



The Five Moral Foundations Sacredness Scale in men in court-mandated treatment for violently abusing their partners



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Intimate Partner Violence through the lens of the Moral Foundations Theory in an attempt to better understand the connections between sacredness and violence. Specifically, it aims to explore the usefulness of the Moral Foundations Sacredness Scale in a sample of 300 men convicted of domestic violence and to determine the existence of a distinctive profile based on the degree to which they sacralize the five moral foundations. Results show that the sacredness scale presents the hypothesized psychometric properties to be used in such specific sample. They also show that controlling for gender and political orientation men convicted of domestic violence have a clear tendency to sacralize the five moral foundations. The Authority foundation significantly discriminates between violent and non-violent participants while the Purity foundation emerges as a significant predictor of self-reported behaviors and beliefs tapping violence within the violent group.

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1. Introduction

Selfishness is a threat to peaceful coexistence (Alexander, 1982) and, according to recent moral psychology studies even some pro-social values can present a large threat, especially when they are considered particularly important (Graham & Haidt, 2012). The need to defend what we hold sacred—whether peace or war, freedom or slavery, my interests or yours—can quickly become an attack on those who question these values. In this paper, we explore connections between the sacralization of some moral principles and a specific type of violence, that which is carried out against the partner. Taking into account that sacredness is a crucial social concept for understanding what is right and wrong within a social group, we analyze the degree to which people who actually commit violent actions that go against common moral beliefs sacralize each of the five moral foundations proposed by the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) (Haidt & Graham, 2007). This approach may allow us to understand IPV as a shared social vision in which sacredness and evil are two sides of the same coin and focus the psychological treatments on the mechanism that leads people to violently defend those moral values they hold sacred.

1.1. From morality to violence through sacredness

Although morality functionally works by either constraining or enabling a wide range of admissible behaviors for the members of any social system to make social life possible (Haidt, 2008), specific connections between very important moral principles and violence have been developed in recent years (Bauman & Skitka, 2009; Baumeister, 1996; Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2012). To this respect, it has been illustrated that the process of sacralizing objects according to sacred values and the attendant process of developing a vision of evil in whatever threatens those objects can lead to violent actions even if those sacred values are radically opposed to violence, such as nurturance, care or peace (Graham & Haidt, 2012).

Sacredness refers to the human tendency to invest people, places, times, and ideas with an importance far beyond the utility they possess (Graham & Haidt, 2012). People seem to want to live in a sacralized cosmos because of its social functions (shared meanings that bind people together) (Graham & Haidt, 2010), but along with such a sacred vision of the world arises a vision of evil in whatever threatens it (Haidt & Algoe, 2004). Evil entails cruelty and violence, and it has been operationalized in terms of harming others intentionally (Baumeister, 1996; Zimbardo, 2007), but recently, the MFT has suggested that perceptions of evil may be based on concerns other than harm. As it turns out, the theory proposes at least five basic concerns or five innate psychological

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systems upon which each culture constructs its own set of moral virtues and vices; there are also at least five types of moral evil that emerge naturally when someone or something threatens these moral concerns. This would happen in such a paradoxical way that the more people sacralize some prosocial moral concerns, the more they may be willing to fight for them.

1.2. The Moral Foundations Theory and the Sacredness Scale

The Moral Foundations Sacredness Scale (MFSS) (Graham & Haidt, 2012) measures the degree to which people sacralize each of the five innate psychological foundations proposed by the MFT (Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2008). These foundations are assessed by the Moral Foundation Questionnaire (MFQ) (Graham et al., 2011), and are as follows: (1) Harm, based on our ability as mammals with attachment systems to dislike the pain of others; (2) Fairness, defined as sensitivity to issues of equality, justice, and rights that allow for reciprocal altruism; (3) Ingroup, based on our need as tribal creatures to form shifting coalitions; (4) Authority, understood as the propensity to manifest hierarchical social interactions; and (5) Purity, understood as the propensity to exhibit the emotion of disgust in response to biological and social contaminants. This last foundation reflects individual differences in the tendency to perceive sacredness in physical objects, such as the body, and, specifically, whether a person treats the body as a playground for their own pleasure or as temples to house a soul (Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). The MFSS assesses this tendency for all of the five moral concerns.

According to the MFT, the five foundations are universally present, and any combination of them can be used to support an ideological narrative, including those that motivate violence (Graham & Haidt, 2012). This allows subcultures within the same society to elaborate and emphasize different foundations to differing degrees. So, the connection between sacredness and IPV could come down to a question of the intensity of some specific moral concerns.

2. Objectives and hypotheses

This study aims to determine the moral concerns that men in court-mandated treatment for violently abusing their partners hold sacred and whether there is a distinctive pattern on which they would construct their ideological narrative about violence. To do this, we first focus on the psychometric characteristic of the MFSS (factorial structure, reliability, and convergent validity). Secondly, we analyze the distinctiveness of their profile.

Regarding the first objective and because there are no published data about the factorial structure of the MFSS, it is expected to have the same structure as that of the MFQ. The MFSS has been used as a criterion to select item combinations that maximize both the internal and external validity of the MFQ, and Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) have provided robust support for a five-intercorrelated-factor conceptualization of the MFQ (Graham et al., 2011) (Hypothesis 1). With respect to convergent validity, some degree of convergence is expected between the sacredness subscales and the MFQ, and between the tendency to sacralize and some type of pleasant and biased vision of the world, including oneself. In this respect, we assume that the shared emotions and practices related to sacred beliefs bind people together in the certainty of the rightness of their own set of moral values, which it is essentially pleasant. We also assume that some degree of self-deception is needed to confer a sacred value to a moral concern and to think that such a value is more important than others. Therefore, convergent relationships are expected (Hypothesis 2) between the sacredness subscales and (1) moral absolutism, understood as the degree to which people see their own set of moral values as the only correct set to

be adopted (Peterson, Smith, Tannenbaum, & Shaw, 2009); (2) self-deception, defined as a non-intentional bias with two types of consequences—the hedonic ones of viewing oneself in an unrealistically favorable light and the offensive ones for deceiving others (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011); and (3) satisfaction with life, understood as a hedonic measure of subjective well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

Regarding the second objective and because gender and political orientation has been consistently associated with differential endorsement of the five moral concerns (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2007), we explore (1) differences and similarities in the sacredness scales between different groups regarding the use of violence while controlling for gender and political orientation, (2) its predictive power to clearly distinguish between two extreme groups: those who have used violence against their partners and those who work on a daily basis against any type of violence, and finally (3) its predictive power, in competition with others variables, to explain self-report behaviors and beliefs tapping violence within the violent group.

If, as it seems, women sacralize the five moral foundations more than men; conservatives sacralize the Ingroup, Authority, and Purity foundations more than liberals (Graham & Haidt, 2012); and those who hold pro-war attitudes sacralize Ingroup concerns significantly more, and Harm and Fairness concerns significantly less (Graham & Haidt, 2012; Koleva et al., 2012), it will be expected that (1) those who have used violence against their partners sacralize at least one moral foundation more than do those non-violent participants who are nonetheless more prone to sacralize (Hypothesis 3), (2) at least one of the sacredness moral foundations will be a significant predictor above and beyond the political orientation variable to correctly classify the violent and non-violent participants (Hypothesis 4), and (3) at least one of the sacredness moral foundations will be a significant predictor of one self-reported measure tapping the violent behavior within the violent group (Hypothesis 5).

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 300 Spanish speaking men in court-mandated treatment for violently abusing their partners. Most of the participants were Spanish (60%) and were followed in frequency by Ecuadorians (18%), Peruvians (3%), Dominicans (3%), and Bolivians (3%). The remaining 13% included Mexicans, Colombians, Chileans, Paraguayans and Cubans. During the second session, the participants were asked to voluntarily participate in a research project under anonymous conditions. All of them accepted but 5 were excluded because more than 20% of their data were missing from their answers. The average age was 38 ($SD = 10.47$) and ages ranged from 19 to 78. Twenty-five percent of the participants had a higher education, and 25% had only elementary education. Regarding the participants' political orientation, 27% were liberals, 50% were moderates, and 23% defined themselves as conservatives. The severity of their crimes was unknown, but we can infer that some degree of homogeneity spurred the judges to make the same decision about them (psychological intervention instead of prison). Using Johnson's terminology, they would be at some intermediate point between "common couple violence" and "intimate terrorism" (Johnson, 1995, 2011). None of the participants had a diagnosed psychiatric disorder.

In order to control for a potential gender influence three comparative samples were added. The first one was made up of 17 women also in a court-mandated treatment for having exercised violence against their partners (M age = 35, $SD = 7.38$).

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