

Exploring the Cross-Cultural Generalizability and Scope of Morally Motivated Intolerance

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Abstract

Research conducted in Western cultural contexts has discovered that people are more intolerant of moral than demographic diversity, prefer greater social and physical distance from morally dissimilar others, and actively discriminate against those who do not share their moral attitudes. The goal of the current work was to test whether (a) these findings generalize across cultural contexts and (b) similar patterns would emerge with not only social but also political intolerance. Strength of moral conviction associated with participants' most important issue was associated with higher and similar levels of social intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others in both China and the United States but was only related to political intolerance in China. These results demonstrate that moral mandate effects are not unique to highly individualized cultural contexts and reveal a possible boundary condition on the links between moral conviction and intolerance. Implications are discussed.

Keywords

attitudes, culture/ethnicity, morality, prejudice/stereotyping, ethics/morality

One thing that theoretically distinguishes some controversial issues from others is the degree to which they are associated with perceivers' fundamental and core beliefs about morality and immorality, right and wrong. Differing points of view have little or no room at the table when moral convictions are at stake: right is right and wrong is wrong. Tolerance in these circumstances may not be simply repulsive, it may be morally corrosive: just considering the other side's position is likely to pose a serious threat to perceivers' sense of moral authenticity and their basic worldview (e.g., Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Tetlock, Kirstel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). It is not therefore surprising that people respond to those with different opinions than their own with various shades of intolerance, such as unwillingness to have "those people" move into their neighborhood, marry into their family, or as a teacher of their children when attitude dissimilarity reflects differences of moral opinion (Skitka et al., 2005).

The goals of the current study were to test whether strength of moral conviction has similar or different effects on willingness to socially and politically tolerate different points of view. Before turning to the specifics of this study, we review previous theory and research on the psychology of moral conviction, as well as why one might expect cultural similarities or differences in whether and how moral conviction relates to different kinds of intolerance.

Theoretical Background

Consistent with the hypothesis that people are especially unlikely to tolerate alternative points of view when they have a moral investment in a given issue, research conducted in the United States indicates that people do not want to work with, live near, or even shop at a store owned by someone who does not share perceivers' position on an issue they hold with high moral conviction (also referred to as a moral mandate, Skitka et al., 2005). Moreover, these same findings emerged in other studies that tested the intolerance hypothesis using a number of researcher-nominated issues, for example, abortion, capital punishment, building new nuclear power plants in the United States, and legalizing marijuana (Skitka et al., 2005); a combination of 41 political and non-political attitude objects such as children playing violent video games, cheating on exams, and

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masturbation (Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008); and college students' relative tolerance of moral as compared to demographic diversity (Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003).

People also behaviorally discriminate against those who do not share their moral beliefs. For example, when given the opportunity to divide a set of 10 raffle tickets for desirable prizes between themselves and an attitudinally dissimilar partner, participants who saw the issue as moral kept most of the raffle tickets for themselves (on average, 8.5 tickets) but divided the tickets equally between themselves and the other participant when the issue was not seen as moral (Wright et al., 2008). Finally, people who violate or challenge perceivers' moral values are not merely disliked but are actively vilified and can and often do become the targets of aggression (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Tetlock et al., 2000). Support for the connection of moral conviction with social intolerance of attitudinal dissimilarity emerges even when controlling for a host of possible alternative explanations for this effect, such as the degree to which the attitudes are strong (e.g., extreme, certain, important, or central), individual differences in dogmatism or tendency to see all issues as morally loaded, or the degree to which participants are ideologues or particularly strong partisans (Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Skitka et al., 2005).

When people have strong moral convictions, they are also less likely to accept decisions made by legal authorities as binding or fair (see Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008 for a review), are more distrustful of turning decisions about these issues over to authorities, such as the courts (Wisneski, Lytle, & Skitka, 2009), and are more resistant to both normative (Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003; Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007) and majority group influence (Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, 2009). The associations of moral conviction with resistance to the usual pressures to comply with legitimate authorities and to go along with consensus opinion are consistent with the notion that moral convictions represent something different from and independent of people's concerns about being accepted or respected by authorities or groups. In other words, people's moral mandates appear to be more autonomous than heteronomous (see also Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1997; Turiel, 2002; cf. Durkheim, 1925), at least in the WEIRD cultural contexts studied to date (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

If the tendency to develop strong moral convictions is universally based on more autonomous than group-oriented foundations, the tendency to have moral convictions may be weaker in collectivistic than individualistic cultural contexts. Cultural contexts that emphasize collectivism may also emphasize consensus and conventionalism, over moral absolutes that transcend what either authorities or peers might think about an issue (e.g., Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 2002). For similar reasons, there may be more cultural pressure to be more accepting of others' points of view even when one morally disagrees, because to do otherwise would disrupt group harmony (e.g., Dien, 1982; Hsu, 1970; Ma, 1988). Consistent with this

idea, researchers find that mainland Chinese children's moral decisions emphasize respect for authority and the group more than perceptions of right and wrong, whereas Western children's moral judgments emphasize the converse (e.g., Fang et al., 2003).

Alternatively, one could argue that moral convictions can also be developed as an outgrowth of social and collective identity, rather than only out of people's sense of autonomy or individualism. Social identity theory (Turner & Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) would seem to predict that whether people's moral convictions reflect personal versus collective beliefs will vary as a function of whether the context makes their personal or social identities more or less salient. One way to examine this hypothesis would be specifically to compare people from an individualistic culture with those in a collectivistic culture. Oyserman, Coon, and Klemmmeir (2002) found that Americans were among the most individualistic and least collectivistic, whereas the Chinese were the least individualistic and the most collectivistic of a host of national groups compared in a cross-cultural meta-analysis. In short, the United States and China represent quite different cultural contexts that may therefore be associated with very different foundations and functions of attitudes. A cross-cultural comparison of the United States and China should therefore be a particularly strong test of whether moral mandate effects are epiphenomenal of highly individualized and autonomous cultural contexts or can emerge in cultural contexts that place a stronger emphasis on collectivism and group harmony.

If moral convictions reflect only (or primarily) autonomous concerns, we would predict that moral mandate effects should be weaker or nonexistent in highly collectivistic cultural contexts, such as China. If we do observe effects, however, the results would suggest that moral convictions can reflect not only autonomous but also more collectivistic values and concerns.

There may be some reasons to expect even stronger intolerance effects in collectivistic than individualistic cultural contexts. When people's attitudes are based on personal concerns, they are likely to see attitude dissimilarity as reflecting individual differences (i.e., differences are between "you" and "I"), not group-based differences. Attitudes based on collective concerns and identities, however, tend to lead people to divide the world sharply in to "us" and "them," which in turn has deep associations with prejudice, discrimination, and even hate crimes directed at out-group members (Gerstenfeld, 2002; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Attitudes rooted more in group concerns, then, could have stronger connections to intolerance than attitudes rooted in more individual level concerns.

One goal of the current research was to therefore to test whether the moral intolerance effects observed in Western cultural contexts also emerge in mainland China, a cultural context that places a stronger emphasis on maintaining harmony and the importance of the collective than is typically observed in the West, and one that otherwise discourages conflict and possible dissent. A second goal was to test whether moral mandate effects generalize across both political and social forms of intolerance. We turn to this issue next.

Political Intolerance

It is one thing to prefer not to work or live with someone who holds a different moral point of view (social intolerance), and quite another to deny them the right to speak about their beliefs in public places or to hold public office or to encourage the government to tap their phones or to monitor their Internet use (examples of political intolerance; Sullivan & Transue, 1999). In addition to testing whether moral mandate effects generalize across cultural context, a second goal of the current study was to empirically investigate the possible link between moral conviction and political intolerance. One reason why people are not only likely to be less socially tolerant of those with whom they morally disagree, but to be more politically intolerant as well, is because moral disagreements are especially threatening to people's worldviews (Solomon et al., 1991; Tetlock et al., 2000). The tendency to become more politically intolerant when feeling threatened is well documented (see Gibson, 1992; Gibson & Bingham, 1982; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; Sullivan & Transue, 1999 for reviews). Sociotropic threat (i.e., threat to one's society or values) poses a much more important role in undermining political tolerance than personal threat (i.e., threat to one's physical or material self; Davis, 2007). There are therefore a number of theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that people will not only be more socially intolerant of those who do not share their morally vested view on a given issue but will be more politically intolerant of them as well.

Political intolerance may also be more likely in China than in the United States. The Chinese government is rooted to a Marxist–Leninist–Maoist tradition of governance that privileges the vanguard role of the Communist Chinese Party and does not encourage deviations from the party line. Chinese citizens are therefore more routinely exposed to greater forms of political intolerance than citizens generally experience in the West. Because elite behavior and opinion could communicate the relative acceptability of political tolerance versus intolerance (Zaller, 1994), there may be higher levels of acceptance of political intolerance in China than in the United States, perhaps especially when moral conviction is high. Elite behavior and opinion in the United States, in contrast, places an especially high premium on political tolerance and freedom of expression, positions reified in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Consistent with this idea, the World Value Survey found that 75% of Americans, but only 31% of Chinese, reported that it is very important for people to be free to express unpopular political views without fear of harassment or punishment (WorldPublicOpinion.org, 2009).

In summary, exploring whether there are cultural differences or similarities in the connections of moral conviction with social and political intolerance can shed light on the degree to which the relationship between moral conviction and intolerance is contextually variable or inevitable. To test the various competing hypotheses of contextual dependence versus generalizability outlined here, we compared how people's moral convictions related to their social and political tolerance

of attitudinally dissimilar others in two very different cultural contexts: The U.S. and mainland China.

Method

Participants

A community sample of 100 rural and 110 urban Mainland Chinese ($N = 210$ in total) were recruited to participate in the current study. The sample was 59% female and ranged in age from 14 to 74 ($M = 36.95$, $SD = 13.51$). Participants were recruited by approaching people in the public places and through door-to-door solicitation. Participants were given small gifts of toiletries (e.g., tooth paste) in exchange for their participation. The survey was translated into Mandarin by the authors; it was then back translated and refined through group consultation. Data were collected using paper-and-pencil questionnaires, and when necessary (e.g., the respondent was illiterate), the questionnaire was read aloud.

A community sample of $N = 596$ in the United States was recruited to participate in the United States for comparison purposes using Mechanical Turk. The U.S. sample was 51% female, 36% male, and the remainder did not identify their gender. The U.S. sample ranged in age from 18 to 81 ($M = 36.23$, $SD = 13.07$). Thirty-three percent of this sample lived in an urban context and the remainder lived in suburban or rural contexts.¹

Procedure

Participants were first presented with a list of 16 contemporary issues in Chinese (e.g., privatizing the state-owned enterprise, one child policy, the Hukou system, allowing parents to sue their children for nonsupport, educational opportunities for children, promoting entrepreneurship and other forms of free market capitalism, gender equality, banning arranged marriages, abolishing the death penalty, sending elderly parents to a nursing home, greater restrictions on the ability of the government to target property for redevelopment, extramarital sex, Tibetan freedom, government regulation of the Internet and cable TV, sex selection of fetuses, and stricter supervision of food safety) or American society (e.g., privatizing social security, cracking down on illegal immigration, gender equality, abolishing the death penalty, sending elderly parents to a nursing home, extramarital sex, the choice to remain childless, gender equality, development even at the cost of environmental pollution, the Afghanistan War, government regulation of the Internet and cable TV, fighting terrorism, urban renewal, food safety, same sex marriage, government oversight of financial institutions and Wall Street, and offshore drilling)² and were asked to select the one issue that they thought was the most important to them. Participants were then asked a number of questions about their most important issue, including measures of attitude strength and moral conviction. Next, participants completed measures of social distance and political tolerance of a target that disagreed with them on their selected most important issue, some items not relevant to the current project,

and demographic information. These measures are described in more detail next.

Measures

Attitude measures. Attitude measures included attitude strength and importance. Specifically, participants were asked whether they supported or opposed the policy they identified as most important, and then how strong this support or opposition was on a 4-point scale with the point labels of *slightly*, *moderately*, *much*, and *very much*. The strength of the attitude, independent of the position, was used as our measure of attitude extremity. Attitude importance was measured with the item, "How important is this issue or policy to you personally?" on a 7-point scale with the end point labels of *not at all important* and *very important*.

Attitude extremity and importance are common measures of attitude strength (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). To be sure that any effects observed for moral conviction were due to morality, rather than attitude strength independent of moral content, we controlled for attitude extremity and importance when testing hypotheses.

Moral conviction. Moral conviction was measured with 2 items used in previous research (e.g., Skitka et al., 2009): "To what extent are your feelings about this issue or policy based on your core moral values and convictions?" and "To what extent are your feelings about this issue or policy based on your fundamental beliefs about right and wrong?" Both items were measured with 5-point scales, with the point labels *not at all*, *slightly*, *moderately*, *much*, and *very much*. These items correlated at $r = .73$ overall, $r = .63$ in the United States, and $r = .80$ in China

Social intolerance. Our measure of social intolerance was an adapted version of the social distance measure used by Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005). Participants were asked the degree that they agreed or disagreed with different completions to the stem, "How willing or unwilling would you be to have someone who did not share your views on (their identified most important issue) . . .". Sentence completions were "as the political leader of the country," "as someone who provided me with domestic help," "to come and work at the same place I do," "as a room mate," "to marry into my family," "as someone I would personally date," "as my work leader," "as a close personal friend," "as the owner of a store or restaurant I frequent," "as the teacher of my children," and "as a doctor in charge of my care." Participants responded on 6-point scales with the point labels of *very willing*, *moderately willing*, *slightly willing*, *slightly unwilling*, *moderately unwilling*, and *very unwilling*. Exploratory factor analyses confirmed that items loaded on a single factor. Scores on these items were averaged to create a global index of social distance, with higher values reflecting greater social intolerance. This scale had a Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$ and $.96$ with the U.S. and Chinese samples, respectively.³

Political intolerance. Political tolerance/intolerance was measured with an adaptation and content-controlled version of the "most disliked group" multi-item measure typically used in this line of research (e.g., Gibson, 1992; Gibson & Bingham, 1982; Marcus et al., 1995; see also Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2004). That is, rather than ask participants to nominate a specific "most disliked group" from a list of possible alternatives as is typically done research on general political tolerance, participants were asked to consider how willing they would be to have someone who disagreed with them about their most important issue being allowed to do a number of behaviors or have their behaviors controlled and monitored in a number of specific ways. For example, participants were asked whether someone who disagreed with them about their chosen issue/policy should be allowed to enforce policy decisions and laws, have their phones tapped by the government, hold important public positions, be subject to more thorough searches in airports or public spaces like the subway, have their e-mail and Internet use monitored by the government, or to talk about national policy on the web. The degree of agreement or disagreement was assessed on 6-point scales with the point labels of *strongly agree*, *moderately agree*, *slightly agree*, *slightly disagree*, *moderately disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. Exploratory factor analysis indicated that these items loaded on a single factor in both samples. All items were recoded so that high scores consistently represented greater political intolerance and were averaged, Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$ and $.67$ with U.S. and Chinese samples, respectively. Paralleling the social distance measure, higher scores on this measure reflected greater levels of political intolerance. Political and social intolerance were not correlated in either sample ($r = -.07$ and $.02$, *ns* in the United States and China, respectively)

Results

Virtually all the issue categories were selected by at least some study participants as their most important issue. *T* tests (corrected for unequal variances as necessary) indicated that people's most important attitudes were more extreme, important, and morally convicted in the United States than they were in China. Americans were more socially intolerant of attitudinally dissimilar others than the Chinese, whereas the Chinese were more politically intolerant of attitudinally dissimilar others than Americans (see Table 1).

Social Intolerance

To test whether moral conviction predicted social intolerance of those with a different point of view on participants' selected issue, nation (United States = 0, China = 1), centered values for attitude extremity, attitude importance, moral conviction, and the two-way interaction terms of each of the latter three variables with nation were simultaneously entered into a regression equation to predict social distance.

The Chinese were more socially tolerant of attitude differences than people in the United States. Attitude extremity,

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Measures as a Function of Country

	United States		China	
	M	SD	M	SD
Extremity	3.41	0.90	3.00	1.07
Importance	5.72	1.25	5.23	1.82
Moral conviction	4.12	0.94	3.11	1.23
Social intolerance	4.39	0.11	3.81	1.37
Political intolerance	2.55	0.78	3.78	0.87

Note. All differences between the United States and China are significant at $p < .01$. Levene’s test for equality of variances was $p < .01$ for all variables except political tolerance, $p = .53$, and tests were conducted taking heterogeneity of variances into account where necessary.

importance, and moral conviction each uniquely and positively predicted social intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others (see Table 2). Nation moderated the effects of attitude extremity and importance but did not qualify the effects of moral conviction.⁴

In summary, participants whose most important issue was more deeply tied to their moral convictions preferred more social distance from those who did not share their attitude on this issue, even when attitude strength (attitude extremity and importance) was controlled. Moreover, the nation by moral conviction interaction was not significant, which means the effect of moral conviction on social intolerance did not differ in China and the United States.

Political Intolerance

To test whether moral conviction predicts not only social intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others, but also the degree to which one is willing to accord them civil liberties, we tested the same model with political intolerance as the criterion. As can be seen in Table 2, attitude extremity and importance did not predict political intolerance but moral conviction did. As strength of moral conviction increased, so too did political intolerance of attitudinal dissimilarity. The effects of moral conviction on political intolerance, however, were qualified by a nation by moral conviction interaction. Analysis of simple slopes indicated that moral conviction predicted higher levels of political intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others in China, $B = .16$, $t(759) = 3.16$, $p < .01$, but was unrelated to political intolerance in the United States, $B = -.01$, $t(759) = -0.05$, *ns*.

Discussion

The goals of this research were to test the cross-cultural generalizability of the ties between moral conviction and intolerance of alternative points of view, as well as to test the degree to which effects observed with social intolerance would emerge with an alternative measure of intolerance, specifically political intolerance. Among other things, we were interested in whether we would find similar evidence of moral mandate

Table 2. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients of Nation, Attitude Strength Measures, Moral Conviction, to Predict Social and Political Intolerance of Attitudinally Dissimilar Others

	Social	Political
Nation (United States = 0, China = 1)	-.28*	1.33*
Extremity	-.34*	-.07
Importance	.13*	-.01
Moral conviction	.19*	.16*
Extremity × Nation	-.26*	.05
Importance × Nation	-.13*	.06
Moral Conviction × Nation	.01	.17*

* $p < .01$.

effects in a collectivistic and more autocratic context (China) as has been observed in highly individualistic contexts, such as the United States.

We discovered that moral convictions are equally predictive of social rejection of attitudinally dissimilar others in both the United States and China. People in the United States and China are equally unenthusiastic about letting those who do not share their moral views to marry into their family, move into their neighborhood, or even be an owner of a store or restaurant they might frequent. Notably, these results emerged even when controlling for the possible effects of nonmoral measures of attitude strength (importance and extremity). In short, moral conviction and social intolerance effects emerge regardless of the degree of cultural emphasis on the group versus autonomy, results that suggest that moral convictions can be associated with collectivistic, and not only autonomous, concerns.

A different pattern of results emerged with political tolerance. Stronger moral convictions were associated with greater political intolerance in China, but not in the United States. This finding is important because it reveals that the connections between moral conviction and intolerance are contextually variable rather than inevitable. Americans are heavily socialized to understand that it is important to accord basic civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, even to those they dislike or with whom they disagree. Although numerous factors can erode American’s commitment to political tolerance (especially conditions of threat), these results suggest that Americans nonetheless maintain a strong commitment to the civil rights of even those with whom they morally disagree.

Given the strong connections of moral conviction and social intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others previously observed in studies in the United States, it is perhaps surprising to find that Americans are not similarly morally motivated to be politically intolerant of attitudinal dissimilarity. Political socialization to accept the principle of political freedom for all apparently works in the United States: On the whole, Americans endorsed providing political freedoms for morally dissimilar others, despite not wanting to personally associate with them. Political context is therefore a boundary condition on the connections of moral conviction and some forms of intolerance. Although moral convictions can lead to both social and political intolerance (as revealed in China), the connections

of moral conviction and political intolerance are not inevitable (as revealed in the United States). When the social and cultural context emphasizes political tolerance—and perhaps even raises political tolerance to the level of a cultural moral conviction—people apparently accept that they must extend the same civil liberties to morally dissimilar others and similar others.

China, in contrast, does not have a political culture that emphasizes political freedom and rights, and therefore Chinese citizens are not similarly socialized to endorse the notion that everyone (and perhaps especially those with whom one has the deepest moral disagreements) is entitled to the same political freedoms. It is critical to note, however, that *individual differences* in moral conviction predicted both social and political intolerance in China, because a strong reading of collectivism under an autocratic government might lead one to predict a reduction of variance in personal opinions on issues of importance, with the consequence of societal consensus overriding individual differences. As can be seen in Table 1, however, the Chinese sample was anything but unanimous across any of the measures collected. These results demonstrate that rather than being monolithic in its political culture, China is a nation where individual differences about moral conviction matter.

Taken together, these results indicate that moral convictions have similar effects in very different cultural contexts but also some important differences as well. Future research will be needed to explore the full range of similarities and possible differences in how these variables play out across cultural settings, but as a first inquiry, the current work suggests that moral mandate effects are not unique to Western cultural contexts. Moreover, the discovery of some cross-cultural generalizability suggests that the effects of moral conviction are not limited to those with a high investment in autonomy but can also emerge in contexts and persons that place a strong emphasis on the group.

In addition to adding to our understanding of the reach of moral convictions across contexts and different forms of intolerance, the current study provides further evidence consistent with the notion that psychological conceptions of morality can be double-edged swords (see also Skitka & Morgan, 2009). Morality is commonly associated with pro-sociality, altruism, and moral courage, that is, people's willingness to personally stand-up and stand-out in defense of a principle, even when others are standing aside (Miller, 2000). Positive social change requires that at least some people will have the moral courage to stand-up for what they believe is right, even when it may be personally costly to do so. Moreover, moral courage to stand-up for one's personal beliefs about right and wrong may be even more important—albeit more personally risky—in political contexts that are particularly intolerant of dissent and conflict. The results of the current study advance our understanding of both the cross-cultural reach and scope of the tendency to have moral convictions and how moral convictions relate to intolerance. Gaining further insight into the psychology of how and why moral convictions have the potential to lead to intolerance and conflict, but also positive social change, remains a critical agenda for further research.

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Notes

1. Urban versus rural context had no effect on any of the observed results, directly or as a moderator, and will therefore not be discussed further.
2. We attempted to keep issues as comparable where possible across China and the United States but still locally relevant.
3. A similar single-factor solution was found by Skitka et al. (2005), but for theoretical reasons, they also compared whether moral conviction had equally strong effects on rejection of attitudinally dissimilar others in more intimate (e.g., family, friends, marry into family) versus more distant (e.g., political leader, teacher) relationships. No differences in effects for moral conviction were found in either Skitka et al. (2005) or the current article as a function of intimacy/distance, so this distinction will not be discussed further.
4. Attitude extremity predicted higher levels of social intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others in the United States, $B = .33$, $t(741) = 4.88$, $p < .01$, but not in China, $B = .08$, $t(741) = 1.63$, *ns*. The reverse pattern of results emerged for attitude importance. Attitude importance predicted higher levels of preferred social intolerance of attitudinally dissimilar others in China, $B = .13$, $t(741) = 3.65$, $p < .01$, but not in the United States, $B = -.01$, $t(741) = -0.48$, *ns*.

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