

PROJECT SUMMARY

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Proposal Title: Moral Schemas, Cultural Conflict, and Socio-Political Action

Research Problem: Sacred moral values underlie group differences and motivate social movements, especially in times of cultural conflict (e.g., Atran et al. 2007, Sheikh et al. 2012, Tetlock et al. 2000). However, established models rarely consider values' diffusion and influence on political activity, in part due to a lack of engagement with the role of culture and social identities in shaping moral values, collective beliefs, and social movements. As such, policy makers lack proper tools for understanding social unrest and devising effective strategies promoting social stability and decreasing violence. We propose an interdisciplinary project to address this gap by investigating the interplay of social and mental mechanisms for the formation and modification of moral values within a cross-cultural perspective.

Proposed Methods: Our project will employ a cross-cultural empirical strategy combining social scientific survey methodology with neuroscientific brain imaging techniques to reveal the role of values in social mobilization. We propose a two-phase methodology that collects large-scale survey data from the U.S. and Turkey to identify important value dimensions for each culture (Phase 1), and then obtains neurological and behavioral data while people respond (partnered with people who share or violate those values) to cultural conflict scenarios threatening these important values in a functional Magnetic Resonance Scanner (Phase 2). Our interdisciplinary empirical approach will (a) reveal how moral values anchored in group identities trigger socio-political action (e.g., violent, non-violent) in cultural conflict situations, (b) explicate the subtle mental processes that contribute to socio-political action ranging from passive support to active mobilization by specifying involved brain activity, and (c) assess inter and intra-cultural variability in the content of moral values in the face of social influence.

Anticipated Outcomes: Our research will expand current knowledge in four ways. First, Phase 1 of our project will derive a theoretically informed, culturally sensitive model identifying sacred values in ways that will improve on current perspectives that rely on after-the-fact indicators rendering them difficult to disprove. Second, we can address intra-cultural variability in the content and the use of moral values and their influence on socio-political action. By comparing the U.S. to Turkey, a Muslim country in the Middle East region, we will either find differences in the way values operate or substantiate largely untested universalistic assumptions about the functions and content of sacred values. Thirdly, our research links sociological understandings of values with specific mental mechanisms underlying socio-political action. We expect to find that brain regions associated with fast processing (the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and the amygdala) will be associated with confrontational action choices (such as active, violent) while regions related to slow cognitive control (dorsolateral prefrontal cortex) will be related to passive and non-violent action responses. Finding distinct activation patterns in the VMPFC and the amygdala vs. the DLPFC would inform policy by suggesting what types of messages trigger fast/intuitive psychological processes associated with more violent actions and socio-political mobilization. These results offer a mechanism underlying social movement participation and violence. Fourth, we expect that these processes are strongly influenced by other people, something rarely incorporated into the study of values. We plan to explore how interactions with moral in-group/out-group members influence neurological processing, which in turn shapes interactional strategies and appraisal processes. We expect that interacting with moral in-groups and out-groups provokes distinct mental processes, one relying on moral empathy (dampening confrontational responses), the other linked with basic negative arousal (fostering confrontational responses). These findings can inform appeals to calm violence, and what sorts of spokespeople might best spread these messages.

Impact on DoD and Broader Implications for National Defense: This study can inform defense communication policy by: A) offering survey instruments for obtaining locally sensitive measures of sacred values to guide cultural interpretation of foreign societies; B) linking individual moral responses to social networks and cultural values, suggesting efficacious ways to use social networks to spread messages among populations; C) exploring specific value motivations in American and Muslim samples that foster transitions from passive support to violent responses to cultural conflict, improving prediction of potential triggers for organized violence; D) locating either core cultural differences or similarities in sacred values and their influence on socio-political behavior within a Middle Eastern country located in an important geographic conflict region. Findings can contribute to effective strategies and policies in reducing organized violence and preventing its contagion, suggesting how U.S. government and military communication and actions are perceived by American and Turkish audiences, and how those messages are proximally influenced by others.