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Jaafar, J., Kolodinsky, P., McCarthy, S., & Schroder, V. (2004). The impact of cultural norms and values on the moral judgement of Malay and American adolescents: A brief report. In B. N. Setiadi, A. Supratiknya, W. J. Lonner, & Y. H. Poortinga (Eds.), *Ongoing themes in psychology and culture: Proceedings from the 16th International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*.
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THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL NORMS AND VALUES ON THE MORAL JUDGMENT OF MALAY AND AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS: A BRIEF REPORT

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Kohlberg describes the development of moral reasoning as a process in which people pass through six qualitatively different stages in a universal and invariant sequence (Kohlberg, 1969; 1976). Kohlberg also asserts that moral judgment is not significantly determined by socio-cultural context. This notion has been critically assessed by a number of researchers. For example, Lei and Cheng (1987) found that some Chinese cultural values such as the maintenance of harmony, obedience and filial piety do affect Chinese moral judgments. Snarey (1985) found that communal equity and collective happiness are important in Israel while compassion and detachment are predominant in the moral judgments of Tibetan monks (Gielen and Kelly, 1983; Heubner and Garrod, 1993). In addition, Maqsd (1977) found that culture and religious values have effects on moral judgment. Other cultural factors that play a role in affecting moral judgment are language, cultural context, rules, and expectations (Rogoff, 1990; Tappan and Packer, 1991).

Researchers in the new emerging discipline of cultural psychology have started to look carefully not only at the moral stages, but also at the kinds of reasoning that individuals from different cultures bring to moral discourse. From the perspective of cross-cultural psychology, social and cultural context is the key factor affecting moral development of individu-

als. Individual moral development refers to how one develops skill in understanding, managing and adhering to the moral expectations of one's culture (Shweder, 1990; Stigler, Schweder and Herdt, 1990). Shweder (1990) and Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller (1987) argue that a highly principled member of a Brahman community in India reasons differently, using different justifications from Americans to explain moral judgments. The researchers conclude that in an Indian society, moral events cannot be easily distinguished from social conventions. Thus, some moral principles which are shared across cultures do not characteristically lead to similar judgments about right or wrong. Other cross-cultural studies also indicate the strong impact of culture on moral reasoning. Some researchers find the existence of cultural variability in justice morality (Keller, Edelstein, Fang, and Fang, 1998; Edwards, 1994; Harkness, Edwards, and Super, 1981; Miller and Bersoff, 1992; Snarey, 1985) while other studies identify types of postconventional outlooks which emphasize moralities of community (Dien, 1982; Gorsuch and Barnes, 1973; Heubner and Garrod, 1991, 1993; Ma, 1989; Okonkwo, 1997; Tietjen and Walker, 1985; Vasudev, 1994). Recent studies also increasingly highlight the importance of religious and spiritual orientations on morality (for example, Bouhmama, 1984; Colby and Damon, 1992; Schweder and Much, 1987). Similarly, Iwasa (1992), Miller (2001) and Mizuno (1999) also agree on the importance of culture in determining moral reasoning. Gender is also noted as a determinant of moral reasoning (see Gilligan, 1977; 1979; 1982) although it is unclear whether gender operates differently as a mediating variable according to cultural context. In sum, researchers who have been focusing their work on the impact of cultural factors acknowledge that greater attention and weight should be paid to understanding the impact of culture on moral development.

Rationale

Objectives of the Study

Given the crucial role that culture may play in adolescents' moral development, this preliminary study explored the impact of both gender and cultural differences on adolescents' moral judgments as assessed by a Kohlbergian moral dilemma. It was hypothesized that: (a) there is a significant difference in the average moral stage evident on a Kohlbergian

task between Malay and American adolescents; (b) there are recognizable differences between Malay and American adolescents in the content of their explanations of moral reasoning based upon the traditional societal values within which socialization occurs, and (c) cultural differences may be mediated by gender.

Method

Procedure

In January 2002, the first author invited the authors from Northern Arizona University to participate in a cross-cultural study on moral judgments of Malay and American adolescents. They were informed of the primary objectives, basic rationale, and the measures to be used in the study. The researchers from the university were asked by the first author to administer one of Kohlberg's moral reasoning dilemmas to a sample of adolescents attending high schools in the United States. Dilemmas were distributed to American high school students in the southwestern and southeastern United States. The first author distributed the same dilemma to a comparable group of Malay adolescents.

Participants

Only participants between 15 and 18 years of age with legible and complete dilemmas were included in the sample for this study. The final sample included 134 adolescents, 67 males and 67 females. The American adolescents who participated included 35 females and 23 males. Seventy-six Malays (32 females and 44 males) also participated.

Measures

The participants were asked to respond in writing to Dilemma I (Joe dilemma) from Form A, Moral Judgment Interview (Colby, Kohlberg, et al, 1987). For the Malaysian adolescents, Dilemma I and its standard questions were translated into Malay as accurately as possible without changing the original meaning. Since Kohlberg's dilemma is hypothetical in nature, the same hypothetical meaning was maintained in the translation. The translation was as faithful as possible to the original wording by Kohlberg.

The first author scored Dilemma I to determine the moral reasoning stage according to the steps described in the manual by Colby, Kohlberg, et al. (1987). The Global Stage Score (GSS) for each respondent was calculated by the modal stage of reasoning in response to all the items in the dilemma. The 9-point GSS is determined by the modal stage of reasoning (if only one stage has 25% or more of the scores) or by the two most frequent of the nine stages (if each has 25% or more of the scores). Thus, if a quarter of the judgments are at Stage 1 and a quarter are at Stage 2 then that respondent is classified as midway between the two stages at Stage 1/2. The nine possible resulting stages are as follows: 1, 1/2, 2, 2/3, 3, 3/4, 4, 4/5, and 5. Thus, the 9-point GSS consists of pure and mixed stage scores.

Results

A 2 X 2 analysis of variance (Gender X Ethnicity) was computed to examine the differences between the male and female adolescents and between the moral stages of Malay and American adolescents. The results showed a significant difference in ethnicity, $F(1, 130) = 21.00, p < .001$. Although there was no significant gender difference, overall, there was a significant interaction between gender and ethnicity, $F(1, 130) = 12.1, p < .001$.

The means of Malay and American adolescents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviation of Malay and American Adolescents by Sex & Ethnicity

Sex	Mean	SD
Malay	3.16	.49
Female (N = 32)	3.40	
Male (N = 44)	3.00	
American	2.77	.43
Female (N = 35)	2.70	
Male (N = 23)	2.90	

The hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the moral reasoning stage expressed between the two groups of adolescents is supported. It appears that the Malay adolescents exhibit a slightly higher moral reasoning stage than the Americans do as assessed by Kohlberg's "Joe dilemma."

The second hypothesis was tested through qualitative analysis. An examination by the authors of the content of responses in both samples suggested a distinctive difference in arguments, explanations and examples given in support of the respondents' judgment. Quite a substantial number of Malays reflected religious principles and Malay traditional norms in their arguments whereas the Americans tended to justify decisions as personal choices based on principals of fairness, individual responsibility and freedom, economic equity or self-interest. Some common examples of how the two groups differ in their moral reasoning follow:

Q: What do you think is the important thing a son should be concerned about in his relationship to his father?

A: The important things are I will try to *jaga bati* them, make them proud, obey them, and uphold family name. (*Malay male*)

A: I must be a devout child to my parents. (*Malay female*)

A: I guess it would be basically the same thing as why a father would be to a son), establishing a bond, a fair relationship. Respect is a very important thing. They might alter things. Respect is a base or foundation that should be kept. If you don't have respect, you don't have much. (*American female*)

A: Trust. Because if a son loses his father's trust, the father might not let him have as much free time. (*American male*)

Q: In general, why should a promise be kept?

A: Because if you don't, you are an infidel. You must keep your promise...it is in the Quran. (*Malay male*)

A: If you keep your promises, it makes a good impression on others and people trust you. (*American male*)

A: It is your duty to obey your parents. (*Malay male*)

A: A promise should be kept because people can know that they trust you. (*American male*)

Table 2

Frequency of the Religious Principles and Traditional Norms and Values Used in Moral Reasoning by Malay Adolescents

Religious Principles	Frequency of Usage (number of instances)	Traditional Norms and Values	Frequency of Usage (number of instances)
sin	10	<i>Jaga bati</i> , respect, obey parents	25
hereafter	6	<i>Sopan santun</i>	4
Holy Quran	2	<i>Balas budi</i>	2
<i>derhaka</i>	3	Give priority to parents	4
religious teaching	32	Duty to parents	9
hell	1	Cannot talk back, cannot raise voice, speak gently, tactfully	8
heaven	7	Uphold good family name	1
devout child	4	Make parents happy	3
infidels	11		
God	6		
Blessing from God, parents	6		

As these examples demonstrate, religious teachings were more frequently cited by Malay adolescents while American adolescents were more concerned with personal consequences of actions, equitable exchange, fairness and self-interest. Adherence to traditional social norms in Malay culture is characterized by following religious principles while in American

society, traditional values to which children are socialized include exchange theory, economic self-interest, freedom, autonomy and respect for authority. Responses of adolescents certainly supported this. Table 2 presents the frequency of some distinctive religious principles and the traditional norms and values used by the Malays. These were absent in the Americans' responses. Table 3 shows the frequency of responses related to distinctive traditional American cultural values of fairness, freedom, autonomy, self-interest, respect for authority and equitable exchange apparent in the responses of the American adolescents.

Table 3

Frequency of Traditional American Norms and Values Used in Moral Reasoning by American Adolescents

Traditional Cultural Value	Frequency of Usage (number of instances referred to in answers)
Fairness	66
Personal Responsibility, Freedom and Autonomy	212
Equitable Economic Exchange	72
Respect for Authority	65
Self-Interest	160
Moral or Religious Principles	38
Consideration for Others	53
Meeting Social Norms/Making a Good Impression	53

From the examples given and from the frequency of religion terminology and Malay traditional values shown in Table 2, it is apparent that Malay adolescents reflected religious principles and Malay cultural values in their moral judgments when compared to the Americans. Not surprisingly, the Americans make no reference to Malay religious or cultural

values. Instead, their answers most commonly reflect personal responsibility, freedom, autonomy and self-interest as justification for moral reasoning, followed by economic exchange, fairness and respect for authority. It could certainly be argued that these are the values predominant in the American culture in which these adolescents have been socialized. Therefore, qualitatively, there is an apparent difference in terms of the content of the moral judgments between the two groups of adolescents.

The third hypothesis, that gender differences would be culturally mediated, was also supported. Although there was no difference between level of moral reasoning demonstrated by males and females from the sample as a whole, very different patterns of reasoning by gender appeared between the Malay and American youth, as shown in Table 1. In the American sample, the difference between levels of males and females was small, and males demonstrated a higher level of moral reasoning (2.9) than females (2.7). Although both males and females in the Malay sample demonstrated higher levels than the American youth, a greater difference between males and females was evident, with Malay females showing the highest level of moral reasoning (3.4).

Discussion

The results show that quantitatively there is a significant difference in moral stages between the Malay and American adolescents. The Malay youth reasoned at Stage 3; the Americans at Stage 2. The greater frequency of Stage 3 reasoning among the Malays possibly reflects the impact of religious principles and traditional values featured prominently in the responses. Stage 3 reasoning is characterized by reasoning based on social contracts and social responsibility. Adherence to religious principles within a society that holds such action in esteem is certainly fulfilling a social contract.

According to Kohlberg, at Stage 3, one equates good behavior with whatever pleases others. In other words, conformity to stereotyped ideas of how people should act is important. In a way, the greater frequency of Stage 3 moral judgment is not surprising since the Malay society is shaped by the Malay traditional norms and values (*adat*), and Islamic teachings. Islam and *adat* are the bases of Malay beliefs, ideologies, and identities (Mat Saat, 1993; Zainal, 1995). The effect of applying these religious prin-

ciples and traditional values to life has resulted in a distinct set of moral values (Hamzah, Madsen, Sin, 1989).

Adat consists of pre-Islamic norms, values, and beliefs. In other words, it is the distinctive and traditional cultural configuration of Malay society, differentiated from purely Islamic elements (Zainal, 1995, p. 46). Simply translated, *adat* means customary practices and is the traditional concept of total culture. There are *adat* principles governing everyday communication, interaction with the elders, behavior in formal occasions, and other types of interaction. Some examples include bowing oneself (especially a member of the younger generation) making way in front of adults; to show politeness, indeed, sometimes one has to ask permission to walk past; not using the index finger or leg to point at objects; and taking off one's shoes before entering a house.

Table 2 indicates eight types of *adat* mentioned in the responses. In brief, *jaga hati* means to mind other people's feelings, or to show consideration for others, and a concern for one's standing in the eyes of other people. *Sopan santun* means good, appropriate manners, while *balas budi* means repaying hospitality, or repaying a good deed to maintain good relationships with people. The word *budi* does not mean tangible materials, rather it is an abstract concept that encompasses countless values and norms, ranging from words and actions to behavior and attitudes. In other words, it is not merely a matter of economic exchange, but more of a practice that has moral, social, and religious significance (Noraziz, 1995).

The Malays' behavior is also governed by the concept of *dosa* (sin) and *pabala* (reward, good marks, deed, and merit). This means one has to obtain as many merits as possible in this life in order to be accepted by God (to go to heaven) by doing good for others, and being good in obeying God's rules. Holm and Bowler (1994) assert that Muslims believe in Divine Judgment, that is, reward and punishment after death, which has a direct bearing on their understanding of the interrelation of theology and morality.

In other words, the Malay adolescents' referral to religious principles has to be understood in terms of deeply held and socially grounded principles. In order to maintain harmony in all aspects of life, a Malay has to behave in a certain appropriate way, demonstrating some traditional behavior like *balas budi* (refer to Table 2) and following a religious code, as

adat co-exists with the religion, Islam. As in the studies by Maqsud (1977), Simmons and Simmons (1994) on Nigerian and Saudi Arabian Muslims, and Bouhmama (1984) on Algerian Muslims, the results of this study suggest that the respondents' moral judgments are largely determined by the commandments in the Holy Quran. Therefore, there are strong grounds to believe that religious principles determine the moral judgments of the Malays who, by their adherence to principles of religious duty, very much reflect the characteristic of Stage 3 moral reasoning.

Although American adolescents also frequently demonstrate reasoning based upon social contract, their more frequent use of Stage 2 reasoning can also be explained within the context of the society in which they live. American society is concerned with individual rights and responsibilities, and with self-interest, economic and otherwise. Adherence to authority based on a reward/punishment orientation is also stressed in American society. Extrinsic rewards are valued and these are viewed as directly correlated to individual effort. The goodness or badness of a particular course of action is determined pragmatically by the physical consequences or outcome of that action. According to Kohlberg's theoretical model, an individual who demonstrates Stage 2 moral reasoning is basically concerned with the individual self and protecting one's own interest. American society, also, reflects this concern.

Although references to religious or moral principles were not entirely absent among American adolescents, they occurred with far less frequency than among the Malay adolescents. Principles cited generally came from Christian faith, referring to the Old or New Testament of the Bible. For example, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" was referred to in several answers, as was "Honor Thy Father and Mother." More general religious references such as sin, moral standards, good character, Jesus' teachings and belief in God were also mentioned, as were principles such as the Hippocratic Oath and the law of karma and reciprocity. American society tends to be more heterogeneous and less identified with particular religious codes other than, perhaps, Christianity in a broad sense, however and the responses of American adolescents reflected this. Religious principles or concepts were cited far less frequently by American youth than by their Malaysian peers.

These findings, which may indeed reflect significant cultural differences regarding morality, should be considered in light of modern and

postmodern thinking. One of the primary tenets of postmodernity is of respect for hermeneutics, or the importance of honoring subjective interpretations of truth as opposed to or in addition to positivistic interpretations. A purely postmodern perspective would promote a horizontal interpretive stance to knowledge rather than vertical point of view. While the effects of postmodern thinking have led to many positive contributions to societies across many domains, including expansion of civil rights, the horizontality contribution from postmodernity has severe limitations (Wilber, 2000). Moral decision-making differences, as in the current study, would not be considered "better/worse" or "higher/lower" from this horizontal perspective – just "different". Wilber calls this a "performative contradiction" (Wilber, 2000, p. 122), wherein postmodernity asserts a preference for non-ranking systems, even though non-ranking is conceptually a ranking system itself. A postmodernist thinker might thus erroneously judge the Americans' stage 2 tendencies in this study as "just different" than the Malaysians', rather than "less developed" on the Kohlbergian scale, a scale which itself is grounded in a vertical scaling system. Thus, one could conclude with respect to Wilber's insights that the American adolescents are actually morally "behind" their Malaysian counterparts.

The present study shows that the Malay cultural and religious norms, values, and expectations influenced by the Muslim religion affect the respondents' moral judgment. On the other hand, the Americans' responses do not reflect these concepts and principles in their reasoning but rather reflect values characteristic of the American socio-cultural milieu. These values include individual freedom and responsibility, self interest, self-protection and reasoning governed by economic fairness. These findings points to the importance of culture in determining all aspects of life, including moral judgments. This result is also parallel with those of other researchers who have conducted studies on the moral reasoning in non-western cultures (Gielen and Kelly, 1983; Heubner and Garrod, 1993; Shweder, 1990; Snarey, 1985; Miller, 2001). Although further study is warranted, and larger and more diverse samples are needed in order to generalize, the results of this study lend credence to the growing number of studies which highlight the importance of culture and socialization in human development.

The culturally-mediated gender differences warrant additional study. It is clear that gender, in and of itself, is not, as has been previously

asserted, an influence on reasoning level as assessed by Kohlbergian dilemmas. The Malay females demonstrated the highest level of reasoning. They seemed the most able to utilize clear Stage 3 reasoning; perhaps the females in this culture are even more concerned with maintaining traditional religious and cultural values than the Malay males, who did not seem to reason much differently than their American counterparts. The American females, on the other hand, exhibited the lowest level of reasoning, scoring below their male counterparts as well as below both genders in the Malaysian sample. They demonstrated clear Stage 2 reasoning within their responses. Perhaps this suggests that females are more likely to reflect societal values in their reasoning than males are, in line with Gilligan's theory that females are more concerned with a social orientation—perhaps even a societal social orientation concerned with maintaining social norms. Or perhaps there are other explanations, such as a heightened competitiveness among American females due to perceptions of gender inequity in the job market and elsewhere. This could also account for more concern with fairness and self-protectiveness. Gender does not appear to comprise a separate culture in and of it, although it does appear to differentially reflect culture. Additional studies with larger samples and in other countries are necessary to provide more insight.

Overall, though, this study certainly replicates the findings of previous researchers cited who have demonstrated that socialization within particular cultures profoundly influences moral reasoning. This replicates earlier work which suggests that Kohlberg's stages may be neither as universal nor as invariant as has been previously assumed. Cultural context is an important consideration when assessing adolescents' level of moral reasoning.

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