Politics and Perceptions: How Social Safety Campaigns and Political Ideology Influence Moral Judgments

Laura Keijzer

S3909301

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

Group number 43

Supervisor: dr. Maja Graso

Second evaluator: dr. Roxana Bucur

In collaboration with: Cindy Oosterhuis, Katerina Vastova, Lenka Kudelska, Lisette Abels, and Maike Muller-Kuckelberg

July 3, 2024

A thesis is an aptitude test for students. The approval of the thesis is proof that the student has sufficient research and reporting skills to graduate, but does not guarantee the quality of the research and the results of the research as such, and the thesis is therefore not necessarily suitable to be used as an academic source to refer to. If you would like to know more about the research discussed in this thesis and any publications based on it, to which you could refer, please contact the supervisor mentioned

Abstract

Social safety policies and campaigns aimed at preventing social harm are part of many organizations and institutions nowadays. But what effect does exposure to these campaigns have on our perceptions of social interactions? Research suggests exposure may lead to harm or threat salience, leading people to perceive consequent behaviors as more harmful to others as they pay attention to the subject. However, this relationship may be affected by many potential variables, such as political ideology. I hypothesize that exposure to social safety campaigns leads to greater harm perceptions in ambiguous social interactions, and that political ideology moderates this relationship. We did an experimental study for which we recruited a total of 161 participants. These were divided into a control and an experimental group, in which we manipulated social safety. Participants then reflected on two vignettes and assessed to which extent they found the behavior harmful, to which extent it morally outraged them, and the extent to which they were inclined to punish the perpetrator(s). The analysis indicated no significant differences in group means for either condition. Regression analysis also indicated no significant moderation effect for political ideology. Political ideology correlated negatively with the second vignette's outcome variables, indicating that more right-winged people found the situation less harmful and morally wrong. The lack of significant results may be due to limitations in the study design and the sample, but the theory behind the study posits that this model may need to be investigated further.

Politics and Perceptions: How Social Safety Campaigns and Political Ideology Influence

Moral Judgments

Sarah and her friends are having a coffee break together. Sarah vents to them about their boss: she feels like he singles her out. Today, for the third time this week, he started the team meeting without her and made comments when she came in. "Hey, sleeping beauty, thanks for finally joining us," he had said in front of the entire team this morning. Sleeping Beauty had become her nickname after she came in late once. She tells her friends she feels like he is bullying her, and that he starts meetings early on purpose. 'You think this is bullying? Aren't you blowing it up a little? Sounds like he just jokes around.', her conservative friend answers. Her other friend, a liberal, is quick to interrupt: Of course this is bullying, are you really not seeing this? This guy should be fired for what he is doing to her'. Sarah sighs as the conversation becomes more tense. How come her friends' reactions are so different?

As we see in the example above, deciding what is and is not harmful behavior in the workplace is a difficult task. Many situations are ambiguous and are strongly subject to people's moral worldviews, norms, values, and other factors unrelated to the incident itself (Jost, 2006; Jost et. al., 2009). Where one may think of a situation as being incredibly harmful to another person, another may think the very opposite. These differences can be stark and may even lead to conflicts or misunderstandings. Many possible variables may cause these differences. In recent literature, there has been a strong focus on the impact of political orientation on various kinds of behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. In this thesis, I will build on political ideology and its effects on harm perception in the workplace.

When we look at political ideology, it becomes clear that liberals and conservatives may perceive and react to workplace issues such as the example above very differently, because they often strongly differ in morals and value certain morals over others. Political

ideology is a variable strongly related to our moral worlds (Haidt & Graham, 2007) and a powerful driver for many kinds of behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and other outcomes, and shapes how people see the world (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2009). The differences in these morals and values, in turn, might mean that some may be more sensitive to possible violations of workplace social safety violations than others.

These differences in sensitivity are highly relevant in today's workplace. Many organizations focus on social safety and do social safety-related campaigns, and political ideology continues to become more salient in people's minds due to the greater accessibility of news (Swigart et al., 2020). The difference in the kinds of issues liberals and conservatives find important may cause them to respond differently to these campaigns as well (Oxley et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2019). For example, liberals and conservatives perceive different violations as threats and respond differently to these threats (Oxley et al., 2008), and may experience different extents of emotions, such as moral outrage or intentions to punish (Bastian et al., 2013; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). As harm, both physical and psychological, is an issue that liberals tend to have strong feelings about, liberals may be more sensitive to these campaigns and morally care more about the implications these campaigns have.

However, this sensitivity may also be caused simply by the mere exposure to these campaigns. Evidence suggests that being exposed to a campaign like this may cause people to be more inclined to perceive consequent situations as more harmful than before, as the campaign makes harm salient in the mind. This means that exposure to a social safety campaign makes people perceive ambiguous situations as more harmful to another person independent from political orientation as well. As many organizations create social safety campaigns to prevent harmful situations in the workplace, it is important to understand the effects of exposure to these campaigns and exposure to potentially harmful situations.

One important outcome of this is that exposure may spark different emotional and moral reactions, especially when one feels strongly about social safety and harm prevention on a moral level. An example of this is moral outrage: a feeling of anger and disgust when someone transgresses against a moral principle (Bastian et al., 2013; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017). This may even lead one to want to punish the transgressor. When we look at what Oxley et al. (2008) found, it would make sense that these emotions are stronger when the transgression connects to your morals and political beliefs.

Guided by different theories on morality, harm perception, and political ideology, I will explain why I expect exposure to social safety campaigns to lead to a greater perception of harm, moral outrage, and punishment intent, and how political ideology moderates this relationship.

Theoretical Foundation

For this thesis, I am interested in whether exposure to a social safety campaign makes people perceive situations as more harmful and whether it makes them experience more moral outrage and a higher intention to punish the perpetrator. More specifically, I will look at the role of political orientation in this relationship and whether liberals are truly more sensitive to these principles than conservatives. In the following paragraphs, I describe these concepts more in-depth.

Harm Perception and its Outcomes

As mentioned before, it is difficult to decide what kinds of situations or behaviors are and are not harmful to people, but the outcomes can be very impactful. To assess this, we first must understand what harm means and what its implications are. Harm is a concept that encompasses a variety of behaviors that have a negative or damaging effect on people, such as bullying, sexual harassment, or traumatic instances (Dakin et al., 2023). In the modern workplace, there is mostly a focus on harm in the social context, and on minimizing

workplace aggressions that may lead to harmful situations. Focusing on (social) harm in the workplace is not a bad thing: about 34% of employees in organizations have experienced some kind of workplace aggression (Zhong et al., 2023), making it quite prevalent. Workplace aggression encompasses many kinds of harmful behaviors at work, and these aggressions have many negative consequences for targeted employees in their job attitudes, well-being, and work behaviors. In other words, workplace aggression may be harmful to the target. However, besides experiencing workplace aggression, *seeing* these transgressions happen to other people may also lead to different emotional outcomes, such as moral outrage and punishment intentions. We will take a closer look at these two outcomes.

When others violate a moral standard someone deeply cares about, they may experience *moral outrage*. This term is defined as a combination of anger and disgust directed towards the violating party for violating a moral principle (Bastian et al., 2013; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017), and is closely related to harm perception: observing harm generally tends to let us experience a greater extent of moral outrage (Ginther et al., 2021). People often express moral outrage on behalf of the victim (third-party perspective) and it is seen as a prosocial emotion (Bastian et al., 2013; Rothschild & Keefer, 2017; Ginther et al., 2021). The intensity of these reactions depends on the valence of the moral standard that was violated and the severity of the act, but the feeling of moral outrage, in general, is strongly related to the intention to punish someone for this violation (Bastian et al., 2013; Salerno & Slepian, 2022). In other words, moral outrage serves as an "emotional barometer" that indicates the harmfulness of an act or type of behavior, which then determines the extent of appropriate punishment (Bastian et al., 2013).

Effects of Social Safety Campaigns

Given the negative effects and emotional outcomes of harmful situations in the workplace, many organizations seek to prevent these instances, for example by creating social

safety-related campaigns that warn people to look out for social transgressions and encourage them to think about how their behavior can impact others. This may include posters and informative e-mails on what to do or where to go when something happens, or to think about what behaviors are and are not okay (e.g., see University of Groningen, 2023). These campaigns are usually created to bring awareness. However, even with targeted campaigns, it remains difficult to narrow down the exact kinds of behavior to look out for and the exact kind of situations to be aware of. Be that as it may, that does not mean these campaigns are ineffective. Evidence suggests that being exposed to a campaign like this may cause harm to become more salient in people's minds (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023). This can be seen as a form of priming: exposing people to targeted information makes them more aware of potential harm in their surroundings. Different experiments have suggested that making harm salient also causes people to perceive ambiguous situations as more harmful than before (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023; Smith & Percy, 2019). An underlying principle of this may be what we call *concept creep* (Haslam, 2016), meaning that harm constructs (such as bullying) continue to encompass more subtle behaviors over time, meaning what we understand as harmful is expanded. This inclusion of more subtle kinds of harmful behavior may contribute to differences in what we see as harmful and what not, because many things may potentially be harmful to some extent. This combination of the ambiguity of social situations and differences in the extent to which we perceive these situations as harmful may also lead to more or less intense emotional and moral reactions, because harm perception seems to relate quite strongly to moral outrage and punishment intent (e.g. see Bastian et al., 2013; Ginther et al., 2021). This strong connection should mean exposure to a social safety campaign leads people to not only increased harm perception, but also to experience a greater deal of moral outrage and stronger punishment intentions.

Based on the theories above, I hypothesize in this study that exposing people to a social safety campaign will lead them to perceive an ambiguous social situation as more harmful, experience greater moral outrage, and have stronger punishment intentions.

Hypothesis 1. Exposing people to a social safety campaign will lead them to perceive an ambiguous social situation as more harmful, experience greater moral outrage, and have stronger intentions to punish the perpetrator.

However, in existing studies it remains unclear whether this relationship stands by itself or whether there may be moderators in place: do merely the exposure to these campaigns themselves lead to greater harm perception, or are these perceptions influenced by other variables as well? This is where political ideology plays a crucial role. In the sections below, I will explain what political ideology entails, what its outcomes are, and why it may moderate the relationship stated above.

Political Ideology

Political ideology is a predictor for many different outcomes such as norms, values, attitudes, and behavior, and is closely related to our moral worldviews (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2009). In recent studies, there has been a greater focus on political ideology as a variable as it may connect to more outcomes than we might expect (e.g. Swigart et al., 2020), such as the moral values we find important. This is why it is important to examine political ideology and its outcomes.

In politics, the most important distinction we make is between liberals and conservatives or between left and right. Although political ideology is considered to be a left to right dimension, the differences in opinions and morals can be quite strong across the dimension as a whole. The basic differences of this left-right dimension are 1) preference for change versus stability, and 2) attitudes concerning equality versus inequality (Sowell, 2002). In general, liberals (left-wing), tend to be more open to experiences and change and highly

value individual liberty to explore and pursue their individual interests and goals (Graham et al., 2009; Sowell, 2002). For conservatives, on the other hand, the stability of institutions and structures forms the core of conservative beliefs and principles. They tend to be resistant to change, believing that change can impact or damage the very stability that makes living in a society possible (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Muller, 1997), and morally opposed to extreme individual freedom, as promoted by liberal views (Muller, 1997). The ideologies people hold on this dimension strongly impact the way they perceive the world on a moral level.

These differences in moral worldviews between liberals and conservatives can be quite stark. People on the two ends of the spectrum often find it difficult to understand the other's perspective, as they may differ cognitively (e.g. through different values), socially (e.g. through different identities), and/or behaviorally (e.g. through different party affiliations) (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Swigart et al., 2020). There are different ways to look at these differences in morality between liberals and conservatives. Haidt & Graham (2007) theorize that it is due to differences in which moral foundations are important to each of them, which is described in their Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). Another theory that may be at the root of moral differences, is the Theory of Dyadic Morality (TDM) (Schein & Gray, 2015, 2018). This theory proposes that harm and immorality are causally linked both ways: what we perceive as harmful, is immoral, and what we perceive as immoral, is harmful. Schein and Gray (2018) state that political ideology plays a much smaller role than the Moral Foundations Theory suggests, and liberals and conservatives have the same moral mind. Although arguments can be made for both the Moral Foundations Theory and the Theory of Dyadic Morality, I assume that liberals and conservatives differ in morality and will mainly focus on the ideas from the Moral Foundations Theory.

According to Moral Foundations Theory, people use five moral foundations for reasoning: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and

purity/sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Individuals vary in the importance they place on each foundation, which may be based on political orientation (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt et al., 2009; Van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). Haidt and Graham (2007) found, for example, that liberals primarily rely on the harm and fairness foundations, focusing on individual freedom and protection of individuals, known as the individualizing foundations. Conservatives value all five foundations more equally, with a greater emphasis on loyalty, authority, and purity, known as binding foundations. These are based on group morals, institutional stability, and the roles and duties of people within these institutions.

Social safety violations connect well to the moral principle of harm, as social safety transgressions may easily be harmful to other people. As Smith et al. (2019) found, liberals tend to dislike people who violate principles such as harm and care more than conservatives, who tend to dislike people more when they violate a principle such as authority. Closely related to this, Oxley et al. (2008) even found that physiological reactions to violations of moral principles differ on each end of the political spectrum, depending on what people morally care about: liberals experienced more intense physiological reactions when a harm or care principle was threatened, and conservatives when an authority, respect, or purity principle was violated. Concretely, it matters *which* moral standard is violated when trying to predict the strength of moral outrage and punishment intentions people experience. These findings may suggest that liberals may find social safety violations more harmful to others than conservatives do, because they care so strongly about the principle of harm. In turn, this suggests that reactions to these violations may also be stronger for people with liberal ideologies than for conservatives, for example resulting in greater moral outrage and stronger punishment intentions. Based on this, I hypothesize that people with liberal political ideologies will find ambiguous social situations more harmful and will experience greater moral outrage and stronger intentions to punish the perpetrator(s).

Hypothesis 2. People with liberal political ideologies will find ambiguous social situations more harmful, will experience greater moral outrage, and have stronger intentions to punish the perpetrator than people with conservative political ideologies.

However, the emphasis on harm in these campaigns may also make liberals more sensitive to social safety campaigns, as exposure to such campaigns may trigger liberal moral principles more than they trigger conservative moral principles. In other words, liberals may have a stronger induction of harm salience when harm is triggered, because they morally care more strongly about harm (see e.g. Haidt & Graham, 2007; Graham et al., 2009; Van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). Because of this, a social safety campaign should have a stronger moral effect on liberals and make them perceive subsequent situations as more harmful, especially when we keep in mind that reactions of moral outrage and punishment intent are stronger when the violated principle is of higher value to a person (Salerno & Slepian, 2022). Therefore, I hypothesize that political ideology moderates the relationship between exposure to a social safety campaign and harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intentions, and specifically that this relationship will be stronger for liberals than conservatives. See Figure 1 for a visual version of the hypothesized model.

Hypothesis 3. For people with liberal political ideologies, the effect of exposure to a social safety campaign on harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent will be stronger than for people with conservative political ideologies.

Figure 1

Moderator Model
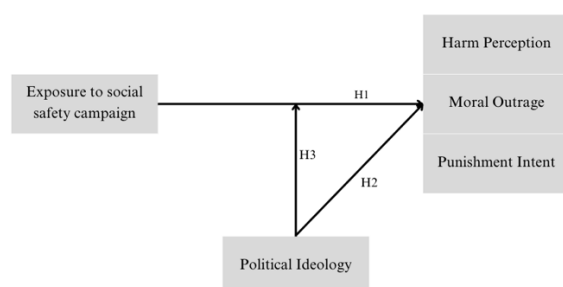
Methods

In the following paragraphs, procedural details and details about the study in general are listed.

Ethics

The study was submitted for ethics approval and approved by the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences ethics committee at the University of Groningen.

Participants

For this study, our group of six Bachelor thesis students collected data using one Qualtrics survey. Participants were recruited through personal networks, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, where we posted the survey with a uniform message about the study's nature, and through Prolific, using funding from the faculty. At the beginning of the survey, participants were informed about the study's aim, procedure, potential outcomes, and the confidentiality of their responses. We then obtained their informed consent and informed them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the survey. Participants provided socio-demographic information, including gender, age, political ideology, work status, and work experience. In total, we recruited 161 participants, 70 of which from Prolific. Of these participants, 81 identified as female, 78 as male, and two preferred not to identify, and the mean age was 30.01 ($SD = 12.50$). The sample included employees, students, student-employees, and individuals who were neither. Fifteen cases were excluded due to failed attention checks (two cases) or incomplete surveys (13 cases).

Study Design and Materials

To investigate whether exposure to a social safety campaign leads people to perceive social situations as more harmful and experience stronger moral outrage and punishment intent, we did an online vignette-based experiment. In this experiment, we manipulated social safety to compare a control group (no exposure) and an experimental group (exposure) on

these outcomes. In addition, I added political ideology as a moderator to investigate whether

this relationship is stronger for liberals (left-wing) than conservatives (right-wing). In the

section below, the design is described in detail.

Social safety manipulation

To account for group differences, participants were allocated to either the

experimental or the control group. In the experimental group, participants first read an

Instagram post containing messages regarding socially unsafe behavior in the workplace. We

told participants that the Instagram post was created as part of a social safety campaign

implemented by a consulting firm, and we instructed them to consider the campaign goals and

reflect on how effectively it communicates its message and engages its audience. The

campaign intended to make people aware of the potential harm that may arise from social

interactions and to define organizational behavioral norms. The two posters pointing out the

potential harm of social interactions contain examples of interactions that can be hurtful even

without malicious intent. This makes it clear to the recipient which ambiguous forms of

harmful behavior the campaign targets. The other two posters entail standards of behavior and

direct calls to action: they point out the individual's responsibility to recognize and address

inappropriate behavior. We designed the posters to signal harm as clearly as possible, for

example by using the color red (often used in warning signals), and we used a social media

format as participants are likely to be familiar with it, and because they are likely to encounter

other campaigns in this format. After observing the campaign, participants were asked to

briefly summarize the main message of the campaign in the designated place. We included

this in the manipulation to make sure participants did not immediately move on but had to

actively look at the campaign. Participants in the control condition were not exposed to a post

or any other messages and were directed immediately to the vignettes.

The Vignettes

We created two workplace vignettes in such a way that the social harm is ambiguous: the first one touches upon workplace exclusion, and the second one on complimenting coworkers' outfits. We developed two vignettes instead of one to increase the generalizability of our results, which also allowed us to study reactions to different scenarios. Participants in both the experimental and control conditions were exposed to two workplace vignettes to account for better generalization of results. The vignettes were designed as WhatsApp messages to increase the similarity to real-life digital interactions, that participants are likely to be familiar with. This may contribute to making the vignettes more relatable and realistic, and it makes the vignettes accessible to a broader population. Both vignette themes intend to touch upon themes that participants have most likely seen around them already. This ensures familiarity and increases the chance of getting genuine responses.

We incorporated several components into the vignettes to optimize the ambiguity of social interactions. For example, the second vignette ends with the simple reply "right", inviting participants to judge the harm themselves. Additionally, we used WhatsApp messages to remove the ability to read body language and facial expressions, so intent and tone must be inferred from text alone. We also made sure the harm in both vignettes is subtle, like the casual exclusion in the second vignette, which can be seen as either innocent or deliberate. Lastly, gender-neutral names were used to reduce gender bias and simplify the study's design.

In the first vignette, we asked participants to read an interaction between four team members in an organization via a screenshot of a text message group chat. In the second vignette, we asked participants to read a text conversation between a manager and a team member. After familiarizing themselves with each vignette, participants were instructed to answer a set of questions measuring how harmful they found the situation to the person, the extent of moral outrage they experienced, and the extent to which they wanted to punish the

perpetrator. Availability bias and personal-organizational value congruence were also measured to account for the moderators of thesis group members.

In the last part of the survey, we asked participants to answer questions measuring personality traits and personal characteristics, including neuroticism and empathetic concern, also to account for moderators of other thesis group members. Upon completing the survey, participants were debriefed and were given a chance to reflect on their participation in the study. They were also asked to indicate if they confirmed their consent, or if they preferred to rescind it.

Measures

Political Ideology

In the demographics section, respondents were asked to indicate their political orientation on a seven-point sliding scale from liberal/left-wing to conservative/right-wing (1 = *extremely liberal/left-wing*; 7 = *extremely conservative/right-wing*). Based on earlier research where political orientation was measured, we chose to combine the terms liberal-conservative and left-right. In literature, these terms are often used interchangeably.

Harm Perception

Respondents were asked how much harm they thought the person in each vignette experienced by rating it on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*no harm at all*) to 6 (*a great deal of harm*). This was based on research from Dakin et al. (2016), in which harm perception was used as a manipulation check.

Moral Outrage

Moral judgment/outrage was measured by a three-item scale derived from Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen (2004). Respondents were asked to reflect on the team's or person's

behavior displayed in the text messages by indicating the extent to which they agreed with four statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These statements included 'X's actions made me angry', 'X's actions are morally wrong', and 'X's actions upset me' ($\alpha = .87$ for the team condition and $\alpha = .95$ for the outfit condition).

Intention to Punish

Intention to punish was measured by a single-item question derived from the same scale from Skikta, Bauman, and Mullen (2004). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they wanted to punish the team or person in the text messages, through the statement 'I feel a compelling need to punish X' and were asked to rate it on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ($\alpha = .83$). This measure is part of the moral outrage scale from Skitka, Bauman, and Mullen (2004), which is often used in studies related to moral outrage or moral judgment.

Results

To analyze the results, I used SPSS to generate descriptive statistics, correlations, t-tests, and multiple regression analysis. In this section, I will describe the main effects for condition, main effects for political ideology, and the interaction effects for political ideology.

Hypothesis 1: Main Effects of Condition

For first hypothesis, I wanted to know whether there are main effects for exposure to the social safety campaign and the dependent variables harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent. To investigate whether the two groups differed in means in their assessment of the vignettes, I analyzed the group means of the control condition and the experimental condition with an independent sample t-test.

Team Chat Vignette

In the Team Chat Vignette (see Table 1), there were no significant differences in means between the control condition and the experimental condition for harm. For moral outrage, there were no significant differences between the control condition and the experimental condition. There were also no significant differences between the control condition and the experimental condition for punishment intent. Levene's test for homogeneity of variances indicated equal variances for both groups in harm, moral outrage, and punishment intent, meaning the variances in both groups did not significantly differ. This means participants in the exposure condition did not assess the situation in the vignette to be more harmful, did not experience more moral outrage or a higher intention to punish the perpetrators than participants in the control group.

Table 1

Independent sample t-test table for the Team Chat vignette - Condition

Variable	Control condition		Experimental condition		F	t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD				
Harm perception	5.12	1.44	5.17	1.31	.03	-.23	159	.867
Moral outrage	3.96	.90	4.10	.86	.01	-1.0	159	.926
Punishment intent	2.49	1.20	2.56	1.21	.07	-.37	159	.796

Outfit Vignette

In the Outfit vignette, there were no significant differences between the control condition and the experimental condition for harm (see Table 2). Levene's test for homogeneity of variances indicated equal variances in both groups for harm, moral outrage, and punishment intent, meaning there are no significant differences in variances between the control and exposure groups. There were no significant differences in means in the control condition and the experimental condition for moral outrage. There were also no significant differences in means in the control condition and the experimental condition for punishment intent. Concretely, this means the participants in the exposure group did not assess the

situation in the vignette to be more harmful than the control group and did not experience

more moral outrage or a higher intention to punish the perpetrator than participants in the

control group.

Table 2

Independent sample t-test table for the Outfit vignette - Condition

Variable	Control condition		Experimental condition		F	t	df	p
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*				
Harm perception	2.95	1.71	3.35	1.73	.37	-1.47	159	.547
Moral outrage	2.52	1.27	2.91	1.37	1.62	-1.90	159	.205
Punishment intent	2.02	1.22	2.13	1.16	.01	-.561	158	.933

The non-significant differences in both the control group (no exposure) and the

experimental group (exposure) indicate that hypothesis 1 is not supported: exposure to a

social safety campaign did not lead to an assessment of more harmfulness, greater moral

outrage, or a higher intention to punish the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 2: Main Effects of Political Ideology

To examine the main effect of political ideology on harm perception, moral outrage,

and punishment intent, I analyzed the correlations between political ideology and the outcome

variables. In the Team Chat vignette, correlation analysis shows no significant correlations

between political ideology and any of the outcome variables. This means no main effect was

found for political ideology in the Team Chat vignette. A main effect was found in the Outfit

vignette. Political ideology correlated negatively with harm perception ($r = -.189$, $p < .005$),

moral outrage ($r = -.279$, $p < .001$), and punishment intent ($r = -.211$, $p < .001$). This means

that when political ideology moved to the right, participants scored the situation to be less

harmful, experienced less moral outrage, and less intentions to punish the perpetrator in this

vignette.

In both vignettes, harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent all correlated positively with each other, so higher scores on one variable also meant higher scores on the other variables. This means that when participants found the situation in the vignettes more harmful, they also experienced stronger moral outrage and had higher intentions to punish the perpetrator(s).

Hypothesis 3: Interaction Effects of Political Ideology

To examine whether political ideology moderates the relationship between exposure to a social safety campaign and harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent, I performed multiple regression analysis. The results are described below.

Team Chat condition

The model did not produce significant interaction effects in harm perception. The regression analysis indicated that 0.1% of the variance in harm perception is explained by the model ($p = .799$), meaning political ideology does not account for much variability in harm perception. This indicates that political ideology does not moderate the relationship between exposure to warning signals and harm perception.

The model did not produce significant interaction effects in moral outrage. The regression analysis indicated that 0.2% of the variance in moral outrage is explained by the model ($p = .493$), meaning political ideology does not account for much variability in moral outrage. This indicates that political ideology does not moderate the relationship between exposure to warning signals and moral outrage.

The model did not produce significant interaction effects in punishment intent in the Team Chat condition. The regression analysis indicates that 0.1% of the variance in punishment intent is explained by the model ($p = .636$), meaning political ideology also does not account for much variability in punishment intent. This indicates that political ideology

does not moderate the relationship between exposure to warning signals and punishment intent.

This means that the regression analysis in total did not support a significant moderation effect for political ideology on the three outcome variables in this vignette. There does not seem to be a difference in perceptions of harm, moral outrage, and punishment intent based on how left or right people indicated their political ideology to be.

Table 3

Regression Table for Harm in the Team Chat condition - Condition x PI

Variable	Coefficients	SE	t	*p*	R²	*F*	*p*
Condition	-.06	.51	-.11	.912			
Political Ideology	.05	.10	.49	.625			
Condition x PI	.04	.15	.27	.785			
Model summary					.01	.34	.799

Note: degrees of freedom: df1 = 1, df2 = 157

Table 4

Regression Table for Moral Outrage in the Team Chat condition - Condition x PI

Variable	Coefficients	SE	t	*p*	R²	*F*	*p*
Condition	.01	.32	.04	.965			
Political Ideology	-.07	.06	-1.08	.283			
Condition x PI	.04	.10	.38	.705			
Model summary					.02	.80	.493

Note: degrees of freedom: df1 = 1, df2 = 157

Table 5

Regression Table for Punishment Intent in the Team Chat condition - Condition x PI

Variable	Coefficients	SE	t	p	R²	F	p
Condition	.42	.44	.96	.338			
Political Ideology	.11	.09	1.25	.212			
Condition x PI	-.11	.13	-.85	.397			
Model summary					.01	.57	.636

Note: degrees of freedom: df1 = 1, df2 = 157

Outfit condition

The model did not produce significant interaction effects in harm perception in the

Outfit condition. The regression analysis indicates that 0.4% of the variance in harm

perception is explained by the model (p = .051), meaning political ideology does not account

for variability in harm perception. This indicates that political ideology does not moderate the

relationship between exposure to warning signals and harm perception in this vignette.

The model did not produce significant interaction effects in moral outrage in the Outfit

condition. The regression analysis indicates that 0.1% of the variance in moral outrage is

explained by the model (p = .010) meaning political ideology does not account for variability

in moral outrage. This indicates that political ideology does not moderate the relationship

between exposure to warning signals and moral outrage in this vignette.

The model did not produce significant interaction effects in punishment intent in the

Outfit condition. The regression analysis indicates that 0.5% of the variance in punishment

intent is explained by the model (p = .063), meaning political ideology does not account for

variability in punishment intent either. This indicates that political ideology does not moderate

the relationship between exposure to warning signals and punishment intent in this vignette.

This means that the total regression analysis did not support a significant moderation

effect for political ideology on the three outcome variables in this vignette. There does not

seem to be a difference in perceptions of harm, moral outrage, and punishment intent based on how left or right people indicated their political ideology to be.

Table 6

Regression Table for Harm in the Outfit Condition - Condition x PI

Variable	Coefficients	SE	t	*p*	R^2	*F*	*p*
Condition	-.04	.62	-.06	.955			
Political Ideology	-.27	.13	-2.12	.035			
Condition x PI	.12	.18	.67	.503			
Model summary					.04	2.64	.051

Note: degrees of freedom: df1 = 1, df2 = 157

Table 7

Regression Table for Moral Outrage in the Outfit Condition - Condition x PI

Variable	Coefficients	SE	t	*p*	R^2	*F*	*p*
Condition	.02	.47	.04	.969			
Political Ideology	-.29	.09	-3.05	.030			
Condition x PI	.10	.14	.74	.461			
Model summary					.10	5.59	.010

Note: degrees of freedom: df1 = 1, df2 = 157

Table 8

Regression Table for Punishment Intent in the Outfit Condition - Condition x PI

Variable	Coefficients	SE	t	*p*	R^2	*F*	*p*
Condition	-.03	.43	-.07	.947			
Political Ideology	-.18	.09	-2.07	.040			
Condition x PI	.03	.13	.22	.824			

| Model summary | .05 | 2.48 | .063 |

Note: degrees of freedom: df1= 1, df2 = 156

The non-significant findings in both vignettes indicate that the relationship between exposure to the social safety campaign and harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent is not stronger for people with liberal political ideology than for people with conservative political ideologies, which does not align with hypothesis 3.

Discussion

For this Bachelor thesis, I was interested in the influences of political ideology on the perceptions of ambiguous social interactions in the workplace. My personal interest in politics, and the effects of political ideology on our daily behavior, morality, and attitudes mostly drove this curiosity. In this thesis, I investigated whether exposure to warning signals influences participants' perceptions of ambiguous situations as more harmful, their experience of stronger moral outrage, and their intentions to punish the perpetrator. Additionally, I examined whether political orientation moderates these relationships.

Specifically, I wanted to find out whether exposure to a social safety campaign leads people to perceive social situations as more harmful and whether they would experience a greater extent of moral outrage and punishment intent. In addition to this, I wanted to study whether liberals score higher on these variables than conservatives. To do so, I conducted an experiment where I manipulated social safety to compare a control group that was not exposed to a social safety campaign and an experimental group that was exposed to this campaign.

The first hypothesis states that participants who were exposed to the social safety campaign would perceive ambiguous social situations as more harmful, experience a higher degree of moral outrage, and have higher intentions to punish the perpetrator. The results

indicate that there are no significant differences in means between the control group and the experimental group in harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent in either of the vignettes. This means that whether participants were or were not exposed to the campaign did not significantly influence how harmful they thought the situation was, and it did not make them experience more moral outrage or a higher punishment intent. Hypothesis 1 is therefore not supported.

The second hypothesis states that liberals perceive ambiguous social situations as more harmful, experience more moral outrage, and have stronger punishment intentions than conservatives, which I investigated through correlation analysis. I found a main effect in the Outfit vignette, but not in the Team Chat vignette. In this vignette, when political ideology moved to the right, the scores on harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent declined. This means that people with more conservative political ideologies assessed the situation as less harmful, experienced less moral outrage, and were less inclined to punish the perpetrator. This partially supports hypothesis 2. However, the mixed results make it difficult to conclude why the main effect was only found in one vignette, and the conditions still influence the correlations. I will expand on this in the theoretical implications and the limitations sections.

Hypothesis 3 states that political ideology moderates the relationship between exposure to the social safety campaign and harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent: liberals would score higher on these variables than conservatives. The results indicate no significant interaction effects for political ideology in either vignette in harm perception, moral outrage, or punishment intent. This means political ideology does not act as a moderator in the relationships between exposure to warning signals and harm perception, moral outrage, or punishment intent. Hypothesis 3 can therefore be rejected.

In general, these results mean that exposure to the social safety campaign did not seem to matter in the extent to which people found a situation harmful, experienced moral outrage, or the extent to which they were inclined to punish the perpetrator. Political ideology also did not moderate the relationship between exposure and the three outcome variables, but only influenced the outcome variables in terms of a main effect in one of the two vignettes. Harm perception, moral outrage, and punishment intent also correlated significantly with each other in both vignettes, which was expected based on findings in the literature. All in all, the results mean that the proposed model (see Figure 1 on page 9) is not supported in this study.

The non-significant results may either be produced because of limitations in the study design or statistics, or because the model is simply not correct. In the sections below, I will explore the results in relation to the theoretical foundation and then discuss some limitations.

Theoretical implications

As different experiments similar to this one provided support for a link with harm perception (e.g. Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023, Smith & Percy, 2019), different outcomes were expected. However, it may be that the theory on harm salience and the potential underlying role of concept creep provides a different explanation than hypothesized. Where I expected that concept creep would contribute to people recognizing more subtle forms of harm, researchers have found that repeated exposure to harm-related content or warnings that should provoke harm salience may also lead people to become desensitized to them or take situations less seriously, especially when more subtle behavior is included (Dakin et al., 2023; Haslam, 2016; McDermott & Zimbardo, 2006). The vast amount of content and forms of social harm people may have already been exposed to outside our experiment may also contribute to a certain extent of desensitization, leading people to be less affected by yet another campaign in this study.

For the mixed main effects of political ideology, it is more difficult to determine whether the significant and non-significant results are due to methodological issues or whether there is a theoretical explanation. In general, there are many findings that political ideology affects our perceptions and moral reactions to events at least to a certain extent (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023; Jost et al., 2006; Swigart et al., 2020) and that liberals prioritize protecting individuals from harm more on a moral level (e.g. see Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Smith et al, 2019). Even though the correlations in this study were only secondary and not based on group differences, they do support this line of thought to a certain extent: political ideology holds some sort of relationship with harm perception, extent of moral outrage, and extent of punishment intent. More specifically, it supports the thought that harm related concepts are judged more severely by liberals than conservatives, at least in a small capacity. However, the other side is that there are different thoughts in literature on the connection between political ideology, harm, and moral outcomes. As opposed to e.g. Haidt & Graham's Moral Foundations Theory (2007), Schein & Gray (2015, 2018) theorize in the Theory of Dyadic Morality that political ideology has a much smaller role in morality than proposed.

Although the results in this study did not directly link political ideology to harm perception, moral outrage, or punishment intent, the significant correlations may provide a preliminary foundation for further research on the different theories and the role of political ideology in these different thoughts on morality. In the next section, I will move to some methodological limitations that may have affected the results.

Limitations

In addition to the theoretical implications, several methodological limitations might have impacted the results, both related to general factors and the study design.

First of all, political ideology was measured on a single spectrum from left to right (or liberal to conservative), rather than on a quadrant that includes progressive to conservative dimensions. Although a multidimensional measurement provides a more accurate measure of political ideology, the single dimension is the most common measure in research and is easier to implement. The terminology differences between North American (liberal to conservative) and European (left-wing to right-wing) contexts were addressed by including both terms in the question. However, it is important to note that these differences may make a difference and it would be recommended to measure political ideology multi-dimensionally to get a more accurate image.

Another limitation is that I used the Moral Foundations Theory to explain a large part of the theory behind this study, especially for the link between political ideology and moral outcomes, but did not test or use the moral foundations in the study design. In many studies, Haidt & Graham's Moral Foundations Theory (2007) is used to explain the relationship between morality and political ideology, which was one of the major support factors for this research topic. However, the moral foundations or any other moral principles were not tested in the context of this research, only by having moral outrage as a dependent variable and by assuming political ideology and moral outrage are indeed related. In future research, measuring morality could make it easier to interpret the relationships and could make inferences more valid.

Another limitation is that the vignettes, intended to depict ambiguous situations, were not pre-tested. This makes it difficult to decide how ambiguous participants found them. The same point applies to the social safety campaign: the examples described in the campaign may not have connected to the behavior in the vignettes well enough to induce harm salience. Moreover, the study included only one control group without any stimulus and one experimental group with a social safety campaign. Including an additional control group with

an unrelated warning (e.g., bike theft) could help determine whether any warning influences perceptions of ambiguous situations, or only context-specific warnings. In our thesis group, this was decided against due to the complexity of the research design and following analysis.

Some sample limitations may have impacted the results as well. The sample distribution was skewed to the left. This skewed distribution makes it more difficult to adequately assess relationships between variables as the responses on the right side are drastically less than on the left side. The sample size in general may also be too small to rightfully draw conclusions about the whole population. A larger sample size may also make the distribution less skewed. For future research, this means a larger, preferably more diverse sample should be collected to make fair inferences.

Future research should redesign the study with the following points: three conditions with an unrelated campaign to see if harm salience is only induced when the campaign relates to the vignettes, a campaign that connects well to the vignettes, and pre-test the vignettes to account for ambiguity.

Practical implications and directions for future research

Although the results did not provide stable, significant effects or easy conclusions, the role of political ideology in perceptions of ambiguous social situations remains an interesting topic that should be further researched. The support found in research indicates that political ideology might be a variable of interest in research on morality and perceptions of social situations, and may have a bigger influence on people's perceptions of social situations than one may think. The support coming from research in politics and morality forms a solid foundation for future research on this topic. It may be interesting to test whether exposure to political messages as well as warning signs would have a stronger effect, as it would prime people's political ideologies in the context of a study. In this way, we could study whether

making political ideology salient would lead to different results than in this study. All in all, the intersection of increasing attention for workplace social safety and an increasingly polarizing political climate will continue to become more important over time, which is why research in this domain is highly important for addressing these complex issues.

The ideas from this study may also apply to daily HR practices such as feedback culture, cooperation, and assessment of ambiguous situations by managers or team leads. Differences in perceptions of social interactions may lead to conflict in the workplace, and as many situations remain difficult to assess, responsible people should be aware of perception and morality differences and the way they influence daily social interactions. Understanding these individual differences in perceptions and willingness to adapt to the perceptions of others may contribute to a safer workplace and may lead to more effective social safety campaigns and interventions. Research in predictors and other variables of interest in perception differences in social interactions is key to creating this understanding. In turn, a greater understanding of this intersection between social safety and political ideology or other variables of interest could also lead to the creation of more effective social safety campaigns.

Ultimately, increasing our understanding of how political ideology shapes perceptions of social situations will be essential for fostering socially safe work environments in a complex world. Although the results are inconclusive, I remain interested in the outcomes of political ideology and how we take our ideologies with us in our daily lives.

References

Bleske-Rechek, A., Deaner, R.O., Paulich, K.N., Axelrod, M., Badenhorst, N., Nguyen, K., Seyoum, E., & Lay, P.S. (2023). In the eye of the beholder: Situational and dispositional predictors of perceiving harm in others' words. *Personality and Individual Differences, 200*, 11902. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111902.

Bastian, B., Denson, T.F., & Haslam, N. (2013). The Roles of Dehumanization and Moral Outrage in Retributive Justice. PLoS ONE, *8*(4), e61842. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0061842

Dakin, B. C., McGrath, M. J., Rhee, J. J., & Haslam, N. (2023). Broadened concepts of harm appear less serious. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *14*(1), 72–83. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/19485506221076692

Ginther, M. R., Hartsough, L. E. S., & Marois, R. (2022). Moral outrage drives the interaction of harm and culpable intent in third-party punishment decisions. *Emotion*, *22*(4), 795–804. https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000950.supp

Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *96*(5), 1029–1046. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1037/a0015141

Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2007). When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. *Social Justice Research*, *20*(1), 19. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1007/s11211-007-0034-z

Haidt, J., Graham, J., & Joseph, C. (2009). Above and below left–right: Ideological narratives and moral foundations. *Psychological Inquiry*, *20*(2–3), 110–119. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1080/10478400903028573

Haslam N. (2016). Concept creep: Psychology's expanding concepts of harm and pathology.

Psychological Inquiry, 27(1), 1–17.

https://dx-doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1080/1047840X.2016.1082418

Jost, J. T. (2006). The end of the end of ideology. *American Psychologist*, *61*(7), 651–670.

https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1037/0003-066X.61.7.651

Jost, J. T., Federico, C. M., & Napier, J. L. (2009). Political ideology: Its structure, functions,

and elective affinities. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *60*, 307–337.

https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163600

McDermott, R, & Zimbardo, P. G. (2006). 'The Psychological Consequences of Terrorist

Alerts', in Bruce Bongar, and others (eds), *Psychology of Terrorism* (New York).

Muller, J. Z. (1997). What is conservative social and political thought? In J. Z. Muller (Ed.),

Conservatism: An anthology of social and political thought from David Hume to the

present (pp. 3–31)*.* Princeton University Press.

Oxley, D. R., Smith, K. B., Alford, J. R., Hibbing, M. V., Miller, J. L., Scalora, M., Hatemi,

P.K., & Hibbing, J. R. (2008). Political attitudes vary with physiological traits.

Science, *321*(5896), 1667–1670.

https://doi.org.proxy.ub.rug.nl/10.1126/science.1157627

Rothschild, Z. K., & Keefer, L. A. (2017). A cleansing fire: Moral outrage alleviates guilt and

buffers threats to one's moral identity. Motivation and Emotion, 41(2), 209–229.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-017-9601-2

Salerno, J. M., & Slepian, M. L. (2022). Morality, punishment, and revealing other people's

secrets. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *122*(4), 606–633.

https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000284.supp

Schein, C., & Gray, K. (2015). The Unifying Moral Dyad: Liberals and Conservatives Share

the Same Harm-Based Moral Template. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*,

41(8), 1147-1163. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/0146167215591501

Schein, C., & Gray, K. (2018). The theory of dyadic morality: Reinventing moral judgment

by redefining harm. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *22*(1), 32–70.

https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/1088868317698288

Skitka, L. J., Bauman, C. W., & Mullen, E. (2004). Political Tolerance and Coming to

Psychological Closure Following the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks: An

Integrative Approach. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *30*(6), 743–756.

https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/0146167204263968

Smith, N. L., & Percy, E. J. (2019). Diversity training methods, opinions of political

correctness, and perceptions of microaggressions. Psi Chi Journal of Psychological

Research, 24(2), 106–112. https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN24.2.106

Smith, C. T., Ratliff, K. A., Redford, L., & Graham, J. (2019). Political ideology predicts

attitudes toward moral transgressors. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *80*, 23–29.

https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1016/j.jrp.2019.04.002

Sowell, T. (2002). *A conflict of visions: The ideological origins of political struggles.* New

York: Basic Books.

Swigart, K. L., Anantharaman, A., Williamson, J. A., & Grandey, A. A. (2020). Working

while liberal/conservative: A review of political ideology in organizations. *Journal of

Management*, *46*(6), 1063–1091.

https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1177/0149206320909419

University of Groningen (2023). Social safety. https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/policy-and-

strategy/social-safety/?lang=nl.

Van Leeuwen, F., & Park, J. H. (2009). Perceptions of social dangers, moral foundations, and

political orientation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *47*(3), 169–173.

https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1016/j.paid.2009.02.017

Zhong, R., Lian, H., Hershcovis, M. S., & Robinson, S. L. (2023). Mitigating or magnifying

the harmful influence of workplace aggression: An integrative review. *Academy of

Management Annals*, *17*(2), 516-545.

Appendix A: Social Safety Campaign

Figure 1.

The social safety campaign for the experimental manipulation

Appendix B: Vignettes

Figure 1.

Team chat vignette

Figure 2.

Outfit vignette