

PROCEEDINGS B

When Injustice Is at Stake, Moral Judgements Are Not Parochial

Journal:	<i>Proceedings B</i>
Manuscript ID	RSPB-2015-2037.R1
Article Type:	Comment
Date Submitted by the Author:	n/a
Complete List of Authors:	Piazza, Jared; Lancaster University , Psychology Sousa, Paulo; Queen's University Belfast, Institute of Cognition and Culture
Subject:	Cognition < BIOLOGY, Evolution < BIOLOGY, Behaviour < BIOLOGY
Keywords:	Moral judgement, Harm, Moral parochialism, Injustice, Morality
Proceedings B category:	Behaviour

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4 When Injustice Is at Stake, Moral Judgements Are Not Parochial

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6 Jared Piazza

7 Lancaster University

8 and

9 Paulo Sousa

10 Queen's University Belfast

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12 Word count: 1,697

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14 Author for correspondence: Jared Piazza

15 Lancaster University, Department of Psychology

16 Fylde College, Bailrigg

17 Lancaster, UK

18 LA1 4YF

19 Tel: +44(0)1524 594869

20 Email: j.piazza@lancaster.ac.uk

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23 To address the shortage of cross-cultural research on putative, panhuman
24 features of moral judgement, Fessler et al. [1] conducted a study with samples drawn
25 from seven different societies. There is much to be praised in their efforts, which
26 advance the recent debate initiated by Kelly et al. [2] regarding whether people view
27 harmful transgressions as *independent of authority* (wrong regardless of the view of
28 any legitimate authority) and *universally wrong* (wrong in all places and times), as
29 argued by Turiel and his colleagues over the last four decades, and by ourselves in the
30 context of this debate [3-6].

31 Fessler et al. claim that people do not conceive harmful transgressions as
32 authority independent and universally wrong because people's third-party moral
33 judgements evolved to "increase individual fitness within local culturally constructed
34 social arenas", which implies that their judgements should be parochial: they should
35 not be sensitive to wrongdoings distant in space and time and they should be sensitive
36 to the opinion of local authorities. Moreover, Fessler et al. claim that their new study
37 supports their moral parochialism hypothesis, providing a "powerful challenge" to
38 positions like Turiel's and ours. Here, we argue that Fessler et al.'s findings can be
39 interpreted in a way that is quite consistent with our position, and that provides
40 instead a powerful challenge to their evolutionary, moral parochialism hypothesis.

41 We [3, 4] entered the aforementioned debate by offering an empirically-
42 guided methodological critique of the research of Kelly et al. We also proposed a
43 deflationary reformulation of Turiel's original hypothesis in which harmful
44 transgressions are understood as authority independent and universally wrong *when*
45 *they are perceived to involve injustice and basic-rights violations* [5, 6]. One major
46 criticism we had of Kelly et al.'s study is that it presented participants cases of
47 harmful actions, such harm as military training or as punishment, that many

48 participants viewed as justifiable [3, 4]. Fessler et al. have taken a large step in
49 addressing this earlier criticism by employing vignettes depicting harmful actions that
50 appear to involve “clear and substantial harm, violations of rights and/or injustice.”
51 Indeed, in this respect, their new study provides an excellent test of our hypothesis.

52 Their study included seven cases of harm ostensibly involving injustice, such
53 as a woman being raped or a man battering his wife without provocation. They
54 presented participants with such cases, and assessed their moral judgements of the
55 harmful acts on a 5-point badness/goodness scale: “How good or bad is what A did?”
56 (“Extremely bad”; “Bad”; “Neither good or bad”; “Good”; “Extremely good”). After
57 answering this first question, participants were provided with probes concerning
58 authority dependence, temporal distance, and spatial distance [for details, see 1]. For
59 each of these questions, participants were assessed again with the same 5-point
60 badness/goodness scale. The aim of the task is to probe whether participants will
61 change their initial judgements of wrongdoing, given the approval of a local authority
62 or the fact that the action occurred in a distant time or place.

63 In the context of the task, evidence consistent with our hypothesis are
64 instances where a participant initially thinks the harmful acts are wrong (i.e.,
65 “Extremely Bad” or “Bad”), and then does not reverse their position to not-wrong
66 (i.e., “Neither good nor bad”, “Good” or “Extremely good”) following the authority,
67 temporal and spatial distance probes. If the majority of responses involve retention of
68 the initial judgement of wrongdoing, this would be consistent with our account, but
69 not with the parochialist account. Fessler et al. do not describe their results in a
70 manner that could test our hypothesis, i.e., that present the amount of responses that
71 involve *non-reversals* of the initial judgement of wrongdoing. Table 1 presents such a
72 breakdown of Fessler et al.’s results. As can be seen, the vast majority of responses

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73 from all seven field sites involve *non-reversals* of the initial judgement of
74 wrongdoing, and this was true across all three probes.

75

76 **Table 1**

77 *Percentage of responses that involve non-reversals of the initial judgement of*
78 *wrongdoing, i.e., “Extremely bad” or “Bad” responses that were not changed to*
79 *“Neither good nor bad”, “Good” or “Extremely good,” in each of the probes and*
80 *field sites, across seven different types of harmful actions.*

81

	Authority Probe	Temporal Probe	Spatial Probe
Tsimane	88%	77%	84%
Shuar	94%	92%	92%
Karo Batak	96%	91%	91%
Storozhnitsa	98%	89%	88%
Sursurunga	96%	97%	98%
Yasawa	87%	86%	83%
California	86%	90%	89%

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84 Obviously, there is still a non-negligible minority that did reverse their initial
85 judgement of wrongdoing. However, there are several ways of explaining these
86 minority responses that are compatible with our hypothesis [3-6]. For example, it is
87 possible that, in response to the authority’s approval of the act, participants inferred
88 that the authority possessed some deeper insight about the event (e.g., additional
89 reasons why the man slapped his wife), which led them to transform their construal of
90 the injustice of the act. Since the authors did not measure the perceived injustice of
91 the act before or after the presentation of the authority dependence probe, it is unclear
92 whether participants who reversed their judgement also changed their construal of the
93 injustice of the event.

94 When Fessler et al.'s data are viewed in this alternative manner, it becomes
95 apparent that moral-parochialist responses represent a tiny minority cross-culturally.
96 This provides a powerful challenge to their evolutionary argument about moral
97 parochialism, since one cannot support an evolutionary argument about the nature of
98 moral judgements with a cross-cultural minority. Instead, their findings become more
99 consistent with an alternative evolutionary hypothesis, based on mutualism [7], which
100 argues that intuitions about authority independence and universalism follow from the
101 panhuman disposition to think in terms of reciprocal social contracts that obligate
102 people to respect the basic interests of others by not selfishly harming one another [6].

103 However, Fessler et al. may reply that their perspective is predicated on the
104 idea that people's moral judgements cannot be dichotomized in terms of judging that
105 an action is wrong (i.e., "Extremely bad" and "Bad") or not-wrong (i.e., "Neither
106 good nor bad," "Good," and "Extremely good") as we did in our interpretation of their
107 results, since from their perspective these judgements should be understood in terms
108 of a "graded continuum" of condemnation [1]. Moreover, they may argue that their
109 statistical analysis shows that the authority dependence, temporal and spatial distance
110 factors explain a substantial amount of the graded reduction of condemnation in
111 participants' judgements when you take into account the entire 5-point scale.

112 We are sceptical about modelling normative judgements simply on a graded
113 continuum (in terms of psychological validity) [6]. We would argue that it is plausible
114 to suppose that participants parse the 5-point badness/goodness scale *categorically* in
115 terms of the act being wrong or not wrong. We do not see much psychological
116 significance in shifts from "Extremely bad" to "Bad" in the context of their scale.
117 This is supported by the fact that a comparable number of responses *increased* in their
118 degree of condemnation as that decreased in their degree of condemnation, among

119 those responses that retained an “Extremely bad” or “Bad” judgement: in this group,
 120 averaging across the three probes, 10% shifted from “Bad” to “Extremely bad”, while
 121 16% shifted from “Extremely bad” to “Bad” (74% retained the same level of
 122 badness).

123 Even setting aside this conceptual issue, we argue that a graded-continuum
 124 approach to the data would still challenge their evolutionary hypothesis. To support
 125 their evolutionary hypothesis, they would have to show that the *majority* of responses
 126 in most field sites reduced the initial judgement. Yet, again, Fessler et al. do not
 127 describe their results in a way that addresses the issue of majority responses. Table 2
 128 presents the amount of responses that *did not reduce* in condemnation as a result of
 129 the authority dependence, temporal and spatial distances probes, either because the
 130 initial badness judgement was maintained (e.g., “Bad”/”Bad”) or because there was an
 131 increase in the level of condemnation (“Bad”/”Extremely bad”). In other words, this
 132 table represents the amount of responses that are inconsistent with the parochialism
 133 hypothesis, under the graded-continuum approach.

134

135 **Table 2**

136 *Percentage of responses that did not reduce, to any degree, the initial badness*
 137 *judgement. Thus, responses that changed from “Extremely bad” to “Bad” are not*
 138 *factored in the percentages.*

139

	Authority Probe	Temporal Probe	Spatial Probe
Tsimane	69%	59%	67%
Shuar	80%	78%	75%
Karo Batak	70%	67%	63%
Storozhnitsa	69%	56%	57%
Sursurunga	83%	81%	82%
Yasawa	75%	75%	73%
California	81%	81%	80%

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142 As can be seen, even when accepting the graded-continuum approach, the
143 clear majority of responses in all field sites, and across all three probes, are
144 inconsistent with the parochialism hypothesis. These results again provide a powerful
145 challenge to their hypothesis about the evolution of parochial morality, as such a
146 claim depends on showing that *most* people across societies are inclined to reduce
147 their condemnation of harmful acts when a local authority approves or the actions
148 occur in another place or time.

149 In sum, although we praise Fessler et al.'s use of cross-cultural samples to test
150 competing models of moral judgement, we question their analysis of the data. When
151 analysed in the manner we outlined here, their findings become consistent with our
152 theoretical proposal [6], not with theirs [1]. We leave it to the broader scientific
153 community to decide which is the most appropriate approach to their data.

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