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MORAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CULTURAL-DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

The area of moral development has in recent decades seen recurrent calls for the inclusion of more than one kind of moral reasoning, in order to move beyond earlier conceptualizations of morality as a unitary structure or domain. The argument for plurality has also been put forth for other fundamental aspects of human psychology, including intelligence, creativity, and self. Typically, the arguments have been inspired by consideration of culturally diverse individuals and groups. What has so far received less attention is the development of these psychological phenomena, and how developmental patterns may vary among cultures. This is because it takes time to build knowledge about new constructs, such as “naturalistic intelligence” and “Ethic of Community.” It also takes new ways of theoretical thinking to capture the development of a pluralistic phenomenon.

Nonetheless, a new emphasis in moral psychology research is how the development of diverse kinds of reasoning occurs across the life course, and the extent to which developmental trajectories vary across cultures. This is the focus of the theory known as the “cultural-developmental approach”. This approach charts trajectories across the life course for three kinds of moral reasoning, the Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity. However, the cultural-developmental approach is not a one-size-fits-all model. The developmental trajectories are proposed as flexible *templates*. Specifically, they accommodate the different hierarchies of Ethics held by culturally diverse peoples. For example, autonomy is valued more in some cultures than others. Depending on the culture, as described below, each of the three Ethics emerges at different points in childhood, varies somewhat on the slope and specific characteristics of its development, and reaches different endpoints in adulthood. The cultural-developmental approach, then, aims to capture how moral development and culture co-modulate. From this perspective, ontogenetic development is not determinative but nor is there a limitless cultural range. In the following, a review of the theory will be followed by a sampling of recent research findings. A synopsis of measurement instruments generated by the cultural-developmental approach will also be provided.

Theory: Templates for Three Ethics

Based on a synthesis of findings from many different research traditions, the cultural-developmental approach lays out developmental trajectories for the three Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity. The three ethics involve different, albeit not incompatible, conceptions of a moral agent. The Ethic of Autonomy involves a focus on the moral agent as an individual. Accordingly, specific types of moral reasons within this ethic include the interests, well-being, and rights of individuals (self or other). The Ethic of Community focuses on persons as members of social groups, with attendant reasons such as duty to others, and concern with the customs, interests, and welfare of groups. The Ethic of Divinity focuses on moral agents as spiritual or religious entities, and reasons encompass god’s authority, natural law, and spiritual purity. Research has shown the presence of the three ethics among diverse age and cultural

groups, and have also confirmed that their moral reasons differentiate into factors that fit the three ethics.

The cultural-developmental approach describes moral development in terms of changes and consistencies in the *degree* of use of the three ethics over the life course. It also speaks to the specific *types* of moral reasons used within an ethic. **Table 1** (see end of preprint) provides examples of types of moral reasons within each of the ethics based on the coding manual and questionnaires used for assessing their use.

Figure 1 (see end of preprint) shows the developmental trajectory templates for degree of use of each of the three ethics. With respect to the Ethic of Autonomy, the hypothesis is that reasoning emerges early in childhood and the degree to which persons use this ethic stays relatively stable across adolescence and into adulthood. The specific types of Autonomy reasons that persons use, however, are likely to change with age. A substantial body of findings from different research traditions has shown that from early on, children in different cultures focus on harm to the self and the interests of the self, as well as the needs and interests of other individuals. As persons in different cultures grow into adolescence and adulthood, some consideration of the welfare of the self and other individuals remains. Adolescents and adults, however, also begin to speak of reasons such as individual rights and equity in a consistent manner—even if findings have indicated that these do not prevail across cultures.

The Ethic of Community, according to the cultural-developmental approach, rises throughout childhood and into adolescence and adulthood, both in degree of usage and the diversity of types of reasons. Findings across different research programs have consistently indicated that younger children in diverse cultures invoke Community reasons such as family interests and customs. By late childhood and adolescence, Community reasons that pertain to social groups other than the family are added, including friends and authority figures in places such as school and work. Cross-sectional and longitudinal findings have shown that by late adolescence or adulthood even more Community reasons are added, such as considerations of societal organization and harmony.

Turning to the Ethic of Divinity, for which less research on moral reasoning is available, the proposal is that its use will often be low among children but will rise in adolescence and become similar to adult use. Diverse religions have ceremonies in early or mid-adolescence that confer moral responsibility on adolescents and link that responsibility to knowledge of religious teachings. Research has also indicated that adults often explain their moral behaviors in terms of divinity concepts, including adults from relatively secular communities.

As noted earlier, the cultural-developmental approach is not a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, the developmental trajectories in Figure 1 are proposed as templates that accommodate the different constellations of ethics held by culturally diverse peoples. For collectivistic cultures, for example, the model predicts a particularly early and strong emergence of the Ethic of Community in childhood, followed by a continuous increase in adolescence that leads to a frequent usage in adulthood.

In sum, the point of emergence of each trajectory and their slopes of development depend on the prevalence of the three ethics within a culture and the hierarchy among them. Thus, the cultural-developmental approach provides developmental templates that need to be merged with knowledge of a culture in order to generate precise hypotheses. It is important to note that within this approach “culture” is not synonymous with country or ethnicity but rather describes communities whose members share key beliefs and behaviors. Of course, as scholars have long observed, cultural communities also include heterogeneity among groups and individuals.

Recent Research Findings

This brings us to what research with the cultural-developmental approach has shown for diverse cultural groups within and across countries.

Religious Conservatives and Liberals in the United States

Research with children, adolescents, and adults who belong to conservative and liberal religious cultures in the United States has highlighted three points. First, as predicted by the cultural-developmental approach, religious liberals and conservatives share important developmental features. For example, children—whether they live in a liberal or conservative household—reason more in terms of the Ethic of Autonomy and less in terms of the Ethic of Community, as compared to adolescents and adults.

Second, as also predicted by the cultural-developmental approach, there is much more to moral development than age or common maturation alone. Culture indeed shapes moral trajectories. For example, conservative children reason in terms of the Ethic of Divinity whereas liberal children seldom do, and this cultural difference in reliance on Divinity becomes even more pronounced among adolescents and adults. **Figures 2 and 3** (see end of preprint) provide a pictorial synopsis of findings from several studies with religious conservatives and liberals from the U.S.

The third point that stands out from research with American liberal and conservative religious communities is that the role of culture in moral development is even more evident when comparing “public” and “private” spheres of reasoning. Conservative adolescents and adults reason in terms of Ethic of Divinity consideration for both public moral issues where judgments are applied to people in general, and private issues where judgments are made for oneself about one’s moral experiences. Whereas liberal children and adolescents scarcely reason in terms of Divinity for any issue, some liberal adults use this ethic when discussing their private moral issues. In contrast to claims that liberal adults simply lack this language, they have privatized the Ethic of Divinity. These findings help cast new and nuanced light on America’s “culture wars.” They indicate that religious conservatives and liberals diverge on what should be society’s moral lingua franca.

Recent research has also addressed processes that underlie the development of moral reasoning among children from conservative religious cultures in the United States. Linguistic analyses of everyday conversations have revealed that parents regularly seek to reroute their children’s reasoning from a focus on Autonomy to Divinity considerations. This research, then, shows that parental socialization by means of everyday discourse contributes to the rise in the

Ethic of Divinity from childhood into adolescence among religious conservatives that is illustrated in **Figure 3**.

Adolescents and Adults in India and Thailand

As predicted by the cultural-developmental approach, studies have shown that adults more than adolescent reason in terms of the Ethic of Community in India and Thailand. Also, within both of these collectivistic cultures, Community reasoning is highly common.

However, research that included adolescents and adults from both urban and rural Thai communities has further illuminated that urban adolescents stand out due to their comparatively frequent use of the Ethic of Autonomy. One interpretation is that the moral reasoning of the urban Thai adolescents is shaped not only by the traditional collectivistic culture characteristic of their parents' generation, but also by the autonomy-oriented values that comes with the globalization of urban communities. These findings, then, highlight how the cultural-developmental approach aids in addressing the intersection of moral development with cultural change.

Emerging Adults Across Cultures

The cultural-developmental approach predicts a relatively stable use of the ethic of Autonomy from childhood into adulthood, as described earlier. Cultures which afford young people in their twenties a prolonged period of identity exploration, also termed emerging adulthood, may nonetheless see a momentary upswing in the Ethic of Autonomy. Emerging adulthood is a recent phenomenon in cultures where education and marriage has been prolonged into the late twenties. The hallmarks of emerging adulthood—-independent decision-making, financial self-sufficiency, and accepting responsibility for oneself—all center on Ethic of Autonomy considerations.

Indeed, findings have shown that emerging adults reason more in terms of Autonomy than the other two kinds of ethics in Brazil, Israel, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. One interesting, if not entirely surprising, exception is Japan—a culture often deemed collectivistic—where Autonomy is tied with Community in the thinking of emerging adults.

Apart from the above examples of research, findings from other recent studies examining cultural-developmental hypotheses can be found in *Moral development in a global world: Research from a cultural-developmental perspective* (see further readings below).

Research Measurements

Measurements are available to researchers interested in examining moral development from a cultural-developmental perspective. In the standard manual for coding oral and written moral reasoning, *Coding Manual: Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity*, each moral reason is coded into one of the three ethics, allowing for an assessment of the degree to which a person uses each. Each reason is also coded into one of numerous subcategories or types. The manual provides 13 to 16 subcategories for each ethic (see **Table 1** for examples). The use of subcategories aids in ensuring careful and comprehensive coding of diverse people's moral reasoning.

Questionnaire measurements include the *Three Ethics Reasoning Assessment (TERA)* and the *Ethical Values Assessment (EVA)*. *TERA* assesses moral reasoning for a selection of moral issues such as abortion, divorce, and suicide in the case of terminal illness. *EVA*, which has been translated into several languages, measures the extent of endorsement of value statements that reflect the three ethics.

Conclusion: Moral Psychology and Beyond

The cultural-developmental approach to moral psychology is a new way to conceptualize multiplicity across the life course among diverse and changing cultures. As noted at the outset, psychologists have documented multiplicity for many other areas of psychology, including intelligence, creativity, and self. For these areas, cultural-developmental templates could also be formulated to guide new research. In my view, at the outset of a new century, the universal aspirations of many theories of the last century are giving way to something more flexible that recognizes both local and global psychological phenomena.

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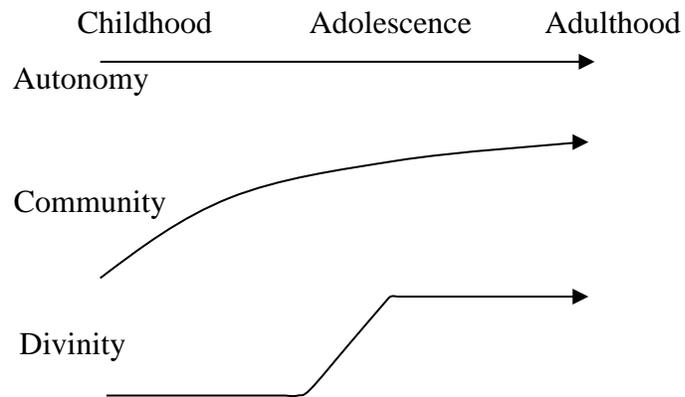
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Table 1: Examples of Types of Reasoning Within Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity

EXAMPLES OF TYPES	DEFINITION OF TYPES
Ethic of Autonomy	
Responsibility for Self	Taking responsibility for one's own actions (or failing to do so).
Self's Interest	Advancing or protecting (or failing to do so) interests, goals, wants, or general welfare of the self.
Other Individual's Psychological Well-Being	Causing or failing to alleviate unpleasant emotional states to another individual's psyche, such as sadness, frustration, fear, and anger.
Fairness and Reciprocity	Treating like cases alike and different cases differently; proper ratio of give and take in an exchange; doing to others what you would have them do to you.
Ethic of Community	
Others' Interest	Focus on interests of society or other form of collective entity, such as family.
Duty to Others	An obligation of station to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances due to one's status or position (e.g., citizen, teacher).
Virtues: Community-Oriented	Attitude or trait which, if manifested in the situation would make behavior right, if not manifested would make behavior wrong. Also habitual manner of action. For Community includes being cooperative.
Social Order or Harmony Goals	Avoiding social chaos or disorder. Promoting to perpetuation of order within any social group.
Ethics of Divinity	
Reward Seeking from God(s)	Action should be done so that actor can receive benefits from God(s).
Conscience: God-Given	Your conscience will feel bad because you know you have done wrong or will not feel bad because you do not believe you have done wrong or think you have done right. For Divinity when the conscience is the soul, or a part of the self through which a higher authority is experienced.
Duty as Spiritual or Religious Being	An obligation of station to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances due to one's status or position (e.g, Brahmin, Muslim). For Divinity when the duties obtain due to a person's status a faithful person, or having been sworn to uphold a divine order.
God(s)' Authority	God has indicated or exemplified by action or otherwise that it is wrong or right. Doing what is pleasing or not pleasing to God. This category includes references to sacrilege.

Figure 1: The Cultural-Developmental Templates of Moral Reasoning



Note: The figure shows developmental trajectories for each ethic, not degree of usage of each ethic in relation to one another.

Figure 2: Moral Reasoning among Religious Liberals

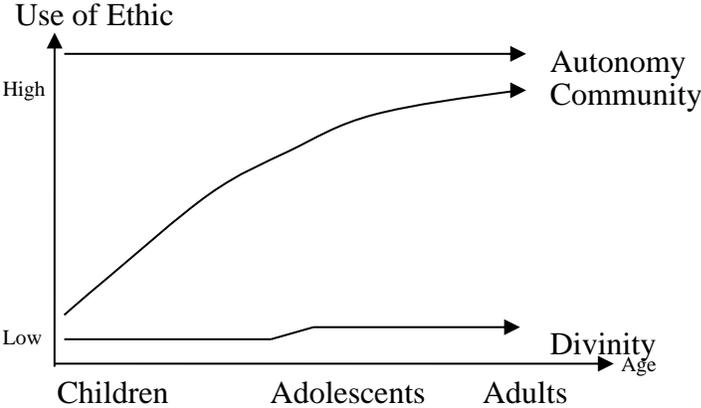


Figure 3: Moral Reasoning among Religious Conservatives

