

# Do future actions matter more than past deeds? It depends on time and culture

August 22 2024, by James Dean

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It's not just about right and wrong: Time and culture also influence our

moral compass, Cornell-led psychology research finds.

In interviews with nearly 350 American and Chinese children, researchers found that 8- and 9-year-olds in the U.S. felt they deserved more praise for good deeds anticipated in the future than those already completed. Their Chinese counterparts, in contrast, considered past [good deeds](#) more praiseworthy, and were more concerned about how past behavior might affect their reputations.

"When people think about [moral judgment](#) and reasoning, oftentimes they don't think time matters, because morality is something right or wrong," said Qi Wang, the Joan K. and Irwin M. Jacobs Professor of Human Development in the Department of Psychology and College of Human Ecology, and director of the Culture & Cognition Lab. "But morality isn't black and white: You need to take time and [cultural differences](#) into consideration in terms of how much weight people put on the past versus the future."

That understanding may have real-life implications, Wang said, potentially shaping attitudes toward conflict—even war—depending on whether more meaning is ascribed to past or future experiences.

Wang is the lead author of a paper titled "Do Future Actions Matter More Than Past Deeds? Temporal Moral Attribution in U.S. and Chinese School-Age Children," [published](#) in *Developmental Psychology*. Co-authors are Tong Suo; Lingjie Mei, M.A.; Li Guan, Ph.D.; Yubo Hou, professor at Peking University; and Yuwan Dai, assistant professor at Renmin University of China.

Previous research has shown that Western adults attribute greater moral significance to future actions than past ones, offering more praise for good acts and harsher punishment for transgressions that hadn't happened yet. That may be because while one can't change the past, the

future is malleable, so a bias toward it might help guide behavior that is still consequential, scholars reasoned.

Wang wondered if Asian cultures with a more cyclic view of time would exhibit the same moral orientation toward the future, and if differences could be seen in children. A memory expert, Wang has shown in prior research that Asian cultures place a stronger emphasis on the past ("To define the future, one must study the past," goes one Confucian saying), and the cultural narrative of learning from the past is reflected both in memories and values imparted to children.

In the study, interviewers presented children ages 6 to 9 with hypothetical moral or immoral behavior, randomly assigned to have occurred either last week or next week. For example, in one moral scenario, "A friend forgot to bring lunch. You brought your favorite sandwich. Even though you wanted to eat it all, you gave half of it to your friend." In an immoral scenario, "You got mad at a friend. You said really mean things to him (her) and made him (her) cry."

By 8 and 9 years old, the attitudes of Western children matched those of previously studied adults: They considered future good acts more deserving of reward and praise than those performed "last week." The opposite was true among Chinese children. Trends among the [younger children](#), who were still developing the capacity for "[mental time travel](#)," were similar but not statistically significant. Furthermore, Chinese children's moral reasoning emphasized morality and deference to authority, whereas U.S. children attributed their evaluations more to personal attributes and choices.

The study shows not only that moral cognition is not timeless, but that culture also plays a central role in shaping it, the authors conclude. In addition to informing theories about how people reason right from wrong, they argue, those dynamics may influence interpretations of

complex current events—from interpersonal disputes to national conflicts—"with causes originated in the past and consequences to occur in the future."

"Time is so important to consider, because people's reactions to a conflict may not just reflect their current state of mind but also their [past experiences](#) and [future](#) anticipations, both for themselves and their country," Wang said. "That can help us understand how a decision was made, and to consider more complex factors than simply right and wrong."

**More information:** Qi Wang et al, Do future actions matter more than past deeds? Temporal moral attribution in U.S. and Chinese school-age children., *Developmental Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0001825](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001825)

Provided by Cornell University

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