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Religious and secular roads to justify wrongdoing: How values interact with culture in explaining moral disengagement attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Using a person-culture interaction perspective, we explored how socialization through a secular versus a religiously orthodox educational system in Israel moderated the associations between personal values and moral disengagement attitudes. In Study 1 (N = 333), we found that among orthodox (but not secular) participants, conservation values were negatively and openness-to-change values were positively associated with moral disengagement. Self-transcendence values were negatively associated with moral disengagement in the whole sample. In Study 2 (N = 251), we focused on the dehumanization subscale of disengagement attitudes to examine the impact of values accessibility among secular and orthodox participants. Findings showed that among secular participants, universalism values inhibited dehumanization more than conservation values did. Conversely, among orthodox participants, conservation values inhibited dehumanization more than openness-to-change values.

1. Introduction

Most of us like to think of ourselves as moral beings who do the right thing. We develop moral standards as the basis for our conduct and strive to act in accordance with them to retain our self-concept as moral individuals. At times, we fall short of those standards and use cognitive moral disengagement strategies to justify our behavior (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001). These strategies, whether they antecede or follow an immoral conduct, release us from self-condemnation. Exploring the motivational underpinnings of the tendency to morally disengage can deepen our understanding of the processes that cause people to stray from the moral path. Accordingly, we explore in the present study the motivational antecedents of the tendency to morally disengage through a person-culture interaction perspective and the theory of personal values (Schwartz, 1992).

We argue that personal values affect the tendency to use moral disengagement mechanisms, such that some values promote and others hinder the tendency to disengage. We further propose that the links between personal values and the tendency to morally disengage are moderated by one's cultural affiliation. We therefore employ a culturally sensitive view, to uncover the differences in

motivators and inhibitors of moral disengagement. Much has been written about both cultural and individual differences in the standards used to judge the morality of a particular behavior or attitude; (e.g., Bersoff & Miller, 1993; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). Within this literature, some research addresses individual differences in the tendency to use moral disengagement strategies (e.g., Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). Yet in line with recent calls to consider a more complex view of moral behavior and its predictors (e.g., Ellemers, van der Toorn, Paunov, & van Leeuwen, 2019) we propose to examine the joint effect of such individual- and culture-level antecedents.

We present such an approach focusing on the personal values of individuals from two cultural groups in Israel: orthodox Jews (Haredim) and secular Jews. These groups differ in the role that religion has in their members' worldview, and thus exemplify consistent differences in values. Religion also plays a different role in their respective educational and community systems. As with other cultural groups, then, differences, including in of moral standards, should be embedded in these groups' early socialization processes.

2. Moral disengagement

People's moral standards serve as the basis for self-sanctions of moral conduct (Bandura, 1999). Behaving in line with these moral standards contributes to a sense of self-worth. Conversely, violating them may result in self-condemnation. Because the experience of self-condemnation is unpleasant, people employ various

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moral disengagement strategies to preserve their self-worth. These strategies include juxtaposing an immoral act to an even worse one, minimizing the consequences of the act, blaming the victim or displacing the responsibility of the aggressor for his or her actions (Bandura, 1999). Interestingly, the relationship between immoral behavior and moral disengagement is reciprocal; immoral behavior can drive moral disengagement (e.g., Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011; for a review see also Tsang, 2002), and moral disengagement can drive immoral behavior (Bandura et al., 2001; Detert et al., 2008). The latter directionality has been addressed by research on individual differences in moral disengagement attitudes and their association with unethical decision-making (Detert et al., 2008) and aggression (Bandura et al., 2001; Obermann, 2011).

The predictors of moral disengagement include contextual variables, such as peer behaviors (Farnese, Tramontano, Fida, & Paciello, 2011) and opportunity for self-gain (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Martin, 2014), as well as personality and motivational variables (e.g., Detert et al., 2008), such as (lack of) empathy and trait cynicism. Given what we know about the interactive effects of context and person factors (e.g., Lewin, 1935; Mischel, 1977), a more revealing investigation of moral disengagement should integrate these factors. We do so by considering individuals' cultural affiliations and their personal values (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012).

3. Personal values

Values are broad goals that vary in importance and serve as guiding principles in people's lives (Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). They are cognitive representations of motivations that transcend specific contexts and times and serve as criteria for choices and behaviors (e.g., Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002). Values tend to be socially desirable and important, and it is the *tradeoffs* among them that ultimately guide behavior (Schwartz, 1992; Tetlock, 1986).

The theory of personal values (Schwartz, 1992) describes a full spectrum of interrelated values (e.g., benevolence, conformity, self-direction, power), represented in a circular structure that consists of two basic contrasts (see Fig. 1). In the first, self-enhancement values, involving the pursuit of self-interests (i.e., achievement, power), are contrasted with self-transcendence values, involving a concern for the welfare and interests of close others and for the broader environment (i.e., benevolence, universalism). In the second, openness-to-change values, including independent thoughts and actions and a readiness for new experiences (i.e., self-direction, stimulation), are contrasted with conservation values, involving the preservation of the status quo, self-restriction, and resistance to change (i.e., tradition, conformity, security).

Schwartz's theory has been validated in over 200 samples from more than 80 cultural groups (Schwartz, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2012). Numerous studies show the predictive power of values in explaining attitudes (e.g., Boer & Fischer, 2013) and behaviors (e.g., Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Roccas & Sagiv, 2010, 2017). In addition, some suggest culture moderates the relationships between values and behavior (Rechter & Sverdlik, 2016; Roccas & Sagiv, 2010) and between values and perceptions of morality (Sverdlik & Rechter, 2020; Sverdlik, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2012). The theory can thus complement research on morality, which focuses on specific moral values (e.g., caring, fairness; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009) or on culturally bound moral principles (e.g., purity; Graham et al., 2011), by considering a broader spectrum of motivations that promote or inhibit moral disengagement in people from different cultural backgrounds.
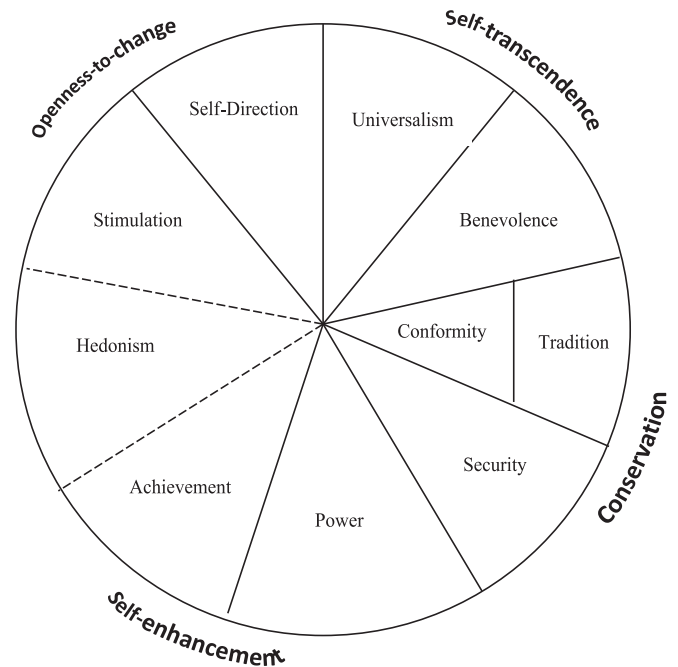

Fig. 1. Schwartz's values theoretical model of relations among types of values. Values are organized by motivational similarities and contrasts. Note. The dashed lines between hedonism and the adjacent values represent the idea that hedonism has elements of both openness and self-enhancement. We therefore didn't include it in our analyses.

4. Values and moral disengagement attitudes

Personal values can be linked to moral disengagement through two processes (see Fig. 2). First, values guide behavior (path 1), including those related to morality (e.g., Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Sverdlik et al., 2012). When those behaviors are considered moral, the need for moral disengagement decreases. In contrast, when they are considered immoral, the need for moral disengagement increases (path 2). For example, self-transcendence (self-enhancement) values may increase (decrease) the likelihood that an individual will come to another's aid, and this, in turn, will decrease (increase) the need to morally disengage. Behaviors may thus mediate the links between values and moral disengagement.

Second, as values affect people's perceptions (e.g., Sagiv, Sverdlik, & Schwarz, 2011; Sverdlik, 2012), they may increase or decrease the inclination to hold chronic moral disengagement attitudes by influencing perceptions of personal accountability and of a behavior's impact on others (path 3). For example, those who emphasize self-enhancement values may be blind to the negative implications of self-serving behaviors. This tendency to disregard or minimize another's predicament is manifested in moral disengagement attitudes. In contrast, those who emphasize self-transcendence values will tend to be more sensitive to the suffering of others and feel more accountable for their wellbeing, resulting in a generally low tendency to hold moral disengagement views.

Values are thus linked with moral disengagement either by shaping individuals' behaviors which, in turn, are related to their need to morally disengage, or by shaping their perceptions of a behavior's morality. In both paths, whereas some values increase the likelihood of morally disengaging, others decrease it. In line with this rationale, in a study of adolescents, self-transcendence (self-enhancement) values were negatively (positively) linked to moral disengagement attitudes (Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Cole,
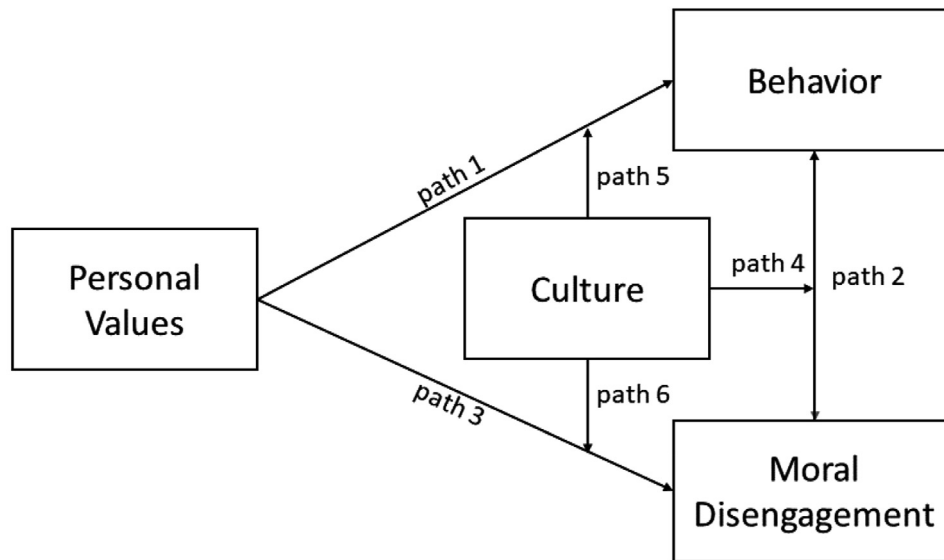
Fig. 2. Theoretical model: Direct and indirect paths from personal values to moral disengagement and the moderating role of culture.

& Cerniglia, 2013). As society shapes the moral landscape, it can influence the links between values and perceptions of morality. All values may be considered part of the moral domain, at least in some societies (Sverdlik & Rechter, 2020; Sverdlik et al., 2012). Therefore, in some cultures, additional values may be related to moral disengagement.

5. The moderating role of culture in the associations between values and moral disengagement

Culture shapes individuals' values, perceptions, and behaviors (e.g., Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Schwartz, 2013). Accordingly, culture should play an important role in shaping the associations between values and moral disengagement. First, as people from different cultures are socialized to hold different values and to associate different values with morality (Sverdlik & Rechter, 2020), they also have different criteria for determining the morality of a given behavior. Accordingly, cultural differences are associated with differential moral outlooks (e.g., Graham & Haidt, 2010; Piazza & Sousa, 2014; Stavrova & Siegers, 2013; Ward & King, 2018), and the "moral ideal" in one culture may differ from that in another. The more a person's value system is consistent with that advocated by the community (i.e., the "moral ideal"), the more she will act in accordance with the community's expectations; consequently, she will feel less need to disengage. Culture may, therefore, moderate the relationship between a given behavior and its relevance for moral disengagement (path 4 in Fig. 2).

Second, as culture shapes the meanings people assign to their acts (see Rechter & Sverdlik, 2016; Roccas & Sagiv, 2010), it influences the manner in which morally disengaging strategies (path 5 in Fig. 2) and behaviors (path 6 in Fig. 2) are interpreted. For example, in a religious community, dehumanization, a moral disengagement strategy involving the perception of a person as lacking humanity, may be perceived as contradicting the conservative premise that God created man in his image. In non-religious communities, however, dehumanization may contradict a universalistic perspective of equality and basic human rights. Thus, dehumanization may be associated with different values in religious and non-religious societies. Similarly, actual behaviors can express different values in different cultures (e.g., Hanel et al., 2018). For example, giving to charity may be motivated by

self-transcendence values in one culture and by conservation values in another. In sum, we suggest that culture shapes moral standards and the motivational meaning of moral disengagement attitudes, as well as behaviors.

To examine the moderating role of culture, we focus on a central cultural dimension reflecting the relationship between the individual and the group that has been studied extensively (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1999; Triandis, 2018). One pole of this dimension represents a view of the individual as embedded in the group and committed to the group's goals in an interrelated manner. This view is emphasized in collectivistic and embedded cultures. The contrasting pole represents a view of the individual as a separate entity who should strive to achieve her personal goals, as emphasized in individualistic and autonomous cultures.

A cultural indicator associated with this dimension is religiosity. As religious cultures are more collectivistic and less individualistic, they emphasize commitment to the group over personal autonomy more than secular ones (Arieli & Sagiv, 2018; Cohen, 2009; Cohen & Hill, 2007). This thinking has been substantiated empirically at the individual level as well; studies find religious people consistently emphasize conservation values more and openness-to-change values less than secular ones (e.g., Roccas, 2005; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). Taken together, then, a growing body of research reinforces the idea that groups with different levels of religiosity represent the cultural contrast of individualism/ autonomy vs. collectivism/ embeddedness.

As our focus is on the autonomy vs. embeddedness cultural dimension, we expect culture to moderate the predictive effect of openness-to-change and conservation values. Specifically, in an embedded culture in which the individual is viewed as an integral part of the group, acting in accordance with openness-to-change values representing autonomy and freedom is more likely to be perceived as an antisocial behavior. Therefore, the more a person holds openness-to-change values in a religious society, the more he might need moral disengagement attitudes to justify his behavior. Conversely, in an autonomous culture promoting a view of the individual as an autonomous entity, behaving in accordance with openness-to-change values should not violate social standards and is therefore less likely to be related to such attitudes.

By the same token, in a society prioritizing group goals over individual ones, a person's motivation to act on her conservation

values is related to moral conduct more than in a society prioritizing individual goals. Therefore, conservation values should be negatively related to moral disengagement attitudes only in societies promoting an embedded view of the individual. We therefore propose openness-to-change values are more positively related and conservation values more negatively related to moral disengagement in religious than non-religious societies.

The self-transcendence vs. self-enhancement personal values dimension should predict moral disengagement attitudes in both cultures because moral codes against harming others and in favor of caring for others' wellbeing seem more universal (e.g., Graham et al., 2011). Accordingly, we expect that self-enhancement values would be positively related to moral disengagement attitudes regardless of cultural affiliation. This expectation accords with previous research finding a positive relationship between self-enhancement and moral misconduct (Feldman, Chao, Farh, & Bardi, 2015; Rechter & Sverdlik, 2016). Within the category of self-enhancement values, we suggest power values will be a more relevant antecedent of moral disengagement attitudes than achievement values. The latter, while focusing on self-interest, express success according to social standards, thus implying a concern about social expectations, including those relevant to the moral domain. Power is therefore more relevant to our context given its emphasis on control over resources, even at the expense of others. Finally, we expect self-transcendence values to be negatively related to the need to disengage, as they emphasize concern for others' wellbeing.

6. The present research

We explored these premises in two studies. Consistent with our aim of highlighting the importance of religiosity at the socio-cultural level, we adopted a novel approach to assess affiliation with religious and non-religious cultural groups by emphasizing the role of socialization systems—in this case, schools—in the development of a moral outlook. As children evolve through continuous interactions with parents and teachers, their upbringing might have a stronger impact on their ultimate world view as adults, including their moral outlook, than their present adult affiliation. Although self-definition measures of religiosity detect identification with religious and non-religious societies, they refer only indirectly to the cultural group in which the person was brought up and socialized. A person, for example, might define herself as a "relatively religious" person but belong to a primarily non-religious environment and culture. Accordingly, we used the school system attended by respondents as an indicator of the subculture in which they were raised. This methodological decision was greatly facilitated by the structure of the Israeli school system.

Most of the Jewish population in Israel attends one of three main school systems: secular state schools, religious state schools, and orthodox independent schools. We focus here on the two most different systems in terms of religiosity, the secular state school system and the orthodox independent system. The secular state schools mainly serve secular Jews and offer a general curriculum, including language, math, and science. Orthodox independent schools do not follow the national curriculum, teaching religious values and sacred-juridical texts at the expense of non-religious subjects (Wolff & Breit, 2012). This system serves mainly orthodox Jews (Haredim). Thus, each school system represents a distinct environment facilitating socialization into a different subculture (i.e., secular and orthodox).

In Study 1, we considered whether these subcultures moderated the links between values and moral disengagement attitudes. In Study 2, we probed the impact of values on one type of moral disengagement attitude – dehumanization – in each of these sub-cultures.

7. Study 1

Based on the preceding argumentation and the differences in the school systems, we formulated the following hypotheses for the orthodox independent and secular state school groups. First, we expected that cultural affiliation (i.e., school system type) would moderate the associations between the dimension of openness-to-change versus conservation values and moral disengagement attitudes such that:

H1(a). *Conservation values will be negatively related to moral disengagement attitudes only in the orthodox group.*

H1(b). *Openness-to-change values will be positively related to moral disengagement attitudes only in the orthodox group.*

On the dimension of self-transcendence versus self-enhancement personal values, the associations with moral disengagement attitudes should be consistent across affiliations, and culture should not have a moderating effect on values-moral disengagement links along this personal values dimension. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H1(c). *Self-enhancement values will be positively associated with moral disengagement attitudes across affiliations.*

H1(d). *Self-transcendence values will be negatively associated with moral disengagement attitudes across affiliations.*

To conclude, in the orthodox group, we expected moral disengagement attitudes would be negatively associated with self-transcendence and conservation values and positively associated with self-enhancement (power) and openness-to-change values. In the secular group, we expected moral disengagement attitudes would be negatively associated with self-transcendence and positively associated with self-enhancement (power) values.

7.1. Method

Participants and procedure. To determine **s**ample size we conducted a power analysis with G*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). We used two alternative methods to evaluate the adequate sample size needed to detect an interaction between the predictors. In both cases, we aimed to have 80% power in detecting an effect with an alpha of 0.05. First, 95 participants are needed to test the significance (α = 0.05) of a ΔR^2 effect (i.e., the increase in R^2 attributed to the interaction) that can be defined as small to medium (f^2 = 0.085) according to Cohen's (1988) rules of thumb. In addition, it is recommended (Warner, 2012) to have sufficient cases within each category of the moderator to estimate regression coefficients reliably. Thus, using Green's (1991) rule of thumb for minimum participants in regressions for each culture (n = 108), we aimed for minimum of 216 participants. Using another approach, we used the option in G*Power software to test a difference between two slopes. Here, we drew on previous relevant findings in the literature on interactions between conservation/openness values and another moderator (Amit, Roccas, & Meidan, 2010; Roccas, Schwartz, & Amit, 2010; Sverdlik & Oreg, 2015; Sverdlik & Rechter, 2020) to estimate the effects we could expect in slope differences. As the differences between b's of slopes in those studies ranged between 0.20 and 0.66, we set our estimation of effect size at a relatively conservative level of |Δslope| = 0.30 with the SD of predictors being 0.50 in both groups and an

alpha of 0.05. Under these assumptions, the required *n* is 132 (1-tailed) or 168 (2-tailed) for each group. Hence, based on this analysis and according to the latter approach, we aimed at a total *N* between 264 and 336. An additional concern is the low feasibility of recruiting a sample of orthodox students, as they belong to a relatively segregated subculture and rarely acquire higher education (if they do so, it is typically in special programs).

During two consecutive semesters, we recruited 333 Israeli Jewish college and university students (63.1% females; M_{age} = 23.91; *SD* = 4.23; age range 18–54), 176 of whom had graduated from a secular state school and 117 from an orthodox independent school. As we did not specify certain school systems as a prerequisite for participation, data were also collected from 40 participants who graduated from religious state-schools. This system mainly serves modern orthodox students; as a cultural socialization system, it lies somewhere between the two focal systems (in terms of curriculum and religious emphasis). Since this group was also too small to be analyzed separately, we included it only in analyses of the whole sample and dropped them from the interaction analyses. In return for course credit, participants completed a values questionnaire, a moral disengagement questionnaire, and a demographic questionnaire, including the school system they attended and an 8-point religiosity scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all religious*) to 7 (*extremely religious*). As we had predicted, the secular group was the lowest in reported religiosity (*M* = 2.91, *SD* = 1.99), the orthodox group was highest (*M* = 6.05, *SD* = 1.05), and the modern orthodox fell in between (*M* = 5.33, *SD* = 1.49; *F*(2,325) = 131.45; *p* < .001).

Measures. Values. Values were measured using a 46-item version of the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992). The measure includes 46 values, each followed by a short definition in parentheses. Participants are requested to rate each value as a guiding principle in their own lives on a 9-point scale, ranging from −1 (*opposed to my values*) through 0 (*not important*) to 7 (*supremely important*). Following Schwartz (1992) recommendations, ratings were centered on the mean for each respondent to control for differences in scale use. Cronbach's alphas were consistent with previous studies (Schwartz, 2005): 0.80 for conservation, 0.79 for self-transcendence, 0.77 for openness-to-change, and 0.65 for self enhancement (power).

Moral disengagement attitudes. We translated the 24-item questionnaire of Detert et al. (2008), an adaptation of Bandura and colleagues' earlier questionnaire (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). We used a translation-back-translation procedure to ensure equivalence between the Hebrew and English versions. The scale uses a 5-point scale to gauge the degree to which respondents agree or disagree with statements such as People cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it, and Insults don't really hurt anyone. Cronbach's alpha for the Moral Disengagement Questionnaire was 0.78.

Gender as control variable. Previous studies have shown that males tend to score higher on moral disengagement than females (Detert et al., 2008; Perren, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Malti, & Hymel, 2012; Wang, Lei, Liu, & Hu, 2016). We therefore controlled for gender to test the effects over and above this variable.

7.2. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the predictive variables and moral disengagement for the full sample (including the modern orthodox group) and separately for the secular and orthodox groups. As can be seen, and consistent with the literature, participants in the orthodox group showed higher levels of conservation values, *F*(1,291) = 49.23, *p* < .001, and lower levels of openness-to-change values, *F*(1,291) = 28.49, *p* < .001, than participants in the secular group. An additional finding consistent with literature was that males score significantly higher in moral disengagement attitudes. The correlations of values with moral disengagement within each group were consistent with our first premise. Specifically, openness-to-change values were positively related and conservation values were negatively related (albeit marginally) to moral disengagement only in the orthodox group.

To test H1a and H1b that culture (school system type) moderates the associations of conservation and openness-to-change values with moral disengagement, we ran two multiple regression analyses, one for each type of value. In each analysis, we included gender as a control variable, the value of interest (centered), a dummy variable representing the educational system (culture), and the interaction term of the two predictors. Results are summarized in Table 2. As the table shows, the interactions between culture and conservation and openness-to-change values were significant, suggesting these values have varying impacts on attitudes of moral disengagement as a function of culture.

Tests of the conditional effects of the educational system further supported our predictions. As can be seen in Fig. 3, the effect of conservation values was negative and significant in the orthodox group (*b* = -0.15, *t*[288] = -2.13, *p* = .034, 95%CI [-0.292, -0.011]) but not in the secular one (*b* = 0.05, *t*[288] = 0.82, *p* = .413, 95%CI [-0.072, 0.175]). The effect of openness-to-change values was positive and significant in the orthodox group (*b* = 0.19, *t*[288] = 3.70, *p* < .001, 95%CI [0.090, 0.297]) but not in the secular one (*b* = -0.09, *t*[288] = -1.58, *p* = .116, 95%CI [-0.189, 0.022]). In other words, culture moderates the associations between conservation/openness-to change values and moral disengagement.

Table 1

Study 1. Mean, standard deviations and correlations of predicting variables with moral disengagement in Orthodox and secular subcultures and in the full sample, including all three groups.

	Orthodox (n = 117)		Secular (n = 176)		The full sample[a] (N = 333)	
	M (SD)	Corr. with Moral dis.	M (SD)	Corr. with Moral dis.	M (SD)	Corr. with Moral dis.
Gender (0 = f, 1 = m)	0.32 (0.47)	0.17[†]	0.36 (0.48)	0.26[**]	0.37 (0.48)	0.21[**]
Values[b]						
Self-transcendence	0.03(0.40)	−0.33[**]	0.04 (0.49)	−0.23[**]	0.03 (0.45)	−0.30[**]
Self-enhancement	−0.95 (1.16)	−0.02	−0.87 (1.17)	0.20[**]	−0.90 (1.16)	0.13[*]
Conservation	0.42 (0.55)	−0.17[†]	−0.01 (0.52)	0.10	0.18 (0.56)	−0.04
Openness	−0.40 (0.73)	0.32[**]	0.01 (0.58)	−0.12	−0.16 (0.67)	0.10
Moral disengagement	2.17 (0.45)	–	2.14 (0.42)	–	2.16 (0.43)	–

[a] Including Modern Orthodox.

[b] In accordance with Schwartz (1992) recommendations, values were centered around each participant's mean.

[†] *p* = .075.

[*] *p* < .05.

[**] *p* < .01.

Table 2
Study 1. Interactions of conservation and openness to change values and cultural group predicting moral disengagement controlling for gender.

| Variable	B	Std. Err	P	95%CI of B	
Gender (0 = f, 1 = m)	**0.21**	0.05	0.000	0.103	0.308
Conservation values	−0.03	0.05	0.539	−0.121	0.064
Edu. System (0 = Secular, 1 = Orthodox)	0.08	0.06	0.157	−0.030	0.185
Edu. System X Conservation	**−0.20**	0.09	0.031	−0.390	−0.019
R^2	0.069				
R^2change (due to interaction)	0.015				
Gender (0 = f, 1 = m)	**0.20**	0.05	0.000	0.102	0.302
Openness-to-change values	0.03	0.04	0.490	−0.049	0.102
Edu. System (0 = Secular, 1 = Orthodox)	0.08	0.05	0.117	−0.020	0.182
Edu. System X Openness to change	**0.28**	0.07	0.000	0.131	0.426
R^2	0.102				
R^2change (due to interaction)	0.043				

Note. N = 293.
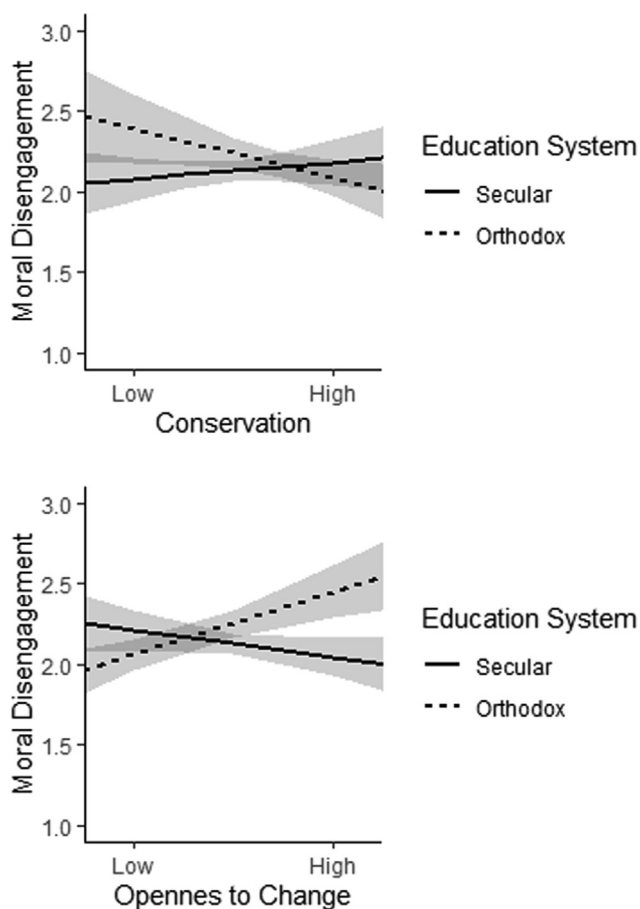
Fig. 3. Plots of interactions between values and cultural group predicting moral disengagement in Study 1: top panel is conservation, bottom panel openness-to-change.

Turning to H1c and H1d on self-enhancement and self-transcendence values, as Table 1 indicates, the correlations in the full sample supported our premise that self-transcendence values would be negatively related and self-enhancement values positively related with moral disengagement across groups. We should note that when we controlled for gender differences, the association with self-transcendence remained significant (β = −0.26, p < .001, 95%CI for B [−0.354, −0.149]), but the association with self-enhancement did not (β = 0.09, p = .114, 95%CI for B [−0.008, 0.073]). Self-transcendence was negatively associated with moral disengagement attitudes in both groups, but we found the expected positive association with self-enhancement only for the secular group. This association remained significant when we controlled for gender (β = 0.162, p = .028, 95%CI for B [0.006, 0.110]).

As we had not found the expected positive association between self-enhancement values and moral disengagement in the orthodox sample, we added an analysis of a not-hypothesized interaction of culture and self-enhancement. The interaction was marginally significant (b = −0.08, t[2 8 8] = −1.84, , p = .067, 95% CI [−0.164, 0.006]). As we did not hypothesize this difference, we should be cautious when interpreting it. Nevertheless, it is possible that this type of value plays a more important role among secular individuals than religious ones (i.e., the orthodox group).

Overall, the results supported most of our premises. Specifically, culture moderated the associations of conservation and openness-to-change values with moral disengagement such that conservation values were negatively related and openness-to-change values were positively related to attitudes of moral disengagement only in the orthodox group. In addition, self-transcendence values were negatively related to moral disengagement across groups. However, results for self-enhancement values only partially supported our premises. In the full sample, we found the expected negative correlation only when we did not control for gender. Looking at each group separately, we found the expected negative association only in the secular group. Furthermore, interaction analysis revealed an unexpected marginal effect for the difference between the two groups. This may imply that self-enhancement played a more important role in motivating moral disengagement among our secular participants than the orthodox ones, but more research is needed to determine whether that pattern is consistent.

In Study 2, we took a further step in understanding how an individual's cultural group may moderate the buffering effect of values on moral disengagement by manipulating the accessibility of specific types of values. Our dependent measure was a subscale of moral disengagement attitudes: dehumanization. We chose to focus on this subtype of attitudes for two main reasons. First, the research on dehumanization points to the important role of these attitudes in the context of intercultural conflicts (for a review, see Kteily & Bruneau, 2017). Thus, dehumanization attitudes are especially interesting when morality is considered in an intercultural context. Second, as we explain next, focusing on dehumanization attitudes allowed us to generate new hypotheses about the differential role of self-transcendence with a focus on universalism values in the secular and orthodox groups. We considered three types of values: conservation, openness-to-change, and the universalism subtype within the category of self-transcendence.

8. Study 2

In Study 2, we continued to explore the role of values and religiosity in morality by testing how religiosity moderated the effect of values accessibility on dehumanization attitudes, defined as perceptions of a person or a group as lacking humanity. A growing body of research highlights the associations of dehumanization attitudes with phenomena such as mass violence (Kelman, 1973), the consumption of pornography, and the segregation of outgroup members (see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014 for a recent review). By clarifying the role of religiosity and values in predicting dehumanization, we sought to contribute to the literature examining dehumanization as a common psychological mechanism with broad implications.

To probe the effect, we manipulated the accessibility of three types of values: conservation, openness-to-change, and self-transcendence, with a focus on universalism in the latter value. Whereas the manipulation of conservation and openness-to-change values stemmed naturally from our previous hypotheses and findings that the conservation–openness-to-change dimension was more relevant for the orthodox group than the secular one, our decision to manipulate universalism deserves elaboration. As conservation values were expected to serve as buffers of dehumanization (in comparison to openness-to-change) only in the orthodox group, we sought a value type that might serve as a buffer against dehumanization among secular people. Universalism values seemed a logical choice. First, previous studies suggest universalism values are a stronger predictor of prosocial attitudes to outgroups in societies lower in cultural embeddedness (Schwartz, 2007a), implying they serve as more important motivators for members of such cultural groups. Furthermore, recent findings suggest universalism values play a more important role in the perceptions of morality of secular people than religious ones (Sverdlik et al., 2012). This can be at least partially explained by the fact that religious subgroups have a dominant concern for in-group solidarity that, in some contexts, might be at odds with concern for universalistic values (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Roccas & Elster, 2014; Sverdlik & Rechter, 2020). This implies that for the orthodox group members, behaving in accordance with universalism values might not be perceived as more moral than behaving in accordance with conservation values. Second, as explained in the introduction, while for secular people, the idea that all humans deserve to be treated equally may originate from human rights principles of justice and equality, for the religious, this idea may have its origins in traditional references to the creation of all humans by God.

Based on this thinking, we argued the buffering effect of universalism values might be stronger among secular individuals than religious ones, especially in comparison to the effect of conservation. In particular, increasing the accessibility of conservation values in a secular society might enhance the orientation towards the in-group (Roccas et al., 2010) and towards stability and security, at the expense of broad mindedness. This preference for the in-group and for stability and security lacks the moral loading it accumulates in a collectivist culture. Thus, while among religious people (i.e., our orthodox group), these values have the potential of decreasing dehumanization, among secular people (i.e., our secular group), they might have the opposite effect.

Based on this thinking, we manipulated the two value types we expected to have stronger effects on the orthodox group—conservation and openness-to-change—to identify the conditions for lowering dehumanization and added one value type with the potential to lower the level of dehumanization for the secular group—universalism.

We hypothesized that, consistent with the results of Study 1, in the orthodox group (but not in the secular one), activation of conservation values would result in lower levels of dehumanization than activation of openness-to-change values. In the secular group, we expected activating universalism values would lead to lower levels of dehumanization than activating conservation values (but not in the orthodox group). Based on the preceding argumentation, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H2. *Cultural group will interact with the manipulation of values accessibility such that:*

H2(a). *Levels of dehumanization will be lower for conservation than for openness-to-change values, only among orthodox participants.*

Given that in each cultural group, there were three value conditions, the two simple effects we expected to find in each cultural group could be seen as two linear hypotheses within each group. Specifically, within the orthodox subsample, the dehumanization of the universalism condition was expected to fall between that of the conservation and the openness-to-change conditions. This would be consistent with the structure of the motivational continuum of personal values in which universalism values are orthogonal to the conservation–openness-to-change dimension and therefore should show an effect lying between the contrasting values. Within the secular group, however, we expected dehumanization in the openness-to-change condition would fall between that of the conservation and universalism conditions. This would be in line with a more context-specific rationale. Whereas openness-to-change values are relatively important in secular societies in the context of the personal domain, they are less directed towards other people. Therefore, they are less relevant to the moral domain. Accordingly, in the secular group, these values should have less impact on moral disengagement mechanisms that focus on the victim, than universalism or conservation values.

8.1. Method

Participants and design. As gender was found to be an important predictor of moral disengagement attitudes in Study 1, and because we sought to keep the two samples as similar as possible to avoid interference of other variables and increase the potential effect size, we restricted Study 2 to a female-only sample. A power analysis using G*Power software indicated that in a 2 × 3 factorial design, 158 participants are needed to to achieve 80% power in detecting a medium effect ($f = 0.25$) with an alpha of 0.05. As we also wanted to preform two planned contrasts, each comparing four of the groups, we calculated the sample size for a 2 × 2 factorial design, which yielded a minimum of 31 participants in each group ($N = 186$ for the whole sample). Given considerations of both statistical power and feasibility of recruiting orthodox students, we aimed at a sample of at least 240 participants (with $n = 40$ for each group). The final sample consisted of 251 Jewish Israeli female college students ($M_{age} = 23.21$; $SD = 4.26$; age range 18–50). Of these, 119 had graduated from a secular state school (secular group) and 132 from an orthodox independent school (orthodox group). Participants were approached on campus after class, at the library, or by email during two academic years and asked to complete several seemingly unrelated questionnaires about their attitudes and their perceptions of others. We randomly assigned them to conservation, universalism, and openness-to-change conditions; they underwent a values accessibility manipulation and then completed several questionnaires, including dehumanization attitudes and demographics. Upon completion, they were thanked, debriefed, and compensated with either a course credit or a small snack.

Accessibility of values manipulation. To manipulate values accessibility implicitly, we used Roccas et al. (2010) manipulation, with suitable adjustments of the background story and value items. Participants were given descriptions of six students who

were required to hand in an academic assignment in pairs. They were instructed to read the description of each student and to pair the students based on how similar they appeared to be. In the conservation condition, all six students were described as espousing conservation values. For example, the description of one student read: It is important to her to live in secure surroundings. She avoids anything that might endanger her safety. Another said: She thinks it is best to do things in traditional ways. It is important to her to maintain the customs she has learned. In the openness-to-change condition, each of the six students was described as upholding openness-to-change values. For example: She likes surprises. It is important to her to lead an exciting life. In the universalism condition, each of the six students was described as advocating universalism. For example: She thinks it is important that every person in the world be treated equally. She believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life. These descriptions were taken from the conservation, openness-to-change, and universalism items in the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001).

Dehumanization. We measured dehumanization using the three items from the Moral Disengagement Scale (Detert et al., 2008) that represent this subscale: Some people deserve to be treated like animals; It is OK to treat badly someone who behaved like an animal (in the original scale, the operative word is worm); Someone who is obnoxious does not deserve to be treated like a human being (α = 0.88)[1].

8.2. Results and discussion

Fig. 4 presents the means and standard errors of dehumanization in the two cultural groups, as a function of experimental condition. Results were in the predicted directions in both groups. In the secular group, the lowest level of dehumanization was found in the universalism condition and the highest in the conservation condition. Among the orthodox participants, the lowest level of dehumanization was found in the conservation condition and the highest in the openness-to-change condition.

To test our interaction hypothesis, we first ran a 2x3 ANOVA with cultural affiliation (secular, orthodox) and values condition (conservation, universalism, openness-to-change) as between-subject factors. This analysis revealed a main effect of cultural group $F(1, 245)$ = 11.26, p = .001, η^2 = 0.044 on dehumanization, with the orthodox group showing higher levels of dehumanization (M = 2.70, SD = 1.76) than the secular one (M = 2.08, SD = 1.17)[2] and a marginally significant main effect of values condition $F(2, 245)$ = 2.49, p = .085. More importantly, and consistent with our hypothesis, the interaction of values with cultural group was significant, $F(2, 245)$ = 4.94, p = .008, η^2 = 0.036.

We tested our specific hypotheses by running a set of planned contrasts. To test H2a, we compared the difference between conservation and openness-to-change conditions in the orthodox and secular groups. Consistent with H2a, we found the difference in level of dehumanization between the openness-to-change and

conservation condition was significantly larger among orthodox participants than secular ones, $t(2 4 5)$ = 3.07, p = .002, 95% CI [0.502, 2.294]. This difference was further characterized by a significant effect in the predicted direction only for orthodox participants, $t(245)$ = 3.18, p = .002, 95% CI [0.376, 1.594], who showed lower levels of dehumanization in the conservation condition (M = 2.31, SD = 1.46) than in the openness-to-change one (M = 3.29, SD = 2.06). As the contrast weights in the analysis represent a linear trend in the three value conditions within the orthodox group, this significant result supports the idea that the effect of universalism on dehumanization among orthodox participants was somewhere between conservation and openness-to-change.

To test H2b, we compared differences between the universalism and conservation conditions for the orthodox and secular groups. Results showed a significant effect in the predicted direction. Specifically, the difference in level of dehumanization between conservation and universalism was larger among secular participants than orthodox ones, $t(245)$ = 2.09, p = .037, 95% CI [0.057, 1.877]. This effect was further characterized by a significant effect in the predicted direction only for secular participants, $t(245)$ = 2.03, p = .036, 95% CI [0.045, 1.375] who exhibited lower levels of dehumanization in the universalism condition (M = 1.76, SD = 0.95) than in the conservation one (M = 2.47, SD = 1.34). As the contrast weights in the analysis represent a linear trend in the three value conditions within the secular group, this significant result supports the idea that the effect of openness-to-change on dehumanization among secular participants was somewhere between conservation and universalism. Thus, our main hypotheses were supported.

All in all, our results suggest that if we want to affect people's moral attitudes, we should consider how their cultural affiliation interacts with their personal values, as the same value may have opposite effects in different cultures. By the same token, different values may have similarly positive effects in different groups.

9. General discussion

In two studies, we compared participants brought up in a secular Jewish culture to participants brought up in an orthodox one. We found that culture moderated the links between the conservation-openness-to-change values dimension and the tendency to morally disengage. Specifically, conservation values were negatively and openness-to-change values positively associated with moral disengagement attitudes only among orthodox individuals (Study1). Furthermore, activating conservation values decreased a specific type of moral disengagement strategy (i.e., dehumanization) more than activating openness-to-change values only in the orthodox group (Study 2). Concerning the self-transcendence-self enhancement dimension, in Study 1 we found support for the premise that self-transcendence values are negatively associated with moral disengagement across cultural groups. The picture was less clear for self-enhancement values (with a focus on power), given our finding of an unexpected marginal difference between the secular and orthodox groups, with a positive association significant only in the former. When we compared a specific self-transcendence value (universalism) to conservation values (Study 2), we found culture may play a role also in self-transcendence values. Specifically, activating universalism values decreased dehumanization more than activating conservation values only in the secular group. Thus, at least compared to other values, universalism played a more important role in the secular sample.

Taken together, we found cultural group moderated the associations between the values we focused on and moral disengagement attitudes. To gain a better understanding of the

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[1] For exploratory reasons, we also added the two dehumanization items from the Propensity to Moral Disengagement Scale (Moore, Detert, Klebe Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012): *Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt; It's okay to treat badly somebody who behaves like scum.* These items lowered the reliability of the index a little (α = 0.84). As they belong to a different scale, we chose to report the analysis with the original 3-item index. The results of the combined 5-item index were very similar to the ones reported (only one significant contrast was marginally significant).

[2] Although this effect is consistent with studies linking dehumanization to conservative ideologies (e.g., Hodson & Costello, 2007), we need to be cautious in its interpretation given the presence of the significant interaction. In addition, the effect can be explained by cultural differences in scale use (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995). We therefore suggest mean differences should be considered within cultural groups and between experimental conditions.
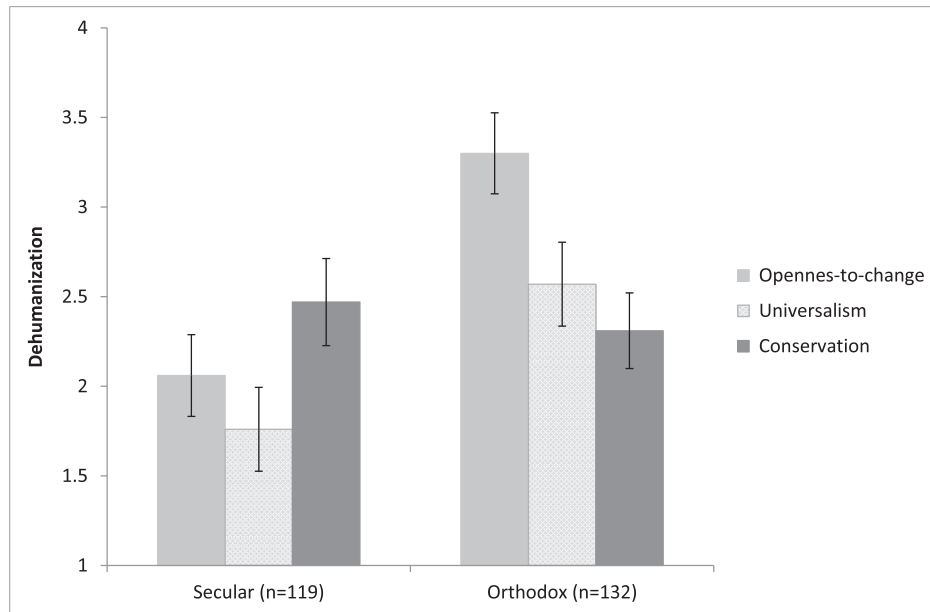
Fig. 4. Study 2. Means and standard errors of dehumanization attitudes in each cultural group as a function of values accessibility manipulation (N = 251).

motivational forces that promote or inhibit moral disengagement, we must consider the interaction between value preferences (i.e., the motivational underpinnings) and the prevailing moral outlook in the affiliated culture.

9.1. Implications for morality and values literatures

In a recent review and bibliometric analysis of the morality literature, Ellemers et al. (2019) point to a notable imbalance in the focus of research: the examination of intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms (e.g., how personal moral principles are related to moral behavior and moral judgment) is far more common than the examination of intragroup and intergroup ones (e.g., how groups influence individuals' moral standards and how groups differ in their moral principles). Our study highlights the potential fruitfulness of integrating individual-level (i.e., intrapersonal) and culture-level (i.e., intergroup) of analyses to shed light on moral conduct. Whereas previous studies show religiosity and other manifestations of culture are linked to variability in moral outlook (e.g., Graham & Haidt, 2010; Guerra & Giner-Sorolla, 2010), we suggest the importance of considering both intrapersonal and intercultural variability in moral reasoning, along with the interaction between the two levels.

More specifically, in the context of the moral disengagement literature (e.g., Bandura, 1999), our research contributes a novel, culturally sensitive motivational approach to the exploration of the links between moral disengagement and moral behavior. We suggest values may predict moral disengagement attitudes either directly, because they serve as standards for judgments and affect our perception of reality, or indirectly, through their effect on behaviors that may increase or decrease the use of moral disengagement strategies. Culture may moderate these associations through two principal mechanisms. First, because culture provides prescriptions of what is considered a moral behavior in accordance with cultural values, the fit between a person's values and her cultural affiliation may determine her need to morally disengage to retain her self-image as a moral person. Second, culture shapes the motivational meaning of behaviors (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010) and affects the instantiation of specific values (Hanel et al., 2018), resulting in culturally dependent values-behavior and

values-moral disengagement associations. We need additional studies to disentangle the various paths linking personal values and cultural values to moral disengagement attitudes, in particular, by measuring actual behaviors. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that by advancing the understanding of the motivational meaning of moral disengagement practices in different cultures, we can enhance the moral accountability of individuals in these cultures.

As well as shedding light on the values that inhibit moral disengagement, our findings draw attention to those values that promote moral disengagement in one culture and not another. Openness-to-change values are particularly interesting in this context. Their positive association with moral disengagement and dehumanization in the orthodox group suggest they may not only promote a transgression of moral rules that apply to the in-group (e.g., not respecting the group leaders' authoroty; see Haidt & Graham, 2007), but also promote the transgression of more universal moral rules on harm and fairness (Graham et al., 2011). In conservative societies which promote an embedded view of the individual, being autonomous and free means, in a sense, turning one's back on society.

Our findings are also in line with the values literature's growing interest in the mechanisms linking values and behavior (Sagiv & Roccas, 2020). For example, previous studies have suggested values affect the way we perceive and interpret the situations we are exposed to (e.g., Sagiv et al., 2011; Sverdlik, 2012) and predict the situations we choose to be exposed to (e.g., Bardi, Buchanan, Goodwin, Slabu, & Robinson, 2014; Sverdlik, 2012). Our research extends this body of literature to the moral context by suggesting a theoretical model that describes how values affect both the perception of the moral situation (i.e., moral disengagement attitudes) and the choice of being in a given situation (i.e., the behavior leading to moral disengagement).

We also join the values literature in exploring the role of culture in values-behavior and values-attitudes associations (Boer & Fischer, 2013; Roccas & Sagiv, 2017). In our research, the activation of the same type of values (i.e., conservation) directed a person to a relatively more morally accountable stand in one culture but a relatively less morally accountable stand in another. More generally, our work joins the extensive body of literature on values-environment fit that points to many positive consequences of the

congruence between personal values and environment, including subjective well-being (e.g., Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000), self-esteem (Benish-Weisman, Daniel, and McDonald, 2020), and various organizational outcomes, such as identification, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (e.g., Edwards & Cable, 2009; Ostroff, Shin, & Kinicki, 2005; Sverdlik & Oreg, 2015). Value congruence may have additional positive outcomes in the moral domain.

From an applied perspective, our findings suggest the importance of tailoring educational messages to a culture's values. To enhance moral accountability, we should be culturally sensitive to those values associated with morality and to the motivational meaning of a moral or immoral act. For example, if we wish to develop an intervention that decreases moral disengagement mechanisms, especially dehumanizing attitudes, we should tailor the intervention to connect those attitudes and mechanisms to a specific, culturally-bound motivational meaning. In a society that values conservation, for example, we should promote a view tying dehumanizing attitudes to the violation of these values.

9.2. Limitations and future directions

Our studies have some limitations that should be noted. First, in determining our minimum sample size, we had to include feasibility concerns, as part of our sample was drawn from an understudied, difficult-to-reach population. In calculating our range of acceptable sample size, we drew on the literature that gives benchmarks for multiple regressions analyses and employed these principles on each of the subsamples (Warner, 2012). We also estimated the effect sizes somewhere between a small and medium effect according to Cohen's (1988) rule of thumb, as we focused on cultures representing extreme opposites on the religiosity continuum, expecting considerable differences in their moral outlooks. We should acknowledge, however, the growing concern in the literature that the effect size of interactions is usually small, and Cohen's medium effect rule of thumb is over-optimistic (Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, & Pierce, 2005). Whereas our main premises were supported, it is possible that our samples were underpowered in their ability to detect additional complex associations.

Second, we could not perform a manipulation check in Study 2. In implementing our manipulation, we were consistent with the typical procedure used to increase values accessibility (e.g., Roccas et al., 2010), wishing to maintain its implicit nature. A manipulation check that shows its effect on self-reported values would counter this implicit nature (for an extensive review of methodological concerns in manipulation of values see also Roccas, Sagiv, & Navon, 2017).

Third, we did not have behavioral measures of immoral conduct. To test our full theoretical model and disentangle the two paths linking values to moral disengagement (the direct path and the behavior-mediated path), we would need to include direct measures of behavior. In future studies, in addition to testing the mediating role of behaviors in the link between values and moral disengagement, we will explore the possibility that decreasing moral disengagement using a values accessibility intervention can affect actual behavior.

Some additional issues concerning the external validity of the results point to possible future directions. To begin with, Study 2's sample consisted only of women. We made this methodological decision because we wished to match our participants from the two groups based on their gender and on our ability to recruit the two relevant samples. This approach may have limited our conclusions, however, and a future study should test our premises in a sample of men. Next, most of the students in our orthodox sample attended programs tailored for orthodox students (in these

programs, for example, men and women are taught separately). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that they are at least slightly more open to the dominant (secular) culture than their counterparts who do not pursue an academic degree. It is therefore possible that these participants represented the more liberal section of this sub-culture, and the actual differences between orthodox and secular participants might be even larger.

The cross-cultural implications of these two studies call for broader research testing the patterns of interactions between values and other cultural groups and dimensions. For example, the cultural dimension of mastery versus harmony (Schwartz, 2007b) focuses on the regulation of the relationship between humankind and the natural and social world. Some cultures encourage a mastery and exploitation of resources in the world to attain personal or group goals, whereas others encourage a harmonious view in which humankind needs to fit into and accept the world as it is. In the context of moral reasoning, we could expect these cultural differences to play an important role, especially in ethical questions concerning environmental issues. Finally, the use of accessibility of personal values as a tool affecting moral perceptions should be expanded in future studies. For example, an intervention that actively links moral behavior toward outgroup members to traditional and religious principles may have a stronger impact on attitude change in conservative groups than in groups emphasizing human rights.

10. Conclusions

All cultures strive to socialize their members to display moral behavior. However, a growing body of research suggests that what is considered moral conduct can differ between cultures. In this research, we draw attention to the interplay between personal and cultural antecedents to moral conduct. Examining a continuum of personal values in light of the perception of morality within a culture, can help us identify individual inclinations toward or away from moral disengagement and direct future thinking on ways to promote moral conduct.

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