

## Cultural Differences in Children's Recommended Punishment of Moral Transgressions

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*The purpose of this research was to examine the severity of punishment recommended by children for moral transgressions. Using Hofstede's (1980) distinction between individualism and collectivism, we examined the severity of punishment recommended by eight to twelve year old children for moral transgressions that violated a cultural value. Participants were children of various nationalities enrolled in a summer camp on the island of Mallorca, Spain. The children were classified as either individualist or collectivist using the Children's Self-Construal Scale (Lewis et al. 2000). Each child reacted to nine moral transgressions, two of which were universal and seven of which reflected transgressions of either individualist or collectivist values. The results indicated that children classified as collectivists recommended harsher punishments for transgressions of collectivist values, whereas individualists did not vary in their recommended level of punishment for transgressions against both collectivist and individualist values.*

**Keywords:** individualism, collectivism, moral judgments, cultural orientation, moral transgressions

### Introduction

According to Krebs (2008), our sense of morality consists of thoughts and feelings about rights and duties and can be perceived to be the result of good or bad character traits, as well as right and wrong motives. An individuals' moral sense leads us to judge our own as well as others' behavior and to desire that good things happen to those who live up to our moral standards and that bad things happen to those who transgress against our moral standards. That said, many moral standards are not universal and vary from culture to culture (Foot 1982). The study of culture has contributed significantly to our understanding of how individuals develop their moral code, and respond to moral dilemmas (Rachels 1986, Sachdeva et al. 2011). Studies of morality in different cultures have refined our understanding of moral concepts and shown how culture influences our perception of moral standards (Vasquez et al. 2001). Different cultures embody different values, thoughts and ideas that they view as important (Haste and Abrahams 2008). Markus and Kitayama (1991) found that persons of the Western world (e.g., the United States) generally subscribe to strongly individualistic beliefs, emphasizing the uniqueness of every individual and encouraging development of an independent

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self-construal. The independent self-construal views the self as an autonomous entity whose own thoughts, feelings, and actions are of utmost importance. Other people are important largely as a basis for social comparison, and the realization of internal attributes and accomplishment of personal goals are viewed as highly desirable states. In contrast, many cultures categorized as non-Western (e.g., China) are characterized as collectivist, focusing on the inherent connectedness of the individual to others. The interdependent construal of self is derived from this belief, viewing the self as an integral part of the social relationships in which one is engaged, and recognizing that thoughts, feelings, and actions are directly related to those of others with whom the person interacts. Relationships with others are integral to self-definition, as is the ability to maintain harmony in such social relationships (by engaging in appropriate actions, filling proper roles, and promoting the goals and needs of the group/others).

In an individualist society, a person's cultural orientation will include independence, autonomy, self-reliance, and freedom as important values. In a collectivist society, one's cultural orientation will include interdependence, group harmony, consensus, and loyalty to the group as important values. Since individualism promotes the belief in one's unique identity, individualists are more likely to claim the right to express themselves, make personal choices, and strive for self-actualization than are collectivists. Collectivists are more likely to see themselves as an inseparable part of a cohesive in-group and therefore expect and are expected to accord priority to the views, needs, and goals of the group rather than "stand out" as individuals (Yu and Yang 1994).

We develop our sense of right and wrong from the culture in which we live (Shweder et al. 1987, Zha and Kushnir 2019). Individualists and collectivists have been shown to differ in their conceptualization of what constitutes moral behavior (Mascolo and Fischer 2010). For example, individualists differ from collectivists in their attitudes about integration and inter-participation (Fischer and Bidell 2006). Collectivist values are underscored by the inclusion of the social context. Thus, collectivist's perception of an event is dictated, in part, by the amalgamation of the situational and contextual parts. In contrast, individualists' perceptions of situations tend to be atomistic. Events are integrated such that each situational or contextual part is not seen as a pivotal aspect of the event. Furthermore, by growing up in a particular cultural context, children internalize (Cole 1996) or adopt behaviors related to their attitudes, which in turn can affect moral judgments (Rogoff 2003).

In general, people respond negatively to those who violate cultural norms and values (e.g., Miller and Anderson 2003, 2013). Even young children have been shown to react to moral transgressions by engaging in forms of punishment to include shunning moral transgressors and acting pro-socially towards victims of moral transgressions (Vaish et al. 2010, 2011). For example, Fu et al. (2007) found that Chinese children (collectivists) rated lying to help a collective but harm an individual less negatively whereas Canadian children (individualists) did the opposite. The present study examined how individualists and collectivists reacted to moral transgressions that violated either individualist or collectivist values, as a function of the children's cultural orientation. It was hypothesized that children

with a collectivist orientation would recommend a more severe punishment for those children who violated a collectivist value and that children with an individualist orientation would recommend more a more severe punishment for those children who violated an individualist value.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Prior to conducting the study, we obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. In addition, permission from the Director of the summer program and the Principal at the participating institutions was obtained. Finally, we obtained parental consent for the children to participate in the research and child assent from each of the underage participants.

Seventy participants, thirty-five boys and thirty-five girls, completed the study at the Colegio Internacional de Baleares on the island of Mallorca, Spain. The children were students at a summer camp being held at the school. The ages of the children ranged from eight to twelve years old ( $M=9.23$ ). The study included children from nine countries including Spain, England, Russia, Germany, Denmark, Argentina, United States, New Zealand, and the Ukraine.

### *Materials*

The children were classified as either individualists or collectivists based on their score on the Children's Self Construal Scale (Lewis et al. 2000). This scale was developed specifically for use with young children and has been shown to be reasonably reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.65$ ). We used the scale to determine whether a child's self-construal was independent (individualist) or interdependent (collectivist). Children rated five statements as to the extent to which they liked each statement on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from a very happy face=5 to a very sad face=1. Statements reflected cultural orientation and included items such as "I like doing things by myself" and "I like working with other students." Thirty-one of the participants were determined to be individualists and 33 of the participants were classified as collectivists. Data from six of the participants were excluded from this study since their scores were not indicative of a clear cultural orientation.

To measure moral decision-making, a questionnaire was created that described nine moral transgressions. Each scenario was prefaced with: "a child like you..." to produce an answer that would reflect their feelings toward members of their own group. Two of the items were classified as universal moral transgressions. These were lying to mother (Scenario 1) and disobeying father (Scenario 2). Honoring one's parents is enshrined across cultures. For example, in China, the Civil Affair Ministry suggested in 2011 that a law be established that would require adult children to regularly visit their parents or face a lawsuit (Hanson 2012). In addition to the Biblical commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," the Jewish

Talmud states that honor of one's parents should continue after their deaths (Nachum 2012). The "second" commandment in the Quran commands the faithful to honor parents, to obey them, and to respect their opinion. In the United States and approximately 200 other countries, mothers and fathers each have a day of celebration to honor them. As a result, we classified the moral transgressions of "disobeying father" and "lying to mom" as universal and expected that both individualists and collectivists would find these behaviors equally morally reprehensible, although the underlying reasons for obedience may differ for collectivists and individualists. In East Asian collectivist societies, obeying and honoring one's parents is based on Confucian ideas of filial piety (Ho 1994), while in Western, individualist societies, parents may be expected to provide reasons in order to insure children's obedience (Trommsdorff and Kornadt 2003). While both disobedience and lying may be seen as moral transgressions, various studies suggest that under certain circumstance, lying may be seen as less reprehensible than many other moral transgressions (see DePaulo et al. 1996). In the words of Nyberg (1993), lying is "publicly condemned" at the same time that it is "privately practiced by almost everybody" (p. 7). However, it is doubtful that this "sophisticated" view of the value of telling certain types of lies will be evident in children.

Based on a review by students enrolled in a course on cross-cultural psychology at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, the remaining seven scenarios were written from either a collectivist perspective or an individualist one. For example a collectivist moral transgression was "a child like you steals money from a friend to buy candy." The individualist version replaced friend with stranger. Triandis et al. (1988) describe the differences between individualists' and collectivists' attitudes and behavior towards friends vs. strangers. In general, individualists tend to be members of more ingroups, are less attached to any particular ingroup, believe that success is less dependent on group membership, and make fewer distinctions between ingroups and outgroups. Thus, the difference between stealing from a friend or tattling on a friend and stealing from or tattling on a stranger is not as distinct as it would be among collectivists. Collectivists tend to be members of fewer ingroups, are very attached to their ingroups, rely on the ingroup to help them achieve success, and make greater distinctions between ingroups and outgroups. Thus, we expect that for collectivists, Scenario 5-stealing from a friend and Scenario 6-tattling on a friend would be a relatively greater moral transgression than stealing from or tattling on a stranger.

Scenario 3 in which the child cheats for the good of the group or himself is based on the cultural differences related to achievement motivation. Individualist-success motivation is a form of achievement motivation that directs one's attitudes and actions towards the attainment of personal goals and self-fulfillment. As such, it stands in contrast to collectivist-success motivation which encourages individuals to connect with others so that his or her contribution is seen as beneficial to the members of a particular group or society in general (Yu and Yang 1994). Thus, we expect that cheating for the good of the group should be seen as less of a moral transgression by collectivists as compared to individualists.

Cultural differences in the appropriateness of bragging about group success vs. individual success is based on differences in self-effacement vs. self-enhancement, (Church et al. 2014).

Collectivists are more likely to engage in self-effacement, which requires that individuals maintain a degree of humility that promotes modesty, fitting-in, not sticking out, and not bragging. In contrast, research conducted in North America has shown that individualists tend to engage in self-enhancement rather than self-effacement, in part because Western culture encourages individuals to define themselves as unique and separate individuals who are self-confident and responsible to themselves (Heine and Lehman 1997, Bond 1991). Thus, we expect that collectivists will be more likely to condemn bragging for personal gain than bragging about group success (Scenario 4).

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), collectivists are more likely to possess interdependent self-construal's that emphasize the connectedness of the individual to others. The interdependent construal of self views the self as an integral part of the social relationships in which one is engaged, and recognizes that thoughts, feelings, and actions are directly related to those of others with whom the person interacts. Relationships with others are integral to self-definition, as is the ability to maintain harmony in such social relationships (Parkes et al. 1999). Thus, we expect that exclusion from the group (Scenario 7) will be seen as a more serious moral transgression by collectivists than by individualists.

To further ensure that the scenarios reflected an individualist vs. collectivist orientation, we administered the Singelis (1994) self-construal scale (SCS) that measures individualism/collectivism to a group of students enrolled in an upper-division social psychology course. The scale has 22 questions, half of which were individualist examples (IndSC) and half of which were collectivist examples (InterSC). An example of an individualist statement was, "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects." An example of a collectivist statement was, "Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument." Participants rated each example on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Singelis (1994) reported Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of 0.73 and 0.74 for the IndSC scale and 0.69 and 0.70 for the InterSC scale. In short vignettes, supporting the predictive validity of the SCS. Two weeks later, we provided the students with the list of moral dilemmas that we had prepared for the children. The students were instructed as follows: Please indicate how bad you would have thought each of these issues would be when you were ten years old using a scale of 1 not that big a deal to 11 really bad. Analysis of variance indicated that the statements did confirm the individualist vs. collectivist orientation about the severity of the moral transgressions.

In the study, the children were asked how severe the child should be punished for each transgression using a 5-point version of the Likert scale similar to the one used to measure cultural orientation. The drawings on the scale reflected the degree of harshness ranging from 5=severe to 1=mild. Students were taken out of summer camp activities individually and administered the questionnaires outside of their classroom. The experimenter sat with the children and responded to questions about the meaning of words as needed.

### Procedure

Because the summer camp program was taught in English, the scales and questionnaire administered were in either English or Spanish, whichever was more comfortable for the participant. Before administration of the measures, researchers first obtained verbal assent to ensure participants knew that their participation was voluntary, and that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to. Once assent was verified, we used simple examples to explain how the Likert-type scale was to be used. We explained that a 1 indicated something you didn't really like, whereas a 5 is something you like very much. A couple of practice questions were given to ensure participants understanding of the scale. For example, researchers asked children about their affinity for chocolate. In most cases this was rated a 5. Contrarily, researchers asked how much children enjoyed celery. This varied a bit more. To determine the child's orientation (individualist/collectivist) the children were individually administered the Lewis et al. (2000) I/C scale for children. The scores for the individualist and collectivist items were compared and the children were classified as individualist or collectivist using the scale's scoring protocol. Once their cultural orientation was determined the children were asked to recommend a degree of punishment for several moral transgressions.

Each child judged the two moral transgressions that were considered universal. The next seven questions were similar in nature, but differed on the cultural value that was being violated. Each child answered a different set of these questions, which were randomly sorted to make sure each child received questions that reflected transgressions of both collectivist values as well as individualist values.

### Results

The mean "punishment" scores for individualists and collectivists for each transgression were compared using Analysis of Variance. Table 1 shows the means, *F* scores and probability. Individualists and collectivists did not differ in the severity of their recommended punishment for the two universal transgressions. We expected that collectivists would be more tolerant of cheating for group gain and that individualists would be more tolerant of cheating for personal gain. The results indicated to no difference between individualists and collectivists with regard to cheating for group gain. However, with regard to cheating for personal gain, collectivists recommended a more severe punishment than did individualists. Similarly, we expected that collectivists would be more tolerant of bragging about their group and that individualists would be more tolerant of bragging about their personal success. The results indicated to no difference between individualists and collectivists with regard to bragging about the group. However, with regard to bragging about personal success, collectivists recommended a more severe punishment than did individualists. With regard to stealing, we expected that collectivists would be less tolerant of stealing from a friend and more tolerant of stealing from a stranger. The results supported that hypothesis and indicated that collectivists recommended more severe punishment for stealing from a friend and

less severe punishment for stealing from a stranger. With regard to tattling, we expected that collectivists would be less tolerant of tattling on a friend and more tolerant of tattling on a stranger. The results indicated that collectivists recommended harsher punishment for tattling on a friend as compared to individualists. With regard to excluding a child from their group, we expected that collectivists would find that more morally repugnant and the results indicated that collectivists recommended harsher punishment for someone who excluded another child from the group. On the issue of refusing to wear a school uniform, a measure of group membership, we expected that collectivists would be less tolerant of a child refusing to wear a school uniform and the results supported that hypothesis. The one issue that did not conform to our hypotheses was the issue of fighting with either a sibling or a stranger. We expected that collectivists would recommend a more severe punishment for fighting with a sibling but the results indicated the opposite. Individualists recommended a harsher punishment for fighting with a sibling than did collectivists.

**Table 1.** *Cultural Differences in the Extent of Punishment Applied to Moral Transgressions*

| Type of Transgression            | M Ind'l | M Coll | F     | p <  | $\eta^2$ |
|----------------------------------|---------|--------|-------|------|----------|
| <b>Universal Transgressions</b>  |         |        |       |      |          |
| Scenario 1 Lie to Mom            | 3.38    | 3.42   | 0.012 | ns   |          |
| Scenario 2 Disobey Dad           | 3.62    | 3.44   | 0.418 | ns   |          |
| <b>Paired Transgressions</b>     |         |        |       |      |          |
| Scenario 3 Cheat (Group Gain)    | 3.63    | 3.67   | 0.008 | ns   |          |
| Cheat (Personal Gain)            | 2.65    | 3.68   | 7.323 | 0.01 | 0.165    |
| Scenario 4 Brag (Group)          | 3.32    | 3.38   | 0.033 | ns   |          |
| Brag (Individual)                | 2.90    | 3.63   | 4.363 | 0.04 | 0.105    |
| Scenario 5 Steal from Friend     | 3.65    | 4.42   | 4.188 | 0.05 | 0.102    |
| Steal from Stranger              | 4.47    | 3.83   | 4.045 | 0.05 | 0.090    |
| Scenario 6 Tattle on Friend      | 2.80    | 3.79   | 5.319 | 0.03 | 0.126    |
| Tattle on Stranger               | 4.00    | 4.04   | 0.017 | ns   |          |
| Scenario 7 Exclude from Group    | 3.00    | 3.89   | 7.637 | 0.01 | 0.171    |
| Refuse to Play                   | 3.21    | 3.33   | 0.102 | ns   |          |
| Scenario 8 Fight with Sibling    | 4.05    | 3.25   | 5.903 | 0.02 | 0.126    |
| Fight with Stranger              | 3.30    | 3.63   | 0.633 | ns   |          |
| Scenario 9 Refuse School Uniform | 2.74    | 3.23   | 4.392 | 0.04 | 0.052    |

## Discussion

From an evolutionary perspective, culturally shared norms and their enforcement seem essential to the survival of the species (Henrich et. al. 2010). According to Schmidt et al. (2013) children by the age of three understand and attempt to enforce moral norms. In fact, the presence of moral norms and values across cultures suggests that morality plays a central role in holding societies together. Previous research has found that both cultural similarities and differences in moral judgments depend on the type of moral transgressions. Some transgressions, such as lying are condemned across cultures (Smith et al. 2007). As expected, our research found that for lying, the punishment was equal for both individualists and collectivists. Similarly, we found condemnation of disobedience to be equally condemned by

individualists and collectivists.

Cultural variations in moral focus affect which behaviors individuals will find morally relevant (Boer and Fischer 2013). We found cultural differences in reactions to moral transgressions between individualists and collectivists that reflected cultural variations in their focus of moral concerns. Consistent with research by Vauclair and Fischer (2011) we found that individualists reacted more harshly to moral concerns that focused on individual rights while collectivists reacted more harshly to moral concerns that focused on communal social duties. Thus, collectivists found it more morally reprehensible to cheat for personal gain, brag about individual accomplishment, steal from a friend, tattle on a friend, exclude others from the group and refuse to wear a school uniform. Consistent with the importance of the ingroup to collectivists, they found it less morally reprehensible to steal from a stranger than did individualists.

Individualists chose to punish fighting with siblings more severely. This is contrary to our central hypotheses. However, Deater-Deckard and Dunn (2002) found that children in extended families were less likely to form aggressive relationships with their siblings than those in nuclear families. In fact, in some collectivist cultures such as India, the term sibling applies beyond ones' brother or sister to include cousins and other related children being raised in proximity (Kumar et al. 2015). Having a larger sibling base can allow for a variety of prosocial relationships to form, and reduce instances of sibling rivalry (Baham et al. 2008). While we expected collectivists to be more distressed by fighting within the family, it may be that sibling fighting is more common among individualists and that these children have been more often warned of serious consequences for this behavior by their parents. The current research was not designed to answer this question fully, and future research is necessary to understand the underlying reason for this finding.

Transgressions against such collectivist norms as offenses against close friends, may be seen as wrong because collectivists' sense of identity is in part determined by connections to friends. For most of the scenarios, the individualistic moral transgression did not elicit more severe punishments by children classified as individualists. This neutral pattern shown by individualists may be an indication that their focus is on the transgression itself, e.g., cheating, and not on who is involved in the transgression cheating, e.g., cheating for the team or the individual. Individualists derive their sense of self not in respect to their social relationships, but their personal qualities independent from others.

This sort of perceptive focus is evident in tasks such as the Michigan Fish Test. When told to describe a simple picture of fish in their environment, individualist Americans were more likely to describe the three focal objects in the picture, the biggest fish. On the other hand, collectivistic Japanese participants described the picture holistically taking into account objects' relationships to each other (Masuda and Nisbett 2001). This is a key delineation between analytic and holistic cognition and perception. While analytic cognition is defined as a process of thinking and decision making that is independent of context, holistic cognition relies on the contextual aspects of a situation to derive understanding and make judgments (Nisbett and Miyamoto 2005). The current research design relied on context to



derive expected differences. This was evident among collectivists, but was not found with individualists. Their underlying cognitive and perceptual differences may explain these results.

## Conclusion

The moral status of specific social behaviors can vary widely across cultures (Henrich 2015). The current research suggests that the cultural syndromes of individualism and collectivism play a role in these differences. Furthermore, cultural norms related to the punishment of moral transgressions vary such that punishment for anti-social behaviors are more stringent in collectivist cultures. Thus, our findings support the work of Herrmann et al. (2008) and demonstrate that the attitudes of young children reflect cultural differences related to the relative values and norms that individualists and collectivists embrace.

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