

**Moral Convictions and Helping Behavior:
The Role of Perspective-Taking**

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Abstract

Moral convictions reflect people's core beliefs about right and wrong and have crucial societal and political consequences. Indeed, previous research has found that moral convictions predict several types of activism, such as helping behavior. Especially, a study found that moral conviction is associated with outgroup helping in the context of the refugee crisis in 2015. However, we know little about the operating mechanisms of moral conviction regarding how it predicts helping behavior towards outgroups. We suggest that perspective-taking is associated with outgroup helping and that it would make the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping stronger. We tested the hypotheses by conducting an online correlational study using the context of the Afghanistan refugee crisis ($N = 248$). The sample consisted of Americans. Results showed that moral conviction is associated with helping behavior, but perspective-taking was not linked to outgroup helping and did not moderate the relationship between moral convictions and perspective-taking. Theoretical implications are discussed.

Keywords: moral convictions, outgroup helping, perspective-taking, Afghanistan, refugee crisis

Moral Convictions and Helping Behavior:

The Role of Perspective-Taking

The number of refugees fleeing Afghanistan is the highest in recorded history (Alemi et al., 2014). The September 11 attacks in 2001 marked the beginning of the Afghanistan conflict. In 2021, the U.S. government in place since 2001, aiming at restoring the nation's fundamental institutions destroyed by the Taliban, announced its complete withdrawal from Afghanistan (Witte, 2023). The Taliban came back to power after almost two decades. As a result, the Afghan government collapsed, taking citizens' freedom away (Maizland, 2023). According to the UN Refugee Agency (2022), Afghanistan's population has been experiencing a dramatic humanitarian crisis, with medical and educational system failures. Battling for survival and facing uncertainty, Afghans constantly seek international help and flee the country. Humanitarian aid organizations in host societies have been put in place to address Afghans' urgent needs. Helping groups rallied volunteers and resources to provide the necessities, mental health support, and education (Butler & Sheriff, 2021). This raises the question: What motivates people to engage in helping behavior toward members of other groups (i.e., outgroups)?

The present research explores if and when moral convictions may relate to outgroup helping in the context of the Afghanistan refugee crisis. According to Kende et al. (2017), moral convictions influence individuals' prosocial actions toward outgroups. However, there is very little research investigating whether and under which conditions moral convictions relate to outgroup helping. This research goes beyond the research by Kende et al. (2017) by investigating the moderating role of perspective-taking in the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping.

Moral Convictions

Moral convictions are strong attitudes that represent people's core beliefs about right and wrong (e.g., “I strongly oppose war in Afghanistan because it’s a matter of moral principle”; Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002). According to the domain theory of attitudes (Nucci, 2001), strong attitudes vested with moral convictions are psychologically different from strong attitudes grounded in preferences or conventions. Especially strong attitudes grounded in preferences are considered to be subjective and matters of taste (e.g., “I strongly oppose the war in Afghanistan because that’s how it feels like”), and conventional attitudes are based on norms and are usually dictated by authority and peers (e.g., “I strongly oppose the war in Afghanistan because all my friends do it too”; Skitka et al., 2021).

Attitudes grounded in moral convictions, however, are perceived as final absolutes rather than subjective preferences and are experienced as actual facts (Skitka et al., 2005). In addition, individuals are more likely to change their behavior when they view a problem from a moral perspective than when their attitudes are seen as strongly held yet nonmoral (Skitka & Bauman, 2008).

Moral convictions are distinct from what authority and the law assert about what is true in the world. Individuals believe that their moral convictions represent universal truths that hold true in all contexts, are applicable to all people and are change-resistant (Skitka et al., 2021). To be precise, moral convictions are perceived as culturally universal, objective, and independent from authority (Skitka et al., 2021). Additionally, moral convictions are strongly related to emotions (Skitka & Wisneski, 2011).

Numerous studies have shown that moral convictions predict social behaviors that drive societal changes. Moral convictions are strong motivators that give their own justifications for behaviors and individuals feel morally obliged to act on them (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). Increased intentions to engage in cause-related activity are correlated with higher moral convictions about a certain cause (Milesi & Alberici, 2018). For instance,

stronger moral convictions are linked to a sense of having more of a responsibility to take a stand, which in turn predicts intentions to participate in particular types of activism and group action (Sabucedo et al., 2018), such as collective action (Van Zomeren, 2013). Indeed, the tendency to act is amplified, since people's moral views justify and even need action (Skitka et al., 2005). In addition, moral convictions are an important predictor of voting behavior (Morgan et al., 2010) and driving force for political engagement in general (Skitka & Bauman, 2008). Therefore, moral convictions have important consequences for society.

Moral Convictions and Outgroup Helping

Recent research suggests that moral convictions also predict forms of benevolent support aimed at alleviating the suffering of others (Louis et al., 2019), such as helping behavior (Kende et al., 2017). When a moral principle is thought to have been violated, outrage arises (Batson et al., 2007). Moral feeling of outrage has been found to play a crucial role in predicting volunteerism (Thomas et al., 2017). Therefore, when moral standards are perceived to be broken, for instance in the context of a war in which innocents suffer, outrage leads to active support.

In the context of the refugee crisis in 2015, Kende et al. (2017) provided the first evidence showing that individuals in Hungary engage in volunteering aid toward refugees crossing Europe based on their moral convictions. The findings of this research demonstrated that individuals were helping outgroup members, even though previous studies have shown that individuals are more reluctant to provide help to those who are unlike to them (i.e., outgroup) than to those who are more similar to them (i.e., ingroup) (Tarrant, et al., 2009). In other words, research has previously demonstrated that individuals tend to provide help to members of their own group, compared to members of an outgroup (Levine et al., 2005). According to Social identification Theory, the need for a strong sense of group identification results in intergroup bias, in which members of one's own membership group (the in-group)

are evaluated more favorably than members of an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This group-serving tendency manifests itself as favoritism of the ingroup (ingroup favoritism) or denigration of the outgroup (outgroup derogation) (Hewstone et al., 2002).

The study of Kende et al. (2017) showed that individual's beliefs about right and wrong can be powerful driving forces and motivators for helping behaviors that go beyond group boundaries. When individuals' moral convictions are violated, people no longer perceive intergroup differentiation, as demonstrated by the findings of the study by Kende et al. (2017). Indeed, violation of one's moral convictions leads this person to act to enhance someone's current situation, regardless of the person's group membership (Skitka et al., 2005). Consequently, prosocial behaviors are no longer influenced by group boundaries.

Another potential reason for individuals helping outgroups is the cognitive dissonance theory, which postulates that when individuals' behaviors and beliefs are inconsistent, people experience dissonance, which is referred to as being psychologically uncomfortable, and this drives them to lessen the dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, individuals tend to act according to their convictions to avoid cognitive dissonance. Engaging in prosocial behavior represents a mean to express one's strong beliefs, regardless of the group in need (ingroup or outgroup members). There is very little research investigating the role of moral convictions in predicting outgroup helping. Therefore, this study aims to conceptually replicate the relationship between moral convictions and helping behavior towards outgroup members (Kende et al., 2017).

The Moderating Role of Perspective-Taking

Although there is already some evidence showing that moral convictions drive helping behavior toward outgroups (Kende et al., 2017), little is known about the conditions in which this effect occurs. We suggest that perspective-taking may strengthen this relationship.

Perspective-taking refers to the tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of

view of others in everyday life (Davis, 1983). It appears to be a subcomponent of empathy, more especially of cognitive empathy (Davis, 1983). Despite the fact that a number of scholars have hypothesized that perspective-taking may enhance the empathy-outgroup aiding link, unexpectedly, we could not find much support for this hypothesis (Leeuwen & Zagefka, 2017). However, a growing body of research suggests that adopting one's perspective might help to reduce many of the biases that are present in intergroup interactions and even lead to helping behavior (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). According to Batson et al. (1997), perspective-taking results in more favorable attitudes toward the outgroup, therefore reducing the outgroup derogation. They discovered that inducing perspective-taking for a young woman with AIDS and a homeless man enhanced participants' attitudes about AIDS patients and the homeless. Adding up to this research, after being induced with perspective-taking instruction, a study found that participants agreed to donate money to the organization that assists stigmatized outgroup (Batson et al., 2002). Additionally, adopting a person with a disability's viewpoint leads to greater support for allocating university monies for facilities aiming at helping students with disabilities (Clare & Jeffery, 1972). Therefore, perspective-taking appears to be a valuable strategy to go beyond the in- and outgroup boundaries and to promote intergroup helping. Taking into account the aforementioned studies, we predict that perspective-taking is associated with outgroup helping.

The present study will focus on cognitive perspective-taking, which has been shown to be associated with outgroup helping behavior (Oswald, 1996). Cognitive perspective-taking refers to the capacity to acknowledge and comprehend others' thoughts (Tjosvold & Johnson, 1977). When individuals cognitively embody the perspective of outgroup members, they have a greater understanding of their situation and therefore they will be more likely to act based on their moral convictions, as they have more information on their current situation. Therefore, we suggest that perspective-taking is associated with moral convictions. We

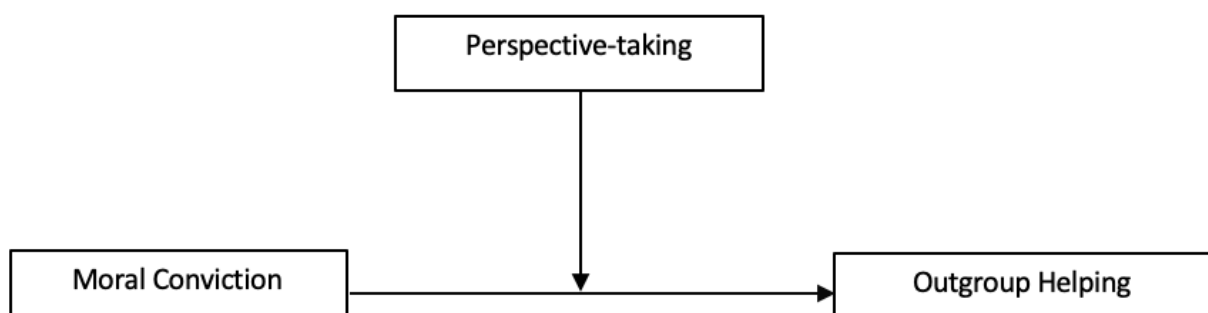
propose that perspective-taking would moderate the relationship between moral convictions and outgroup helping. Indeed, adopting the psychological perspective of other individuals should make the association between moral convictions and outgroup helping stronger. In other words, moral convictions would predict outgroup helping more strongly for those who score highly on perspective-taking.

Overview

This study brings novelty by investigating the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping and the moderating role of perspective-taking in this relationship in the context of the Afghanistan refugee crisis. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that (1) moral conviction is positively associated with outgroup helping, (2) perspective-taking is positively associated with outgroup helping, and (3) perspective-taking moderates the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping, such that the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping is stronger for people who score highly on perspective-taking (see Figure 1 for an overview of the research model).

Figure 1

Research Model: The Relationship Between Moral Conviction and Outgroup Helping Moderated by Perspective-Taking



Method

Participants and Design

We recruited 248 American individuals who participated in our online study via Academic Prolific and sampled people who currently reside in the U.S. and are American. As compensation, the participants received 0.75 USD for completing the study. As we did not exclude any participants, the final sample consisted of 248 participants (120 females, 125 males, 3 reported other) ranging in age from 18 to 76 years ($M = 38.17$, $SD = 13.69$). One hundred fifty-five participants reported to be members of the Democratic party, 47 were members of the Republican party, and 47 reported Other. The study had a correlational design in which the independent variable was moral conviction, the dependent variable was outgroup helping, and the moderator was perspective-taking.

Procedure

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen approved the study. At the beginning of the study, participants' informed consent was obtained. In the first part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to answer several questions about their moral convictions about different societal issues, namely abortion, human-made climate change, the Afghanistan refugee crisis, and death penalty. We additionally included filler items by asking them about their attitudes towards the aforementioned issues. The target issue of moral convictions was the Afghanistan refugee crisis, and the other three issues were used as filler items. In the second part of the study, participants were introduced to the Afghanistan refugee crisis and human-made climate change. They completed a questionnaire stating their willingness to participate in outgroup helping with regards to the Afghanistan refugee crisis. The target issue of interest was the Afghanistan refugee crisis, whereas the issue of human-made climate was not relevant for the hypothesis of this study. Next, participants filled out a questionnaire measuring cognitive

perspective-taking. As the study was part of a larger project, they completed other questionnaires¹ that were not relevant for the hypotheses of this study. Finally, participants provided information about their gender, age, and political ideology. At the end of the study, participants were paid, fully debriefed, and informed about the purpose of the study.

Measures

Moral Conviction

The scale measuring moral conviction (Skitka et al., 2005) was adapted for the Afghanistan refugee crisis and included the following items: “How much is your opinion on Afghanistan’s refugee crisis: A reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions? Connected to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong? Based on moral principle?” Participants answered these questions by using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). We averaged the items and created a composite score for moral conviction ($\alpha = .97$; $M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.66$).

Outgroup Helping

We measured outgroup helping by using four items adapted from Kende et al. (2017). Participants indicated their willingness to engage in the following behaviours: “donate 15 euros to an organization that is supporting Afghan refugees”, “take part in a fundraising project to aid Afghan refugees activists”, “help Afghanistan refugees with official documents if they want to come to your country of residence”, and “offer emotional support via an internet platform to English-speaking Afghan refugees”, by using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). We averaged the items and created a composite score for outgroup helping ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.68$).

Perspective-taking

¹ Hope, Perceived descriptive norms, Perceived threat and Self-efficacy were also measured.

Perspective-taking was measured by using five items of the perspective-taking subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). Participants indicated how much they agreed on each of the following items: “When I’m upset at someone, I usually try to ‘put myself in their 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), “I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective” by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We averaged the items and created a composite score for perspective-taking ($\alpha = .79$; $M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.72$).

Results

The data analysis was conducted using the statistical software JASP (Version 0.14.1; JASP Team, 2020). All analyses were conducted at a .05 significance level.

Preliminary Analysis

First, we checked the assumptions for multiple linear regression. The assumption of normality was inspected via a Q-Q plot, which showed that the residuals were normally distributed because they rested along the line (see Figure 1 in the Appendix). Next, we plotted the residuals on a scatterplot and their scattered distribution indicated that the assumption of homoscedasticity is not violated (see Figure 2 in the Appendix). Also, by inspecting the scatterplot, it is apparent that there is a linear relationship between the independent variable, moderator, and dependent variable. The independence of residuals was assessed with the Durbin-Watson test which resulted in a value of .094. Finally, there appeared to be no multicollinearity between the variables as VIF scores were well below 2.5 (1.06), (1.03) and 1.03) and tolerance scores were above 0.2 (0.94), (0.96) and (0.97).

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. Moral conviction was significantly and positively correlated with outgroup helping ($p < .001$). Perspective-taking was significantly and positively correlated with moral conviction ($p = .012$), but not with outgroup helping ($p = .100$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Dependent, Mediator, and Independent Variables, and Correlations Between Variables

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	1	2
1. Moral conviction	248	4.74 (1.66)		
2. Outgroup helping	248	3.48 (1.68)	.437***	
3. Perspective-taking	248	3.81 (0.71)	.159**	.105

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$

Main Analysis

As the assumptions were not violated, we continued with the multiple linear regression using JASP (Version 0.14.1; JASP Team, 2020). First, we centered the independent variable moral conviction and the moderating variable perspective-taking around a meaningful zero, and then we computed an interaction between the calculated centered moderator perspective-taking and the centered independent variable moral conviction.

For our main analysis, we conducted a multiple linear regression using the centered variables for moral conviction and perspective-taking, as well as the computed interaction variable as predictors of outgroup helping. The overall model accounted for 19.4% of the total variance ($R^2 = .19$) of outgroup helping and was significant ($F(3, 244) = 19.54, p < .001, f^2 = .24$).

In line with our first hypothesis, we found a significant relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping, $\beta = .43, t(244) = 7.32, p < .001, sr^2 = .42, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.32,$

.55]. Contradicting our expectations, there was no significant association between perspective-taking and outgroup helping, $\beta = .04$, $t(244) = .62$, $p = .536$, $sr^2 = .04$, 95% CI = [- .19, .35]. Finally, and against our prediction, results showed no significant interaction, indicating no moderating effect on the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping $\beta = -.004$, $t(244) = -.07$, $p = .944$, $sr^2 = -.004$, 95% CI = [-.14, .13].

Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping and the moderating role of perspective-taking in this relationship in the context of the Afghanistan refugee crisis. We hypothesized that moral conviction is positively associated with outgroup helping. We also hypothesized that perspective-taking is positively associated with outgroup helping, and that perspective-taking moderates the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping, such that the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup behavior is stronger for people who score highly on perspective-taking.

We found that moral conviction is positively and significantly associated with outgroup helping (i.e., helping Afghan refugees). However, we did not find any support for the prediction that perspective-taking is associated with outgroup helping, nor that perspective-taking moderates the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping.

Theoretical Implications

This research offers some theoretical contributions. First, we replicated the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping (Kende, et al., 2017). Indeed, this research shows the significant and positive association between moral conviction and outgroup helping in the context of the Afghanistan refugee crisis, that has been earlier evidenced in the context of the refugee crisis in 2015, in which Hungarian helped refugees

crossing Europe. Therefore, we offer converging evidence for the idea that moral conviction is linked to outgroup helping. Our findings resonate with the idea that individuals tend to act in consistency with their moral convictions to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Additionally, any violation of moral convictions encourages individuals to take actions to change the current situation of a person, regardless of whether it is an ingroup or outgroup member (Skitka et al., 2005). Therefore, we conceptually replicated the initial findings of Kende et al., (2017), showing that moral conviction is an important driving force for helping behaviors that goes beyond the borders between in- and outgroups.

Second, this study does not support previous evidence suggesting that perspective-taking is positively associated with outgroup helping. We indeed did not find that perspective-taking was associated with outgroup helping. This finding is not in line with the results of the study conducted by Oswald (1996), which found that cognitive perspective-taking is associated with altruistic helping. A potential explanation could be that in the present research, we focused on outgroups, in that the American participants had to cognitively take Afghan's refugee's perspectives, whereas the study did not provide a lot of information on the Afghan's refugee's current situation. Therefore, it might be harder for the participants to imagine what they have been through and to cognitively take their perspective. If more details were given to the participants, they could better adopt the Afghan's refugee's point of view, and therefore increasing their helping behavior toward them.

Third, the expectation that perspective-taking moderates the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping, such that the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping is stronger for people who score highly on perspective-taking was not supported by this study. One potential reason for this non-significant finding is that this research focus on cognitive perspective-taking, and not affective perspective-taking. As demonstrated by previous research, cognitive and affective perspective-taking are separable

processes (Meghan & Murray, 2018). Affective perspective-taking has been previously demonstrated to be a stronger predictor of helping behaviors compared to cognitive perspective-taking (Oswald, 1996) and refers to the capacity to discern the feeling or emotions of another individual (Meghan & Murray, 2018). The portrayal of some emotion to induce emotional perspective-taking is a common component of study in the field of affective perspective-taking (Oswald, 1996). Importantly, emotions play a key role in explaining the motivational effect of moral convictions on behavior (Skitka & Wisneski, 2011) and have been shown to be associated with helping behaviors (Xiao et al., 2021). Therefore, emotions (induced by moral convictions, and amplified by affective perspective-taking) can be an emotional-affective driver for outgroup helping. This could imply that cognitive perspective-taking, which is not associated with affective processes, may have thus not influenced the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping. Therefore, the affective component should not be disregarded and represents a great area for further research.

Strengths, Limitations and Direction for Future Research

The strengths of the present correlational study were; the applicability of our data to real life, as we used a real-world setting (Afghanistan refugee crisis) to investigate our variables, the variety of our sample consisting of various ages and gender, which allows to generalize our results to a range of ages and gender and the high reliability of the scales used to measure our variables.

The present research possesses some limitations. First of all, the sample consists only of Americans, which affects the generalizability of this research. Indeed, the findings of this research can only be applied to this specific population. Thus, further research should replicate this study using a larger ethnically varied sample. In addition, the findings of the present research are specific to the context of the Afghanistan refugee crisis. Further studies

could use another context to examine our variables, such as environmental refugee crisis to explore whether Americans would be more inclined to provide help towards outgroup.

Secondly, we measured behavioral intentions to help outgroup members and not actual behaviors towards outgroup helping. The use of intention measures does not always accurately predict the future, by sometimes underestimating or overestimating future actions (Young et al., 1998). In addition, willingness to engage in various forms of help differs from actually helping outgroups in that participants do not have to actually donate money or provide support to refugees (Nguyen et al., 2022). Therefore, intentions and subsequent behavior frequently diverge. However, this study could grasp the attitudes of the participants regarding their willingness to help outgroup members based on their moral convictions. This leaves room for further studies to actually measure outgroup helping. Additionally, this correlational study cannot predict a causal relationship between moral convictions and outgroup helping but can only underline the association between the two variables. To determine causation between moral convictions and outgroup helping, further research should conduct more controlled experiments.

Lastly, this study focuses on controversial and hot topics (i.e., Afghanistan refugee crisis), findings might be distorted by social desirability bias. Indeed, participants might be prone to answer in a socially desirable way rather than answer truthfully. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize on the protection of the data, the confidentiality and anonymity of the study to reduce social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013).

Conclusion

The act of providing help towards outgroups happens across social or geographical boundaries (van Leeuwen, 2007), and moral conviction was found to be an important driver for helping behaviors toward outgroup (Kende et al., 2017). Still, we do not know under which condition this effect occurs, especially in the intergroup context. This research adds on

previous literature (Kende et al., 2017), by investigating the moderating role of perspective-taking on the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping. It was expected that for individuals scoring high on perspective-taking, the relationship between moral conviction and outgroup helping would be stronger. However, contrary to our prediction, our findings do not support this hypothesis. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that cognitive-perspective-taking was measured in this study and that affective perspective-taking could lead to different results. Therefore, affective perspective-taking could be a potential moderator for further research. In addition, as already demonstrated by the study Kende et al. (2017) in the context of the refugee crisis in 2015, this study found that moral conviction was associated with outgroup helping. This shows the power of individuals' fundamental beliefs about right and wrong to overcome the barrier between in-and outgroup members to provide help.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Normality of Residuals

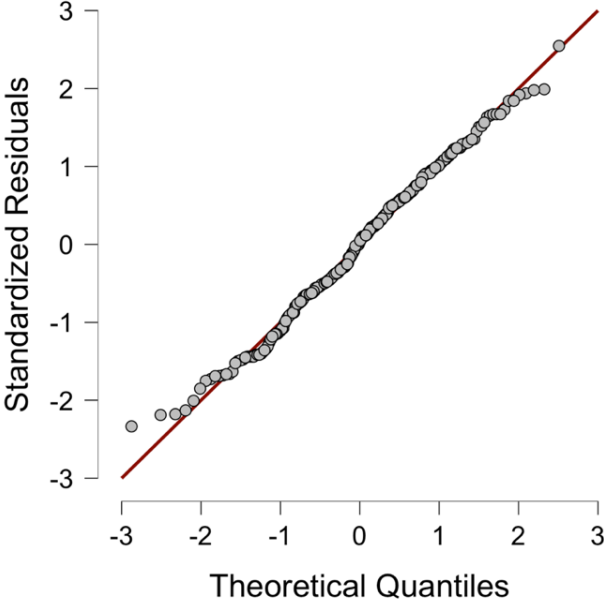


Figure 2

Homoscedasticity of Residuals

