



# Individual differences in relational construal are associated with variability in moral judgment



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## ABSTRACT

Relationship Regulation Theory (RRT; Rai & Fiske, 2011) posits that moral judgment varies depending on how one construes the social relationships in which moral actions occur. We provide a novel test of this theory using a wide variety of moral violations based on Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Graham et al., 2011). In two studies participants judged violations occurring in several different relationships, and then rated the degree to which they use four Relational Model prototypes (Fiske, 1991) to construe each relationship. Variability in construal was associated with variability in wrongness judgments across several types of violations; this was shown when analysis observed aggregated relationship-specific effects and also relationship-general individual differences in average construal. Results (a) showed mixed support for specific RM-judgment hypotheses derived from RRT and MFT, thus warranting further research exploring the nuances of RRT, while also providing novel implications for MFT, (b) extend past research to show that individual differences in relational tendencies shape moral judgment, and (c) support RRT's claim that relational construal is an important factor accounting for variability in moral judgment.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding variability in moral judgment is becoming increasingly important in the social and personality sciences. A recent yet untested theory accounting for such variability is Relationship Regulation Theory (RRT; Rai & Fiske, 2011). RRT posits that when making moral judgments, people do not solely rely on abstract moral rules or general concerns for consequences; rather, notions of right/wrong and good/bad depend on the social relationship in which moral events take place, and how the judge construes this relationship. We provide a pioneering test of this idea, and also explore whether moral judgment is shaped by individual differences in *general* construal of interpersonal relationships.

### 1.1. Relationship regulation theory

RRT proposes that people form judgments of right and wrong in specific relationships using four cognitively discrete *moral motives* of relationship regulation. Each motive shapes moral judgment differently, as each entails distinct moral considerations based on distinct socio-relational concerns. *Unity* is the moral motive to

nurture and protect one's ingroup by avoiding/eliminating threats of physical/spiritual contamination, and providing empathy-based aid and protection to ingroup members in need. Moral considerations prioritize solidarity, need-based giving, and empathy with similar others. *Hierarchy* is the motive to create and maintain linear rank in social relations. Subordinates must defer to authority rule, while superiors must provide leadership and pastoral care. Under this motive, moral judgments are shaped by concerns for duty, roles, and rank-based entitlements. *Equality* is the moral motive for ensuring balanced, in-kind reciprocity, and equal treatment, voice, and opportunity. Fairness is determined by a strict rubric of one-for-one equality, and moral judgments depend on whether balance has been achieved or maintained. *Proportionality*, finally, involves a ratio metric for determining what is morally just, fair, and rationally appropriate. This motive promotes an equity-based sense of fairness: benefits, rights, and entitlements are fair if calculated in proportion to merit, input, or some other criterion. Also, Proportionality entails a cost-benefit calculus for determining the rightness/wrongness of actions, such that actions (e.g., cheating) may be judged more or less wrong in proportion to their costs and benefits.

RRT builds on Fiske's (1991) Relational Models Theory, which posits four discrete ways of structuring social relations. Each moral motive maps onto one particular *relational model* (hereafter, *RM*). Communal Sharing (CS), the model in which Unity concerns apply,

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organizes individuals into distinct groups within which individuals feel a shared identity, common purpose, and a sense of equivalence (e.g., families). Authority Ranking (AR), corresponding to the Hierarchy motive, involves a linear ordering of social status in which individuals have unique roles, duties, and privileges corresponding to their social rank (e.g., boss–employee relations). Equality Matching (EM), the model for the Equality motive, organizes interaction based on even balance or in-kind reciprocity (e.g., housemates). Finally, Market Pricing (MP), corresponding to the Proportionality motive, applies ratio considerations to the coordination of social interactions (e.g., “you get out what you put in”, as in many business relations).

RRT proposes that because different RMs entail different moral motives, moral judgment will vary depending on how the RMs are used to construe the relationship in which moral actions take place. Consider corporal punishment. If a father struck his child, one’s judgment might depend on how one construes the parent–child relationship: individuals adopting a CS construal (and motivated by Unity) might show harsher wrongness judgments than those adopting an AR construal (and motivated by Hierarchy). Accordingly, in this paper we looked at numerous moral violations occurring in several different interpersonal relationships. We explored whether variability in judgment of moral violations depends on how RMs are used to construe these relationships. Furthermore, we investigated individual differences in general tendencies toward each RM when construing interpersonal relationships. Past RM research (e.g., Caralis & Haslam, 2004; Haslam, Reichert, & Fiske, 2002) has shown that individuals vary in stable tendencies to construe relationships using each RM (e.g., Caralis & Haslam found that individuals high in general-CS construal were typically high in agreeableness). We extend this line of research to explore how relational tendencies are associated with moral judgment.

## 1.2. Hypotheses

Moral violations were based on Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Graham et al., 2011), which posits five categories of moral intuitions pertaining to morally relevant acts: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Respect, and Purity. As a comprehensive theory of the content of moral judgment, MFT grants us much breadth with which to explore moral violations. Although above all we sought to investigate RRT’s basic claim that variability in the RMs used to construe social relationships shapes moral judgment, we also tested specific RM-moral foundation hypotheses derived from RRT (and, for some hypotheses, also commensurate with certain premises of MFT). We expected CS construal to positively correlate with Care violation wrongness, given the importance of care and empathy in the Unity motive. CS construal should also positively correlate with Loyalty and Purity violation wrongness, as people are “motivated by Unity to uphold group boundaries and avoid contamination of [their] groups” (Rai & Fiske, 2011, p. 66), and because Loyalty and Purity are described as ingroup “binding” foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Also, CS construal should negatively correlate with Fairness violation wrongness, because communal relationships disavow tab-keeping and are tolerant of imbalances and disproportions (Fiske, 1991). AR construal should positively correlate with Respect violation wrongness, as AR’s Hierarchy motive focuses attention on acts that undermine social order. There is inconsistency in MFT as to whether the Fairness foundation stresses concerns for equality- or proportionality-based fairness (Haidt, 2012), while RRT posits that fairness judgments emphasize equality under EM construals yet emphasize proportionality under AR and MP construals (fairness/unfairness of actions are proportionate to rank/entitlement and merit/contributions, respectively). Thus, we explored whether violations of the Fairness foundation are

judged more wrong under AR, EM or MP construals. These hypotheses guided an otherwise exploratory investigation.

## 2. Study 1

We first sought to demonstrate that variability in RM construal of social relationships is associated with moral judgment. We looked at a range of social relationships and assessed variability (across all relationships) in wrongness judgments of violations.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

One-hundred four (29 male) Australian undergraduate psychology students participated for course credit;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.44$  years,  $SD = 3.36$ .

#### 2.1.2. Materials and procedure

We sought relationships that could be construed using different RMs and thus could elicit variability in construal. To this end, we chose relationships such that the victims of the violations were the perpetrator’s classmate, colleague, boyfriend/girlfriend, parent, university class tutor, friend, sports-team captain, or cousin. Violations were constructed based on standard moral foundations measures and descriptions (in particular, see appendices in Graham et al., 2009) and were phrased such that each could reasonably occur in numerous different interpersonal relationships. There were twenty violations in total (four per foundation). Item examples for each foundation are as follows: “Person-A makes cruel remarks about Person-B’s weight and appearance” (Care); “Person-A fails to reciprocate Person-B’s nice favor” (Fairness); “Person-A snitches on Person-B after he/she has committed a minor offense” (Loyalty); “Person-A mocks Person-B in front of his/her equals” (Respect); “Person-A gives Person-B a flier for an obscure sex fetish website” (Purity).<sup>1</sup>

After providing informed consent, participants rated the wrongness of each violation in each relationship on a 0 (*Not at all wrong*) to 4 (*Very wrong*) scale. They rated each violation, one relationship at a time, before rating the next violation. Presentation order of the relationships was fixed as per above. Violation order was fixed such that any five consecutive items covered all five moral foundations. Participants then read summaries of the RMs devised by Haslam and Fiske (1992), which describe how each RM coordinates dyadic relationships (e.g., the Authority Ranking summary included the text “One person tends to ‘call the shots’ and take the initiative in this relationship and the other tends to follow along”). Participants then rated how relevant each RM was to each relationship, using a 0 (*Not at all relevant*) to 4 (*Very relevant*) scale, and were then debriefed.

#### 2.1.3. Data analysis

Data were structured hierarchically (relationships nested within participants), warranting a multilevel modeling approach. Level-1 captures within-participants variance: within each participant, correlations were observed between relational construals of a particular relationship and wrongness judgments within that relationship, with analysis observing the overall patterns of these associations across all relationships. Following standard Level-1 modeling procedures (e.g., Enders & Tofghi, 2007), scores were mean-centered: a participant’s score for each relationship was centered around that participant’s mean score across all relationships.

All analyses used the following Level-1 model:

$$\text{WRONGNESS}(k)_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{CS}) + \beta_{2j}(\text{AR}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{EM}) + \beta_{4j}(\text{MP}) + r_{ij}$$

<sup>1</sup> Full list of items available from the first author.

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