

Morality in Intergroup Relations: Exploring the Role of Moral Foundations and Perceptions of Outgroup Morality

Steffi Kim

Mercer Island High School, 9100 SE 42nd St, Mercer Island, WA, 98040, United States

ABSTRACT

Unspoken moral codes form the basis of social interaction, prescribing how individuals and groups conduct themselves and relate to one another. Given that society today is characterized by high levels of intergroup conflict and polarization over differing notions of right and wrong, examining groups' underlying moral values is imperative to understanding why countries, political parties, and ethnic or religious groups are unable to see eye-to-eye. The purpose of this paper is to explore how morality factors into intergroup dynamics and how moral values dictate how other groups are treated and perceived. We utilize Moral Foundations Theory as a psychological framework to effectively parse apart the abstract notions of right and wrong. Our main findings are that each of the five core moral principles—Care/Harm, Fairness/Injustice, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Disgust—is responsible for driving specific attitudes and behaviors, both positive and negative, toward other groups. Specifically, these principles drive prejudice-reduction through empathy, define equality and reparations amongst competing groups, and shape group allegiances. On a darker note, these moral principles also beget prejudicial attitudes about social change and contribute to dehumanization. After dissecting the role of each moral foundation, we move to a broader investigation of how judgments of other groups' morality drive intergroup attitudes, finding that stereotypes and social norms are critical factors. Throughout the paper, we provide actionable recommendations for how to use moral principles to induce groups to behave in more virtuous, harmonious ways. Key limitations of Moral Foundations Theory in intergroup contexts are discussed.

Keywords: Moral Foundations Theory; Intergroup Relations; Outgroup Morality; Moral Psychology; Ingroup Bias; Social Perception; Stereotypes and Norms; Prejudice Reduction

INTRODUCTION

Morality is one of the most important, primordial forces that governs human attitudes and behavior. While differences and similarities between groups are often examined in terms of social norms and societal factors, morality remains an underexplored yet deeper, underlying factor (1). Indeed, when social structures are stripped away, human behavior can be understood

Corresponding author: Steffi Kim, E-mail: steffikim07@gmail.com.

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at the most fundamental level by people striving to act in ways that are morally good while avoiding “evils” or “wrongs.” When groups in the real world conflict, there is often an underlying incompatibility in fundamental moral beliefs that manifests in each group feeling justified in their certain ideological views, appeals to fair land claims, ethnocentric attitudes, and so forth (2). Investigating these differences in morality has been a topic of much discussion in the fields of social and moral psychology. How do various groups judge what is right, what actions are acceptable, or what is taboo and must be avoided? In intergroup contexts, moral values establish the stances of each individual’s own social group, termed the “ingroup,” and set the tone for how to perceive and interact with other groups, termed “outgroups.” Thus, to better understand intergroup dynamics and pave the way for a more harmonious society, it is imperative to consider various groups’ moral principles and how morality influences group behavior.

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) was first proposed by social psychologists Jonathon Haidt and Craig Joseph in 2004, as an alternative to moral psychology theories that emphasized distinct stages of moral development (1, 2). Rather than morals developing at different points in time, Moral Foundations Theory is premised on the belief that people’s morals are inborn, instinctive guiding principles that transpire below the level of conscious reasoning. According to Haidt, these moral foundations are evolutionarily based and ingrained in human nature due to their necessity in facilitating cooperation and survival between individuals and groups (1). Moral Foundations Theory meaningfully differs from traditional empiricist approaches reminiscent of John Locke, which state that morals are entirely learned through sociocultural experience and that humans are born with a “blank slate,” or no conception of right and wrong (1). The MFT also breaks from nativist approaches which state that a set of morals is entirely pre-programmed in the human mind. Instead, the MFT posits that humans are born with a limited sense of moral intuitions, or fleeting, instinctive feelings of right and wrong. These deeply rooted moral impulses serve as instinctive rules-of-thumb informing basic moral codes, which are then expanded upon and altered by various social and cultural norms (1, 2). The result is humans possessing complex moral codes that differ from person to person but are analogous in their foundational beliefs. The MFT’s framework that morals are driven by intuition and emotional impulse, rather than deliberate cognition, has become one of the dominant ways of understanding

morality in psychology and holds implications for related fields like political science (3). While imperfect, the MFT has received substantial empirical support for its simplicity and its ability to explain how moral codes overlap and differ across various social groups (3).

The central premise of Moral Foundations Theory is that people make moral judgments about right and wrong by referring to five intuitive metrics or foundations: Care/Harm, Fairness/Injustice, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Disgust (2). The principle of Care/Harm is the universal impulse to look after others and to view helping others as morally “good,” while disapproving of attempts to inflict harm. Similarly, the Fairness/Injustice metric captures the innate regard for justice and distaste for systems that appear rigged. The first two moral foundations, Care and Fairness, are commonly referred to as “individualizing foundations” because these urges to help others and uphold justice promote every individual’s best interest, irrespective of group contexts (4, 5). Meanwhile, the third moral foundation, Ingroup/Loyalty, is the consensus that it is virtuous to prioritize one’s own group and that people who contribute to the ingroup are morally good. Similarly, Authority/Respect is the moral sense that leaders who maintain social order are admirable, and that it is noble for people to fulfill their designated group role. The Purity/Disgust moral foundation is related to the evolutionary impulse to like honorable people and to avoid disgust-inducing stimuli, whether perceived as physically or morally unclean (2). Taken together, the three moral foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Purity are referred to as the “binding foundations” because they evolved to promote group functioning and cohesion, therefore ensuring better human survival (4, 5).

Since a strong sense of shared values is among the most critical factors in promoting group viability and cohesion, Moral Foundations Theory is highly relevant to understanding both intragroup and intergroup relations (6). The MFT can be directly applied to examining intergroup relationships in the real world, specifically in understanding how different groups develop disparate—and often incompatible—worldviews. These foundations are generally regarded as universal principles, and in particular, the individualizing foundations of Care and Fairness are utilized by nearly every group, while binding foundations may vary more from culture to culture (2, 7). Despite their ubiquity, the extent to which different groups weigh and prioritize these five moral foundations creates decisive clefs in viewpoints and ideology (1, 2,

7). This issue has been extensively studied with regard to political party ideology in the United States, and the polarization that keeps liberals and conservatives from seeing eye-to-eye on issues such as the environment, foreign policy, welfare, and reproductive rights. Liberals, it has been found, are more likely to favor the Enlightenment-era ideals of Care and Fairness above the other three moral foundations, while Conservatives weigh binding foundations like Loyalty, Authority, and Purity to a much greater extent (2, 4, 8, 9). A similar trend has been applied to global divergences over proper and improper behaviors, as individualistic cultures favor individualizing foundations, while collectivistic cultures favor binding ones; interestingly, religious people also favor binding moral foundations more than atheists (8, 10, 11). A group's moral foundation priorities are often shaped by the confluence of multiple factors, as evidenced by Saudi Arabia, which scores higher in binding foundations than the UK owing to a combination of it being collectivist, less pluralistic or diverse, and much more religiously devout (10).

Moral foundations are not only important in dictating groups' and individual group members' beliefs and behaviors, but are also relevant to how other groups are judged, that is, intergroup attitudes. Sacchi *et al.* [2021] argue that from an evolutionary standpoint, moral foundations are among the first criteria used to assess other groups, providing a basic appraisal of the extent to which the people are compassionate or dangerous, trustworthy or conniving, pure or disgusting, and so forth. They assert that assessing a group's morality is the paramount factor driving social judgment about whether to like or dislike an outgroup (6). According to Belief Congruence Theory, if outgroups are perceived to hold many of the same moral principles, members of the ingroup display a strong preference for the outgroup and report more favorable feelings (7, 12, 13). On the other hand, if outgroups are judged to hold clashing moral beliefs, people feel a strong compulsion to avoid interaction, even extending to an inclination to maintain increased physical separation (7). Groups higher in the individualizing foundations of Care and Fairness generally treat people well regardless of group membership and exhibit lower prejudice. On the contrary, people high in the binding foundations of Loyalty, Authority, and Purity, which evolved to protect community norms first, generally display heightened prejudice toward other groups (14). For instance, people high in binding foundations are more biased against Muslims, overweight individuals, and immigrants, and

people who emphasize moral purity typically express greater sexism and sanctimonious critique (10, 15). Altogether, morality on an individual and a group level is an important factor in intergroup relations, playing a vital role in the fundamental reasons why groups diverge in their convictions and how the outgroup is perceived.

We thus propose the following research question:

How do Moral Foundations and perceptions of outgroup morality influence intergroup relations?

Our analysis is divided into three sections. In Section One, we delve into Moral Foundations Theory by dedicating a subsection to exploring how each one of the five moral foundations specifically contributes to shaping intergroup dynamics. In Section Two, we focus on the latter half of the research question; with a broader view of moral foundations, we explore how perceptions of outgroup morality are dependent on group stereotypes and social norms. Lastly, Section Three discusses key limitations of applying Moral Foundations Theory to intergroup contexts and provides real-world suggestions for promoting positive intergroup conduct and morality.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This review was conducted using the PsycINFO database, which was selected due to its wealth of comprehensive, curated content with over 5 million records spanning psychology and related behavioral sciences. A systematic review process was initiated to identify research papers relevant to Moral Foundations Theory and intergroup relations. To accomplish this, we used a series of keyword search terms and the Boolean operators of "AND" and "OR." Before any of the searches were executed, the date range was set to only include studies from the last fifteen years, that is, from 2010 to 2025, to ensure information was up to date and relevant; however, on separate later occasions, several seminal pieces of literature predating 2010 were added for context. The first search was conducted using the terms "Moral Foundations" AND "Intergroup Relations," yielding 252 studies, which were then ordered by relevance. Subsequent PsycINFO searches were conducted using the combined terms of "Moral Foundations" AND "Prejudice," which yielded 238 qualified journal articles, as well as "Moral Foundations" AND "Group Conflict," which yielded 220 qualified journal articles, respectively. After these main

searches, other keyword combinations, such as “Moral Foundations” AND “Social Categorization,” as well as searches utilizing the “OR” operator were conducted to capture any papers that may have slipped through the cracks. A total of 33 papers were included in our review.

Our inclusion criteria involved several main factors. Firstly, selected papers had to be peer-reviewed journal articles from the past fifteen years with English as their primary language. After each search, our first step was to review the abstracts of promising papers to gauge their relevance. Secondly, papers had to either use Moral Foundations Theory as a framework or, even if moral foundations were not explicitly cited, draw on similar conceptions of morality. Similarly, the papers had to directly relate to the context of intergroup relations and have a strong psychologically-based focus. At this point, papers with relevant ideas were then thoroughly reviewed to check for rigorous theoretical grounding, methodology, and analysis. Thirdly, to further narrow down our search, various journal impact factors and the number of times a paper had been cited were kept in mind as secondary criteria. However, many of the selected papers were recent publications that reflected findings from the past five years, and thus naturally had lower citation counts. We mainly prioritized empirical research, as opposed to more speculative or theoretical

methods, in order to compile a stronger set of applicable, data-driven findings.

Exclusion criteria involved articles that were too theoretical or opinion-based and lacked empirical evidence. Studies that did not have a strong psychological foundation, were not published in peer-reviewed journals, or were not available in full-text English were further excluded. Other reasons for excluding articles were papers that were too narrowly focused on one group, not anchored in Moral Foundations Theory, or not centered around intergroup contexts, such as those that solely probed intragroup dynamics. Our final set of 33 papers largely studied populations of adults in WEIRD countries (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic); notably, many studies had a more global reach and were conducted with non-American participants. Regarding methodologies, many studies presented participants with fictionalized moral scenarios or utilized online self-report surveys that assessed morality and beliefs.

RESULTS

The following Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the studies included in this review. Studies are generally listed in order of appearance, with broad thematic groupings based on their relevance to morality.

Table 1.

Study	Target Population	Design	Relevant Moral Foundation(s)	Key Findings & Relevance to Intergroup Relations
1. Haidt & Joseph [2004]	N/A	Theoretical Review	All Foundations	Introduced the concept of instinctive moral foundations to explain differences between various cultures and groups' values
2. Haidt & Graham [2007]	N/A	Theoretical Review	All Foundations	Introduced Moral Foundations Theory and discussed how each moral foundation contributes to clefs in real-world intergroup contexts
3. AlSheddi <i>et al.</i> [2021]	Adults in Saudi Arabia and the UK (N = 395)	Cross-Sectional Survey	All foundations	Described how divergences in moral foundations were associated with cultural divergences between Saudi Arabia and the UK
4. Allport [1954]	N/A	Theoretical Review	General Morality	First proposed Intergroup Contact Theory as a means of reducing prejudice and bridging divides between groups
5. Dovidio <i>et al.</i> [2017]	N/A	Theoretical Review	Care	Summarized literature on how Intergroup Contact Theory inspires attitude change through fostering interpersonal relationships with care

Continued Table 1.

Study	Target Population	Design	Relevant Moral Foundation(s)	Key Findings & Relevance to Intergroup Relations
6. Čehajić-Clancy <i>et al.</i> [2024]	Adults in Sweden, Pakistan, Serbia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina ($N = 1,131$)	Experimental	Care	Across many contexts, hearing accounts of outgroup moral exemplars who performed noble, compassionate deeds led participants to express more favorable emotionality toward the outgroup
7. Yang <i>et al.</i> [2023]	American and Chinese children and adults ($N = 963$)	Experimental	Fairness	On a resource allocation task, judgments of what was a “fair” split varied by children’s age and American versus Chinese culture
8. Mosley & Solomon [2025]	American adults ($N = 853$)	Experimental	Fairness	Participants assessed white Americans as more righteous when they illustrated a greater initiative to learn about racial injustices
9. Tajfel <i>et al.</i> [2001]	N/A	Theoretical Review	Loyalty	Proposed Social Identity Theory to explain how people become so invested in their group’s moral values and group identity
10. Sacchi <i>et al.</i> [2021]	Italian adults ($N = 332$)	Experimental	Loyalty	Participants high in ingroup loyalty expressed feeling happier with themselves after hearing accounts of the outgroup’s misdeeds
11. Leidner & Castano [2012]	American adults ($N = 274$)	Experimental	Loyalty	After hearing stories of American and Iraqi soldiers’ crimes, participants condemned the Iraqi soldiers but adjusted their moral foundation priorities for the American ones
12. Wagoner & Rinella [2024]	American adults ($N = 1,614$)	Experimental	Loyalty	Conservatives and liberals expressed the strongest desire to renounce their groups when their parties breached either binding or individualizing moral foundations, respectively
13. Hadarics & Kende [2018a]	Hungarian university students ($N = 401$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	Authority	The prejudiced ideologies of Right Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation were linked to more binding and less individualizing moral foundations
14. Valtorta & Volpato [2018]	Adults ($N = 204$)	Experimental	Purity	Participants induced to feel either physical or moral disgust engaged in different strands of prejudice and dehumanization
15. Harris & Fiske [2006]	American university students ($N = 22$)	Experimental Neuroimaging	Purity	On fMRI scans, participants’ brains exhibited patterns of subconscious dehumanization when exposed to photos of disgust-inducing groups like the homeless
16. Vezzali <i>et al.</i> [2017]	Italian high school students ($N = 639$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	Purity	Greater intergroup friendship with gay people was linked to viewing gay people as more morally clean
17. Wu <i>et al.</i> [2014]	Beijing university students, Hui Muslims ($N = 85$)	Experimental	Purity	Hui Muslims did not mind when non-Muslims broke sacred halal customs, but exhibited disgust when ingroup members did

Continued Table 1.

Study	Target Population	Design	Relevant Moral Foundation(s)	Key Findings & Relevance to Intergroup Relations
18. Rokeach & Rothman [1965]	N/A	Theoretical Review	General Morality	Proposed that groups prefer other groups with similar moral values due to Belief Congruence Theory
19. Obeid <i>et al.</i> [2017]	Lebanese, Moroccan, and American adults ($N = 838$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	All Foundations	Across many cultures, perceptions of how similar other groups' moral foundations were influenced participants' outgroup attitudes
20. Nash <i>et al.</i> [2017]	Adults ($N = 56$)	Cross-Sectional Neuroimaging	All Foundations	Participants higher in binding moral foundations exhibited lower levels of grey matter in brain regions that process conflict
21. Bianco <i>et al.</i> [2022]	Maltese adults ($N = 222$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	Authority, Loyalty, Purity	Maltese participants high in binding moral foundations and the trait of Need for Cognitive Closure displayed greater prejudice toward African immigrants
22. Forsberg <i>et al.</i> [2019]	Swedish adults ($N = 430$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	Authority, Loyalty, Purity	Participants with higher binding moral foundations and a desire to make black-and-white moral judgments were more prejudiced against various minority groups
23. Winget & Tindale [2020]	American university students ($N = 410$)	Experimental	All Foundations	Outgroups like immigrants who were perceived a certain way using the Stereotype Content Model were also stereotyped to prioritize certain moral foundations
24. Zheng & Kim [2024]	Adults in Hong Kong and Singapore ($N = 750$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	Care, Loyalty, Purity	Different social norms in Hong Kong versus Singapore interacted with moral foundations to shape different attitudes about minority groups
25. Janković & Čehajić-Clancy [2021]	Serbian adults ($N = 119$)	Experimental	General Morality	Participants' intergroup attitudes were influenced by whether fictional media accounts framed Bosniak outgroup members in a virtuous or stereotypically immoral light
26. Brenick & Killen [2014]	American children, both Jewish and non-Jewish ($N = 490$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	General Morality	Jewish children were more inclined to morally condone excluding Arabs in certain social spaces and circumstances
27. Yilmaz & Saribay [2017]	Adults ($N = 396$)	Experimental	All Foundations	Prompting participants to critically consider moral issues led them to use more individualizing foundations
28. Argüello-Gutiérrez <i>et al.</i> [2024]	Spanish adults ($N = 624$)	Experimental	Fairness, Authority	Participants who read a piece underscoring the importance of fairness exhibited more favorable moral judgments of Muslims
29. Hadarics & Kende [2018b]	Hungarian university students ($N = 490$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	All Foundations	Hungarian students generally opposed to prejudice still condoned bias against Muslim immigrants via Moral Exclusion

Continued Table 1.

Study	Target Population	Design	Relevant Moral Foundation(s)	Key Findings & Relevance to Intergroup Relations
30. Efron <i>et al.</i> [2009]	American university students ($N = 99$)	Experimental	General Morality	After publicly displaying approval of Barack Obama, participants were less likely to hire Black job candidates due to Moral Licensing
31. Jasinskaja-Lahti <i>et al.</i> [2021]	Finnish adults ($N = 299$)	Experimental	General Morality	Moral Licensing interfered with how participants generalized positive intergroup attitudes
32. Kertzer <i>et al.</i> [2014]	American adults ($N = 2,003$)	Cross-Sectional Survey	All Foundations	Among the American public, individualizing or binding moral foundations were linked to either cooperative or militant foreign policy stances
33. Hadarics & Kende [2021]	Hungarian adults ($N = 265$)	Longitudinal Survey	All Foundations	Hungarians who encountered an anti-Muslim government campaign experienced shifts in their outgroup attitudes as a result, followed by adjustments in moral foundations

DISCUSSION

Section 1: Applying Moral Foundations to Intergroup Relations

To attain a nuanced understanding of intergroup relations and how dynamics like prejudice arise between groups, Section One delves into the intricacies of Moral Foundations Theory. Since the human concept of morality is multifaceted and somewhat contradictory—for instance, the fair thing to do is not always caring or right—we break our analysis into five different subsections, each focused on one moral foundation. Each section explores the effect its specific moral foundation has on attitudes and behaviors toward the outgroup, connecting the principle to relevant psychological concepts and real-world implications.

Care/Harm: Intergroup Contact Theory and Compassion

The first moral foundation, Care/Harm, describes the human conviction to approve of those who help others and to avoid inflicting unnecessary harm (2). As an individualizing foundation, Care/Harm is highly relevant to understanding intergroup relations because it is at the heart of many real-world reconciliation initiatives that transcend group divides. This moral foundation’s potent ability to transform intergroup attitudes is perhaps best demonstrated through its role in Intergroup Contact Theory, which was first proposed by psychologist Gordon Allport in 1954. Utilized in many real-world contexts, Intergroup Contact Theory has become one of the

forefront approaches to reconciling groups across racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation lines. Crucially, it proposes that positive interaction between groups reduces prejudice through emotional and cognitive mechanisms, such as by establishing a shared sense of identity as different group members cooperate and get to know each other (16, 17). Importantly, contemporary research has pinpointed that the intuitive, emotional processes—which involve deeply held Care/Harm moral values—that occur during intergroup contact, like a reduction in outgroup fear and a fostering of empathy, are particularly important to attitude-change, playing a larger role than the cognitive aspects involved (17). Along with being a pivotal underlying mechanism of Intergroup Contact Theory, the principle of Care/Harm is especially relevant to the formation of Intergroup Friendships, such as bonds between roommates of different races or ethnicities (17). Intergroup Friendship has been shown to be one of the optimal mechanisms for reducing prejudice, owing to the fact that people become personally, morally invested in an outgroup member’s well-being and become accustomed to applying Care/Harm principles to the outgroup not just in abstract, grandstanding principle, but in face-to-face exchanges and practice (17). Thus, regarding Intergroup Contact Theory and efforts to bridge group divides, it is clear that harnessing people’s desire to empathetically connect with and care for others is one of the strongest pathways to transformative attitude change (12).

In addition to combating prejudice through promoting

positive, heartfelt connections with members of the outgroup, the moral foundation of Care/Harm entails protecting the vulnerable from danger, a prominent example being people advocating for other groups' human rights. In intergroup conflicts, the ideal of Care/Harm is epitomized by Moral Exemplars, or inspirational accounts of outgroup members selflessly risking their lives to assist someone from the ingroup. Čehajić-Clancy *et al.* [2024] conducted four experiments using online questionnaires in regions afflicted by different stages of intergroup conflict and reconciliation—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Pakistan, and Sweden. Even in areas torn by active intergroup conflict, they found that hearing accounts of outgroup Moral Exemplars prompted participants to experience the phenomenon of Moral Elevation, a state defined by feelings of genuine inspiration, happiness, and optimism about the world. Mediated by moral elevation, learning that an outgroup member risked their own safety to care for an ingroup member caused participants to report more favorable attitudes regarding the outgroup and increased prosocial, altruistic intentions (12). Importantly, participants also perceived these outgroups as sharing more similar moral values with them, indicating how generous acts transcend prejudice to reaffirm a deeper sense of common humanity (12). This suggests that the impulse of Care/Harm is not only relevant to forging intergroup camaraderie during times of peace, but is especially impactful during conflict when an outgroup member unexpectedly extends mercy to an ingroup member in need (12).

Because people are instinctively drawn to individuals who help others, performing selfless acts toward the outgroup can inspire prejudice-reduction not just on a cognitive level (e.g., “That person seems kind; perhaps I should reassess”) but on a deeper emotional level by rousing people’s senses of what is fundamentally right. Especially in regions of the world afflicted by distrust and intergroup conflict, stories of Moral Exemplars or even small instances of outgroup kindness can become highly salient reminders of human compassion—a moral ideal with which the vast majority of people resonate (12).

Fairness/Injustice: Notions of Equality and Reparation

While the moral foundation of Care/Harm transcends group divisions through human concern, Fairness/Injustice impels people to give and take from the outgroup based on innate principles of what is just (2). This principle is highly pertinent to modern-day debates over the idea of equity; for example, some

groups view affirmative action as fair and morally upstanding, while other groups condemn affirmative action as a disgrace that rigs the system (2, 14). Different definitions of Fairness/Injustice engender conspicuously different societal practices, norms, and attitudes about egalitarianism. Take, for example, how some conservative cultures may view women having different gender roles as morally acceptable, whereas progressive cultures may view this practice as inexcusably sexist. As another example, the communist-capitalist ideological split stems from communism believing that every person should be economically and socially equal, whereas capitalist democracy emphasizes fairness through equal opportunity, where those who work harder receive more in return. While even babies seem to grasp innate notions of fairness and sharing, there is some debate over how prescriptive social norms, such as a desire to outwardly appear equitable, influence these moral inclinations (11). For instance, researchers like Yang *et al.* [2023] found that when tasked with dividing up resources, ingroup favoritism was prevalent among younger children, and only around age 8 did a preference for equal distribution emerge.

When it comes to intergroup relations, the moral foundation of Fairness/Injustice is often portrayed in a tenuous relationship with the foundation of Ingroup/Loyalty, as these two principles preach conflicting approaches—Fairness prescribes acting impartially irrespective of group membership, whereas Loyalty deems favoring the ingroup to be morally acceptable and right (11). The crux of this tension between Fairness and Loyalty is summed up by the ethical paradox of the Trolley Dilemma, in which an individual must weigh whether it is right to sacrifice five strangers to save one close member from their ingroup. Yang *et al.* [2023] investigated this Fairness-Loyalty split, finding that American and Chinese adults who read scenarios of resource allotment generally believed that resources should be divided up equally, irrespective of group ties such as family or political party. Notably, participants perceived this impulse toward fairness as a prescriptive group norm, or embodiment of what others ought to do, but believed that their other group members would not divide fairly; hence, fairness did not meet the standards for a descriptive group norm (11). This deviation between personal versus group morals complements the finding that individuals acting alone typically behave more cooperatively and less competitively than groups (9). Another duality seems to emerge along these lines: while the moral foundation of Care/Harm entails much

the same behavior at the group and individual levels (e.g., treating others with kindness), treatments that are deemed fair for a rogue outgroup are often not fair when considered at an individual level. This is common in intergroup conflicts like war, where nations justify militaristic retaliation by asserting that the outgroup rightfully deserves the consequences, but equivocate when pressed on whether this justice translates to innocent civilians being held responsible.

Another important duality found in Yang and colleagues' 2023 experiment was a cultural divide between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, as adults in China, but not America, displayed a willingness to favor family over others under high-pressure circumstances, which may reflect a higher adherence to binding moral foundations. Although in principle, applying notions of Fairness/Injustice to intergroup policy should have a predictable, prescribed effect (e.g., "it is fair to divide this territory up equally, it is not fair to circumvent the treaty") it is clear that the lines of fairness often become entangled with cultural and group priorities, and that simple policies of an eye-for-an-eye or tit-for-tat are not adequate to describe these dynamics (11). Thus, while on a personal level people's innate sense of Fairness may entail gravitating towards equality for outgroups, on a group level the scales of justice are often tilted and skewed by larger contexts and social norms.

Other complex questions about Fairness/Injustice in the context of competing group interests arise after the fact, when confronting intergroup remediation and whose responsibility it is to make up for previous injustices and wrongs. Mosley & Solomon [2025] investigated how morality played into white Americans' curiosity to gain an understanding of racial issues in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement. A curiosity to engage with another group's perspectives is generally deemed morally right, as opposed to remaining deliberately ignorant and turning a blind eye to inequality, an unfortunate but commonplace stance. Mosley & Solomon [2025] concluded that when ingroup members took proactive steps to educate themselves about the outgroup, in this case Black Americans, they were perceived to possess greater morality, especially when they visibly invested effort. This curiosity to engage with the outgroup was deemed less morally sound when white Americans implied that they expected the outgroup members to facilitate their learning and showed lower commitment. Considering this, well-intentioned approaches to bridge injustice may not come across as morally right if the approach is perceived to

be half-hearted or lacking in commitment (18). When it comes to social justice initiatives intended to appeal to Fairness, it is not just the acknowledgement of injustice and the thought that counts—an example being Indigenous land acknowledgments that lack genuine substance. Rather, after an injustice has been committed, a major factor in improving intergroup attitudes seems to be where the accountability for investing effort and pursuing reconciliation is placed (18).

Ingroup/Loyalty: Group Identity and Bias

Moving on to the three binding moral foundations, intragroup and intergroup dynamics are predicated on the moral foundation of Loyalty, and understanding the power of loyalty is key to better understanding relationships between groups. Loyalty is the driving force that enabled humans to form successful groups in the first place, and likely evolved because steadfast, loyal groups help humans better cooperate, defend themselves, and survive (9). Loyalty is ingrained into human nature due to Social Identity Theory, which postulates that people derive key aspects of their identities and self-esteem from their group membership (6, 9, 19). As such, fierce loyalty and a preference for the ingroup come naturally and righteously to people; however, this loyalty comes at a price. Despite its benefits, this moral inclination to favor the ingroup can naturally beget bias, prejudice, and discrimination toward the outgroup if left unchecked (6, 9).

Building on Social Identity Theory, the psychological need to protect one's self-esteem runs deep, and within this realm, there is an especially high desire to defend one's honor and morality (6). This effect translates to the group level, where people universally perceive their ingroups as more moral and label the outgroup as less moral and inferior in almost every situation (4, 6, 9). According to Sacchi *et al.* [2021], this ingroup-centric pride is so strong that people may actually relish hearing about outgroup misbehavior because these stories confirm their negative beliefs about the outgroup and boost their own self-image (6). Importantly, this tendency was only reported for people high in ingroup loyalty, demonstrating how each individual's moral foundations influence how they personally perceive their ingroup relative to the outgroup (6). In many real-world instances of war or intergroup conflict, excessive patriotism has been used to rile up throngs of people, as citizens who more strongly identify with their country are more willing to exhibit outgroup prejudice and zealously defend their national identity (6, 20).

Intergroup conflicts bring out the best and worst of people's loyalty, and when the demands of staying

loyal to the ingroup and perceiving the ingroup as highly moral clash, which is often the case, people will both consciously and subconsciously alter their moral foundations to justify ingroup misconduct (21, 22). While quick to condemn the outgroup, people show a greater reluctance to admit that the ingroup committed a moral sin, often requiring overwhelming evidence to sway their bias-prone cognition (6, 22). Leidner & Castano [2012] conducted an experiment wherein participants read stories about wartime crimes that were either framed as being committed by an Iraqi or an American soldier. When American participants were later told to describe American soldiers' unethical behavior, they used more words referencing binding moral foundations like Authority, Loyalty, and Purity, implying that the actions were morally admissible because they were for the overall good of the group. Conversely, when asked to describe the Iraqi soldiers' behavior, words referencing violations of the individualizing moral foundations, Care and Fairness, were more often employed (22). Nevertheless, in some instances, ingroup members who commit moral sins may be more strongly condemned than outgroup members, specifically when these ingroup members' acts egregiously threaten one's self-image and presumed moral high ground. In these cases, people may maintain their positive moral evaluation of the ingroup by heavily ostracizing the ingroup member via the Black Sheep Effect, a conspicuous phenomenon demonstrating how group Loyalty can prevail over the considerations of interpersonal Fairness and Care (6, 22).

Although this proclivity toward ingroup Loyalty is deeply ingrained in the human psyche, it is important to note that in the wake of changing group dynamics, it is possible for other moral foundations to override group loyalty and impel people to schism or renounce their ingroups. In times of controversy, people may deviate from the group if they feel that their identity is being subverted; that is, if the ingroup is compromising on its tenets or no longer remaining a cohesive entity (4). Wagoner & Rinella [2024] studied when and why people choose to schism from political groups by presenting different hypothetical situations in which the ingroup deviated from the moral norm—for example, a conservative church legitimizing Pride month—and then by recording participants' moral reactions and desire to renounce the group. They found that liberals expressed a greater desire to desert the group when they heard stories about the left-wing violating Care/Harm and Fairness/Injustice principles, which liberals typically prioritize. Meanwhile, conservatives expressed

the same desire to leave their party when they judged the party to have violated a binding moral foundation of Loyalty, Authority, or Purity (4). Thus, Ingroup/Loyalty is malleable and not the end-all, be-all when it comes to intergroup dynamics—nor is it a blanket excuse for all wrongs—as many other moral considerations affect how people navigate their allegiances to various groups.

Authority/Respect: Maintaining the Social Order

Closely linked to the foundation of Loyalty, Authority is a binding moral foundation that enables group functioning and order to prevail. Just as a world without Care would be cold-blooded, one without Fairness would be rigged, and one without Loyalty would be ruthless, without an evolutionarily ingrained respect for Authority, anarchy and disorder would reign. Authority can be described as the human appreciation of structure and the sense of comfort and security that “staying in your lane” of the social hierarchy provides (2, 9). This moral foundation influences intergroup attitudes by predicting how receptive or hostile groups are to social change. Indeed, the crux of many intergroup conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries stem from groups' differing stances toward Authority; conservative groups are likely to use the foundation of Authority/Respect to condemn progressive movements as disruptive and morally wrong, while social justice groups who score low in Authority instead see protest as a moral good (2). Authority/Respect also applies to pressing border crises and moral dilemmas, such as whether people are more morally obligated to aid desperate immigrants or preserve their communities' status quo (23). Many debates regarding intergroup relations, like this, are shrouded in moral ambiguity, and Authority/Respect may incline people to prioritize the social order and behave in an unwelcoming manner toward immigrant groups (23). Since diverse groups in the modern world cross paths and shake up the social order more than ever before, Authority/Respect is very relevant to understanding rising anti-immigration sentiment and xenophobia, as well as the pervasive human resistance to societal disruption and change (15, 23).

Expanding on these ideas, the moral foundation of Authority/Respect strongly influences intergroup attitudes through the desire to use paradigms, which are collections of beliefs that people hold, to satisfy Authority by creating a sense of structure and hierarchy in the world (15). The moral foundation of Authority is especially relevant to the framework of Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), which was identified by social psychologist Bob Altemeyer in 1981 as a particular

set of beliefs and measurable personality dimensions that strongly predict prejudice (14, 15). People high in Right Wing Authoritarianism are characterized by the belief that the world is a dangerous place and that strong leaders are needed to maintain order and tradition. In other words, driven by fears of outgroup immorality and disorder, Right Wing Authoritarianism is marked by the conviction that it is one's moral duty to protect the status quo (14, 15). Right Wing Authoritarianism is highly correlated with prejudice, as is the rigid paradigm of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), which is the belief that the world is inherently competitive and that only the strongest groups can survive. Those high in SDO exhibit Authority/Respect through a strong belief in a natural hierarchy of groups and harbor prejudice on a more cognitive level, wherein they perceive the outgroup as inherently inferior and deserving of disdain (14).

Moral foundations are key to understanding RWA and SDO, and how people develop such strong convictions about the correct state of the world and the outgroup's rightful place. To investigate how moral foundations informed authoritarianism and prejudice, Hadarics & Kende [2018] used online surveys of Hungarian university students that measured participants' moral foundations, RWA and SDO ratings, and views toward outgroups that were either categorized as dangerous, derogated, or dissident. Right Wing Authoritarianism has been linked to a preference for stronger binding, rather than individualizing, moral foundations (14, 15). In line with this trend, the study found that participants high in RWA displayed more prejudice toward dissident groups (ex, immigrants) they perceived as disrupting the social order and dangerous groups (ex, drug addicts) who violated principles of Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. Meanwhile, the hierarchical beliefs of Social Dominance Orientation have been linked to a lower regard for the individualizing foundations of Care and Fairness. Participants high in SDO showed strong bias against dissident and derogated (ex, homeless) groups, but were not as prejudiced against dangerous ones. Perhaps believing the world was a ruthless place and that inequality was morally acceptable, people high in SDO were unsympathetic toward the lack of Care and Fairness afforded to these dissident and derogated groups (14). Importantly, these findings demonstrate how moral foundations form the blueprint of people's distinct moral codes, but from these basic and theoretically benevolent foundations, complex worldviews, demeaning attitudes about the outgroup, and insidious strands of motivated prejudice can arise.

Purity/Disgust: Outgroup Dehumanization

The final moral foundation, Purity/Disgust, is rooted in the potent evolutionary instinct to avoid unclean individuals and groups at both the tangible and abstract level, as a manner of moral principle (2, 24). When exposed to outgroups, an assessment of the group's purity or disgrace is among the first knee-jerk, reflexive reactions that either invites curiosity or repulses future interaction (24). This intuitive admiration or disgust is evident not only on an emotional level but also on a neuroscientific level. In one fMRI study, participants exposed to photos of drug addicts and homeless people, two groups that trigger high levels of aversion, displayed greater brain activity in the amygdala and insula, which are regions associated with disgust (25). Importantly, this indicates that before cognitive processing occurs, people's brains already perceive these outgroups in a fundamentally different way than other humans. Thus, people's demeaning attitudes toward certain groups may reflect not only prejudicial beliefs like RWA and SDO, but also a troubling pattern of subconscious dehumanization driven by the more primordial foundation of Purity/Disgust (24, 25).

People's perceptions of the outgroup are so contingent on disgust that throughout history, authoritarian governments have effectively used propaganda to exploit Purity/Disgust as a gut-feeling moral reaction. Dehumanization, arguably the most alarming strand of prejudice, can occur when groups such as immigrants are depicted as animals or otherwise unclean and unfit for society. The evolutionary desire for cleanliness, termed Biologization, can induce people to label the outgroup as social contaminants and may even lead people to avoid physical proximity with the outgroup and exhibit "passive harm tendencies" such as excluding the outgroup in social situations (24). Although disgust is not limited to the outgroup and may be felt toward people from the ingroup as well, individuals who harbor disgust for an outgroup are more likely to report "active harm tendencies" and an intent to inflict pain (24). Within the realm of Purity/Disgust, moral disgust can be just as influential as its physical counterpart and is especially pertinent to the abstract principles governing intergroup relations. Vezzali *et al.* [2017] examined how intergroup friendships with gay people, who are frequent targets of moral disgust, affected intergroup relations through questionnaires assessing Italian high schoolers' level of contact and stances (5, 26). As aforementioned, Intergroup Contact Theory posits that greater interaction between groups reduces prejudice

by altering cognitive and emotional perceptions (16, 17). Importantly, Vezzali *et al.* [2017] found that higher levels of intergroup contact and friendship correlated with respondents expressing a greater likelihood of exhibiting prosocial behavior toward gay people and with perceiving gay people as possessing greater moral Purity than initially assumed. Thus, although Purity/Disgust is a deeply aversive force that discourages interaction, insofar as individuals are willing to break the stigma by reaching out to ostracized outgroups, much of this disgust can eventually be overcome via personal relationships that pierce harmful social norms and undercut fear-based avoidance and shame (17, 26). Since the moral foundation of Disgust is one of the forefront factors setting the tone for intergroup judgments, dehumanization, and self-segregation between groups, combating Disgust should be a top priority in ensuring groups can engage in the productive interaction and discussion needed to address many of the world's most pressing challenges today (24).

Section 2: Perceptions of Outgroup Morality

In Section One, we covered how each moral foundation informs attitudes and behaviors toward the outgroup; in this section, we pivot to a broader discussion of how these moral foundations work together to affect intergroup relations. With this fresh perspective, we specifically zero in on how perceptions of the outgroup's morality, that is, how well the outgroup adheres to moral principles, shape broader attitudes toward the outgroup. A key driver of moral perception is the aforementioned Belief Congruence Theory, which states that people are inclined to like outgroups that hold moral priorities comparable to their own—for instance, a high regard for Purity and Fairness—while disliking groups they perceive as having incompatible moral foundations (7, 12, 13). For instance, immigrant groups are typically perceived as holding foreign moral foundations and are thus viewed as not only “realistic threats” to the ingroup's politics, jobs, natural resources, and so forth, but also as “symbolic threats” to the ingroup's morality and cherished ideals (20). A certain degree of grey area and nuance is involved when making judgments of outgroup morality, as people seemingly hold the ingroup and outgroup to different ethical standards (7). This is aptly illustrated by a 2014 experiment conducted on Hui Muslims at a Beijing university, which found that Hui Muslims exhibited strong disgust when members of their ingroup violated the sacred halal diet by consuming pork or alcohol;

nevertheless, Hui Muslims displayed indifference when non-Muslims consumed these foods (27). This suggests that while the individualizing foundations of Care and Fairness are held almost unanimously and would elicit general anger if broken, groups seem to accept that their binding foundations and norms are not universal (7). Thus, as long as two groups' central moral foundations align, the groups may overlook differences in areas like Purity and still emerge with positive moral evaluations of each other.

It is also important to keep in mind that the extent to which individuals make these accommodating or harsh evaluations of the outgroup's morality varies from person to person, due to varying moral foundations and personality traits like Need for Cognitive Closure (NCC). This is exemplified by the finding that an individual's moral foundations, specifically a preference for individualizing or binding foundations, are neurobiologically linked to differences in how their brains perceive intergroup behavior. Nash *et al.* [2017] observed that individuals who prioritized binding foundations, namely conservative political groups, tended to possess lower levels of grey matter in regions like the lateral Prefrontal Cortex and Anterior Cingulate Cortex, indicating that they were less capable of perceiving and acknowledging conflict (8). In addition to moral foundations being associated with fundamental differences in perception, styles of reasoning and decision-making also play a prominent role in shaping attitudes toward the outgroup. Need for Cognitive Closure (NCC) is a personality measure linked to greater binding moral foundations and characterized by a strong psychological preference to minimize uncertainty and instead perceive the world as having more absolutist categorical divides (15, 20). People who more heavily employ this black-and-white moral polarization of outgroups, wherein other groups are solely good or solely bad, are also likely to perceive other groups as more inherently different, threatening, and stereotypical, as well as exhibit greater prejudice levels (10, 15). These categorical perceptions of the outgroup's morality can have serious real-world consequences—Bianco *et al.* [2022] found that Maltese people higher in NCC and binding foundations were more nationalistic and prejudiced against African immigrants. Importantly, judgments about the outgroup's morality are influenced by each individual's own moral foundations and cognitive appraisal styles like NCC, as well as by societal factors like stereotypes and social norms (15, 20).

Stereotype Content Model and Social Norms

When applying Moral Foundations Theory to complex groups in the real world, perceptions about various groups' moralities are typically biased and stereotypical in nature, but nonetheless useful predictors for how the outgroup will be treated and perceived (9, 28). Especially for groups with little intergroup interaction, how an individual stereotypically perceives the outgroup's moral values can lead to misguided beliefs that preemptively dissuade future interaction and enable the continuation of these stereotypes (28). Since stereotypes are so complex in their motivations and origins, the Stereotype Content Model is frequently used by social psychologists as a way to simply categorize and measure stereotypical views, positing that most stereotypes convey the two dimensions of warmth, whether the other group should be approached, and competence, what the ingroup stands to gain or lose from the interaction (9, 25). Notably, Janković & Čehajić-Clancy [2021] and Sacchi *et al.* [2021] assert that morality is just as important a factor—if not more important—as the metrics of warmth and competence when developing perceptions of the outgroup. How groups are stereotypically categorized determines the moral emotions that they induce, for instance, groups seen as Low warmth, Low competence (ex, people on welfare) trigger greater disgust, meanwhile groups stereotyped as High warmth, Low competence (ex, the elderly) may garner pity (9, 25).

Utilizing the Stereotype Content Model, Winget & Tindale, R. S. [2020] investigated how stereotypes about a group extend to affect perceptions of other groups' moral foundations. They asked American undergraduate students to rate various groups' moral foundations via the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) and analyzed how perceptions of other groups' warmth and competence levels correlated with stereotypes about those groups' moral foundations. They found that outgroups stereotyped as more warm, such as stay-at-home wives and the elderly, were perceived to value the moral foundations of Care, Fairness, and Loyalty more than groups stereotyped as colder or aloof (9). A possible logical explanation is that individuals are more likely to have had firsthand interaction with outgroups judged as warmer, as opposed to less sociable, and thus have had more encounters of empathy and mutual cooperation that attest to the outgroup's Care, Fairness, and Loyalty (17). On the other hand, groups without these chances for positive intergroup contact, like minority groups with language and cultural barriers, may be stereotyped as less warm and thus assumed to value moral Care,

Fairness, and Loyalty less. Regarding intergroup relations and diplomacy, then, groups that come across as more socially disarming and hospitable—which typically share relatable backgrounds or cultural practices—are the beneficiaries of more ingroup trust and favorable assessments of moral credibility. Conversely, less well-connected groups pegged as more socially distant are not given the benefit of the doubt and are, fairly or unfairly, perceived as less moral in these respects.

While groups stereotyped with higher warmth were generally associated with greater moral Care, Fairness, and Loyalty, Winget & Tindale [2020] found that groups stereotyped as more competent were perceived to care less about Care and Fairness and instead emphasize more Loyalty, Authority, and Purity, as opposed to groups that were less capable. This may explain why many stereotypically successful minority groups, such as Asians or Jewish people, are often unfairly perceived as flocking together and maintaining their exclusivity over caring for others' fair treatment and well-being (9). All factors considered, groups rated as Low Warmth and High Competence, such as business executives, were judged to hold the cumulative lowest morality across all five moral foundation measures (9). These groups, which seem aloof yet highly successful, may be viewed with the greatest suspicion and immorality due to their coming across as unrelatable on a human level and disconnected from commonplace struggles and concerns. Along with threatening socioeconomic prospects, these self-sufficient groups challenge people's notions of ingroup superiority, and individuals may deem these successful groups as less morally righteous to compensate for other feelings of being inferior (6, 9, 22). Thus, perceptions of outgroup morality are heavily shaped not by the outgroup's behavior itself, but by how agreeably the outgroup fits into its surrounding societal context—in particular, a combination of how socially well-connected and socioeconomically powerful the outgroup seems (9).

Furthermore, as an interrelated factor, social norms about how an outgroup ought to be perceived, which often go hand-in-hand with stereotypes, also play a vital role in outlining which attitudes should be held toward the outgroup. Zheng & Kim [2024] conducted survey research in China and Singapore—two collectivistic societies marked by greater emphasis on norms—and observed that scoring higher in Purity/Disgust was linked to Singaporeans being less open to interacting with LGBTQ+ people, but—critically—greater Purity/Disgust did not influence Hong Kong subjects' desire

to interact with this stigmatized group. To explain this atypical finding, the researchers proposed that greater LGBTQ+ acceptance in Hong Kong versus Singapore led Hong Kong subjects to perceive LGBTQ+ people in a more positive moral light. Importantly, both prescriptive and descriptive social norms interact with and modify moral foundations to dictate attitudes about outgroup morality (5). Even more surprisingly, Zheng & Kim [2024] found that when the moral foundation of greater Loyalty was primed, Hong Kong subjects tended to exhibit less outgroup prejudice, not more. This suggests that if the ingroup's norms encourage tolerance toward other groups, increasing Ingroup/Loyalty—or a desire to follow the norms of the group—can actually reduce prejudice and make people more open to pursuing positive intergroup interaction (5).

Improving Perceptions of Outgroup Morality

In order to combat prejudice and facilitate more intergroup collaboration, forming more positive, less biased impressions of outgroup morality should be among the first measures taken. As such, we have several recommendations for how to address stereotypes about the outgroup's morality, starting with the most prominent perpetuator of these stereotypes: the media (28). Across many societies, the media disproportionately portrays various outgroups, such as Black, Hispanic, and Muslim people, in a stereotypically immoral light, which can precipitate deeper, highly troubling changes to how the outgroup is perceived. Indeed, people who frequently consume media or encounter hate speech exhibit measurable increases in outgroup bias and prejudice, called Media Effects, which can create self-fulfilling prophecies that detrimentally affect behavior toward the outgroup (17, 28). For example, if an individual believes an outgroup is low in the moral foundation of Fairness, they may treat members with suspicion, causing the outgroup members to reciprocate this underhandedness and confirm the stereotype (17). By far, the most effective way to break this cycle and combat harmful media stereotypes is through positive intergroup contact, which opens the door for a greater understanding and enhanced view of the outgroup's moral foundations (17, 29). As a case in point, Brenick & Killen [2014] found that among Jewish and Arab children in America, Jewish children with greater intergroup contact were more inclined to disapprove of excluding Arab children by citing moral values. This suggests that greater Intergroup Contact translates to a greater desire to fairly apply moral principles to the treatment of outgroups

(29). Therefore, intergroup contact opportunities—such as through cross-community projects, religious groups, sports teams, or school-sponsored programs—should be a top priority to instill tolerant moral stances toward outgroups from a young age (17). If direct intergroup contact is not possible, efforts to improve intergroup attitudes should start by portraying outgroups in a more favorable moral light through unbiased media coverage, school curriculum that teaches accurate information about the outgroup, and broader tolerance-based public messaging campaigns.

We further propose that, in addition to improving perceptions of outgroup morality by altering the outside information people receive, prompting people to introspectively reflect on morality itself can transform attitudes and counter reductionist stereotypes (30). Prompting people to slow down cognition has been shown to be an effective way to make people more receptive to subjective morality, the idea that a gradient of moral considerations exists, and can discourage absolutist, stereotypical perceptions of outgroup morality (15, 30). Interestingly, encouraging people to critically evaluate moral issues also induces them to utilize more individualizing foundations in their decision-making rather than binding ones (30). Given this, Yilmaz & Saribay [2017] propose that prompting conflicting groups—like liberals and conservatives—to slow down contemplation can effectively induce both parties to become more responsive to Care and Fairness and hence find common moral ground (30). Importantly, when discussing issues regarding the outgroup, drawing attention to certain moral foundations is an easy-to-implement, highly effective strategy to improve intergroup attitudes and beliefs. Argüello-Gutiérrez *et al.* [2023] primed participants to think about Fairness by reading a story stressing the importance of equality, and found that priming led individuals to display less biased views of Muslims and to perceive Muslims as possessing greater morality and interpersonal warmth (31). When implementing this framing technique, it is important to note that each outgroup's specific stances will determine which moral foundations should be avoided or emphasized; among liberals, priming the moral foundation of Purity/Disgust typically leads to reduced prejudice against gay people, while among conservatives, priming Purity/Disgust begets more (9). As a general principle, people who view themselves as more moral exhibit greater prosocial behavior (10). In intergroup contexts, then, intentionally reminding people of their morality and prompting them to dwell on

specific moral principles is an effective way to promote better, more ethically sound decisions regarding the outgroup.

Section 3: Limitations and Recommendations

Now that we've explored how each of the five moral foundations affects intergroup relations through the question, "When do these moral foundations apply to intergroup contexts?", to gain a fuller understanding, we pivot to the inverse: "When do these moral foundations *fail to* apply to intergroup contexts?" In this final section, we identify three main limitations of applying Moral Foundations Theory to intergroup relations: (a) a group-level failure where the MFT does not apply to *morally excluded* groups, (b) an individual-level to group-level discrepancy where group and group member morality are unaligned, and (c) a theoretical-level issue where societal factors may override the MFT.

Moral Exclusion

Since morality is such a key driver of behaviors toward the outgroup, it is imperative to consider instances when the ingroup hypocritically deviates from its moral foundations, which is all too common in intergroup conflict scenarios, and the MFT becomes seemingly irrelevant as a predictor. This hypocritical behavior is primarily owed to the process of Moral Exclusion, which arises when certain outgroups are deemed to be undeserving of the ingroup's ethical consideration and are thus subjected to a manner of conduct completely divorced from the ingroup's typical moral code (14, 23). Through mathematical modeling, Hadarics & Kende [2018] discovered that Moral Exclusion is the crucial mediating factor that explains how generally "good" people with righteous moral foundations can care about the welfare of most groups, but make an exception for certain groups who have been excluded from the "scope of justice;" in their case, well-intentioned Hungarian college students who still displayed prejudice toward Muslim immigrants (23). This has key implications for the MFT, suggesting that an ingroup's prejudice may be partially motivated by prejudicial moral foundations, *and/or* may be driven by a view that a certain outgroup does not meet the standards for moral consideration in the first place (23). Although moral foundations provide a general blueprint for an ingroup's intergroup stances, how these foundations are applied is anything but uniform and varies case-by-case, depending on how the ingroup perceives their unique dynamic with and obligation to that specific outgroup (23). Essentially, this argues that

the root of intergroup prejudice is not solely an issue of morality (e.g., certain groups think prejudice is morally acceptable), but also a fundamental social categorization issue of *us vs. them*, wherein the outgroup is perceived as irreconcilably different and morally disenfranchised as a result (14, 23).

To address this prominent limitation of how outgroups are perceived using the MFT, we propose several measures in line with our previous recommendations. Moral Exclusion is highly correlated with groups that elicit disgust and fear; for instance, fears of Muslim terrorists may induce other groups to exhibit less concern for the well-being and ethical treatment of Muslims as a whole (23). People who are psychologically distant and morally disengaged, or do not feel accountable for the outgroup's plight, are also more likely to exhibit Moral Exclusion (23). To this end, more intergroup contact and cooperation are vital to dismantle the disgust, fear, and psychological distance that breed Moral Exclusion. Moreover, we propose that school curriculum and public messaging that accurately inform people about the outgroup can combat ignorance, allowing all groups to be afforded basic moral dignity.

Moral Licensing

Another limitation in using Moral Foundations Theory to improve intergroup relations is that individual-level and group-level moral judgments do not always align, and due to Moral Licensing, establishing group social norms that promote upstanding moral foundations may not actually lead members to exhibit better intergroup conduct (6, 32). Moral Licensing posits that people feel strong social pressure to appear moral by adhering to group moral standards, but by performing a conspicuously righteous act, people satisfy this desire and hence feel permitted to engage in subsequently less ethical behavior (32, 33). This is illustrated by a 2009 study, where participants who presumably displayed their non-racist intentions by noting favorable opinions of Barack Obama were more inclined to later exhibit greater bias when given a hiring exercise, and chose fewer Black job candidates as a result (33). While Moral Licensing has a relatively small effect, initiatives to promote more ethical intergroup behavior should target not only moral foundations on a group level but also seek to gauge and align people's deeply entrenched moral beliefs (32, 33). With this in mind, however, there are some high-stakes scenarios where it is beneficial to maintain a cleft between group

members' individual moral foundations and the larger morality of the group (3). Moral foundations are highly pertinent to foreign policy, predicting up to 50% of the differences in whether people support militant or cooperative internationalism, and the American public often pressures politicians to consider their moral beliefs in policymaking (3). Nevertheless, introducing personal morals into institutional settings may yield messier outcomes—as in the case of the ideologically-fueled conflicts of the Cold War or the Vietnam War—than strictly utilitarian and rational, rather than moral-impulse-driven, policy (3).

Societal Factors Taking Precedence

A third notable limitation of the MFT is that intergroup behavior is governed by many other powerful factors besides moral beliefs, and the MFT may not be stable, as differing social contexts can cause people to adjust their moral foundations for better or worse (21, 22). As an illustration, among Jewish children in America, excluding Arab children was judged to be the most immoral and wrong in personal peer-to-peer relationships, but more admissible when the exclusion took place in the more normative spheres of the community center and home (29). Therefore, spaces where prejudice is more readily expected or accepted may invite more biased intergroup behavior, where social norms essentially override personal moral inclinations (29). Hadarics & Kende [2021] concurred with this concept, based on a longitudinal study tracking attitudes and morality throughout a Hungarian government campaign that employed binding foundations to elicit anti-Muslim sentiment. Importantly, the researchers found that more frequent encounters with prejudiced political messaging led to measurable shifts in participants' attitudes regarding Muslims, and *subsequent* shifts toward greater binding moral foundations, perhaps as a way to accommodate these newfound prejudiced beliefs (21). This raises important questions about the assumed causal pathway from moral foundations to attitudes about the outgroup, and whether moral foundations are actually the values shaping outgroup attitudes, or merely malleable principles that self-servingly reflect an individual's outgroup beliefs (21, 22). Either way, the wrong social environments can quickly lead people astray from their personal moral convictions, which is why parents, schools, and community organizations should strive to instill strong senses of moral foundations and individual accountability from a young age (29).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper sought to answer the question, “How do Moral Foundations and perceptions of outgroup morality influence intergroup relations?” through investigating how each of the five moral foundations applies to intergroup contexts, and then by examining how outgroups are judged and viewed based on their morality. We then concluded our analysis by discussing several key shortcomings of applying Moral Foundations Theory to intergroup contexts and provided real-world recommendations for how to encourage people to treat outgroups with more virtue.

The main findings of our analysis reveal that moral principles dictate how outgroups are treated and perceived across a range of contexts before, during, and after intergroup contact takes place. The principle of Care/Harm fosters empathy that transcends group divides and is the underlying mechanism driving attitude change during prejudice-reduction initiatives like Intergroup Contact Theory. Meanwhile, questions regarding Fairness/Injustice mainly come into the discussion amidst settling intergroup disputes and conflict. We found that people generally strive to treat other groups according to principles of impartiality, but that definitions of Fairness are influenced by group loyalty, social norms, and a history of past wrongdoings or larger intergroup context. During and after intense episodes of intergroup conflict, the principle that Loyalty is “good” drives groups to display ingroup-centric pride and justify otherwise immoral acts, as well as hinders the fair application of justice to mistreated outgroups. As groups in the real world interact, the moral principle of Authority/Respect can feed the beginnings of prejudice and conflict, by driving people to impose frameworks about outgroups being threats to social order through Right Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation. The principles of Authority/Respect and Purity/Disgust can both pre-emptively contribute to an attitude of moral disdain for outgroups viewed as threatening and “different,” and may dissuade groups from pursuing positive intergroup contact and cooperation. If groups are not given the chance to become better informed about each other and interact, stereotypes about other groups' morality can perpetuate strong stances like suspicion or distaste toward the outgroup.

Overall, principles of morality contribute both positively and negatively toward the ultimate goal of shaping better attitudes and behaviors toward other

groups. Initiatives to shape a more harmonious society should instill stronger individualizing moral principles at both the individual and group/social normative level, as well as work to create more positive perceptions of other groups' morality. This may take the form of changing stereotypical media narratives, introducing lessons about morality into school curriculum, or prompting people to dwell on moral principles when making intergroup decisions. Because in the end, whether groups will cooperate or conflict is not predetermined by abstract ideas of morality, nor by whether groups' values and perceptions of each other compatibility align. Rather, intergroup relations are forged by how individual members choose to harness these moral principles in everyday life, and by each person's big and small choices to treat others well and stand up for what is right.

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