

A few weeks back, Clark Barrett and his colleagues published a fascinating [piece](#) in PNAS in cultural variations in moral judgments. They found wide cultural variation in the factors people take into account to mitigate bad behavior. For instance, it seems natural to us, WEIRD people, that intent should mitigate morally wrong actions. However, it seems that some cultures—some hunter-gatherers in particular—do not take intent into account at all in moral judgment. For instance, the Yasawa—horticulturalists and gatherers from the Fiji—judge equally harshly a series of moral wrongdoings irrespective of whether they were committed intentionally or not (see bottom left of Figure 3).

This is surprising, both for theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, it seems that intent ought to be taken into account in moral judgments. If the function of moral judgments is [to assess the value of potential cooperators](#), it seems that intention should play some role—I'd rather cooperate with someone who took something that didn't belong to them by mistake than someone who knowingly stole it. In WEIRD cultures, the intentional / accidental distinction is so robust that it can be [found](#) in 3- and 4-year-olds. In these cultures, when older children discuss moral transgression together, those who argue for letting intentions trump severity of outcome tend to [convince](#) their peers who put more weight on severity of outcome than on intentions. Even [chimpanzees](#) get more annoyed when an experimenter fails to give them some expected food intentionally rather than accidentally.

When we look at the details of Barrett et al.'s results, the robustness of the intentional factor is borne out. Even the Yasawa actually take it into account, but with a weird twist (see p.50 of the ESM). They tend to think that moral wrongdoings committed intentionally are morally worse, and ought to be punished more than those committed less intentionally. However, they also seem to think that the perpetrator's reputation will suffer more when the act was less intentional. So, when it comes to how they see the action itself, intentionality seems to play its expected role. The results about reputation are fascinating, and might be related to cultural traits of the Yasawa (maybe they put a premium on competence rather than benevolence?).

Still, there might be sound reasons to sometimes ignore, or at least discount, differences in intentionality. Making a wrongdoing look accidental is always possible—either in the action itself, or in the accounts we later give of it. When trust between agents is low, it might be difficult to rely on intentionality as a mitigating factor. You can find a good example of the effects of lack of trust in this excerpt from the Godfather [discussed by Steven Pinker](#):

Following the tragic death of his eldest son, Vito addresses the heads of the rival crime families and explains the strategic rationality of apparent irrationality: "I'm a superstitious man. And if some unlucky accident should befall my son, if my son is struck by a bolt of lightning, I will blame some of the people here." Elsewhere, he elaborates: "Accidents don't happen to people who treat accidents as a personal insult."

My guess would be that these issues of trust would play an important role in the mitigating role played by various factors in moral wrongdoings.