

IS CLIMATE CHANGE AN ETHICAL ISSUE? MORAL PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND CLIMATE ETHICS

Ezra Markowitz
University of Oregon

January 27th, 2011
SPSP Justice & Morality Pre-conference

The premise

- Climate change poses significant challenges to our moral judgment systems
- Recent work in moral psychology has a lot to offer our understanding of climate change beliefs

Is climate change an ethical issue?

- Normatively: yes
 - Actions of some harm others living now and in future
 - Those least responsible bear greatest burden
 - Mis-appropriation of common resource (atmosphere) by rich individuals and nations
- Descriptively: **unknown**
 - What do non-experts believe?

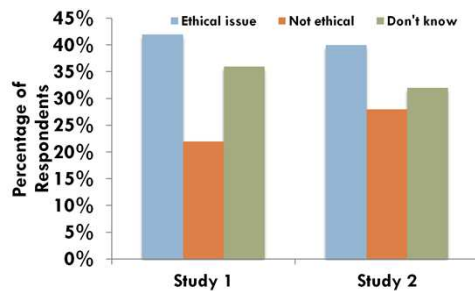
Some preliminary studies

- Two samples, taken in Winter and Fall 2010
 - $N \approx 500$ for each sample
 - University of Oregon undergraduates
- Primary question: Do you consider climate change to be an ethical/moral issue?
 - Yes, No, Don't know/unsure
 - 1st sample also asked open-ended follow-up
- Also asked suite of climate change belief and concern items, MFQ30

Some results

- High level of variability in ethics beliefs

- 40% Yes, 25% No, 35% Don't know



- Open-ended responses

- Among 'yes': importance of responsibility and obligation, primarily to future generations and to non-human life

- Among 'no': many references to CC as natural, environmental or scientific issue

Other findings

- Significant differences in concern, efficacy, and responsibility as function of ethics beliefs
- Controlling for ideology, no differences on any MFQ scales as function of 'CC ethics'

Moral psychological insights

- Climate change may activate moral judgment
 - ▣ Clear harm- and fairness-related concerns
 - ▣ Centrality of moral values and temporal construal
- Certain features may inhibit moral judgment
 - ▣ Unclear intentionality and causal structure
 - Caused by everyday actions of ordinary people
 - ▣ Intergenerational decision-making
 - ▣ Infrequently framed in non-harm, non-fairness moral terms

Discussion

- Considerable variation in people's moral judgments about climate change
 - **Complex issues like climate change pose difficulties for our moral judgment systems**
- Can climate change be framed in ways that generate novel moral intuitions?
 - Climate change as religious issue
 - Climate change as an issue of purity, protecting the in-group and/or respect for authority
- Broader implications for moral psychology
 - How do all the pieces fit together?

Future directions

- **Identify role of morality beliefs (including responsibility) in motivating action on climate change**
- Explore generation and transmission of moral judgments regarding climate change
- Better integrate insights from moral philosophy with research in moral, social (cognitive) psychologies

Acknowledgments

- Sara Hodges (and lab)
- Paul Slovic
- Dale Jamieson
- National Science Foundation
- Barker Foundation & UO ENVS Program
- UO Psychology Department



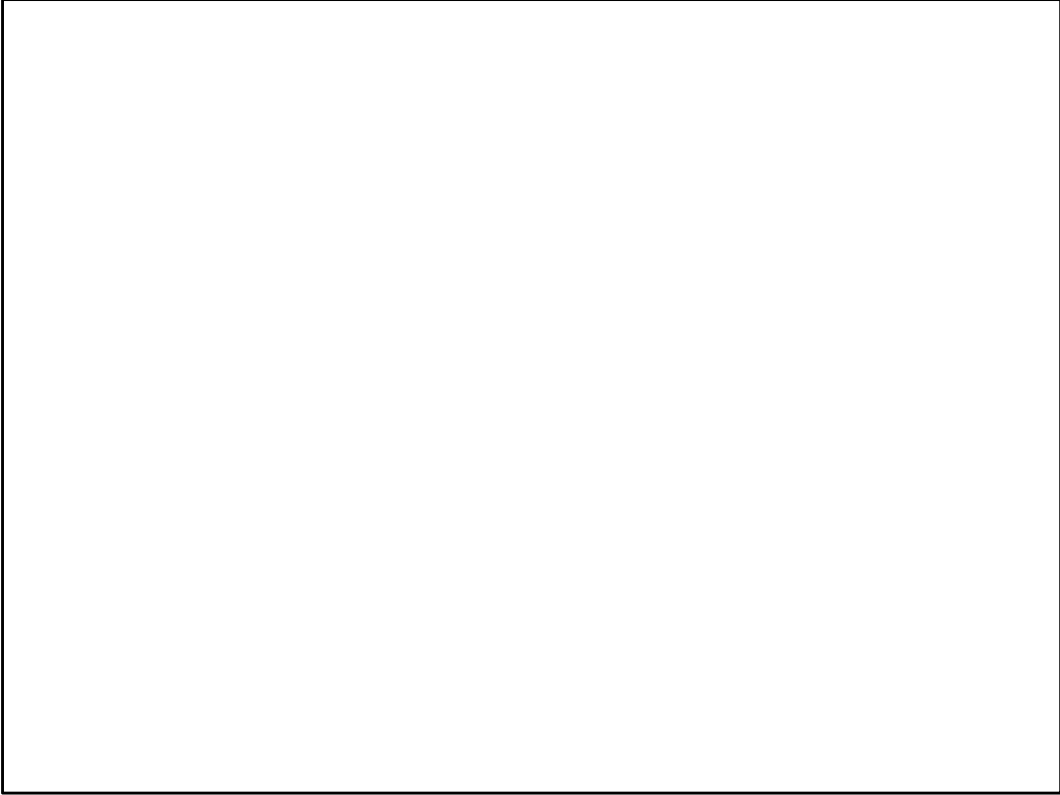


Questions?

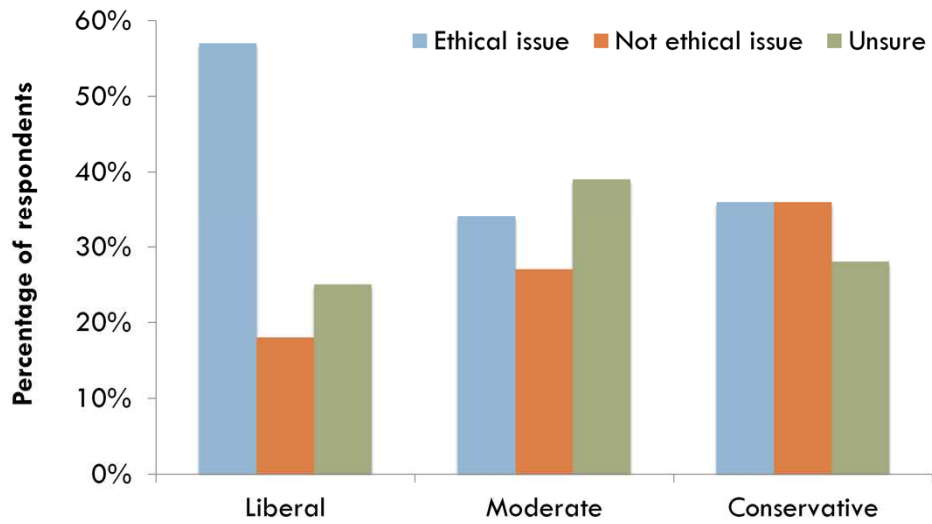
Contact info:
Ezra Markowitz
University of Oregon
emarkowi@uoregon.edu
<http://pages.uoregon.edu/emarkowi>

References

- Agerstrom, J. & Bjorklund, F. (2009). Temporal distance and moral concerns: Future morally questionable behavior is perceived as more wrong and evokes stronger prosocial intentions. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 31, 49-59.
- Gardiner, S.M. (2006). A perfect moral storm: Climate change, intergenerational ethics and the problem of moral corruption. *Environmental Values*, 15, 397-413.
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B.A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 1029-1046.
- Haidt, J. (2007). The new synthesis in moral psychology. *Science* 316, 998-1002.
- Haidt, J. & Kesebir, S. (2010). Morality. In S. Fiske, D. Gilbert & G. Lindzey (Eds.) *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 5th Edition. Hoboken, NH: Wiley.
- Jamieson, D. (2007). The moral and political challenges of climate change. In S. Moser & L. Dilling (Eds.) *Creating a Climate for Change. Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jamieson, D. (2010). Climate change, responsibility and justice. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 16, 431-445.
- Kellstedt, P. M., Zahran, S., & Vedlitz, A. (2008). Personal efficacy, the information environment, and attitudes toward global warming and climate change in the United States. *Risk Analysis*, 28, 113-126.
- Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., & Roser-Renouf, C. (2009). *Climate change in the American mind: Americans' climate change beliefs, attitudes, policy preferences, and actions*. Retrieved from <http://environment.yale.edu/climate/>
- Singer, P. (2006). Ethics and climate change: A commentary on MacCracken, Toman, and Gardiner. *Environmental Values*, 15, 415-422.
- Wade-Benzoni, K. A. & Tost, L. P. (2009). The egoism and altruism of intergenerational behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 13, 165-193.

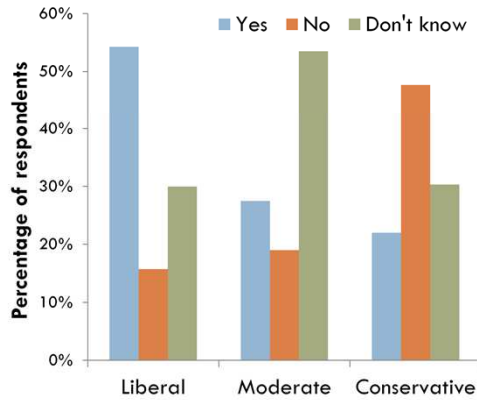


CC ethical among participants who believe CC is happening (Study 2)

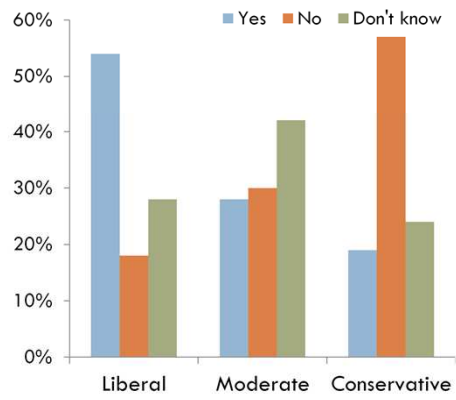


CC ethical issue x ideology

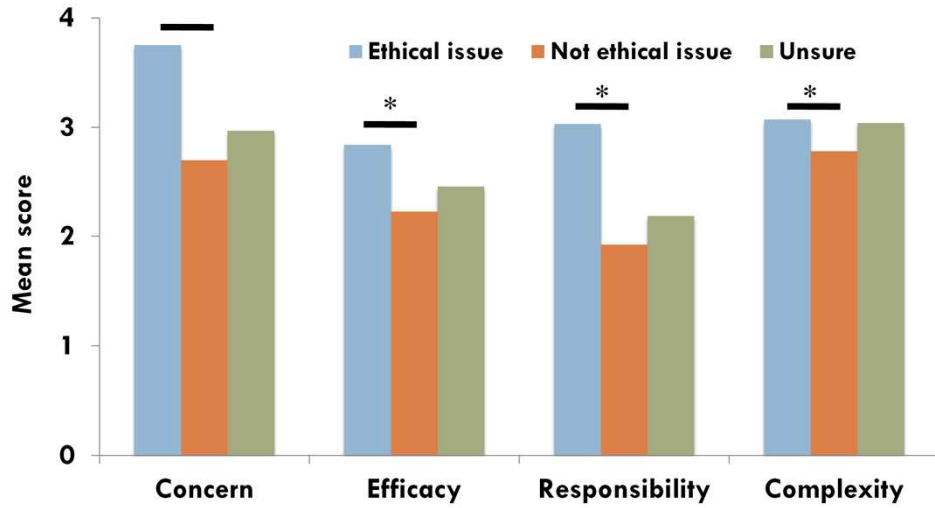
Study 1



Study 2



Relation to other CC beliefs, concern



Note: all omnibus $F_s (2, 431) > 5$, all $p_s < .01$