emotion review

Emotion Review
Vol. 3, No. 3 (July 2011) 323–324

ISSN 1754-0739
DOI: 10.1177/1754073911402383
er.sagepub.com

Moral Universals and Individual Differences

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Abstract

Contemporary moral psychology has focused on the notion of a universal moral sense, robust to individual and cultural differences. Yet recent evidence has revealed individual differences in the psychological processes for moral judgment: controlled cognition, mental-state reasoning, and emotional responding. We discuss this evidence and its relation to cross-cultural diversity in morality.

Keywords
cross-cultural differences, individual differences, moral circle, moral judgment

Kohlberg, Piaget, and the first generation of moral psychologists focused on moral reasoning as "reasoning" and therefore investigated people's explicit explanations of how and why they judged right and wrong as they did (Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1932/1965). Moral psychology thus emphasized the differences in moral reasoning between people—between children and adults, and between men and women (Gilligan, 1982/1993). Contemporary moral psychology has focused on the judgments themselves that arise from unconscious, automatic, and emotionally mediated processes. Unlike explicit moral reasoning, moral judgments were hypothesized to reflect a universal moral sense (Hauser, Cushman, Young, Jin, & Mikhail, 2007; Mikhail, 2007).

Many moral judgments are surprisingly robust to demographic differences: participants are sensitive to some of the same moral principles independent of gender, age, ethnicity, and religion (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Petrinovich, O'Neill, & Jorgensen, 1993). Across studies, and demographic groups, the vast majority of participants judged turning a trolley away from five people and onto one person to be permissible, but pushing a man off a bridge so that his body would stop a trolley from hitting five people to be forbidden. Plausibly, unconscious moral rules (e.g., it is wrong to intend harm) and automatic emotional responses (e.g., aversion to pushing the man) support such moral universals. The bulk of moral diversity and disagreement, by contrast, was presumed to arise in conscious reasoning and justifications.

More recent evidence, however, suggests that all moral judgments reflect the complex output of numerous psychological processes—controlled cognition, mental-state reasoning, emotional responding—and that individual and cultural differences emerge at every level. We describe three examples.

First, moral judgments are affected by individual differences in cognitive style, and working-memory capacity. Individuals high in "need for cognition" and working-memory capacity are more likely to deliver utilitarian judgments; that is, to endorse emotionally aversive actions that maximize aggregate welfare, like pushing the man off the bridge (Bartels, 2008). Individuals low in "need for cognition" are more punitive towards negligent or reckless behavior, neglecting to consider complex situational factors (Sargent, 2004). Moreover, people exhibiting more neural activity associated with controlled cognition (abstract reasoning, cognitive control) deliver more utilitarian judgments (Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004). Disrupting controlled cognition, by imposing a secondary cognitive load, impedes utilitarian judgments (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008).

Second, moral judgments are affected by individual differences in reasoning about intentions. Recently, we have discovered that individual differences in moral judgments of accidents (good intent, bad outcome) are correlated with individual differences in the engagement of a cortical region dedicated to mental-state reasoning, the right temporo-parietal junction (RTPJ)

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(Young & Saxe, 2009). Participants with a high RTPJ response weigh beliefs and intentions more heavily when judging accidental harms, assigning less blame for the unintended bad outcome; participants with a low response blame more on the basis of the outcome alone. Temporarily disrupting RTPJ activity using transcranial magnetic stimulation also resulted in more outcome-based moral judgments (Young, Camprodon, Hauser, Pascual-Leone, & Saxe, 2010).

Third, moral judgments are affected by individual differences in emotional responses. People who are feeling generally disgusted make harsher moral judgments of unrelated incidents (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). This effect is even stronger in participants who are more sensitive to their own bodily states (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008).

Each of these aspects of individual differences seems to have a cultural corollary. For example, individual differences in disgust sensitivity partially account for cultural differences in moral views: political conservatives are more sensitive to disgust than liberals (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009); disgust sensitivity also predicts certain moral and politicized attitudes (e.g., towards homosexuality) (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009). Cultures also differ in the moral weight of intentions: in one study, Jews weighed outcomes more than mental states, endorsing actions like resentfully caring for one's parents; Christians, by contrast, weighed mental states more, rejecting such actions as hypocritical (Cohen & Rozin, 2001). Other work suggests that Japanese subjects assign less weight to personal intentions than American subjects (Hamilton & Sanders, 1983).

Individuals and cultures may also differ in how they strive to integrate their intuitive moral judgments with explicit moral reasoning. For example, some individuals and cultures are more comfortable endorsing judgments they cannot explicitly justify, like moral prohibitions against safe, consensual, one-time incest (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). These cultural differences are more robust in adults than children. Over time, differences in culture (and education) may accentuate differences in the role of conscious principled reasoning for moral judgment.

In sum, the current literature reveals individual and cultural differences in many aspects of moral judgment. Unlike Kohlberg's system, these differences are unlikely to be arrayed on a ladder of moral progress. The next stage for research must therefore be to understand the structures underlying these differences. Patterns of correlations across individuals can identify independent psychological components of moral judgments in individuals, and also illuminate regularities in apparently arbitrary "cultural clusters" of moral values. Why might prolifers also be more likely to express antiwelfare or antiterrorist sentiment? Why are supporters of gay rights, animal welfare, and the environment more likely to be the same people? Rather than being culturally inherited and arbitrary, moral values, and how they cluster, may be determined by systematic individual differences in the underlying psychological processes (Haidt, 2007). For example, at the root of typically conservative values might be robust emotional attachment to identifiable individuals (e.g., Baby Jessica, Terri Schiavo), and the bounded moral community they constitute (e.g., the family, the race, the nation). Typically liberal values may find their source in more diffuse emotions that target not only the core of one's moral circle but abstract entities at the outer rungs: out-groups, animals, and even the earth. Ultimately, an individual-differences approach to our moral sense may help us understand and resolve moral disagreements not only between individuals but also on a broader scale.

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