



## Moral Conflict

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### What is it?

Moral conflict occurs in disputes when individuals or groups have differences in deeply held moral orders that do not permit direct translation or comparison to one another. Moral orders include the knowledge, beliefs, and values people use to make judgements about the experiences and perspectives of others. Moral orders form grammars of action, where meaning, assumptions, and ways of thinking construct worldviews that are reflected through behaviour and communication. Differing grammars are incommensurate and therefore preclude conflicting parties from being able to engage each other in a common frame of reference or from being able to consider each other's perspectives. This means that disputants often find themselves in forceful, bitter, and sometimes even violent patterns of communication.

### Who uses the concept?

Moral conflict is useful for researchers and practitioners. The concept aligns with Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory, so it is used in understanding patterns of communication and their potential transformation. Over time, the moral conflict project has evolved into a program called the Transcendent Communication project, which is used by those interested in understanding how to move beyond unresolvable conflict through collaboration and community dialogue.

### Fit with intercultural dialogue?

The concept of moral conflict does not give specific attention to the origins of moral orders and differences but these are embedded in cultural groups, understandings, and practices. Unlike

intercultural dialogue, disputants in moral conflict are often unaware - and unwilling to become aware - of conflicting moral assumptions. Similar to intercultural dialogue, transcending moral conflict requires participants to work together to find new and different ways of communicating.

### What work remains?

Research on moral conflict must pay increasing attention to the role that media and technology play in representing and intervening in cases. Work that still remains also includes analyzing how differences in power influence patterns of moral conflict; investigating how non-human actors, such as objects and places, gain moral meaning in conflict; and examining how conflicts are successful in achieving transcendent communication.

### Resources

- Freeman, S. A., Littlejohn, S. W., & Pearce, W. B. (1992). Communication and moral conflict. *Western Journal of Communication*, 56(4), 311-329.
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- Littlejohn, S. W., & Cole, K. L. (2013). Moral conflict and transcendent communication. In J. Oetzel & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of conflict communication* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 585-608). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pearce, W. B., & Littlejohn, S. W. (1997). *Moral conflict: When social worlds collide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.