



Influence of Cultural Values and Cognitive Styles on Moral Reasoning among Young Adults

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Abstract: The study aimed to find the impact of cultural values and cognitive styles on moral reasoning. The sample for the study was Indian Young Adults within the age range of 18-25 years. The total sample size was 100, of which 35 were males and 65 were females. The five dimensions of moral reasoning were studied, which included harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect and lastly, purity/sanctity. The topic of morality has been studied in different subjects over the years. Attempts have been made to find out what the factors that influence morality. Previous research had shown that culture plays a major role in understanding how individuals make moral judgements. Context was particularly considered essential as far as determining morality was concerned. Cognitive styles, that are the ways preferred by individuals in order to perceive a piece of information, are also considered essential factors that determine morality. Analytical style has been associated more with moral values such as autonomy and fairness. Intuitive thinking finds its association with foundations such as purity, sanctity and authority. Results showed that cognitive styles and cultural values predicted different moral foundations to varying degrees. Authority was predicted by cultural values, along with purity. The foundation of harm/care was predicted by the cognitive style of a person. The findings confirm previous research on moral reasoning.

Keywords: *Analytical, Cognitive Styles, Cultural Values, Intuitive, Moral Reasoning, Fairness*

1. Introduction

Moral reasoning plays a crucial role in shaping human behavior, guiding individuals in making ethical decisions and understanding right from wrong. It is influenced by various

factors, including personal beliefs, upbringing, and societal norms. Among these, cultural values and cognitive styles are two significant aspects that shape the way people perceive and process moral dilemmas. Cultural values provide individuals with a framework for understanding morality based on the traditions, beliefs, and norms of their society. Meanwhile, cognitive style refers to how individuals think, reason, and solve problems, which in turn impacts their moral decision-making.

Young adulthood is a critical period for moral development, as individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences that shape their ethical judgments. During this stage, they transition from relying solely on societal norms to forming independent moral viewpoints. Understanding the influence of cultural values and cognitive styles on moral reasoning is essential in a globalized world where people from diverse backgrounds interact regularly. It helps in fostering mutual understanding, improving cross-cultural communication, and addressing ethical conflicts in multicultural settings.

Cultural values shape moral reasoning by influencing what individuals consider to be ethical or unethical. Different societies have varying moral codes that dictate acceptable behavior, and these values are passed down through generations. For example, cultures that emphasize hierarchy and respect for authority may encourage moral reasoning that prioritizes obedience and duty, whereas cultures that value egalitarianism may foster moral perspectives that emphasize fairness and individual rights.

Cognitive style also plays a significant role in moral decision-making by affecting the way people process information and evaluate moral situations. Individuals with an analytical cognitive style tend to rely on logical reasoning, carefully weighing the pros and cons before making a decision. In contrast, those with an intuitive cognitive style are more likely to rely on gut feelings and immediate emotional responses.

1.1 Culture

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, customs, practices and social behavior of a group or society. It encompasses language, traditions, rituals, and moral codes that define group identity (Hofstede, 1980).

Key Concepts in the Study of Culture

1.1.1 Individualism vs. Collectivism (Triandis, 1995)

Individualistic cultures (e.g. the US and Canada) prioritize personal autonomy, self-expression and individual rights. Collectivist cultures (e.g. China and India), on the other hand lay more emphasis on group harmony and loyalty. Here, decisions are often based on maintaining harmonious relationships.

1.1.2 Power and Distance (Hofstede, 1980)

High power distance cultures (e.g. many Asian and Middle Eastern countries) respect hierarchical structures, which is seen to lead towards a type of moral reasoning that values obedience and authority. Low power cultures (e.g. Scandinavian countries) encourage that authority figures be questioned and emphasize equality in moral reasoning.

1.2 Cognitive Styles

Cognitive styles refer to preferred ways in which individuals perceive, process and interpret information. These styles shape how people make decisions, solve problems and learn new tasks. In the context of moral reasoning, cognitive styles influence whether individuals rely more on intuition or analytical thinking when making ethical judgments (Kahneman, 2011).

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks of Cognitive Styles

Several types of cognitive styles exist, but one of the major frameworks include:

1.2.1 Field- Dependent vs. Field-Independent Thinking (Witkin, 1962)

Field-Dependent thinkers rely on external cues and social contexts for decision-making. They tend to be more socially oriented. Field-Independent thinkers analyze information independently and tend to focus on abstract principles. They prefer rule based moral reasoning.

1.2.2 Holistic vs. Analytical Thinking (Nisbett et al., 2001)

Holistic thinkers are those who consider the broader context, that is, the situational factors in decision-making. This style is seen to be more common in East Asian cultures. Analytical thinkers have been seen to focus more on the individual components, rules, and logic. This style is dominant in western cultures.

1.3. Morality

Morality is one of the most basic aspects of the lives of human beings and has been so since times immemorial. It guides the actions of people by setting standards for what is considered right and what is considered wrong in a particular civilization. It incorporates the principles, norms and values that influence decision-making and behavior of people inhabiting a society.

1.3.1 Historical Background of Morality

Morality as a concept of study has its roots in ancient civilizations, where ethical principles were closely related with religious institutions and writings of famous philosophers of those times. The evolution of early concepts related to morality can be traced back to

religious texts such as the Vedas, the Bible and the Quran. These texts provided guidelines to people of those societies for engaging in proper conduct and ethical behavior.

1.3.2 Contemporary Perspectives

Modern research suggests that morality is shaped by an interaction between biology, culture, social influence, and cognitive processes. Moral reasoning is shaped by deeply rooted cultural traditions and individual cognitive processing styles, both of which influence how people judge right and wrong.

2. Review Of Literature

This review examines existing studies on these three variables, individually as well as combined, through various theoretical frameworks and empirical findings.

Cultural Values and Moral Reasoning

The current studies have attempted studying the interrelationship between morality and social factors such as social order, interpersonal relations and harmony. It is a topic of research that tries to understand the reasons for a person's action and hence, is extremely relevant. Shweder and his colleagues (1991) challenged the idea that moral development follows a universal pattern, as suggested by earlier theorists like Kohlberg. Their research emphasized that different cultures have unique moral systems shaped by traditions, religion, and societal expectations. They conducted studies in India and the United States, comparing how people from these cultures judged moral issues and found differences in these cultures.

Cognitive Styles and Moral Reasoning

Studies conducted on these concepts, namely, moral reasoning and cognitive styles, have highlighted the relationship between the two, which has appeared to be very complex. Among other important factors is the person's cultural setting, which is then responsible for embedding certain patterns of making moral judgments over others in a way that distinguishes it from the ways of other cultures. Rest and his colleagues (1993) built upon Kohlberg's theory of moral development but introduced a new perspective known as the Neo-Kohlbergian approach. Their research suggested that moral reasoning is not just a stage-wise progression but is influenced by how individuals process information and make ethical judgments.

Cultural Values and Cognitive Styles

Oyserman et al., (1998) explored how cultural values influence decision-making and cognitive processing. Their research showed that individuals raised in individualistic societies were more likely to think in categorical terms, grouping objects based on shared abstract

features. Meanwhile, those from collectivist cultures focused more on relationships and functional connections between objects, leading to a different way of organizing information.

Gender Differences in Cultural Values, Cognitive Styles and Moral Reasoning

Gender plays an important role in shaping how individuals think, make decisions, and interact with society. Over the years, researchers have explored how men and women differ in their moral reasoning, cultural values, and cognitive styles.

Cultural Values and Gender

In the area of cultural values, Hofstede (1998) introduced the concept of masculinity and femininity as key cultural dimensions. He argued that masculine cultures tend to value competition, assertiveness, and achievement, while feminine cultures emphasize cooperation, modesty, and social harmony.

Cognitive Styles and Gender

Research on cognitive styles has also revealed notable gender differences. Witkin et al. (1991) examined how men and women process information differently. Their study found that men were generally more field-independent, meaning they preferred to analyze details and work through problems systematically. Women, on the other hand, were more field-dependent, meaning they were more likely to consider the broader context and rely on social cues when processing information.

Moral Reasoning and Gender

Carol Gilligan (1982) was one of the first to challenge traditional moral development theories by arguing that men and women approach moral dilemmas differently. She proposed that men generally follow an "ethics of justice," emphasizing fairness and rules, whereas women tend to adopt an "ethics of care," prioritizing relationships and empathy. Walker (1991) conducted a meta-analysis that examined multiple studies on gender and moral reasoning. His research showed that while both men and women use justice and care-based reasoning, women were more likely to favor care-based approaches, especially in interpersonal situations.

2.1 Gaps in Research

Most of the so far studies on moral development have been conducted more specifically on people residing in western countries. (Henrich et al., 2019). This leads to frameworks being not inclusive and focused on just a limited number of groups in a particular society, which might lead to inaccurate representation of certain cultures.

2.2 Objectives and Hypotheses

The objectives of the study include:

- To understand the influence of cultural values on different dimensions of moral reasoning (care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity).
- To study the role of cognitive styles in shaping moral reasoning
- To evaluate the combined effect of cultural values and cognitive styles on the different dimensions of moral reasoning (care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity).
- To examine gender differences in cultural values, cognitive styles and moral reasoning.

2.3 Hypotheses

H1: It is expected that there exists a relationship between the five dimensions of moral reasoning (care/ harm, fairness/ reciprocity, ingroup/ loyalty, authority/ respect, purity/ sanctity), cultural values and cognitive styles.

H2: It is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the care/harm foundation of moral reasoning.

H3: It is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the fairness/reciprocity dimension of moral reasoning.

H4: It is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the in-group/loyalty dimension of moral reasoning.

H5: It is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the authority/respect dimension of moral reasoning

H6: It is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the purity/sanctity dimension of moral reasoning.

H7: It is expected that there will be gender differences in the five dimensions of moral reasoning (care/ harm, fairness/ reciprocity, ingroup/ loyalty, authority/ respect, purity/ sanctity), cultural values and cognitive styles,

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The sample consists of 100 individuals, 65 females and 35 males, aged 18 years to 25 years. The participants were selected from universities and colleges pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Students were included from the states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Union Territory of Chandigarh to ensure diversity in cultural backgrounds and cognitive styles.

Inclusion Criteria

- Participants must fall within the specified age range of 18-25 years.
- Participants must be able to read basic English.
- Participants must belong to an Asian culture.
- Participants must fill the complete questionnaire.

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals not meeting the age criteria (18-25 years)
- Individuals do not have command over basic English.
- Individuals not belonging to an Asian culture.
- Those suffering from any psychopathology or undergoing treatment

3.2 Measures

Cultural Values Scale-Revised: The Asian Values Scale – Revised (AVS-R) has been developed by Kim and Hong (2004). It measures a person's level of adherence to traditional Asian cultural values. The AVS-R has a total of 25 items. All the items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale.

Cognitive Style Index: The Cognitive Style Index (CSI) has been developed by Allinson and Hayes (1996). It is a widely used tool to measure an individual's preferred way of processing information. It assesses cognitive styles of people, whether a person is an intuitive or an analytical thinker. The CSI consists of 38 items.

Moral Foundations Questionnaire: The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ-30) was developed by Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian Nosek (2008) as part of Moral Foundations Theory. It assesses five core dimensions of morality: care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity.

4. Results

Results represent the findings on how cultural values and cognitive styles influence moral reasoning across the five moral foundations: care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. A correlation matrix was prepared and used to show the relationship among the variables. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine whether cultural values and cognitive styles predict differences in moral reasoning. Due to unequal sample sizes of both groups (males and females) Mann-Whitney U Test was employed to find gender differences.

Table 1. *Mean and Standard Deviation of 100 Young Adults on Cultural Values, Cognitive Styles, and Five Dimensions of Moral Reasoning*

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Cognitive Style	Male	35	44.17	7.462
	Female	65	44.51	8.229
Cultural Values	Male	35	2.50	0.262
	Female	65	2.50	0.298
Care/Harm	Male	35	20.66	4.186
	Female	65	22.97	4.062
Fairness/Reciprocity	Male	34	20.56	4.412
	Female	65	22.98	3.533
In-group/Loyalty	Male	35	19.80	4.477
	Female	65	20.00	4.886
Authority/Respect	Male	35	20.23	3.889
	Female	65	19.72	4.995
Purity/Sanctity	Male	35	19.89	3.684
	Female	65	18.80	5.090

Table 2. *Gender differences in cultural values, cognitive styles and five dimensions of moral reasoning*

Variable	U	p
Cognitive Style	1057	0.560
Cultural Values	1047	0.515
Harm/Care	778	0.009
Fairness/Reciprocity	751	0.009
In-group/Loyalty	1098	0.777
Authority/Respect	1104	0.808
Purity/Sanctity	1008	0.347

Note. $H_a: \mu_{male} \neq \mu_{female}$

Table 3. *Correlation matrix of cultural values, cognitive styles and five dimensions of moral reasoning*

	Care/ Harm	Fairness/ Reciprocity	In-group/ Loyalty	Authority/ Respect	Purity/ Sanctity	Cognitive Style	Cultural Values
Care/ Harm	—	0.743**	0.471**	0.397**	0.233*	0.295**	0.068
Fairness/ Reciprocity		—	0.517***	0.500***	0.419***	0.136	0.081
In-group/ Loyalty			—	0.538***	0.573***	0.021	0.185
Authority/ Respect				—	0.613***	0.097	0.242*
Purity/ Sanctity					—	0.017	0.270**
Cognitive Style						—	0.365***
Cultural Values							—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4. *Regression analysis of care/harm dimension of moral reasoning with cognitive style and cultural values as predictors*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	β
Intercept	16.470	3.7755	4.362	< .001	—
Cognitive Style	0.166	0.0555	2.994	0.003	0.3117
Cultural Values	-0.677	1.5477	-0.437	0.663	-0.0455

Table 5. *Regression analysis of fairness/reciprocity dimension of moral reasoning with cognitive style and cultural values as predictors*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	β
Intercept	18.1323	3.7183	4.877	< .001	—

Cognitive Style	0.0620	0.0547	1.134	.260	0.1229
Cultural Values	0.5059	1.5200	0.333	.740	0.0361

Table 6. *Regression analysis of in-group/loyalty dimension of moral reasoning with cognitive style and cultural values as predictors*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	β
Intercept	12.8728	4.3345	2.970	.004	—
Cognitive Style	-0.0316	0.0638	-0.496	.621	-0.0531
Cultural Values	3.3857	1.7769	1.905	.060	0.2039

Table 7. *Regression analysis of authority/respect dimension of moral reasoning with cognitive style and cultural values as predictors*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	β
Intercept	9.96437	4.1930	2.3764	.019	—
Cognitive Style	0.00606	0.0617	0.0983	.922	0.0104
Cultural Values	3.86768	1.7188	2.2502	.027	0.2381

Table 8. *Regression analysis of purity/sanctity dimension of moral reasoning with cognitive style and cultural values as predictors*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	β
Intercept	9.1881	4.1730	2.202	.030	—
Cognitive Style	-0.0549	0.0614	-0.895	.373	-0.0936
Cultural Values	4.9736	1.7107	2.907	.005	0.3040

5. Discussion

The aim of this research study was to find if there exists any influence of cognitive styles and cultural values on different foundations of moral reasoning. These foundations included harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect and purity/sanctity. The combination of the two predictors (cognitive styles and cultural values) was used to predict how much change each bring about in the moral reasoning of young adults.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics. The table highlights both similarities and differences in how males and females approach cognitive style, cultural values, and moral reasoning. While cognitive style and cultural values exhibited little to no gender differences, females demonstrated higher scores on the Care/Harm and Fairness/Reciprocity foundations, reflecting a stronger emphasis on care-based and justice-oriented moral reasoning. In contrast, males scored slightly higher on Authority/Respect and Purity/Sanctity, suggesting a greater focus on tradition, hierarchy, and sanctity in their moral judgments.

Table 2 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney U test, conducted to examine gender differences in cognitive style, cultural values, and the five dimensions of moral reasoning (Care/Harm, Fairness/Reciprocity, In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity). The Mann-Whitney U test is a non-parametric test used to compare differences between two independent groups when the assumptions of normality are not met.

Statistically significant gender differences were found in the Care/Harm ($U = 778$, $p = 0.009$) and Fairness/Reciprocity ($U = 751$, $p = 0.009$) dimensions of moral reasoning. Female participants scored higher than males in these domains, indicating that women may prioritize empathy, compassion, fairness, and justice more strongly in their moral reasoning.

The correlation matrix reveals intricate relationships between the five moral foundations, cognitive styles, and cultural values. The strongest associations are observed between Care/Harm and Fairness/Reciprocity, and among traditional moral foundations like In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity. Cognitive styles show some influence on Care/Harm, while cultural values appear most closely related to Purity/Sanctity and Authority/Respect.

The regression model (table 4) shows that cognitive style is a significant predictor of care-based moral reasoning, with a moderate positive effect. In contrast, cultural values do not significantly predict Care/Harm scores in this sample.

The regression model in table 5 suggests that neither cognitive style nor cultural values significantly predict the Fairness/Reciprocity dimension of moral reasoning in this sample. Although both predictors have positive estimates, their low t-values and high p-values indicate that these relationships are weak and non-significant. This suggests that additional factors beyond cognitive style and cultural values may play a more substantial role in shaping fairness-based moral reasoning.

The regression analysis from table 6 reveals that cultural values have a stronger, though marginally non-significant, influence on in-group/loyalty dimension of moral reasoning compared to cognitive style, which shows a weak and non-significant effect. These results

suggest that individuals with higher cultural values may lean more toward loyalty-based moral reasoning, but further research is needed to establish stronger significance.

In table 7, the regression analysis shows that cultural values significantly predict authority/respect moral reasoning, while cognitive style has no notable effect. This suggests that individuals with higher cultural values are more inclined to emphasize authority and respect in their moral reasoning, a finding consistent with cultural theories of morality.

The findings from the regression model in tale 8 indicate that cultural values significantly predict purity/sanctity moral reasoning, while cognitive style does not. Individuals with higher cultural values are more likely to prioritize concerns related to purity and sanctity in their moral judgments, underscoring the role of cultural influences over cognitive styles in this domain of moral reasoning

H1 stated that it is expected that there exists a relationship between the five dimensions of moral reasoning (care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity), cultural values, and cognitive styles. Based on these results, H1 is partially accepted, as significant relationships exist between some dimensions of moral reasoning, cognitive styles, and cultural values, though not all correlations are statistically significant

H2 stated that it is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the care/harm foundation of moral reasoning. Regression analysis shows that cognitive style significantly predicts care/harm reasoning, while cultural values do not have a significant predictive effect. This suggests that cognitive style influences care/harm reasoning, but cultural values do not contribute significantly. Therefore, H2 is partially accepted.

H3 stated that it is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the fairness/reciprocity dimension of moral reasoning. The regression analysis shows that neither cognitive style nor cultural values significantly predict fairness/reciprocity reasoning. Thus, H3 is not accepted.

As per H4 it was expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the in-group/loyalty dimension of moral reasoning. The values of results from the analysis shows H4 being partially accepted.

H5 stated that it is expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the authority/respect dimension of moral reasoning. Cultural values significantly predict authority/respect reasoning, whereas cognitive style does not. This finding aligns with previous research. Schweder et al. (1997) found that respect for authority is more pronounced in cultures emphasizing hierarchy and obedience, supporting cultural values as predictors. H5 is partially accepted,

As per H6 it was expected that cultural values and cognitive styles will significantly predict the purity/sanctity dimension of moral reasoning. The regression analysis shows that cultural values significantly predict purity/sanctity reasoning, while cognitive style does not. Previous research has shown similar findings. Haidt & Graham (2007) found that purity-based concerns, such as sanctity, are often guided by religious and cultural values, especially in conservative societies. Therefore, H6 is partially accepted

H7 stated that it is expected that there will be gender differences in the five dimensions of moral reasoning (care/harm, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity), cultural values, and cognitive styles. The results show significant gender differences in the care/harm and fairness/reciprocity dimensions of moral reasoning. However, no significant gender differences were found in cognitive styles, cultural values, or the remaining moral reasoning dimensions (ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity).

Previous studies have shown findings that align with this result. Gilligan (1982) argued that women emphasize care and fairness in moral reasoning due to gender socialization differences, while men focus on justice and loyalty. Thus, H7 is partially accepted

5.1 Limitations of the study

Limited generalizability due to limited sample size is one of the limitations. For future studies, a sample size larger than 100 should be employed. This may improve the generalizability of future research. It should also be noted that self-report questionnaires were used.

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