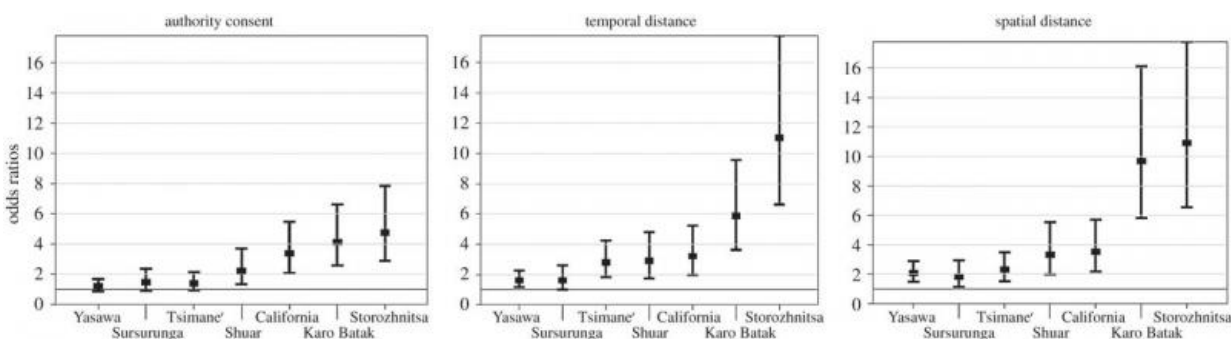


Study shows moral judgment influenced by locality, time and authority figures

August 5 2015, by Bob Yirka



Reductions in the ranked 'badness' of transgressions, aggregated across scenarios, as a function of the consent of an authority figure, temporal distance, or spatial distance, presented as odds ratios and their 97.5% confidence intervals. The odds ratios, computed by exponentiating the beta coefficients ($e\beta$), provide the odds of a badness judgement falling at a given ranked level or below when the factor is present, relative to when it is absent, across all badness levels. Odds ratios above 1 thus indicate reduced judgements of badness. Credit: *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, Published 5 August 2015. DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2015.0907

(Phys.org)—A large team of researchers with members from institutions in the U.S., Australia, Canada and the U.K. has conducted a study that they claim shows that moral judgments by people in communities are influenced by distance, time and authority figures. In their paper published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, the team outlines theories on moral behavior in society and then the study they undertook

in attempting to show whether such theories are right or not.

Common sense dictates that morality should be universal—a bad thing should be a bad thing regardless of who does it or when—or whether people in authority condone it or not. But some evidence, anecdotal and otherwise has suggested this may not be the case. Studies have shown for example, that when people are asked about slavery in the U.S. they respond strongly against it, pointing out how it is morally wrong—but those same people do not react nearly as strongly when asked about slavery in ancient Greece. The team notes that such judgments have not actually been tested across a diverse set of societies as part of an attempt to prove that such influences are universal. To remedy that situation, they conducted a study that included testing theoretical predictions in several countries in five small-scale societies and two that were large-scale.

The testing consisted of enlisting volunteers to listen to stories that included moral situations and then asking them to rate the degree of moral right or wrong of acts that occurred in the stories. Each volunteer was then told how an important authority figure felt about the act, and were then asked to answer the same question again to see if they changed their mind—likewise if the act occurred sometime in the distant past.

In studying the answers from all the volunteers, the researchers found that their theories appeared to hold true—people tended to be more morally outraged, for example, when an act occurred in their community than in some distant country. Time also appeared to be a factor—acts that happened long ago were viewed as less morally wrong. And, not surprisingly, the opinions of authority figures had an impact as well, causing people to feel more or less strongly about something that had happened, depending on which way public leaders leaned.

The researchers also offer theories on why they believe morality appears

to be rather parochial in nature, suggesting that morality likely is the result of an evolved psychology.

More information: Moral parochialism and contextual contingency across seven societies, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, Published 5 August 2015. DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2015.0907

Abstract

Human moral judgement may have evolved to maximize the individual's welfare given parochial culturally constructed moral systems. If so, then moral condemnation should be more severe when transgressions are recent and local, and should be sensitive to the pronouncements of authority figures (who are often arbiters of moral norms), as the fitness pay-offs of moral disapproval will primarily derive from the ramifications of condemning actions that occur within the immediate social arena. Correspondingly, moral transgressions should be viewed as less objectionable if they occur in other places or times, or if local authorities deem them acceptable. These predictions contrast markedly with those derived from prevailing non-evolutionary perspectives on moral judgement. Both classes of theories predict purportedly species-typical patterns, yet to our knowledge, no study to date has investigated moral judgement across a diverse set of societies, including a range of small-scale communities that differ substantially from large highly urbanized nations. We tested these predictions in five small-scale societies and two large-scale societies, finding substantial evidence of moral parochialism and contextual contingency in adults' moral judgements. Results reveal an overarching pattern in which moral condemnation reflects a concern with immediate local considerations, a pattern consistent with a variety of evolutionary accounts of moral judgement.

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