to question and resist the legitimacy of authority figures whose attitudes do not match theirs (Skitka et al., 2005, 2021; Wright et al., 2008). Importantly, moral convictions empower people to engage in actions of their behalf, such as engage in collective action that supports one’s conviction (Van Zomeren et al., 2011, 2012).

### **Moral Conviction and Collective Action**

Some research suggests that moral conviction may motivate people to engage in collective action (Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2011, 2012, 2018). Social psychologists typically define collective actions as any action that individuals take as group members, with the goal to change and improve their group’s conditions (Wright et al., 1990). This could be done by a disadvantaged group-member trying to improve their own conditions but also an advantaged group member trying to help the disadvantaged group (Thomas et al., 2020). Additionally, collective action can be done by a single individual, it does not have to

be a *collective* action to count as collective action (Van Zomeren, 2013), for example, an individual can participate in collective action by signing a petition or posting something on social media to raise awareness.

According to value protection and moral conviction literature (Pauls et al., 2022; Tetlock et al., 2000), when people experience that a moral conviction or value is being violated (e.g., the death of Mahsa Amini), they feel the need to take action to protect such convictions and values (Van Zomeren et al., 2018). This is because people experience such violations as attacking to their own fundamental, and feel internally compelled to do something about them against such threats (Van Zomeren et al., 2018).

People who hold strong moral convictions are more inclined to engage in collective action to protect their moral values and convictions (“what we stand for”) and respective identities (“who are we”; Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2018). After all, people who hold strong moral convictions feel morally obliged to act in line and be consistent with them and who they are (Sabucedo et al., 2018; Van Zomeren et al., 2018). In this research we aim to conceptually replicate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

### **The Moderating Role of Social Connectedness**

Even though there is ample evidence showing that moral convictions predict collective action (Agostini & Van Zomeren., 2021; Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2018), we know little about the conditions under which this effect can occur. We propose that social connectedness may make this relationship stronger.

Social connectedness refers to the degree to which individuals feel connected to other people in their social circle, including family, friends, and community members. It contains both emotional and behavioral aspects of social relationships, such as feelings of attachment, belongingness, and social support, as well as the frequency and quality of social interactions (Haslam et al., 2015).

Social connectedness might influence people's attitudes and behaviors, including those related to collective action (Bäck et al., 2015). Feeling connected and belonging to other people in a social group, is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Leary et al. (2007) claimed that people with a high need to belong look for other people's acceptance by being engaging in social actions- and wanting to socialize. They feel more attuned to opportunities to connect with others, such as contexts of collective action. Consequently, Bäck et al. (2015) stated that individuals who are given a chance to socialize, like participating in a protest, are more likely to do so. Being part of a social group satisfies the basic human need for a sense of belonging and connectedness, but it also carries the risk of being punished by the group for failing to comply with its norms, which could result in exclusion (Bäck et al., 2015). In this research, we aim to study whether social connectedness is positively associated with collective action.

We suggest that social connectedness may moderate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action. Feeling more socially connected provides people with social reinforcement and support for acting and protecting their moral convictions. People who feel connected to a social network that values and supports their moral convictions are more likely to feel motivated to engage in collective action on behalf of their convictions (Mooijman et al., 2018). Their social network provides a sense of identity and support, which can increase their motivation to engage in collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2004). Thus, we propose social connectedness might strengthen the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

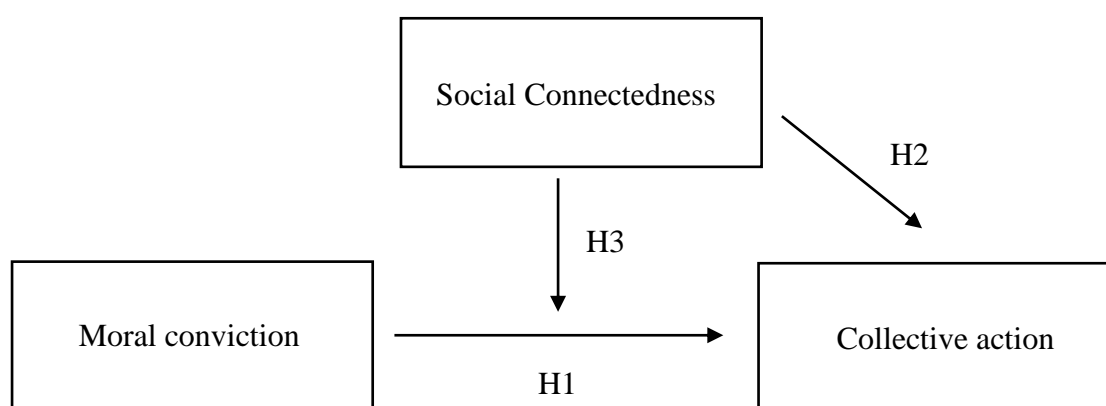
### **The Current Research**

The goal of this research is to investigate whether and when moral convictions is associated with collective action, in the context of the women's rights movement in Iran, The Iran Revolution. We hypothesize that (1) moral conviction is positively associated with

collective action, (2) social connectedness is positively associated with collective action, and (3) social connectedness moderates the relationship between moral convictions and collective action such that the relationship between moral conviction and collective action is stronger for individuals who score high on social connectedness.

### Figure 1

*Model for the current study. The Relationship Between Moral Conviction and Collective Action and The Moderating Role of Social Connectedness*



### Method

#### Participants and Design

For this research 227 first year psychology bachelor students at the University of Groningen participated in an online Sona study. The participants received 0.4 Sona credits for participation. Our sample consisted of 52 males, 171 females, and 4 reported other. They ranged in age between 17 and 35<sup>1</sup> ( $M = 20.08$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ). From the 227 participants that participated in this study, 139 were from the Dutch bachelor program, 83 were from the English bachelor program and 5 were other. This study was a correlational study design, with

<sup>1</sup> We removed one answer pertaining age, because it did not include valid data. Participant reported age being 93550.



moral conviction as the independent variable, collective action as the dependent variable, and social connectedness as the moderating variable.

## **Procedure**

This 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 in English. Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study, and the data were collected and analysed according to General Data Protection Regulations.

In the first part of the study, we asked participants to complete a questionnaire about their moral convictions about three societal issues, namely, gender equality, racial inequality, and human-made climate change. The issue of interest was gender equality, and the other two issues were used as filler questions.

In the second part, we briefly introduced the context of Mahsa Amini's death and the 2022 Iran Revolution, and participants filled out a measure reporting their willingness to collective action. Furthermore, the participants were asked to complete a measure of social connectedness, and other measures that were not relevant for the hypotheses of this study. After completing all questionnaires, the students were asked for some basic socio-demographic information (i.e., gender, age) and debriefed about the intentions of the study.

## **Measures**

### ***Moral Conviction***

To measure moral convictions, participants indicated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), 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?”, “based on moral principle?” (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka et al., 2021). Cronbach's alpha for moral conviction was 0.88 ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ).

### ***Collective Action***

We used a 4-item measure for willingness to engage in collective action adapted from Leal et al., (2020). Participants indicated their willingness 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”, “sign a petition to support gender equality in Iran” by using a 7-point Likert-scale (1=not at all, 7=very much). Cronbach's alpha for collective action was 0.83 ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ).

### ***Social Connectedness***

We used six items of the Social Connectedness Scale – Revised (SCS-R) to measure social connectedness (Lee et al., 2001). The items were: “I feel disconnected from the world around me” (reverse coded), “I find myself actively involved in people’s lives”, “I catch myself losing a sense of connectedness with society” (reverse coded), “I am able to connect with other people”, “I see myself as a loner”, “I don’t feel related to most people” (reverse coded). Participants used a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for social connectedness was 0.82 ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ).

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analyses**

We first checked whether the assumptions for multiple linear regression were met (i.e., normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity, linearity and independence of observations). To assess normality, we computed a normal P-Plot to confirm the assumption. The P-Plot indicated that the residuals are normally distributed as they follow a straight line (See Figure 1 in the Appendix). To confirm the assumption of homoscedasticity and linearity, we reviewed a scatterplot of the standardized residuals, which illustrated that the residuals are equally distributed as they seem to be scattered. Thus, the scatterplot suggests a linear

relationship between the independent variable, moderator, and dependent variable (See Figure 2 in the Appendix). Residuals are independent as Durbin-Watson = 2.02 and finally, the data showed that the assumption of collinearity was met (Moral conviction, Tolerance = 1.0, VIF = 1.0 ; Social Connectedness, Tolerance = 1.0, VIF = 1.0).

We then conducted preliminary analyses where we inspected the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability scales for the variables, as shown in Table 1. Moral conviction was positively and significantly correlated with collective action. However, social connectedness was not significantly correlated with either moral conviction or collective action.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics: Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Correlations*

Variables	N	M	SD	$\alpha$	Collective action	Social connectedness
Moral Conviction	227	5.70	1.17	.875	.481**	.013
Collective Action	227	4.32	1.45	.827	1	-.055
Social Connectedness	227	3.60	.76	.82	-.055	1

*Note:  $p < .001$*

### **Hypotheses Testing**

To test our hypotheses, we first centered the independent variable (moral conviction) and the moderator (social connectedness) and then computed an interaction between the centered variables. Afterwards, we ran a multi linear regression analysis, and we found that

our overall model regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = .24$ ,  $F(2,224) = 34.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We first hypothesized that moral conviction was positively associated with collective action. Our findings supported our hypothesis, showing a significant association between moral conviction and collective action,  $\beta = .483$ ,  $t(223) = 8.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $f^2 = 0.23$ , 95% CI [0.45 ; 0.74]. For the second hypothesis, we hypothesized that social connectedness was positively associated with collective action. We found no significant association between social connectedness and collective action,  $\beta = -.061$ ,  $t(223) = -1.048$ ,  $p = .296$ ,  $f^2 = 0.01$ , 95% CI [-0.34 ; 0.10], and no support for the second hypothesis. Lastly, we hypothesized that social connectedness moderated the relationship between moral convictions and collective action such that the relationship between moral convictions and collective action is stronger for individuals who score high on social connectedness, but we found no significant interaction effect,  $\beta = .004$ ,  $t(223) = .067$ ,  $p = .947$ ,  $f^2 = 0.00$ , 95% CI [-0.15 ; 0.16], and no support for this hypothesis.

## Discussion

In this study, we aimed to investigate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action, and the moderating role of social connectedness in this relationship in the context of the “Iran Revolution” movement. We hypothesized that moral conviction was positively associated with collective action. Our findings supported this hypothesis and replicated previous evidence that moral conviction is a predictor of collective action (Agostini & Van Zomeren., 2021; Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2018). Furthermore, we hypothesized that social connectedness is positively associated with collective action. Our findings did not confirm this hypothesis, meaning that based on our findings, social connectedness is not positively associated with collective action. Lastly, we hypothesized that social connectedness moderated the relationship between moral conviction and collective

action. We expected the relationship between moral conviction and collective action to be stronger when people scored high in social connectedness, compared to those scoring low in social connectedness. Our findings did not support this hypothesis, meaning that based on our findings, social connectedness did not moderate and strengthen the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This research has some theoretical implications. In this research, we replicated earlier study findings (Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2018) in a different context, namely the “Iran Revolution”, showing moral convictions about gender equality are associated with collective action in the context of the “Iran Revolution”. We can conclude from this that the relationship between moral conviction and collective action is a robust, context-independent relationship, since this context had not been investigated before. This contributes to the existing literature and expands the knowledge of the relationship between moral conviction and collective action, in different contexts.

Moreover, we found that social connectedness was not associated with collective action or even strengthen the relationship between moral conviction and collective action. A reason for this lack of findings could be that social connectedness might be related to other forms of social activism. There is evidence showing that volunteerism and social connectedness are associated (Brown et al., 2012; Gilster, 2012). Volunteerism is a form of prosocial behavior (Snyder, 2009), which refers to voluntary behavior benefitting some else (Bierhoff, 2002). Research has shown evidence that moral conviction also predicts prosocial behavior (Kende et al., 2017). In this study we hypothesized that social connectedness was associated with collective action. However, social connectedness might be associated with different forms of social activism, like prosocial behavior (e.g., volunteerism). Future research could measure different forms of social activism in relation to social connectedness.

Another possible reason we did not find an association could be that social connectedness needs to be targeted to the ingroup (e.g., “I feel connected to women in Iran). Studies have shown that those with a higher ingroup identification are more likely to exhibit different forms of group-level responses compared to those with a lower ingroup identification (see Ellemers et al., 1999). This is especially evident when moral convictions and group identity are threatened. This can lead to collective action (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Whether feeling connected to women in Iran will lead to collective action or even strengthen the relationship between moral conviction and collective action, could be a direction for future research.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

The first limitation in this research concerns the used sample. The sample consisted of first-year psychology students, who were mostly female. A homogeneous sample makes it harder to generalize the findings to other populations. Further research can focus on having a more diverse sample, to ensure generalizability across other populations.

The second limitation in the study pertains to measuring intentions. For this study we used a self-report measure to investigate intentions to participate in collective action. Intention to engage in collective action does not always lead to actual behavior. Future research could measure actual behaviors, instead of intentions. For example, the frequency of participants engaging in collective action.

The third limitation is related to the context we used. We investigated the relationship between moral conviction and collective action in the context of the “Iran Revolution” movement. A movement this specific is not very generalizable to other contexts. However, we did replicate previous study findings that were measured in different contexts (Pauls et al., 2022; Van Zomeren et al., 2018). Further research in different contexts will add to the robustness of the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, this study enhanced our understanding of whether and under which conditions moral conviction might be related to collective action. We used a correlational study design to investigate this relationship. We replicated previous findings and found that moral conviction was positively associated with collective action. Unlike our prediction, social connectedness was not positively associated with collective action. Furthermore, social connectedness did not seem to moderate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action. Overall, we found that moral conviction is a key predictor for collective action, and further research is needed to fully understand the conditions and contexts in which moral conviction may lead to collective action.

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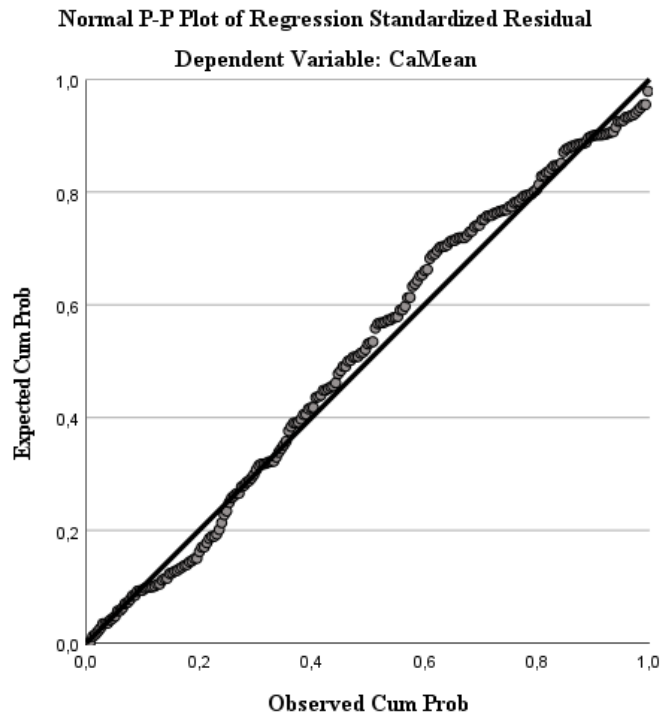
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## Appendix A

**Figure 1**  
*Normal P-Plot of the Standardized Residuals to Assess Normality*



**Figure 2**  
*Scatterplot of the Standardized Residuals to Assess Homoscedasticity and Linearity*

