Does and When Does Moral Conviction Relate to Helping Behavior?

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Abstract

The incident around Mahsa Amini's death in the Iran Revolution 2022 has risen awareness about gender equality in Iran and led many people to show solidarity. In this research we aimed to investigate whether moral conviction (i.e., an absolute opinion about right and wrong) about gender equality is associated with subsequent helping behavior,. Moreover, we investigated the moderating role of perspective-taking in the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior. We hypothesized that moral conviction is positively associated with helping behavior and secondly, we hypothesized that perspective-taking is positively associated with helping behavior. Furthermore, we proposed that perspective-taking moderates this relationship, such as the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior would be stronger for people who scored highly on perspective-taking. This was done in the context of the Iran Revolution 2022. We conducted an online survey and recruited 227 psychology students as participants. We found that moral conviction was significantly associated with helping behavior, and perspective-taking as well. However, we did not find a significant interaction between moral conviction and perspective-taking, meaning that perspective-taking does not seem to play a moderating role in this relationship. These findings contribute to the existing literature showing that moral convictions are a driving force for engaging in helping behavior, which is important for understanding drives of helping in any society and especially in humanitarian crises.

Keywords: moral conviction, helping behavior, benevolent support, perspective-taking

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On Friday, 16th September 2022, Mahsa Amini died under Iranian police custody. Three days earlier the 22-year-old woman had been arrested for not wearing her hijab according to the Iranian dressing rules for women, or as Iranian authorities stated for wearing "an improper hijab". According to news reports, she was badly beaten by the police when taken into custody, which Iranian authorities have denied and claimed that she died because of a heart attack that had nothing to do with alleged police violence (United Nations, 2022). This incident sparked nationwide protests about women's rights in Iran and led people all over the world to show solidarity towards women in Iran (Burga, 2022; Reuter, 2022). For instance, two well-known German TV reporters, who have a broad reach on social media, decided to give their private Instagram accounts to female activists in Iran so they could use the reach to create more awareness about, for instance, the discrimination of women's rights in Iran (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2022). It is likely that these acts of helping were fuelled by, for example notions of morality (e.g., *moral convictions*; i.e., absolute beliefs about right and wrong; Skitka et al., 2005) concerning gender equality (Kende et al., 2017; Sabucedo et al., 2018; Skitka, 2010). Therefore, in this research, we aim to answer the following question: Does and when does moral conviction relate to helping behavior?

Previous research has shown that moral convictions are a strong motivational force to engage in activist behavior, such as collective action (Kende et al., 2017; Sabucedo et al., 2018; van Zomeren, 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2011). However, we know very little about how moral conviction relates to more benevolent forms of activism that are aimed at alleviating the suffering of others (Louis et al., 2019; Thomas & McGarty, 2017), that is, helping behavior.

Kende et al. (2017) provided the first evidence that moral convictions were associated with activistic helping behavior among volunteers in the context of the Hungarian refugee crisis. In the current research, we aim to conceptually replicate the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior in a different context, namely the Iran Revolution 2022, sparked by the incident around Mahsa Amini. Moreover, we go beyond it by investigating whether individual differences in perspective-taking may moderate this relationship. Indeed, perspective-taking (i.e., the ability of adopting another person's thoughts and emotions) has been positively related to helping behavior (Davis et al., 2019; Galinsky et al., 2005; Gülseven et al., 2020; Mestre et al., 2019; Oswald, 1996). We further propose that perspective-taking may strengthen the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior.

Moral Convictions

Moral convictions are defined as strong attitudes which are perceived as fundamental beliefs about right and wrong and are expressions of core values (e.g., "I strongly support gender equality because it's a matter of moral imperative to me") (Skitka et al., 2005). Attitudes grounded in moral conviction are theoretically different from strong attitudes grounded in preference or convention, which are based on personal likes or dislikes (e.g., "I strongly support gender equality because that's what I feel like"), or on the norms and customs of one's social group (e.g., "I strongly support gender equality because all my friends do it, too"), respectively. Attitudes grounded in preference or convention are typically more malleable than attitudes grounded in moral conviction, and are often less emotionally charged, which also means that people are more tolerant of others who hold different opinions about a given object (Skitka et al., 2005).

Indeed, moral convictions are psychologically experienced in unique ways (Skitka et al., 2005, 2021). They are experienced as true and universal, which means that attitudes rooted in moral convictions are not restricted to a certain culture or group of people and apply to every context. Moreover, they tend to be perceived as objectively true facts about the world, and people are more likely to resist changing them, even in the face of persuasive arguments or social pressure (Skitka, 2010). People are also less tolerant towards dissimilar attitudes and more inclined to socially distance themselves from people holding opposing attitudes (Skitka et al., 2005). When faced with a conflict between their moral convictions and duty to authority, people tend to prioritize their convictions over their sense of obligation, implying a certain intolerance towards authority when moral convictions are at stake (Skitka, 2010; Skitka et al., 2005, 2021). One important characteristic of moral convictions is that they motivate individuals to act on them (Kende et al., 2017; Sabucedo et al., 2018; Skitka, 2010; van Zomeren, 2012 van Zomeren et al., 2011). Indeed, some research has shown that moral convictions can predict important social behaviors that drive social change, for example collective action (van Zomeren, 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2011), voting (Skitka, 2010), and volunteerism (Kende et al., 2017) Therefore, the consequences of moral conviction should not be underestimated as they can have important implications for individuals, groups, and society.

Moral Conviction and Helping Behavior

Indeed, there is initial evidence showing that moral convictions drive helping behavior (Kende et al., 2017). When people are exposed to situations in which their moral conviction gets violated (e.g., the death of Mahsa Amini), they very likely feel the urge to do something about it and morally obliged to act on it (Sabucedo et al., 2018; van Zomeren et al., 2018). There are two

theoretical explanations for why moral conviction relates to helping behavior. One is that people want to act in line with their moral conviction and what they stand for because it feels uncomfortable if they do not. According to Festinger's (1957) theory of *cognitive dissonance*, people like to engage in behaviors that are in line with their attitudes. When the attitude does not fit the behavior, this constitutes a strong motivation to change either of the two, in order to make it consistent with the other. Thus, people would engage in helping behavior to be consistent with their attitudes and avoid psychological discomfort.

Another explanation for why moral conviction may also relate to helping behavior is through *moral obligation.* Sabucedo et al. (2018) found that a feeling of motivation to comply with one's moral conviction is a strong predictor for helping behavior. That means it is not a discomforting feeling arising from a cognitive dissonance that makes someone act according to their moral conviction, but rather a "purer" way of wanting to live in line with one's core values. In other words, people feel morally obliged to engage in acts that support who they are (i.e., identities) and the convictions they stand for (van Zomeren, 2013; van Zomren et al., 2018). Therefore, people can engage in helping behavior that validates and expresses their identities and moral convictions.

Kende et al. (2017) conducted a study in the context of the Hungarian refugee crisis aiming to investigate what motivates people to engage in different forms of activism such as collective action or volunteerism (i.e., helping behavior) among volunteers in this political climate. They found that volunteers engaged in helping behavior (and collective action) to support refugees due to their feelings of identification with the group of volunteers and moral convictions about the refugee crisis. In this study, we aim to conceptually replicate the

relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior. However, it remains unclear when moral conviction may motivate such helping behavior.

The Moderating Role of Perspective-Taking

Even though there is already some evidence showing that moral conviction can motivate helping behavior (Kende et al., 2017), we know little about the conditions under which this effect can occur. We propose that individual differences in perspective-taking may make this relationship stronger. Perspective-taking refers to the ability of understanding and experiencing the thoughts, feelings and situations of other people. It is an essential cognitive process and social skill that enables people to communicate effectively, build relationships with others and predict other people's behavior, thus it is crucial for social functioning (Davis, 1983; Smith, 2006). Research has shown that perspective-taking is linked to improved social interaction, reduced prejudice and stereotyping, and enhanced social relationships (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd et al., 2011). Importantly, perspective-taking has also been linked to increased helping behavior (Davis et al, 2019; Galinsky et al., 2005; Gülseven et al., 2020; Mestre et al., 2019; Oswald, 1996). One possible explanation for this might be that perspective-taking may enhance feelings of emotional empathic concern, which makes people worried about other's well-being and thus intensifies the need to alleviate their suffering (Gülseven et al., 2020; Mestre et al., 2019). Moreover, perspective-taking enhances an experience of being connected to other people (Galinsky et al., 2005) and therefore can lead to a feeling of social responsibility for others (Cojuharenco et al., 2016), hence it might facilitate helping.

We suggest that perspective taking may enhance the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior. In the case of a violated moral conviction (e.g., the death of

Mahasa Amini), someone high in perspective-taking more easily recognizes the unjust situation of victims affected by such violations and experiences the other person's suffering, which may lead to a strong need to help those (i.e., women in Iran) affected by the violation. After all, people want to be consistent with who they are and the convictions they stand for (van Zomeren et al., 2018). This is consistent with the idea that perspective-taking may induce a feeling or state of cognitive and emotional dissonance, which means that a person's thoughts and feelings toward a certain issue do not match their deeds. This incongruence supposedly intensifies the need to help by urging people to bring their behavior in line with their thoughts and emotions (Mestre et al., 2019).

The Current Research

In the present study, we aim to conceptually replicate the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior in a different context, namely that of the Iran Revolution 2022 arousing around the incident of Mahsa Amini's death. Moreover, we investigate the moderating role of perspective-taking in the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior. We hypothesize that moral conviction is positively associated with helping behavior and secondly, we hypothesize that perspective-taking is positively associated with helping behavior. Furthermore, we expect that perspective-taking moderates this relationship, such as the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior is stronger for people who score highly on perspective-taking.

Figure 1 *Visual Display of the Study's Hypotheses*

Method
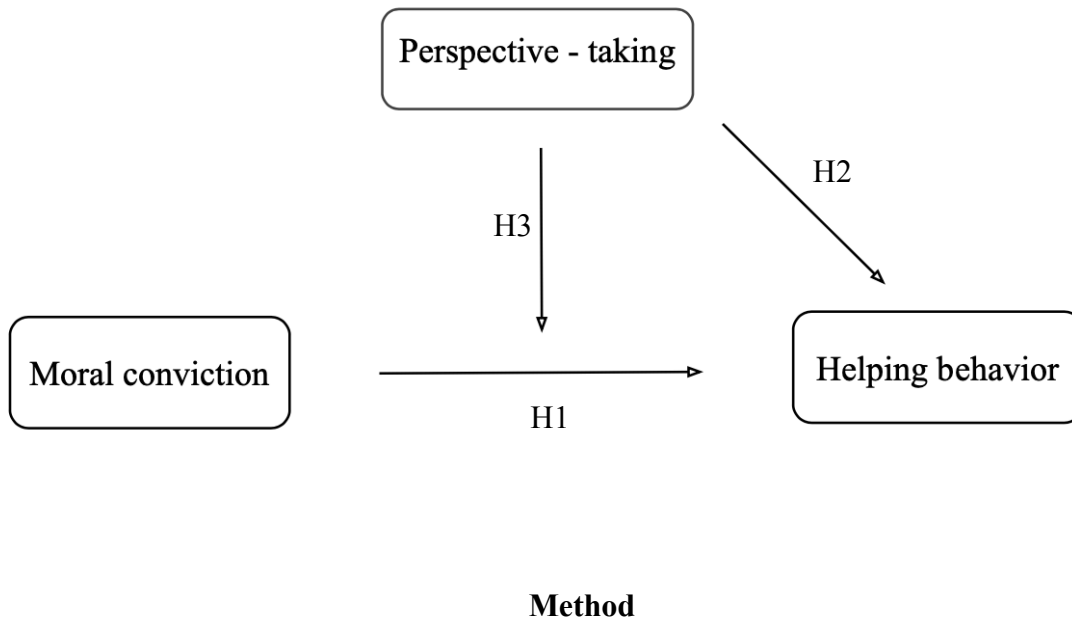
Participants and Design

Two-hundred-twenty-seven first-year psychology bachelor students of the University of Groningen participated in an online study via Qualtrics. Participants received 0.4 SONA credits for participation. Our sample consisted of 52 males, 171 females, and 4 "other". They ranged in age between 17 and 35 *(M* = 20.08, *SD* = 2.11). Out of the 227 participants that participated in this study, 139 were from the Dutch psychology bachelor program, 83 were from the English psychology bachelor program and 5 from other programs. This study was a correlational study design, in which moral conviction was the independent variable, perspective-taking the moderator, and helping behavior the dependent variable.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Social and Behavioral Sciences of the University of Groningen. Participants were recruited via SONA, an internal participant database and platform of the University of Groningen, and completed the questionnaire online. All questions were in English. Data collection and analyzation was done according to the General Data Protection Regulations and after consent was given by the participants.

In the first part of the study, participants completed a questionnaire on their general attitude and moral convictions regarding gender equality, racial inequality, and human-made climate change. The target issue of moral conviction was gender equality, and racial equality and human-made climate change were filler issues used to conceal the study's target issue. In the second part of the study, they were told that they had been assigned to the social movement context of the Iran Revolution 2022. Participants were then asked to indicate their willingness to engage in a specific helping behavior addressing gender equality in the context of the Iran Revolution 2022. Furthermore, the participants were asked to complete a measure of perspective-taking and other measures that were not relevant for the hypotheses of this study. Finally, participants provided some basic socio-demographic information (i.e., gender, age) and were debriefed about the intentions of the study.

Measures

Moral Conviction

For assessing moral conviction, we used items from Skitka et al. (2005, 2021). We first measured participants' general attitude towards gender equality. Participants indicated to what extent they supported or opposed gender equality on a 7-point Likert scale *(1- Strongly oppose 7*

- *Strongly support)*. To measure moral conviction, participants indicated how much their opinion on gender equality was "a reflection of their core moral beliefs and convictions", "connected to their beliefs about fundamental right and wrong", "based on moral principle" , 'important to who they are as a person" and "how strongly they feel about gender equality" by using a 7-point Likert scale *(1 = not at all, 7 = very much)*. Cronbach's alpha for moral conviction was .875 (*M = 5.70, SD = 1.17*).

Helping Behavior

Helping behavior was assessed in the context of the Iran Revolution 2022. We measured participants willingness to engage in a variety of helping behaviors addressing gender equality in the context of the Iran revolution 2022 (adapted from Kende et al., 2017). Participants reported their willingness to "donate 15 euros to an organization that is fighting for gender equality in Iran", "lend their social media platform account to an Iranian gender equality activist to help her spread awareness about the issue", "offer emotional support via an internet platform to Iranian people protesting for gender equality" and "take part in a fundraising project to support women's right activists in Iran" by using a 7-point Likert scale *(1 = not at all, 7 = very much)*, Cronbach's alpha for helping behavior was .849 (*M* = 4.26, *SD* = 1,54).

Perspective-Taking

For assessing perspective-taking, we used five items of the perspective-taking subscale of Davis' (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Participants indicated on a 5- point Likert scale *(1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)* to what extent the following statements applied to them: "When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.", "I

try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.", "Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place." "If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments." (reverse coded), and "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective." Cronbach's alpha for perspective-taking was .732 ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .62$) after removing the item "If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.", which somehow decreased the internal consistency of the measure (Cronbach's alpha = .683).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

We first tested whether the assumptions for (multiple) linear regression (i.e., normality, linearity, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, and independence of observations) were met. Visual inspection of the P-P plot indicates that residuals are distributed normally, as they roughly follow a straight line (see Figure 1 in the Appendix). Visual inspection of the scatterplot suggests that the data is homoscedastic as residuals are equally distributed and seem to be scattered within two horizontal lines (see Figure 2 in the Appendix). This suggests a linear relationship between independent variable, moderator, and dependent variable. We also checked for multicollinearity, which did not seem to be a problem as the VIF-values were below 10 (< 1.13) and tolerance scores above 0.2 ($> .89$). Furthermore, residuals were independent as Durbin-Watson = 1.93. Overall, all assumptions were met. We examined the correlations, means, and standard deviations between all variables, as shown in Figure 2. All variables were positively and significantly correlated ($ps < .05$).

Figure 2

Mean, Standard Deviation, Reliability, and Correlations for all Variables.

Variable	Scale point	α	Mean	SD	2	3
1. Moral conviction	1-7	.875	5.70	1.17	.307**	.421**
2. Perspective-taking	1-5	.732	3.95	.62	1	.283**
3. Helping behavior	1-7	.849	4.26	1.54	.283**	1

** $p < .001$.

Data Analysis Strategy

For the regression analysis, we first centered the independent variable's mean (moral conviction) and the moderator's mean (perspective-taking). We also computed the interaction of moral conviction and perspective-taking. Then, we ran a multiple regression analysis, which tested 1) the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior, 2) the relationship between perspective-taking and helping behavior and 3) the interaction between moral conviction and perspective-taking (i.e., moderating role perspective-taking has on the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior). Using G*Power, we computed the required effect size for $\alpha = .05$ and power = .8 the required effect size we found equals $f^2 = .05$ (see Figure 3 in the Appendix), computing the model's effect size from R^2, we found $f^2 = .26$.

Hypothesis Testing

The overall model was statistically significant with a variance explained by our model

equal to $R^2 = .207$, $F(3,223) = 19,44$, $p < .001$. We found that moral conviction towards gender

equality was positively and significantly associated with helping behavior intentions ($\beta = 0.377$,

$t(223) = 5.970$ $p < .001$, 95% CI [.33, .66], $sr^2 = .127$). Our first hypothesis was thus supported.

In line with our second hypothesis, results showed a positive and significant relationship between

perspective-taking and helping behavior ($\beta = 0.172$, $t(223) = 2,743$, $p = .007$, 95% CI [.12, .73],

$sr^2 = .027$). Finally, results showed a nonsignificant interaction of moral conviction and

perspective-taking ($\beta = 0.065$, $t(223) = 1,077$, $p = .282$, 95% CI [-.10, .35], $sr^2 = .004$). As shown

in Figure 4 (see Appendix), the simple slopes seem quite parallel. Thus, we did not find support

for the moderation hypothesis.

Discussion

In the present study, we aimed to conceptually replicate the relationship between moral

conviction and helping behavior in a new context, namely that of the Iran Revolution 2022

arousing around the incident of Mahsa Amini's death. Moreover, we investigated the moderating

role of perspective-taking in the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior. We

hypothesized that moral conviction is positively associated with helping behavior and secondly,

we hypothesized that perspective-taking is positively associated with helping behavior.

Furthermore, we expected that perspective-taking moderates this relationship, such as the

relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior is stronger for people who score

high on perspective-taking.

We found support for the first hypothesis, that is, moral conviction was positively related to helping behavior, and the second one, that is, perspective-taking was also positively related to helping behavior. However, our third hypothesis was not supported, that is, perspective-taking did not moderate the relationship of moral conviction and helping behavior.

Theoretical Implications

Our research has several important implications for the existing literature of moral conviction, helping behavior, and perspective-taking. First of all, we replicated the positive association between moral conviction and helping behavior, which has not been studied extensively yet and is therefore of particular value. Our findings confirm Kende et al.'s (2017) findings showing that moral conviction is related to helping behavior, but in a different and novel context, namely the Iran Revolution 2022. Thus, moral convictions are an important drive to engage in more benevolent forms of activism, that is, helping behavior. This means that moral convictions can motivate social activists to express their empathy and engage in positive contact or charitable giving in an effort to address the needs and alleviate the suffering of a disadvantaged group or even to bring about social change (see Louis et al., 2019 for an overview of intergroup prosociality). This is important in any society and especially in humanitarian crises.

Using Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance as an explanation for the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior, people engage in helping behaviors that are in line with their attitude to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of a discrepancy between the two. Explaining this relationship through moral obligation, people engage in helping behavior because their moral convictions bear a feeling of motivation to bring one's behavior in

line with them (Sabucedo et al., 2018). Following this line of reasoning, it is not so much a cognitive dissonance, but rather a "purer" way of wanting to live according to one's core values that motivates people to engage in helping behavior matching their moral convictions. That is, through moral obligation, people can engage in helping behavior that not only supports who they are and what they stand for but also expresses their identities and moral convictions (van Zomeren, 2013; van Zomeren et al., 2018).

A second theoretical implication results from the association between perspective-taking and helping behavior, which adds to the literature, by suggesting that this association generalizes across different contexts. This may be due to people high in perspective-taking have feelings of emotional empathic concern, which makes them worried about other's well-being and thus intensifies the need to alleviate their suffering (Gülseven et al., 2020; Mestre et al., 2019). Moreover, perspective-taking leads to an experience of being connected to other people (Galinsky et al., 2005) and therefore feeling more social responsibility for others (Cojuharenco et al., 2016), which might also facilitate helping.

A third theoretical implication results from the lack of support for the moderation hypothesis, implying that perspective-taking does not influence the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior One explanation could be related to our sample, as participants scored relatively high on perspective-taking ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.54$). Therefore, there was no sufficient variance to detect an interaction effect, and perhaps a larger sample would be needed to test this interaction. Another explanation could be that the relationship between moral conviction and helping behavior is not dependent on personality traits related to prosociality, such as

perspective-taking. Our results suggest that people high in perspective-taking are likely to engage in helping behavior and also have strong moral convictions, thus, perspective-taking does not seem to moderate their relationship, but to go along with both: strong moral convictions and helping behavior.

Limitations, Future Research and Strengths

There are several limitations in our study. First, our sample consisted predominantly of female psychology students, therefore it was very homogenous regarding gender, and education which can lack external validity and does not allow for much generalizability of the finding's interpretation. Therefore, future research could sample a more diverse population regarding other socio-demographic variables such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, political orientation, age, study field, educational level and gender to ensure generalizability. Secondly, measuring merely the *intention* to engage in helping behavior instead of actual helping behavior presents another limitation of our study. Although it has been shown that intentions are a quite good predictor of behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), future research should look at the relationship between moral conviction and *actual* helping behavior. Another limitation results from our model as our findings are very specific about the context and moral conviction issue we used, and therefore do not allow for much generalisability.

Using a real-life context and gender equality issue displays a strength of our study as it makes it relevant to the participants. This might be particularly true for our predominantly female sample as women might be especially sensitive regarding gender equality (therefore, they might hold relevant moral convictions) and perceive Iranian women more easily as in-group members,

which makes them more easily connect with them, which in turn facilitates helping (e.g. Reicher et al., 2006; Telzer et al., 2015). The real-life context also enabled us to create items about context-specific and very tangible examples for measuring helping behavior enhancing our study's ecologically validity.

Future research about the association of moral conviction and helping behavior could study mediators such as identification with out-group members, how moral convictions develop (i.e. attitude moralization), or the role of prosocial moral reasoning. A longitudinal study could provide information about how sustained the effects are, as we were only able to capture a momentary picture. As already mentioned, sampling from a more diverse population would be beneficial for obtaining more generalizable results and more variation in the variable measurement to detect possible interaction effects. Furthermore, future research could measure actual helping behavior (e.g. volunteering or donating) and interview participants about their motivation for engaging in benevolent forms of activism.

Conclusion

Moral conviction has previously been linked to helping behavior, however, there is only little research about this association and we do not know under which conditions this association occurs. Therefore, this research investigated the moderating role of perspective-taking on the relationship of moral conviction and helping behavior in the context of the Iran Revolution 2022. In line with previous research, we found that moral conviction, as well as perspective-taking, is associated with helping behavior. Thus, these associations generalized to the context of the Iran Revolution 2022 and gender equality as a moral issue. No support was found for the moderating

role of perspective-taking. However, this research supports the idea that moral convictions drive

helping behavior even regarding a humanitarian crisis in Iran, thus at a long distance.

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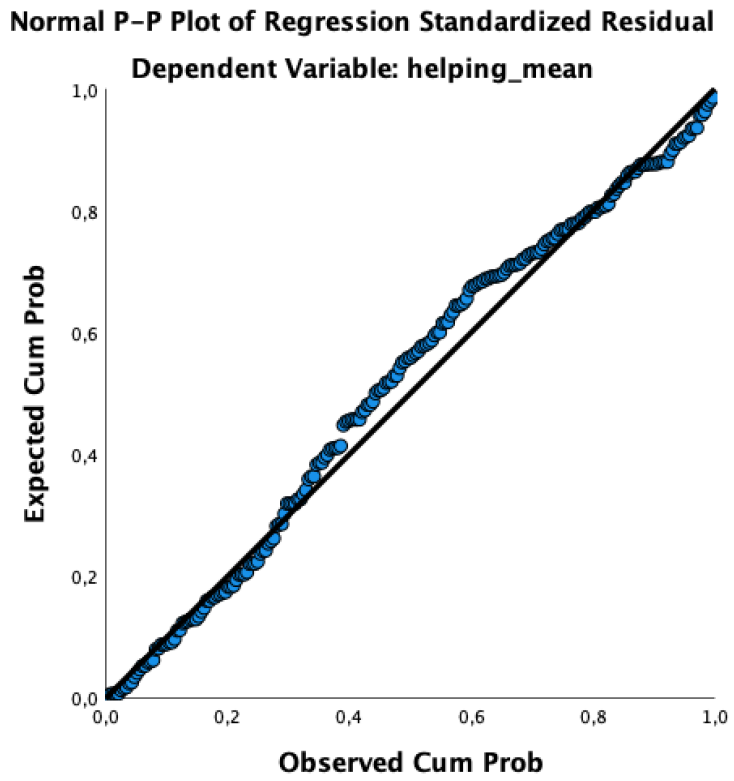
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van Zomeren, M., Kutlaca, M., & Turner-Zwinkels, F. (2018). Integrating who 'we' are with what 'we' (will not) stand for: A further extension of the Social Identity Model of Collective Act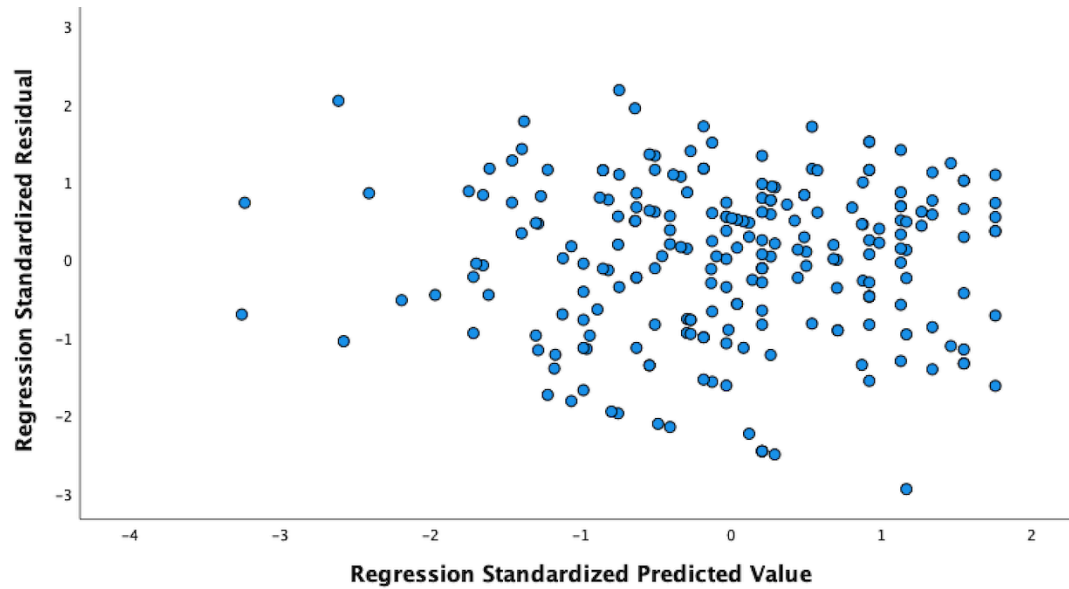ion. *European Review of Social Psychology, 29(1),* 122-160. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1080/10463283.2018.1479347

Appendix

Figure 1

Normal P-P Plot to Assess Normality

Normal P–P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

Dependent Variable: helping_mean

Figure 2

Scatterplot of the Standardized Residuals to Assess Homoscedasticity

Figure 3

G*Power Analysis for Linear Regression: Required Effect Size
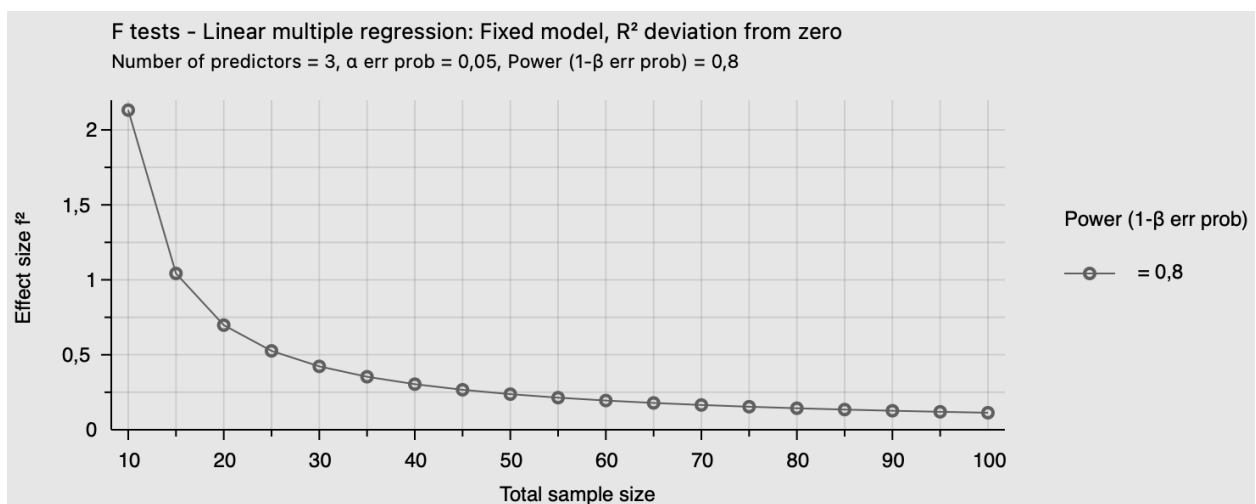
Figure 4

Simple Slope Analysis for Vizualising a Possible Interaction of Moral Conviction and

Perspectieve-Taking