

Moral or lawful? When legal constraints reverse the motivational benefits of moral considerations

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ABSTRACT

Nearly every employee is subject to some form of legal requirement as a function of their work. Laws are often implemented by authorities to ensure that employees and organizations engage in ethical and moral conduct at work. Importantly, acting in a moral manner is linked to benefits for employees, increasing intrinsic motivation which facilitates high levels of proactive behavior. Yet, employees increasingly face situations where laws or regulations conflict with what they perceive as morally appropriate (i.e. legal constraints on moral behavior), which we argue instead has negative consequences for employees. Combining insights from literature on motivation and moral foundations theory, we propose that when employees face legal constraints on moral behavior, they feel less intrinsically motivated, leading them to engage in less proactive behavior. We further predict that legal constraints are less damaging when employees perceive them as necessary, versus unnecessary evils. We test our model across three complementary studies: a field study of employees from a company in a heavily regulated industry and two pre-registered experiments.

There is an emerging consensus that moral concerns are important motivators for people at work (Bunderson & Thompson 2009, Gok et al. 2023, Reid & Ramarajan 2022). Employees who moralize their work (e.g. Kundro 2023) feel more intrinsically motivated in their jobs (Feng et al. 2018, Yidong & Xinxin 2013, van der Werff et al. 2013, van der Linden 2015, Brink 1997) and as a result, are more likely to go beyond the call of duty (Bunderson & Thompson 2009) and behave proactively in their organizations (Gok et al. 2023). Moralizing one's work can motivate employees to pursue careers despite diminishing financial rewards or recognition (Reid & Ramarajan 2022). Taken as a whole, the findings in past research consistently paint a picture of the motivational benefits of integrating moral concerns into one's work behaviors.

Notably, an implicit assumption of previous work is that employees' individual moral concerns exist in harmony with their legal environment.¹ That is, past research has generally focused on cases in which employees' moral concerns are supported by the laws they are subject to at work. For example, past research has examined cases in which regulations help zookeepers to care for animals, support doctors in their mission to nurture patient health, and enable education workers to support student learning (Bunderson & Thompson 2009, Lutzen et al. 2000, Campbell 2013).

¹ In this manuscript, we follow past work and use the terms regulations and legal requirements synonymously (Campbell 2007).

Yet, employees often find themselves in situations where they moralize their work in ways that conflict with legal requirements (Manning & Anteby 2015). Clinicians may view it as their moral obligation to provide abortion services for patients' health and wellbeing, yet may be constrained in states with restrictive abortion laws (Simmons-Duffin 2022). Alternatively, education workers may face legal requirements to report suspected abuse, even if they believe such reports are unethical and against the best interests of those involved (Holland et al. 2021). Whereas individuals often have different moral perspectives (Graham et al. 2009; Warren & Smith-Crowe 2008), regulations are applied consistently by a central authority (c.f. Buchanan & Barnett 2022). Thus, employees may hold strong moral convictions that diverge from what an authority imposes through legal regulations (Skitka & Houston 2002). However, we know very little about employees' experiences when their moral concerns conflict with the rules of their regulatory environment, which may create strong levels of internal conflict, disrupting the beneficial effects of moral concerns.

In the present research, we examine the motivational consequences when employees have moral concerns that conflict with the regulations of their work (legal constraints on moral behavior).² Drawing from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 2012) and moral foundations theory (Graham et al. 2013), we propose that holding moral concerns that conflict with legal constraints reduces employees' intrinsic motivation. Moral attitudes and beliefs are amongst the most central part of the self (Strohming & Nichols 2014, Goodwin 2015, Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin 2014) and thus any regulations that constrain employees from acting upon their moral attitudes presents a strong degree of conflict. We argue instead of benefitting from their moral concerns while at work, employees will feel less intrinsically motivated when legal requirements constrain these moral concerns. Importantly, prior work has documented that reduced intrinsic motivation has important behavioral consequences. We propose that when legal constraints reduce employees' intrinsic motivation, these employees will be less likely to engage in proactive, discretionary behaviors that help accomplish the organization's goals (Morrison & Phelps, 1999)—the

² For brevity, we refer to "legal constraints on moral behavior" as "legal constraints". We test and confirm in Study 2 if legal constraints on moral behavior are especially damaging relative to other forms of legal constraints.

same behaviors that past research suggests moralization promotes (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Gok et al., 2023).

In studying legal constraints on moral behavior, we also identify situations where the effects of legal constraints are mitigated. Specifically, we argue that employees may hold, or adopt, different orientations towards legal constraints. Since legal constraints reduce employees' intrinsic motivation because they threaten personal moral values, we argue that considering the legal constraint as a "necessary evil" leads employees to adopt the underlying moral value that motivates the law (Molinsky & Margolis 2005). Although employees may not fully embrace the logic behind the legal constraint, in these cases, we suggest employees come to see the legal constraint as an imperfect solution to a difficult problem. Thus, when employees adopt a necessary evils (vs unnecessary evils) orientation, we argue they experience greater intrinsic motivation which facilitates proactive behavior.

By examining the motivational consequences of legal constraints, our findings contribute to literature on organizational ethics and work moralization in several important ways. First, whereas past research has emphasized the motivational benefits of moral concerns at work (Bunderson & Thompson 2009, Feng et al. 2018, Gok et al. 2022), the present research establishes when moral concerns can also demotivate employees. Critically, previous studies of the motivational benefits of morality at work rely on the condition that employees' personal moral concerns align with their legal obligations. Yet, regulations may prevent employees from taking actions they perceive as morally imperative (e.g., terminating a dangerous pregnancy) or demand they act in ways they perceive as morally problematic (e.g., reporting an undocumented immigrant). The present research reveals that, in both cases, legal constraints on moral behavior can reduce employees' intrinsic motivation at work and does so beyond the specific moralized task where the moral-legal conflict occurs. Thus, our findings complement growing research on the motivating benefits of moral concerns by uncovering an unstated assumption of past research—that the regulatory environment aligns with employees' individual moral concerns—and demonstrating that when this assumption is broken, the effects supported by past research are reversed. In doing so, we also make

an empirical contribution by developing and validating a scale of legal constraints on moral behavior to capture employees' perceptions that regulations constrain their moral motivations.

Second, we go beyond identifying the negative experiences employees feel when regulations constrain their moral concerns to uncover how they may shield themselves from the consequences of these experiences. Specifically, we find that employees mitigate the deleterious consequences of legal constraints when they take steps to consider the law as a necessary evil (Molinsky & Margolis 2005, Margolis & Molinsky 2008). In doing so, we expand the conceptualization of necessary evils as not merely a given action, but also an orientation employees can adopt to navigate morally challenging experiences at work. Thus, our research moves away from a situational view of necessary evils as event-specific, towards a perceptual view, whereby individuals can construe an action as a necessary evil, thereby shaping their experience of that action.

Third, we advance a conceptualization of morality and the law to suggest the two entities can, and often do, conflict. In some cases, empirical work has collapsed immorality and illegality, focusing on behaviors that are both illegal and generally agreed upon as unethical, such as accounting fraud (Desai & Kouchaki 2017). In other cases, research has alluded to the differences between legality and morality (Jones 1991) but has not investigated how the relationship between both constructs might affect employees. In the present research we address this gap, examining how employees experience conflict between their personal morality and the legal regulations of their work, finding that legal guidelines can also cause individuals to struggle to uphold their perceived personal moral obligations. This has important implications for how researchers conceptualize, test, and discuss (un)ethical behavior in organizations.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Research suggests that moralizing work, the extent to which an employee integrates moral considerations into their work tasks (Kundro 2023), increases employee intrinsic motivation—the desire to expend effort based on interest and enjoyment of the work being performed (Amabile 1993, Fishbach & Woolley 2022). A sense of moral obligation can keep employees motivated despite dwindling financial compensation, such as the poorly compensated journalist who continues working because they view

journalism as “an honorable, even a noble pursuit” (Reid & Ramarajan 2022, p. 1922). Even in less clearly moralized professions, corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices increase employee motivation, in part because CSR enables employees to imbue their work with moral meaning (Bauman & Skitka 2012; Glavas & Kelley 2014). Further, leaders who communicate and embody moral behavior at work make their employees feel more intrinsically motivated (Yidong & Xinxin 2013). Related research suggests that individuals may feel motivated by moral concerns because upholding moral values is particularly satisfying (Goodwin & Darley 2012). Indeed, acting upon moral values is so deeply motivating that scholars have described it as feeling “compelled” (Skitka & Mullen 2002). As Feng et al. (2018) summarize (p. 649); “when employees understand their work’s ethical value... they will be proud of themselves (Tymon et al. 2010), feel more self-accomplishment, and be intrinsically motivated (Gagné al. 1997; Johns et al. 1992; Richards 1995; Shamir et al. 1993; Thomas 2000).”

Research has documented that these motivational benefits of moralization promote proactive behaviors which benefit the individual employee’s career as well as the broader organization (Bunderson & Thompson 2009; Gok et al. 2022; Dobrow, Weisman, Heller, & Tosi-Kharas 2023). In their seminal work, Bunderson & Thompson (2009) found that employees who experienced moral duty were likely to engage in proactive behaviors at work, going above and beyond to help the organization accomplish its goals (see also Dik and Duffy 2009; Dobrow et al. 2023). More recent research has found that employees who experienced moral potency (“the sense of ownership over the moral aspects of one's environment”; Hannah & Avolio 2010, p. 291) were more likely to engage in proactive behaviors that help accomplish the organization’s ethical mission (Gok et al. 2023). Thus, current research suggests that the benefits of ethical considerations extend beyond employees’ experiences of intrinsic motivation to bolster positive workplace behaviors with important consequences for the employee and their organization. Against this backdrop, we investigate how legal constraints may influence intrinsic motivation.

Conceptualizing Legal Constraints on Moral Considerations

First, to conceptualize legal constraints, we draw on moral foundations theory (MFT). MFT is a broad theoretical perspective that aims to explain and understand variations in moral perception and

reasoning (Graham et al. 2011). As of the most recent update to the theory in 2023³, MFT posits six moral foundations – care, equality, proportionality, loyalty, authority, and purity (Atari et al. 2023). These foundations are thought to pluralistically explain human moral judgments (Graham et al. 2011).

Further, MFT notes that laws are generally developed and enforced by authoritative bodies (Graham et al., 2009). Importantly, scholars have conceptualized the law as a reflection of what a larger authority believes is morally important, noting that “legal principles are often based on moral principles (Jones 1991, p. 374).” In many cases, individuals in society generally agree on what is (im)moral and thus should be (il)legal (i.e. fraud, murder). In fact, this is the basis for the definition of unethical behavior by many organizational ethics scholars (i.e. behaviors “that violate widely accepted moral norms in society”; Moore et al., 2012, p. 2). However, MFT also acknowledges not all individuals endorse the same moral foundations (Graham et al. 2013). As summarized by Skitka, Bauman, and Lytle, “there are likely to be gaps between what any two individuals perceive to be moral” (2009: 568). This potential for disagreement about morality means that individuals may disagree with the underlying morality of specific laws. As Silver and Silver (2017; p. 266) write, “juries or legal officials belonging to social groups or subcultures that endorse different sets of moral foundations—for example, residents of rural areas versus urban areas—may share different moral foundations (see Haidt & Graham, 2007).”

These instances of misalignment between what is legally required and what an individual views as moral also hold relevance to employees in organizations. Employees may face situations where the law demands they engage in actions they perceive as unethical or forbids them from acting in ways they see as ethically imperative based on different moral foundations. For example, clinicians who believe it is morally obligatory to provide abortion services may be legally prevented from providing them (care foundation); employees who morally disagree with gay rights may be legally required to issue a marriage license for a gay couple (purity foundation); employees who view it as immoral to report coworkers who are illegal immigrants may be legally required to do so (loyalty foundation); employees may be legally

³ This update split the fairness foundation into two foundations: proportionality and equality.

required to show deference to leaders they morally disagree with (authority), and employees may be required to hire individuals they view as undeserving (i.e. equality and proportionality, formerly fairness; Atari et al., 2023)

Across these examples, individuals must act in ways they perceive is morally problematic to fulfill the legal obligations of their job, which we conceptualize as *legal constraints on moral behavior* (henceforth “*legal constraints*”). When faced with legal constraints, individuals are forced to make a choice between violating the law or violating a moral domain they see as imperative. Importantly, given the zero-sum nature of these constraints, there are rarely integrative solutions available (unlike other cases, see Zhang et al. 2018). Thus, although past empirical work has significantly advanced our understanding of the many cases when ethical concerns and the law align, it has precluded our understanding of the increasingly prevalent cases in which employees’ ethics and the law conflict.

The Effects of Legal Constraints on Intrinsic Motivation

To understand how legal constraints affect employees’ motivation, we draw on self-determination theory. Self-determination theory suggests that people have basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci 2000). When individuals can fulfill these needs through their work, they feel intrinsically motivated, where they “pursue an activity as its own end” (Fishbach & Wolley 2022, p. 340). Intrinsic motivation involves inclinations towards mastery, exploration, and engagement. As a result, scholars have argued that “no single phenomenon reflects the positive potential of human nature so much as intrinsic motivation” (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 70). However, intrinsic motivation is also sensitive to changes in the surrounding environment and can be “fairly readily disrupted by various non supportive conditions” (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 70).

We argue that experiencing legal constraints reduces intrinsic motivation. Specifically, we contend this is because legal constraints on moral behavior are especially conflicting. Research has suggested that moral considerations are essential and powerful (Tomasello et al., 2012), possessing qualities that differentiate them from standard attitudes (Skitka et al. 2005; Tetlock et al. 2000). Primarily, this is because morality represents “a fundamental part of what it means to be human, and therefore, as

highly fundamental to one's sense of identity and self-worth" (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin. 2014).

Researchers have empirically corroborated the suggestion that moral traits are an integral, even preeminent, part of one's identity and sense of self (Strohming & Nichols, 2014). As a result, scholars have argued that moral preferences have a stronger influence on behavior than do non-moral preferences (Kwon et al., 2023). This means that, regardless of the source or type, moral convictions are strongly ingrained, leaving little room for negotiation or compromise, which makes them especially conflicting (Ditto & Koleva 2011; Feinberg & Willer 2013, 2015).

In this sense, regardless of how an employee responds to legal constraints, we argue that either approach will make their work less intrinsically enjoyable. On the one hand, individuals could sacrifice their morals to uphold the law. However, in doing so, employees will perceive they are acting immorally to complete their work tasks. People feel compelled to act upon their moral values (Skitka 2010; Skitka et al., 2005), and having to act in ways that violate moral values makes people feel dehumanized (Kouchaki et al. 2018). Since individuals may believe they must sacrifice an important part of their personal identity to complete their work (Goodwin et al. 2014), we suggest they will experience reduced intrinsic motivation.

On the other hand, individuals may break the law to uphold their morals. However, this also presents undesirable consequences, as employees may face punishment and scrutiny from their organization or outside bodies, which is linked with decreased intrinsic motivation (Weinberg 1978). While incentives may generally crowd out intrinsic motivation (Cameron & Pierce 1994), disincentives, such as punishment, are especially harmful (Deci & Cascio 1972). This is primarily because individuals may fear that completing their work as they see fit will result in negative repercussions. For example, research has found that behaviors that are otherwise intrinsically motivating instead lead to anxiety in punitive environments (Cangiano et al. 2019).⁴ Moreover, even though they ultimately choose not to,

⁴ We compare both options – violating the law but upholding morals, versus violating morals but upholding the law – in an online supplement to empirically test our contention that either choice will have a negative effect on intrinsic motivation. Indeed, we find that both are equally damaging relative to acting in a way that is legal and upholds morals.

individuals in these situations are still likely to consider violating their moral values when considering the constraint, which in and of itself can be distressing given the integral nature of morality (Vonasch et al. 2018).

In summary, although the specific processes may differ depending on an individual's behavior, we argue that legal constraints will reduce intrinsic motivation. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Legal constraints on moral behavior reduce intrinsic motivation.

Prior work has suggested that moral concerns will increase proactive behavior via intrinsic motivation. However, here, we propose that through decreasing intrinsic motivation, legal constraints on moral behavior will instead reduce employee proactivity. When individuals experience lower intrinsic motivation, they become detached from their work, taking a passive orientation towards work activities. In these cases, we suggest employees will be less inclined to expend additional effort to improve their job and the work it entails. Proactivity requires a high level of energy and effort and thus is generally reserved for tasks that employees find especially exciting and desirable (Morrison & Phelps 1999). Since employees with lower intrinsic motivation find their work less enjoyable and fulfilling, we argue they are less likely to expend effort to take charge, as their attention may be focused on other domains where they do have intrinsic interest (Cangiano & Parker 2016). Supporting this logic, prior scholarship has suggested that lower levels of intrinsic motivation are related to lower levels of proactive behaviors (Parker et al. 2010; Unsworth & Parker 2003). Moreover, related work has found employees who enjoy an activity less are less likely to dedicate themselves and put effort towards it (Lawler & Hall 1970). Thus, when employees have lower intrinsic motivation, they are less likely to be proactive.

Hypothesis 2: There is a negative indirect effect of legal constraints on proactivity via intrinsic motivation.

The Attenuating Role of Necessary Evils

Although we argue legal constraints will have deleterious effects, some evidence suggests that individuals do not always suffer under such constraints. For example, lawyers often report certain legal constraints – such as their legal duty to defend clearly guilty and egregious criminals – as important and

necessary to ensure fairness (Babcock 1983). This aligns with research that has hinted that individuals can find different ways to approach difficult moral situations (Zhang et al. 2018). Relatedly, research on self-determination theory suggests that intrinsic motivation is affected by the orientation individuals bring to their work, not just the work itself (Deci et al. 1981). Thus, the way in which individuals orient themselves to legal constraints should influence their motivational reactions.

We focus on (un)necessary evils as theoretically relevant orientations which are also accessible in practice (for a summary of examples from a pilot study, see our online supplement). A necessary evil is an action that is perceived to cause harm for a greater good or purpose (Molinsky & Margolis 2005).⁵ This contrasts with unnecessary evils, which are actions that are perceived to cause harm for reasons that *do not* advance a greater good or serve a purpose (Molinsky & Margolis 2005). Scholars have traditionally conceptualized certain actions or behaviors as necessary evils. For example, doctors may subject patients to pain during a procedure in service of healing, addiction counselors give “tough love” to substance abusers, and managers lay off poor performers to preserve work standards (Molinsky & Margolis 2005; Margolis & Molinsky 2008). In our conceptualization, we deviate from previous studies wherein different actions were inherently necessary or unnecessary. Instead, we put forth a perceptual conceptualization and suggest that individuals can vary in the degree to which they see the *same legal requirement* as a necessary evil or not. In line with this, we posit that the same legal constraint can be seen as necessary or unnecessary, which we contend has implications for intrinsic motivation and thus proactivity.

We argue that when legal constraints are conceptualized as necessary evils, the negative effect on intrinsic motivation is reduced. While individuals are unlikely to abandon their prior moral beliefs (Haidt, 2001), we argue that a necessary evils orientation leads employees to adopt, at least partially, the moral foundation underlying the law. For example, education workers who see reporting an undocumented immigrant as an issue of harm may additionally endorse the issues of fairness that led to the origination of

⁵ A necessary evil is related to, but different, from moral disengagement. Moral disengagement involves removing morality from a situation (i.e. failing to act in ways that are aligned with normative societal values). Instead, as we argue and empirically test below, those who hold a necessary evils orientation consider and adopt different moral foundations.

the law (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Thus, a necessary evils orientation may reduce the damaging effects of legal constraints, as employees come to see moral value in the underlying rationale of the law, which mitigates the negative effects on intrinsic motivation. While employees may not fully endorse the moral foundation underlying the law, we argue they come to perceive the law as an imperfect but functional solution to a difficult problem (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004). In turn, since intrinsic motivation is not harmed to the same degree, we argue that the effects on proactivity are also muted.

However, when legal constraints are conceptualized as unnecessary evils, we argue the negative effects of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation are amplified. In these cases, employees remain downcast by the requirement to violate their ethical convictions to adhere to laws. For example, outdoor enthusiasts who view recreation laws as unnecessary report less enjoyment from their recreational experiences (Larson et al. 2018). Thus, when employees see legal constraints as unnecessary, we argue the negative effects on intrinsic motivation and proactivity remain. In these cases, individuals continue to face a trade-off and tension because they do not see moral value in following the law.

Hypothesis 3: *The negative indirect effect of legal constraints on proactivity via intrinsic motivation is attenuated when individuals conceptualize the legal constraints as necessary (versus unnecessary) evils.*

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We tested our theoretical model across three core studies. In Study 1, we conducted a field survey of employees and their supervisors at an organization with a high degree of legal regulations. By testing our model in the field and collecting supervisor ratings of proactivity, we provide evidence of our effects in organizational settings. Moreover, in our field study, we ruled out five alternative forms of motivation as potential alternative mechanisms. In Study 2, we replicated our model in a pre-registered online experiment. Importantly, we show the effects of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation and proactivity are stronger when the law has implications in a moral domain (versus an alternative business domain). This suggests that legal constraints on moral behavior have stronger effects on intrinsic motivation and proactivity. In Study 3, we test whether framing legal constraints on moral behavior as a necessary, versus unnecessary evil, attenuates these effects using a pre-registered, immersive experimental design with a

behavioral measure of proactivity. In an online supplement, we constructively replicate the findings from Study 3 in two different studies with complementary paradigms (a politically liberal issue in Study S4, and a politically conservative issue in Study S5). Across our experimental studies, we test different types of legal constraints, including those where the legal constraints require employees *engage* in a behavior they see as ethically problematic (Study 3), or whether they require employees to *not engage* in a behavior they see as ethically imperative (Study 2). Our online supplement includes additional empirical tests, as well as data and syntax for Studies 2 and 3: <https://tinyurl.com/MLtradeoff>

STUDY 1 METHOD

The Setting: Employees in a Heavily Regulated Industry

In Study 1, we sought to test our hypotheses in an organizational context where employees frequently experience legal constraints on moral behavior: a wastewater treatment plant. Workers in this context have varying moral considerations given the impact their work has on the environment and their local region's drinking water. Additionally, their work is regulated by local, state, and federal laws, and thus provides an ideal context to test the effects of legal constraints on moral considerations. We conducted interviews with leaders of the sanitation plant to discuss what these constraints entailed across levels and jobs within the organization.

This study uses data from a larger field data collection effort (Kundro, 2023). In this data collection effort, we invited 862 employees to participate in a research study in 2019. Of those invited, 622 employees provided complete ratings of their experiences of legal constraints and motivation. Six weeks later, we asked supervisors to rate their employees' proactivity behavior. Because plant leaders requested we reduce the burden on managers, we randomly selected up to two direct reports for supervisors to rate. Our final sample was comprised of 259 employee/supervisor pairings. 60% of employees identified as men and 70% were White. Employees had an average age of 42.17 years ($SD = 11.99$) and an average tenure of 12.40 years ($SD = 10.40$).

Measures

The response scale for all measures was 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Legal constraints on moral behavior. We developed and validated a four-item measure of legal constraints on moral behavior ($\alpha = .94$) as there was no existing measure of this novel construct. The four items, with the stem “At work,” are: “My ethics often clash with what I am legally supposed to do; I frequently have conflict between the law and my personal morals; What I am legally supposed to do and what I should morally do are often inconsistent; I often find myself having to decide between what is morally right and what is legal.” We explain the scale development process in our online appendix.

Employee Intrinsic Motivation. We used four items from Grant (2008) to measure intrinsic motivation. Participants responded to the prompt “Why are you motivated to do your work?” and a sample item was “Because I enjoy the work itself.” ($\alpha = .92$).

Supervisor-Rated Proactivity. We focus on taking charge as a key proactive behavior of scholarly interest, defined as “voluntary and constructive efforts, by individual employees, to effect organizationally functional change with respect to how work is executed within the context of their jobs, work units, or organizations” (Morrison & Phelps 1999, p. 403). We focus on taking charge, relative to other conceptualizations of proactive behavior, because as Fuller et al. (2012) note, taking charge is a “general form of proactive behavior rather than context specific (Crant 2000), making it applicable to many situations in the workplace” (p. 884). We used three items from Morrison & Phelps (1999) to measure proactive taking charge behavior, as rated by supervisors. A sample item was “[Employee] often tries to bring about improved procedures for the work unit or department” ($\alpha = .94$).

Alternative forms of motivation. We sought to rule out alternative forms of motivation that could mediate the relationship between legal constraints on proactivity. As a result, we included measures of motivation alluded to in the self-determination theory literature, including extrinsic motivation (Ryan and Connell 1989: 4 items, sample item = “I am motivated to do my work because I need to earn money,” $\alpha = .93$), introjected motivation (Moran et al. 2012: 3 items, sample item = “I am motivated to do my work because I would feel guilty if I did not do well,” $\alpha = .91$), integrated motivation (Moran et al. 2012: 3 items; sample item “I am motivated to do my work because my work is a big part of who I am,” $\alpha = .88$), identified motivation (Moran et al. 2012: 3 items; sample item “I am motivated to do my work because I

believe my work is valuable,” $\alpha = .94$), and prosocial motivation (Grant 2008; 4 items, sample item = “I am motivated to do my work because I want to have a positive impact on others,” $\alpha = .94$).

Results

For hypothesis testing, we performed path analysis using the *lavaan* package in *R* (Rosseel 2012). Given some employees were nested within a supervisory unit with another employee, we used robust standard errors to account for potential nonindependence (Bliese 2000). To calculate bootstrapped indirect effects while using robust standard errors, we used the *bootstrapLavaan()* command based on guidance from Schoemann & Jorgenson (2021). Our results are consistent without robust standard errors.

To provide evidence of construct validity and distinctness of the survey measures in Study 1, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the survey items with *lavaan* (Rosseel 2012). The hypothesized eight-factor structure showed good fit ($\chi^2[322] = 570.39, p < .001$; comparative fit index (CFI) = .964; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .055; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .041). This eight-factor structure fit better than a three-factor model where all forms of motivation were loaded together ($p < .001$) and a four-factor model where intrinsic motivation, identified motivation, prosocial motivation, and integrated motivation (i.e. autonomous self-regulation motivations) were loaded together on one factor, and introjected and extrinsic motivation (i.e. controlled self-regulation motivations) were loaded together on another factor ($p < .001$). For full CFA results, see our OSF.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and correlations. We specified a just-identified model with legal constraints as the predictor, intrinsic motivation as the mediator, and proactivity as the dependent variable. As predicted, employees who experienced greater legal constraints felt less intrinsically motivated ($b = -.24, se = .08, p = .001$). In addition, employees’ self-rated intrinsic motivation was positively associated with their supervisor’s ratings of their proactivity behavior ($b = .24, se = .06, p < .001$). Results of 1000 bootstrapped samples revealed there was a significant negative indirect effect of legal constraints on proactivity via intrinsic motivation (*indirect effect* = -.058, 95% CI [-.11, -.02]). Thus, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were supported.

Supplementary Analyses. Next, we examined whether intrinsic motivation uniquely accounted for the relationship between employees' experiences of legal constraints and their proactivity behavior. We created a structural equation model where all forms of motivation were modeled as simultaneous mediators. As can be seen in Figure 1, the indirect effect via intrinsic motivation remained significant (*indirect effect via intrinsic motivation* = -.067, 95% CI [-.13, -.02]), but the indirect effect via other forms of motivation were not significant (*indirect effect via identified motivation* = -.012, 95% CI [-.07, .03]; *indirect effect via integrated motivation* = -.000, 95% CI [-.02, .02]; *indirect effect via introjected motivation* = -.000, 95% CI [-.01, .01]; *indirect effect via prosocial motivation* = .010, 95% CI [-.01, .05]; *indirect effect via extrinsic motivation* = .000, 95% CI [-.02, .02]).

Robustness Checks. We conducted a series of robustness checks to rule out alternative explanations. Since autonomy may covary with legal constraints and intrinsic motivation, as well as limit one's ability to act proactively, we included a three-item measure of autonomy as a control (sample item = "My job allows me to make my own decisions about how to schedule my work.", $\alpha = .94$; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). When controlling for autonomy, the indirect effect of legal constraints on proactivity remained significant, although it was weakened (*indirect effect* = -.029, 95% CI [-.063, -.003]). We also conducted our model controlling for demographic variables (i.e., age, tenure, gender, minority status), finding that our indirect effect again remained significant (*indirect effect* = -.057, 95% CI [-.11, -.02]). Finally, we tested a model where we included autonomy and demographics as controls, while also modeling all forms of motivation as simultaneous mediators. Once again, we found that our indirect effect remained significant through intrinsic motivation (*indirect effect* = -.04, 95% CI [-.087, -.001]), but not through any other form of motivation. See our OSF for full results.

Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 found evidence that legal constraints on moral behavior have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation, which decreases proactivity. Moreover, by testing alternative forms of motivation, we show that these effects are unique to intrinsic motivation rather than any other form of motivation. One significant benefit of this study is that we were able to test our effects in a field context that is

heavily influenced by legal regulations. And, by ruling out alternative mechanisms, we were able to isolate intrinsic motivation as a key mechanism of our main effect. However, as with any field survey, our field study was limited in its ability to provide causal evidence of the consequences of legal constraints. Thus, we next conducted a series of experiments to constructively replicate our effects and rule out alternative explanations. In doing so, we provide stronger evidence of causality than can be obtained from time lagged survey data alone (Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008).

STUDY 2 METHOD

In Study 2, we sought to replicate our effects from Study 1 and demonstrate the especially conflicting effects of legal-*moral* constraints on intrinsic motivation, relative to other forms of legal constraints. Specifically, we manipulated whether participants experienced legal-*moral* constraints or -legal-*business* constraints. Our contention is that legal-*moral* constraints, versus other forms of legal constraints, are especially damaging and result in decreased intrinsic motivation and proactivity.

Thus, Study 2 employed a 2 (legal: constraints vs no constraints) x 2 (topic: moral vs business) between-subjects design to test Hypothesis 1 and 2. We recruited 400 working adults from Prolific. In our final sample of 388, participants had an average age of 41.56 (SD = 12.85), were 52% male and were 78% White. We pre-registered this study: https://aspredicted.org/RH8_32B.

In this survey, we recruited participants for whom climate change was an important issue with a built-in screener offered by Prolific (i.e. those who said they were “very concerned” about environmental issues). We randomly assigned them to one of four experimental conditions. In each condition, we asked participants to imagine they worked at the company we described.

Manipulations.

Topic: Moral vs Business. In the scenario, we manipulated the specific nature of the work. In the moral condition, participants were informed that they worked at a company that develops environmental solutions, and, through their work, they made a discovery that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions at their company by 50%. Prior research has investigated morality using manipulations about the environment with success (Feinberg & Willer 2013). To provide a balanced control, we created the

business condition. In the business condition, participants were informed that they worked at a firm that develops investment solutions and, through their work, they made a discovery that would reduce investment risk by 50%.

To pre-test our suggestion that moral versus business considerations are more central to one's identity, we created 10 phrases for reducing climate change (i.e. "combating global warming") and 10 phrases for reducing investment risk (i.e. "reducing investment vulnerability") using Chat GPT 3.5. We then recruited participants from Prolific, using the same screener as this study, to rate how much each activity reflected their identity from (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*). We recruited 120 participants assuming that some would fail an attention check, but none did, so we retained the entire sample. As expected, a paired t-test revealed that an average of the moral items ($M = 3.75$, $SD = .87$) were rated higher than an average of the business items ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.12$; $t(119) = 7.53$, $p < .001$, $d = .69$).

Constraint: Legal vs No Legal. We manipulated the presence of legal constraints by informing participants that, due to intellectual property laws, their work did, or did not, "legally prohibit" them from sharing the solutions and products they created in their work. In the legal constraints condition, we informed participants they *could not* share any discoveries they made in their work because of intellectual copyright laws. In the no legal constraints condition, we informed participants they *could* share any discoveries they made in their work because there were not any intellectual copyright laws.

Measures

The response scale for all measures was 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Intrinsic Motivation. We used the same four item scale from Study 1 ($\alpha = .95$). Participants answered questions as they pertained to the job in the scenario.

Proactivity. We used the same three item scale from Study 1 ($\alpha = .95$). Participants answered questions as they pertained to the job in the scenario.

Results

Attention checks. As pre-registered, we removed 2 participants who failed an attention check and 10 participants who wrote a nonsense open-ended response, for a final sample of 388.

Manipulation checks. We asked participants to indicate the extent to which they faced legal constraints with three items (“In this work ... I faced legal restrictions; I had legal constraints; laws limited by behavior”), and participants in the legal constraints condition ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.42$) were more likely to agree than participants in the no legal constraints condition ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.61$; $F[1,385] = 292.33$, $p < .001$, $n^2_p = .43$). Moreover, we asked participants to indicate if they saw the issue as a moral one. Participants in the moral condition ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.13$) were more likely to agree than participants in business condition ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.43$; $F[1,385] = 24.95$, $p < .001$, $n^2_p = .06$). Finally, we asked participants to indicate if they saw the issue as a business one. Those in the business condition ($M = 6.37$, $SD = .86$) were slightly more likely to agree than participants in the moral condition ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.03$; $F[1,385] = 7.62$, $p = .006$, $n^2_p = .019$), although it is important to note that this effect size was less than one-third of the size of the manipulation check for morality.

Hypothesis testing. Hypothesis 1 predicts that legal-*moral* constraints would lead to decreased intrinsic motivation. Thus, we expected there would be an interaction between legal constraints and the topic condition, such that the relationship between legal constraints and intrinsic motivation would be more negative in the moral versus business condition. Thus, we created an interaction term between the legal constraints condition and topic condition, which revealed a significant interaction on intrinsic motivation ($b = -.94$, $se = .26$, $p < .001$). Specifically, the effect of legal constraints vs no legal constraints on intrinsic motivation was more negative for participants in the moral condition ($b = -1.64$, $se = .18$, $p < .001$) vs. the business condition ($b = -.70$, $se = .19$, $p < .001$). An examination of effect sizes for the simple effects reveals that the effect of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation in the moral condition ($n^2_p = .17$) versus the business condition ($n^2_p = .035$) was 4.86 times larger. Thus, we found support for Hypothesis 1.

As a non-pre-registered exploratory analysis, we investigated if moral considerations were *more* motivating in the absence of legal constraints and *less* motivating in the presence of them. This would support prior theoretical suggestions that moral considerations are motivating. As can be seen in Figure 2, we observed a cross-over interaction, such that when there were no legal constraints, the moral condition

($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.04$) was *more* motivating than the business condition ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.19$; $b = .40$, $se = .19$, $p = .03$). However, when there were legal constraints, the moral condition ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.54$) was *less* motivating than the business condition ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.34$; $b = -.54$, $se = .18$, $p < .01$).

Finally, we examined Hypothesis 2. To do so, we tested the indirect effects of legal constraints on proactivity via intrinsic motivation, conditional on whether participants were in the moral versus business condition. Results revealed that there was a greater negative indirect effect of legal constraints on proactivity via intrinsic motivation for participants in the moral condition (*indirect effect* = $-.79$, 95% CI $[-1.09, -.54]$) versus in the business condition (*indirect effect* = $-.34$, 95% CI $[-.55, -.16]$) with a significant difference between these effects (*difference* = $-.46$, 95% CI $[-.76, -.20]$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 constructively replicated the results from Study 1 in a controlled experiment. Results indicated that legal constraints hampered intrinsic motivation and thus decreased proactivity. Importantly, results indicated that these effects are especially strong for moral issues, as we show that the motivating effect of moral considerations became demotivating under the presence of legal constraints. This supports our theorizing that legal-moral constraints are a particularly harmful form of legal constraints in terms of their effects on intrinsic motivation and proactivity.

STUDY 3 METHOD

In Study 3, we sought to replicate our effects from Studies 1 and 2. Moreover, we sought to test the effects of two different orientations: necessary evils and unnecessary evils. Specifically, we argue that the negative effects of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation and thus proactivity are muted when the legal constraints are viewed as necessary evils compared to when they are viewed as unnecessary evils. To test our predictions, we used a similar background story as Kundro & Nurmohamed (2021) to develop an immersive experimental design. The advantage of this background story is that it utilizes the crowdsourcing platform as the organizational context of the study, increasing realism and participant engagement. These immersive experimental designs are also desirable because they more closely

resemble organizational life (Staw 2016). As a result, we could test a behavioral measure of proactivity and assess participants' intrinsic motivation with a real task they engaged in.

We used a three condition (legal constraints with a necessary evils orientation vs. legal constraints with an unnecessary evils orientation vs. no legal constraints) between-subjects design to test Hypotheses 1-3. To this end, we recruited 303 adults from Connect (as survey platform similar to MTurk that launched in 2022). In our final sample of 288, participants had an average age of 41.57 ($SD = 13.78$), were 49% male and were 73% white. We pre-registered this study here: https://aspredicted.org/TL5_RMY.

We informed participants that we, as researchers, wanted to test a crowdsourced evaluation system for submitted participant responses on Connect. We were particularly interested in participants who entered an incorrect survey completion code. Current participants were presented with our manipulations and then read a response from a prior participant who ostensibly made an error when submitting their survey code. The message said *"I completed the entire survey, but forgot to enter the correct completion code. I believe it was something like UXWB87D but I may have entered a letter wrong. I am very sorry about this! I hope you can accept my survey response and I can get paid."* The implication was that the prior participant was not able to access the survey and thus could not provide an accurate completion code. We chose this background story because background research on forums suggested that participants feel that getting paid for completed responses is morally important.⁶ Participants were informed their key task was to write a response message to the participant detailing their decision and rationale.

Manipulations

Legal constraints: Unnecessary evils. In the unnecessary evils condition, participants were asked to write a response to the participant under the pretense that, due to legal guidelines from the university, any incorrect survey codes could not be accepted, regardless of the reason.

⁶ See our online appendix for a sample forum post about this issue.

Before this, to manipulate unnecessary evils, we first asked participants to write a few sentences on why this legal regulation may be “unnecessary.” Participants were asked to take this perspective as they wrote their message to the participant and completed the survey. A summary of reasons given by participants can be found in Table 2.

Legal constraints: Necessary evils. Like in the unnecessary evils condition, participants were informed of the legal regulations and received the same information.

In addition, to manipulate necessary evils, we asked participants to write a few sentences on why this legal regulation may be “necessary.” Participants were asked to take this perspective as they wrote their message to the participant and completed the survey. See Table 2 for a summary of responses.

No legal constraints. In the no legal constraints condition, participants were informed that there were no legal regulations in place for how to handle these cases. To maintain a balance of effort across conditions, participants wrote about why there may not be a law in place.

Measures

The response scale for all measures was 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Intrinsic Motivation. We used the same four item scale from Study 1 and 2 ($\alpha = .96$). The stem was adapted to refer to the task (i.e. writing the message) that participants had just completed.

Proactivity. To measure proactivity behaviorally, we created an opportunity for taking charge by giving participants the opportunity to provide input and develop improvements for our survey design. This fits clearly with the definition of taking charge (our proactivity measure in Study 1 and 2) because it is a voluntary, constructive effort by participants to facilitate how their work is executed within the context of their specific job and task (Morrison & Phelps 1999). Participants were given the option to provide the researchers input on their survey. If participants opted to provide a suggestion, they were provided a small space to do so; those who declined to provide feedback were not brought to this page. Participants who elected to share ideas that improved our survey design were coded as a “1” and

participants who did not elect were coded as a “0.”⁷ An example of taking charge provided by a participant was: “Try to combine questions on one page to minimize the total number of pages as much as possible without interfering with your research.”

Results

Since we had three conditions and an a priori plan for analyses (as pre-registered), we used indicator coding to conduct our analyses (Hayes & Preacher 2014; Hayes & Montoya 2017). Because mediation analyses require the use of regression (Hayes & Preacher 2014), our analyses use regression and indicator coding to maintain consistency across analyses. However, our results are also consistent if we use ANOVA with a Tukey post hoc test. To test indirect effects on proactivity, a binary variable, we used PROCESS for R, which by default uses logistic regression in the second stage (i.e. testing intrinsic motivation on proactivity).

Attention checks. As pre-registered, we removed 4 participants who did not answer a Likert scale question correctly (i.e. answer “strongly agree” when prompted) and 11 additional participants who provided a non-sense or blank response to the manipulation, resulting in a final sample of 288.

Manipulation checks. We asked participants to indicate the extent to which they faced legal constraints on moral behavior using the same scale as Study 1, and results revealed that both the necessary evils ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.78$; $b = 1.47$, $se = .24$, $p < .001$) and the unnecessary evils condition ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.56$; $b = 2.10$, $se = .24$, $p < .001$) had more agreement with the items than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.59$). Moreover, we used three items (“necessary,” “important”, and “valuable”) to assess how necessary participants viewed the constraints during the survey, and results revealed those in the necessary evils condition ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.34$) agreed more than those in the unnecessary evils condition ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.94$; $b = 2.88$, $se = .25$, $p < .001$).

⁷ Five participants clicked the “provide feedback” box but did not provide actual survey feedback (i.e. some wrote non-sense responses). Since our pre-registration stated we would only measure proactivity as “offer[ing] idea to improve survey”, these participants were coded as a 0 for proactive behavior. However, when coding these participants as a 1 for proactive behavior, the effect of intrinsic motivation on proactivity is still significant when testing the indirect effects in Hypothesis 2 ($b = .26$, $se = .12$, $p = .022$) and Hypothesis 3 ($b = .24$, $se = .12$, $p = .036$).

Hypothesis testing. Hypothesis 1 suggested that legal constraints would lead to decreased intrinsic motivation. To test this, as pre-registered, we collapsed both legal constraints conditions. Results indicated that legal constraints ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.65$) lowered intrinsic motivation relative to no legal constraints ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.50$; $b = -1.83$, $se = .20$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Supporting Hypothesis 2, results indicated there was a significant indirect effect on proactivity via intrinsic motivation (*indirect effect* = $-.63$, 95% CI $[-1.25, -.14]$).

Next, we tested whether these negative effects were attenuated for participants in the necessary evils, versus unnecessary evils, condition (Hypothesis 3). Using indicator coding, we found a positive indirect effect comparing the necessary evils versus the unnecessary evils condition (*indirect effect* = $.18$, 95% CI $[.01, .45]$). This indirect effect suggests that when participants viewed the legal constraint as a necessary evil, they reported greater intrinsic motivation than the unnecessary evil condition, which was in turn associated with greater proactivity. Put another way, necessary evil orientations mitigated some of the negative effects of legal constraints. See Figure 3.

Exploratory Results: Moral foundations coding. Since we posit that a necessary evils orientation leads individuals to adopt a different moral foundation underlying the law, we evaluated which moral foundation participants appeared to endorse in the necessary evils vs. unnecessary evils condition. Two undergraduate RAs, blind to condition and hypotheses, coded the open-ended response for the extent to which responses endorsed each of six moral foundations on a scale of 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very*. Since average deviation scores for our extreme bimodal distribution were within convention thresholds (Smith-Crowe et al., 2013; AD ranges from .016 to .54 for each foundation), we averaged the two coders' responses to create composite scores. As can be seen in Figure 4, analyses revealed that participants shifted from endorsing proportionality in the unnecessary evils condition ($b = -2.11$, $se = .18$, $p < .001$) to endorsing equality in the necessary evils condition ($b = 1.97$, $se = .17$, $p < .001$). Thus, a necessary evils orientation led participants to partially endorse the moral foundation underlying the law.

Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 constructively replicated the results from Studies 1 and 2. Importantly, we found support for our model when using an immersive experimental design with a behavioral measure of proactivity. Despite the strengths of our paradigm, it is important to note that the legal constraint may not have been as strong or as salient as those in our field data. To address this, we constructively replicated our results in two scenario designs with stronger legal constraints in our online appendix (Study S4 and Study S5).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The push for morality at work is based on its established benefits when there is alignment between employees' personal ethics and the policies they are beholden to at work. Yet, every law or regulation also introduces the possibility for misalignment with individual employees' moral values. We focus on the consequences of such occurrences, where workers face legal obligations as part of their work that they perceive as ethically problematic. Across our studies, we found consistent evidence that experiencing legal constraints leads employees to feel less intrinsically motivated and subsequently engage in less proactivity. Moreover, we found that employees can reduce the detrimental consequences of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation and proactivity when they view constraints as a necessary evil. Our studies in the field and lab provide convergent evidence for our theoretical model.

Theoretical Contributions

First, our perspective challenges underlying assumptions about the unfettered benefits of ethical considerations at work. Researchers have often suggested that ethical considerations in the workplace are intrinsically motivating for employees, leading employees to invest more in their work, and engage in more proactive behaviors (Sekerka et al. 2009). Our work shifts consensus to suggest moral concerns can also be demotivating when legal pressures constrain employees' ethical concerns. In these cases, employees experience *lower* levels of intrinsic motivation and are *less* likely to engage in proactive behaviors. Indeed, we argue and find that legal constraints on moral behavior are especially conflicting for employees. Instead of engaging deeper with their work due to ethical considerations (Bunderson & Thompson 2009), we find legal constraints on moral behavior can lead employees to take a passive orientation to their work.

Second, our work contributes to research on necessary evils. Our research suggests that necessary evils can be a cognitive orientation that individuals apply across a range of situations, rather than an inherent characteristic of a given situation (Molinsky & Margolis 2005). That is, individuals may be able to view the same activity as a necessary or an unnecessary evil, and what orientation they adopt has important motivational and behavioral implications. Thus, our research advances a perceptual view of necessary evils that exists in the eye of the beholder, which shapes their experience of that action. We contribute and extend this line of research, pushing scholars to account for the perceptual nature of necessary evils in future research, both in the domain of legal constraints and beyond.

Third, we contribute to organizational ethics research by exploring when ethical concerns and legal constraints are at conflict, and establishing that when they do, it has important implications for employees' motivation and proactive behavior at work. Research has not empirically investigated the relationship between illegality and immorality, even though the two may not always be aligned. Our literature review on this topic suggested that 67% of ethical behavior papers in management journals refer to unethical behavior as illegal behavior.⁸ Our findings take a novel step in understanding the consequences of when moral and lawful misalign. This investigation is especially timely given emerging research suggesting individuals often disagree over what is moral (Brown et al. 2022; Reynolds 2006), creating the strong likelihood that employees experience conflict between their ethical values and the law while at work. Moreover, we develop a novel and empirically validated measure for future scholars interested in studying legal constraints on moral behavior.

Practical Contributions

Our work makes important practical contributions. First, organizations may find themselves at the nexus of institutional laws and individuals' moral codes. We suggest organizations should consider both the legal regulatory environment they operate within *and* the spectrum of ethical concerns of their

⁸ We searched *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Organization Science* for the terms ethical, moral, dishonest(y), cheating, lying, moral, immoral, and cover-up from 2012-2022. We only included papers that assessed or discussed (un)ethical or (im)moral behavior in some form. Our review yielded 72 papers, and 67% (n = 48) referred to illegal behavior as unethical behavior.

employees. Although emphasis on ethical considerations at work may be beneficial in deterring organizational scandals (Treviño et al. 2014), they may also have unintended consequences when the law serves as a constraining factor to ‘do right’ at work. Thus, organizations should be acutely aware of the regulatory environment they operate within, as well as its potential to clash with the ethical inclinations of their employees. Failure to acknowledge this reality may have important implications for whether employees engage in desirable work behaviors such as proactivity.

Second, we show that employees should be acutely aware of how they view the legal constraints they face at work. Our work shows that taking steps to view legal constraints as a necessary evil may be a way for employees to stay intrinsically motivated in the face of undesirable legal environments. Finding ways to stay motivated in the face of regulatory environments may help employees meet work demands and continue to be proactive. Notably, proactivity can benefit not only the organization but also employees themselves (Tornau & Frese 2013). However, we urge caution in adopting necessary evils orientations as a panacea to the ills of legal constraints, especially when doing so can be used to justify ethically questionable laws.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the many benefits of our empirical approach, including a field study in a regulatory environment, and two pre-registered experiments, including one with a behavioral measure of proactivity, our research is still subject to some limitations. First, we were only able to test the effects of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation and proactivity in a single organizational context. However, our experimental studies tested a variety of legal constraints. Second, we only investigated proactivity as a specific outcome of intrinsic motivation. We did so because of past literature’s interest in proactive behaviors in highly moral work and because of the practical importance of proactivity at work. However, intrinsic motivation has also been linked to several other important work behaviors (Patall et al., 2008). Future research should investigate the effects on related outcomes, such as performance and well-being. Third, we theorize that legal constraints can reduce intrinsic motivation through multiple avenues, such as through violating one’s morals to uphold the law or violating the law to uphold one’s morals. However,

our empirical approach did not allow us to test the unique mechanisms that explain each process. Future work may want to tease apart this distinction, as effects may be contingent on contextual factors, such as the level of organizational punitiveness (Affinito et al., 2020). Fourth and finally, although we find that necessary evils buffer the negative effects of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation, the effectiveness of this orientation varied across experiments (Study 3, S4, S5) and there may be cases when these orientations are ineffective. We reason this is the most likely when the moral issue is deeply held or when the law offers little to no benefit, at least in the eyes of employees. For example, medical doctors now face extreme legal pressure with new (i.e. 2023) era abortion laws, and may not be able to reframe these laws as necessary evils (<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/792/when-to-leave>).⁹ This may have implications beyond proactivity, such as issues with retention and turnover.

Future researchers should consider comparing legal constraints on moral behavior to other forms of conflict – both those that do not derive from the law and those that have non-moral drivers. Indeed, we theorize that legal constraints on moral behavior are a strong source of conflict, but individuals with moral desires may feel conflicted for reasons that do not pertain to the law (i.e. leader ideology, social norms etc.). Alternatively, the law may lead individuals to feel conflicted domains unrelated to morality (i.e. status, identification). Future research should compare these types of conflict to understand the relative strength and effects of each.

Moreover, scholars should consider a different type of divergence between moral concerns and the law, such those involving a lack of legal constraints. Namely, future research should examine instances in which individuals believe the law fails to constrain behavior as much as moral concerns dictate. Indeed, there may be situations in which an individual perceives what is legal is immoral – that is, the law does not constrain behavior enough. We do not focus on this because it is less likely to have *intrapersonal* consequences or affect their own intrinsic motivation in these tasks, since it does not

⁹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this astute insight.

constrain their behavior. However, future research should investigate these situations, as there may be important *interpersonal* consequences that emerge.

Finally, our research also has important implications for normative scholars interested in the intersection between morality and the law (i.e. Young, 2019; Caulfield & Lynn, 2022). Indeed, while we show that necessary evils can buffer the negative effects of legal constraints on intrinsic motivation, normative scholars should clarify if – and when – this is warranted. On the one hand, this orientation may help employees overcome normatively incorrect views. On the other hand, organizations or individuals may use this to justify or adhering to normatively questionable laws. Future normative work should seek to unpack and integrate these considerations.

Conclusions

While legal constraints are a ubiquitous part of organizational life, research up to this point has not examined their effects on employee motivation and productivity. The presumed benefits of moral considerations in the workplace are built on an assumption that legal work processes align with personal ethics, which is often not the case. Our research and theorizing shifts consensus and opens a new line of inquiry for organizational ethics researchers on when moral and lawful diverge.

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Table 1 - Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

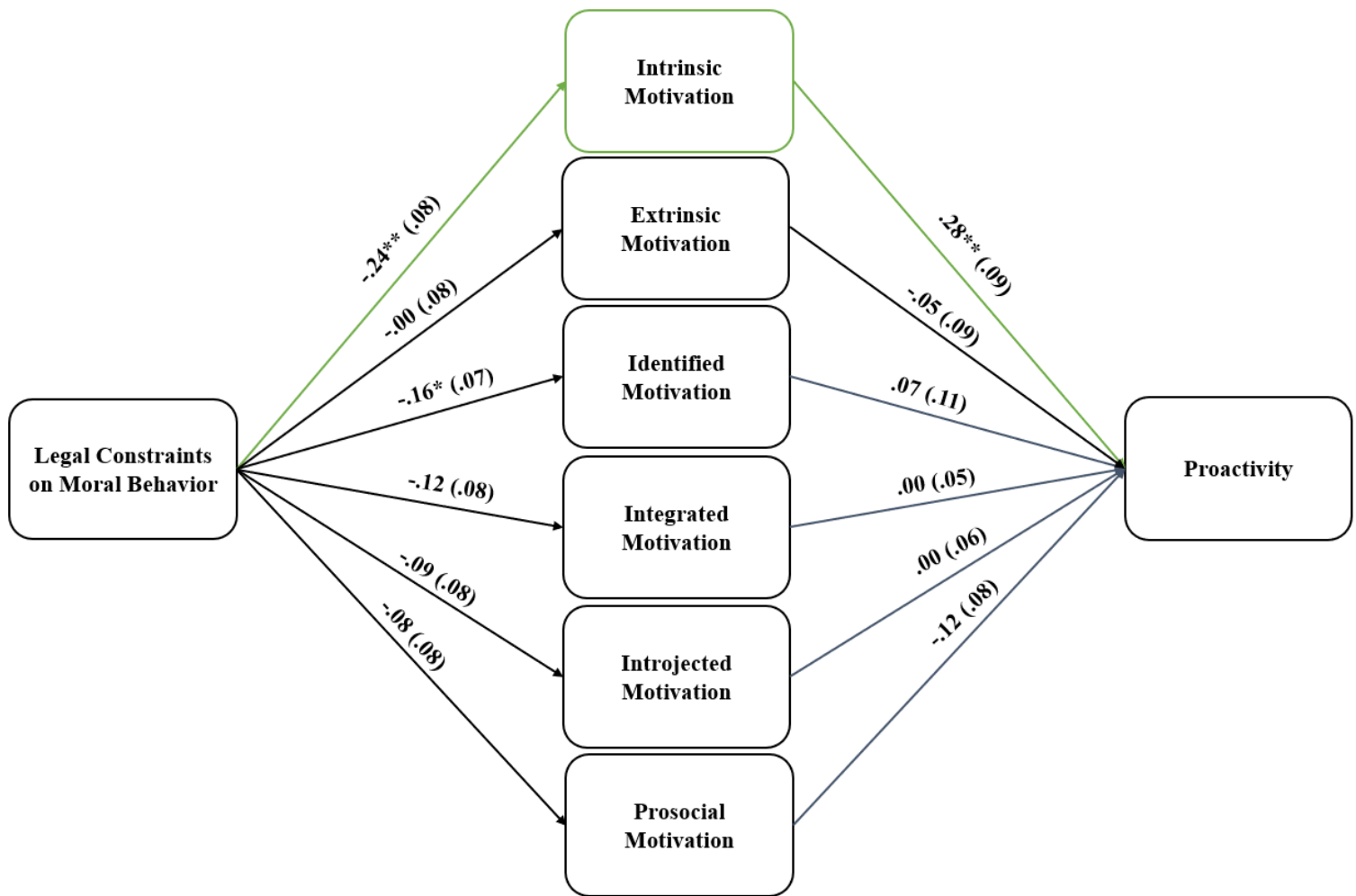
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Legal-moral constraints	1.75	1.06	--							
2. Intrinsic Motivation	5.44	1.15	-.22***	--						
3. Extrinsic Motivation	6.39	.91	-.00	-.06	--					
4. Prosocial Motivation	5.73	1.09	-.08	.69***	.12	--				
5. Introjected Motivation	5.47	1.34	-.07	.13*	.19**	.29***	--			
6. Identified Motivation	5.98	1.03	-.17**	.64***	-.04	.62***	.28***	--		
7. Integrated Motivation	4.79	1.36	-.09	.46***	.04	.44***	.22***	.54***	--	
8. Proactivity	5.35	1.25	-.15*	.24***	-.06	.11	.02	.18**	.11	--

N = 259 for all variables. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

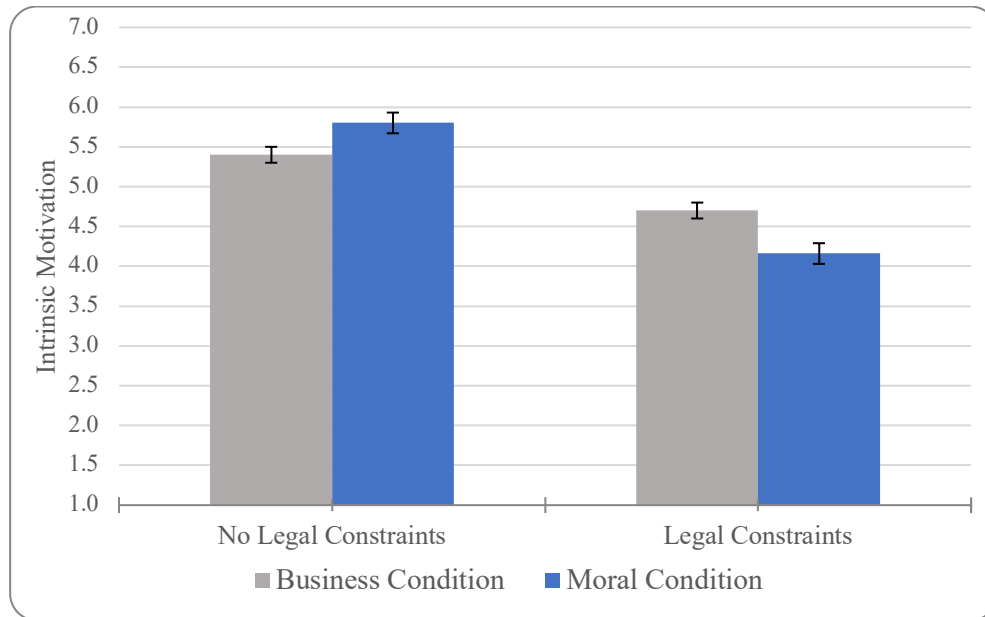
Table 2 - Study 3: Sample Responses

Necessary Evils Orientation	Unnecessary Evils Orientation
This is important to keep fraudulent activity from happening. There could be some loopholes that the researchers do not know about like, for example, third-party apps that share completion codes that might have a huge effect on who actually completed it or not. This strict policy protects them a little bit from these situations.	I feel as if people should get compensated for the time that they spend taking surveys. Sometimes mistakes happen and I think that individuals should still get compensated if they enter the wrong code because they spent the time and effort into completing the survey.
This policy could be important because not having access to the completion code could be a red flag for someone trying to access the account of a participant, or somehow accessing the survey directly bypassing the original website thus making participants and researchers lose a survey	The policy is problematic because respondents take the surveys in good faith with the expectation of being paid what the expressed amount was, and if the completion code is mis-entered or is not seen and the respondent can't get back to the page it was on, they should not be penalized. In fact, it would be theft to use their data without compensating them the agreed upon amount.
Requiring a correct completion code, even if the survey was fully filled out, prevents fraudulent submissions. Someone may have shared the code (and made an error doing so) or any other number of situations. It verifies that the same person completed the survey, gave input, and is reimbursed fully.	Well-intentioned participants who do good work and complete a task according to the directions, deserve to be paid for their time. If they receive an unexpected rejection, they deserve an explanation, which requires that researchers take the time to communicate in friendly terms with the worker. Anything less than that is unprofessional. I have encountered a handful of researchers who have issued rejections without any justification and no response to worker communication.

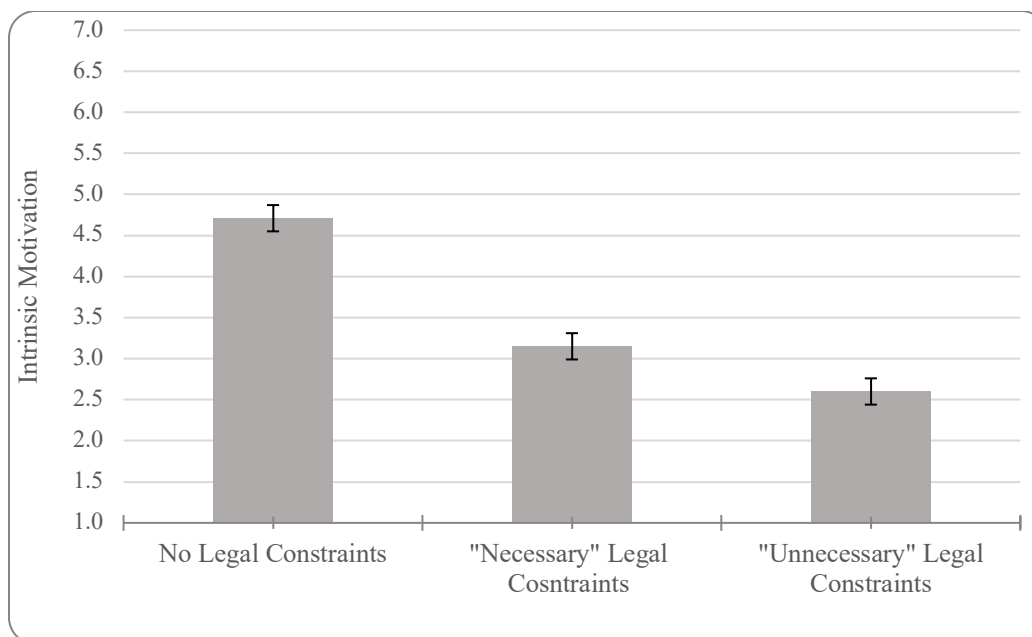
Figure 1 - Study 1



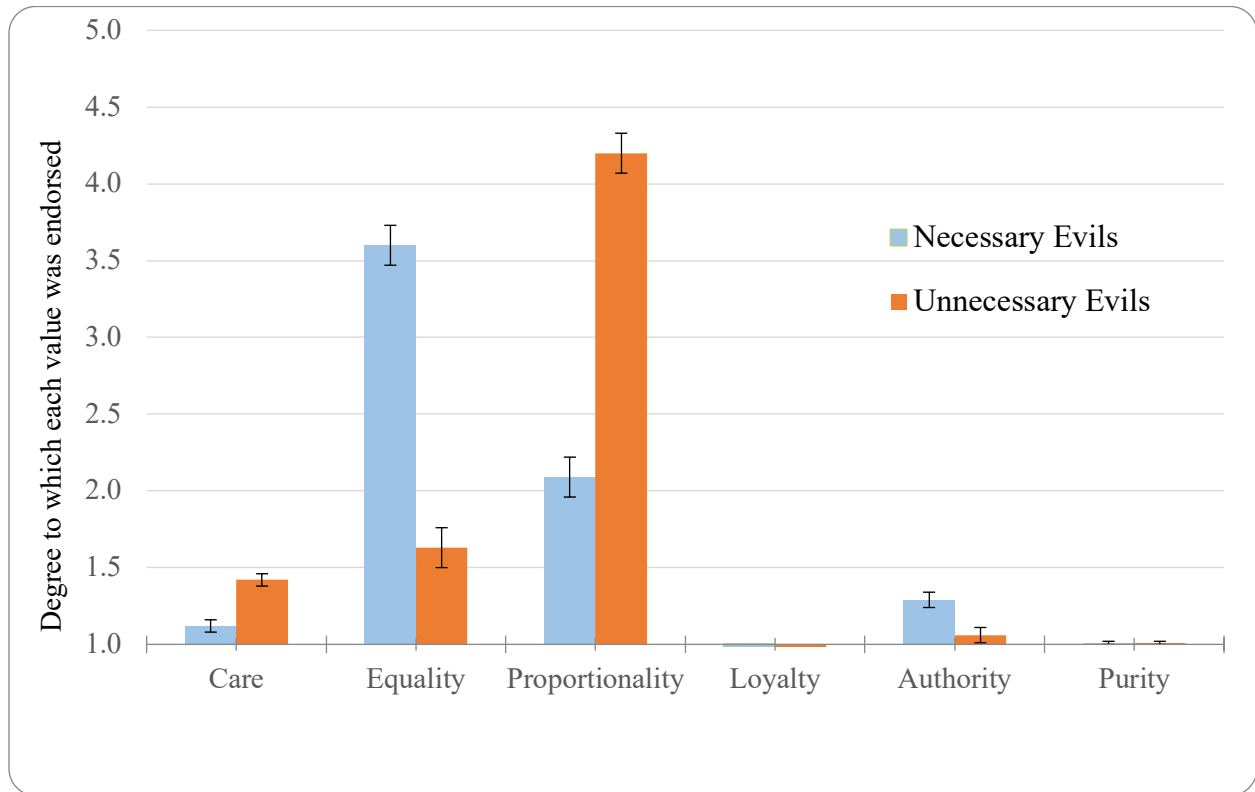
Estimates are unstandardized. Modeled but not visually depicted is the direct effect of legal constraints on proactivity ($b = -.11$, ns).

Figure 2 - Study 2: Interactive effects of condition on intrinsic motivation

Error bars are standard errors

Figure 3 - Study 3: Effects of condition on intrinsic motivation

Error bars are standard errors

Figure 4 - Study 3: Coding of moral foundations

Error bars are standard errors