Belief and Identity: Perspectives from Psychology

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Abstract

A complete understanding of moral beliefs relies on an understanding of social identity, and vice versa; because moral beliefs and social identities inform one another, it is impossible to understand either in isolation. Presently, however, these two areas of research remain largely separate. Using three identities that are particularly important to many people around the world—gender, race, and religion—as illustrative examples, the current chapter highlights connections between identity and belief. We begin by showing how each of these identities informs moral beliefs and then turn to the question of how moral beliefs inform each identity. Throughout, we emphasize the benefits that accrue to the study of both morality and identity when scholars consider these topics in tandem.

Keywords: cognitive science; gender; identity; intergroup bias; morality; philosophy; psychology; race; religion; social cognition

Introduction

The 2017 film *Disobedience*, adapted from the novel of the same name, follows a queer woman named Ronit Krushka as she returns to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community that she had left years prior. As a child of a rabbi, Ronit grew up highly religious; however, after falling in love with her childhood best friend, Esti, and being chastised by her father and several members of her community for her sapphic orientation, Ronit de-identified with her Orthodox roots and left for Manhattan to become a photographer. While holding on to some aspects of her Jewish background, Ronit no longer supported other aspects of her traditional upbringing. For instance, she chose to leave her religious community in part due to the community's expectation that she would marry a man. That is, the development of Ronit's moral beliefs as she came into adulthood—most prominently her belief that she should have the freedom to explore her queer identity—led to a shift in her religious identity.

In contrast to Ronit, her childhood sweetheart Esti remained a part of their religious community. Rather than separating from her religion, Esti disconnected from and concealed her attraction to women. To adhere to what she believed she must do, Esti married her friend Dovid despite having no romantic feelings for him. In other words, Esti's sexual identity, both in the past and throughout the film, is directly at odds with and shaped by her moral beliefs. Both Ronit and Esti represent an experience common to many queer people raised in religious communities. More specifically, their story highlights the strong ties between social identity and moral beliefs in everyday life.

Currently, work on social identity and intergroup bias exists largely separately from work on morality (Hester & Gray, 2020; Mosley & Heiphetz, 2021; for notable exceptions, see Leach et al., 2015; Rutland et al., 2010). However, many behaviors that people believe are morally

wrong in an interpersonal setting occur in intergroup contexts. For example, members of dominant groups discriminate against and physically harm members of minoritized groups (Green, 2017; Herek et al., 1999). Starting early in development, people generally believe that acts of physical harm such as hitting are wrong (Baxley et al., 2022; Dahl & Turiel, 2019; Weston & Turiel, 1980). However, little work has asked how people morally evaluate transgressive behavior in intergroup contexts and how participants' own identities might shape beliefs about right and wrong. Similarly, work on intergroup bias often does not examine how moral beliefs may underpin those biases. This chapter argues that scholars should consider questions of morality and identity in tandem. Specifically, we will review the interplay between moral psychology and social identity in recent research, focusing first on how social identities shape moral beliefs and then on how moral beliefs shape social identities. Finally, we will highlight how integrating the study of moral beliefs and social identity provides researchers with an avenue to better understand human cognition and behavior. While disagreement exists about what constitutes morality (e.g., Dahl, 2023) and what constitutes a belief (e.g., Van Leeuwen & Lombrozo, 2023), here we adopt a relatively expansive definition: when we discuss moral beliefs, we are referring to people's views about what is right or wrong. Because the work discussed in this chapter itself uses a variety of definitions, this broad approach allows us to bring together a variety of perspectives on connections between identity and moral belief (see also BEYOND NORMS AND PREFERENCES for a discussion of how beliefs come to be moralized).

Identity Shapes Moral Beliefs

Although often studied independently, identity and morality are intertwined. In many ways, identity shapes how people navigate the world. Marginalized groups such as Black people,

queer people, and women experience unique forms of interpersonal and societal harm including racial microaggressions, misgendering, and gender-based discrimination (Domínguez & Embrick, 2020; Doering et al., 2023; Truszczynski et al., 2022). Perhaps in part for this reason, social identities can shape people's beliefs about and responses to the social situations they encounter (Jefferson et al., 2021; Spruill & Lewis, 2022). Further, many situations involving moral reasoning occur in intergroup contexts (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1981; Goldring & Heiphetz, 2020; Hester & Gray, 2020; Mosley & Heiphetz, 2021; Mosley & Solomon, 2025; Swim et al., 2003; White et al., 2024; Yudkin et al., 2016). Thus, to fully understand moral cognition, it is necessary to investigate this topic at the inter*group* level in addition to the inter*personal* level. Below, we describe how three identities that are particularly important to many people—gender, race, and religion (e.g., Sellers et al., 1998; Wood & Eagly, 2009; Ysseldyk et al., 2010)—may shape moral beliefs (see also BELIEVING OTHERS for how social identities may shape other aspects of life, including trust).

Gender Identity

To the extent that prior work has examined how social identity informs moral beliefs, research has focused primarily on gender identities. This work has taken important steps toward recognizing the important role that identity can play in informing moral beliefs. However, this past work has also left important questions unaddressed.

Early in development, children attend to gender as an important social category. Children as young as three years old endorse gender stereotypes and prefer to play with same-gender peers (Hilliard & Liben, 2010; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). Groundbreaking work with gender minority populations has demonstrated that transgender children (i.e., children whose gender identification does not align with their sex assigned at birth) show similar trends to their

cisgender peers (i.e., children who do identify with the sex to which they were assigned at birth; Olson & Gülgöz, 2018). These early-emerging preferences and stereotypes have important consequences throughout the lifespan. For instance, cisgender women, as well as transgender and nonbinary individuals, face group-based institutional and social stigma (Doering et al., 2023; Truszczynski et al., 2022), such as higher rates of sexual violence (CDC, 2022-a; Flores et al., 2021) and workplace discrimination (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009; Sawyer et al., 2016). Such experiences can shape moral beliefs and decision-making. For example, women and men hold different implicit and explicit attitudes about intimate partner violence, with women showing greater rejection of such violence and a lower inclination to blame victims (Ferrer-Perez et al., 2020). While both women and men can be victims of intimate partner violence, women experience physical and sexual violence more often than men do (CDC, 2022-b). These experiences may, in turn, shape their views of what is right and wrong (e.g., views of intimate partner violence)—a hypothesis that can form the basis of future work. Thus, examining the role that gender identity plays in moral judgments can deepen scholarly understanding of moral beliefs.

Psychological research, including work on moral cognition, overwhelmingly examines cisgender people—i.e., people who experience alignment between their gender identity and their sex assigned at birth. And gender—at least among cisgender participants—is one of the few social identities widely studied in the domain of morality (Hogan, 1982; Gilligan, 1982; Lifton, 1985). Early studies suggested that women and men differ in the principles they use to support moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982). For instance, a 1982 study found that men prefer the principle of justice and women tend to prefer the principle of caring (Hogan, 1982).

More recent research has continued to find some gender differences in moral beliefs. For instance, in one line of work (Atari et al., 2020), researchers conducted a cross-cultural investigation (including 67 countries in Study 1 and 19 countries in Study 2) of the interplay between gender and beliefs about what constitutes morality. In widely ranging cultures (e.g., Australia, Iran, Spain, China, and the United States, among others), women placed more emphasis than did men on care, fairness, and purity when making moral judgments. Another study (Capraro & Sippel, 2017) observed that women were more likely than men to hold deontological moral beliefs in emotionally salient situations. In these situations, women were more likely than men to make judgments prioritizing duties (e.g., the duty not to kill an innocent person), whereas men were more likely to prioritize utilitarian principles (e.g., to believe that it is acceptable to kill one person in order to save five people). However, gender differences did not emerge in situations that were not emotionally salient.

These results provide some evidence that cisgender men and women may differ in the extent to which they endorse certain types of moral frameworks (e.g., care, deontology).[1] However, both women and men also conceptualize gender in somewhat essentialist terms—as an innate, inborn, biologically-based characteristic with inductive potential (i.e., the potential to reveal other important information about a person, such as their preferences and beliefs; Gelman, 2003; Medin & Ortony, 1989; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). In fact, gender is a social category; biological differences between women and men are not entirely categorical, and people's understanding and enactment of their gender can change across contexts and across development (Donovan et al., 2022; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Meadow, 2018; Olson, 2017). Gender is also an

[1] These studies did not specifically report how many participants identified as cisgender versus transgender. However, transgender people make up less than 2% of the United States population (Herman et al., 2022). Therefore, studies that do not specifically sample transgender participants are not well-equipped to draw conclusions about this population.

important feature of intergroup relations; for instance, gender-based bias emerges in early childhood (Hilliard & Liben, 2010; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987) and persists through adolescence (Eckes et al., 2005) and adulthood (Begeny et al., 2020; Eagly & Mladinic, 1994).

Thus, future work can benefit from examining how gender-based social experiences (e.g., gender-based violence and discrimination) shape moral beliefs. For instance, future studies can ask whether experiencing, or enacting, gender-based discrimination alters moral evaluations of acts such as sexual harassment and unfair hiring. Future work can also recruit transgender participants to investigate how experiences specific to that group shape moral beliefs. For instance, transgender men who "pass" can receive deferential treatment. However, they have also had experiences of receiving quite different treatment when others viewed them as female (Bahrampour, 2018; Barres, 2018). Further, transgender men who do not "pass" are at risk for violence (e.g., Flores et al., 2021; Green, 2017). In part for these reasons, cisgender and transgender masculinity may shape moral beliefs differently; for instance, transgender men may show less acceptance than do cisgender men of gender-based violence. In addition to expanding basic scientific knowledge of how social identities shape moral beliefs, research including transgender participants would also help to diversify the social sciences and allow empirical research to speak to a greater array of human experiences.

Racial Identity

Like gender, racial identities play a significant role in how people navigate their social world (e.g., Dominguez & Embrick, 2020; Guess, 2006; Sellers et al., 1998). However, racially minoritized individuals remain underrepresented in moral psychology research (Hester & Gray, 2020)—a trend that is not unique to the psychological study of morality (Guthrie, 2003; Prather

et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2020). Therefore, currently, moral psychology is not well-positioned to understand how moral beliefs vary depending on racial identity.

Some initial work indicates that racial identity predicts beliefs about what is moral. For instance, White and Black participants infer that behaviors (e.g., getting sufficient exercise, drinking alcohol heavily, getting the flu shot) that are common among their racial in-group are more moral than behaviors that are uncommon among their group, but they do not take commonality of behaviors among their racial out-group to indicate how moral those behaviors are (Goldring & Heiphetz, 2020). Racial identity also predicts the extent to which participants view particular behaviors as harmful; for instance, White participants view cultural appropriation as less harmful than do Black participants (Mosley & Biernat, 2021). Given that harm constitutes a central component of immorality in many people's minds (e.g., Graham et al., 2011), this result suggests that White, versus Black, participants view appropriation as less wrong.

Additional work from the intergroup cognition literature has begun to examine how racial identity might shape people's understanding of identity-based inequality, and, of relevance to this entry, these identity-based differences in people's factual beliefs about inequality present notable moral implications. Providing initial evidence that racial identity shapes people's views of inequality, one study found that non-Hispanic Black Americans were more likely than both Hispanic and White Americans to believe that the socioeconomic gap between Black and White Americans was a result of discrimination (Hunt, 2007). In addition, several studies (e.g., Abaied & Perry, 2021; Anoll et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2021) have probed how parents discuss race and racism with their children. This work has shown that Black parents had more conversations about race and racism with their children after George Floyd's death than they had previously (Sullivan et al., 2021) and were more likely to discuss the Black Lives

Matter movement with their children than were White parents (Rogers et al., 2024). In contrast, although George Floyd's death and Black Lives Matter protests did prompt White parents to discuss race and racism with their children to some extent (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Anoll et al., 2022), White parents were more likely than Black parents to focus on color blind messages communicating that race does not or should not matter (Sullivan et al., 2021). Notably, over 70% of White parents reported having conversations about race; however, only 50% or fewer reported conversations about *inequality or identity* (Sullivan et al., 2021). By comparing White and Black parents, this work provides evidence that the racial identity of parents shapes the types of conversations they have with their children about race-related events. In turn, these different conversations, and Black versus White parents' different understanding of inequality, can shape children's developing notions of (in)justice.

As the parental actions in the above-mentioned work highlight, racial differences in beliefs about inequality that emerge during childhood persist into adulthood. Indeed, Black adults are more likely than White adults to attribute inequality to societal-level factors (e.g., to attribute economic inequality to discrimination rather than lack of individual motivation, Hunt, 2007). In addition to offering different *explanations of* inequality, Black and White participants differ in their estimates of *how much* inequality exists (Kraus et al., 2019), with high-income White respondents underestimating inequality compared with low-income White respondents as well as both high- and low-income Black respondents (Kraus et al., 2017). Insofar as morality concerns topics such as justice and fairness, inequality is a moral issue (e.g., Elenbaas et al., 2020). Therefore, this work shows that beliefs about objective matters of fact (e.g., average income of Black versus White families) varies across participants who differ in racial identity in at least one morally relevant context.

Taken together, these findings provide insights into the association between racial identity and moral beliefs. Starting early in development (Geraci & Surian, 2011; Rutland & Killen, 2017) and persisting into adulthood (Graham et al., 2011), people generally view matters of right and wrong—including phenomena such as fairness and justice, which scholars have conceptualized as definitionally moral in nature (e.g., Dahl, 2013)—as important norms (though see Yucel et al., 2022, for arguments that children reason about fairness differently than other moral norms). Thus, probing how racial identity informs beliefs about unfair or unjust distribution of resources benefits work on moral psychology by clarifying mechanisms rooted in social experience that could underlie moral cognition. For instance, asking how racial socialization informs moral beliefs clarifies *why* individuals may hold the beliefs that they do. Further, investigating the role of racial identity in moral beliefs allows moral psychology to speak to a greater diversity of human experience, as such work would include a greater representation of non-White participants than is common in much moral psychology research currently (e.g., Hester & Gray, 2020).

Testing links between racial identity and moral cognition also benefits work on intergroup bias by highlighting a particular outcome of racialized experiences—i.e., beliefs about right and wrong—that is currently understudied in group-based research. While some initial work along these lines, summarized above, has probed how beliefs about inequality depend on racial identity, future work can extend this questioning to other types of moral beliefs. For instance, future studies could test the extent to which racial identity informs reasoning about interpersonal moral issues (e.g., do Black and White children receive different socialization about what constitutes interpersonal harm, and if so, how does this socialization shape adults' beliefs?) and inferences about which issues fall into the moral domain at all. Future work can

also probe the extent to which certain moral beliefs constitute a feature of how some individuals perceive their racial identity. For instance, some Black individuals may see their work to dismantle mass incarceration in the United States as part of their racial identity, while others may hold more punitive attitudes that they perceive as core to who they are as Black people (Forman, 2017; Jefferson, 2023). In some sense, such connections between racial identity and moral beliefs may be even stronger than those that depend on experiences that typically accrue to members of one racial group but could conceivably occur among other racial groups as well (e.g., a White family could conceivably provide messages to their White children similar to those that Black children receive from their Black parents—for instance, if those White parents have grown up in community with Black people). Future work can test this possibility.

Religious Identity

Race is often connected to other identities that can inform moral beliefs—namely, religious identity. Religious practices often depend on race, as Martin Luther King observed when referring to eleven o'clock on Sunday morning as "the most segregated hour" in the United States. Religious rhetoric can also work in the service of race-related goals, such as when claims of anti-Christian bias lead White individuals to perceive greater anti-White bias (Al-Kire et al., 2024).

Many people believe that religiosity and morality are associated, reporting that religion is required for morality and that it is impossible for atheists to be good people (Fetterolf & Austin, 2023; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015). One line of work demonstrating this effect drew on the conjunction fallacy, or people's tendency to incorrectly report that it is more likely for a person to hold two identities rather than one when they judge the target person to be representative of the second identity. In a classic demonstration of this fallacy, participants erroneously reported that

Linda—an outspoken, female philosophy major who cared about issues of discrimination—was more likely to be a bank teller and a feminist rather than simply a bank teller, despite the fact that the category "bank teller + feminist" cannot be larger than the category of all bank tellers (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983). Participants perceived Linda as representative of feminists and therefore concluded that it was more likely that she was both a bank teller and a feminist rather than being a bank teller. Research on religious cognition applied this fallacy to study perceptions of atheists. Results showed that religious and non-religious people—as well as people living in both religious and non-religious cultures—perceived immorality as representative of atheists. For instance, participants were more likely to commit the conjunction fallacy when asked whether it was more likely that a person who harms animals is a teacher or a teacher and an atheist, whereas participants were less likely to commit the conjunction fallacy when indicating whether a person who harms animals is more likely to be a teacher or a teacher and a religious believer (Gervais, 2014; Gervais et al., 2017).

The perception that people's religious beliefs determine their morality originates in childhood, and participants' own religious views can shape this perception to some extent (see BELIEF IN THE RELIGIOUS AND SUPERNATURAL for additional discussion on the developmental origins of religious belief). For instance, one line of work (Heiphetz et al., 2015) tested 5- to 10-year-olds and adults from religious and non-religious backgrounds. Participants learned about pairs of characters; in each pair, one person performed a behavior for a religious reason and the other person performed the same behavior for a secular reason. While 5- to 6-year-olds did not distinguish between these characters, distinctions increased with age; by adulthood, religious participants reported that the religiously-motivated behavior was morally better to some extent, and non-religious participants reported that the secularly-motivated

behavior was morally better to a strong extent, despite the fact that the two behaviors were identical.

Religious identity can also shape moral beliefs about social groups that are not directly religious in nature. For instance, high religiosity predicts negative responses to queer people (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019), and this negativity carries moral connotations. In one study demonstrating this effect, heterosexual respondents from faith communities used moralized language to describe their anti-queer biases. For instance, a Christian respondent explained that "in the Old Testament God smites a city for practicing sexual immorality, so it's up to gay people to stop, otherwise God's going to smite them" (Valentine & Waite, 2010, p. 478). Religious messages can even influence the moral beliefs of those *within* the targeted social group. Another study interviewed queer adults who grew up in the Bible belt; one participant explained that "the preacher would preach on homosexuality. . .Of course, since I was having feelings about me being different, I felt like I needed to go to the altar and just pray and ask God to forgive me every Sunday" (Barton, 2010, p. 472-473).

Notably, the link between religious identity and moral beliefs is a particularly strong one, such that even the loss of one's religious identity does not always lead to total loss of all aspects of one's former religious-based moral judgments. In other words, religious "dones"—those who were once religious but no longer identify as such—show different patterns of moral cognition and behavior than religious "nones," or those who have never identified as religious. For instance, religious "dones" appear more similar to currently religious individuals than to people who have never identified as religious in the basis for their moral judgments (e.g., the extent to which they place importance on individuating moral foundations such as harm as well as binding moral foundations such as loyalty; Van Tongeren et al., 2021-a) and in their propensity to engage

in pro-social behaviors (Van Tongeren et al., 2021-b). That is, (former) religious identity continues to shape moral beliefs even following de-identification.

Together, these results highlight the important role that religious identity plays in shaping people's moral beliefs. To date, this research has been situated largely in literatures on moral cognition and on the cognitive science of religion, which typically conceptualize religion as an individual belief system. Future work can probe how these individual beliefs contribute to group-based phenomena such as intergroup conflict. For instance, politicians may use religious language to garner support for anti-queer policies even if the politician's own biases are not rooted in religious beliefs. Such language can seem compelling to people who are religious and may, in fact, make it appear that anti-queer policies are a moral mandate. Future research can test whether people actually use and respond to religious language in this way and, more broadly, investigate the role that individual-level beliefs that stem from particular social identities play in intergroup conflict.

Moral Beliefs Shape Social Identity

Just as identity shapes moral beliefs, moral beliefs also shape how people conceptualize their identities. Work on perceptions of the "true self" supports this idea broadly construed. This research suggests that both children and adults view morality as a central component of identity (Heiphetz et al., 2018; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014) and believe that their own and others' "true selves" are fundamentally good (De Freitas et al., 2017). People's own moral beliefs shape their understanding of others' "true selves"; for instance, people believe that others are acting in accordance with their true selves when those people's actions conform to the observer's understanding of what constitutes a morally good action (Newman et al., 2014). In other words,

observers' beliefs about what is moral shapes those observers' understanding of another person's identity.

While work on perceptions of the "true self" focuses on personal characteristics that are fundamental to who a person is, moral beliefs can also shape more specific social identities, including the three discussed above: gender, race, and religion. Below, we describe how moral beliefs might inform each of these identities.

Gender Identity

As discussed above, gender is a multifaceted concept, comprising social, cultural and biological components and involving both identity (i.e., a person's internal sense of self) and expression (i.e., how people communicate their gender identity through behavior, hair, clothes, and so on; American Psychological Association, 2023; Barr & Temkin, 2022). In fact, some individuals identify between or outside of gender binaries entirely (Trevor Project, 2021). In other words, gender identity is not always fixed, stable or unchanging. The extent to which people identify with their own gender is also variable. For instance, one study (Gülgöz et al., 2022) asked children to identify their gender both categorically ("Do you feel like you are a boy, a girl, or something else?") and continuously, using a scale ranging from 0 ("feeling totally like a boy") to 100 ("feeling totally like a girl"). Both cisgender and transgender children could identify themselves as a member of a binary gender group (e.g., cisgender and transgender girls both answered the first question by responding that they felt like a girl), but, on average, children in both groups showed scores that differed from the scale endpoints when using the continuous measure. That is, even people who identify as a member of a binary gender category may not identify as "feeling totally like" a boy or a girl.

The way people identify their gender may depend in part on moral beliefs. Many people view deviations from gender norms—particularly identifying as transgender or nonbinary—as morally condemnable (Haider-Markel et al., 2019). About 1.6 million 13- to 17-year-olds identified as transgender in the United States in 2022 (Herman et al., 2022), and over one in four queer youth identified as nonbinary in 2020 (Trevor Project, 2021). Additionally, about 1.2 million adults living in the United States identify as nonbinary (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). However, transgender and nonbinary identities are among the most strongly targeted groups in today's political climate and are often at the forefront of moral panic (Haider-Markel et al., 2019; Izaguirre, 2022) and legislative attacks (ACLU, 2024). These types of societal pressures can directly shape people's gender identification. One study supporting this point investigated changes in gender identification. Transgender people and other gender diverse individuals may pursue gender affirmation (e.g., changing their gender expression through behavior, pronouns, clothing, hair, or medical treatments such as hormones or surgery). People who detransition are those who later decide to no longer pursue gender affirmation (e.g., return to living as their sex assigned at birth). In one line of work (Turban et al., 2021), more than 80% of people who detransitioned cited an external driving factor such as pressure from family or societal stigma, whereas a much smaller percentage (15.9%) cited at least one internal factor such as changes or doubt about their gender. In other words, awareness of others' moral beliefs (e.g., the societal belief that pursuing gender affirmation is immoral) can shape how transgender and gender diverse individuals engage with gender identity. Because moral views can shape gender identity, a lack of attention to the connection between these two constructs can prevent researchers from garnering a full picture of how some identities (e.g., gender) arise and shift over time.

Gender can also be malleable for cisgender people. For instance, people may see masculinity as precarious—"difficult to achieve and tenuously held" (Vandello & Bosson, 2013, p. 101). Traditional social norms dictate that men should exhibit characteristics such as agency, dominance, pursuit of high social status, and avoidance of femininity (Berent et al., 2016; Kimmel, 2010; Mahalik et al., 2003). When men are not demonstrating these characteristics, they may experience threats to their gender identity, and others may perceive them as less masculine. Some laypeople perceive the concept of "womanhood," on the other hand, as less vulnerable and more rooted in biology than masculinity, making it a less often challenged identity when compared to "manhood" (Vandello & Bosson, 2013).

Supporting these ideas, some empirical research has shown that participants view masculinity as precarious and femininity as more grounded in unchanging factors. In one line of work (Vandello et al., 2008), college students in the United States were more likely to endorse themes of precariousness for manhood than for womanhood. For instance, participants were more likely to agree with statements such as "manhood is something that can be taken away" than with statements such as "womanhood is something that can be taken away." Participants also considered transitioning from boyhood to manhood to result more from social than physical factors, found it easier to interpret statements about lost manhood than lost womanhood, and attributed statements of lost manhood to social (rather than physical) factors. In another line of work (Haslam et al., 2000), college students in the United States reported that the social category "woman" had more of an underlying core or essence than the social category "man." For instance, participants were more likely to agree that the category "woman" has "an underlying reality; although [this category's] members have similarities and differences on the surface, they

are basically the same" and more readily agreed that the category "man" has "similarities and differences on the surface [that] do not correspond to an underlying reality" (p. 118).

Threats to masculinity can therefore lead to a more precarious gender identity for men, and these threats can be moral in nature. For instance, some cultures represent male homosexuality as morally wrong; in these cultures, being misperceived as gay can threaten straight men's gender identity (e.g., Schermerhorn & Vescio, 2022). As another example, cultures of honor place great importance on politeness; in such cultures, it is morally justifiable to act violently in response to disrespect (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). These beliefs can enhance gender identity threat. For instance, in one classic study (Cohen et al., 1996), men from Southern (versus Northern) states experienced more masculinity threat in response to another man bumping into them and swearing at them and appeased this threat by behaving aggressively themselves (for evidence that men use physical aggression to appease threats to their gender identity, see also Bosson et al., 2009).

Taken together, these studies provide initial evidence that moral beliefs (e.g., beliefs regarding the moral wrongness of transgender identities) can inform how people relate to and express gender identities. This understanding contributes to moral psychology and to work on intergroup bias by showing how moral processes inform people's understanding of social categories and group memberships. At the same time, as discussed in the section on how identities shape moral beliefs above, researchers often conceptualize gender as a fixed identity that remains stable over time. Future work can further probe how moral cognition informs people's shifting gender concepts. For instance, stereotypes of women represent them both as morally virtuous and as sinful (DeWall et al., 2005; Leach et al., 2015). Future research can investigate how these conflicting stereotypes shape women's gender identities and how these

influences may change across contexts. More broadly, future work can probe how moral beliefs inform the ways in which people understand their own identities and respond to people whose identities differ from their own.

Racial Identity

Like gender, racial identity plays a role in how people think about morality. Additionally, morality can shape how people understand their racial identity. Although laypeople sometimes conceptualize race as having a biological reality, many scholars understand race to be a social construct (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Morning, 2007; see also Spencer, 2017, for an overview of philosophical debates about how to understand race). Despite some laypeople's assumption that race is immutable, there can be instances where concepts of race do, in fact, change across contexts.

Initial work investigating the construction of Whiteness (i.e., "the attribute of being recognized and treated as a White person in society" as defined by Knowles et al., 2014, p. 594) puts forth compelling arguments for examining morality's role in shaping racial identity. White Americans typically reason about their racial group's historically advantaged social position in three ways, including denying that they benefit from privilege, trying to separate their own identity from Whiteness as a broader category, and working to dismantle systemic oppression that privileges their group over other groups (Knowles et al., 2014). Of particular interest to the interplay of moral psychology and identity is the second strategy, i.e., disidentifying from a particular social identity. One reason that disidentification from White identity may occur is that belonging to a group that has harmed other groups can create an internal conflict around a positive moral self-image (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ford et al., 2022). Structural inequality also violates widely held and cross-cultural moral norms such as fairness and the avoidance of harm

(Berman & Singh, 1985; Elenbaas, 2019; Paulus, 2014; Wörle & Paulus, 2018). Thus, moral cognition may contribute to when and how White people choose to identify with or separate from their racial identity. For instance, rather than wrestling with internal conflicts about racism in the United States, White residents of this country may find it easier to adopt a colorblind narrative around race (e.g., claiming that race does not matter to social outcomes), disidentifying from their own Whiteness in the process.

Extending this model, Shuman and colleagues (2024) investigated the extent to which White participants living in the United States and Jewish participants living in Israel used each of the strategies above. Although cultural differences did not emerge in the extent to which participants denied inequality, such differences did emerge with regard to other strategies. Of most relevance to the argument that moral considerations can shape identity, White participants in the United States were more likely to distance themselves from their dominant-group identity than were Jewish participants in Israel. Shuman and colleagues (2024) argue that this effect may have emerged because Jewish Israeli identities are sometimes linked to the country of Israel in a way that White American identity is not typically linked to the United States. Thus, creating distance from an identity implicated in immoral behaviors may be a more achievable strategy in the latter context.

While some White residents of the United States seek to distance themselves from their racial identity, others identify particularly strongly with their racial group membership. Work on White Christian nationalism—a "cultural framework that idealizes and advocates for a fusion of a particular expression of Christianity with American civic life" (Gorski & Perry, 2022, p. 28)—indicates that some groups of White Americans come to strongly identify with their Whiteness based in part on their moral values. For instance, White Christian nationalists typically believe

that the United States is experiencing moral decay and that the way to address this decay is to return to a prior time in which the United States espoused White Christian ideals (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Such ideals could include the federal government "advocat[ing] Christian values" and "allow[ing] prayer in public schools" (the quoted language is taken from survey items measuring White Christian nationalism; Whitehead et al., 2018, p. 155). White Americans who endorse such values often experience a deep connection to their White identity and view racially minoritized individuals as threats to their way of life and as not true Americans (Gorski & Perry, 2022).

Taken together, the findings discussed in this section indicate that moral beliefs can inform how people experience their racial identity. These findings largely come from the psychology of intergroup bias (e.g., research on denying, dismantling, and distancing as strategies to navigate identities associated with immorality) or from sociology (e.g., research on White Christian nationalism). Incorporating perspectives from moral psychology can benefit this work by clarifying specific components of moral cognition that can inform identity. For instance, if threats to moral self-image lead people to distance themselves from identities associated with group oppression, then appeasing those threats should result in less distancing. Work on factors that help people feel more moral, such as performing and reflecting on past moral behaviors (Young et al., 2012) and engaging in social comparisons with people they perceive to be less moral than they themselves are (Fleischmann et al., 2021), can inform scholarly understanding of phenomena that may affect the extent to which White people distance from their racial identity. Additionally, theorizing from moral psychology suggests that a moral self-image may be less central early in development than in adulthood (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Thus, a moral

development approach could clarify whether, and why, age-related changes in racial identity occur.

Religious Identity

As discussed above, racial identities can be connected to religious identities. Further, just as religion shapes moral beliefs, moral beliefs can shape religious identification. In recent years, religiosity has seen a relatively rapid decline in the United States. Adults who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular shifted from about 16% in 2007 to 29% in 2022 (Pew Research Center, 2022). This disaffiliation, particularly from Christianity, is especially "sticky" among younger generations. Of those surveyed who were 40 years and older, 80% of those raised Christian continued to identify as Christian; however, fewer people in their 30s (66%) raised with a Christian background continued to identify as Christian into adulthood (Pew Research Center, 2022). This drop was strongest among White evangelical Protestants, although the speed of this decline has slowed somewhat in recent years (Public Religion Research Institute, 2023). The number of religiously unaffiliated United States residents has grown across all ages, but the largest proportion has been among young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 years (Public Religion Research Institute, 2023).

These stark declines raise the question of why people are de-identifying with religion. Recent research (Van Tongeren & DeWall, 2023) has theorized that de-identification falls into several domains: a) Disbelief From Belief (no longer believing in god(s) or supernatural agents), b) Disengagement From Bonding (no longer engaging with religious rituals or practices), c) Discontinuance From Behaviors (no longer following the moral norms associated with the religion), and d) Disaffiliation From Belonging (no longer engaging with a religious group or community). Individuals may stop identifying as religious in multiple ways; some people may

disidentify in only one of the ways described above, while others may combine several domains. Of most relevance to the idea that moral beliefs can shape social identity is the domain of Discontinuance, in which individuals view their moral convictions as misaligned with their religious identity. As our introductory example illustrates, when faced with a conflict between one's actions and religious moral standards, some may shape their behavior to align with their religious identity while others may choose to disengage with religious identity to adhere to their internal moral beliefs.

Studies examining sexuality and religious integration also serve well to highlight the interplay between moral beliefs and religious identity. Queer individuals often receive messages that they are immoral from broader cultures, including religious cultures (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019; Wolf & Platt, 2022). Thus, it is not surprising that there remain challenges for queer people in claiming religious identity while reckoning with their sexual identity. Indeed, discontinuance due to moral beliefs that are misaligned with the teachings and/or cultural narratives present in one's religion might be particularly relevant for queer religious people (Buchanan et al., 2001; Lease et al., 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

In one qualitative line of work (Levy & Reeves, 2011), several queer participants expressed awareness of conflict between their religious beliefs and sexual identity. For example, one participant reflected on a pastor who said, "You could not be gay and go to church. You cannot be a Christian. You cannot inherit the Kingdom of God and be a homosexual. You will burn forever in hell" (p. 59). In response to this conflict, several participants expressed fear and confusion, akin to the dissonance between moral belief and religious identity that Van Tongeren and DeWall (2023) outlined. This awareness resulted in various tactics to respond, including shaping one's identity to fit religious beliefs. For instance, many participants reported concealing

their sexuality while simultaneously increasing involvement in religious activities. Individuals who struggled to integrate their sexual orientation and religious beliefs at times outright rejected their sexual identity, in some cases resorting to extreme measures such as conversion therapy (i.e., the controversial and dangerous practice of attempting to alter sexual orientation or gender identity; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). For other individuals, sexual minority status can result in loss of religious beliefs altogether (Buchanan et al., 2001; Sherry et al., 2010). Queer individuals who retained their religious identity nevertheless report lower levels of religious endorsement, on average, than straight participants (Platt et al., 2021). Thus, a misalignment of moral beliefs (e.g., queer individuals believing that their sexual identity is morally acceptable; religious groups believing that it is not) may lead individuals to disidentify from religion.

A similar process can occur among active duty and veteran military members. Traumatic experiences, such as war, can lead to moral injury (Litz et al., 2009) or inner conflict (Koenig et al., 2017). Moral injury results from exposure to traumatic experiences that violate a person's moral beliefs or values, resulting in negative feelings such as shame, guilt or anger (Koenig et al., 2017). For some service members, moral injury might impact their religious or spiritual beliefs. Notably, in one study, veterans reported a lower sense of being religious and increased religious struggles (e.g., questioning God, viewing their problems as punishment from God) when compared to non-veteran matched controls (Currier et al., 2014). Service members' difficulties with having engaged in or witnessed behaviors that conflict with their religious and moral beliefs (e.g., murder is wrong) can compel them to deidentify with religious identity (Van Tongeren & DeWall, 2023).

For both queer people and service members, dissonance between their own moral beliefs and religion's external moral standards can create conflicts that lead to disengagement from

religion. In other words, people's moral beliefs can shape their willingness to engage with religion. These findings enhance research in moral psychology by clarifying one potential consequence of misalignment between one's own moral beliefs and the moral views that particular social groups espouse. These findings also enhance work on identity by clarifying factors rooted in moral cognition that shape how people choose to identify.

Future work can more directly probe similarities and differences in racial and religious disidentification. As discussed above, White people sometimes disidentify with their racial group as a way to protect their moral self-image (e.g., Knowles et al., 2014), and religious people sometimes disidentify from religion to avoid misalignment between their own moral beliefs and the beliefs espoused by the religious communities to which they belonged (e.g., Van Tongeren & DeWall, 2023). Although both phenomena involve disidentification, the process is not the same; religious people can entirely stop being religious in a way that White people cannot entirely stop being White. Thus, future work can investigate the psychological processes involved in disidentification from groups that one can leave versus groups in which one must, in some sense, remain. Additional research can further investigate the moral antecedents and consequences in these two types of disidentification (e.g., whether disidentifying from groups that one can leave entirely has a stronger influence on moral beliefs and self-image than disidentifying from groups in which one must, in some sense, remain).

Implications and Conclusions

Morality and identity are closely linked. As discussed above, identity can shape moral beliefs: one's own identities can inform the beliefs one holds (e.g., moral beliefs can vary across gender), and others' identities can shape moral evaluations (e.g., atheists elicit less positive moral evaluations than theists). Moral beliefs can also shape identity (e.g., alignment between one's

own moral beliefs and the beliefs espoused by particular groups can inform the extent to which people identify with those groups).

Drawing on three domains that are especially relevant to many people's daily lives—gender, race, and religion—this chapter showed that a bidirectional association between moral beliefs and identity exists in each domain and highlighted specific implications of these associations. These implications largely depended on integrating work from different scholarly areas. For instance, work on precarious masculinity suggests that being perceived as gay can threaten straight men's gender identity (Schermerhorn & Vescio, 2022). This finding is related to work highlighting cultural representations of queer people as immoral (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Wolf & Platt, 2022); if people perceived queerness as morally good or neutral, being misperceived as queer would not be a threat. However, research on precarious masculinity rarely makes direct connections to work on moral psychology, and studies on identity more broadly rarely incorporate theories from moral psychology. Similarly, current work on moral cognition typically examines beliefs at the inter*personal* level (e.g., asking participants whether they think that it is right or wrong for one person to harm another without emphasizing the social identities of participants, transgressors, or victims; Greene et al., 2001; Killen et al., 2011; Levine et al., 2020; Payir & Heiphetz, 2022; Young & Saxe, 2011). Yet, social identities inform many morally relevant behaviors, such as who transgresses against whom (Salter et al., 2017; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), who punishes whom (Eberhardt et al., 2006; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Yudkin et al., 2016), and who helps whom (Abad-Merino et al., 2013; McAuliffe & Dunham, 2016; Sierksma et al., 2015). Incorporating a group identity framework into moral psychology can therefore increase understanding of how moral cognition and behavior occur in intergroup contexts and allow moral psychology to speak to a greater diversity

of human experience.

As one specific example relevant to the domains emphasized here, consider the role of intent in judgments of racist behaviors. Moral philosophers and legal theorists have long made the normative claim that intent *should* shape moral cognition (i.e., people *should* evaluate murder more harshly than manslaughter; Fletcher, 1998; Gert, 1998; Green, 1998; Hart, 1968/2008; Mikhail, 2007). Descriptive work from moral psychology has shown that neurotypical adults *actually do* make moral judgments in this way, showing more lenience toward accidental rather than intentional moral transgressions (Ames & Fiske, 2013; Cushman et al., 2013; Killen et al., 2011; Moran et al., 2011; Payir & Heiphetz, 2022). At the same time, an intergroup perspective suggests that laypeople's focus on innocent intent may not always be ideal. For instance, dominant group members may emphasize a transgressor's internal states (e.g., benign intent) when observing instances of prejudice or discrimination (Davidson & Friedman, 1998; Swim et al., 2003). This emphasis may draw attention away from harmful outcomes that people with stigmatized identities experience. Because these two bodies of work are proceeding largely in parallel, moral psychology is not currently attending to the potential harms of focusing on intent. Further, work on group identities is not incorporating the knowledge that an emphasis on intent is a deeply rooted aspect of human cognition, making it more difficult for the intergroup literature to effectively intervene on intent-based moral judgments when such judgments cause harm. Integrating these two perspectives in one line of work, as some initial studies have begun to do (Yonas & Solomon, 2024), clarifies a mechanism rooted in moral cognition that underlies dominant group members' propensity to focus on intent and adds nuance to arguments in moral psychology and philosophy about when and how intent shapes moral judgments. While this is only one example of the power of considering identity and morality together in one line of work,

it offers insight into the theoretical benefits for both moral psychology (e.g., clarifying how moral cognition might function in intergroup contexts) and work on group identity (e.g., shedding light on why dominant group members might prioritize intent in some contexts but not in others). This type of integration also offers translational benefits; in this example, understanding mechanisms underlying group processes offers more insight into how to alter those processes.

Using an interdisciplinary foundation, this chapter has argued that research in social identity and scholarship in moral cognition, when studied in conversation with one another, provide new and diverse insights into both areas of study. By investigating identity and moral beliefs in tandem, research can clarify how both concepts manifest in everyday life. In other words, taking an interdisciplinary approach will allow researchers to better understand how different people experience moral beliefs and in which broader contexts and at the same time unveil morally based mechanisms that may underlie intergroup biases. More broadly, investigating how social identities and beliefs influence one another can reveal how internal processes such as beliefs inform, and are informed by, social phenomena that do not reside solely inside one individual's mind. Ultimately, integrating social identity with the study of beliefs provides an opportunity to make critical shifts in psychology toward a direction that considers context, identity, and culture within cognitive processes and provides important translational potential in unveiling a mechanism of harm toward minoritized communities.

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