Moral parochialism misunderstood: a reply to Piazza and Sousa

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Our paper [1] compared two competing hypotheses. The hypothesis that we label universalistic moral evaluation holds that a definitional feature of reasoning about moral rules is that, ceteris paribus, judgements of violations of rules concerning harm, rights or justice will be insensitive to spatial or temporal distance or the opinions of authority figures. The hypothesis that we label moral parochialism, consonant with a variety of theories of the evolutionary origins of morality, holds that, because moral judgements primarily serve to navigate local social arenas, remote events will not activate the mechanisms that generate negative moral evaluation to the same extent as events occurring in the here and now, whereas the consent of local authority figures will temper condemnation. Hence, moral parochialism predicts that the collective output of the faculties responsible for moral judgement will exhibit a reduction in the severity of judgement as a function of spatial or temporal distance or the opinions of local authority figures. We provided evidence from seven diverse societies, including five small-scale societies, showing that such reductions in severity judgements exist in all of the societies examined.

Piazza and Sousa [2] argue that our data do not support parochialism, and instead support universalism, because

1. Only a minority of our participants reversed their initial judgement of the wrongness of an action (from wrong to not wrong or good) when it was subsequently framed as having occurred long ago or far away, or as having been sanctioned by authority figures.
2. Our use of graduated moral judgements, rather than dichotomous judgements, is inappropriate.
3. Only a minority of our participants diminished the severity of their initial judgement of the wrongness of an action when it was subsequently framed as having occurred long ago or far away, or as having been sanctioned by an important person.

These objections stem from misunderstandings of moral parochialism and the evolutionary reasoning behind it.
Moral parochialism does not hold that moral judgements should necessarily be insensitive to wrongdoings distant in space or time or to violations sanctioned by local authorities, but rather that the collective output of the faculties responsible for moral judgement will exhibit a reduction in the severity of judgement as a result of such factors. As we explicitly noted, ‘remote events will not activate the evolved mechanisms undergirding negative moral evaluation to the same degree as actions that occur in the here and now. This is not to say that actors should assess remote transgressions as acceptable. Rather, remote events should simply trouble actors less than immediate events, evoking weaker sentiments and eliciting less overt condemnation.’

The heart of our thesis is a cost/benefit analysis wherein the benefits of moral disapproval mainly derive from reputation enhancement and the avoidance of higher-order punishment, in addition to the cost/benefit ratios of addressing harmful actions occurring at a distance or with the consent of local authorities. Many factors will affect such cost/benefit analyses; hence, whereas the primary benefits of moral judgement accrue from judgements regarding local matters, especially those concerning one’s ingroup, this does not mean that moral judgement should not function at all regarding more distant matters, merely that they should be judged to be of less importance. Thus, moral parochialism does not require that any participants ever reverse their judgements from condemnation to neutrality or praise when judgements concern matters spatially or temporally distant or sanctioned by authorities—merely that condemnation will tend to diminish. Whether or not, for a given transgression and a given participant, this diminution will reach the point of indifference is an empirical question.

Sceptical that moral judgement is graded, Piazza and Sousa argue that our five-point evaluative scale should be replaced with a dichotomous wrong/not wrong categorization, and thus that our analyses employing said scale are uninformative. While both folk intuition and formal judicial systems around the world suggest that moral judgement is indeed graded, nevertheless, without accepting Piazza and Sousa’s premise, we can settle the matter by conducting additional analyses, certainly that the magnitude of such changes should be greater for changes that involve a reduction in condemnation relative to those that involve an increase.

Third, our dependent measures—judgements communicated to a researcher by pointing to a linear scale—were an intentionally shallow, cross-culturally replicable simulation of the sorts of community discussions that are the domain of actual moral judgement. Our dependent measures differed from real life in that they entailed few costs to participants. Cost/benefit considerations are central to moral parochialism, hence it is likely that investigations in which moral judgements have more substantive consequences (e.g. expending resources to penalize wrongdoers abroad versus locally) will enhance the degree of parochialism observed.
In sum, Piazza and Sousa (i) attribute predictions to moral parochialism that it does not entail; (ii) present descriptive statistics that mask rather than reveal key features of the patterns at issue; (iii) assert that analyses using graduated moral judgements are misleading when, in actuality, employing dichotomous judgements produces essentially the same results; and (iv) fail to appreciate methodological factors that must be taken into account when assessing research conducted across diverse societies. While Piazza and Sousa’s critique thus does little to undermine the evidence for moral parochialism, nevertheless, it does constructively draw attention to variation in moral judgement. Even after exploring the methodological considerations discussed above, research is likely to reveal substantial individual differences in moral parochialism, possibly including a set of individuals who are staunchly universalist. The evolutionary and ontogenetic sources of such variation—including cultural differences, a pattern clearly evident in our results—merit investigation.

References