

**Attitude Moralization in Intergroup and Intragroup Contexts:
Do value violations committed by immoral out/in-group members trigger attitude
moralization?**

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Abstract

Attitude moralization is an important process that shapes human behaviour, however we know little about when it occurs. To broaden our knowledge on the topic, we aim to replicate a study investigating moralization within the intergroup context, and as a function of a value protection response. We expect attitudes to become more strongly moralized in response to immoral, but not moral, violators, as the moral character of the transgressor plays a crucial role in the perception of threat and experience of other-condemning negative emotions. We also suggest that moralization can occur in the intragroup context. More specifically, we propose that immoral ingroup violators pose a higher threat to ingroups' stability and image of the group, compared to moral ingroup violators, which in response triggers moralization of the issue at hand. We set up a 2x2 experimental design to test the effects of group membership and perceived morality of the violator on attitude moralization. We found evidence of equally strong moralization in all four of our experimental conditions. This suggest that other factors than morality of the violator potentially play a key role in the process.

Keywords: moralization, moral conviction, immoral and moral outgroup, immoral and moral ingroup, violation

Attitude Moralization in Intergroup and Intragroup Contexts:

Do value violations committed by immoral out/in-group members trigger attitude moralization?

People's moral convictions- their beliefs about core questions of right or wrong, are predictive of their social and political behaviour (Skitka et al., 2015, Skitka et al. 2005). For example, individuals who are morally committed to a common purpose are more likely to take part in collective action (van Zomeren, 2013; van Zomeren et al., 2011) and to be politically engaged or active (Skitka & Wisneski, 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2011; Zaal et al., 2011). Knowing what triggers attitude moralization- the process through which an attitude is prescribed greater moral relevance or transforms into a stronger moral conviction (Brandt et al., 2015; Rozin et al., 1997; Rozin & Singh, 1999), holds potential for shaping society and individual behaviour (e.g., Skitka & Bauman, 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2012 van Zomeren et al., 2018;). However, little is still known of the triggers of attitude moralization (Skitka et al., 2018). To deepen our understanding of the process, we follow a novel line of research (Leal et al., 2021), which explores moralization in the intergroup context. We aim to replicate their findings that moralization can be triggered in response to outgroup value violation. Additionally, we propose that violations in the intragroup context can trigger moralization in an attempt to protect the image of the group in the face of an immoral transgressor. Thus, we have formulated the research questions: Do value violations committed by immoral out/in-group members trigger attitude moralization?

Moral Convictions and Attitude Moralization

According to the domain theory of attitudes, we can distinguish between three psychologically different types of attitudes, which are grounded in: preferences, convictions or

morals (Nucci 2001, Nucci & Turiel 1978, Skitka 2014, Skitka et al. 2005). Preferences signify personal taste and subjective dispositions. Attitudes in this domain are prone to change and people are commonly accepting of dissimilar likings. Being against deforestation because it will ruin the quality of your family trips to the Amazon is an example of an attitude based on preference. Conventional attitudes, on the other hand, are rooted in coordination rules. They indicate the right or wrong way of conduct, according to relevant authority or group norms. If a certain rule/ norm is revised, the individual will likely adapt to this change. A person working in the wood industry might change their attitude on deforestation (from “for” to “against”), if they decide to switch to an environmentalist career. Unlike conventions, attitudes grounded in moral conviction comprise one’s fundamental beliefs about good or bad. They are perceived as objective facts based on universally generalizable truths about reality, which apply to all people, independent from authority. Attitudes that are high in moral conviction are resistant to change and people who hold them tend to be intolerant towards differing inclinations. Someone with a morally-grounded attitude against deforestation likely holds the conviction that it is morally right (wrong) to protect (damage) the environment (Nucci 2001, Nucci & Turiel 1978, Skitka 2014, Skitka et al. 2005, Skitka et al. 2021).

We refer to attitude moralization as the process through which an attitude receives greater moral relevance or turns into a stronger moral conviction (Brandt et al., 2015; Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997; Rozin & Singh, 1999). We do not know much about the process but emotions seem to play an important role. Some studies show that the experience of certain attitudinally relevant emotions (e.g. anger, disgust, contempt) is related to an intensified feeling of moral conviction (e.g., Brandt et al. 2015, Clifford 2019, Feinberg et al. 2019, Wisneski & Skitka 2017). To deepen our understanding of attitude moralization, we follow a novel line of research,

which suggests that, in the broader frame of value protection theory, violations committed by immoral outgroups arouse such negative emotions, which in turn trigger moralization (Leal et al., 2021, see also Skitka, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000).

Immoral Outgroup Violations as Triggers to Moralization

The study by Leal et al., was based on the hypothesis that value violations committed by immoral outgroups would triggered greater attitude moralization, compared to moral outgroups. They theorized that moralization signals the need of value protection in response to an outgroup value violator, who is threatening the social and moral sense of the observer. Moreover, they suggested that immoral violators are likely to arouse enhanced negative emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, contempt), which are strongly associated with moralization. This should increase the likelihood that moralization occurs, and thus the moral character of the violator should be a vital role in the process. They tested their hypothesis across three experiments. In each, participants of the ingroup (females/ Democrats) were confronted with statement of a relevant outgroup, which operated as a value violation. In Study 1a, the moral character of the violator was established by a pilot study. Differently, in Study 1b and 2, aiming to strengthen the causal link, moral character was explicitly manipulated with a fragment, serving to portray the perpetrator as either moral or immoral. In all three of the experiments, participants' scores in the immoral violator condition indicate stronger attitude moralization. These findings support the idea that attitude moralization can be triggered in response to a value violation within the intergroup context. However, this studies do not explore attitude moralization within the intragroup context.

Immoral Ingroup Violations as Triggers to Moralization

We suggest that attitude moralization can be triggered in the intragroup context as well. Actions by those relevant to our social identity influence our moral self-views, as shared moral standards convey important information about who we are and where we belong (Ellemers & van der Toorn, 2015). Studies show that a feeling of threat is elicited when we witness immoral behaviour by members of our group (Brambilla et al., 2013). Brambilla and his colleagues (2013) provided support to the notion that our group's saintly self- image is put in jeopardy, when one is faced with an immoral ingroup violating the moral standards of the group. Because our ingroup's morality is so important to our self-image, any indication that our group is not moral might lead to a strong reaction (e.g., Leach et al., 2007; for reviews, see Ellemers & Van den Bos, 2012). Furthermore, as we have previously seen (Leal et al., 2021), when the violator is perceived as immoral, this could triggered an even stronger reaction. Thus, we suggest that ingroup violations can act as potential triggers of attitude moralization.

Overview and Hypotheses

We created an online experiment to explore whether identical ingroup value violation would have a different effect on the process of moralization depending on whether the perpetrator was considered to be a moral or immoral member of the ingroup, or a moral or immoral outgroup member. The moral issue used for our study was deforestation and we tested our hypotheses in the intergroup setting of the 2017 U.S. departure from the Paris Accord on Climate Change. We tested two hypotheses: The first hypothesis suggests that violations committed by immoral outgroups will lead to greater moralization in comparison with moral outgroup violations. The second hypothesis states that violations committed by immoral ingroups will lead to greater moralization compared to moral ingroup violations.

Method

Participants and Design

We recruited participants via Academic Prolific and used pre-screening questions to select individuals. Particularly, we targeted Americans, who are currently located in the USA and who identify with the Democratic Party. We sampled 600 individuals who were offered a monetary compensation of \$1.40 for their participation. We excluded one hundred and six participants because they were not members of the Democratic Party ($n = 24$), or failed at least one of the attention checks ($n = 82$). The final sample consisted of 494 American Democrats- 277 females, 212 males, and five who identified as “other”. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 81 ($M_{age} = 35.27$, $SD = 13.01$). They reported to be American Indian or Alaska Native ($n = 8$), Asian ($n = 56$), African American ($n = 42$), Caucasian ($n = 379$), Hispanic ($n = 43$), and/or other ($n = 6$). We used a 2 (group membership: ingroup or outgroup) x 2 (moral character: immoral or moral) design and participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions: immoral outgroup, moral outgroup, immoral ingroup, or moral ingroup. The study was approved by the ethics committee of University of Groningen, faculty of Behavioural and Social sciences.

Procedure

Participants were presented with a consent form, which informed them about the procedure and the goal of the study that is to get a better understanding of people’s opinions and attitudes about different societal issues and politicians. In the first part of the study, participants read a passage about the issue of deforestation, and then completed a short questionnaire regarding their attitude strength and moral conviction about deforestation at time 1. Furthermore,

they had to complete a pre-screening question where they pointed the political party they identify with the most (“Republican Party”, “Democratic Party”, “Libertarian Party” or “Other”) in order to assure that our sample consists only of people from the Democratic Party.

The second part of the study, we introduced the manipulation in the form of an envision task. Depending on the experimental condition, participants were asked to envision a political representative that was either from the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, and who they considered as either moral or immoral. In the immoral ingroup/outgroup condition, respectively participants read the following text: *“We would like you to choose and think about a representative politician or member of the Democratic/ Republican party that you consider to be immoral. This means that you think this person is not very trustworthy, honest, and sincere. This politician has not been actively involved in campaigns and movements that support minority rights issues (e.g., Black Lives Matter), and gender equality issues (e.g., MeToo), and does not always try to fight for human rights, justice, and equality. Additionally, this politician is generally motivated to do what is good for their own interests.”*

Participants in the moral ingroup/outgroup condition, respectively, read the following: *“We would like you to choose and think about a representative politician or member of the Democratic/ Republican party that you consider to be moral. This means that you think this person is very trustworthy, honest, and sincere. This politician has been actively involved in campaigns and movements that support minority rights issues (e.g., Black Lives Matter), and gender equality issues (e.g., MeToo), and always tries to fight for human rights, justice, and equality. Additionally, this politician is generally motivated to do what is good for people and society”.*

After the envision task, participants, in each condition, had to answer number of questions that we used to assess whether the manipulation was effective. Then, participants read a short informational text about the announcement of former US president Donald Trump to withdraw from the Paris Accord (a global agreement geared towards climate change mitigation), which was rebuffed by the executive order of the president-elect, Joe Biden, to re-join the agreement. Regulations, climate change policies and US contribution to the issue have been under investigation in the recent months.

The violation was introduced by asking participants to imagine the earlier envisioned politician in the following scenario: *“Imagine that you have discovered that {Politician} has financially supported and is strongly affiliated with a very large US company that has significantly and negatively contributed to climate change in different ways. This large-scale company has been responsible for the mass destruction of forests, natural habitats, and ecosystems to expand businesses and the economy. For example, they have cleared and removed trees in forests in the US (but also in Amazon and Indonesia) for agriculture, livestock farming, and wood businesses. These actions have already led to the extinction or relocation of several species and forced Indigenous people to relocate or live in severe scarcity. According to {Politician} “we need and should invest in deforestation activities to build a better world and future, and the collateral damages to people and the environment are inevitable”. Even though several environmental activists and supporters have urged the company to revisit their deforestation practices, {Politician} still firmly supports this company and believes we cannot do better than this.”*

After the violation, participants had to rate their attitude strength and moral conviction towards deforestation at time 2. Furthermore, they answered a number of questions used to assess

whether they had perceived a violation of their moral values, as well as two questions serving as attention checks (“Earlier, I was asked to imagine a...”; “Please select the topic that best illustrates the information you read earlier”). Lastly, participants had to provide demographic information- their gender (Male, Female, or Other), and their age in years. We do not report some additional measures that are not relevant to the current study. At the end, participants were debriefed about the goal of the study, as well as informed that the texts they read were fictional and constructed by the researchers.

Measures

We have adjusted the items used by Leal et al. (2021), according to the context of the current study.

Manipulation and Violation Checks

To check the efficacy of the manipulation, we included three items ($\alpha = .95$) on which participants rated the perceived morality of the envisioned politician (“I think that {Politician} cares about doing morally right things (reverse coded)/ lacks some morality/ values good moral principles (reverse coded).”) using a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *absolutely not* to 9 = *absolutely*).

The effect of the violation text was assessed with four items ($\alpha = .83$) where participants evaluated the extent to which they perceived their moral values to be violated (“To what extent do you think the opinion of {Politician} on the environment and use of forests violates your moral values/ is morally wrong/ violates the values of the Democratic Party/ violates the values of the Liberal ideology?”) using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*).

Moral Conviction at Time 1 and Time 2

Participants were first asked to rate their general attitude towards deforestation (“To what extent do you support or oppose deforestation?”). Following, we included three items to measure participants’ moral convictions about the issues of deforestation (“To what extent is your position on deforestation a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions/ to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong/ based on moral principle?”), which they answered at time 1 ($\alpha = .92$) and at time 2 ($\alpha = 0.94$) using a 7-point Likert scale (1= *not at all* to 7= *very much*). We subtracted participants’ mean score of moral convictions at time 1 from the mean score at time 2 to calculate attitude moralization- the dependent variable (Leal et al., 2021).

Attitude Strength at Time 1 and 2

To measure participants’ attitude strength towards deforestation, they had to rate two items (“To what extent is your position on deforestation important to who you are as a person?”, “How strongly do you feel about deforestation?”) on a 7-point Likert scale (1= *not at all* to 7= *very much*), at time 1 ($r = .70, p < .001$) and at time 2 ($r = .74, p < .001$). These scores were used as our control variables in our main analysis.

Results

Manipulation and Violation Checks

We conducted a two-way analysis of variance to compare the effect of the two independent variables (group membership and moral character), as well as their interaction effect on the perception of morality of the violator. Both independent variables had two levels- group membership consisted of ingroup and outgroup level, whereas moral character consisted of moral and immoral level. Main effects were significant at the .05 significance level, whereas interaction between the two variables did not yield a significant result, $F(1, 490) = .18, p = .67$, meaning that the effect of either of the independent variables did not depend on the level of the other variable.

The main effect for group membership yielded an F ratio of $F(1, 490) = 135.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$, indicating a significant difference between perceptions of outgroup violators ($M = 5.83, SD = 2.76$) and ingroup violators ($M = 4.31, SD = 2.70$), suggesting that participants in the outgroup condition perceived the violator as more immoral compared to those in the ingroup condition. Furthermore, we found a significant main effect of moral character with an F ratio of $F(1, 490) = 1157.64, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .70$, indicating that immoral violators ($M = 7.45, SD = 1.70$) were perceived as significantly more immoral compared to moral violators ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.69$). Thus, we can conclude that the manipulation was effective.

To check the efficacy of the violation, we first conducted a one sample *t* test, which confirmed that a violation to one's moral values was perceived in all of the conditions ($M = 4.02, SD = 0.84$), since scores were significantly different from the scale midpoint, $t(493) = 40.33, p < .001, d = 1.81$. Following, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance to explore whether there were any differences in the perceived strength of the violation across conditions. Interaction was not significant, thus any effects of either of the independent variables (group membership and moral character) can be considered as independent from each other, $F(1, 490) = 0.02, p = .90, \eta_p^2 = .00$. We did not find a significant difference in the perception of the violation between participants in the outgroup ($M = 4.05, SD = 0.84$), and in the ingroup ($M = 3.99, SD = 0.84$) conditions. Meaning, we did not find a main effect of group membership on perceived violation, $F(1, 490) = 0.77, p = .38, \eta_p^2 = .002$. The effect of moral character on the perception of the violation was slightly above the cut-off score for significance, $F(1, 490) = 3.78, p = .053, \eta_p^2 = .008$. Since, the *p*-value is above the .05 significance level, we can conclude that the difference in violation perception between the immoral ($M = 4.10, SD = 0.85$) condition compared to the moral ($M = 3.95, SD = 0.82$) condition was not significant. Scores of the violation were high in

all four conditions and significantly different from the scale midpoint, thus we can conclude that the violation was successful, and any effects of the manipulation cannot be attributed to the value violation itself.

Hypothesis Testing

Before conducting the main analysis, we ran a two-way analysis of variance to check whether group membership, violator's moral character, and/ or an interaction between the two had an effect on moral convictions at time 1. The analysis indicated that there were no significant differences in moral convictions at time 1 between participants in the outgroup ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.39$) and participants in the ingroup conditions ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.31$), $F(1, 490) = 0.76$, $p = .38$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$. Furthermore, we did not find a significant main effect of moral character, $F(1, 490) = 1.75$, $p = .19$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$. Moral convictions at time 1 did not differ significantly between participants in the moral conditions ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.31$) in comparison with participants in the immoral conditions ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.39$).

We conducted a paired samples t test to assess whether there was evidence for moralization across conditions. The test revealed that there was a significant difference in the mean scores for moral convictions at time 1 ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.35$), compared to the mean scores for moral convictions at time 2 ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(493) = - 2.70$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.12$. Thus, we have evidence of moralization of attitudes towards deforestation from time 1 to time 2. We conducted a second paired samples t test, to compare participant's attitudes towards deforestation before and after the manipulation and violation. The test revealed that in general there was a significant increase in attitude strength from time 1 ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.50$) to time 2 ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.51$), $t(493) = - 5.40$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.24$.

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance. We assessed whether moralization of participants' attitude towards deforestation occurred when participants were faced with an immoral violator but not when the violator was moral, independent of their group membership. The prior *t* test indicated that attitudes towards deforestation became significantly stronger from time 1 to time 2. Thus, to separate attitude moralization from strengthening of the attitude, we used attitude strength at time 1 and at time 2 as control variables in this analysis (cf. Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). In accordance with our expectations, we did not find significant interaction effect, $F(1, 490) = 0.14, p = .71, \eta_p^2 = .00$, thus any effect of violator's morality could not be associated with group membership. Furthermore, we did not find a significant difference in moralization between participants in the outgroup ($M = 0.099, SD = 0.68$) and participants in the ingroup ($M = 0.085, SD = 0.83$) conditions, $F(1, 490) = 0.19, p = .67, \eta_p^2 = .00$. However, we did not find a significant main effect of moral character on moralization either, $F(1, 490) = 0.01, p = .91, \eta_p^2 = .00$. Moralization in the immoral conditions ($M = 0.095, SD = 0.77$) was not significantly different from moralization in the moral conditions ($M = 0.09, SD = 0.75$). In sum, we did not observe significant differences in moralization across conditions. Important study variables with their means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to replicate and provide more support to the findings by Leal and her colleagues (2021), which link attitude moralization to violations committed by immoral outgroups. We wanted to extend this findings by suggesting that value transgression committed by immoral ingroups also serve to trigger one to moralize their attitude on a specific issue. To test our hypotheses, we set up a 2x2 experimental designed, conditions divided by

group membership and perceived morality of the violator. More specifically, the first hypothesis stated that greater moralization will be triggered in the immoral outgroup condition, compared to the moral outgroup condition. Whereas, the second hypotheses predicted stronger moralization when the violator is an immoral ingroup, compared to when he is a moral ingroup. There were no significant differences in moralization across conditions, therefore the findings do not support our hypotheses.

Implications

This study follows a recent line of research exploring attitude moralization with an experimental approach, and provides some theoretical contributions to our understanding of the process. We found support to the idea that the intergroup context can act as a conduit of moralization. More specifically, Leal and her colleagues (2021) conceptualized moralization as a response to an ingroup value violation. In three experiments, they found evidence that immoral outgroup violators instigate moralization, whereas moral outgroups violators do not trigger the process. Different from their study, in our research, attitudes on deforestation became equally moralized in both (immoral and moral) outgroup conditions.

Novel in our study was the idea that the intragroup context can also serve as a conduit of moralization. Immoral ingroup violators pose a threat to the group's stability and saintly image (Brambilla et al., 2013, Brambilla & Leach, 2014), which enhances strong negative reactions. Different to our expectations, we again found evidence for moralization in both (immoral and moral) ingroup conditions.

Since attitudes became more strongly moralized in all four of our experimental conditions, we did not find support for our hypotheses. With this in mind, there could be other

potential factors that play a role in the process. One possible reason we did not find an effect of condition could be that the violation was perceived quite strongly in all conditions. Negative information has a strong effect on impression formations, and despite being presented as moral, once the violation was introduced, the initial impression of the moral violators could have been revised (Reeder & Coovert, 1986). Thus, it is possible that they were perceived as equally immoral, as the violators in the immoral conditions. However, we did not measure perceptions of morality after the violation, thus we cannot know for certain whether that was the case.

Another possible reason for the lack of effect of condition could be that participants experienced emotional shock. In one of their experimental studies, Leal and her colleagues (2021) found evidence of a stronger emotional shock in the moral condition in comparison to the immoral condition. When the violator is perceived as moral, one might not expect such a “bad” behaviour, which could trigger a threat response (e.g., Mendes et al., 2007), as well as a sense of moral instability and lack of social order (Ellemers, 2017). These negative effects could be mediated by revisiting ingroup values and moralizing them (Tetlock et al., 2000).

People respond to moral violations with moral outrage and a need to affirm their values (Tetlock et al., 2000), and intense negative emotions are experienced in a response to others who differ in term of moral values (Skitka & Mullen, 2002). Taking together that perceived strength of the violation was overall pretty high, as well as the initial strength of participants’ attitude towards deforestation, makes it likely that the attitude was easily pushed in the moral domain, independent of the experimental condition. Our findings support the idea that the intergroup and intragroup contexts can act as conduit of moralization, however there might be other factors that play a key role in the process.

Limitations, Strengths and Future Research

Our research is not free of limitations. We collected our sample through Academic Prolific which makes it likely that most of the participants were well-educated, interested in research and more likely to be interested in important societal issues. Adding to this, our sample consisted of American citizens that are part of the Democratic Party. It is possible that these participants differ in their engagement and attitudes towards liberal social issues, such as deforestation, which could compromise the generalizability of our study. Still, we should note that our sample was quite diverse in age, gender and ethnicity. Furthermore, they were met with a novel, realistic and contemporary societal issue. Future research could benefit from sampling participants from different societal groups (e.g. conservatives) or different cultural background (e.g. non-western) to examine how moralization works in this different mediums.

Another limitation of our study is that we did not measure perceptions of morality after the violation, nor did we include a control group. Thus, we cannot fully separate the effects of the manipulation and the violation. Future research could add an extra measure or include a control condition that is not subjected to a manipulation of the moral character of the violator to gain more insight into the process of moralization.

Since we did not find support for our hypotheses, it would be sensible to investigate other factors that could play a role in the process of moralization. Future research could implement violations of different strengths, to investigate their effects, as well as explore possible mediators like perceptions of threat and emotional shock. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the importance of the morality of the violator, since unlike the three experiments by Leal and her colleagues (2021), we did not find an effect of moral character.

Conclusion

Moral convictions are strong predictors of a variety of politically- relevant behaviours (Skitka & Morgan, 2014), thus it is important to understand what triggers the process of moralization where one ascribes moral value to their attitude on a specific topic (Brandt et al., 2015; Rozin et al., 1997; Rozin & Singh, 1999). A novel line of research (Leal et al., 2021) investigated the process within the intergroup context and found evidence that value violations committed by immoral outgroups can trigger moralization. Our study suggest that moral outgroup, as well as immoral and moral ingroup violators could also motivate people to moralize their attitude on a specific topic.

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Table 1*Means and standard deviations per condition*

	Moral outgroup	Immoral outgroup	Moral ingroup	Immoral ingroup
Moral Convictions at time 1	5.18 (1.39)	4.99 (1.40)	5.26 (1.21)	5.13 (1.39)
Moral Convictions at time 2	5.29 (1.48)	5.07 (1.55)	5.33 (1.41)	5.23 (1.39)
Moralization (Moral Convictions at time 2 - time 1)	0.11 (0.65)	0.087 (0.72)	0.068 (0.85)	0.10 (0.82)