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How universal is universalization?

Exploring the use of universalization in norm violation across the globe

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Abstract

How do people know when it is permissible to break a rule? Sometimes people *universalize*, asking “What if everyone felt at liberty to violate the rule?” While there is mounting evidence that universalization guides rule-breaking judgments, this evidence is limited to participants who are English-speaking, United States residents, leaving open the question of how universal universalization actually is. Moreover, geography and identity have important influences on morality and cultures differ widely in the stringency with which they adhere to rules. In this paper we use a language-agnostic, video-game paradigm to investigate whether universalization guides rule-breaking judgments in 20 countries across the globe (n=2,652 participants) and find that universalization plays an important role in moral judgment in every one. However, the strength of universalization varies. While cultures may vary dramatically in how strongly they adhere to norms, the underlying *logic* of norm breaking appears remarkably consistent.

Keywords: moral judgment; cross-cultural psychology; universalization