

Differences in the importance of intentions and circumstances in moral judgments across diverse societies

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(Medical Xpress)—Do all cultures place the same importance on a person's motives when making moral judgments? According to the "moral intent hypothesis" all societies consider a person's intent, motivation, and circumstances important when making moral judgments on his or her actions. However, most studies that confirm the moral

intent hypothesis investigated Western, large-scale industrialized societies.

A collaboration of researchers from various institutions has conducted a study in which they consider how eight traditional small-scale societies and two Western societies weigh intention and motivation when considering moral judgment. They found that rather than a "strong" moral intent hypothesis, a "weak" moral intent hypothesis may be a better description of global attitudes toward certain actions. Specifically, while all societies considered motivation and intent in moral judgements to some degree, they did not prioritize them to the same extent. Their work appears in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

To understand the influence of motivation and intention in moral judgments, Barrett, et al. looked at the following demographics: Los Angeles (urban, North America), Storozhnitsa (rural-agriculture, Europe), Shuar (hunter-horticulturist, South America), Tsimane (hunter-horticulturist, South America), Hadza (hunter-gatherer, Africa), Himba (pastoralist, Africa), Karo-Batak (small-scale cultivators, Asia Pacific), Martu (hunter-horticulturalist, Australia), Sursurunga (horticulturalist, Asia Pacific), Yasawa (fishing-horticulturalist, Asia Pacific). Participants were asked to respond to scenarios from an "Intentions Bank" and from a "Mitigating Factors Bank."

The Intentions Bank provided examples that varied by how intentional or unintentional an act committed by a person was. The type of act was also varied to see if the severity of moral judgment based on intention, or lack of intention, correlated to the type of act that was done. The acts were scenarios that involved physical harm (e.g., hitting a person), group harm (e.g., poisoning a village), theft (e.g., stealing someone's bag), and violating a food taboo. Each of these had scenarios in which the violation was intentional, accidental, motivated, or antimotivated.

While the Intentions Bank tested one particular type of mitigating factor, or "excuse," that might make something judged as less wrong across different kinds of acts, the Mitigating Factors bank explored five different kinds of mitigating factors that might excuse a particular harm. Barrett, et al. provided five different scenarios that involved one person hitting another person. Each scenario had a different reason for why the person hit the other person: out of necessity (e.g., to get a bucket to put out a fire), self-defense, insanity, mistake of fact (e.g., the person wrongly thought two other people were fighting), intentional, or different moral beliefs (e.g., the perpetrator holds the belief that striking a weak person to toughen him up is praiseworthy contrary to the prevailing view of the community).

After analyzing their results using ordered logit models, Barrett, et al. found that there was an overall correlation between what they call high versus low intent and severity in judgment. "High" intent would be an action that was deemed intentional or the perpetrator had motive. "Low" intent would be an action that was deemed unintentional or the perpetrator did not have a motive. The Yasawa, in particular, and the Himba, to a smaller degree, showed little difference in the severity of the punishment a person should receive for an action that was high intent versus an action that was low intent. The urban and the rural Western societies showed the largest difference in the severity of the punishment based on high or low intent.

As far as particular scenarios were concerned, whether a person intentionally stole something or not resulted in the largest difference in the severity of the punishment. For most societies, the punishment should be less severe if the theft was unintentional. Violating food norms showed the least difference among the societies tested.

The authors found that circumstances matter across all societies. In their second experiment, where they looked at various circumstances in which

someone would physically harm another person, all societies judged intentionally hitting someone and hitting someone because of differing moral beliefs more harshly. The Western societies judged mistake of fact and insanity less harshly than the other societies, but all of them, except the Yasawa, viewed them as a less severe violation than intentional or differing moral beliefs. Necessity and self-defense were considered mitigating factors across all societies. Striking someone out of necessity was considered praiseworthy in several of the societies.

These results show that all of the societies that were tested considered the perpetrator's intentions, motivations, and the circumstances when making moral judgments. However, they differed in how much intention and circumstances play a role in the severity of the [moral judgment](#). The authors note that the two Western societies weighed intentions and circumstances more so in their moral judgments than the other societies. Additional research into how the size of the [society](#) affects moral judgments might provide clues as to both the similarities and differences found in the current study.

More information: H. Clark Barrett et al. Small-scale societies exhibit fundamental variation in the role of intentions in moral judgment, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1522070113](#)

Abstract

Intent and mitigating circumstances play a central role in moral and legal assessments in large-scale industrialized societies. Although these features of moral assessment are widely assumed to be universal, to date, they have only been studied in a narrow range of societies. We show that there is substantial cross-cultural variation among eight traditional small-scale societies (ranging from hunter-gatherer to pastoralist to horticulturalist) and two Western societies (one urban, one rural) in the extent to which intent and mitigating circumstances influence moral

judgments. Although participants in all societies took such factors into account to some degree, they did so to very different extents, varying in both the types of considerations taken into account and the types of violations to which such considerations were applied. The particular patterns of assessment characteristic of large-scale industrialized societies may thus reflect relatively recently culturally evolved norms rather than inherent features of human moral judgment.

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