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The Relationship between Moralization and Social Cohesion on an Individual Level

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Abstract:

Moralization has emerged as a consistent factor contributing to the decline of social cohesion. Research and scholarly works have demonstrated that the sense of social cohesion experienced by individuals is intricately connected and mutually influential with the larger frameworks of community dynamics and institutional structures. Through a review of existing literature, the paper explores the key consequences or predictors of the inverse relationship between moralization and low social cohesion, such as the emotion of disgust and intolerance, which is found to intensify individuals' moral judgments. Furthermore, this paper presents the perspective that a lack of social cohesion might serve not only as a consequence of moralization but also as a potential tool or mechanism. It suggests that the breakdown of social bonds and the resulting fragmentation within a community or society could be both an outcome of moral decay and, paradoxically, a factor that perpetuates or even exacerbates this moral decline. This dual role of social cohesion, as both an endpoint and an instrument in the cycle of moralization, highlights the complex interplay between societal structures and moral development. However, the directionality remains uncertain based on current literature. It is suggested that policymakers take into account the impacts of moralization to avoid reinforcing discriminatory attitudes.

Keywords: Moralization, social cohesion, disgust, intolerance, protective strategy.

1. Introduction

Moralization is defined as the process where morally neutral behaviors are endowed with moral significance, thus converting from them personal preference into a matter of right or wrong. Moralization can have a significant impact on both societal and individual levels, as scholars have argued that moralization influences government policies, societal support, individual moral judgments, and internalization and so on [1]. In modern literature, social cohesion has also been redefined as the ability of a community to tolerate diverse values and cultures, promote well-being, a sense of belonging, voluntary participation of members, and ensure equal rights and opportunities

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[2].

Moralization depicts the subjective shift in personal perception towards a certain behavior, as the inevitable tension arising from subjective clash would undermine social cohesion, which is crucial in fostering a safe and thriving society. Thus, it is necessary to investigate how moralization affects social cohesion at the individual level, as personal biases in moral judgment can harm one's sense of belonging to a community, in turn, weakening group-based identity on an individual scale and may negatively influence societal development on a larger scale [3].

Initially, the discussion of moralization focused heavily on its impact on public health. It has been argued that moralization acts as a catalyst for promoting health movements, inducing commitment, and garnering governmental and institutional attention more effectively than merely raising health concerns [4]. As one example, the moralization of cigarette smoking has been linked to heightened perceived personal risk, quitting intentions, and decreases in smoking behaviors [5]. On the other hand, moralization has also been criticized because it decreases acceptance of diversity and reduces tolerance. When smoking is framed as a personal preference, nonsmokers may tolerate being in the company of smoke. Once cigarette smoking is moralized, nonsmokers may find such environmental conditions intolerable [6]. Therefore, while moralization can strategically benefit health-related behaviors through governmental support, it may also have societal consequences, potentially harming social cohesion and intergroup dynamics.

The multifaceted concept of social cohesion can be understood through a framework identifying three intersecting levels: individual, community, and institutions. It also postulates that social cohesion exists when persons want to belong to a group or society. It also postulates that social cohesion exists along with the desire of individuals to belong to a group or society. These desires are motivated by values and beliefs that come from community involvement and experiences, which themselves are subject to the influences of institutional policies and regulations. This paper addresses the impact of moralization on social cohesion from the level of the individual. It discusses the negative effects of moralization on social cohesion, often via enhanced emotions and intolerance, and its directionality.

2. Method

A literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, leading to various academic databases such as Springer Link and ScienceDirect. To gain an understanding the concepts of moralization and social cohesion, search terms included: "Process of Moralization" and "Social Cohesion." To discuss the relationship between moralization and social cohesion, the search terms included "Moralization and Social Cohesion" and "Moralization and Stigma." For the connection between moralization and the emotion of disgust, searches included "Disgust," "Disgust and Moralization," "Disgust and Discrimination," and "Discrimination and Social Cohesion." For moralization and intolerance, terms such as "Moralization and Tolerance" and "Tolerance and Social Cohesion" were used. Lastly, entries like "Moralization as Protection" and "Moralization Strategy" were included to investigate the directionality of moralization.

The studies included in this literature review were filtered according to the following inclusion criteria: (i) they must discuss social cohesion at the individual level, and (ii) they must address moralization or related concepts such as moral conviction or moral conflict.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Moralization on an Individual Level

On an individual level, Rozin describes moralization as occurring through two mechanisms: moral expansion and moral piggybacking [6]. Moral expansion involves adopting new moral principles through powerful and affective experiences, while moral piggybacking classifies previously neutral behaviors as moral issues in line with existing moral principles. Both mechanisms can occur through cognitive routes, such as rational thinking and gaining new information, or affective routes, such as emotional reactions and experiences [6]. The impact of moralization on social cohesion will be examined with regard to individual-level factors, including self-motivation to belong to a group, perception, and sense of belonging [7].

3.2 Moralization and the Emotion of Disgust

Emotion, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as a complex response involving feelings, physiological arousal, and cognitive processes like appraisals [8].. Emotion had been acknowledged as a crucial factor in influencing moral judgements as an amplifier, meaning that one considering an action as immoral with emotional triggers can lead to thinking that is it even more immoral, vice versa. On the other hand, emotions also play a role in moralizing nonmoral behaviors, which is moralization [9]. One of the most significant emotion studied under moralization is disgust. The relationship of moralization and disgust has been an ongoing discussion in its significance in influencing each other. Specifically, the emotion of disgust is often an accompaniment of the moralization of purity.

According to the appraisal tendency framework pro-

posed by Lerner and Keltner, it is proposed that emotions are linked to specific appraisal, which means that each emotion leads to a certain assessment of a situation, influencing an individual's mental processing of the significance of a situation, and thus impacting response [10]. Under this framework, Horberg et al. proposed that by experiencing emotion, an individual's moral judgment of right and wrong can be more salient [11]. Specifically, the most common example under such framework is the disgust-purity association, where the emotion of disgust amplifies the significance of judgment stimuli involving the purity domain, as a person may judge a situation such as the common example of having sex with a dead chicken, commonly judged as morally wrong because it evokes the emotion of disgust, morally signaling impurity as bad and purity as good [12]. However, purity considered as a moral domain is debatable, and this paper will see purity as a moralized moral domain triggered by the emotion of disgust.

According to the study, it is discovered that disgust predicted discrimination of impure actions and that individuals who frequently experience disgust are more likely to believe that being unjust over impure is more worthy of punishment, while being pure over just is more worthy of reward [12]. This finding suggests that discrimination, justification of punishment triggered, and overweighing the moral value of justice as a result moralization provides support that moralization undermines social cohesion. This implication also supported by Molenmaker et al, suggesting despite punishment can be viewed as a tool to guarantee cooperative social norms for the public good, since moralization involve behavior that cannot be deemed uncooperative societally, such justification and utilization of punishment, called discriminatory punishment, becomes ineffective and harmful in maintaining social cohesion and even reinforces subgroup boundaries that further divides a society [12, 13]. Thus, on an individual level, moralization, especially when fueled by disgust, can lead to discriminatory moral judgments, reducing individuals' motivation to belong to a group and thereby eroding social cohesion.

3.3 Moralization and Intolerance

Previous research has highlighted the connection between moralization and intolerance, both of which has been found to significantly affect social cohesion and diversity. Tolerance is defined as accepting behaviors one disapproves of, and it is categorized into passive and active forms. Passive tolerance involves suppressing the urge to restrict disapproved behavior, while active tolerance entails defending or supporting the rights of those engaging in such behavior [14]. Moralization and tolerance can be seen as opposing forces; while tolerance seeks to accept, moralization involves using moral judgments to restrain disapproved conduct, which can be seen as a form of active intolerance. Intolerance arises, according to Adelman, when moral reasons override the reasons for putting up with certain behaviors [14]. This may be attributed to perception that morality is an objective truth that transcends societal boundaries, and that people may subconsciously generalize their moral values to others, wherein lies a moral conflict. It is also postulated that when an individual evaluates others' behaviors based on a moral lens of self, both passive and active tolerance is less likely to take place; hence, indicating that individuals who engage in moralization are less likely to accept behavior that deviates from their moral approval [14]. This finding indicates that individuals are less likely to accept behavior that deviates from their moral approval as a result of moralization.

Moralization can also be viewed as the construction of a moral belief system, as meeting individuals with opposing or different moral values can trigger anxiety, signaling a violation of one's belief system. According to Brandt et al., individuals find less common ground, meaning lower tolerance, when encountering moral conflicts compared to conflict over resources [15]. Moral conflicts are thus more potent in shaping perceptions and reactions than non-moral disagreements. Additionally, moral and value conflicts are some of the strongest predictors of prejudice. This means that moralized conflicts, which involve matters of morality, heighten the perception of societal threats and lead to intolerance toward those with different worldviews, thereby undermining social cohesion at the individual level.

On the other side of the argument, some argue that intolerance toward traits that society deems inefficient or negative could enrich the general function of society or personal well-being. Such an argument is implemented to cases like smoking, vegetarianism, effort, obesity, and self-control. While such moralization may, in theory, inspire positive behaviors, they can also lead to damaging stigmatization. The moralization of obesity, for example, results in the attribution of obesity as a result of poor lifestyle choices or lack of willpower. This emphasis on self-control and personal responsibility is a major predictor of weight stigma. Hence, persons who moralize obesity are likely to blame people for their lack of certain quality, which further stigmatizes them and weakens social cohesion. Thus, individuals who emphasize morality in their worldview are more likely to account victims for their lack of certain quality, triggering stigmatization that contributes to weaken social cohesion for the individual

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[16]
Moralization inevitably leads to intolerance between individuals, and tolerance is essential for maintaining social cohesion by promoting inclusiveness and preventing division. contributing to cultural peace within and between societies. Thus, moralization, through decreasing tolerance, can lead to low social cohesion.

3.4 Directionality: Moralization as a Consequence of Low Social Cohesion

The previous sections had focused primarily on the negative impacts of moralization on social cohesion. To such an extent that moralization often associates with discrimination, through its strong linkage with emotions of disgust and intolerance, those consequences may be seen as extreme effects of moralization rather than as evidence that moralization itself is inherently immoral. In fact, it can be argued that moralization is a response to a lack of social cohesion, rather than a cause of its decline. This perspective offers an alternative view to the argument presented in this paper.
First, moralization can be seen as a form of protective strategy for individuals against exploitation. Research suggests that individuals with limited alternative sources of protection, such as social support, are more likely to utilize moralization to engage third parties- someone who is not directly involved in a conflict such as the community or institutions- to back their position. This can be attributed to our evolutionary origin as moralization can be strategically used to deter challenges to their interests by framing actions as moral violations, thereby invoking the moral outrage which is the justification of punishment for moralized behaviors [17]. Thus, moralization can be utilized in triggering moral outrage, which is termed as strategic manipulation moralization [17]. However, moralization does not always involve manipulative intent, this is because individuals who moralize are also subject to the same moral rules they enforce, excluding oneself from engaging in that behavior, it becomes more of a self-protection strategy rather than manipulation in risking the potential for being exposed as hypocrite. In other words, this paper argues that strategic moralization as a form of protection rather than manipulation For instance, moralizing adultery in a legal partnership may serve as a protective tool, engaging third parties such as a court in divorce proceedings. The intent here is self-protection from a partner's failure to uphold commitment, not manipulation. In this sense, moralization functions as a strategic tool for individuals facing power imbalances or injustice. Thus, moralization can be seen as a product of the loss of social cohesion on the individual level, rather as the cause of its loss
Similarly, moralization can also act as a psychological defense mechanism. Defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies used to reduce internal conflict and stress [18]. Jordan and Monin (2008) demonstrated this in an experiment where participants rated their own morality higher after witnessing others take shortcuts in a task. Faced with the possibility of feeling like a "sucker" for not doing the same, participants justified their actions by moralizing their choice, a phenomenon termed the "sucker-to-saint" effect. Furthermore, a second study discovered that the more confident the individuals are, the less likely they are to moralize their choices in comparison to others, as they may not feel like being a "sucker" and therefore do not need to claim moral superiority in becoming a "saint" [19]. Therefore, moralization can be viewed as a response to the individual's perceived loss of social cohesion, employed as a means to secure support and protect self-esteem, rather than moralization leading to the loss of social cohesion, as studies have shown that social support and self-esteem are closely linked, where self-esteem and confidence for the purpose of this paper will be viewed equally as they are intercorrelated concepts, and individuals who experience a lack of social cohesion are more likely to engage in moralization to regain a sense of security and belonging [20]. Thus, rather than moralization leading to social cohesion, it can be seen as a consequence of its decline on the individual level.

4. Conclusion

The present paper attempted at exploring the complexity underlying the relationship between moralization and social cohesion at an individual level. A critical literature review of the literature encompassing both sides of the argument can lead to a deduction that moralization and social cohesion tend to have an inverse relationship, as studies have suggested that moralization can predict emotions like disgust and intolerance, which has been shown to contribute to a reduction in social cohesion. However, while this paper demonstrates this inverse relationship, the directionality remains ambiguous. As discussed in the final section, definitively established whether moralization leads to low social cohesion or if it arises as a response to it. and should be considered in future research to facilitate a solution targeting the origin of low social cohesion. Future research should focus on clarifying this directionality to better address the root causes of declining social cohesion.
Additionally, to gain a more holistic understanding of social cohesion, future studies should examine other contributing factors beyond moralization. Based on these

conclusions, policymakers should take into account the influence of moralization on individuals' moral judgments when crafting institutional policies, as it has been shown to negatively affect perceptions and social cohesion.

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