



Original Articles

Activating analytic thinking enhances the value given to individualizing moral foundations



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ABSTRACT

Two central debates within Moral Foundations Theory concern (1) which moral foundations are core and (2) how conflict between ideological camps stemming from valuing different moral foundations can be resolved. Previous studies have attempted to answer the first question by imposing cognitive load on participants to direct them toward intuitive and automatic thought. However, this method has limitations and has produced mixed findings. In the present research, in two experiments, instead of directing participants toward intuitive thought, we tested the effects of activating high-effort, analytic thought on participants' moral foundations. In both experiments, analytic thought activation caused participants to value individualizing foundations greater than the control condition. This effect was not qualified by participants' political orientation. No effect was observed on binding foundations. The results are consistent with the idea that upholding individualizing foundations requires mental effort and may provide the basis for reconciliation between different ideological camps.

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1. Introduction

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; [Graham et al., 2013](#); [Haidt, 2007](#)), by defining morality through evolved intuitions, emerged as a critique of monolithic approaches to morality that emphasize reasoning (vs. emotion and intuition) and care/fairness concerns (see [Kohlberg, 1969](#)). According to MFT, morality, which has been previously defined through care and justice, reflects a rather Western and liberal understanding. However, only a small minority of societies in the world approaches morality in this way ([Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010](#); [Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997](#)). MFT argues that the human species evolved to possess at least five distinct moral foundations: *Care/harm* is based on the instinct to protect and care for offspring and weak members of one's community. *Fairness/cheating* serves the need to detect cheaters and those who offend against norms of justice. *Loyalty/betrayal* concerns being loyal to and sacrificing the self for ingroups. *Authority/subversion* functions to defend authority and social order within a hierarchical structure. *Sanctity/degradation* corresponds to physical and spiritual cleanliness, valuing sacredness, and suppressing worldly desires. While political liberals define morality primarily

on the basis of care/harm and fairness/cheating, conservatives value all five dimensions equally ([Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009](#)). [Graham et al. \(2009\)](#) called care/harm and fairness/cheating “individualizing foundations” because they emphasize individual rights while they called the other three “binding foundations” because they strengthen group ties and discourage selfish behavior in group contexts.

A central debate within MFT concerns which moral foundations are more basic (or core). Core values are “moral sentiments that are consistently applicable across time, place, and contexts” ([Napier & Luguri, 2013, p. 755](#)). [Haidt and Kesebir \(2010\)](#) argue that, due to evolution, all members of the human species possess the five foundations and that the above-mentioned differences between liberals and conservatives emerged during Enlightenment as a result of liberals narrowing their definition of morality by suppressing their binding foundations. As evidence for these arguments, they offer the finding that under cognitive load or distraction, liberals' personal attributions concerning victims become more like those of conservatives ([Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002](#)). Even though this research does not measure moral foundations, it shows that liberals make attributions like conservatives when they are prevented from thinking effortfully. Likewise, [Van de Vyver, Houston, Abrams, and Vasiljevic \(2016\)](#) found, in two representative samples tested 6 weeks before and 1 month after the 2005 London suicide

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bombing, that the loyalty foundation generally became stronger while fairness became weaker. Such change occurred more strongly in liberals than conservatives. In addition, liberals' increasing prejudice against Muslims and immigrants was explained by this change in moral foundations. Since it is known that terrorist attacks like September 11 have an effect similar to mortality salience manipulations (Landau et al., 2004) and that mortality salience in turn acts as a kind of high cognitive load (Trémolière, De Neys, & Bonnefon, 2012), it can be argued that terrorist attacks cause people to adopt an intuitive cognitive style and create corresponding changes in their moral foundations. Therefore, Van de Vyver et al.'s (2016) research suggests that liberals resemble conservatives when they adopt a more intuitive cognitive style (see also Cohen, Ogilvie, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2005; Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009).¹ Moreover, Graham (2010) found that the discrepancy between explicit and implicit moral foundations was greater for liberals than conservatives. Such findings can be seen as support for the idea that liberals in fact value binding foundations but suppress them using mental effort when asked to report on their foundations at the explicit level. Indeed, while liberals (appear to) value binding foundations less than conservatives at the explicit level, this difference between liberals and conservatives decreases at the implicit level or when cognitive resources are depleted (see Graham, 2010).

A counterargument comes from Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway's (2003) "conservatism as motivated social cognition" approach. Instead of arguing that liberals suppress binding foundations via mental effort, this model suggests that everyone possesses two core foundations (care and fairness) and that conservatives enhance the importance they give to binding foundations in order to satisfy their resistance to change and opposition to equality motives (see also Jost, 2012). In research that directly pits these two viewpoints against each other, Wright and Baril (2011) examined whether people's moral foundations would shift under cognitive load or when cognitive resources are depleted. They found that conservatives in the cognitively distracted group (compared to the control condition) experienced a decrease in the value they gave to binding foundations. This supports the argument that conservatives enhance the value they give to binding foundations using mental effort. However, in two separate studies, these findings failed to replicate (reported in Graham et al., 2013). In addition, this research was criticized on methodological grounds (e.g., see Van Berkel, Crandall, Eidelman, & Blanchar, 2015). Van Berkel et al. (2015) found that, contrary to Wright and Baril, participants under cognitive load (vs. not) placed more value on care and authority dimensions, but that there was no change in the other foundations. In addition to these studies, Napier and Luguri (2013) relied on the distinction between concrete and abstract thinking in Construal Level Theory and attempted to uncover participants' core moral foundations by manipulating abstract thinking. They reported an increase in the value given to individualizing foundations and a decrease in the value given to binding foundations for both liberals and conservatives as a result of the abstract (vs. concrete) thought manipulation. Similarly, Luguri, Napier, and Dovidio (2012) showed that tolerance toward value-violating groups increases for conservatives engaged in abstract (vs. concrete) thought. However, the absence of a true neutral condition prevents one from knowing the precise locus of the effect in these studies (cf. Napier & Luguri, 2013). In addition, it is not clear whether abstract thinking corresponds to high-effort, and concrete thinking to low-effort thought.

Regardless of how viable an approach it seems to impose cognitive load on participants to uncover their core moral foundations, this approach results in an artifact because agreeing (vs. disagreeing) with any given statement is more likely under intuitive thought (e.g., Knowles & Condon, 1999) and the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) lacks reverse-coded items. Thus, participants under cognitive load should tend to score higher on the MFQ because they should be more likely to respond with "strongly agree" and "extremely relevant" to the statements provided. In other words, because the MFQ lacks reverse-coded items, higher scores under cognitive load (vs. no load) could emerge as a methodological artifact rather than having theoretical significance.

In fact, the findings of Van Berkel et al. (2015) discussed above could be seen as supporting this interpretation because under cognitive load, they observed a significant increase in both care and authority—two unrelated dimensions. Even though there was no significant difference on the other foundations, the high-load group scored always higher than the low-load group. It thus seems unsuitable to examine differences in MFQ scores under cognitive load (vs. no load) to try to answer the question of which moral foundations are core and which foundations should be central (taken as a basis) for resolving the disagreement between ideological camps because such differences may occur as experimental artifacts rather than indicate theoretical significance.

1.1. The issue of 2 vs. 5 foundations and resolving ideological disagreement

Haidt (2012) argued that the basic source of ideological disagreements lies in different moral foundations being valued by people in different ideological camps and reviewed empirical evidence demonstrating such moral foundation differences. According to MFT, these differences are based on intuitions and cannot be resolved rationally. Thus, resolving disagreements is only possible if each camp (i.e., liberals and conservatives) recognizes the moral foundations valued by the other. Accordingly, since conservatives already recognize foundations valued by liberals, the resolution of disagreements rests on liberals' recognizing binding foundations.² However, Sauer (2015) argues that this approach is normatively asymmetrical and that the two camps already agree on two foundations. Therefore, disagreements should be resolved by conservatives decreasing the value they place on binding foundations, instead of liberals extending their foundations to include all five of them. In other words, rationally, moral principles that the two camps agree on are sufficient to establish social harmony. Additionally, some findings suggest that possessing a wider range of moral convictions is associated with more rigid-mindedness and prejudiced attitudes (see Goodwin & Darley, 2012; Skitka, Washburn, & Carsel, 2015; see also Yilmaz & Bahçekapili, 2015). Thus, one group extending their moral foundations may increase the possibility of conflict, whereas there already exists agreement on two foundations. For instance, one consequence of belief in objective morality, which is positively related to having a wider range of moral convictions, is closed-mindedness, which in turn is related to intuitive thought. Objectivists tend to view people who they disagree with as immoral and socially distance from them (Goodwin & Darley, 2012). It is also known that high-effort, analytic thought is positively related to belief in subjective morality (Goodwin, 2009, as cited in Goodwin & Darley, 2010), which itself is probably negatively related to having a wider range of moral convictions. Likewise, high-effort thought is negatively related to the tendency to make wrongness judgments

¹ However, it must be noted that since Van de Vyver et al. collected their data before MFQ was developed, it used a less reliable measure of moral foundations.

² Actually, what is meant here by "recognition of the moral foundations of conservatives" is seeing these foundations as morally relevant because liberals still see loyalty as the extension of nationalism and communitarianism, authority as an indication of submissiveness, and sanctity as a sign of being sexually repressed.

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