The Moral, the Team, and the Ends: a Three-Motive Model of Moral Judgment For Politics and Other Team Contexts

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Though there has been an explosion of research on the motives that affect moral judgment, few projects have examined how these different motives operate with and against one another. This project provides a three-motive model that advances and integrates moral judgment research, especially where team and group outcomes are involved.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

What motives underlie moral judgments in team contexts? For judgments in contexts of competing team such as brands, political parities, and universities what motives drive moral judgments? How do moral judgments vary across different aspects of actions and actors? How do moral judgments vary by whether one is on the “team” of the actor whose behavior is in moral question?

Despite the explosion of research in moral judgment (Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), these questions remain incompletely understood. Furthermore, these questions have been largely examined in isolation. This project celebrates the advancements of research on particular moral motives, but also recognizes the need for an integrative advancing model and empirically testing that model.

In this paper, we present a basic three-motive model of moral judgment relevant to contexts where team and group based outcomes are involved. Through the illustrative and pertinent context of politics, we show how this model can help us make predictions of people’s moral judgment propensities. Integrating the three motives together provides a clear but nuanced view of moral judgment in team based contexts. It illustrates why sometimes one might fail to find strong evidence for a certain moral motive, because other moral motives might be more active. It provides a view of moral judgment as a series of motives pushing against and constraining with one another. Human moral judgment may be complex, but with this integrative model, we hope to make it more predictable.

The model includes three motives and subsequent predictions.

Moral Motive Prediction: People will generally hold that the same moral standards should be used without bias to judge various politicians, regardless of the individualistic characteristics of any politicians, such as the politician’s party.

Team Motive Prediction: Partisans will condemn an immoral action more when done by a politician from the opposing political party rather than by their own political party.

Ends Motive Prediction

There will be a greater own team member favoring bias, between moral judgments of actors from one’s team versus another team, when the actor takes actions that is beneficial for the actor’s team than only for the actor’s self.

Integrating the three motives provides a clear but nuanced view of moral judgment in team based contexts. Using the pertinent content of politics, we conducted four studies.

Study 1 tests and finds that people overwhelmingly have a conscious moral motive to apply the same moral standards across actors, regardless of the actor’s team. We find that the overwhelming majority people explicitly report that they hold similar standards for the politicians regardless of party. Though there are some differences observed in explicitly stated standards, the differences are small, especially compared to the differences observed in the later studies.

In line with a team motive, Study 2 finds that with individual instances of specific immoral violations, people engaged in strong biased judgments of an actor in a manner that favors a team member. However, the moral motive seems to produce a “boundary” on this motivated bias such that the team-favoring bias exists but is not unlimitedly strong. These findings were observed during the 2012 United States presidential election. In a between subjects design, partisans indicated that it was more wrong for the candidate from the other party (i.e., Barack Obama or Mitt Romney) to engage in “ethically gray” actions such providing favors to campaign donors, not fully disclosing information to the public, and scheduling votes when politicians are away.

Study 3 showed the strength of motive to be biased, affects the amount of bias. Using a hypothetical versus real action paradigm, Study 3 tested how the strength of bias can be exaggerated when motivational needs are higher and provides insights into how people can generally seem or feel relatively unbiased—because they exhibit a stronger bias only when most needed (i.e., with the action is a real versus a hypothetical moral violation). This study was performed at the local level by asking partisans at the North Carolina State Fair opinions about local politicians.

Finally Study 4 examines the considerations of ends, finding a specific ends motive in addition to a general team motive. This motive builds from the fact that team members can engage immoral actions that can be team-benefiting (e.g., getting oneself elected such that a member from the other party does not get elected) or only actor-benefiting (e.g., cheating on a spouse, personal tax evasion). Here, the ends-motive makes predictions that the other motives do not. It specifically predicts that actions which directly yield team-benefiting ends (e.g., politicians getting elected) will be receive more team member favoring leniency bias than actions that do not directly yield the ends (e.g., transgressions in the politician’s personal life). Results supported these predictions.

Today, popular discourse over immorality in many intergroup contexts tends to place the blame on a selected few. For example, in politics and brand settings, we overwhelmingly point fingers at the politicians and CEOs. However, this research suggests that by compromising our moral standards, ordinary citizens are partly responsible for the current corrupt state of affairs in politics, organizations, and businesses. Collectively, we may allow and forgive unethical behaviors in those that most directly represent and serve our teams. Ultimately, we fail to discerningly police actors with the consistent morality required of ethically functioning democracies and market economies. When it comes to addressing the sorry state of morals in politics, brands, businesses, sports, and even sometimes schools, it may be time to stop pointing fingers at the top, and instead look into the mirror.

REFERENCES