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Sonya Sachdeva^a; Purnima Singh^b; Douglas Medin^a

^a Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA ^b Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India

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Culture and the quest for universal principles in moral reasoning

Sonya Sachdeva¹, Purnima Singh², and Douglas Medin¹

¹Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

²Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India

The importance of including cultural perspectives in the study of human cognition has become apparent in recent decades, and the domain of moral reasoning is no exception. The present review focuses on moral cognition, beginning with Kohlberg's model of moral development which relies heavily on people's justifications for their judgments and then shifting to more recent theories that rely on rapid, intuitive judgments and see justifications as more or less irrelevant to moral cognition. Despite this dramatic shift, analyses of culture and moral decision-making have largely been framed as a quest for and test of universal principles of moral judgment. In this review, we discuss challenges that remain in trying to understand crosscultural variability in moral values and the processes that underlie moral cognition. We suggest that the universalist framework may lead to an underestimation of the role of culture in moral reasoning. Although the field has made great strides in incorporating more and more cultural perspectives in order to understand moral cognition, theories of moral reasoning still do not allow for substantial variation in how people might conceptualize the domain of the moral. The processes that underlie moral cognition may not be a human universal in any simple sense, because moral systems may play different roles in different cultures. We end our review with a discussion of work that remains to be done to understand cultural variation in the moral domain.

Keywords: Cultural psychology; Cognition; Moral reasoning; Sociocultural approaches.

L'importance d'inclure une perspective culturelle dans l'étude de la cognition s'est imposée au cours des dernières décennies. Le domaine du raisonnement moral ne fait pas exception à cette règle. Le présent relevé de la documentation porte sur la cognition morale, nous présentons d'abord le modèle du développement moral de Kohlberg qui repose avant tout sur les justifications que les gens donnent à leurs jugements, puis nous passons aux théories plus récentes qui reposent, elles, sur des jugements rapides, intuitifs et qui considèrent les justifications données comme étant plutôt non pertinentes par rapport à la cognition morale. Malgré ce changement spectaculaire, les analyses de la culture et de la prise de décision morale ont été formulées comme étant une recherche et une mise à l'épreuve de principes universels du jugement moral. Dans ce relevé de la documentation, nous discutons des défis qui demeurent pour tenter de comprendre la variabilité entre les cultures en ce qui concerne les valeurs morales et les processus qui sous-tendent la cognition morale. Nous proposons qu'un cadre universel peut conduire à une sous-estimation du rôle de la culture dans le raisonnement moral. Même s'il y a eu de grands pas de fait dans ce domaine en incorporant de plus en plus les perspectives culturelles pour comprendre la cognition morale, les théories du raisonnement moral ne font toujours pas une place suffisante à la variation substantielle dans la conceptualisation de la moralité selon les gens. Les processus qui sous-tendent la cognition morale pourraient ne pas être partagés universellement de façon simple parce que les systèmes moraux pourraient jouer différents rôles dans différentes cultures. Nous terminons notre relevé de la documentation avec une discussion concernant le travail qu'il reste à faire pour comprendre la variation culturelle dans le domaine moral.

Correspondence should be addressed to Sonya Sachdeva, Northwestern University – Psychology, 2029 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208, USA. (E-mail: s-sachdeva@northwestern.edu).

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*E*n las últimas décadas se ha vuelto aparente la importancia de incluir una perspectiva cultural en el estudio de las cogniciones humanas, y el área del razonamiento moral no es una excepción a esta generalización. El presente artículo se focaliza en la cognición moral, comenzando con el modelo del desarrollo moral de Kohlberg, el cual se apoya en gran medida en las justificaciones que hacen las personas de sus juicios personales; luego, se traslada a teorías más recientes que se apoyan en juicios personales más rápidos e intuitivos, que perciben los juicios personales como más o menos irrelevantes a la cognición moral. A pesar de este cambio dramático, los análisis de cultura y la toma de decisiones morales han estado enmarcadas como una búsqueda y una prueba de principios universales de juicios morales. En esta reseña, se analizan los desafíos que quedan al tratar de entender la variabilidad cultural en los valores morales y los procesos subyacentes a las cogniciones morales. Se sugiere que un marco universal puede llevar a subestimar el papel de la cultura en el razonamiento moral. Aunque esta área ha hecho grandes avances al incorporar más y más perspectivas culturales para entender la cognición moral, las teorías de razonamiento moral aún no permiten una variabilidad considerable en la manera en que las personas conceptualizan la esfera de lo moral. Los procesos que subyacen la cognición moral no pueden ser universales en ningún sentido simple, porque los sistemas morales pueden tener distintos roles en distintas culturas. El artículo finaliza con una descripción del trabajo que aún resta para entender la variación en la esfera de lo moral.

Human universals have played a key role in the history of psychology. In the quest to discover the nature of the mind, psychologists have tended to assume, if only by their restricted use of study populations (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), that the mental functions they are studying have a biological basis and are therefore shared by all members of the human species (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Moral reasoning is no different in this regard and research in this area has been heavily influenced by standards of universality.

The question of whether morality is an objective truth gleaned from nature or a socially constructed concept has been important in the philosophical study of ethics as well. Since the time of Plato, one of the foundational assumptions of morality is that it is based in the very core of human nature. It concerns what people should do as people (Fleischacker, 1994). The idea of a “universal moral sense” that emerges naturally and that affects reasoning and consequent behavior has been accepted by most researchers. Efforts in the cognitive sciences have included an attempt to provide a descriptive theory of universal moral reasoning, but even this account fails to answer questions concerning individual and cultural differences in moral reasoning. In this paper we take the position that an understanding of cultural differences in moral reasoning will enable us to also understand why differences occur, thereby facilitating understanding the cognitive underpinnings of moral reasoning.

Here is a quick overview of our perspective. The field of moral judgment and decision-making has undergone an explosion of interest over the past decade. This burgeoning interest has been accompanied by a shift in the very conception of

moral reasoning and the way it should be studied. For example, the thought-provoking, realistic moral dilemmas used by pioneers such as Kohlberg have been superseded by a focus on less realistic, sharply focused scenarios aimed at eliciting rapid moral intuitions rather than thoughtful judgments. With respect to cultural research, this shift escapes some of the problems of ethnocentrism associated with research on moral reasoning in favor of a focus on more universal moral intuitions (although even that point is open to debate). But confining one’s studies to moral intuitions that are candidates for being universal does not demonstrate that moral reasoning itself is universal. We argue that what is needed in cultural research is an analysis of systems of moral judgment and decision-making that will provide a framework for analyses of similarities and differences in moral reasoning across cultures. This effort may also address limitations associated with much of the moral reasoning research originating in the West (Medin, Bennis, & Chandler, 2010). In the next section we situate moral reasoning research in the larger body of moral psychology before turning to our review.

Moral objectivists have been the dominant force in the psychological study of morality. This situation represents a double-edged sword. On one hand, if one has identified a moral truth, then one may feel justified in imposing and enforcing it on others whose moral sense may be less developed. On the other hand, if this understanding of moral truth is universal, then it is a force that binds people together and becomes a core part of human identity. Even if people do not hold the same values and ideals, then at least one might expect that they undergo the same cognitive

processes when reasoning about whatever they do hold as a moral value. The need to universalize some part of morality has led to “invisible fences” in the moral domain that preclude us from understanding the motivating factors in what may appear in one culture to be bizarre behavior but might be perfectly acceptable in another (Haidt, 2005). By constraining moral reasoning in such a way, we severely limit ourselves in uncovering the processes through which morality is developed, socialized, and conceptualized in human societies.

The surge of interest in moral psychology has brought a need to re-evaluate current research in terms of possible cultural influences. Like the consensus in moral philosophy, most work in moral psychology favors the idea that there is a universal way of thinking about moral issues and, in some cases, a universal set of moral values. Most of the theorizing in moral psychology is based on universal prescriptions or modes of reasoning. But this observation may tell us as much about the culture of the researchers as about the culture of the researched, and new work suggests that these ways of thinking are at times flawed or, worse, simply incorrect. Humans may be much more sensitive to context than philosophers typically assume. In this paper we first show that there has been a shift of focus in moral psychology. The earliest models, such as Kohlberg’s stage models of moral development and Turiel’s moral-conventional distinction, focused on moral *reasoning*. These models emphasized deliberation and top-down control in reasoning, but later cultural analyses revealed these ideas to be largely ethnocentric. More recent models in moral psychology try to infer the basic mechanisms of morality from studying moral *intuitions* (e.g. universal moral grammar and social intuitionist models). The shift in these current models is the assumption that moral judgments are rapid and unconscious. Some of these models allow for cultural differences and we shall analyze whether they are adequate for the task.

In the next section, we begin to specify possible differences in social structures that may lead people to construe morality differently. We discuss variations in the structures of moral concepts across cultures that might arise from the differences in organization of social spheres. Any good psychological research ought to focus on processes, relations and contexts, as these facilitate the understanding of both behavior and mind. Thus while understanding morality we discuss its relationship to how individuals view themselves in relation to others in their society. As we will show,

a rights-based vs. duties-based approach to morality can lead to different representations of moral concepts and, consequently, to differences in reasoning processes that are not captured by moral intuitionist theories. We conclude by showing that without incorporating culture into the framework for studying morality, the complexities of moral reasoning are greatly understated. First, however, we provide more by way of background information.

MORAL DEVELOPMENTALISTS

Initially, the study of morality in psychology was primarily an examination of how children form moral concepts. Jean Piaget is often credited with introducing the concept of moral development in psychology (Piaget, 1932). He described several stages that children traverse in order to form a coherent moral concept from a self-centered to a principle-based morality. However, the most radical part of Piaget’s theory, shifting from Durkheimian and other sociologists’ views of the time, was the notion that moral concepts were independent of social norms and could not be taught by authority figures. Rather, they were something the child learned through interaction with his peers over time.

Stage models of moral development

Inspired by the Piagetian approach, Lawrence Kohlberg devised a six-stage model of moral development (Kohlberg, 1976, 1984). The stages in Kohlberg’s model are interesting in that they progress from the most relativistic view of morality to the most universalistic, which Kohlberg considered to be the most advanced form of moral reasoning. In the first level of the model, people behave morally by following the constraints of some extrinsic set of rules, e.g., to avoid punishment. In the intermediate stages, people uphold the moral values of the social system in which they reside and fulfill interpersonal obligations as mandated by the community. The final stage of the model is titled “universal ethical principles” and is marked by the realization that ethical principles are universal and independent of social systems in all rational individuals.

Kohlberg’s model describes the development of moral reasoning in an invariant sequence, one that holds across all societies and cultural groups. Supporting the claim of stage invariance, Turiel (1966) found that exposing children to a stage directly above their level of moral reasoning,

instead of two stages above or a stage below, was the most effective way of advancing moral maturity. Exposing a child to a higher stage of moral reasoning also leads the child to reject justifications based on lower levels of moral reasoning.

Although Kohlberg's model received considerable support and was widely influential, Carol Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg's model was male-oriented and failed to capture gender differences in moral reasoning. In her revised model, Gilligan claimed that women possess certain unique moral principles and modes of reasoning. Holding these unique moral ideals leads women to have very different perspectives on ethical dilemmas than men (Gilligan, 1982). While males may evaluate themselves and others around them on the basis of abstract principles such as justice or equality, according to Gilligan, women measure themselves in terms of particular instances of care. Women tend to have a more contextualized view of morality which takes into account relationships between people rather than a notion of an overarching moral principle that presides across all situations. For example, in one interview probing reasoning about the Heinz dilemma,¹ a young boy, Jake, is certain that Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife's life, because the value of life supersedes all else. A young girl, Amy, on the other hand, cites the importance of the wife's survival to the husband's wellbeing. She also acknowledges that her current frame of mind leads her to that opinion and in a different context, she might have a different opinion.

The best a Kohlbergian model would do in categorizing Amy is assign her to a conventional stage of moral reasoning that highlights interpersonal relationships. But arguably Amy's moral reasoning is much more complex than that. Unlike Jake, she reasons broadly that in such a scenario there is no "right" answer. Gilligan's perspective suggests that even at equal stages of moral maturity by Kohlberg's standards, men and women may provide very different justifications for their judgments. Gilligan's work argues that Kohlberg's model is incomplete because it approaches morality only from an ethics of justice.

John Snarey (1985) employed a related line of argument to critique the Kohlbergian research

framework. He reviewed findings testing Kohlberg's model in 27 different cultural groups, including small-scale societies and involving a wide array of religious beliefs. He noted that there was a significant difference between the folk and urban societies in that the postconventional stage was absent in all of the eight traditional tribal or village folk societies. Snarey concluded that Kohlberg's model incorporates a culturally based bias, because it was developed largely with urban populations. Had Kohlberg's research originated in a small-scale society, his theory of moral development might have been very different.

In addition, Snarey noted that Kohlberg's model was unable to account for some of the moral principles engendered by Eastern religious traditions. For example, in one study of Indian subjects, the unity of life, connecting humans with plants and animals, emerged as a moral principle—a principle not discussed by Kohlberg (Vasudev, 1983). In another study conducted with Buddhist monks from Ladakh, a Tibetan culture in northern India, Gielen & Kelly (1983) noted the counter-intuitive result that by the Kohlbergian system monks received lower moral reasoning scores than laypeople. These researchers concluded that Kohlberg's model was insufficient for understanding the principles of cooperation and nonviolence. Another set of researchers found that Taiwanese participants' score could change depending on whether they were taking a subordinate role (son) or a superordinate role (father) while reasoning about a dilemma (Lei & Cheng, 1984). Role-dependent judgment is outside the scope of Kohlberg's theory.

Situational context may also affect moral judgment. For example, Snarey (1985) pointed out that especially constrictive social structures, like prisons, are not conducive to higher-order reasoning relying on abstract ideals. In these situations, it is much more adaptive to rely on interpersonal relationships and lower-level moral principles including immediate payback or reward. More broadly, one might suggest that Kohlberg's model itself applies in particular contexts, namely the ones he chose to study in the USA. The prescription for addressing these limitations is a broader range of perspectives and a broader

¹A frequently used example in Kohlberg's interviews: "A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?"

sampling of cultures as well as within-cultural variation across roles and contexts.

Development of social norms: Moral and conventional

A related theory of moral development relies on the moral vs. conventional distinction. Elliot Turiel's (1983) influential work has shown that even very young children are sensitive to different types of social norm violation. Conventional rules, such as hanging up your coat on the coat rack instead of leaving it on the floor, or not chewing gum in class, guide behavior. Conventional norms are dependent on particular social systems and highly context-sensitive. Moral norms, in contrast, deal with issues of harm, rights, and justice and are independent of social expectations or arrangements (Turiel, 1987). As such moral norms are authority-independent, if the principal of a child's school, a parent, or even God tells the child to commit a moral transgression (e.g., intentionally harming another child), that act remains impermissible (Nucci & Turiel, 1978, 1982, 1993; Turiel, 1997). In short, Turiel argued that there are features of moral norms that are universal and apply globally rather than on a local level.

Like Kohlberg, Turiel claimed that moral norms are based on underlying principles of harm, rights, and justice. However, by showing that children as young as three can distinguish conventional violations from moral ones, Turiel produced a strong argument against Kohlberg's progression from thinking of morality as emerging from punitive and social concerns to eventually being based on universal ethical principles. Instead, Turiel showed that even children who probably would not rank very high on Kohlberg's scheme understand universal moral principles of justice and harm.

According to Turiel, the moral-conventional distinction is constructed by a child as a result of empathizing with the victim in one type of transgression but not the other. So when a child sees violations of a moral nature, she learns a prescriptive norm against it because she imagines the pain such an act would cause to herself. Conventional violations, on the other hand, do not inspire such perspective-taking. Conventional norms are learned differently (through social enforcement), because moral and conventional norms are part of two distinct conceptual domains.

The moral-conventional distinction has received some support from crosscultural research. Studies in Hong Kong and Korea by Yau and Smetana

(1996) found that children rated moral transgressions as more serious than conventional transgressions. However, they also found that these children did not differentiate between the two domains of social transgressions as early as American children. Although even the youngest children in Korean and American societies were able to differentiate moral from conventional norms in terms of their generalizability to other societies and authority-independence, Korean kindergartners thought that both moral and conventional transgressions were impermissible.

A similar pattern of results was found in a study with Colombian children (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001). The participants were asked about conventional and moral norms within a school setting. When there was a conflict involving conventional violations, they preferred to resolve the issue by negotiation. But when the violation was moral, such as when it involved hitting another child, these Colombian children preferred that the teacher use the principle underlying the moral norm to resolve the situation. However, they thought that the moral and conventional norms were equally authority-contingent. Given that this study took place in a school, it is possible that the children knew that they could be punished for violating both types of norm and hence did not treat the moral norms as more independent of authority.

Similarly, Nisan's (1987) work comparing secular urban Jewish kids with children from either a secular Jewish kibbutz or traditional Arab villages found that although the secular groups differentiated between moral and conventional norms, they did not view moral transgressions as authority-independent. When moral transgressions were permitted by law, secular participants thought the violation was significantly less bad than when it was prohibited by law. Interestingly, the traditional group judged all violations of conventional or moral norms as wrong even when some of these violations were deemed permissible.

In summary, cultural studies with children focusing on the moral-conventional distinction have produced somewhat mixed support for Turiel's theory. This distinction becomes more problematic when looking at adults from different cultural groups. Shweder and his colleagues conducted fieldwork with rural populations in the town of Bhubaneswar in India (Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1997). They found that moral principles are just as socially bound as conventional norms. These authors do not believe that there are any social transgressions that only fall under the category of conventional in this

small town, but, interestingly, these transgressions embody more characteristics of the “moral.” The only difference may be that scenarios falling under our previously conceived notion of “moral” may be perceived as more serious and as more punishable offenses (Singh, Pande, Tripathi, & Maheshwari, 2010). On the other hand, in work looking at the moral–conventional distinction among psychopaths, neither the moral nor the conventional domain seems to carry any moral content. It appears then that further work is required to identify the delineation between these two types of social norm. Perhaps instead of being separate domains of thought, the moral and the conventional are opposite poles on a continuum of how much importance society places on a particular norm, regardless of whether or not that norm contends with issues of harm (see Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007 for additional evidence).

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Given the developmental focus of early work on moral judgment and the associated research paradigms, the shift in focus associated with recent work is quite striking. Contemporary research employs paradigms eliciting or calling for rapid, intuitive, often emotion-based judgments, while largely retaining its emphasis on universal principles of moral reasoning. There has also been a broadening of frameworks for moral judgments that accommodates a corresponding broadening of perspectives on cultural differences in moral thought.

Universal moral grammar

Using Chomsky’s model of grammar as an analogy for the moral module, Hauser (e.g., 2006; see also Mikhail, 2000; Rawls, 1971) revived the theory that all humans have a universal moral sense—an innate capability to perceive rights and wrongs. Hauser is not a traditional universalist because his framework does not necessarily mandate specific moral values. Instead, he claims that an individual is born with a set of tools and parameters for constructing morality (examples given below). These sets of protomoral parameters operate over principles that guide humans’ understanding of various other phenomena, even those that occur in the physical world. This means that people might use the very same causal principles that help them understand physical motion to guide their understanding of moral and immoral behavior. One promising

aspect of this orientation is that it suggests that mainstream cognitive science research on causal reasoning may inform research on moral judgment (e.g. Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007)

The above considerations are only the very basic elements of morality. How the actual content of our moral sense is realized is fairly situation-dependent. The culture or environment within which an individual develops assigns values to her moral parameters, thereby producing specific moral values and principles responsible for guiding behavior. An interesting implication of the linguistic analogy is that once an individual’s moral parameters are set to the constraints of a culture, they may be resistant to influence by another culture’s unique set of moral values.

The most compelling empirical support for the universal moral grammar (UMG) approach derives from the use of abstract moral dilemmas, such as the trolley car problem. Trolley car problems have become so popular that some researchers have made the ironic suggestion that there should be a separate discipline of trolleyology. This particular dilemma and significant variations on it derive from debates in moral philosophy (Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1976). Although the trolley car problem may appear to be overly contrived, it can be argued that it is highly amenable to subtle manipulations that help reveal the basic elements of human morality (Greene et al., 2009). We focus on the two most commonly used versions of this problem—the switch and footbridge scenarios.

The switch version

A trolley is headed down the tracks. There are five people on the track ahead of the trolley, and they will be killed if the trolley continues going straight ahead. There is a spur of track leading off to the side. There is one person on that spur of the track. The brakes of the trolley have failed and there is a switch that can be activated to cause the trolley to go to the side track. You are a bystander. You can throw the switch saving the five people, which will result in the death of the one person on the side track. What do you do?

1. “Throw the switch, which will result in the death of the one person on the side track”
2. “Do nothing, which will result in the death of the five people.”

The footbridge version

You are standing on a footbridge over the train tracks. You see a trolley coming down the

tracks toward the bridge running out of control. There are five people on the track ahead of the trolley, and they will be killed if the trolley continues going straight ahead. The only way to stop the trolley is to drop a heavy weight in its path. The only object available that is heavy enough is a man who is standing next to you on the footbridge. What do you do?

1. "Push the man over the footbridge, resulting in his death"
2. "Do nothing, which will result in the death of five people."

The trolley variations are interesting because the two versions are structurally equivalent—that is, you save five people at the expense of one. However, a large body of data (e.g., Hauser, Cushman, Young, Kang-xing Jin, & Mikhail, 2007) suggests a widespread tendency to approve of throwing the switch, but to disapprove of pushing the man over the bridge. Universal moral grammarians say a basic parameter within the moral module is responsible for the differing intuitions associated with the two scenarios. This parameter, known as the *doctrine of double effect* (DDE), is responsible for recognizing when harm is caused as a means to a noble end vs. when harm is caused as a side-effect of an action. When participants are given variants of the trolley car problem that systematically move from being obvious harm-as-means to harm-as-side-effect, participants' moral permissibility ratings increase (Mikhail, 2007), supporting the idea that the DDE is a general property of our moral sense.

The difference in judgments for the two trolley car versions also suggests that participants often do not use consequentialist or utilitarian principles when making moral judgments. A consequentialist judgment would result in the lives of the five being weighed more heavily in both versions, yet it appears that when participants encounter the footbridge version, the deontic norm of "do not intentionally cause harm to another" is more highly activated than utilitarian considerations. Although the activation of such deontic norms seems intuitively reasonable, it is sometimes taken as an instance of a logical fallacy on the part of participants by decision-making theorists (Bazerman & Greene, 2010).

Although some have questioned the DDE (Iliev, 2010; Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007), the distinction between these two forms of harm may be universally recognized. In internet surveys

conducted across a sample of 120 countries and various ethnic and religious groups, responders viewed action in the footbridge version as significantly worse than action in the switch version (Hauser et al., 2007). O'Neill and Petrinovich (1998) also conducted a crosscultural study of the trolley-car problem and found that even participants who followed religions that favor inaction over action showed this switch-footbridge difference.

If the mind's moral processor is akin to its language processor then one should be able to take this analogy further and claim that it should not be susceptible to priming or context effects. Uhlmann and his colleagues (Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009), however, have found that when the identity of the victim in trolley problems is varied, the universality of judgments is eroded. Uhlmann et al. varied the identity of the victims in a scenario similar to the footbridge version of the trolley car problem. Participants saw a case in which an American or Iraqi military officer was deciding to sacrifice Iraqi or American civilians. They found that conservatives were much more likely to endorse consequentialism (willing to sacrifice one to save five) than liberals when Americans killed Iraqi civilians than when Iraqis killed Americans. Furthermore, when non-partisan participants were primed with liberal values they showed no difference between the two conditions, but when primed with conservative values they endorsed consequentialism more often when Americans killed Iraqis than when Iraqis killed Americans. This work suggests that people's moral intuitions can be altered both by ideology and by priming ideological perspectives, undermining the idea that moral intuitions, once formed, are immutable.

Dupoux and Jacob (2007) argue that moral diversity in the world is not accounted for by thinking of morality as a system of binary parameters that can be switched on or off. They suggest that it is more helpful to think of moral diversity as different preference orderings among a finite number of moral values, not all of which are consciously accessible to all cultural groups. In support of their argument they draw on evidence from Shweder, Jensen, and Goldstein (1995) showing that Indian and North American family sleeping arrangements vary as a function of the relative weights assigned to different moral values. This conceptualization of the moral faculty is different from the linguistic analogy in that Dupoux and Jacob (2007) suggest that a person can reorder his or her value preferences almost at will.

Moral judgments as rapid intuitive judgments

The social intuitionist model of moral reasoning is another influential model (Haidt, 2001) that allows for more within- and across-culture variation in moral judgment than the universal grammar approach. It emphasizes the role of affect and visceral responses in evaluating moral situations. Haidt explicitly argues against what he claims to be the overemphasis on the cognitive/deliberative processes in moral judgment. As in the Nichols (2002) norms-with-feeling account, emotion is a precursor of moral judgment rather than an offshoot of other purely cognitive processes. A subtle but significant distinction between these two affect-based approaches is that while Nichols's (2002) approach can be applied to any affect producing norm violations, Haidt's (2001) model focuses exclusively on the moral domain.

In line with the Kohlbergian tradition, most earlier moral psychologists have focused on and analyzed participants' justifications of their moral judgments. Haidt believes this approach to be unfruitful, because he finds that often people cannot justify their views when challenged to explain them. This *moral dumbfounding* is seen as evidence for the hypothesis that moral reasoning is a post-hoc process to rationalize moral intuitions. For example, imagine a case in which a person uses the national flag to clean her bathroom. It can be argued that no clear harm is committed against anyone, yet it still may seem to be morally wrong. According to Haidt (2001), the sense of moral

wrongness is caused by the triggering of specific moral intuitions based on notions of respect and purity.

Moral intuitions develop within a rich cultural context, with children learning through trial and error what a society considers to be permissible or impermissible. However, through a process of socialization either through one's lifetime or through changing cultural mores (see Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997; Rozin & Singh, 1999 for a development of this view), these moral norms become so engrained within an individual's being that they are perceived to be apparent objective truths. Moral intuitions may also be viewed as self-evident because, within a particular closed cultural context, there are few occasions for these norms to be questioned. So, moral norms may be continually reinforced generation after generation, until a psychologist comes along with a cleverly designed scenario.

There are other explicitly culturally specific facets of the social intuitionist model. For instance, some emotions are more likely to be expressed in a particular culture in response to a moral violation than others (see below). But this is the extent to which Haidt's (2001) model allows for crosscultural variation. Tracing across the various nodes in Figure 1 (based on Haidt's figure), there may be variation in the types of moral intuitions, the situations that violate particular intuitions, and the emotional consequences of those violations. But the fundamental process through which moral judgment is formed remains constant, according to Haidt. As we will

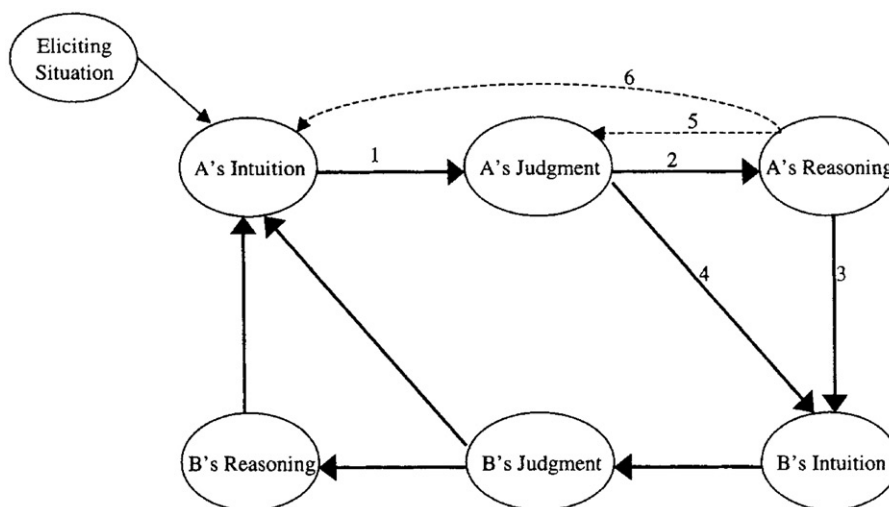


Figure 1. Processing in the social intuition model. From Haidt (2001): "The numbered links, drawn for Person A (only), are (1) the intuitive judgment link, (2) the post hoc reasoning link, (3) the reasoned persuasion link, and (4) the social persuasion link. Two additional links are hypothesized to occur less frequently: (5) the reasoned judgment link and (6) the private reflection link."

see, however, Haidt's model is also one of the most culturally flexible.

CULTURAL VARIATION IN MORAL VALUES

It is difficult to study the effect of culture on moral values without having a clear understanding of what we mean by moral values. For instance, should we think of moral values as being defined at a very concrete, behavioral level or are they something more functionally defined as overarching principles with which to organize one's life? The answer to this question may itself be culturally specific, but it appears that most moral or religious prescriptions about how one ought to act are more akin to the latter.

One promising recent approach to both within- and between-cultural differences in moral reasoning conceptualizes morality within a framework of five basic domains of moral values: harm, fairness, reciprocity, ingroup loyalty/respect, and purity (Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Krebs, 2008; Shweder et al., 1997). Different models have different theories for how these norms develop. For instance, Dennis Krebs, an evolutionary psychologist, takes the perspective that these principles are observed in some capacity in most societies of the world because they allow people to achieve their goals in mutually beneficial ways. Take as an example the norm for purity. Certain types of food taboos, such as prohibitions against eating particular types of fish at specified times among some Amazonian tribes, are conceptualized by tribal members as issues of purity but have also been shown to be adaptive strategies to prevent the spread of disease (Begossi, Hanazaki, & Ramos, 2004).

Groups may differ in the extent to which they rely on the five abovementioned foundations to provide moral structure. For example, cultural or environmental influences can affect whether purity is a moral foundation of a particular group and whether issues such as the cleanliness of religious spaces are moralized.

In one set of studies Haidt, Koller, and Dias (1993) gave participants several vignettes describing people behaving in some socially offensive manner. The participants were of low or high socioeconomic status (SES) from Brazil (Recife and Porto Alegre) and the USA (Philadelphia). Some of the scenarios were typical moral violations such as one person hitting another, while others were specifically designed to show disrespect or disobedience. The disrespectful or

disobedient acts were not caused by harmful intentions and did not have an (apparently) harmful consequence (e.g., using the national flag to clean one's toilet).

Haidt et al. (1993) found that participants belonging to the high-SES samples from the USA and Brazil treated the moral offensive behavior stories notably differently from the stories involving disrespect, which they did not see as moral violations. In contrast, the low-SES participants both from Brazil and from the USA thought that the disrespectful/disobedient behaviors were just as morally bad as the harm-based ones. For example, participants from high-SES regions in the USA or Brazil said that it is not necessary to prevent someone from using the flag to clean a bathroom, whereas low-SES participants thought this was morally imperative. The low-SES participants also thought that violations of purity (a man buying a chicken from the supermarket, having sex with it and then cooking and eating it) were morally wrong and not just socially inappropriate.

Haidt and his associates have argued that striking differences in the very definitions of what constitutes morality are the root of many social ideological differences within a country. For example, liberals and conservatives in the United States may rely on very different moral structures. In addition to the ethic of autonomy and the value of the individual, there is some evidence to show that conservatives emphasize loyalty and respect for societal institutions as well as issues of purity (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Conservative values, such as those that favor an ingroup, are often misunderstood or viewed as irrelevant by (liberal) researchers because morality has been primarily conceptualized in terms that are not domain-specific but rather general moral violations of harm, rights, and justice only.

These studies suggest that culture (as well as ideology and SES) specifies the eliciting situations for a particular type of moral norm violation as well as something of a moral toolkit with respect to the relative importance of the big five domains of morality. The particular actions that are part of a moral category might differ, but perhaps the underlying structure of morality (i.e., how people reason about morality) remains the same if it is based on similar principles. Within this approach to cultural influence on reasoning, however, once the issue is moralized, it will be thought about and reasoned through similarly across cultures. We now turn to potential cultural differences that may not be so readily captured within current moral reasoning theories.

CULTURAL VALUES AFFECT THE SCOPE OF MORAL REASONING

Previous approaches suggest that cultural factors may constrain which moral values or norms are most salient within a community. Less attention has been paid to whether culture may influence which entities are recognized to be moral agents or to have moral standing in a society (e.g., an animal, a fetus, a corporation, ingroup members, traditions). For example, when the United States Constitution was adopted, voting was viewed as an inalienable human right—but it was not applied to about half of the population (women) until 1920. In contrast, religious doctrines in Jainism² provide even the tiniest of microorganisms with moral protection, as observed in the prohibitions imposed on Jain monks against harming them in any way (Tobias, 2000). The scope of a moral decision or how far the consequences of a moral decision reverberate can be thought of as a moral circle. In nineteenth-century USA, the moral circle, at least with regard to the issue of voting, did not include women.

Baron and Miller (2000) found that college participants from both the USA and India were sensitive to how distant (both physically and socially) the potential recipient of a bone marrow donation was. Although Indians were more likely to express a willingness to donate overall, both groups became less willing to donate as physical distance from the recipient increased. This study suggests that the value or motivation to engage in moral behavior might be affected by the identity of the beneficiary of this action. This is a fairly intuitive point—people generally do not like to help their enemies. But this study goes a bit further and implies that the idea of a moral circle might be crucial in understanding the motivation to be moral.

The moral circle seems to be an important factor in deciding on who is eligible to receive the benefits of a prosocial action. Another complementary component to the moral circle idea is that people have different expectations of moral behavior depending on to whom that behavior is directed. American college students consider it morally reprehensible not to tell your friend that the car you are selling her might be a lemon, but accept a less than meticulous disclosure for the case of selling the car to a stranger (Haidt & Baron, 1996).

As Fiske and Tetlock (1997) have noted, different spheres of life (e.g., different types of

relationship) come with unique sets of moral codes. A communal relationship between a father and a son is not the same as a relationship between two friends. A behavior that may simply be a breach of social convention in one domain may be a moral transgression in another (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Offering your parents monetary compensation to raise you feels morally offensive (again by our intuitions) whereas offering your friend gas money for driving you around does not.

Other research reinforces the idea that morality and social relationships are intertwined. For example, within the Gahuku-Gama, a small-scale society in New Guinea, moral norms can vary drastically depending on whom an individual is interacting with (Read, 1955). Read finds that most of the moral imperatives among the Gahuku-Gama take a very specific form, such as “it is bad for brothers to quarrel” or “it is right for a man to fence his wife’s garden.” However, they do not take the form, “it is wrong to kill”, or anything similar to what he calls the universal commands of Christianity, because among the Gahuku-Gama killing a member of a rival clan can sometimes be a moral imperative. Read claims that Western societies fail to consider “the ethical category of a person.” Western principles of morality, at least as conceptualized by moral reasoning theorists in academia, do not assume that moral rules are based on both the identity of the receiver of a moral or immoral action and the perpetrator of an action. But when one examines more situated concrete contexts such as applying the death penalty to a convicted murderer, taking the life of an unborn fetus, or rules of engagement in times of war or catastrophe, these abstract principles may become much more grounded (though there may be a sentiment that moral behavior toward a person should not be based on factors such as age, race, or gender, at least currently).

Judgments may also depend on whether the focus is on personal action vs. group welfare. Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, and Board (1997) asked Chinese and Canadian children to evaluate lies about antisocial vs. prosocial behaviors. Chinese children judged the beneficial lies more positively than the hurtful lies. For the Chinese children the key factor was whether the actions benefited or harmed the social group and they gave little consideration to personal action. Canadian children focused on personal action and did not see

²Jainism is a major Indian religion, followed by about 4 million people. It is purported to have begun somewhere in the fifth to sixth century BC. Jainism teaches a profound respect for all living things and strongly condemns violence of any sort.

any difference in the moral wrongness of lying to help a person vs. lying to hurt someone.

Adults recruited from a mid-sized city in India also tended to factor in contextual information when making moral decisions (Miller, 1994). In considering whether a person should steal a train ticket out of another person's coat pocket in order to reach his best friend's wedding to deliver the wedding rings, 91% of Indian adults said he should, whereas only 46% of Americans agreed. Indian adults were not less likely than American adults to say that stealing is, in general, an immoral action, but they were more willing to give up an abstract value in the face of a more pressing, interpersonal obligation such as stealing a ticket to get to your best friend's wedding. Moreover, Indians were more likely to value interpersonal relationships even in life-threatening situations where the theft would result in someone's death (Miller, 1994). So, while American participants were not willing to fatally harm a stranger to help their friend, Indian participants valued their friendships relatively more than obligations to society or the law.

A worthwhile next step in this line of work might be to examine which types of relationships would warrant forsaking one's abstract moral values. This question interacts closely with the issue of the moral circle. For instance, in close-knit societies people might value interpersonal relationships more than abstract moral principles, but even in individualistic communities there might still be relationships that would outweigh moral principles. For example, in the relatively recent Hurricane Katrina tragedy in the USA, many dog owners refused to be "rescued" because the rescuers did not allow victims to bring their dogs along. The rescuers were relying on the abstract principle of saving the most people as quickly as they could, but many dog owners put aside these principles in favor of their relationship with their dog.

Earlier we cited evidence that moral judgments may vary with SES and there may also be within-culture variation as a function of social position. For example, if we take the case of Indian culture, the caste system determines the status of various groups within the society and prescribes honor to some and social ostracism to others. The caste system specifies different standards of morality for different caste groups. What is moral for the higher castes may not be moral for the castes lower in the hierarchy. Even the reasoning offered to justify conceptions of morality may be different.

Morality is defined by the higher caste groups, enabling them to legitimize their role and relevance for the society. Within the caste system the most stringently regulated areas of behavior are marriage and sexual relations. Marriage within the same *gotra*³ is considered immoral as it violates traditional practices — though the recent spate of honor killings in some parts of northern India has raised questions against this kind of morality (*Times of India*, December 2, 2010).

The work just cited suggests that different social positions entail different types of moral responsibility. It appears that participants also accept differences in moral responsibility as a function of social expectations when making judgments about third-party behavior. For instance, participants at a prestigious university in Delhi were more accepting of action on the footbridge version of the trolley car problem from a person of the warrior caste than from a person of the priestly or scholarly caste (Sachdeva and Iliev, in preparation). This result could be due to the belief that a person of the warrior caste is more suited to taking such a drastic and forceful action (as pushing a person off a bridge) than a person of the scholarly caste. In a similar vein, if participants saw someone engaging in a good or heroic action, they were more impressed if that action was unexpected based on social roles. So, for instance, if a police officer managed to prevent a robbery vs. an ordinary passerby, the ordinary passerby's action was more noteworthy to participants. The police officer's actions are simply warranted by his position but the passerby has gone above and beyond the call of duty. This result held for both US and Indian samples (Sachdeva, 2010).

Recent studies have also focused on individual differences in moral reasoning. Participants who are more abstract thinkers or those who rate higher on "need for cognition" scales are more likely to make utilitarian judgments (Bartels, 2008). Individual variations in activation of different brain regions can predict how heavily participants weigh others' mental states in making moral judgments (Young & Saxe, in press). However, individual differences may have a cultural corollary. For example, being a woman or coming from a poor background can be both an individual difference and a cultural difference variable. Individuals and cultures may differ not only in moral judgments but also in moral reasoning. Sex before marriage or drinking may be morally wrong because these behaviors go against religious teachings and cultural traditions,

³A *gotra* refers to descendants of an unbroken male line from a common ancestor.

factors that have tended to be ignored in moral psychology.

SYSTEM-LEVEL CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN MORALITY?

We believe that a neglected aspect of moral reasoning research is that moral reasoning may vary as a function of more systems-level cultural structures. Thus far, we have suggested that a culture's moral code of conduct can be different in terms not only of content but also of scope of applicability. Another possible source of cultural specificity in moral reasoning may arise from whether the concept of morality is conceptualized as being based on a system of duties owed to others or on a system of rights to be demanded from others. Moghaddam, Slocum, Finkel, Mor, and Harre (2000) propose that the division between a culture of rights and a culture of duties can have important implications for how different cultures represent morality and engage in moral behaviors. For example, perceptions of moral behaviors can change from being viewed as an individual decision to one that is made for the sake of others, with important implications for the idea of a moral circle (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990).

These broad systems of morality (i.e., duty-based or rights-based) may be closely related to the different types of self-construals that have been found in the East–West cultural psychology literature (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For instance, an interdependent construal of the self can lead to a greater emphasis on a duty-based orientation toward morality which makes the group the relevant unit of consideration in a moral situation instead of the individual (Brewer & Gardner, 1999; Miller, 1994). As a result, individual motivation or one's personal reasons for engaging in prosocial action may become less important. Miller and Bersoff (1994) found that, in judging whether or not an individual acted morally in helping a neighbor, participants from India (an interpersonal or duty-based culture) did not weigh whether the individual acted out of his own volition or as a result of a help prompt, relative to participants from the United States (a rights-based culture).⁴ It was more

important for American participants to know that the individual in a scenario decided to help on his own initiative.

Differences in valuing endogenous motivation in duties- vs. rights-based cultures may also be related to motivational differences in fulfilling social obligations. For example, Latino students perceive more social obligations than European American students toward distant relatives and friends, as should be expected for a duty-based culture. But, in addition, they find it more desirable and satisfying to fulfill social obligations than European American students (Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002). Janoff-Bulman and Leggatt found that Latinos showed a positive correlation between fulfilling social obligations and life satisfaction while European Americans showed a negative correlation.

Reasoning about morality on either the group or individual level can also affect which aspects of a situation capture attention. Going back to the trolley car problem for a moment, imagine that a person who is attuned to thinking about morality on the level of the individual focuses on the one person who has to be sacrificed in order to save five. In this case, the two versions of the trolley car problem seem quite different in how the person meets his end. However, if someone is used to thinking about morality on the group level, her attention may instead be drawn to the five workers that must be saved and the two trolley car scenarios start to seem very similar. So, a person with an individual or rights-based moral orientation may find the indirect/direct harm distinction in the trolley car problem to be relevant, but a person with a group or duty-based moral orientation may not. In some surveys conducted with several populations in India, Sachdeva and Iliev (in preparation) have found that participants do not differentiate between the switch and footbridge versions and strongly approve action in both.

In a rights-based system, it is conceivable that the needs of the few may sometimes outweigh the needs of the many. However, in a duty-based system, the needs of the many should be emphasized more than the needs of the few because the relevant unit of consideration is the social group.⁵ What this might mean for utilitarian

⁴Although rights- and duty-based systems of morality do appear to map closely on to the different construals of the self, a potentially interesting future line of work will be to look at the nature of rights and duties within these different types of self-construal. We imagine that duties in a culture that emphasizes and enforces interdependence (through a host of other factors) would have very different content and behaviors associated with it than duties in a culture where independent self-construals are more prevalent. The same reasoning holds for the nature of rights across cultures.

⁵As noted above, hierarchical relations may be more prevalent in duty-based cultures. Thus, it is conceivable that sacrifice for a respected monarch or other valued community member may be laudable. In these cases, the needs of a single person could certainly win out over the needs of many.

interpretations of the trolley car problem is an open question. The most straightforward reading of these findings is that Indian participants are simply more consequentialist. But the case may not be so simple. Other possible explanations could be that these participants are behaving in accordance with other deontic norms such as one based on sacrifice (Sachdeva, 2010). Participants might be construing the act of pushing a person off a footbridge as so emotionally and internally painful that carrying it out might be seen as a necessary evil. The footbridge version in India may involve just as much perceived harm as seen by American participants, but the reactions in India to this type of harm may be quite different. This interpretation suggests that although the harm domain may be present in every model of morality, the object of a harmful act could be perceived very differently depending on whether a person is operating in a rights-based or a duties-based system of morality.

Finally, a systems-level orientation may provide a broadened perspective for what falls into the realm of the moral (in the sense of defining how one should act). For example, a set of practices such as voodoo and the associated zombification may seem to be bizarre until is conceptualized as a system for norms and social control (Davis, 1997; see also Atran and Medin, 2008, on the role of forest spirits in shaping moral behaviors).

WHAT LEVEL OF CROSSCULTURAL VARIATION IS RELEVANT IN MORAL PSYCHOLOGY?

The issue of universality of human cognition is important in psychology for a variety of reasons. Note, however, that the very concept of a universal admits of a wide range of interpretations, as Norenzayan and Heine (2005) point out. For example, accessible universals are defined as cognitive abilities that are readily used by all humans in similar ways (other examples might be language and quantity estimation). In a number of models of moral reasoning, concepts such as harm and justice are supposed to be accessible universals as well. Models such as Kohlberg's, Turiel's and Hauser's conceptualize the moral domain as operating the same way across cultures.

Other levels of universalities range from the functional universals to existential universals to clearly culturally dependent phenomena. Functional universals are the concepts that are not equally accessible across cultures, but all humans have the cognitive capacity to perceive

these concepts and if they are accessible, they are used in the same way (e.g., models drawing on the five moral domains). Not all moral principles are expressed equally across cultures, but this view does not allow for variance in the definitions of each of the moral principles. Harm, if expressed in a culture, is always harm (even if the eliciting conditions are different).

As we have noted in our critique of these approaches, the definition of justice may vary across cultures, as well as across social roles and contexts. Therefore, we believe that moral reasoning might better fit the third level of universals, existential universals. These types of universals include concepts that are cognitively available to humans but are distributed unevenly across cultural groups and serve different functions in a community.

It may be that moral cognition is not one stream of processing but rather a collection of very different systems of reasoning (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009). Perhaps violations in the domain of purity are reasoned about much more intuitively than violations in the domain of justice. Instead of each theory being an exclusive explanation of how morality operates, many aspects of each theory might be required in order to explain the broad complexity of the moral mind. In essence, what this exclusive, one-correct-theory-of-moral-reasoning approach implies is a universal cognitive process that accounts for all moral judgments. However, if we are able to reconcile ourselves to pluralism in moral values, then the next step might be to accept pluralism in the cognitive processes supporting morality.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this review, we have suggested that cultural differences in moral reasoning affect not only what people value but also how people reason about the values they hold. Duty-based conceptions of harm have different implications than rights-based conceptions of harm. They also may be enforced and upheld in different ways. Additionally, cultures might be sensitive to the same types of social offenses, but view them as religious violations rather than moral violations. One could also examine cultures of honor and cultures of shame in terms of morality and moral reasoning. Dodds (1951) distinguished between conception of the world and the moral order as arbitrary vs. understanding of the limits of moral responsibility. The positive aspect of a guilt culture is its concern

for truth and justice and the preservation of individual rights. In a shame culture (sometimes referred to as “honor–shame culture”), what other people believe is a much more powerful factor. Morality is defined by others in the society and one is expected not to challenge but to accept others’ definition of morality.

The broader point in emphasizing large systemic differences, i.e., duties vs. rights systems or shame vs. guilt systems, is that morality, like other forms of cognition, must necessarily act in conjunction with other mental processes and sociocultural influences. Without studying the interactions between all of these factors, it is difficult to even begin to understand moral cognition. There is also evidence that cultural mores, preferences and values may change drastically over time, and that participants take this into account when determining the moral wrongness of an act (Kelly et al., 2007). Most people would probably agree that flogging crew members on a ship is a highly immoral action these days. When participants were asked to imagine this happening 500 years in the past, however, they did not even consider it to fall into the domain of morality at all.

Because moral cognition does not take place in isolation, we think that it is important to take a systems-level approach to studying human morality. This means including cognitive factors previously considered as unrelated to moral reasoning, such as causal reasoning (Greene et al., 2009), but also looking at social factors that might be salient in some cultural groups but not in others. One such factor might be the extent to which the concept of morality itself is salient within a culture. Interestingly, certain languages, such as Hindi, do not have a separate word that maps directly onto the word morality in English.⁶ The closest translation yields a meaning more akin to societal norms. What implications might this linguistic feature have for the moral–conventional distinction which is so firmly established in the field?

A severe limitation of current work in moral psychology is that the researchers engaged in it are largely Western white, middle-class, liberal males. Although the huge over-representation of Western college students as research participants is a very serious limitation for psychological research (Henrich et al., 2010), the lack of researcher diversity may be equally serious. For example, we find it striking that research on moral reasoning has overwhelmingly ignored the role of spiritual or

religious beliefs in moral cognition. This fact likely reflects the lack of salience of these same values in the researchers’ lives. It is worth remembering that some of the oldest moral codes in the world, such as the Ten Commandments, are a cornerstone of religious beliefs. Duties also are an important part of Hindu moral beliefs, and it likely is nonaccidental that duties play a large role in Indian moral systems. In addition, the mere fact that researchers tend to be Western and focus on Western participants carries the liability that the procedures, stimulus materials, and theoretical frameworks are likely to be ethnocentric (Medin et al., 2010). The study of moral reasoning needs to become more international with respect to both the researched and the researchers.

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