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0521808332 - The Culture of Morality: Social Development, Context, and Conflict

Elliot Turiel

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The Culture of Morality

The Culture of Morality examines how explanations of social and moral development inform our understandings of morality and culture. A common theme in the latter part of the twentieth century has been to lament the moral state of American society and the decline of morality among youth. A sharp turn toward an extreme form of individualism and a lack of concern for community involvement and civic participation are often blamed for the moral crisis. Elliot Turiel challenges these views, drawing on a large body of research from developmental psychology, anthropology, and sociology. He also draws from social events, political movements, and journalistic accounts of social and political struggles in many places throughout the world. Turiel shows that generation after generation has lamented the decline of society and blamed young people. Using historical accounts, he persuasively argues that such characterizations of moral decline entail stereotyping, nostalgia for times past, and a failure to recognize the moral viewpoint of those who challenge traditions. He also argues that people's discontents with the unfairness of many aspects of societal arrangements, traditions, and established practices are often misinterpreted as a lack of commitment to society or community.

The positions put forth in the book are grounded in research showing that people develop judgments that entail deep understandings of issues of welfare, justice, and rights and that such judgments stand alongside people's conceptions of social systems and realms of personal choice. Individuals are part of their culture and yet they scrutinize societal arrangements and cultural practices. Social life often includes conflicts and discontents stemming from social hierarchies framing relationships of dominance and subordination. Turiel's penetrating analyses go well beyond American society. Drawing on work from diverse cultures, he shows that people in positions of lesser power in the social hierarchy, such as women and minorities, often oppose cultural arrangements and work to subvert and transform the system. Generalizations often made regarding the cultural sources of morality in traditions and general orientations like individualism and collectivism serve to obscure the heterogeneous nature of people's judgments and social interactions. Analysis of the moral and social problems faced in many societies requires recognition of people's multiple moral, social, and personal goals and of the ways social arrangements provoke opposition from those who are treated unfairly.

In this thought-provoking book, Turiel presents original positions on moral development, social justice, and culture. *The Culture of Morality* is an important work that shows how social interactions and social practices involve dynamic processes of participation in culture and efforts at transforming culture.

Elliot Turiel is Chancellor's Professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. He is an Affiliate in the Department of Psychology. He served as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs (1994–1999) and Acting Dean of the Graduate School of Education. He is author of *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention*, and is editor or coeditor of *Values and Knowledge, Development and Cultural Change: Reciprocal Processes*, and *Culture, Thought and Development*.

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For Judy and Joshua

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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, CONTEXT,
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Preface

For many years, my colleagues and I have been conducting research on the development of social judgments and actions from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood. That work – some of which is discussed in this book – has shown that people in the United States and many other places form deep understandings of moral matters – of matters pertaining to people’s physical and psychological welfare, to human rights, and to justice. The research also indicates that we cannot simply divide up the world into people who are more committed and those who are less committed to issues of welfare, rights, and justice. Almost everyone is committed to these issues in one way or another. And for most people, morality is not the only social concern in their lives; they are concerned with personal goals as well. Most people are also concerned with other social goals, such as matters of interdependence, efficiency, and pragmatics in social relationships.

During the time my colleagues and I were accumulating and scrutinizing these research findings, others made many claims about morality and society that do serve to divide people into categories of those who are or are not committed to all or some of the moral matters we have identified as of concern to most people. One claim is that contemporary American society is in a dire moral state, and there is urgent need for renewal, revival, and recommitment. The existing or impending moral crisis is attributed to abandonment and loss: abandonment of traditions, a loss of a sense of community, and a sharp decline in civic participation and trust. In their place, it is said, we see a pervasive orientation to individualism – an individualism that has taken hold in such a way that it has become radical and threatening.

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And youth is often to blame. The new generation is accused of narcissism, caring only about their self-interest, and of being unconcerned with the welfare of others, of the community.

Another way people are characterized as differing in their moral, personal, and interpersonal orientations is through a division drawn by some cultural psychologists and anthropologists between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. A number of terms have been used to generalize about each type of cultural orientation, including egocentric and sociocentric, independent and interdependent, bounded and unbounded. Whatever the terms, the idea is that some cultures (usually non-Western ones) are structured by close networks of interdependence in which people adhere to duties and traditions, look out for each other, and make little distinction between self and others. Other cultures (usually Western ones) are said to revolve around the importance given to the individual and the separation of people from each other.

In these ways of looking at social relationships, people in a culture supposedly agree on most social mores. To put it simply, they share one orientation or the other. However, the research done over the years has shown otherwise. One way only of approaching social matters is not very common. From childhood, people form distinctly different types of judgments and attempt to weigh and balance different concerns and goals in their multifaceted social world. With flexibility of mind, people typically apply in purposeful ways their judgments to the particularities of social contexts. The research also revealed that with flexibility of mind people do not simply accept their lot in life or the conditions given by societal arrangements and cultural practices. People accept and critique. They seek to cooperate, but will disagree and oppose when they judge conditions unfair. Oppositions of either organized or covert kinds are especially prevalent when conditions and practices favor some at the expense of others through institutionalized hierarchies based on social class, racial groups, and gender.

I believe that overarching characterizations of societies or cultures as of one type or another or as in serious decline obscure the heterogeneity of social thought, the multiplicity of influences on children's development, and the variety of types of social relationships

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experienced. Generalizations about cultures also fail to account for the social struggles so common in people's efforts to achieve justice or to assert their own legitimate interests. Research conducted in several places in the world revealed the heterogeneity of social judgments and social relationships and that one person's traditions and role responsibilities can be another person's freedom and autonomy. In so-called collectivistic cultures, individualism is alive and well. Traditions of social hierarchy, whether in Western or non-Western cultures, embody freedom, autonomy, and entitlements for those in dominant positions. Those in subordinate positions, such as women relative to men, are restricted in freedom of activity and rights accorded. Therefore, the cultural dichotomy breaks down. Moreover, because people in lower positions on social hierarchies are not always content with, or appreciative of, their treatment, the ideas of harmony and shared perspectives within cultures fail to capture essential features of social relationships – even in close relationships.

This book is about the dynamics of social relationships and how people's judgments – moral and otherwise – make for cultures of their own. Research on the psychology of social and moral development is the starting point of these formulations. Other disciplines, however, have influenced my thinking. I have drawn in substantial ways from philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. I have also found very useful – and have used – journalistic accounts about social life in many cultures. Such journalistic accounts sometimes provide insights about relationships between men and women that have not yet made their way into research efforts. There is, however, enough research to suggest that those accounts are valid.

Nevertheless, the arguments I put forth rest on evidence from research. I am very fortunate to be part of a broad program of research with a number of former students who are now good friends, colleagues, and collaborators all at once. They have their own well-established and highly respected research programs, but we have also formed a network that entails a good deal of interchange and collaboration. Much of what I presented in this book has been influenced by the thinking and research of Larry Nucci, Judi Smetana, Melanie Killen, Marta Laupa, Marie Tisak, Cecilia Wainryb, Charles Helwig,

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Peter Kahn, Batya Friedman, Carolyn Hildebrandt, Bill Arsenio, Ron Astor, Kristin Neff, Sara Brose, and Daphne Anshel. I am also grateful to those who commented on earlier versions of this book. Current students Serena Bodman, James Mensing, and Nadia Sorkhabi have contributed through our research collaborations and in other ways extremely helpful to the completion of this book.

The University of California at Berkeley, where I have taught for more than twenty years, has been a very good environment for me. At Berkeley, there is a serious effort to maintain a democratic institution and faculty governance. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect, without people taking themselves or the institution too seriously. It is an atmosphere that I find intellectually supportive and stimulating. I am also grateful for the financial support for my research from a Chancellor's Professorship that I was awarded by the Berkeley campus.

I wish to thank Julia Hough, editor at Cambridge, for her much appreciated encouragement all along the way. I also thank her for suggestions that helped improve the book. My typing and computer skills leave much to be desired. I am very grateful to Terri Callen who patiently transformed my barely legible handwriting (referred to by my son, Joshua, as scribbles on yellow paper) into manuscript form. She also provided editorial comments and periodically passed newspaper articles my way that proved very useful. I am indebted to Helen Clifton for so much help in putting together the manuscript. Helen and I have worked together in a number of capacities for a long time. Before computers, she typed the manuscript for my book, *The Development of Social Knowledge*, published by Cambridge in 1983.

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