



## FlashReport

## Priming family values: How being a parent affects moral evaluations of harmless but offensive acts

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## ABSTRACT

In modern liberal societies people are generally reluctant to morally condemn acts that they find personally distasteful so long as those acts are not harmful or unfair to others. However, in providing character education for their children, parents often have to censure harmless but offensive acts. Thus, we hypothesize that the parental role broadens the scope of morality beyond narrow considerations of harm and fairness. To test this idea we asked parents and nonparents to morally evaluate harmless/offensive acts and a control harmful act. We manipulated whether the parental role was primed before they evaluated these acts. Parents and nonparents did not differ in their moral objections to the control act regardless of parental role priming. However, when the parental role was primed parents were more morally opposed to harmless but offensive acts than were nonparents. We discuss the implications of these results for understanding the dynamics of moral judgment and the recruitment of parents into moral reform movements.

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“Who am I to judge?” This commonly heard rhetorical question captures the attitude of moral reticence that has become the defining moral ethos of modern liberal societies (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985/2008; Spragens, 2006; Tubbs, 2007; Wolfe, 1998, 2001). As the question suggests, people in modern liberal societies often feel that they lack the standing to morally oppose actions that they find personally distasteful so long as those actions respect the rights and well-being of others and thus fall within the scope of personal freedom.

This nonjudgmental, laissez faire approach to morality often becomes problematic for parents who must nurture the character development of children (Tubbs, 2007). Because children are considered to be relatively undeveloped and impressionable, parents are often duty-bound to shield them from behavior that models unvirtuous character traits. The question “Who am I to judge?” is less relevant to a person acting in a parental role because this role confers special standing to morally criticize actions that threaten to corrupt the character development of children even if those actions fall within the scope of personal freedom. The parental role may thus expand the domain of morality by causing parents to attach moral significance to acts that would otherwise be considered matters of personal preference.

Moral judgment typically encompasses three broad domains of concern: harm and fairness (ethics of autonomy), social harmony

(ethics of community), and moral purity (ethics of divinity) (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Jensen, 1995, 1997; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). People differ in the emphasis they place on each of these ethics. For example, moral judgments in India emphasize divinity and community more and autonomy less than moral judgments in the United States (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987; Shweder et al., 1997). Within the United States conservatives' moral judgments more often draw on the ethics of community and divinity than the moral judgments of liberals do (Haidt & Graham, 2007, 2009, 2006; Jensen, 1997). We propose that the parental role is another variable that influences whether a person's moral worldview goes beyond the ethics of autonomy.

The ethics of autonomy respects the moral self-direction of adults, creating minimal moral bounds on choice, and permitting individuals to pursue their own definitions of the good. However, even within modern liberal societies, children are typically not accorded the same moral autonomy as adults because children are seen as moral innocents who cannot discern right from wrong on their own and whose character development depends on external guidance (Jackson & Scott, 1999; Tubbs, 2007). Parents are typically held responsible for instilling the values and providing the moral instruction that is necessary to develop a virtuous character. Thus, parents should be more morally concerned about acts that fall outside the scope of the ethics of autonomy, instructing children to avoid choices that violate community standards (the ethics of community), or defile the purity of sacred objects and symbols

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(the ethics of divinity). Those who are responsible for the character development of children are also often sensitive to how the choices of others sometimes model undesirable character traits and thus could negatively influence children exposed to those choices (Tubbs, 2007).

The idea that the parental role changes a person's moral stance towards harmless but offensive acts is consistent with Tetlock's (2002) social functionalist framework. Tetlock situates human judgment in the context of the person's various social roles and relationships and emphasizes the sensitivity of judgment to the recurring functional problems of social life. Tetlock's framework posits that different normative criteria guide judgment depending on what functional problem is dominant in the context. Applying Tetlock's framework to the present case, we suggest that parents face the functional problem of nurturing the character development of their children by shielding them from unwanted influences. This function of the parental role may influence parents to morally oppose harmless but offensive acts. Thus, parents' moral judgments may often be less constrained by the normative guidelines of the ethics of autonomy which would define harmless but offensive acts as morally insignificant.

We hypothesize that, as a result of concern about the character development of children, the parental role should shift a person from a relatively nonjudgmental, *laissez faire* moral stance that only condemns acts that harm others to a more expansive moral worldview that encompasses acts that violate community standards or intuitive notions of purity, even if these acts do not harm others. As a preliminary test of this hypothesis, we analyzed data from a section of the 2006 General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2006) that asked adults about their moral attitudes toward controversial sex acts. Participants judged the morality of three types of nontraditional sex: "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex," "a man and woman having sexual relations before marriage," and "a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner." Participants recorded their judgments on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 ("not wrong at all") to 4 ("always wrong"). We averaged these judgments for an overall measure of disapproval of nontraditional sex ( $\alpha = .63$ ). As predicted, parents judged nontraditional sex to be significantly more wrong ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = .84$ ) than did nonparents ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = .87$ ),  $t(930) = 5.99$ ,  $p < .001$ . Since these data are correlational we cannot know whether the parental role causes people to become more morally opposed to these acts or whether preexisting differences in moral attitudes influence the likelihood of becoming a parent.<sup>1</sup> To overcome this problem we designed an experimental study that manipulates the salience of the parental role.

If parents' moral disapproval of harmless but offensive acts is specifically tied to their parental role, then they should be more likely to express moral disapproval of such acts when that role is salient. Thus an experiment that varies parental role salience allows us to isolate the potential causal impact of this variable in expanding the domain of morality to encompass harmless but offensive acts. Priming a relational role automatically activates goals that the person pursues in the context of that relationship (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Fitzsimons, Shah, Chartrand, & Bargh, 2005). Consistent with this research, we predicted that priming the parental role would activate the associated goal of censoring acts that violate community standards or defile sacred objects and symbols. However, when the parental role is not salient or the evaluator is a nonparent, moral judgments should be restricted to the ethics of autonomy, with relatively little objection to

harmless but offensive acts. Furthermore, reactions to acts that infringe on others' rights should not be affected by parental role priming because such acts are morally objectionable within the ethics of autonomy.

## Methods

### Participants

Fifty-three adults (34 parents, 19 nonparents; 51% female; 70% white; age:  $M = 38.43$  years,  $SD = 12.19$ ) were recruited at community events and various public locations nearby a university in the northeastern United States.

### Procedure

Participants filled out a demographics sheet with a critical question about their parental status along with questions about their gender, age, and race. For the parental question participants were simply asked: "Are you a parent?" and circled either "yes" or "no". The order in which participants received the demographics sheet was varied between participants to manipulate role priming. In the experimental condition the parental role was primed by participants, completing the demographics sheet before they read and evaluated the scenarios. In the control condition participants completed the demographics sheet after reading and evaluating the scenarios.

Participants read four scenarios based on those used in previous research (Haidt et al., 1993). Three scenarios described harmless but offensive acts; a fourth control scenario described a harmful act. After reading each scenario participants evaluated the morality of the actor's behavior in each scenario on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all morally wrong*) to 10 (*extremely immoral*). The three harmless–offensive scenarios involved actions that were distasteful or disturbing but did not involve the actor inflicting harm on another. Specifically, participants evaluated the morality of: (1) a woman who undergoes plastic surgery to permanently affix animalistic horns to her skull, (2) a congenital dwarf who voluntarily participates in dwarf-tossing competitions, and (3) a man who watches videos of animal copulation to become sexually aroused. Moral evaluations of the actors in these harmless–offensive scenarios were significantly intercorrelated and so were averaged together for an overall index of moral disapproval of harmless–offensive acts ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ). The control scenario involved a violation of property rights. Specifically, participants evaluated the morality of a shoplifter. Participants received the harmless–offensive scenarios either before ( $N = 26$ ) or after ( $N = 27$ ) the control scenario.

## Results

To test the prediction that when the parental role is primed parents express more moral disapproval of harmless but offensive acts than nonparents we conducted a mixed-model ANCOVA with two between-subjects factors (parental status: *parent* vs. *nonparent*, and priming condition: *role-primed* vs. *unprimed*) and one within-subjects factor (scenario type: *property rights violation* vs. *harmless–offensive*). Participant age was included as a covariate.

There was a significant main effect of scenario type,  $F(1, 48) = 17.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $h_p^2 = .27$ . Participants disapproved of the property rights violation significantly more strongly ( $M = 7.43$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) than the harmless–offensive acts ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). There was also a significant main effect of parental status,  $F(1, 48) = 7.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .13$ , and a marginally significant two-way interaction between parental status and role priming,  $F(1, 48) = 3.75$ ,  $p < .1$ ,  $h_p^2 = .07$ . These effects were qualified by a

<sup>1</sup> The difference between parents and nonparents remains significant in regression analyses that control respondent age;  $\beta = .15$ ,  $t(927) = 4.49$ ,  $p < .001$ .

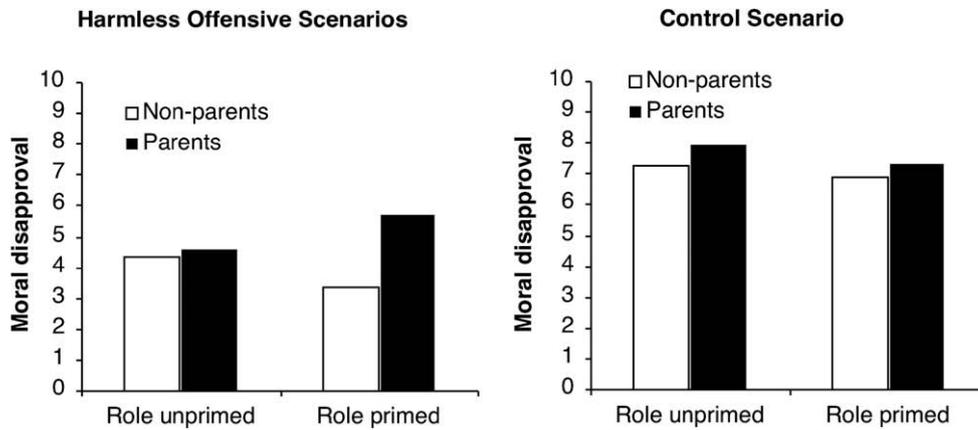


Fig. 1. Parents' and nonparents' mean moral disapproval ratings of harmless-offensive acts and a control act as a function of parental role priming condition.

significant three-way interaction between parental status, role priming, and scenario,  $F(1, 48) = 6.11$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .11$  (see Fig. 1).

Follow-up tests revealed that, as predicted, there was a significant interaction between parental status and role priming for the harmless-offensive acts,  $F(1, 48) = 9.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $h_p^2 = .16$ , but not for the property rights violation,  $F < 1$ . Decomposing this interaction for harmless-offensive acts, we found that in the *role-primed* condition, parents disapproved of harmless-offensive acts significantly more than did nonparents,  $F(1, 48) = 15.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $h_p^2 = .24$ . However, in the *unprimed* condition parents' and nonparents' moral evaluations of harmless-offensive acts did not differ,  $F < 1$ .

Further follow-up tests revealed that, as predicted, parents' moral disapproval of the harmless-offensive acts was significantly higher in the *role-primed* condition than in the *unprimed* condition,  $F(1, 48) = 8.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $h_p^2 = .14$ . However, parents' moral disapproval of the property rights violation was not significantly influenced by the priming manipulation,  $F(1, 48) = 1.97$ ,  $p > .1$ . For nonparents moral disapproval of the harmless-offensive acts was marginally lower in the *role-primed* condition than in the *unprimed* condition,  $F(1, 48) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .1$ ,  $h_p^2 = .06$ . However, as with parents, the role priming manipulation did not significantly affect nonparents' disapproval of the property rights violation,  $F < 1$ .

## Discussion

Parents are more inclined to express moral disapproval toward harmless but offensive acts than are nonparents, especially when their parental role is salient. However, parents and nonparents do not appear to differ in their inclination to morally disapprove of violations of other's rights, regardless of role priming. This suggests that the parental role expands the moral domain beyond the ethics of autonomy. By demonstrating that the same harmless but offensive acts elicit different moral judgments depending on a person's role-based perspective this research contributes to the literature on the contextual nature of social judgment (Asch, 1952; Ross, 1990; Tetlock, 2002).

Given the present results it is perhaps not surprising that protecting children from corrupting influences has often been the focus of moralistic movements that seek to censure behaviors that many people consider personally offensive, including homosexuality, obscene content in art and literature, and recreational drug use (Ben-Yehuda, 1986; Biesel, 1997; Gilbert, 1988; Herman, 1997; Springhall, 1998). The present results suggest that parents may be a ready-made constituency for moral entrepreneurs who seek to mobilize moral outrage to enact restrictions on other citizens' personal freedoms. A particularly successful example of this type

of moral entrepreneur is Anita Bryant who adopted the slogan "Save Our Children" in her campaign against the expansion of gay rights (Hills, 1980). Movements like Bryant's that successfully frame issues in ways that arouse parents' concerns about the corruption of children may thus achieve more widespread support for restrictions on behaviors that violate traditions and offend popular tastes. As Rozin (1997 and 1999) notes, one of the most effective ways to arouse moral opposition to a previously tolerated behavior is to somehow link that behavior to negative effects on children.

The present results may also help explain the widespread belief that societal morality is declining (Eibach & Libby, 2009). People generally overlook or underestimate changes in their own interpretations of events and this causes them to sometimes mistake changes within themselves for changes in the external world (Eibach, Libby, & Gilovich, 2003). If the many people who eventually become parents generally experience moral domain expansion as we argue, then these people should judge more acts to be immoral after becoming parents than they did before. Furthermore, if they fail to recognize how the parental role altered their moral outlook then they may erroneously conclude that immorality is rising when it is their own moral standards that have actually changed.

One limitation of the present study is an absence of nonmoral evaluative judgments. Haidt (2001) shows that a person's emotional response to an act is often a critical determinant of his or her moral evaluation of that act. Thus, making the parental role salient might have led to greater negative emotional reactions, compared to those among unprimed participants, and a difference in emotional reactions may have mediated the observed difference in moral judgment. Alternately, participants might have used the moral evaluation scale to express negative emotional reactions such as anger or disgust in the absence of direct questions about those emotions. Future research including both moral and nonmoral evaluative judgment measures would be useful to explore whether parental role salience leads to greater moral opposition to harmless but offensive acts even when individuals have the opportunity to express negative emotional reactions directly.

## Conclusions

We found evidence that the parental role expands the domain of moral judgment beyond the relatively narrow scope of the ethics of autonomy that has become the defining code of public morality in modern liberal societies. The need to shield children from immoral influences often requires parents to take into account more than just harm and fairness when judging morality, and this is reflected in parents' greater moral objections to harmless but offensive behaviors when their parental role is salient. Thus, parents in

modern liberal societies may play a role in influencing how other citizens make use of the many freedoms those societies afford them.

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