



## Exposure to moral relativism compromises moral behavior



Tage S. Rai <sup>a,\*</sup>, Keith J. Holyoak <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

### HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined whether exposure to moral relativism would compromise moral behavior.
- Participants who read a relativist argument were more likely to cheat.
- Participants who read an absolutist moral definition were less willing to steal.
- The subjectivity of morality implied by relativism appears to compromise behavior.

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### ABSTRACT

Across two studies we investigated the relationship between moral relativism versus absolutism and moral behavior. In Experiment 1, we found that participants who read a relativist argument for tolerating female genital mutilation were more likely to cheat to win an incentivized raffle than participants who read an absolutist argument against female genital mutilation, or those in a control condition. In Experiment 2, participants who read a definition of morality phrased in absolutist terms expressed less willingness to engage in petty theft than those who read a definition of morality phrased in relativist terms, or those in a control condition. Experiment 2 also provided evidence that effects were not due to absolutist arguments signaling that fewer behaviors are morally permissible, nor to relativist arguments defending more disagreeable moral positions. Rather, the content of the philosophical positions themselves—the fact that relativism describes morality as subjective and culturally-historically contingent, whereas absolutism describes morality as objective and universal—makes individuals more likely to engage in immoral behaviors when exposed to moral relativism compared to moral absolutism.

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### Introduction

The philosophical position of *moral absolutism* holds that some moral beliefs are objectively true, and reflect facts that are independent of any social group's specific preferences. Under this view, a statement such as "killing is wrong" is similar to the statement " $2 + 2 = 4$ ." The statement is either true or false; it is not a matter of opinion. On the other end of the spectrum, the philosophical position of *moral relativism* holds that the truth or falsity of moral beliefs are products of our traditions and cultural histories, rather than objective statements based on logic, or facts about the state of the world independent of our own opinions or perspectives. According to moral relativism, if we had different traditions and cultural histories we would have different moral beliefs, which would be no more "right" or "wrong" than those we now hold (Harman, 1975). In recent decades, philosophers and psychologists alike have adopted

less absolutist positions on morality in light of evidence that people across cultures and time periods differ radically in their moral beliefs (Flanagan, Sarkissian, & Wong, 2008; Haidt, 2007; MacIntyre, 1984; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Wong, 2006). In the present paper we examine what effects, if any, exposure to these different moral perspectives may have on moral behavior and moral intentions.

The inherent subjectivity of moral relativism may imply that people can have no basis for making moral judgments against those with whom they disagree, as relativism provides no objective criteria for determining who is right (Gowans, 2012). For example, whereas human rights advocates have argued that female genital mutilation harms women's bodies and is therefore intrinsically morally wrong, defenders of the practice have argued that moral judgments must be made relative to the social groups in which practices take place, and therefore we must tolerate female genital mutilation because it carries important meaning for the people who practice it (Gruenbaum, 2001; James, 1994). Importantly, those who fear the consequences of moral relativism believe that if people lose their objective basis for judging others, they will eventually direct this attitude inward and become more likely to engage in immoral behaviors themselves.

\* Corresponding author at: Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Road, Jacobs Center 501, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.

E-mail address: [tage.rai@gmail.com](mailto:tage.rai@gmail.com) (T.S. Rai).

Note that there is no intrinsic reason why a relativist conception of morality need adopt all of these positions. In philosophy, meta-ethical relativism accepts that our moral beliefs are ultimately subjective, but does not hold the normative position that this subjectivity forces us to tolerate behaviors that we find morally disagreeable, nor that our own behavior should necessarily be impaired (Wong, 2006). And yet, is it possible that the folk conception of moral relativism carries less weight for laypeople than does moral absolutism, because the former is thought to imply that nothing is definitively right or wrong? And might this perspective weaken the moral motivation we need to refrain from engaging in immoral behaviors ourselves?

Previous research has found that priming participants' sense of morality in some way (e.g., by having them write down the Ten Commandments or reminding them of their school's honor code) reduces their willingness to engage in immoral behavior (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). However, this line of research has not distinguished between more absolutist and more relativist conceptions of morality. Goodwin and Darley (2008) found that people often view their moral values in more absolutist, factual terms than their non-moral values, such as aesthetic preferences and tastes. However, there is considerable variability in the perceived objectivity of moral beliefs, and perceived consensus regarding the moral status of an act and the negativity of the act both predict more absolutist beliefs in regard to the act (Goodwin & Darley, 2012).

Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005) have argued that this quality of strongly held moral beliefs, which they refer to as *moral conviction*, is crucial to their functioning. Specifically, they have argued that deeply held moral values derive their strength to motivate moral behavior from being experienced as universal and rooted in facts about the state of the world, rather than in subjective opinions that differ across time and cultures. Skitka and colleagues have found that greater moral conviction is predictive of more strongly held beliefs and judgments on a range of moral-political issues, greater willingness to act on moral beliefs (e.g., to vote), and greater intolerance of those who disagree with them (for reviews, see Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Skitka, 2010). However, only one experimental study has provided support for a causal link between moral absolutism and actual behavior. In a study of donating behavior, Young and Durwin (2012) found that participants primed with an absolutist question about morality, "Do you agree that some things are just morally right or wrong, good or bad, wherever you happen to be from in the world?" were twice as likely to donate to a charitable cause as participants in a control condition or those primed with a more relativist question about morality.

Studies of workplace attitudes across cultures have consistently found that people who hold more relativist attitudes about morality are more likely to express behavioral intentions and support for unethical workplace practices, such as misleading customers and co-workers, stealing from the company, or misreporting work (Barnett, Bass, & Brown, 1994; Singhapakdi, Vitell, & Franke, 1999; for a meta-analytic review, see Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). Outside of work settings, (Baker, 2005; Inglehart & Baker, 2000) found that participants in the World Values Survey, a large cross-cultural survey of values and opinions, that agreed with the statement, "There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances at the time," assigned slightly reduced blame for various moral offenses. However, Forsyth and Berger (1982) found that people who scored higher on the relativism subscale of the Ethics Position Questionnaire (Forsyth, 1980), an individual differences measure of relativist attitudes, were no more likely to cheat on a test than non-relativists.

Previous research thus demonstrates a robust relationship between individual differences in relativist attitudes and relaxed moral standards and corresponding behavioral intentions, but not actual immoral behavior. Although one study has demonstrated that priming moral absolutism increases engagement in pro-social behavior, none have demonstrated causal links between exposure to relativism and

engagement in immoral behavior, nor have any studies elucidated the causal mechanisms that might underlie such effects.

In the present paper, we examine whether exposure to moral relativism versus moral absolutism shifts our willingness to engage in immoral behavior. We hypothesized that if moral beliefs derive their motivational strength from being perceived as universal and rooted in facts about the state of the world rather than in subjective preferences, exposure to moral relativism will lead people to engage in immoral behavior, whereas exposure to moral absolutism will make people refrain from engaging in immoral behavior. From this perspective, to be absolutist in our moral beliefs increases motivation to behave in accord with them, whereas the inherent subjectivity of morality implied by moral relativism reduces this motivation and increases the likelihood of engaging in immoral behavior.

In Experiment 1, we investigated whether exposing participants to either a moral relativist argument in favor of tolerance toward a culturally disagreeable practice, or a moral absolutist argument against tolerance of the practice, would influence their cheating behavior in a subsequent incentivized task. In Experiment 2, we investigated whether exposing participants to either relativist or absolutist definitions of morality would influence their willingness to engage in a petty theft while testing between competing hypotheses regarding the causal mechanisms underlying our effect.

## Experiment 1

Experiment 1 investigated whether exposure to arguments for moral relativism and moral absolutism could impact moral behavior. We presented participants with either a moral relativist argument for tolerating the practice of female genital mutilation or a moral absolutist argument for banning the practice. If adopting more relativist perspectives weakens moral motivation by making morality more subjective, then exposure to an argument for moral relativism should make participants more likely to engage in an immoral behavior: specifically, lying in order to increase their chances at winning a cash prize.

## Method

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 120$ ) were recruited via the introductory psychology subject pool at the University of California, Los Angeles. After giving consent to participate, each participant was randomly assigned to a condition and completed the study anonymously in an isolated room. Participants were told they were taking part in a study on learning and remembering.

### Design and materials

Experiment 1 employed a between-subjects design. Participants in the experimental conditions were presented with a brief description of female genital mutilation ("female genital mutilation refers to the practice of cutting or otherwise modifying female genitalia, including the clitoris and labia minor"). Following the description, participants were informed of the opinion of "many prominent scholars, activists, and world leaders" and presented with an accompanying argument from a "leading scholar" that varied based on condition. Participants in the moral relativism condition read an argument for respecting the practice, while participants in the moral absolutism condition read an argument for banning the practice. A control group of participants read an emotionally neutral opinion from a chef about cooking.

In the moral relativism condition, participants were told that our moral values are subjective opinions and we cannot impose them on another group of people because they see female genital mutilation as a necessary, purifying act ("...it is not our place to judge and

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