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Demographic correlates of moral differences in the contemporary United States[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Bourdieu argued that cultural tastes have tangible social and economic consequences. Some work suggests that moral differences might have similar effects, but it is not yet clear how morality is distributed across the social landscape, and hence where moral variation is likely to occur. This research note examines the relationships between several well-established morality measures and an extensive set of demographic variables using Bayesian model averaging (BMA), a statistical technique that better captures uncertainty in parameter estimates. Results show that gender, age cohort, and religious affiliation predict the widest range of moral constructs, followed by education and marital status. Comparison with earlier work suggests that gender, age, and religious affiliation are important predictors of morality generally.

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1. Introduction

One of Pierre Bourdieu's lasting legacies is the recognition that seemingly idiosyncratic and inconsequential cultural tastes are neither idiosyncratic nor inconsequential. Rather, personal cultural capital is what allows some people to interact easily with high status others and to gain access to valued social and economic rewards (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Although those in positions of power usually unconsciously favor those with similar forms of capital, the process can also be intentional (Lamont, 1992; Rivera, 2012).

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A number of scholars have extended this line of thinking, noting that individuals also make distinctions along moral lines (Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Graham and Haidt, 2012; Lamont, 1992, 2012; Lamont et al., 1996; Prasad et al., 2009). As with other forms of differentiation, moral distinctions can lead to misunderstandings, reduced empathy, and even differential evaluations of worth, which in turn can create uneven access to social, economic, and political rewards (Ditto and Koleva, 2011; Liu and Ditto, 2013; Prasad et al., 2009; Sayer, 2010). These disparities in access are likely to be systematic to the extent that social divisions pattern moral differences. This makes it important to determine how moral worldviews are distributed across the social landscape.

Recently, scholars have argued that morality depends on a variety of factors including evolved psychological intuitions, cultural socialization, and personal experiences (Graham et al., 2013; Greene, 2013; Sayer, 2010). Although intuitions generally provide a common “first draft” of morality, different cultural, sub-cultural, and personal experiences heavily revise this initial material, leading to a wide variety of moral outlooks (Graham et al., 2013: 61). Bourdieu (1990) argued that socializing experiences vary by social location, and work together to form dispositions that shape subsequent thought, perception, and action (i.e., the *habitus*). Consistent with work on morality, these dispositions often have a moral character, giving individuals a sense for what is right or wrong, worthless or worth striving for (Bourdieu, 1984; Ignatow, 2009; Vaisey, 2009). The result is that differences in moral dispositions are likely to run along lines of prominent social distinctions, such as race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status (c.f., Marsh, 2009; Sayer, 2010).

Morally formative experiences are also likely to vary by other socio-demographic characteristics. For example, participation in a religious group can create a sense of moral order, and embed individuals in dense social networks that provide opportunities and support for moral action (Bader and Finke, 2010; Durkheim, 1995 [1912]). The contours of this shared morality vary by the religious tradition and religious and/or political ideology that characterize a given religious community (Putnum and Campbell, 2010; Wuthnow, 1988). Local or regional sub-cultures might also predict moral norms and behaviors; in the United States, for instance, the South is associated with both high levels of religiosity and – among whites males – participation in a “culture of honor” that emphasizes both positive and negative forms of reciprocity (Cohen et al., 1996; Leung and Cohen, 2011; Putnum and Campbell, 2010). Moral understandings might also vary with age, both because age captures cohort-based variations in life experiences (e.g., coming of age in the 1960s), and because individuals’ concerns may shift in patterned ways as they move through the life course (Danigelis et al., 2007; Harding and Jencks, 2003). Personal experiences, too, are likely to play a role. Major life events such as marriage, divorce, or loss of employment can shift a person’s social networks and provide support for different types of moral logics and activities (e.g., selecting into or out of religion, see Stolzenberg et al., 1995).

Initial evidence supports the idea that morality maps in patterned ways onto social and demographic characteristics. Several studies have found that women rate other-centered concerns (e.g., caring for others) more highly than men, and self-focused concerns less highly (e.g., power, achievement; Graham et al., 2011; Longest et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2012). Older cohorts likewise express more concern for others, and additionally place greater importance on conformity to social norms, preserving traditions, and respect for authority than younger cohorts (Koleva et al., 2012; Lamont et al., 1996; Longest et al., 2013). Conformity and tradition are also more important among those who frequently attend religious services, but less salient for those who have attained higher levels of education (Lamont et al., 1996; Longest et al., 2013). Class also plays a role, shaping a variety of values and morality-related social attitudes (Sayer, 2010; Weeden and Grusky, 2005).

These studies support the claim that morality is socially patterned, but fall short in a number of ways. In many cases, links between morality and demographic characteristics are treated only superficially, as a step toward pursuing analyses with a different focus (e.g., a table of bivariate correlations; c.f., Aquino and Reed, 2002; Koleva et al., 2012). Among sociologists, scholars often use attitudes toward specific social issues (e.g., pornography laws) rather than measures of the moral constructs thought to underlie them (e.g., freedom, purity, c.f., Danigelis et al., 2007; Weeden and Grusky, 2005). Even within the reviving sociology of morality treatments vary widely in the questions they address and often draw on ad hoc moral frameworks and measures, making systematic comparisons challenging (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013). In contrast, psychologists use established morality

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