



Expanding the scope and content of morality policy research: lessons from Moral Foundations Theory

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Abstract

Scholars have not precisely defined morality policy, and Smith (Policy Stud J 30(3):379–395, 2002) urged an empirical taxonomy be used to identify those policies. We argue that Moral Foundations Theory offers a methodology for empirically identifying issues with moral content. We inventory 15 issues in parliamentary studies of “conscience” voting, 14 morality policies in western democracies compiled by Studlar (in: Mooney (ed) *The public clash of private values: the politics of morality policy*, Chatham House Publishers, New York, 2001), and then survey MFT empirical studies to identify 22 issues with moral content. Based on this universe of 37 issues, three journals are content analyzed to determine the coverage given them and to outline productive lines for future research.

Keywords Morality policy · Comparative · Moral Foundations Theory · Content analysis

This essay reviews the beginnings of what we now call morality policy, argues that Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) offers a methodology for identifying the moral content of issues, and outlines some promising avenues for future research. The parameters of morality policy have yet to be defined with any degree of precision. To us, the state of play recalls US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when he struggled to articulate the line between art and pornography. He declared: “But I know it when I see it.” For morality policy scholars, the relevant moral issues also seem obvious enough, and yet our difficulty in defining their content has kept the full scope of our research agenda fuzzy. This point was forcefully made by Smith (2002; p 379) who argues that the “central difficulty for typologies is establishing some means to objectively assign policies into conceptually distinct categories.” He urges that we consider taxonomies that employ empirical criteria to identify types of policy, especially morality policy. Smith (2002; p 382) recalls that “classifying constructs such as ideology or culture and connecting them to policy issues and patterns of political behavior are generally where taxonomic methodologies are used,” which begs the

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question: “Why not do the same with individual perceptions of policy and use this data as the raw material of a taxonomy?” The morality policy classification problem is our label for this evergreen issue: what makes a policy a *morality* policy?

Here, we meet Smith’s challenge with two related contributions. First, we recommend that morality policy scholars should borrow from Moral Foundations Theory [MFT] to help develop an empirically based taxonomy for validating the moral content of issues. Second, through a literature review, we demonstrate that morality policy researchers have generated insights about deep moral beliefs for decades, an idea fully compatible with Moral Foundations Theory, and yet our field thus far has underutilized those insights. We posit that Moral Foundations Theory fits well theoretically with the assumptions and practices of morality policy researchers, both past and present.

These definitional problems also vexed Advocacy Coalition Framework [ACF] until recently. ACF is a leading paradigm for policy analysis, and “deep core beliefs” are the key component that shapes attitudes of each advocacy coalition about public policies (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). In order to provide a “standardized metric for measuring deep core beliefs,” ACF scholars have recently borrowed from Culture Theory (Ripberger et al. 2014; p 509). Culture Theory [CT] contributes to Advocacy Framework Theory by employing techniques that are “multidimensional, generalizable, and measurable” (Ripberger et al. 2014; p 509), and those three advantages also pertain to Moral Foundations Theory. MFT is based on five different foundations of moral intuitions, was derived from and has application to different cultural systems of morality (Graham et al. 2013; pp 92–94), and can be employed in case studies, opinion surveys, and content analysis. In order to apply Culture Theory to specific policy issues, analysts have used “12 indicators to measure individual orientations toward each of the worldviews posited by CT” (Ripberger et al. 2014; p 519). In like fashion, keywords in the Moral Foundations Dictionary can be used to content analyze any public document, including political debates, in order to assess the degree to which a particular issue qualifies as morality policy (Graham et al. 2013; p 74). Then, analysis can turn to studying the morality policy process, its policy outputs, and outcomes.

Moral Foundations Theory is based on five psychological foundations: Care/Harm, Fairness/Reciprocity, In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Haidt and Graham 2007). A Moral Foundations Questionnaire [MFQ] was developed to measure the moral relevance of these dimensions and the moral judgments involved when respondents are faced with real-world situations (Graham et al. 2011). The first two pairs comprise *individualizing foundations* and are more emphasized by liberals. They are measured on the MFQ with these following questions. For Care/Harm: “Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue” or “One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal” or “It can never be right to kill a human being.” For Fairness/Reciprocity: “When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly” or “Justice is the most important requirement for a society” or “I think it’s morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.” In contrast, conservatives are influenced by all five foundations more evenly, although more so by the remaining three pairs which comprise the *binding foundations* of MFT (Haidt and Graham 2007). The Purity/Sanctity foundation seems uniquely important for conservatives (see Koleva et al. 2012) and is measured with these MFQ questions: “People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed” or “I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural” or “Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.”

Table 1 MFT, Moral Foundations Dictionary [MFD] and selected morality policies

MFT foundation	Illustrative MFD Keywords		Illustrative Morality policies
	Virtue (words)	Vice (words)	
Care/Harm	(16)	(35)	
	Peace	War	Animal rights ^a
	Compassion	Fight	Capital punishment ^b
	Defend	Kill	Environment ^a
	Shelter	Cruel	Gun control ^a
	Sympathy	Exploit	Stem-cell research ^a
Fairness/Reciprocity	(26)	(18)	
	Equal	Bias	Same-sex marriage ^a
	Justice	Bigot	Affirmative action ^a
	Rights	Dishonest	Women's rights ^a
	Tolerant	Prejudiced	Disability rights ^a
In-group/Loyalty	(28)	(22)	
	Impartial	Favoritism	Ethnic/racial minority ^a
	Nation	Foreign	Iraq War ^a
	Homeland	Enemy	Defense spending ^a
	Family	Imposter	Official English laws ^a
Authority/respect	(43)	(27)	
	Patriot	Traitor	Terrorism ^b
	Member	Renegade	Immigration ^b
	Obey	Rebel	Voter ID laws ^a
	Duty	Illegal	US flag burning ^b
	Law	Insurgent	Divorce ^b
Purity/Sanctity	(27)	(34)	
	Control	Unfaithful	Punish war criminals ^a
	Tradition	Protest	Torture ^a
	Pious	Disgust	Prostitution ^b
	Sacred	Sin	Pornography ^b
	Holy	Debase	Homosexuality ^b
	Wholesome	Sick	Abortion ^b
	Church	Lewd	Euthanasia ^b

^aMoral rhetoric to support this policy; ^bmoral rhetoric to oppose this policy

To content analyze textual materials for their moral content, Graham and his associates developed a Moral Foundations Dictionary (or MFD, at MoralFoundations.org; also see Graham et al. 2009; pp 1045–1046) of keywords that designate the positive (virtue) or negative (vice) expressions within each of the five foundations. Table 1 gives the number of keywords for each foundation, illustrations of keywords for each type, and examples of morality policies where those keywords seem most applicable.

Morality policy research

The term “morality policy” was coined by Meier (1994) in a volume entitled *The Politics of Sin*. Meier differentiated between one-sided and two-sided morality policies. One-sided morality policy is the “politics of sin” because “[e]veryone is opposed to sin” (Meier 1994; p 247) such that no opposition challenges the dominant view that sinful behavior, like illicit drug use or murder, should be deterred and punished. Two-sided morality policies like abortion or gay rights Meier called the “redistribution of values” because there are two legitimate points of view. That iteration Meier borrowed from Lowi’s (1964) policy paradigm, which included “redistribution” though Lowi meant the reallocation of economic resources from wealthier to poorer segments of society. The core definition of morality policy for Meier involves values, sometimes consensual and often contentious, though he offered no parameters about the scope of moral conflict.

Morality policy does not require that the political antagonists on both sides employ moral claims in their policy arguments (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; p 333). As Mooney (2001; p 4) explains: “A policy is classified as a morality policy based on the *perceptions* of the actors involved and the terms of the debate among them.” Moreover, “If at least one advocacy coalition involved in the debate defines the issue as threatening one of its core values, its first principles, then we have a morality policy.” And just as only one side needs to use moral arguments for an issue to be morality policy, having policies with an economic or instrumental dimension does not preclude them from also being classified as morality policies. Mooney (2001; p 8) further elaborates: “All morality policies have certain technical and instrumental questions associated with them, but the distinction is that nontechnical, controversial moral questions are far more prominent and primary in the debate over them than they are in the debate over nonmorality policy.” On this point, Knill (2013) would go further and draw a sharp distinction between “manifest” and “latent” morality policies. The former are based primarily on values, whereas the latter involve economic concerns as illustrated, he says, by gambling, gun control, and drug regulation.

Moral Foundations Theory can help distinguish between one-sided and two-sided morality policies by showing which specific moral foundations are connected to each side of whatever morality policy is being debated. MFT can also identify those cases of morality policy where one side perceives a policy to be moral, while the other does not. In addition, MFT also travels well through time and space. Morality policies change over time as when drinking alcoholic beverages was sinful behavior and codified in Prohibition (Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution), but later became a two-sided morality policy when the retailing of beer, wine, and spirits was regulated by subnational governments in both the USA and Canada (Schwartz and Tatalovich 2018; pp 32–53). This temporal shift could be validated by content analysis of legislative debates at both periods in both countries. Other contemporary issues had stronger moral content at earlier historical periods, like smoking (Studlar 2008) or birth control; others like the environment have gained moral content in recent decades (Feinberg and Willer 2013); and still other issues like flag burning as political protest excite moral outrage in the USA though not elsewhere (likely arguably in Germany). McLean (2018) found profound cultural differences in how the gun enthusiasts “frame” the gun control issue in the USA compared to Canada, but content analysis of political debate using MFT could further verify that moral claims about gun ownership are more prevalent in US rhetoric than in Canada. In sum, MFT is a more sophisticated taxonomy for studying morality politics than any simple typology.

The operational template that guides most empirical analysis of morality policy was supplied by Mooney (2001). His inclusion of abortion, capital punishment, gambling, gay rights, pornography, physician-assisted suicide, and sex education was premised on three criteria. Like Meier, first and foremost these issues involve debates over “first principles” that are “no less than legal sanctions of right and wrong, validations of particular sets of fundamental values” (Mooney 2001; p 3). Second, morality policy “can be highly salient to the general public” because they “are clear and simple statements about a polity’s values, not arcane policy instruments.” And third, morality policy “has a higher than normal level of citizen participation” because “little technical information” is needed for people to engage the political process (Mooney 2001; pp 7–8).

To test those attributes, Mooney and Schuldt (2008) asked students to evaluate eight issues in terms of their moral content, resistance to compromise, salience, and technical simplicity. Salience proved unreliable, but same-sex marriage and abortion were judged to be the purest morality policies, followed by capital punishment and casino gambling which were considered more moralistic than homeland security, national health insurance, or limits on campaign contributions. Earlier Smith (2002) also used a student survey to classify 11 policies according to whether they exhibited attributes of morality policy. Abortion, same-sex marriage, and prostitution ranked highest in his cluster of morality policy attributes. But again, while survey results bring us closer to knowing a morality policy when we see it, they do not offer boundary lines that demarcate the scope and content of this research agenda.

Arguably the most exhaustive inventory of morality policies across 22 North American and Western European countries was published by Studlar (2001; p 46). He listed 14 issues (see Table 2), and only three (alcohol, divorce, and women’s rights) were not included in any of the MFT studies. Most likely the Purity/Sanctity foundation galvanizes opposition to alcoholic beverages, and perhaps also divorce (see below), whereas resistance to women’s rights (like the opposition to women in combat during the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment) is grounded in the authority/respect foundation. Studlar did not offer his own definition of morality policy but instead referenced Mooney and Lee (1995) to conclude: “its debate is framed in terms of fundamental rights and values, often stemming from religious imperatives, by competing promotional groups whose members have little or no direct economic interest in the outcome.” In recent years, some of the most innovative work on morality policy has been published by European scholars (Knill et al. 2015; Hurka et al. 2017), though they have narrowed the scope of morality policy from what Studlar (2001) originally had in mind.

Engeli et al. (2012; p 26) would limit morality policies “to fundamental decisions about death, marriage and reproduction” and thus restricted their case studies to abortion, assisted reproductive technologies (ART), embryo and stem-cell research, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage. Those same issues, as well as capital punishment, were subjected to an institutional analysis that delineated the morality policy process (Studlar et al. 2013). A fourfold definition by Heichel et al. (2013; p 330) moves the boundary lines outward to encompass life and death issues (abortion, assisted suicide, stem-cell research), sexual behavior (homosexuality, same-sex recognition, prostitution, pornography), “addictive behavior or substances” (gambling and drug use) as well as “all policies defining public limitations on individual self-determination,” for example gun control. This last category, however, is so elastic that almost any regulation or law seemingly would apply.

Table 2 Issues with moral content discussed in four bodies of scholarship

Issues	Parliamentary “Conscience” voting	Morality policy studies (Studlar 2001)	MFT issues inventory	Morality policy issues (2001–2015) ^a
Abortion	X	X	X	26
Alcohol		X		7
Animal rights/hunting	X	X	X	2
Baby outside marriage			X	
Capital punishment	X	X	X	6
Casual sex			X	
Cloning			X	1
Corporal punishment	X			
Contraception	X			2
Defense spending/Military spending			X	
Disability rights	X			13
Divorce	X	X		
Drugs		X	X	12
Education			X	134
English official language			X	2
Embryo/stem cell research/ testing	X		X	2
Environment/global warm- ing/climate change			X	198
Evolution (teaching)			X	3
Ethnic/racial minorities		X		319
Euthanasia	X	X		1
Flag burning			X	
Gambling		X		6
Gun control		X		5
Health care			X	44
Homosexuality/Gay rights/ Same-sex marriage	X	X	X	33
Immigration			X	92
Iraq War			X	4
Nuclear power plants			X	3
Pornography/obscenity/ censorship	X	X		2
Prostitution	X			
Religion–education/sunday observance	X	X		60
Seat belts (required)	X			2
Terrorism			X	16
Torture			X	
Voter ID laws			X	2
War criminals (punish)	X			
Women’s rights		X		118

^aSee footnote 1 for sources and content analysis

Emotive symbolism, conscience issues, and MFT

MFT also connects the current research on morality policy with value-laden scholarship from the 1960s and 1970s. What Smith (1975; p 90) called “emotive symbolic” policies were “types which generate emotional support for deeply held values” such as the death penalty, public school prayer, homosexuality, abortion, and racial segregation. But Smith had been influenced by earlier studies on the abolition of capital punishment in Great Britain by Christoph (1962a, b). If one had to date the beginnings of this research tradition, in fact, the honors likely would go to Christoph (1962a; p 173), a comparative politics specialist who observed that the “high moral and emotional content” of capital punishment caused government leaders to view this issue “as a matter of private conscience” and thus freed the rank-and-file MPs “from the ordinary claims of party cohesion and discipline.” Similar parliamentary behavior affected birth control, homosexuality, and prostitution because they also “plumb deep-seated moral codes.”

Not long after Christoph wrote the so-called Golden Age of Private Member’s Bills emerged when the governing Labour Party during 1964–1970 stood aside and allowed their MPs to vote their consciences on issues of morality. That period was scrutinized by Richards (1970), whose analysis spawned a body of scholarship on un-whipped voting on a range of morality policies in the UK (Hibbing and Marsh 1987; Marsh and Read 1988; Plumb and Marsh 2011; Plumb 2013; Plumb and Marsh 2013; Plumb 2015; Read et al. 1994) and elsewhere (Pothier 1979; Overby et al. 1998, 2011; Baumann et al. 2015). For Richards (1970; p 7), the commonality was that “conscience” issues were “social questions which have strong moral overtones” but Cowley (1998; p 2), though unable to offer a definition, nonetheless included an exhaustive listing of 15 UK “conscience” issues (see Table 2).

To their credit, both Richards (1970) and Smith (1975) went beyond life, death, and sexuality to expand their scope of inquiry. The three case studies employed by Smith (1975) included, first, patriotism, which occurred when France in 1954 debated creation of a multi-national European Defense Community. A second pertained to race, which occurred when the US Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the third involved what is now called identity politics when the “Great Flag Debate” of 1964 had to reconcile the English and French traditions in a new national flag for Canada. Patriotism, race, and identity politics all directly implicate the In-group/Loyalty foundation of MFT which presumably would provoke more moral argumentation from conservatives than liberals. Thus, logically morality policy should extend to the more recent controversies over displaying the flag or symbols of the Confederacy in Southern states (Cooper and Knotts 2006) or the movement to make English the “official” language of the US states (Tatalovich 1995).

Smith (1975) was the first to recognize that Lowi’s (1964) paradigm did not consider policy based on contested values. Eventually, Lowi (1988) did acknowledge that moral rhetoric can “radicalize” conflict over policy ends unlike the debate over instrumental goals that typify “mainstream” economic policies. Support for this Lowi insight comes from research on how political elite rhetoric can trigger moralizing by ordinary citizens. As Clifford et al. (2015; p 241) explain: “When it comes to hot-button political topics – climate change, gun control, fighting terrorism, and the like – the prospects for consensus seem dim. The present study [of the stem cell debate] suggests that one contributor to polarization on salient issues is the use of moral rhetoric by elites. Through their appeals to specific moral foundations, elites are able to ‘moralize’ political issues, facilitating (and reinforcing) the connection between people’s moral beliefs and their policy attitudes.” By his

argument that any issue could be transformed into a moral cause, Lowi inadvertently anticipated recent theoretical developments in Political Psychology: Moral Foundations Theory.

Moral convictions and the scope of morality policy

A distinct line of inquiry closely related to MFT is research on “moral conviction,” which is a more powerful motivator than simply having intense feelings. Attitudes grounded in moral conviction, or what Skitka et al. (2005) call “moral mandates” (also see Skitka and Houston 2001; Skitka 2002; Skitka and Mullen 2002), “refer to a strong and absolute belief that something is right or wrong, moral or immoral.” Moreover, “Attitudes rooted in moral conviction therefore are perceived as ones that transcend the boundaries of persons and cultures. They are perceived as terminal absolutes rather than personal preferences and are felt to apply across persons and contexts” (Skitka et al. 2005; p 896). Moral convictions “do not require reason or evidence. People at times judge moral and immoral, right and wrong, on the basis of deeply visceral and intuitive, rather than deliberative, cognitive processes that they support with post hoc rather than a priori reasoning” (Skitka and Mullen 2002; p 36).

Moral conviction affects the issue of voter ID laws, for example, which has polarized political elites though not the mass public. Large majorities in opinion polls, including both Republicans and Democrats, favor those laws to prevent voter fraud. Democratic Party leaders belatedly tried to re-frame this issue as “voter suppression” since those laws serve to reduce turnout among less educated voters and minorities, but Republican leaders preempted the public relations battle by emphasizing the integrity of the ballot against voter fraud. The Republicans soundly defeated the Democrats because their “voter fraud” framing of the issue activated a sense of “moral conviction” in people, particularly those who support voter ID laws (Conover and Miller 2017).

The political behavior that flows from moral conviction largely parallels some attributes that policy analysts use to categorize morality policy, namely citizen engagement and resistance to compromise (Mooney 2001). Research shows that moral conviction can promote civic participation, as Skitka and Bauman (2008; p 52) reported that “people whose feelings about candidates [Bush or Kerry] or issues [abortion, gay marriage, Iraq War] were experienced as strong moral convictions were higher in political engagement than those whose feelings were not.” But there is also a “dark side” to having moral convictions (Skitka and Houston 2001; Skitka and Mullen 2002; Skitka et al. 2005). Experiments that selectively employed the issues of abortion, capital punishment, legalization of marijuana, and building new nuclear power plants in the USA (Skitka et al. 2005; p 914) concluded that moral conviction is “associated with intolerance” insofar as “people do not want to live near, be friends with, or even sit too close to someone who does not share their core moral convictions.” Analysis of policy decisions about abortion, gay marriage, and illegal immigration also showed that “when people have a moral mandate about an outcome, any means justifies the mandated end” (Skitka 2002; p 594). Even more serious is the scenario where people prejudge the guilt of criminal defendants according to their moral mandates rather than procedural fairness, because “moral mandates could form the foundation and justification for extreme actions taken in the name of justice, such as civil disobedience, rioting, and vigilantism” (Skitka and Houston (2001; p 323).

Ryan (2017) tested whether people with moral convictions resist compromise with respect to a group of putatively moral (stem-cell research; same-sex marriage) and

nonmoral issues (Social Security reform; collective bargaining rights; US troops in Afghanistan; corporate taxation; and investment in renewable energy). Ryan (2017; p 409) found that “moralized attitudes lead citizens to oppose compromises, punish compromising politicians, and forsake material gains.” For our purposes, however, he did not analyze the impact of moral convictions on each separate issue, so this study is not conclusive evidence that Social Security, for example, evokes the same degree of moral conviction as same-sex marriage. That question was partly addressed in an earlier two-prong study by Ryan (2014). In the first, (Ryan 2014; p 385) more survey respondents chose gay marriage and stem-cell research as having moral content rather than collective bargaining rights, Social Security reform, or the Afghanistan War, but in varying degrees all these issues were viewed in moralistic terms by some people. In the second, education was viewed by more people as having moral content, followed by same-sex marriage, health, and abortion, though again some moral content was also attributed to the economy, environment, Afghanistan War, immigration, unemployment, and lastly the budget (Ryan 2014; p 389). These results led Ryan (2014; pp 392–393) to conclude: “Characteristically moral responses are more likely on some issues than others, but there is considerable variability even within particular issues, and some issues not widely regarded as moral are moralized for some people.”

MFT and the content of morality policy

MFT theory is grounded in the claim that humans are evolutionarily driven to have moral intuitions, and these moral intuitions are expressed differentially between cultures (Graham et al. 2013). Although originally fashioned for cultural psychology and not political psychology (Graham et al. 2013; p 74), the very first empirical demonstration of Moral Foundations Theory was an application of the empirical tools of MFT to political ideology in the USA (Haidt and Graham 2007). This early study immediately demonstrated the appeal of the empirical tools of MFT for studying politics and morality. Graham and colleagues note the importance of the empirical tools, stating that “[w]hile MFT’s origins were in anthropology and evolutionary theory, its development has been inextricably linked with the creation and validation of psychological methods by which to test its claims” (p 72). The empirical tools were classified by Graham and colleagues into four discrete categories: self-report surveys, implicit measures, psychophysiological and neuroscience methods, and textual analysis. It is this empirical bounty, we argue, that makes MFT the tool that morality policy researchers have been waiting for.

Recently, a critique has been levied against MFT on the grounds that the causal pathways by which MFT is said to stabilize political ideology for individuals cannot be empirically verified (Smith et al. 2017). There is no need for us to engage that debate here, nor does this criticism diminish the importance of our argument, because we are not employing MFT to predict ideology or political behavior but to offer guidance about the types of issues that have moral content. Perhaps a more immediate concern is the criticism that morality policy debates are simply contested “frames” used by the adversaries for strategic advantage (Mucciaroni 2011). But MFT scholarship is fundamentally at odds with that claim, given its assumption that people sincerely hold and act upon these morally charged opinions. While strategic framing may be employed in political debate, counter-frames must take into account the moral “foundation” that underlies the arguments of your opponents. Then, efforts at re-framing may be effective.

A comprehensive discussion of the origins, methods, and findings of MFT research by Graham et al. (2013) allows us to highlight those studies that most directly engage morality policy. Liberals and conservatives emphasize different foundations in making their moral judgments, both at the elite level (Graham et al. 2009; Clifford and Jerit 2013) and at the mass level (Haidt and Graham 2007; McAdams et al. 2008). It is not easy to bridge that ideological divide, therefore, unless liberals frame their argument in ways that appeal to conservatives. Moral discourse over global warming is dominated by the Harm foundation, which is much preferred by liberals, but appeals to conservatives based on Purity served to reduce the ideological divide on this issue (Feinberg and Willer 2013). This hypothesis also was validated with respect to the issues of same-sex marriage, English as the official language, universal health care, and increased military spending (Feinberg and Willer 2015). Also with respect to voter ID laws, a study by Wilson and Brewer (2016) showed that employing a frame that emphasizes “harm” to African Americans, in particular, reduced support (though not below majority levels).

MFT also explains attitudes toward US foreign policy (Kertzer et al. 2014). Although liberal idealists are presumed to be more moralistic than realists, the empirical reality is that both are moralistic though influenced by different moral sentiments. Idealists who support global cooperation and multilateralism are characterized by the “individualizing” foundations while realists, who want a muscular foreign policy based on military preparedness, by the “binding” foundations. These differences are manifested in their attitudes toward four specific foreign policies. Those scoring high on binding foundations were more supportive of the Iraq War and the use of military force against a nuclear Iran; those who scored high on the individualizing foundation supported efforts to renew the Kyoto Protocol on climate warming; and both were supportive of the 2011 Libya air strikes, but from different moral perspectives—the idealists embraced humanitarianism while the realists defended US strategic interests.

The “culture war” thesis argues that conflict between “orthodox” and “progressive” religious worldviews lies at the heart of many contemporary moral conflicts (Hunter 1991; also Haidt and Hersh 2001). That dimension is captured by the Purity/Sanctity foundation, which is closely related to divinity and religion (Schweder et al. 1997). One MFT study focused on 13 “culture war” issues (Koleva et al. 2012) but also assessed the moral content of defense spending, teaching evolution, use of torture, global warming, burning a US flag, combating terrorism, illegal immigration, and gun control. All these issues had some kind of moral content, but the Purity/Sanctity foundation was most relevant to the “culture war” issues. (Koleva et al. 2012; p 192). In contrast, concerns “about ingroup/loyalty held together views on foreign policy issues, such as defense spending, the use of forced interrogation/torture, and confronting terrorism,” whereas the “harm/care foundation appeared to cast a moral net over the death penalty [opposition], the use of torture [opposition], medical testing on animals [opposition], gun control [support], and global warming [support for emissions standards]” (Koleva et al. 2012; p 192).

Abortion and gay rights, in particular, exert a powerful influence on public opinion that is equivalent to the partisan and religious commitments of Americans. Goren and Chapp (2017; pp 115 and 124) empirically show that these “culture war opinions are, roughly speaking, as durable as partisan and religious predispositions” and, moreover, “the culture war issues-to-party link appears much stronger than the party-to-issues link, and the culture war issues-to-religious belief pathway seems somewhat stronger than the religious belief-to-opinion pathway. Put succinctly, culture war issues have power sufficient to alter the so-called fountainheads in political and religious belief systems.”

MFT for content analysis of morality policy

Content analysis of morality policy debates shows the way forward to expand the scope and content of this research agenda. For examples, Clifford and Jerit (2013) employed the Moral Foundations Dictionary (or MFD, at MoralFoundations.org; also see Graham et al. 2009; pp 1045–1046) to content analyze rhetoric in the stem-cell research debate. Analysis of messages on Twitter about same-sex marriage, gun control, and climate change (Brady et al. 2017) that also used the MFD found that “moral-emotional” words increased diffusion by twenty percent, though primarily among conservatives or liberals, but not across ideological boundaries. Thus, they concluded that social “communications about morality are more likely to resemble echo chambers and may exacerbate ideological polarization” (Brady et al. 2017; p 7317). Much earlier, Haidt and Graham (2007) used a more general analysis of content to identify the moral themes of articles published in *Social Justice Research* and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (both mostly emphasized the Care/Harm foundation).

Summary and future research

Since research on “moral conviction” is based on a self-reporting measure, we do not know *why* respondents perceived a moral quality to issues like education or health. For the mass public, moreover, this body of research argues that trying to discern the reasons why individuals perceive moral content in particular issues, or when assessing their vote for candidates (Skitka and Bauman 2008; p 36), poses intractable methodological and conceptual problems. For elites, however, it was already noted that perceptions are key to determining whether political antagonists define an issue as moral or nonmoral (Mooney 2001; p 4).

In his analysis of legislative debates over gay rights, Mucciaroni (2011) showed that opponents were more likely to make instrumental or procedural rather than moralistic arguments. But the use of “sacred” appeals in political rhetoric on gay marriage, the death penalty, the environment, and gun rights increased political engagement and opinion intensity though at the expense of meaningful deliberations (Marietta 2012). The greater use of sacredness by Republicans also suggests that the “conservative advantage may be grounded in their rhetorical distinction: the emphasis on sacred claims that for many citizens are meaningful and motivational. The consequentialist rhetoric favored by Democrats has neither the same power to influence the process of reasoning nor the same persuasive ability to inspire political engagement” (Marietta 2012; p 214). The latest study of a political debate over stem-cell research also found that when morality is evoked by one side, the other side will also respond with moral arguments (Clifford and Jerit 2013). However, researchers do not know whether political adversaries will employ moral argument when faced with nonmoral or economic issues.

Which issues previously identified as morality policies have moral content according to the empirical research on MFT (and “moral conviction”)? One approach is to make comparisons among categories of morality policies identified in four bodies of scholarship (see Table 2). First, 15 issues were discussed in the studies of “conscience” issues during the 1960s in Great Britain and its more recent progeny in Canada and elsewhere. Of that number, only four in Cowley’s (1998; p 2) inventory have not yet been studied in MFT research, but they would apply. Liberal opposition to capital punishment based on the Care/Harm foundation would extend to corporal punishment (Hoffmann et al. 2017); the Purity/

Sanctity foundation likely implicates prostitution as does the authority/respect foundation with divorce; and the In-group/Loyalty foundation has application beyond the 1940s War Criminals to include punishing Serbian generals for ethnic cleansing during the 1990s or the mass murders of the Iraqi regime headed by Saddam Hussein.

Second, Studlar (2001) identified 14 different morality policies across Europe and North America, and only three (alcohol, divorce, and women's rights) were not included in any of the MFT studies. For opponents, the consumption of alcoholic beverages obviously implicates the Purity/Sanctity foundation while divorce, as already noted, would be evaluated in terms of the authority/respect foundation. On the other hand, supporters would assess women's rights based on the Fairness/Reciprocity foundation. Third, 22 issues are identified in the MFT and "moral conviction" studies as having moral content, and some gained greater prominence since Studlar (2001) compiled his list: combating terrorism, use of torture, Iraq War (and more generally a muscular foreign policy, as in Iran and Libya; see above), global warming and climate change (or more generally the environment). Including the MFT findings adds a measure of empirical validation to the extant scholarly consensus and, looking ahead, identifies productive avenues for future research on issues that have been largely neglected by morality policy analysts and which deserve our attention.

Finally, our inventory of issues given recent coverage in scholarly publications points to a future research agenda for morality policy insofar as very few issues have dominated that body of scholarship.¹ In this sample of US scholarship, the top five are ethnic/racial minorities, the environment/global warming, education, women's rights, and immigration (which together account for 77% of the issues studied in these scholarly journals). So far the environment, education, and immigration have been verified by MFT research as having moral content, so a high priority for any future research agenda is the need to analyze the policy debates over ethnic/racial minorities and women's rights in terms of Moral Foundations Theory. For example, the debate over affirmative action cuts to the heart of many programs aimed at improving the economic position of racial or ethnic minorities as well as women. On the other hand, a comparison of this 2001–2015 inventory with the MFT listing offers empirical confirmation that the conventional understanding of what comprises morality policy is valid for a large number of issues.

Of that number, the most fruitful lines of inquiry for future research would seem to be animal rights, drugs, gun control (Hurka 2017), and the use of nuclear power. Animal rights would recall the parliamentary debate in the UK over abolishing fox hunting and, in the USA (Oldmixon 2017), the numerous referendum campaigns to outlaw or regulate certain types of hunting, trapping, and laboratory testing on animals. Drugs would now engage the current debate over legalizing possession of marijuana for medical or even recreational purposes, just as the gun control debate has intensified in the wake of Supreme

¹ This number count of the issues listed in Table 2 is based on the articles published during 2001–2015 in three journals that seem to be favored by morality policy analysts, namely *Policy Studies Journal* (for its policy orientation), *Social Science Quarterly* (for its interdisciplinary scope), and *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* (since much morality policy occurs at the subnational level). The content analysis employed only the wording of the title/subtitle for every article (or, where clarification was necessary, the lists of keywords and subjects). The issue Women's Rights includes all articles that mention "women" or "gender;" Environment/Global Warming/Climate Control includes natural resource management (forests; fishes), open spaces and land-use planning; Ethnic/Racial Minorities includes all mentions of specific groups (Hispanics, African Americans) as well as the terms "race/racial, ethnic/ethnicity," or "minorities/minority groups;" homosexuality/gay/rights/same-sex marriage is extended to transgender rights; drugs also include specific substances, like heroin or marijuana; education also includes the terms educational, educating, and schools.

Court rulings which upheld the right to bear arms for self-defense. In the wake of the highly publicized accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in 1979, content analysis might confirm that what had been a two-sided debate between energy advocates and environmentalists has been transformed into a one-sided morality policy dominated by the advocacy coalition opposed to any new construction of nuclear power plants.

To conclude, Moral Foundations Theory answers the Smith (2002) appeal for an empirically based taxonomy of morality policy issues. MFT both reaches back to the early scholarship on “conscience” issues and “emotive symbolic” policies and looks ahead to defining a research agenda for the twenty-first century. As an empirical taxonomy, MFT stands ready, willing, and able to answer the key questions raised by morality policy researchers, including the morality policy classification problem. At first glance, voter ID laws would not seem to be a good candidate for morality policy analysis, but two studies have confirmed how Republicans and Democrats deployed differing moral frames with very different effects. The 22 issues thus far identified by MFT research as having moral content comprise sixty percent of the all-inclusive listing in Table 2, and we have argued that the remaining 15 issues can readily be accommodate by one or more of the five foundations of Moral Foundations Theory. We began this essay with a quote from Justice Potter Stewart about how he discerned whether or not material was pornographic. We end with the lesson learned from the case of voter ID laws, namely that the field of vision gained from Moral Foundation Theory extends the morality policy agenda far beyond what the naked eye can see.

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