Shared Perceptions: Morality Is Embedded in Social Contexts

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Abstract
Morality helps make social life possible, but social life is embedded in many social contexts. Research on morality has generally neglected this and instead has emphasized people’s general beliefs. We therefore investigated the extent to which different moral principles are perceived as embedded in social contexts. We conducted two studies investigating how diverse social contexts influence beliefs about the operative moral principles in distinct group types. Study 1 examined these perceptions using a within-subjects design, whereas Study 2 utilized a between-subjects design. We found a high degree of consensus among raters concerning the operative moral principles in groups, and each group type was characterized by a qualitatively distinct pattern of applicable moral principles. Political orientation, a focus of past research on morality, had a small influence on beliefs about operative moral principles. The implications of these findings for our understanding of morality and its functional role in groups are discussed.

Keywords
morality, group types, politics, social context

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It is generally acknowledged that morality helps make social life possible (e.g., de Waal, 1996; Haidt, 2008; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009; Neuberg & Cottrell, 2008; Parks, Joireman, & Van Lange, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Morality plays a functional role in facilitating sociality, whether we are dealing with strangers, acquaintances, coworkers, friends, family, community, or civic society writ large. As such, morality is a far richer phenomenon than a set of embodied associations, intuitions, or abstract principles, and yet much of the current psychological research on morality has emphasized people’s general beliefs and has neglected the extent to which people’s daily lives are embedded in different social contexts. The research presented below is an initial step aimed at understanding the socially embedded nature of morality. More specifically, we investigated the extent to which people believe that distinct moralities are embedded in different types of groups (e.g., families, task groups, loosely associated strangers, and broad social categories).

Mapping Moral Principles
In the recent explosion of research on morality, a focal point of interest has been identifying and classifying the different moralities people rely on in navigating their social worlds. The dominant model in this area is Moral Foundations Theory (MFT); Haidt and his colleagues posit five distinct moral foundations: Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity (Haidt, 2007, 2008, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004, 2007). The functional role morality plays in social life is clearly evident in MFT as it distinguishes between individualizing foundations (i.e., Care & Fairness) that function to suppress selfishness by focusing on the rights and welfare of individuals, and binding foundations (i.e., Loyalty, Authority, & Purity) that do so by binding people into roles and duties in larger groups and institutions (e.g., Graham et al., 2011; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). The moral principles in MFT each achieve the goal of facilitating life in social groups by suppressing selfishness, but each moral principle helps solve this social problem in a different way.

Recently, Janoff-Bulman and Carnes (2013) expanded the moral map in their Model of Moral Motives (MMM) by distinguishing between moral motives that suppress the bad and moral motives that promote the good. More specifically, the moral principles are derived from crossing the fundamental motivational distinction between approach and...
avoidance with three social contexts (i.e., the self, other, and group) that represent the focus of moral concern. A key extension of moral principles based on this model involves the binding, or group-focused, moralities. Janoff-Bulman and Carnes have argued that MFT omits Social Justice, a critical prescriptive (i.e., approach-based) group morality. The three binding moralities of MFT—Loyalty, Authority, and Purity—all reflect Social Order, a prescriptive (i.e., avoidance-based) group morality in MMM. Despite the seeming similarity of Social Justice to MFT’s Fairness foundation (also included in MMM), Social Justice is quite distinct (for a detailed discussion of differences, see Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; also see Brickman, Folger, Goode, & Schul, 1981), representing an a priori concern for the distribution of outcomes across a group in the direction of greater equality rather than an assessment of deservingness based on attributes (e.g., merit, need) of identifiable others.

In considering these varied moral principles, much past work has focused on individual differences and personal preferences. Thus, Graham, Haidt, and colleagues note that their three binding moralities are embraced more by conservatives than liberals (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Janoff-Bulman and Carnes (2013) similarly note that Social Order is embraced more by conservatives, but, in contrast, Social Justice is a group morality embraced more by liberals than conservatives (for a review, see Jost & Kay, 2010; also see Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008). The current research takes a very different tack and asks about the extent to which people believe that these moral principles play distinct roles in various social contexts. In the next section, we argue that these social contexts pose unique challenges or problems for social actors to solve. If moral principles solve problems differently and social contexts pose different challenges, then perhaps certain kinds of social relations can shape our beliefs about the applicability of Care, Loyalty, Social Justice, or any other moral principle to that social context. That is, groups may strongly influence the moral principles we perceive as operative.

**Moral Principles Embedded in Social Organizations**

A socially embedded view of morality suggests that there is likely to be some consensus in the way people understand the role of moral principles in distinct social contexts. From this perspective, people perceive different moral principles playing primary roles in different social situations because they fulfill context-specific functions that serve to successfully regulate social life. Distinct types of groups present particular challenges and opportunities to social actors, and moral principles provide guidance as to how best navigate these different contexts. For example, classic research on communal versus exchange relationships (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1979) demonstrated that people expect reciprocity norms in exchange relationships—such as with coworkers—but not in communal relationships—such as with family—in part because these different kinds of relationships have different goals and priorities. People expect the norm that best fits the particular goals and priorities of the relationship relatively independent of personal preferences for communal or exchange norms in general.

We hypothesize that the moral principles discussed above are essentially moral norms when embedded in different forms of social organization, in that norms are shared beliefs that both guide and govern our behavior in a specified context. Successful group living is largely dependent on mutually understood norms, including, we believe, moral norms. Although people might differ in the extent to which they endorse different moral principles, particularly when considering them in the abstract, there may also be considerable consensus about the applicability of different moral principles within different social contexts. Just as in more specific attitude domains (e.g., perceptions of norms and personal attitudes about littering), the mental underpinnings of morality may consist of both people’s beliefs about what is descriptively normative in different contexts and also their personal preferences for different moral principles. We thought it possible that the frequent focus on individual differences in moral preferences in contemporary morality research has served to obscure what may be a strong consensus about the moral norms believed to operate in different group contexts.

In this research, we were thus interested in investigating the extent to which there is consensus in people’s beliefs about the moral principles that regulate social life in given social contexts. Consensus is important because it may tell us something about the degree to which perceivers agree that particular moral principles fit with particular groups. To address this question, we needed to consider a variety of groups that matter to people in the real world. Past work has demonstrated that people possess intuitive theories about different forms of social groupings (Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001; Lieckel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001). More specifically, Lieckel et al. (2000) used a variety of methods and samples to empirically characterize four basic types or clusters of social organization. Intimacy groups (e.g., family, friends, romantic partners) involve frequent interactions with close others and are seen as small, long-lasting, and difficult to enter and exit. Social categories (e.g., Black people, Women, U.S. citizens) are large, long-lasting, relatively impermeable, and only modestly interactive. Task groups (e.g., coworkers, juries, committees) are generally small and highly interactive, but are relatively short-term and easy to join and leave compared with intimacy groups. Finally, loose associations (e.g., people at a bus stop, people who like classical music, people in a movie theater) are very permeable, generally have low levels of interaction, and are often short in duration.

Given that prior research indicates that different types of social organization have distinct patterns of group properties
that distinguish them, we hypothesized that people may believe that some moral principles might have relatively more “fit” within different kinds of groups. That is, just as there is consensus in people’s intuitive theories of the properties of diverse groups, people are also likely to hold shared beliefs about the moral principles that are operative within groups. We conducted two studies to ascertain the extent to which the social context (specifically different forms of social organization) accounts for people’s perceptions of the moral principles that operate in and regulate social groups.

**Study I**

In Study 1, participants rated a number of groups that previous research has identified as falling into different clusters (Lickel et al., 2000). This within-subjects design has been used effectively in past work on groups (e.g., Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Lickel et al., 2000; Lickel, Rutrichick, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2006). Participants first provided ratings of structural properties, such as size, duration, permeability, and interaction, which are important for differentiating between kinds of groups. Second, groups were rated on the moral principles, such as Loyalty and Social Justice, that past research in morality has identified as important.

This study was designed as a first step toward addressing two inter-related questions. First, to what extent is there consensus in raters’ perceptions of the operating moral principles in different group contexts? Second, insofar as there is consensus about which moral principles are operative in any particular group, what does that consensus look like? Overall, we predicted that there would be substantial consensus concerning the perceived importance of distinct moral principles in different group contexts. Given past findings relating political orientation to personal preferences in moral principles, we also explored the separate question of whether liberals and conservatives differed in their perceptions of operative moral norms across contexts.

**Method**

**Participants.** A total of 118 undergraduates at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst participated in exchange for extra course credit. Of them, 5.1% identified as Black, 6.8% as Hispanic, 13.6% as Asian, 66.9% as White, 0.8% as Native American, and 6.8% as Other. There were 29 males (24.6%) and 89 females (75.4%). The median age of participants was 20.

**Measures.** Study materials were administered in a computerized questionnaire. Each page of the questionnaire contained a single rating scale on which participants were instructed to rate 13 groups. The same 13 groups were used on each rating scale and included four social categories (i.e., Jewish people, Black people, farmers, citizens of the United States), three loose associations (i.e., people at a bus stop, people who like classical music, people at a movie theater), three task groups (i.e., the cast of a play, jury members, an airline crew), and three intimacy groups (i.e., a clique of close friends, members of a family, a local fraternity). The order in which the groups were listed was fully randomized on every page. All participants rated all 13 groups on 21 rating scale measures using 9-point scales anchored from (1) to (9). Composites of each rating scale measure were created by averaging either across all 13 groups or within each group type (i.e., social categories, loose associations, task groups, and intimacy groups) depending on the analysis.

**Rating tasks.** Participants engaged in two rating tasks; they first provided ratings of group properties and then moral principles. These tasks were framed in a parallel fashion to tap participants’ own opinions about the nature of these groups. A lengthy introduction emphasized our interest in participants’ views of various social groups (“it is very important to us to get an accurate measure of your opinions and perceptions”).

**Group property rating task.** Participants rated each of 13 groups on seven group properties: size, duration, permeability, interaction, common traits, common goals, and entitativity (see appendix).²

**Moral principle rating task.** Participants rated each of the 13 groups on six moral principles. Five of these moral principles corresponded to the moral foundations of Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity (e.g., Haidt, 2007, 2008; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004, 2007) and the sixth corresponded to the moral motive of Social Justice (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). Amid a lengthy explanation, participants read: “Norms are formal or informal rules about behavior. We are interested in the extent to which each norm applies to different groups.” They were then asked to select the response that best represents “your opinion about the extent to which each statement applies to each group” and were then provided with a norm involving one of the six moral principles.

Each of the moral foundations was measured using two of the abstract moral relevance questions from the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ), because we could easily adapt these items to different group contexts without altering the wording (see appendix; Graham et al., 2011). For example, one of the Harm/Care items asked, “How important is the following norm for how people relate to each other within each of the following groups: whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable.” Social Justice was measured using four items with the same abstract moral relevance format (see appendix). For example, one of the Social Justice items asked, “How important is the following norm for how people relate to each other within each of the
following groups: whether or not those at the bottom of the group are given assistance by the rest of the group.” Each moral principle was measured with rating scales anchored from (1) not at all important to (9) extremely important. The order of the moral principle rating task was fully randomized. The reliabilities of each composite moral principle across all groups were as follows: Harm/Care ($r = .68, p < .001$), Fairness/Reciprocity ($r = .58, p < .001$), Ingroup/Loyalty ($r = .75, p < .001$), Authority/Respect ($r = .46, p < .001$), Purity/Sanctity ($r = .45, p < .001$), and Social Justice ($\alpha = .86$).

**Political orientation.** Political orientation was measured with two items on a 9-point scale anchored from (1) very liberal/strong democrat to (9) very conservative/strong republican. The composite measure was adequately reliable ($r = .63, p < .001$). These items were administered in the demographic questionnaire.

**Procedure.** Participants were run in groups ranging from one to six persons per experimental session. Participants were seated at a computer and instructed to follow the directions on the screen. Participants were asked to complete the group property rating task first, and then completed the moral principle rating task second. Last, participants who completed a demographic questionnaire were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

**Results and Discussion**

**Assessing perceivers’ consensus in applicability of moral principles.** The following analyses were conducted using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation because the data had a nested structure (e.g., observations nested within persons). In these analyses, the Level 1 units were the ratings of the different groups on the moral principles and group properties (i.e., group targets), whereas the Level 2 units were the individuals making the ratings (i.e., raters).

To assess the degree of consensus among raters in their judgments of the groups, we utilized HLM’s ability to estimate the extent to which the Level 1 units (groups) and Level 2 units (individuals) account for the applicability of each moral principle. HLM calculates an intraclass correlation that quantifies the proportion of the variance in an outcome that is between the Level 2 units by dividing the Level 2 variance component by the sum of both the Level 1 variance and Level 2 variance component (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In the current study, the intraclass correlation indicates how much of the variance in the perceived applicability of each moral principle lies between different raters, whereas the inverse of the intraclass correlation indicates how much variance lies between different rated groups. We ran a series of one-way ANOVAs with random effects in which each moral principle was a separate outcome to generate the intraclass correlation for each moral principle. This analysis indicated that differences between raters explain only a small proportion of the variance in moral principles: Care (10.45%), Fairness (13.77%), Loyalty (2.82%), Authority (9.1%), Purity (26.31%), and Social Justice (8.65%). The rest of the variance in moral principles is due to variation at Level 1 (i.e., group targets). Thus, there was a high degree of consensus among raters in their judgments of the applicability of different moral principles to different groups. As we predicted, the moral principles display a key characteristic of norms in that beliefs about their applicability in different contexts are broadly shared across people.

We thought the variance in the ratings due to perceiver differences (even if modest in scope) could still be meaningful. Because prior research has shown the importance of political ideology in predicting individual differences in moral preference (e.g., Graham et al., 2009; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013), we further assessed whether individual differences in political orientation might also moderate the ratings of how applicable the moral principles were perceived to be either across the group types or within the group types. We first ran a set of six regression-with-means-as-outcomes models in which each moral principle was a separate outcome variable (i.e., there was only one moral principle in each model) and political orientation was always the Level 2 predictor. These analyses tested whether political orientation moderated the mean applicability of the moral principles across all of the group types. The outcomes from these analyses indicated that political orientation did not significantly moderate any of the moral principles (all $t < 1$). Second, we ran another series of six regression-with-means-as-outcomes models in which each moral principle was again a separate outcome variable, but this time group type was dummy coded at Level 1, and political orientation was still a Level 2 predictor. This analysis tested whether political orientation moderated the mean applicability of the moral principles within each of the group types. Again, political orientation did not appear to substantively moderate people’s beliefs about the applicability of moral principles within different group contexts (see Table 1). We identified one instance in which political ideology significantly moderated people’s beliefs within a group type (Loyalty in loose associations), but this finding should be interpreted with caution because of the possibility of a non-replicable outcome when performing so many statistical tests.

**Profiles of perceived moral principle applicability by group type.** The prior analyses documented a high degree of consensus among participants in their ratings of the groups. However, these analyses provided no description of the nature of this consensus. In particular, we wished to test the extent to which each group type (e.g., intimacy groups) was characterized by a unique profile of perceived applicable moral principles. We first generated means for each of the group types on each of the basic group properties (e.g.,
duration, degree of group member interaction) and as can be seen in Table 2, the pattern of the group properties associated with each group type was consistent with prior research (e.g., Lickel et al., 2000). We also generated means for each of the moral principles for each group type (see Table 3).

We predicted that each type of group would be characterized by a unique profile of perceived applicable moral principles. To test this, we averaged responses to the questions that indicated each moral principle, and then created a composite variable for each group type on each moral principle. In our first analysis, these data were submitted to a 4 (Group Type) × 6 (Moral Principle) repeated measures ANOVA. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of group type, $F(3, 351) = 509.10, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .81$, and of moral principles, $F(5, 585) = 17.50, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .13$. Pairwise comparisons among group types (collapsing over moral principles) demonstrated that intimacy groups were rated the highest on the combined moral principles, followed by social categories, task groups, and last loose associations (all $p < .001$). Critically, however, we found the predicted interaction between group type and moral principles, $F(15, 1755) = 40.79, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .26$. This interaction indicates that the general pattern of applicable moral principles differed depending on the type of group that was being rated. Our second set of analyses was run to determine the extent to which every one of the group types was characterized by a qualitatively unique pattern of perceived applicable moral principles. The prior analysis demonstrated at least one instance of a qualitatively different pattern between two of the group types, but does not show how many of the group types (e.g., intimacy groups vs. social categories) were different from one another. Therefore, we conducted a series of six repeated measures analyses that compared each group type with every other group type in a pairwise manner.

### Table 1. Estimated Political Moderation of Moral Principles Within Group Type (Study 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology × Morality interactions</th>
<th>Loose association</th>
<th>Task group</th>
<th>Social category</th>
<th>Intimacy group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *$p < .05$.

### Table 2. Mean Ratings of Group Properties Within Group Type (Study 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group property</th>
<th>Loose association</th>
<th>Task group</th>
<th>Social category</th>
<th>Intimacy group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permeable</td>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entitativity</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Mean Ratings of Moral Principles Within Group Type (Study 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral principle</th>
<th>Loose association</th>
<th>Task group</th>
<th>Social category</th>
<th>Intimacy group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interaction between group type and moral principle in every pairwise analysis: all $F(5, 585) > 7.78$, all $p < .001$, and all $\eta_p^2 > .11$.

Thus, each group type was characterized by a unique profile of perceived applicable moral principles. As can be clearly seen in Figure 1, there is very distinctive pattern with regard to how people rated the different types of groups. Although the series of six repeated measures ANOVAs indicates that each group had a moral principle profile that was significantly different from every other group, these analyses do not provide a sense of the relative dissimilarity between groups. To further quantify the degree to which the pattern of moral principles is different between group types, we rank-ordered the mean moral principles ratings within each group type and generated pairwise Spearman rank-order correlations relating each group type and every other group type. The most similar profile was between social categories and task groups ($r = .714$), whereas the least similar was between intimacy groups and loose associations ($r = -.714$). Furthermore, the average correlation was .105, suggesting that the ranking of applicable moral principles within each group type was quite distinct. Loyalty is the primary operative principle within Intimacy Groups, Fairness is the predominant principle in Social Categories and Task Groups, and Purity is of greatest relative applicability within Loose Associations.

**Summary.** In Study 1, we discovered two important sets of findings. First, overall there was a very high degree of consensus in people’s perceptions of how different moral principles are applied across different group contexts. We found that when participants were presented with different group contexts and asked to judge the applicability of moral principles within those contexts there was very strong normative consensus. People have a shared understanding of what moral principles would be expected to operate in different kinds of groups, and interestingly, this was not strongly moderated by political ideology. Thus, although they may have different preferences, liberals and conservatives have a shared understanding of what is expected in different contexts. Second, Study 1 demonstrated that the different types of groups investigated in past social perception research (e.g., Johnson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2000) are judged by perceivers to be regulated by distinct profiles of moral principles, with different moral principles having relatively more or less applicability within different types of groups.

In many respects, Study 1 extends work on both morality and group perception in ways that are congruent with much prior research. The current findings amplify the centrality of morality in the layperson’s understanding of the operation of groups and the finding of strong consensus in perceptions of moral norms is particularly important. However, although we believe Study 1 was valuable for helping to paint a picture of the layperson’s association between group types and morality, we would note that the method that we used in Study 1 pulled for differentiation between the group types. Because people judged all of the groups on each moral principle (and then moved to judging all the groups again on another moral principle), this probably increased differentiation of the groups. If true, this would have had a side effect of increasing consensus among raters and therefore reducing our ability to detect individual differences in judgments of applicability. It is also worth remembering that in everyday life, people generally only consider a single group context at a time rather than contrasting them with different group contexts. We conducted Study 2 using a between-subjects design to better assess the degree of consensus among raters in how applicable they perceive the moral principles to be, as well as to replicate the other results of Study 1.
Study 2

In Study 2, participants each rated one group that fell into one of the four types of groups examined in Study 1. Whereas the within-subjects design in Study 1 may favor consensus among raters (i.e., group type differences), the between-subjects design in Study 2 may favor variation among raters; this study design should therefore provide a more conservative test of the replicability of the findings from Study 1. Participants provided ratings of both group properties and moral principles as in Study 1, but additional items were added to improve reliability. This time we included all of the abstract moral relevance questions from the MFQ as well as three items each for both Social Justice and Social Order. In Study 1, the three MFT binding foundations were essentially regarded as indices of Social Order; here MMM Social Order items were included as well to test this assumption.

This study was designed to answer two questions. First, will the consensus found in Study 1 regarding operative moral principles replicate? Although we cannot generate an intraclass correlation as we did in Study 1, we would expect both the large main effect of the group types and the qualitatively unique patterns of applicable moral principles associated with each group type to replicate if there were consensus about the perceived operative moral principles in groups. Second, will individual differences in political orientation influence raters’ perceptions of the operative moral principles in groups? We believed political differences in perceptions of moral norms, even if small, would be more likely to emerge using this between-subjects study design. Our prediction was that differences in perceived operative moral principles would mirror differences in moral preferences identified in past work; that is, liberals and conservatives would perceive the individualizing foundations as similarly applicable, but would differ in how they perceive the applicability of the binding foundations (and the group-based moral motives).

Method

Participants. A total of 404 adults on Amazon Mechanical Turk participated in exchange for payment. All participants resided in the United States. Of them, 11.6% identified as Black, 3.0% as Hispanic, 6.7% as Asian, 76.7% as White, 0.7% as Native American, 1.0% as Other, and 0.2% did not disclose. There were 174 males (43.1%), 227 females (56.2%), and 3 participants (0.7%) did not disclose. The median age of participants was 35. Based on two catch questions designed to identify careless responders, 36 participants (8.9%) were excluded from analysis leaving 368 included participants.

Manipulations and measures. Experimental materials were administered in an online questionnaire over Amazon Mechanical Turk. Each page of the questionnaire contained a single rating scale on which participants were instructed to rate one group. Participants were randomly assigned to answer all of the rating scales using as a reference group either citizens of the United States (social category condition), people waiting in line (loose association condition), coworkers assigned to a project (task group condition), or members of a family (intimacy group condition).

Group property rating task. Participants rated the group they were assigned to on the same seven group properties as in Study 1, as well as nine items measuring entitativity and essentiality drawn from Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2000, 2002).^3^ Each moral foundation was measured using all three abstract moral relevance questions from the MFQ (Graham et al., 2011). The other moral principles corresponded to the moral motives of Social Justice and Social Order, both of which were measured using three items (see appendix). An example Social Justice item asks, “How important do you think the following is for how people should or should not behave in the group: Whether or not people strictly follow the group help provide resources for those who are worse off.” An example Social Order item asks, “How important do you think the following is for how people should or should not behave in the group: Whether or not those who are better off in the group help provide resources for those who are worse off.”

Moral principle rating task. Participants rated the group they were assigned to on seven moral principles. Directions for the moral principle rating task were the same as Study 1, except that ratings were now made for a single group. Five of these moral principles corresponded to the moral foundations of Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity (e.g., Haidt, 2007, 2008; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004, 2007). Each moral foundation was measured using all three abstract moral relevance questions from the MFQ (Graham et al., 2011). The other moral principles corresponded to the moral motives of Social Justice and Social Order, both of which were measured using three items (see appendix). An example Social Justice item asks, “How important do you think the following is for how people should or should not behave in the group: Whether or not those who are better off in the group help provide resources for those who are worse off.”

Political orientation. Political orientation was measured with two items on a 9-point scale anchored from (1) very liberal/strong democrat to (9) very conservative/strong republican. The composite measure was adequately reliable ($r = .84, p < .001$). These items were administered in the demographic questionnaire.

Procedure. Participants completed the questionnaire online. Otherwise, the procedure was the same as in Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Profiles of perceived moral principle applicability by type of group. We first tested whether the ratings of the four group
types on the perceived applicability of the moral principles produced qualitatively distinct patterns associated with different types of groups, replicating our findings from Study 1. We averaged responses to the questions that indicated each moral principle to represent the within-subjects factor, and then dummy coded the group types to represent the between-subjects factor. The data were submitted to a 4 (Group Type) × 7 (Moral Principle) mixed-design ANOVA. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of group type, \( F(3, 364) = 37.26, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .24 \), and of moral principles, \( F(6, 2184) = 55.87, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .13 \). Importantly, we found the predicted interaction between group type and moral principles, \( F(18, 2184) = 14.19, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11 \). This interaction indicates that the pattern of applicable moral principle ratings differed depending on the type of group that was being rated. To more precisely demonstrate that each of the group types was characterized by a qualitatively unique pattern of applicable moral principles, we conducted a series of six repeated measures analyses comparing every group to every other group in a pairwise manner just as we did in Study 1. Consistent with our predictions, there was a significant interaction between group type and moral principles in every single pairwise analysis (all \( p < .001 \)). Just as we did in Study 1, we next rank-ordered the mean moral principles ratings within each group type and generated pairwise Spearman rank-order correlations relating each group type and every other group type. The most similar profile was between task groups and loose associations (\( r = .679 \)), whereas the least similar was between intimacy groups and loose associations (\( r = -.214 \)). The average correlation was .310, suggesting that the pattern of moral principles within each group type was again relatively distinct.

The distinct pattern of moral principles associated with each group type is depicted in Figure 2. Even though each participant rated only one exemplar from one group type in Study 2, a comparison of Figures 2 and 1 (from Study 1) shows substantial replication of the patterns from Study 1. To quantify the degree of replication, we rank-ordered the mean moral principles ratings within each group type and generated pairwise Spearman rank-order correlations relating each group type from Study 1 to its corresponding group type exemplar from Study 2. The most similar profile was between intimacy groups and the exemplar “members of a family” (\( r = .943 \)), whereas the least similar was between social categories and the exemplar “citizens of the United States” (\( r = .429 \)). The average correlation was .641, suggesting a reasonable degree of overlap between studies despite using somewhat different items, a different methodology, and comparing ratings of a single exemplar (Study 2) to the overall group-type mean (Study 1).

**Individual differences as a moderator of perceived moral applicability.** Considering that the group effects replicated, indicating some degree of consensus concerning the perceived applicability of moral principles in groups, the next critical analysis for Study 2 was to examine whether individual differences in political orientation moderated the perceived applicability of the moral principles either across the group types or within the group types. We ran a series of seven general linear model regressions in which the outcome was one of the seven moral principles (i.e., Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Purity, Social Justice, or Social Order). The predictors in all seven models were group type, political orientation, and the interaction between group type and political orientation. Our first hypothesis was that the group context would moderate all of the moral principles, despite labels such as binding or individualizing, because morality facilitates sociality and should be differentially applicable depending on the social context. Our second hypothesis was that individual differences in political orientation would moderate people’s ratings of the binding foundations but not the individualizing foundations of Care and Fairness, similar to findings in past research investigating moral preferences.

As predicted, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of group type for all of the moral principles: Care, \( F(3, 359) = 35.45, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .23 \); Fairness, \( F(3, 359) = 8.25, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .06 \); Loyalty, \( F(3, 359) = 59.34, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .33 \); Authority, \( F(3, 359) = 3.69, p = .012, \eta^2_p = .03 \); Purity, \( F(3, 359) = 4.48, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .04 \); Social Justice, \( F(3, 359) = 51.05, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .30 \); and Social Order, \( F(3, 359) = 8.68, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .07 \). Our analysis indicates that the group context plays an important role in determining the perceived applicability of all the moral principles.

We predicted that only the binding, group-based moral principles (i.e., Loyalty, Authority, Purity, Social Justice, and Social Order), and not individualizing moral principles (i.e., Care and Fairness), would be moderated by political orientation. For Care and Fairness, there was no main effect of political orientation (all \( p ≥ .10 \)), and political orientation did not interact with group type (all \( F < 1 \)). Critically, the analysis revealed the predicted main effect of political orientation for Loyalty, \( F(3, 359) = 6.31, p = .012, \eta^2_p = .02 \); Authority, \( F(3, 359) = 9.50, p = .002, \eta^2_p = .03 \); Purity, \( F(3, 359) = 40.48, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .10 \); Social Justice, \( F(3, 359) = 5.59, p = .019, \eta^2_p = .02 \); and Social Order, \( F(3, 359) = 15.33, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .04 \). None of the interactions between group type and political orientation were significant (all \( p ≥ .09 \)). It is worth noting that the average effect size of political ideology on perceived moral applicability in this set of analyses was small in size (\( \eta^2_p = .03 \)), whereas the average effect size of group type on perceived moral applicability was medium in size (\( \eta^2_p = .15 \)).

The direction of these main effects were all in the predicted direction. Political orientation (with “conservative” at the high end of the scale and “liberal” at the low end) was positively related to ratings of Loyalty, \( B = .10, SE = .04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.03, .18] \), \( t(362) = 2.61, p = .009 \); Authority, \( B = .11, SE = .04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.04, .18] \), \( t(362) = 3.13, p = .002 \); Purity, \( B = .30, SE = .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.21, .40] \),
t(362) = 6.66, p < .001; and Social Order, B = .15, SE = .04, 95% CI = [.08, .23], t(362) = 4.04, p < .001. In contrast, political orientation was negatively related to ratings of Social Justice, B = −.09, SE = .04, 95% CI = [−.17, −.01], t(362) = −2.25, p = .025. Across group contexts, conservatives were more likely to perceive Loyalty, Authority, Purity, and Social Order as applicable, whereas liberals were more likely to perceive Social Justice as applicable. They did not differ regarding ratings of Care or Fairness. As expected, the three MFT binding foundations paralleled the findings for Social Order and not Social Justice. Ratings of Social Justice were uniquely and positively associated with liberalism.

Summary. Study 2 provides an important replication of the findings from Study 1. By replicating the group context effects using a completely different design, we feel confident in asserting that group context exerts a powerful and unique influence over the applicability of different moral principles. People’s beliefs about morality are sensitive to group context. Furthermore, we were able to find individual differences in political ideology on moral applicability that mirrored past work investigating moral preference. Conservatives were more likely to perceive a role for Loyalty, Authority, Purity, and Social Order, whereas liberals were more likely to perceive a role for Social Justice; political orientation was not associated with perceptions of Care or Fairness, the individualizing moral foundations. It is noteworthy that these differences do not appear to be dependent on the group context, but are rather systematic. However, the effect sizes of these individual differences were generally small, whereas the effect size of the group type differences were larger. Although this finding does not address the moral preferences of liberals and conservatives, it indicates that liberals and conservatives have a largely shared understanding of the applicability of moral principles in different social contexts.

General Discussion

We conducted this research to better understand the extent to which forms of social organization (i.e., groups) account for people’s beliefs about the relative applicability of different moral principles in distinct social contexts. Our general hypothesis was that there would be considerable consensus in the extent to which people perceive operative moral principles in different types of groups. The clearest finding from our studies is that there is a great deal of agreement about the moral norms that operate in different contexts. In Study 1, group context accounted for an average of 88.15% of the variance in perceived moral principles. This estimate may be inflated due to the within-subjects methodology of Study 1, but it is very apparent that the many forms of social organization in which people’s daily lives are embedded are critically important to understanding how people think about morality. This point is reinforced by our findings in both Studies 1 and 2 that each group type evoked a qualitatively different profile of perceived moral principles. The distinct groups appear to orient people toward particular moral principles that are presumably functional in that context, such as Loyalty in intimacy groups and Fairness in task groups.

The Functional Role of Morality in Groups

Why should various forms of social organization matter for morality? We noted at the outset of this article that morality is for sociality; morality helps us live together in interdependent groups. Genes and culture are hypothesized to have coevolved to support humans living in these highly interdependent...
groups because such groups afforded substantial fitness-enhancing benefits (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). According to a sociofunctional perspective, people utilize a suite of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms that help them both maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of this sociality (Neuberg & Cottrell, 2008). Haidt and Kesebir (2010) argue that morality is one such mechanism that functions to make social life possible. It accomplishes this by constraining self-interest and promoting altruism to both provide for and protect the self, the other, and the group (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013).

To understand our findings, we can borrow the logic of Cottrell, Neuberg, and Li (2007), who found that different kinds of groups imply different kinds of valued characteristics in others. We value athleticism for sports teams and intelligence for study groups precisely because these groups have different goals to accomplish. In the same vein, we found that people believe that different kinds of groups stress different sets of moral principles in regulating behavior and relations within the group. Loyalty is perceived as the most applicable moral norm within intimacy groups and Fairness for task groups because these groups generally present us with different opportunities and pose different challenges. However, our results go beyond suggesting that any single moral principle has primacy (either in general or in a particular context) by demonstrating that each type of group is characterized by a qualitatively unique profile of perceived moral principles. Theoretically, each moral principle helps manage a different sort of problem or challenge to group living that is present to varying degrees in different kinds of groups. People seem to understand that distinct types of groups emphasize different combinations of these moral principles that, in turn, may serve as guides to social interactions in these contexts.

**Moral Norms, Not Moral Preferences**

In this research, participants were asked to provide their opinions about the moral principles operating in groups. Within any society, shared norms are important for smooth social functioning, for they guide behavior in diverse social contexts. The current studies suggest that there is considerable consensus regarding the moral norms that govern behavior in groups. That is, there is a shared understanding of what is expected in groups and, as is the case with social norms more generally, it seems likely that such expectations influence the behavior of group members, including the participants themselves. This remains an empirical question, however, because the current research did not address actual behavior. In addition, these studies explored consensus in the perception of moral norms, and not people’s opinions about the moral norms they would establish if provided with the opportunity; that is, we focused on perceived moral norms, not moral preferences—shared moral norms rather than personal morality.

This may help account for the relatively small role played by political ideology in this research. In Study 1, political orientation did not moderate the perceived applicability of any moral principles, whether between groups or within groups. Study 2, which used a between-subjects methodology and pulled for differentiation in individuals’ perceptions, found differences in the perception of moral norms based on political ideology. Although relatively small (i.e., the average main effect of political ideology on all of the moral principles was small in size, $\eta^2_p = .03$), it is noteworthy that differences arose when the focus was on perceptions of moral norms rather than personal morality. The associations found in past research were again found here: Social Justice was perceived to be more operative by liberals than conservatives (i.e., positively associated with liberalism), whereas Social Order, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity were perceived as more operative by conservatives than liberals (i.e., positively associated with conservatism). These seem to be broad-based orientations that apply across many different forms of social organization, because political ideology did not interact with group type in any of our analyses. It is interesting to note that the findings for the MFT binding foundations paralleled those for MMM’s Social Order and not Social Justice; also, although Fairness and Care were not perceived differently by liberals and conservatives, their perceptions of Social Justice did differ. Although largely in consensus, liberals and conservatives may differ not only in what they prefer but also (to some degree) in what they believe normatively operates within groups.

The different relationships observed between political ideology and perceived morality in Studies 1 and 2 possibly reflect methodological differences between the two studies. The within-subjects design of Study 1 forced participants to think about the breadth of their social interactions and experiences, whereas the between-subjects design of Study 2 focused participants on a single salient social context. On the other hand, the literature using the standard MFQ to assess personal morality either does not give participants a social context to think about (i.e., the abstract moral relevance items) or averages across several social contexts (i.e., the contextualized moral judgment items). Although each of these modes of judgment has relevance, we suspect that thinking about a particular social context (our approach in Study 2) is the most ecologically valid representation of people’s everyday lives and experiences.

**Future Directions**

Our data suggest a great deal of consensus across raters on the moral principles that are believed to be operative in a given group, reflecting the socially shared nature of morality. Although we suspect that perceived moral norms may influence behavior and, over time, personal morality, it is certainly the case that what people believe to be important in any particular context may not reflect what they personally
value. Given the importance of the distinction between perceived norms and personal preferences found in other areas of behavior (e.g., Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Prentice & Miller, 1993), exploring the relationship between perceptions of moral norms and personal preferences is an important avenue for future research on morality.

Another goal for future research will be to integrate moral principles with other important elements of people’s folk theories of groups. In particular, the relational models that group members use to guide interactions with one another are undoubtedly related to how people think about morality. A prior set of studies (Lickel et al., 2006) examined people’s beliefs about how different relational models (as described by Fiske and colleagues; for example, Fiske, 1992; Haslam, 1994) are related to the different types of groups studied in the present research. Furthermore, Rai and Fiske (2011) argue that relational models are themselves the dimensions of human understanding of morality. As argued elsewhere (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013), we do not believe that morality can be reduced so simply to the four elements of the Fiske relational models theory. Nonetheless, given their importance in people’s folk theories of groups, future work should investigate the inter-relationships of these different constructs more thoroughly.

An additional direction for future research is to carefully unpack the relationship between the elemental structural properties of groups and the moral principles perceived as important in these groups. Past research on group perception demonstrates that people can readily provide ratings of group properties given a particular group, and can also readily identify a particular group given a set of group properties (Lickel et al., 2000). This suggests that group properties can serve as a signal that ordinary people use in their folk perceptions of groups. One intriguing possibility raised by the present research is that different group properties serve as signals for the use of different moral principles. Future research should attempt to clarify the relationship between group properties and perceived moral principles, and identify the group functions that these moral principles fulfill. In the meantime, the current findings reinforce the central role of morality in facilitating group living. There was considerable consensus in the perception of moral principles that operate in a given group, reflecting the socially shared nature of morality.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**


**Supplemental Material**

The online supplemental material is available at http://pspb.sagepub.com/supplemental.

**Notes**

1. Six moral motives result from this crossing. Industriousness (Self), Helping/Fairness (Other), and Social Justice (Group) are prescriptive moral motives based in approach motivation. Self-Restraint (Self), Not Harming (Other), and Social Order (Group) are prescriptive moral motives based in avoidance motivation.

2. Participants read: “Group properties describe what a group of people is typically like. We are interested in the extent to which each group property applies to different groups.” They were then asked to select the response that best represented their opinion “about the extent to which each statement applies to each group.” Each group property was measured with one rating scale using item-specific semantic differential anchors (e.g., very small to very large for the group property of size). Most of these items were drawn from Lickel et al. (2000) and Lickel, Rutlich, Hamilton, and Sherman (2006). The order of the group property rating task was fully randomized.

3. Directions for the group property rating task were the same as Study 1, except that ratings were now made for a single group. The order of the group property rating task was randomized, and the Haslam scale followed the other group property measures. Both the five item essentiality composite ($\alpha = .66$) and the four item entitativity composite measure ($\alpha = .63$) were adequately reliable across conditions.


