Oliver Fink and Orly Idan

Collective Action in Political and Moral Uncertainty

Understanding Moral Foundations of Exemplars and Perpetrators in the Second World War

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Challenging complexities within increasing global crises such as the Middle East or the Russia/Ukraine war require difficult moral decisions in uncertainty. While previous research suggests that moral foundations such as care and fairness elicit support for prosocial collective action, within contexts of violent conflict, this morality seems to shift towards loyalty and authority. However, there is a lack of studies on real-life high-stakes decisions in violent conflict, and connections to actual behavior remain unclear. To better understand how moral foundations facilitate support for collective action in violent settings, this article examines exceptional moral outliers during the Second World War as described in three autobiographic documents by Dutch Jewish peace activist Etty Hillesum, Christian conscious dissenter Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp Rudolf Hoess. These analyses are conducted by utilizing natural language processing.

The results reveal that all individuals studied were subject to morality shifting. While moral exemplars find agentic ways to creatively compensate for changes based on protective moral foundations and social strategies, the moral perpetrator narrative shows substantially enhanced shifting. Our findings suggest that while morality shifting explains collective action behaviors in challenging intergroup settings, individual nuance exists, and carefully crafted strategies can avert the consequences of moral shifting. Theoretical and applied implications for collective action under political and moral uncertainty are discussed.

DEUTSCH

Kollektives Handeln in politischer und moralischer Unsicherheit. Verständnis moralischer Grundlagen von Vorbildern und Tätern im Zweiten Weltkrieg

Die Herausforderungen komplexer globaler Krisen wie im Nahen Osten oder im Krieg zwischen Russland und der Ukraine erfordern schwierige moralische Entscheidungen. Während Forschungen belegen, dass moralische Werte wie Fürsorge und Fairness prosoziales kollektives Handeln fördern, scheinen sich Werte im Kontext gewalttätiger Konflikte hin zu Loyalität und Autorität zu verschieben. Empirische Studien zu realen Entscheidungen mit hohem persönlichem Risiko im Kontext von tatsächlichem Verhalten fehlen jedoch. Um besser zu verstehen, wie moralische Grundlagen die Unterstützung für kollektives Handeln in gewaltgeprägten Kontexten fördern, untersuchen wir moralische Extrembeispiele während des Zweiten Weltkriegs, der niederländischen jüdischen Friedensaktivistin Etty Hillesum, des christlichen Dissidenten Dietrich Bonhoeffer und des Kommandanten des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß, mittels computergestützter Sprachanalyse autobiografischer Dokumente.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass alle untersuchten Personen gewisse Verschiebungen ihrer moralischen Grundlagen berichten. Während Vorbilder Wege finden, um diese Veränderungen auszugleichen, zeigt der Täter-Narrativ erheblich stärkere Verwerfungen. Moralverschiebungen scheinen zwar kollektives Handeln in schwierigen zwischenmenschlichen Situationen zu erklären, es gibt jedoch ausgeprägte individuelle Nuancen, um die Folgen moralischer Verschiebungen abzuwenden. Theoretische und angewandte Implikationen für kollektives Handeln unter politischer und moralischer Unsicherheit werden diskutiert.

| KEY WORDS

moral foundations; collective action; intergroup violence; World War II; moral exemplar; perpetrator

moralische Grundlagen; kollektives Handeln; Gewalt; Zweiter Weltkrieg; Vorbilder; Täter

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1 Introduction

Events such as October 7th 2023, seriously challenged our resolve for peaceful collective action and instigated polarized discussions worldwide on responding to such atrocities. Also in other contexts, the recent increase in intergroup hostilities and the intertwining of local and global crises emphasizes the importance of finding ways to attenuate the destructive effects of intergroup conflicts. Morality is one important basis for collective action (cf. Van Zomeren 2013). However, what people see as moral can change, depending on defining norms and distinctive features of the groups and contexts to which they belong (cf. Ellemers/Van Der Toorn 2015). Past studies suggest that moral foundations are subject to *morality shifting* under conflict conditions, pointing to an important regulation mechanism to maintain a moral self-image (cf. Leidner/Castano 2012). How can we understand the concept better and what could be creative ways to attenuate morality shifts?

What people see as moral can change.

The current settings marked by growing violent conflict and affective polarization might require costly and difficult moral choices in uncertainty, putting the collective good above personal risk or disadvantage. This uncertainty was the same in historical settings such as the Second World War. Research has made progress in identifying factors in how people *think* about morality (cf. Garrigan et al. 2018). Yet, much less is known about how this affects their moral *behavior* (cf. Ellemers et al. 2019), particularly in high-stakes moral decisions for collective action in conflict settings. Our study approach expands on existing literature by examining real-life contexts and personal social identity narratives (cf. Ellemers et al. 2017). Most existing literature on moral action during conflict examines these issues without real-world consequences for the participants. The following study examines moral behavior utilizing language analysis of ego documents. Our study adds to existing literature about morality shifting by exploring moral foundations of outliers in real-life settings *and* associated clear behavior outcomes. We use well-established natural language dictionaries (cf. Tausczik/Pennebaker 2010), specifically 'Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count' (LIWC 2022; cf. Boyd et al. 2022) and the 'extended Moral Foundations Dictionary' (eMFD; cf. Hopp et al. 2021).

We hypothesize that moral exemplars' linguistic patterns will differ from perpetrators in that exemplars will defy morality shifting, while perpetrators will accede. The results reveal that moral exemplars are much less subject to morality shifting, while moral perpetrator reasoning experiences substantial shifts, showing strongly decreased indicators for care and fairness. Further verbal behavior markers and qualitative analyses complement the findings. We suggest that individually contrived strategies can be used to mitigate the effects of morality shifting. In the introduction, we first conceptualize moral foundations in conflict settings and then morality-based collective action in these contexts.

1.1 Moral Foundations in Intergroup Conflict Settings

Morality indicates the 'right' and 'wrong' way to behave (cf. Kesebir/Haidt 2010), and moral foundations help to explain the social behavior of individuals living together (cf. Gert 2004). A growing body of literature has recognized the importance of affective components, cognitions, and social evaluations for morality (cf. Garrigan et al. 2018). This is particularly important in intergroup conflict (cf. Bilewicz/Čehajić-Clancy 2023; Halevy et al. 2015; Toscano 1998). While earlier researchers proposed moral stages (cf. Kohlberg/Hersh 1977; Lapsley/Narvaez 2005), moral foundations theory suggests a more pragmatic moral pluralism (cf. Graham et al. 2009; Graham et al. 2013). Context is a substantial factor in influencing human behavior (cf. Blalock, 1984; Manski 2000), particularly in intergroup conflict (cf. De Coning 2018; Mac Ginty 2014). This is also true for moral behavior, as conflict contexts stipulate extreme situations, impacting moral reasoning (cf. Atran/Ginges 2015; Vandello et al. 2011). Yet, to which extent morality shifts occur depending on the specific context is subject to scholarly debate.

To which extent does morality shift depend on the specific context?

Moral identity advocates would assume moral deliberations as relatively stable (cf. Boegershausen et al. 2015; Hertz/Krettenauer 2016).

> *"The moral life is not something that is switched on at a particular crisis but is rather something that goes on continually in the small piecemeal habits of living"* (Oliner/Oliner 1992, 222).

In the more succinct version, "At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over" (Murdoch 1970, 36). Moral reasoning proponents on the other hand argue that

> *"no simple criterion picks out propositions about morality from within the larger set of deontic propositions concerning what is permissible and impermissible in social relations"* (Bucciarelli et al. 2008, 121),

suggesting situational reasoning based on contextual cues at specific moments. However, the knowledge about moral reasoning and identity as antecedent conditions for moral behavior has remained mostly hypothetical (cf. Ellemers et al. 2019).

This study focuses on moral foundations and morality shifting during *intergroup conflict*. Morality shifts have been proposed as a mechanism through which individuals can maintain a moral image of themselves and the ingroup, directing the moral concerns about harm and fairness towards loyalty and authority when assessing potentially threatening events, particularly among high ingroup glorifiers (cf. Leidner et al. 2010). In contrast to other motives for extremist violence, this reasoning is particularly dangerous as perpetrators feel — or pretend to feel — moral (cf. Giner-Sorolla et al. 2011). While theory is clear that morality shifts happen, what could prevent these in times of war and conflict is less clear. Researchers point to religious values, social motives, and intergroup moral emotions (cf. Halevy et al. 2015). Yet, verification remains anecdotal and empirical backing elusive (cf. Čehajić-Clancy/Bilewicz 2020; Unsworth 2012; Wittstock 2024).

1.2 Morality as Motivation for Collective Action

"What ought I to do?" is, according to Kant, the basic question in ethics (cf. Heschel 1965). We look at morality mainly with the intent of specifying of its effect on subsequent behavior, specifically collective action behavior (cf. Van Zomeren 2013). Collective action is defined as individual action undertaken on behalf of a collective in a group context (cf. Wright et al. 1990). While possibly including individual components such as career advancement or personal protection (cf. Stroebe et al. 2015) this always involves a group benefit or threat component. What people see as moral can shift, depending on norms and distinctive features of the groups they belong to. Acting in ways considered moral by the group se-

cures inclusion and elicits respect from others, which is important to the self (cf. Ellemers/Van der Toorn 2015). Relatively few researchers have addressed *intergroup* mechanisms in morality, even though their relevance — for instance, for moral reasoning — is demonstrated in work that shows 'circles' in which people are afforded or denied moral treatment are defined by group memberships (cf. e. g. Olson et al. 2011; see also Ellemers et al. 2017).

Moral standards can be collectively deduced. However, they can also be individually induced.

The distinction between individual and group levels is important for moral behavior in conflict settings (cf. Fink et al. 2024). Moral standards can be collectively deduced when group ideology informs individuals' moral standards (cf. Turner et al. 1994). However, they can also be individually induced such as in the development of individual moral convictions (cf. Skitka et al. 2005; Van Zomeren 2013). Illustrating this point, relying exclusively on social identity considerations to label moral judgments and associated collective action as resulting from being Jewish or a member of the 'elite' SS unit is too superficial. Stella Goldschlag and Etty Hillesum, both Jewish women, as well as Kurt Gerstein and Rudolf Hoess, both male German SS-officers, are testament to this. Stella Goldschlag decided to collaborate with the Gestapo to identify Jewish refugees (although her case might be more complex as indicated here). Kurt Gerstein documented detailed proof of SS atrocities and handed them to a Swedish diplomat. Both examples point to outlier research — individuals deciding against universal or group norms — to elucidate the intricate interplays of moral reasoning.

In addition to the group component, conflict contexts add another layer of complexity. Considerations on moral issues are especially challenging during crises and intergroup conflict, where moral decisions on collective action can have serious personal consequences. While most research on morality has neglected this aspect and instead has emphasized people's *general* beliefs, moral principles are perceived as deeply embedded in social contexts (cf. Carnes et al. 2015; Leidner/Castano 2012). Based on strong psychological entrenchment in intergroup conflict settings (cf. Hameiri et al. 2014), people make very different moral judgments and behavioral choices in these contexts (cf. Neuberg/Schaller 2008; Saguy/Reifen-Tagar 2022). Finally, recent work underlines how emotional

dynamics influence individuals toward collective action (cf. e. g. Tausch et al. 2011; Van Stekelenburg/Klandermans 2013), particularly in conflict settings (cf. Fink et al. 2022; Fink et al. 2025). Emotions are powerful engines of human behavior in social contexts, particularly conflict settings (cf. Halperin 2015). This includes moral behavior (cf. Halevy et al. 2015; Halperin/Schori-Eyal 2019).

Between moral foundations and real-world collective action

While some previous work combines laboratory with field-based studies, most research has focused on action *tendencies* instead of behavior outcomes at possibly high individual costs. Our approach expands on existing literature by systematizing the association between moral foundations and real-world collective action, contrasting exemplars defying group norms with a perpetrator violating universal norms ('thou shalt not kill') to instead follow ingroup norms ('violence is permitted and required due to outgroup threat'). Concretely, we assume the context will elicit morality shifting. Exemplars will modify shifting or find creative alternative moral bases for their individual decisions while perpetrators will accede to and justify morality shifting according to ingroup norms.

1.3 The Current Research

The Second World War was a global conflict involving nearly all of the world's countries, with many nations mobilizing all resources in pursuit of total war. With its devastating impact resulting in 70 to 85 million deaths, more than half of which were civilians, it was the deadliest conflict in history. As millions died in genocides, including the Holocaust, the context was ripe with political and moral uncertainty amongst enormous practical difficulties and dangers (cf. Oliner/Oliner 1992). Three detailed autobiographic documents allowed us to study moral foundations and psychological reasonings of collective action choices among moral outliers within disadvantaged and advantaged group members in a live and violent conflict setting. The research contributes to moral exemplar interventions in intergroup conflict (cf. Čehajić-Clancy/Bilewicz 2021) but it is also important to understand costly moral choices and behavior foundations in crisis settings, as moral arguments facilitate changes across political-attitudinal divides (cf. Feinberg/Willer 2015; Feinberg/Willer 2019).

The study examines the association between moral foundations and collective action outcomes, indicating psychological processes such as morality, attitudes, emotions, and social cognitions of moral exemplars and perpetrators. We first postulate that differential language use will diverge between exemplars and perpetrators. We also hypothesize that exemplars will resist morality shifting while perpetrators will succumb to it. Specifically, exemplar reasoning will be marked by care and fairness indicators, while perpetrator reasoning will be associated more with loyalty and authority.

2 Methods

2.1 Datasets and Participants

The datasets include three biographic narratives of exceptional detail and moral expression related to real-world collective behavior in enormously challenging settings. In our study, we look at rather extreme individual outliers in extreme times — the Second World War and particularly the Holocaust — and one must be cautious not to draw too simplistic historical parallels (cf. Barnett 2017). Nevertheless, we are convinced that at such moments of crisis, the collective action responses of citizens and even institutions are crucial and particularly worthy of examining. Comparing extreme cases can provide valuable insights through their sharpened focus within an arguably sometimes too nuanced field (cf. Eisenhardt et al. 2016). Examining extreme cases within groups has been found valuable to reveal differences often obscured when studying 'average' people, but can nevertheless serve to uncover patterns relevant to a 'typical' population (cf. Hodgetts/Stolte 2012).

Extreme outliers in extreme times

Etty Hillesum was a Dutch Jewish peace activist who worked in the Westerbork transition camp, secretly publishing two reports about the camp and ensuing conditions. She died in 1943 in Auschwitz. She entrusted her diary — which she intended to publish eventually — to a friend before her deportation. Rudolf Hoess was a German SS officer and commandant of Auschwitz from 1940–1944 after serving in several other concentration camps. After the war, he attempted to hide, was extradited

to Poland, tried, and executed in Auschwitz. He was ordered to write his biography during his final months in prison. Researchers assure that he made efforts to tell the truth as he perceived it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, university lecturer in theology, and anti-Nazi dissident who was a founding member of the Confessing Church. He was arrested in 1943 by the Gestapo and imprisoned. Later, he was transferred to Flossenbürg concentration camp, where he was executed in April 1945 during the collapse of the Nazi regime.

2.2 Data Processing and Analysis

Language analysis posits that the words we use encode our attention, thoughts, emotions, and cognitions (cf. Boyd/Schwartz 2021). We used 'Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count' (LIWC 2022), a transparent text analysis program that extracts words into psychologically meaningful categories for language processing. LIWC has empirically demonstrated its ability to detect meaning in a wide variety of settings, including attentional focus, emotionality, social relationships, and thinking styles (cf. Tausczik/Pennebaker 2010).

Extracting words into psychologically meaningful categories for language processing

LIWC checks each word of a document against an internal dictionary of over 12,000 words and word stems. Words are assigned to specific linguistic categories, and the percentage of total words in each category is reported. For example, "cried" falls into categories such as sadness, negative emotion, overall affect, and past tense verbs. Moral foundations measures were completed by analyses on personal pronoun use and social orientation as important measures for behavior in conflict contexts (cf. Böhm et al. 2020; Fink et al. 2024). All but the moral foundations variables are the result of counting the words in the corresponding dictionaries (Cronbach's α = .43 and .58, while Kuder-Richardson KR-20 Formula = .97 and .98). KR-20 is provided as α tends to underestimate reliability in language categories due to highly variable base rates of word usage within categories (cf. Boyd et al. 2022). Data from the study was also analyzed using qualitative thematic content (cf. Braun/Clarke 2006) and critical discourse analysis (cf. Van Dijk 1993).

2.3 *Language Variables*

We used the LIWC-22 standard dictionaries (cf. Boyd et al. 2022), reflecting the complexity of our constructs through refined measurements of language expression in naturally occurring verbal behavior beyond single variables in isolation (cf. Bardi/Zentner 2017; Boyd/Markowitz 2024; Teper et al. 2015). The LIWC-22 dictionaries rely primarily on function ('stealth') words, which scaffold language, are more frequent and less consciously controllable than content words (cf. Boyd 2017; Pennebaker 2011).

Function words which are less consciously controllable

We selected the following LIWC categories in addition to the overall summary variables connected to verbal behavior patterns of dialogue facilitators:

- *Personal Pronouns*. Substantial information about self versus group versus other orientation can be learned from pronouns such as *I*, *we*, *you*, or *they*, especially in relation to each other or when considering changes in use over time (cf. Pennebaker 2011). We focus in particular on the relative expression of "*I*" and "*we*" pronouns, which have been found to robustly distinguish psychological and social processes in decades of prior work (cf. Pennebaker 2011; Pennebaker et al. 2003). LIWC summary variables such as analytic processes (cf. Markowitz 2023; Pennebaker et al. 2014) and clout as an indicator of resolve (cf. Kacewicz et al. 2014) rely heavily on pronoun use.
- *Social Orientation*. The social drives dictionary includes motivational tendencies such as *affiliation* (e. g. *we*, *our*, *help*), *achievement* (e. g. *work*, *better*, *best*, *working*), and *power* (e. g. *own*, *order*, *power*). Relative profiles capture social dominance orientation, a variable predicting social and political attitudes (cf. Ho et al. 2012; Körner et al. 2024; Pratto et al. 1994).
- *Moral Foundations*. Capturing moral foundations in more detail, we utilized the extended moral foundations dictionary (eMFD; Hopp et al. 2021). Based on moral foundations theory (cf. Graham et al. 2009; Graham et al. 2013), it uses a more refined and crowdsourced measurement approach compared to the original LIWC-based version.

3 Results

In the results section, we first illustrate the moral foundations (eMFD) results and then the LIWC-22 analyses. In the final section, the results are examined with qualitative deliberations, mainly on the emotional aspects of their moral behavioral choices.

3.1 Moral Foundations

To better indicate individual differences for each moral value, the eMFD scores are not shown according to study participants but each moral foundation.

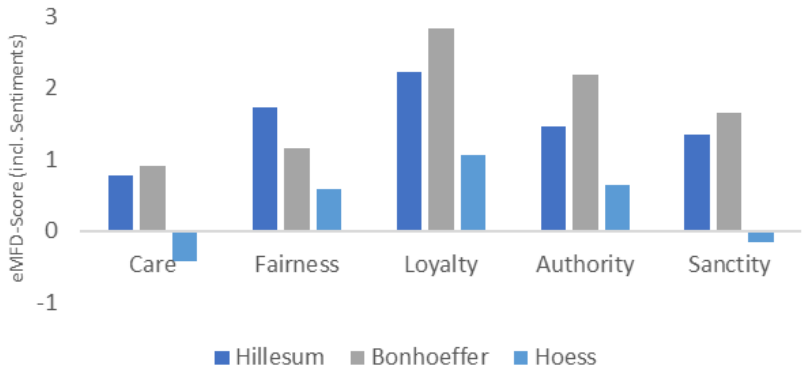

Fig. 1: Comparison of moral exemplar versus perpetrator reasoning in times of war (eMFD)

Figure 1 shows the combined eMFD scores of our study participants. The moral foundations dictionary results did not fully confirm our hypothesis: While Hoess (ingroup glorifier — loyalty, authority) shows strong morality shifting, Hillesum is high on fairness but her highest value is loyalty. Nevertheless, as expected in such an extreme comparison, results indicate pronounced differences in overall moral expression. Etty Hillesum's overall moral foundation indicators are much higher than Hoess' scores. In the case of Rudolf Hoess, care and sanctity even have negative connotations and are therefore considered as vice instead of value. All three individuals display morality shifting in times of war to some extent. Hoess shows with a strong ingroup affiliation the lowest overall moral scores and the strongest shifting. Hillesum seems to counterbalance morality shifts with high fairness/sanctity, and Bonhoeffer with high sanctity.

3.2 *LIWC-22 Summary Indicators and Personal Pronouns*

These moral foundations indicators are further substantiated when examining LIWC-22 summary indicators and personal pronoun use, frequently used 'stealth' words indicating social-affective references with limited ability to realize or influence these personal verbal styles.

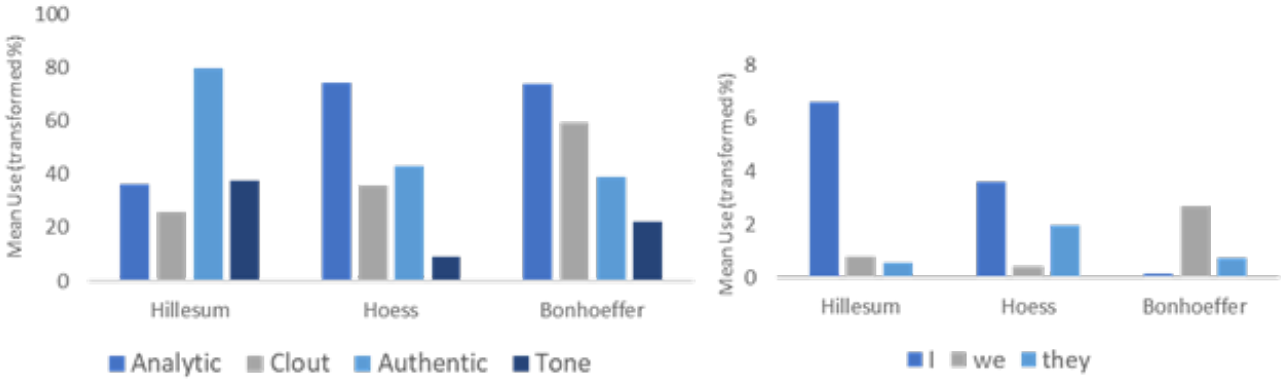

Fig. 2: LIWC-22 Summary Indicators and I/we/they ratio

As indicated in Figure 2, Etty Hillesum is the least analytic while being the most authentic and vulnerable in her diary. Bonhoeffer shows the highest clout ('agency') indicators, displaying the 'language of leadership', despite many setbacks over the previous years, such as being banned from public speaking, the Gestapo closing his alternative pastor training seminary, and facing a generally difficult situation at the time of writing (he was arrested within a few months). Regarding emotional tone (the higher, the more positive), Hoess, facing imminent death, is the least optimistic of the three. Etty Hillesum is the most self-focused, displaying the highest use of *I*. Rudolf Hoess alternates equally between *I* and the deflective *they*, describing what he did and how others were responsible. Bonhoeffer displays a high use of *we*, which may be partially due to the text being mainly addressed to two of his fellow conspirators against Nazi Germany, but which is arguably also indicative of a man who gave up safety at the US Fuller Theological Summary in order to return to the 'trenches' with his Confessing Church fellows.

3.3 *LIWC-22 Social Drives Dictionary*

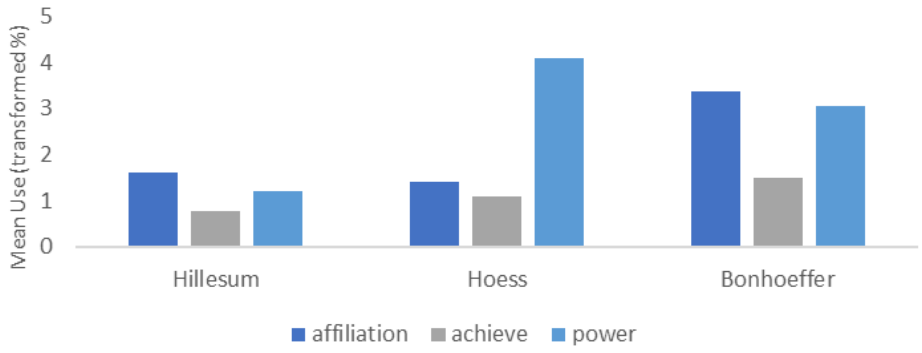

Fig. 3: LIWC-22 Social Motivations/Drives

Finally, we compared the results on morality with social behavior processes as indicated by further verbal markers (Figure 3), in particular by supplementing the eMFD with further LIWC-22 data on social motivational drives. Etty Hillesum is the least socially motivated, following her own moral compass. Hoess is mostly and substantially concerned with power. While Bonhoeffer is also relatively power-driven in his resistance activities against the Nazi state, the social drive for power is mitigated (also shown in the *we*-dictionary) by a strong sense of affiliation, arguably with his 'Confessing Church' friends as well as his co-conspirators.

3.4 *Qualitative Considerations*

In many ways, Hillesum and Hoess are antipodes — on the one side, the very self-focused, individualistic, mindful person (spiritually, relationships) who radically follows her inner moral compass. On the other side, the very authoritarian bureaucrat who conforms fully to and thereby collaborates actively with a morally twisted regime committing atrocities beyond our grasp. Why are these two people so different? What influences can we deduce from their writing?

Why are these people so different?

Etty Hillesum engages purposefully in moral self-reflection (which Hoess avoids until forced to), initially regarding individual matters such as relationships or dysfunctional parental patterns. Relatively soon, she fo-

cuses on the intergroup context — the German terror against Dutch Jews becomes the guiding theme also in her inner life. Her instruments seem to be twofold — nondenominational religious mindfulness-type meditation as well as purposeful work on her emotions, notably fear and hate.

"It is the problem of our age: hatred against the Germans poisons everyone's mind. 'Let the bastards drown, the lot of them' — such sentiments have become part and parcel of our daily speech. […] Indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is a sickness of the soul. […] And then I knew: I should take the field against hatred." (Woodhouse 2009, 78)

This conclusion awakens her activist convictions.

"This is what I really want to say: Nazi barbarism evokes the same kind of barbarism in ourselves. […] We have to reject barbarism within us, we must not fan the hatred within us, because if we do, the world will not be able to pull itself out of the mire." (Woodhouse 2009, 80)

Attention to the human heart can root out hatred, not political action or violent civil resistance.

"Each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others. And remember that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable." (Woodhouse 2009, 88)

Her next emotional focus is fear, as fear and hate are interrelated.

"Fear generates hatred and hatred maximizes fear, and fear weakens the spirit and finally destroys people." (Woodhouse 2009, 90)

Etty Hillesum refused to fear — and go into hiding although she had the opportunity to do so repeatedly — even at the cost of her own life.
Rudolf Hoess' moral standards were shaped by his involvement in the Freikorps after the First World War (where he served mostly in the Middle East).

"The fighting in the Baltic States was more savage and more bitter than any I had experienced either in the World War or later with the Freikorps. There was no real front, for the enemy was everywhere. When it came to a clash, it was a fight to the death, and no quarter was given or expected." (Hoess 1956, 45)

His elaborations on fear and hate follow a completely different approach to Hillesum.

"I must emphasize here that I have never personally hated the Jews. […] I treated all [prisoners] in the same way. […] In any event, the emotion of hatred is foreign to my nature. But I know what hate is, and what it looks like. I have seen it and I have suffered it myself." (Hoess 1956, 147)

This focus on or blaming of others and self-victimization also dictate his view on moral responsibility.

"It was Eicke's[1] *intention that his SS men, by continuous instruction and suitable orders concerning the dangerous criminality of the inmates, should be made ill-disposed toward the prisoners. They were to […] root out once and for all any sympathy they might feel for them. By such means, he succeeded in engendering in simple-natured men a hatred and antipathy for the prisoners which an outsider will find hard to imagine. This influence spread through all the concentration camps and afflicted all the SS men and the SS leaders who served in them, and indeed it continued for many years after Eicke had relinquished his post as Inspector. All the torture and ill-treatment inflicted upon the prisoners in the concentration camps can be explained by this 'hate indoctrination.'"* (Hoess 1956, 86; see also *they*-dictionary)

The following passage allows insight into his feelings of guilt:

"And it is here that my guilt begins. It was clear that I was not suited to this sort of service. […] My sympathies lay too much with the prisoners, for I had myself lived their life for too long and had personal experience of their needs. I should have […] explained that I was not suited to concentration camp service, because I felt too much sympathy for the prisoners. I was unable to find the courage to do this." (Hoess 1956, 87)

Until the very end, Hoess rejects any moral responsibility. He feels shame about how he dies, not about the collective action he decided to pursue, thus maintaining the moral self-image of a good person in bad circumstances (cf. Ellemers/De Gilder 2022).

"On every occasion, fate has intervened to save my life so that at last I might be put to death in this shameful manner. How greatly I envy those of my comrades who died a soldier's death. Unknowingly I was a cog in the wheel of the great extermination machine created by the Third Reich.

1 Theodor Eicke (1892–1943) was a senior SS functionary and a Waffen-SS divisional commander. He was a key figure in the development of Nazi concentration camps, served as the second commandant of the Dachau camp, and as the first Concentration Camps Inspector.

The machine has been smashed to pieces, the engine is broken, and I, too, must now be destroyed. 'The world demands it.'" (Hoess 1956, 202)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is astonishingly optimistic after more than ten years of setbacks in his collective action pursuits, with his illegal pastor seminary having got shut down and being banned from public speaking or publishing. His notes include a brief chapter on trust and optimism.

"But where we broke through the layer of mistrust, we were allowed to experience a trust hitherto utterly undreamed of. Where we trust, we have learned to place our lives in the hands of others; contrary to all the ambiguities in which our acts and lives must exist, we have learned to trust without reserve." (Barnett 2017, 39; see also *we*-dictionary and social drives)

His descriptions are still grounded in a bleak reality:

"In recent years we have become increasingly familiar with the thought of death. […] We can no longer hate death so much." — and — *"We also know too well the fear for life and all the other destructive effects of unrelenting imperilment of life."* (Barnett 2017, 44)

Nevertheless, he still engages in empathy (which he calls sympathy) and perspective-taking, as his account balances suffering with empathic concern.

"[…] most people learn wisdom only through personal experiences. This explains […] people's dull sensitivity toward the suffering of others; sympathy grows in proportion to the increasing fear of the threatening proximity of disaster." (Barnett 2017, 41)

Finally,

"if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ's greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ's freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer. Inactive waiting and dully looking on are not Christian responses. Christians are called to action and sympathy not through their own firsthand experiences but by the immediate experience of their brothers, for whose sake Christ suffered." (Barnett 2017, 42)

To summarize the qualitative results: Etty Hillesum uses spiritual mindfulness focusing on emotions to increase healthy ego strength. Dietrich Bonhoeffer uses theological insight and affiliation to justify his collective action choices. Rudolf Hoess fully succumbs to morality shifting, justifying his actions with high personal morals in unfortunate circumstances beyond his powers.

4 Discussion

The collective action decision-making of people living in times of political and moral uncertainty is challenged by possibly severe personal consequences as epistemic violence influences general moral norms. All three testimonials have unique lessons to teach.

All three testimonials
have unique lessons to teach.

In the case of Rudolf Hoess, we can see how certain collective action stances lead — through morality shifting — to a moral group identity profile that is difficult to evade even in the light of moral atrocities. Although we analyze only one case, similar moral reasoning shifts towards loyalty and authority are known from other perpetrators in the same setting, for example, Franz Stangl, commandant of the Treblinka camp (cf. Sereny 1974). Yet, the other two accounts provide complementary examples of how moral exemplars resist morality shifting by assessing — from a spiritual-theological perspective — possible collective action responsibilities toward peace and social change. While perpetrators submit to morality shifting and find ways to rationalize and justify their behavior, the verbal behavior of exemplars was marked by individualistic mindfulness-based self-reflection (Hillesum) or carefully selected affiliation strategies (Bonhoeffer). It could be postulated that when faced with moral decisions in uncertainty, again paraphrasing Iris Murdoch, *at crucial moments of [moral] choice, most of the business of choosing is [either] over* or, one can draw on and decide to implement carefully crafted fallback strategies even at great personal cost. Overall, our research highlights valuable moral resistance strategies in perilous times.

4.1 Theoretical and Applied Contribution

Our research provides new insights into the nuanced connection between moral foundations and support for collective action in morally difficult contexts. Thus far, examining the relationship between moral foundations, especially morality shifting and collective action, has paid little attention to the interplay between personal and group perspectives, and did not include actual behavior outcomes. Using natural-language processing, the present study describes the broad theoretical and empirical potential of exploring morality shifting as individual-dependent. The study thus reveals differentiated strategies to moderate morality shifting in political and moral uncertainty.

This enhanced understanding of how moral foundations are associated with behavior in conflict settings can be utilized in moral exemplar research and interventions (cf. Čehajić-Clancy/Bilewicz 2021), showing in detail *how* people engage in moral deliberation or decision-making processes. The insights into moral reasoning in uncertainty can facilitate two distinct, yet related, appraisal processes: changing perceptions about social groups (e. g. moral emotion regulation and morality judgments as in the case of Etty Hillesum) and changing one's level of social categorization (e. g. by facilitating perceptions of more inclusive social identities as in the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer; cf. Čehajić-Clancy/Bilewicz 2021). Another possible application concerns political decision-making across attitudinal worldview divides (cf. Feinberg/Willer 2015; Feinberg/Willer 2019), where research has suggested facilitating attitudinal change through moral-based (in contrast to factual) arguments. Our results can inform moral political decision-making across political and attitudinal divides through detailed knowledge about prototypical moral reasoning denominators such as loyalty and authority. Furthermore, we were able to confirm that moral shifting occurred where previously moral disengagement was assumed. Our study expands both theories by exploring what moderates morality shifting in violent and uncertain conflicting settings. Following Durant/Durant (2012), we assume that history and historical accounts have important lessons to teach. On the other hand, we want to be cautious and refrain from over-simplification in light of complex interrelations leading to these exceptionally convoluted times of violence (cf. Barnett 2017). It will be valuable to examine the generalizability of the results in activist and transgressor/perpetrator accounts in other morally difficult and uncertain political settings. The study also provides insight

into the strong need to maintain a moral self-image despite substantial transgressions (cf. Ellemeers/De Gilder 2022).

4.2 Limitations and Future Direction

The present research demonstrates how morality shifting works on the example of three autobiographic documents from the Second World War. However, as with all qualitative research, the generalizability of the findings is limited due to the nature of the research methodology and the sample size. We describe a small number of people, using theoretical non-probability sampling. These methods limit the generalizability beyond our sample and the research period. Although results are consistent with findings from other conflict zones (cf. e. g. Bilewicz/Čehajić-Clancy 2023; Sawaoka et al. 2014), our study should be considered exploratory. While we quantify the qualitative data utilizing natural language processing, additional work is needed to confirm, extend, or challenge our findings with further samples. The particular historic nature of the study limits transferability, and we want to theorize with caution regarding today's authoritarian and morally challenging contexts. Yet, it has been claimed, that "What is most personal is most universal" (Rogers 1962, 29).

Caution in transferring to today's morally challenging contexts

In addition, the slightly different nature of each text in terms of intended audience, word count and further characteristics of the documents might lead to differences in the results of the features measured. This said, LIWC's high reliance on style ('stealth') words, in contrast to content words, should make the results reasonably reliable despite this factor. The target group of moral outliers is notoriously elusive. Sir Nicholas Winton, for example, never published a single line about his extraordinary rescue mission in Prague and even simply admitting his commendable activities had to be forced out of him. Furthermore, examples of moral transgressors are arguably subject to falsification. Therefore, it might be necessary to look at less dramatic occurrences of moral choices (for further discussion of complementary methods of moral choice and perpetrator research see e. g. Gøtzsche-Astrup et al. 2020; Smeulers et al. 2019).

Future studies should attempt a more differentiated examination of the outcome variables — peaceful/violent versus normative/non-normative

collective action activities at the time, such as on the example of Georg Elser, the 'White Rose' (whose members Bonhoeffer was supposed to meet shortly before their arrest), or Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. However, personal accounts are limited (see Oliner/Oliner 1992 for exception). As already mentioned, it is desirable to deepen the transferrable knowledge of these results to other historical periods, including more current context. Many aspects remain unanswered, including how malleable we are by diverse moral influences over certain periods. Oskar Schindler, arguably the most famous 'righteous of the nations' saved hundreds of Jews. Yet, he was known as a confidence trickster and swindler ("Schwindler-Schindler") before becoming a factory owner and activist. For example, working for the German Abwehr secret service (like his 'colleague' Dietrich Bonhoeffer), he provided Polish army uniforms and other diversions for the staged attack on the Gleiwitz radio station as the pretext for the German invasion of Poland that started the Second World War. Also, Etty Hillesum began her diary as a confused, family-impaired young woman before entering into an intense psychotherapeutically-guided self-reflection process.

5 Conclusion

The current research suggests that people's behavior in political and moral uncertainty will remain unclear if the differential association between context and moral foundations is not explored. In our current times marked by polarized moral conviction and arbitrary choice, costly moral exemplar strategies have important lessons to teach for peaceful collective action. Our findings can aid conflict scholars and practitioners by highlighting the nuanced function of individual approaches in preventing morality shifting. We hope insights from this study will help guide the efforts of those striving to transform intergroup polarization and establish sustainable social change in places where it is genuinely needed. As Etty Hillesum wrote,

> *"I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me the only lesson to be learned from this war. That we must look into ourselves and nowhere else."* (Woodhouse 2009, 89)

Acknowledgments
We thank Alette Smeulers (Groningen) for her expertise and valuable support on perpetrator research throughout our study, particularly during the conceptual stages.

Declaration of Competing Interest
The authors report no declarations of interest.

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