



## Understanding violence through morality: A review

Dhananjay Pandey, Dr. Ghanshyam Pati Tripathi

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, R.L.S.Y. College, Bettiah, B.R.A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

### Abstract

Violence has been a problem of epidemic proportions in the modern world. It is everywhere from the individual level to the level of nations. The last two decades were very influential in the development of Moral psychology as an emerging field of study. Moral Psychology indulges with the questions of moral norms, values, attitudes, beliefs and reasoning systems in order to explain human behaviour. This review tries to summarize the development in understanding violence through moral psychology. It briefly looks into cognitive and social perspectives on violence and morality.

**Keywords:** Morality, moral cognition, violence

### Introduction

Morality indicates what is the “right” and “wrong” way to behave, for instance, that one should be fair and not unfair to others (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010) <sup>[13]</sup>. Moral principles indicate what is a “good,” “virtuous,” “just,” “right,” or “ethical” way for humans to behave (Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Turiel, 2006) <sup>[13]</sup>. The role of morality in the maintenance of social order is recognized by scholars from different disciplines. This is considered of interest to explain the social behaviour of individuals living together in groups. The interest of psychologists in moral behaviour as a factor in maintaining social order has long been driven by developmental questions (how do children acquire the ability to do this, for example, Kohlberg, 1969) and clinical implications (what are the origins of social deviance and delinquency, for example, Rest, 1986). Jonathan Haidt’s (2001) <sup>[12]</sup> publication, on the role of quick intuition versus deliberate reflection in distinguishing between right and wrong, marked a turning point in the interest of psychologists in these issues. The consideration of specific psychological mechanisms involved in moral reasoning prompted many psychological researchers to engage in this area of inquiry. This development also facilitated the connection of psychological theory to neurobiological mechanisms and inspired attempts to empirically examine underlying processes at this level—for instance, by using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) measures to monitor the brain activity of individuals confronted with moral dilemmas (Greene, 2013; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). Skitka (2010) and colleagues have convincingly argued that beliefs about what is morally right or wrong are unlike other attitudes or convictions (Mullen & Skitka, 2006; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002) <sup>[20, 15]</sup>. Instead, moral convictions are seen as compelling mandates, indicating what everyone “ought” to or “should” do. This has important social implications, as people also expect others to follow these behavioral guidelines. They are emotionally affected and distressed when this is not the case, find it difficult to tolerate or resolve such differences, and may even resort to violence against those who challenge their views (Skitka & Mullen, 2002). The observation that “good people can do bad things” further suggests that we should

look beyond the causes of individual deviance or delinquency to understand moral behavior.

### Moral Cognition

Moral cognition refers to the human capacity to experience and respond to situations of moral significance. It is the study of the brain’s role in moral judgment and decision-making. It involves understanding the rationalizations and biases that affect moral decision-making. Moral judgments are grounded in several cognitive and social-cognitive processes, which guide the social regulation of behaviour. The studies by Kohlberg represented a milestone in the psychological study of morality (Kohlberg, 1984) <sup>[14]</sup>. Kohlberg considered moral reasoning to be a result of cognitive processes that may exist even in the absence of any kind of emotions. However, findings in evolutionary psychology (Trivers, 1971; Pinker, 1997) <sup>[21, 18]</sup> suggested that emotions played a key part in the origins of human morality (e.g., kin altruism, reciprocal altruism, revenge). Today, there is a consensus in psychology and philosophy in favor of the differentiation of moral processes into two different classes: (1) rational, effortful and explicit, and (2) emotional, quick and intuitive (De Neys and Glumicic, 2008) <sup>[4]</sup>. Among current models of moral processes and how they relate to each other, three distinct theories stand out (Greene and Haidt, 2002; Moll and Schulkin, 2009) <sup>[11]</sup>. The “*social intuitionist theory*” (Haidt, 2001) <sup>[12]</sup> links research on automaticity to recent findings in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology. The “*cognitive control and conflict theory*” (Greene *et al.*, 2004) postulates that responses arising from emotion-related brain areas favor one outcome, while cognitive responses favor a different one. The third “*cognitive and emotional integration theory*,” suggests that behavioral choices cannot be split into cognitive vs. emotional. Complex contextual situations can make behavioral decisions exceptionally difficult (Gottfried, 1999) <sup>[9]</sup>.

### Morality and Violence

At present, there are two main theoretical approaches to understanding violence. The first is the disinhibition theory which suggests that people have violent impulses that are typically restrained. They succumb to their dark side when

their moral sense falters or is interfered with in some way (Dewall, 2007) <sup>[6]</sup>. The second is the rational theory which contends that using violence is only ever a means to an end. According to these rational-choice models, there will be more violence if the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

But both approaches have their shortcomings. The disinhibition theory avoids the issue of what drives us to use violence in the first place. It is mute as to where the impulse might originate, but it must come from somewhere. When it comes to practical utility, non-violent methods are always preferable to violent ones, however rational theory is unable to explain why people frequently choose to use violence (Baumeister *et al.*, 1996) <sup>[3]</sup>.

The extension of the Relational Model Theory (Fiske, 1991) is the Relationship Regulation Theory which predicts that any action, including violence, unequal treatment, and "impure" acts, may be perceived as morally correct depending on the moral motive employed and how the relevant social relationship is construed (Fiske & Rai, 2011) <sup>[19]</sup>. They argue that people support and participate in violence primarily for moral reasons, regardless of customs, civilizations, or historical eras. When they use the term "moral," they mean that people act violently because they believe they have to do so. Violence is not a result of psychopathic immorality. Contrarily, it results from the practice of a sense of moral rights and obligations. (Fiske & Rai, 2014) <sup>[8]</sup>.

There is widespread moral disagreement across cultures which inhibits the understanding of other people's actions and often escalates violence. Relational Regulation Theory (Fiske & Rai, 2014) <sup>[8]</sup> seeks to understand moral disagreement and identifies 4 fundamental and distinct moral motives. Unity is the motive to care for and support the integrity of in-groups by avoiding or eliminating threats of contamination and providing aid and protection based on need or empathic compassion. Hierarchy is the motive to respect rank in social groups where superiors are entitled to deference and respect but must also lead, guide, direct, and protect subordinates. Equality is the motive for balanced, in-kind reciprocity, equal treatment, equal say, and equal opportunity. Proportionality is the motive for rewards and punishments to be proportionate to merit, benefits to be calibrated to contributions, and judgments to be based on a utilitarian calculus of costs and benefits. The 4 moral motives are universal, but cultures, ideologies, and individuals differ in where they activate these motives and how they implement them. Relationship regulation theory predicts that any action, including violence, unequal treatment, and "impure" acts, may be perceived as morally correct depending on the moral motive employed and how the relevant social relationship is construed.

### Social Cognitivist approach

Moral agency is an individual's ability to make moral choices based on some notion of right and wrong and to be held accountable for these actions. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002) <sup>[2]</sup> suggests an interactionist perspective on morality. People do not operate as autonomous moral agents unaffected by the social realities in which they are embedded, and hence moral agency is socially situated. Moral agency is exercised in "particularized ways" depending on the conditions under which people's everyday life transactions are taking place.

Moral disengagement is the process of convincing the self that ethical standards do not apply to oneself in a particular context. It involves a process of cognitive re-construing or re-framing of destructive behaviour as being morally acceptable without changing the behaviour or the moral standards (Bandura, 1990) <sup>[1]</sup>. It functions through moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacing or diffusing responsibility, disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences, and dehumanizing the victim. Some studies (Detert, 2008) <sup>[5]</sup> propose that some individuals are more inclined to morally disengage than others. Based on their study, they found that certain individual differences like empathy, external locus of control, trust in others predict and influence moral disengagement. Studies (Obermann, 2011) <sup>[16]</sup> indicate that aggression is positively related to self-reported moral disengagement in children and adolescents.

### Conclusion

Morality is a highly complex process influenced by many factors. It is strongly related to violence as a moderating factor. Studies focus on individual differences, cultural and socioeconomic differences and cognitive functions to understand the variety of mechanisms that govern it. It needs to study the phenomenon from both micro (neuroscience) and macro (Socio-cultural) perspectives. Understanding the mechanisms of morality and its relation with violence will improve the understanding and thus effective prediction and control over incidents of violence.

### References

1. Bandura A. Mechanisms of moral disengagement. In W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind*. Cambridge University Press; Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1990, 161–191
2. Bandura, Albert. Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency. *Journal of Moral Education*, 2002; 31(2):101–119.
3. Baumeister RF, Smart L, Boden JM. Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: the dark side of high self-esteem. *Psychol Rev*, 1996; 103(1):5–33.
4. De Neys W, Glumicic T. Conflict monitoring in dual process theories of reasoning. *Cognition*, 2008; 106:1248–1299.
5. Detert James R, Treviño Linda Klebe, Sweitzer Vicki L. Moral disengagement in ethical decision making: A study of antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2008; 93(2):374–391.
6. Dewall CN, Baumeister RF, Stillman TF, Gailliot MT. Violence restrained: Effects of self-regulation and its depletion on aggression. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2007; 43(1):62–76.
7. Ellemers N, van der Toorn J, Paunov Y, van Leeuwen, T. *The Psychology of Morality: A Review and Analysis of Empirical Studies Published From 1940 Through 2017*. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2019; 23(4):332–366.
8. Fiske A, Rai T, Pinker S. *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. doi:10.1017/CBO9781316104668

9. Gottfried K. Moral calculus and the bom. *Nature*,1999:401:117.
10. Greene JD, Nystrom LE, Engell AD, Darley JM, Cohen JD. The neural bases of cognitive conflict and control in moral judgment. *Neuron*,2004:44:389–400.
11. Greene J, Haidt J. How (and where) does moral judgment work? *Trends Cogn. Sci*,2002:6:517–523.
12. Haidt J. The emotional dog and its rational tail: a social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychol. Rev*,2001:108:814–834.
13. Haidt J, Kesebir S Morality. In S. Fiske, D. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (5th ed.. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010, 797-832.
14. Kohlberg L. *Essays in Moral Development, Volume I: The Psychology of Moral Development*. New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1984.
15. Mullen E, Skitka LJ. Exploring the psychological underpinnings of the moral mandate effect: Motivated reasoning, group differentiation, or anger? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*,2006:90:629-643.
16. Obermann ML. Moral disengagement in self-reported and peer-nominated school bullying. *Aggressive Behavior*,2011:37(2):133–144.
17. Pascual L, Rodrigues P, Gallardo-Pujol D. How does morality work in the brain? A functional and structural perspective of moral behavior. *Front. Integr. Neurosci*,2013:7:65.
18. Pinker S. *How the Mind Works*. New York, NY: Norton, 1997.
19. Rai T, Fiske Alan. Moral Psychology Is Relationship Regulation: Moral Motives for Unity, Hierarchy, Equality, and Proportionality. *Psychological review*,2011:118:57-75.
20. Skitka LJ, Bauman CW, Sargis EG. Moral conviction: Another contributor to attitude strength or something more? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*,2005:88:895-917.
21. Trivers RL. The evolution of reciprocal altruism. *Q. Rev. Biol*,1971:46:35–57.