



## Culturally Informed Moral Domain

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## ABSTRACT

*The present study provides support for a culturally informed moral domain beyond the values of 'harm' and 'justice'. This paper documents the findings of the Moral Foundation Questionnaire (MFQ). The MFQ was administered on 100 participants which helped in knowing the moral preference of the sample. The MFQ showed an emphasis on the moral domain of 'purity', apart from the emphasis on the ideals of harm and fairness.*

**KEYWORDS :** Moral Foundation questionnaire, culture

## Introduction

In the field of psychology 'morality' has been initially studied within the cognitive developmental paradigm. The psychologists assessed the reasoning of the participants on the moral dilemmas revolving around the issues of 'harm' and 'justice' Piaget (1932/1965), Kohlberg (1969/1981). Morality had been narrowly defined to include only issues related to harm and justice. Turiel (1983, p.3) gave a popularly cited definition of moral domain as, "prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other". Moreover, such constrained notion had been believed to be universal in nature.

The universal notion of harm/justice based morality has been challenged by various researchers. For Example, Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller, 1997 showed that the strict distinction between moral rules (limited to harm and justice) and conventions does not hold good cross-culturally. They compared adults and children from North America and India, and found that Indians considered practices related to food, clothing and sex to lie under moral domain, while for North Americans they were issues related to social conventions. In another study Nisan (1987) found that the children in traditional Arab villages considered transgressions like mixed-sex bathing and addressing a teacher by his first name as moral in nature.

There is a plethora of studies contesting for expansion of the domain of morality beyond harm and fairness. Cultural psychologists propose more comprehensive and holistic view of moral domain. Shweder et al. (1997) gave 'three ethics' of moral discourse: the ethics of *autonomy* (in which the self is conceived of as an autonomous agent with preferences and rights), *community* (in which the self is considered as an office holder in a larger interdependent group or social system), and *divinity* (in which self is taken as a creation of god, housing a divine soul within). Shweder and colleagues' (1997) work was extended by Haidt and colleagues (Haidt & Joseph 2004). They gave Moral Foundations Theory wherein they proposed five moral foundations. These five moral foundations are (1) Harm/ care, (2) Fairness/ cheating, (3) Loyalty/betrayal, (4) Authority/subversion, (5) Sanctity/ degradation.

This paper presents empirical evidence for a broader conceptualization of morality. Moral Foundation Questionnaire which is grounded in a broad cultural theory of morality was administered to infer the moral preference of a larger sample.

## Method

## Participants

The MFQ was given to a sample of 100 participants. The participants lied in the age-range of 25- 45 years and included both males and females. They belonged to an upper-middle SES and were at least graduates.

## Procedure

The questionnaires were given to the participants either in person or through e-mail. The participants were encouraged to read the instructions carefully and fill in the questionnaire

by themselves, with minimum interference from the researcher. In order to encourage the participants to fill in their responses honestly, their anonymity was maintained. They were asked not to write their names, and to just mention their age and gender for the purpose of analysis. The scores obtained on MFQ were subjected to one way ANOVA and post-hoc (Tukey) comparison.

## Tool

## Moral Foundations Questionnaire

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) is based on the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) (Haidt & Joseph 2004). It has five domains, namely: (1) Harm (2) Fairness, (3) Loyalty, (4) Authority and (5) Purity. The MFQ provides a measure of the degree to which individuals endorse each of the five moral foundations posited by MFT. It is a rating scale with responses ranging from (0, not at all relevant / strongly disagree) to (5, extremely relevant/ strongly agree). The test-retest Pearson correlations for each foundation score are: harm (.71), fairness (.68), in-group (.69), authority (.71), purity (.82).

## Results

The mean and standard deviation was obtained for the scores of the participants on the five dimensions (as shown in table 1).

Table 1.

**The mean and standard deviation of the participants' scores on the MFQ**

Moral Domain	Mean	Standard Deviation
Harm/ Care	23.98	3.21
Fairness/ Cheating	23.68	3.20
Loyalty/ betrayal	19.78	4.35
Authority/ subversion	20.25	4.48
Sanctity/ degradation	22.10	4.50

It is evident from the table that the highest preference was given to the moral foundations of harm and fairness. Further, a one way ANOVA was conducted to see if the scores obtained on the five moral domains differed significantly or not (Table 2).

Table 2.

**One-way ANOVA for the moral domains**

Sources of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1473.488	4	368.372	23.010	.000
Within Groups	7924.630	495	16.009		
Total	9398.118	499			

The ANOVA shows a significant difference in the participants' score obtained on the five moral domains [F (4, 495) =23.010, P<0.000].

Finally a Post-hoc test was carried out to further establish which of the domains actually differed significantly. The post-hoc analysis indicated that there exists no significant

difference between the mean moral scores obtained in the domains of 'Harm' and 'Fairness'; 'Loyalty' and 'Authority'. However, the mean moral score obtained in the domain of 'Harm' differ significantly with the scores obtained in the other three domains of 'Loyalty', 'Authority' and 'Sanctity'. Similarly, the mean score obtained in the domain of 'Fairness' also differ significantly with the scores obtained on the other three domains of 'Loyalty', 'Authority' and 'Sanctity'. Further, the mean score obtained in the moral domain of 'Sanctity' differ significantly from the scores obtained in the remaining four domains of 'Harm', 'Fairness', 'Loyalty', and 'Authority'

Thus, the relative preference for the moral domains of the MFQ is: the greatest emphasis is given to the values of 'Harm', and 'Fairness'; second in preference is the moral domain of 'Purity', and the least emphasis is on the values of 'loyalty', and 'Authority.'

### Discussion

The participants seemed to emphasize the most on the moral domains of 'harm' and 'fairness', followed by the domain of 'purity' and the least preference was given to the domains of 'authority' and 'loyalty'. This order of preference is similar to the preference made by the participants of individualistic western culture. This similarity can be because the participants in the present study were from upper-middle SES residing in the capital city. This section of society is characterized by nuclear families, working parents, and is self-contained / self-sufficient familial units. Thus, they can be said to have an individualistic orientation in their everyday life, similar to western society.

The moral domain of 'purity' was the next most preferred domain after the dimensions of 'harm' and 'fairness' in the MFQ. Its emphasis can be understood in Indian context, as it has been documented by various studies. For example, Froerer (2011) conducted a study on people of Chhattisgarh and documented that they commune with supernatural agents like deities, ancestral spirits, and ghosts. If any action prohibited by these supernatural agents (like trespassing onto the sacred ground, roaming outside the house at dawn, dusk, or mid-day when the supernatural agents are most active), or any action that upsets them (like forgetting to give blood sacrifice to the deity) is committed, it can lead to illness or death of the person himself/herself or the family member. These transgressions are considered to be moral in nature, as a consequence of which one gets ill.

Lastly, it was found that the values of 'loyalty', and 'authority' were emphasized least. This can be attributed to the changing times. In the age of cut-throat competition people emphasize more on success, than on ideal like loyalty which often can become an obstacle in their path of achieving it. Further, the meaning of 'respect for authority' too have undergone a change. As Mehta (1997) mentions that the meaning of respect is shifting from obedience and subservience to courtesy and kindness.

### Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that the conceptualization of the moral domain is largely dependent on the cultural inputs. The definition of moral domain varies cross-culturally, and cannot be universalized. It extends beyond the values of 'harm' and 'fairness', to include under culturally significant ideals.

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