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RESEARCH PAPER

Mongolian *yos surtakhuun* and WEIRD "morality"

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Abstract "Morality" is a Western term that brings to mind all sorts of associations. In contemporary Western moral psychology it is a commonplace to assume that people (presumably across all cultures and languages) will typically associate the term "moral" with actions that involve considerations of harm and/or fairness. But is it cross-culturally a valid claim? The current work provides some preliminary evidence from Mongolia to address this question. The word combination of *yos surtakhuun* is a Mongolian translation of the Western term "moral". However, freelisting data indicates that Mongolians do not typically associate the term *yos surtakhuun* with actions that involve considerations of harm and/or fairness. Instead, the most cognitively salient category is respect (*khündlekh*). The lack of convergence between *moral* and *yos surtakhuun* suggests that the term "moral" does not refer to universal "moral" cognition that specifically deals with harm and/or fairness. On the contrary, I would argue that the term "moral" brings to mind exclusively WEIRD associations, and *yos surtakhuun* brings to mind specifically Mongolian associations. Thus, pointing to different historically shaped cultural models of "moral" behavior.

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Introduction

"Morality" is a Western term that brings to mind all sorts of associations. However, it is not clear whether we share similar network of associations across the different groups. More specifically, it is not clear whether psychologists and philosophers share similar associations with ordinary folk on the street. More importantly, it is not clear whether Westerners (be they scholars or ordinary folk) share similar network of associations with people from other non-Western cultures and languages.

In respect to the first point, it should be noted that the term "moral" is not only in circulation among philosophers and psychologists, but it is also a viable word in everyday language. Often it is not clear whether researchers intend to use "moral" differently from ordinary folks, though frequent insertion of this very term in the psychological questionnaires and experiments presupposes a considerable overlap of scholarly and folk usage (e.g., Schein and Gray 2015; Clifford et al. 2015). For purposes of this paper, however, I will assume that, *ceteris paribus*, the term "moral" used in moral psychology research is similar to the everyday folk notion of "moral" (in English language).

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Now, what evidence there is in response to the second point—do Westerners share similar network of associations with people from other cultures and languages? Unfortunately, there is a lack of systematic cross-cultural investigation of the native *emic* conceptions of "morality" (Purzycki et al. 2018). One reason is that psychologists often downplay (or simply neglect) the importance of learned cultural information (Sachdeva et al. 2011) and emphasize intuitive responses that are, presumably, outputs of evolved cognitive systems (e.g., Graham et al. 2011). Consequently, this approach (held explicitly or implicitly) dictates the kind of methodology that is employed in studies—i.e., theoretically motivated scale designs and questionnaires (see also Purzycki et al. 2018, p. 490). Besides, as it is the case with most of the psychology research, such studies heavily rely on the WEIRD[1] sample (Arnett 2008; Henrich et al. 2010), with some notable exceptions (e.g., Haidt et al. 1993; Shweder et al. 1997).

In itself, this approach is not problematic, many specific behaviors depend on innate psychological mechanisms, but the problem arises when researchers start assuming that "morality", whatever it might mean across cultures, itself has universal and innate bases (Machery 2018; Machery and Mallon 2010). I suspect that the conceptual confusion arises from the fact that before explicating the typically shared understanding of what "morality" means (and across cultures), researchers use "morality" intuitively to refer to disparate things such as a sense of fairness (Baumard et al. 2013) or harmful acts (Gray et al. 2012). Such intuitive usage might be justified if the source of intuitions related to the term of "morality" indeed stems from a shared pan-human "moral" cognition, where "moral" refers to the same thing. But it is not as justified if the source of (at least some of) "moral" intuitions stems from culturally shared models.

In what follows I suggest to apply the perspective of cultural models in studying "morality". By way of concrete illustration I present preliminary data from Mongolia and discuss it in relation to the aforementioned question—do Westerners share similar network of associations (in response to the term "moral") with people from other cultures and languages? I argue that the answer to this question will have some implications for the claim of "moral" universality.

Between cognitive modules and cultural models

Following cognitive perspective, "culture" here is understood as shared and socially transmitted information (Richerson and Boyd 2005; Sperber 1996), though, admittedly, this is a rather mush characterization of the phenomenon (see de Munck and Bennardo 2019). Thus, an introduction of cultural models into the description of "culture" might help to systematize the whole notion of "shared and socially transmitted information" (D'Andrade 1995; Strauss and Quinn 1997). Cognitive anthropologists over several decades developed not only the conceptual tools, but also a systematic methodology to investigate culturally shared knowledge—such as free-listing, pile sorting, consensus analyses, etc.—that is employed in this paper as well (for the relatively recent exposition of the field see Kronenfeld et al. 2011). More specifically, here cultural models are viewed as individual representations of collective cultural representations. Furthermore, as "a consequence of their assumed sharedness, cultural models generate social commitments to act in appropriate, expected ways in given contexts" (de Munck and Bennardo 2019, p. 175).

Importantly, the operation of any given cultural model is more or less automatic, it does not require any conscious pondering before making a judgment or acting. This poses some methodological problem for standard moral psychology—do experimental (or questionnaire) results indicate an operation of morally relevant evolved cognitive mechanisms or is it an output of acquired cultural models? Arguably, both views can accommodate intuitive judgments equally well. On one hand, it is true that culturally specific moral prescriptions might be post hoc rationalizations of behavior rather than a cause (see Moral Foundations Theory, Graham et al. 2013; Haidt 2012). But if one allows cultural models of "moral" behavior to be a source of intuitive judgment and behavior, then the post hoc rationalization argument doesn't hold on.[2] So, the challenge remains: a more careful study designs should be constructed in order to disambiguate between the

[1] Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic (Henrich et al. 2010).

universal and the cultural in moral psychology research.

Is "morality" a WEIRD cultural model?

In this section, before presenting and discussing the Mongolian case, I specify the very notion of the cultural model of "moral" behavior, especially the very term "moral", since it is important to be clear in what sense and in what contexts it is going to be used.

To begin with, I look at some influential research traditions in moral psychology and what kinds of typical behaviors they associate with the term "moral". For instance, researchers in the Turiel tradition are quite explicit about prototypical moral transgressions (Nucci and Turiel 1993; Tisak 1995; Turiel 1983; Yau and Smetana 2003; Wainryb 1991). Specifically, Wainryb indicates that "acts entailing harm, injustice, or violation of rights performed arbitrarily or for self interested goals" could be referred to as "prototypical moral violations" (Wainryb 1991, p. 842).

Schein and Gray in a recent paper have also addressed this question (2015, Study 1). In one study they asked people (presumably Americans, since the sample was recruited on MTurk without any detailed characterization of the participants) to list acts that are *morally* wrong and found that harmful acts were the most dominant acts listed. This study is a rare example of investigation that takes, what anthropologists call, an *emic* perspective—studying people's explicit conceptions about a given domain. At any rate, these and other experimental results are used to support a theory claiming that "morality is essentially represented by a cognitive template that combines a perceived intentional agent with a perceived suffering patient" (Gray et al. 2012, p. 102; see also Gray et al. 2014), and this moral dyadic template (intentional agent and suffering patient) is "a core feature of all immoral acts" (ibid., 107).

On the other hand, Baumard and Sperber 2012; Baumard et al. 2013; (see also Sousa and Piazza 2014) have argued that certain social actions are moralized only insofar as they involve fairness considerations. Even though these authors don't provide any explicit predictions about the likely prototypical examples of the "moral" across different languages and cultures, it is safe to assume that considerations of fairness should be of paramount importance. Taken all together, thus, the universalist claim could be formulated as follows: people (presumably across all cultures) typically associate the term "(im-)moral" with actions that involve considerations of harm and/or fairness. Now, there are two questions in order. First, what evidence there is for this universalistic claim? Might it be a rather WEIRD association? Second, why this type of *emic*, linguistic, type of data should be important for the discussion of universal "morality"? I begin with the latter question, then briefly discuss previous evidence and outline current study as an additional evidence.

As Wierzbicka noted (2007), many languages don't even have a word for "morality" or even "right" and "wrong". Nevertheless, such deontic modals as "ought" and normative predicates as "good/bad" could be found across different languages. Consequently, as Machery notes: "If the moral domain were a fundamental feature of human cognition, we would expect the distinction between moral and nonmoral norms to be lexicalized in every language, as are deontic modals and the distinction between good and bad" (2018, p. 262). This fact, according to Machery (2018) suggests that "morality is culturally specific … and instead of being a product of evolution, it is a product of particular, still ill-understood, historical circumstances" (p. 260). This indeed might be the case. Yet, a further thing to explore would be to look at historical circumstances of non-Western societies that traditionally had no lexical expression of the Western "moral", but by being in contact with Western religious and philosophical ideas attempted to translate that notion. Such is the case of Chinese and Mongolian translations (to be discussed below). In time, locally translated terms became part of academic and everyday usage. But this newly created term has a rather different (from Western "moral") meaning for native speakers.

This brings us to the second question. To the best of my knowledge, there is almost no evidence for the aforementioned universalistic claim. However, there is some evidence indicating that considerations of

[2] See also, for instance, Kahneman 2011, who acknowledges that intuitive reasoning System 1 might also be a result of long-time expertise; see also Mercier and Sperber 2017, for a recent attempt to reconcile evolved cognitive modules with acquired mental models in reasoning.

harm and/or fairness are cognitively most salient associations for WEIRD people. For instance, Lithuanians (Berniūnas and Dranseika 2017; Dranseika et al. 2018), Americans (Dranseika et al. 2018), and Canadians with Australians (Buchtel et al. 2015) in response to the task to list actions that are *immoral*, overwhelmingly produced lists with harm and fairness transgressions. Instead, in response to the same task in Chinese (immoral translated as *bu daode* 不道德), respondents in mainland China associated *bu daode* with littering and spitting on the street rather than with killing people (Buchtel et al. 2015; Dranseika et al. 2018). That is, Chinese were more likely to use the word *bu daode* for behaviors that were uncultured/uncivilized (or *bu wenming* 不文明 in contemporary Chinese).

Note, that *daode* is a dictionary translation of the Western term "moral", so a recent linguistic creation. As a result, *bu daode* did not become an equivalent term, with the same Western meaning, rather it brought all the linguistic/cultural connotations of semantically rich *dao* and *de* terms.

Moreover, I would argue, the freelisting task activated markedly different cultural models of "moral" behavior. That is, *daode* refers to specifically Chinese cultural model of "moral" behavior, where the main normative job is done by the *dao* and *de* (as they are traditionally understood). Indeed, by looking at how people in different cultural groups apply the notion of *immoral* (as it is expressed in local languages) in everyday life, we could extract some evidence that might have some baring for the claims about universal mental representations or about specific cultural models. For this reason, it is important to look at socially shared cultural models of "moral" behavior (see also Purzycki et al. 2018) in order to draw the contours not only of our own Western conception of "morality", but also of non-Western cultures as well. The next sections provide a sketch of a Mongolian cultural model of "moral" behavior, which I discuss in the light of the theoretical questions outlined earlier.

Mongolian *yos surtakhuun*

Mongolia is in Central Asia, situated between China and the Siberian parts of Russia. For the most part, Mongolians have been nomadic herders pasturing animals in the steppes. But they are not just simple pastoral nomads, they have had a long history of literary tradition stretching back to the times of Chinggis Khan (Kaplonski 2006, p. 65), where many prescriptions of proper Mongolian ways were encoded there (for instance, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, written around 1240). Historically, shamanism was the dominant form of religion (Heissig 1980), but since the end of the thirteenth century (mainly due to Khublai Khan) Mongolians began to adopt a Tibetan style of Buddhism; by the end of the sixteenth century, the majority of Mongolians fully converted to the *Gelukpa* school. This branch of Tibetan Buddhism was introduced by Altan Khan and was labeled as *Shariin Shashin* (literary, the yellow religion; see Sagaster 2007). As a result, many later Mongolian texts with prescriptions and codes took a more Buddhist turn.

Up until the early twentieth century, Buddhist institutions played important political, social and economic roles (Jerryson 2007). The most important religious and political institutions were the lineages of reincarnated lamas (*khubilgan* in Mongolian), who were regarded as religious/political authorities, of which the Bogd Gegeen (or *Jabzandamba Khutukht*) was the most important one. In the period from 1921 to 1991, Buddhist lamas and their property came under attack from the Soviet government (Kaplonski 2008). This interruption had an impact on the ways people preserved, taught and acquired Buddhist tradition throughout Soviet times and well into the post-soviet period (Højer 2009). Under these circumstances, though traditional ritual practices (Buddhist or shamanist) were concealed, they were nonetheless still actively practiced (Humphrey 2002). At the same time, the remaining Buddhist monastic institutions (with a new Buddhist university in Ulaanbaatar) was integrated into the Soviet state (Lhagvademchig 2018). However, from the early nineties to the present day, there is a noticeable revival of Buddhism, shamanism and everything that is considered to be traditional (*ulamjlal*). Including traditional norms of proper conduct.

Before the soviet period, there was no term in Mongolian that would correspond to the Western term "morality". However, the native term *yos* is rather versatile and crisscrosses many aspects of the normative domain. Its literal translations would encompass such things as: rule, custom, habit, principle, system, mode, order and etiquette (Bawden 1997, p. 151). But in essence, it could be understood

as generally expressing "the proper Mongolian way of doing things" (Michelet 2013, p. 102). The proper Mongolian way of doing things integrates a host of rather diverse prescriptions or restrictions of conduct, for example, how one ought to behave as a host and/or a guest (Humphrey 1987, 2012), how one ought to interact with natural environment without unnecessarily disturbing it (Humphrey 1995), how junior people ought to show respect (*hündlekh*) towards older people (Michelet 2013), or just how to enter the yurt (*ger*), where and how to sit, how to hold the bowl or the knife, and etc. *Yos* also comes in other forms (like *yostoi*, expressing such modals as *must* or *ought*) or in combination with other words (like *yos tör*, ceremony; Bawden 1997).

Incidentally, at the dawn of the Soviet era in Mongolia, *yos*, with all its rich traditional normative connotations, had been deliberately used to coin a new term to translate the European notion of "morality" (that came via Russian language). The combination was (and is still used to this day) *yos surtakhuun*, thus creating an explicit entry in the dictionary to denote "morality" (Bawden 1997, p. 151). *Surtakhuun* here could be literary translated as "'those things that have been taught" (Humphrey 1997, p. 25), perhaps, as Humphrey notes, to emphasize the fact that Mongolians highly value exemplars of proper and skillful conduct. In time, this word combination became a part of official Mongolian language. Importantly, the term *yos surtakhuun* has not been a word used only by academics and dictionary creators, but it is frequently used by the general public as well. A quick look at some of the recent Mongolian media websites and one will get articles or interviews discussing *yos surtakhuun*[3] issues. Or one could look into popular books for kids and teenagers at the local book store (for instance, a recent such book is explicitly titled *Yos surtakhuuny Mongol Tsagaan Tolgoi* (An Alphabet of Mongolian Morality), Narangerel 2018).

[3] For instance, an interview (2015.12.30) with a philosopher Zolzayaa on the website of Mongolian National Broadcaster (MNB) titled *Bükh asuudald yos surtakhuuny uchir kholbogdol bii* (All the issues have a moral significance): http://www.mnb.mn/i/74310. Or an interview (2018.05.18) with lama Odgarid from *Gandantegchenlin* monastery titled *Mongold ediin zasgiin bus, yos surtakhuuny khyamral nüürlesen* (Mongolia has faced not an economic, but a moral crisis): https://ikon.mn/n/1aup.

Thus, the question is: given the rich cultural background behind such terms as *yos* and, to some extent, *surtakhuun* (Humphrey 1997), what sorts of associations the recent (but now widely circulating) term of *yos surtakhuun* brings to Mongolian minds? We know that Chinese have a markedly different conception of what constitutes *bu daode* behavior (Buchtel et al. 2015; Dranseika et al. 2018), now we will look at what Mongolians have to say about *yos surtakhuun* behaviors.

Free listing task

In order to explore the typical examples of *yos surtakhuun* behavior, I have adopted one of the traditional methods in cognitive anthropology—a free-listing task [following similar freelisting study with the English term *moral*, the Lithuanian *moralė* and the Chineses *daode*; (Dranseika et al. 2018)]. This task is especially useful in that it allows researchers to familiarize themselves with the terms shared and used by the respondents (see de Munck 2009, Ch. 3; Weller and Romney 1988). Free-listing allows one to describe the conceptual domain from an *emic* perspective, as it is used within a particular cultural group. The task has been successfully used in studying cultural models of romantic love (de Munck and Kronenfeld 2016), ethnobotany (Quinlan 2005), folk terms for emotions and illnesses (Schrauf and Sanchez 2008) or even folk conceptions of gods' minds (Purzycki 2016). Several software tools have been developed to analyze freelist data, such as ANTHROPAC (Borgatti 1996), a more recent free add-in for Microsoft Excel, FLAME (Pennec et al. 2012) and the most recent R package AnthroTools for cross-cultural ethnographic data analysis (Purzycki and Jamieson-Lane 2017).

Method

Participants

Most of the participants were recruited at the National University of Mongolia and included mainly students from different parts of the country. There were also several non-student older participants. In total, there were N=95, age M=22, female 61%. The participants

were divided into two groups, one group received a prompt with *yos surtakhuun* 'moral', N=46; another group received a prompt with *yos surtakhuungui* 'immoral', N=49.

Materials and procedures

The freelisting task was embedded within a larger research, and it was administered at the end of other activities regarding this larger project. All materials were translated (and back-translated) into Mongolian. Participants were given the following prompts on paper (two groups: one was asked about *yos surtakhuun*, the other about *yos surtakhuungui* behaviors):

> The aim of this study is to learn which actions or behaviors are considered to be *yos surtakhuun* [*yos surtakhuungui*]. Please provide a list of actions and behaviors which, in your opinion, are *yos surtakhuun* [*yos surtakhuungui*]. Please list as many examples as you know. There are no correct answers, we are just interested in your opinion.

Results

Participants provided lists composed of simple verbs or nouns referring to particular behaviors. Some terms were either synonymous or superfluously formulated, therefore I ran through the lists to reduce the number of terms by unifying synonyms, where appropriate, changing from singular to plural and vice versa, and checking for typos. The translations of the lists from Mongolian to English were provided by a native speaker assistant. Cleaning and unification of lists were done by the author.

In the cleaned version of the results, there are 143 cited and 66 unique items in the *yos surtakhuun* group, while in the *yos surtakhuungui* group there are 152 cited and 64 unique items. It should be noted that lists were relatively short, in fact, in each group the average length of the lists were M=3. This might have been due to the fact that the task was given at the end of the bigger questionnaire (which took about 15 min to complete) or because respondents were young students (see also Schrauf and Sanchez 2008, showing that younger participants give on average shorter lists). Either way, follow-up studies with directly presented freelisting tasks or with older participants will be carried out in the near future, this should help to get a more accurate picture of the domain.

The results of the most frequently used terms, their frequencies, average ranks and Smith's salience indexes for both groups are reported in Table 1. For the purposes of more detailed exposition, the cut point was chosen at the lowest possible point, that is, in the *yos surtakhuun* group the term had to be mentioned at least twice. Thus, there were 17 items. Accordingly, the cut point for the *yos surtakhuungui* group was the same and it yielded 17 items as well. Table 2 shows which items appear in both groups as indicators of consensus and sharedness across different valences (positive versus negative) of behavior.

Taken together, it seems that Mongolians are mostly concerned with the issues related to respect (*khündlekh*), which could mean many things. For instance, beside respect of others, respecting natural environment by not polluting, cleaning it (*orchindoo tseverkhen baikh*), could also be included. Then, there is a rather culturally specific notion of not being a burden or a nuisance to others, especially to parents (*gai/saad bolokhgüi*). Also, culturedness (*soyoltoi baikh*) appears as a general requirement, and in the *yos surtakhuungui* list it shows as concrete actions such as spitting (*nulimakh*), littering (*khog*) and cursing (*kharaal ügs*). Finally, such items as lying (*khudlaa khelekh*) and honesty (*shudarga baikh*) are perhaps the only items that are in some way comparable to Western harm and fairness consideration, though it is not clear whether Mongolians would associate lying and honesty with fairness and harm (see below for more detailed discussion).

Overall, results do not support a universalistic claim: Mongolian participants do not typically associate the term *yos surtakhuun* (as an established translation of "moral") with actions that involve considerations of harm and/or fairness. With very few exceptions, the main concern for them is respect (*khündlekh*), broadly understood.

Cross-cultural comparison

The results indicate that prototypical instances of *yos surtakhuungui* behaviors do not fully match the prototypical instances of *immoral* (US and

Table 1 Most frequently mentioned *yos surtakhuun* and *yos surtakhuungui* behaviors

Yos surtakhuun (moral), *N*=46						*Yos surtakhuungui* (immoral), *N*=49					
Mongolian	English	Freq.	%	Avr.rank	S	Mongolian	English	Freq.	%	Avr.rank	S
Khündlekh	Respecting	19	41.30	2.105	0.311	*Khündlekhgui*	Disrespecting	16	32.65	1.688	0.253
Gai/Saad bolokhgüi	Not disturbing/burdening	6	13.04	1.833	0.100	*Khudlaa khelekh*	Lying	8	16.33	2.375	0.122
Orchindoo tseverkhen baikh	Clean environment	5	10.87	2.000	0.083	*Gai/Saad bolokh*	Disturbing/burdening	8	16.33	3.000	0.082
Dürem juramtai baikh	Following rules	5	10.87	2.800	0.063	*Soyolgui baikh*	Being uncultured	7	14.29	1.857	0.116
Erkh üürgee ukhamsarlakh	Understanding duties	5	10.87	1.600	0.085	*Nulimakh*	Spitting	6	12.24	2.833	0.088
Zöv kharitsdag baikh	Right behavior with others	5	10.87	1.800	0.092	*Khulgailakh*	Stealing	6	12.24	2.833	0.076
Soyoltoi baikh	Being cultured	5	10.87	3.200	0.059	*Muu züil khiikh*	Doing bad things	5	10.20	2.400	0.069
Eyeldeg baikh	Being kind	4	8.70	3.000	0.045	*Orchnyg bokhirduulj*	Polluting environment	4	8.16	3.000	0.052
Busdad tuslakh	Helping others	4	8.70	1.750	0.061	*Khüchirkhiilel*	Violence	4	8.16	1.250	0.078
Yos züitei baikh	Being ethical	3	6.52	1.333	0.061	*Kharaal ügs*	Cursing	4	8.16	2.750	0.052
Busdad khairtai	Loving other	3	6.52	4.333	0.033	*Khog*	Littering	4	8.16	3.000	0.049
Busdyg sonsokh	Listening to others	3	6.52	2.333	0.047	*Shudaragui baikh*	Being_dishonest	4	8.16	2.000	0.051
Khokhirolgüi baikh	Not harming	3	6.52	4.333	0.021	*Ger bülee ül toomsorlokh*	Family neglect	3	6.12	4.333	0.026
Khariutslagatai	Being responsible	3	6.52	2.667	0.033	*Khariutslagagui*	Being irresponsible	3	6.12	1.667	0.048
Shudarga baikh	Being honest	3	6.52	1.667	0.043	*Khuvia bodson baikh*	Selfishness	3	6.12	1.333	0.054
Khünleg chanar	Humanness	2	4.35	1.000	0.043	*Mekhlekh*	Cheating	3	6.12	2.333	0.043
Khudlaa kheleegüi	Not lying	2	4.35	2.500	0.035	*Gütgekh*	Slandering	3	6.12	2.333	0.044

Table 2 Most frequently mentioned *yos surtakhuun* and *yos surtakhuungui* behaviors that overlap in both lists

Yos surtakhuun (moral), *N*=46					
Mongolian	English	Freq.	%	Avr.rank	*S*
Khündlekh	Respecting	19	41.30	2.105	0.311
Gai/Saad bolokhgüi	Not disturbing/burdening	6	13.04	1.833	0.100
Orchindoo tseverkhen baikh	Clean environment	5	10.87	2.000	0.083
Soyoltoi baikh	Being cultured	5	10.87	3.200	0.059
Shudarga baikh	Being honest	3	6.52	1.667	0.043
Khudlaa kheleegüi	Not lying	2	4.35	2.500	0.035
Khariutslagatai	Being responsible	3	6.52	2.667	0.033
Yos surtakhuungui (immoral), *N*=49					
Mongolian	English	Freq.	%	Avr.rank	*S*
Khündlekhgui	Disrespecting	16	32.65	1.688	0.253
Khudlaa khelekh	Lying	8	16.33	2.375	0.122
Soyolgui baikh	Being uncultured	7	14.29	1.857	0.116
Gai/Saad bolokh	Disturbing/burdening	8	16.33	3.000	0.082
Orchnyg bokhirduulj	Polluting environment	4	8.16	3.000	0.052
Shudaragui baikh	Being_dishonest	4	8.16	2.000	0.051
Khariutslagagui	Being irresponsible	3	6.12	1.667	0.048

Lithuanian) and *budaode* (China) behaviors. Table 3 presents *yos surtakhuungui* list in comparison to lists that have been provided by Americans and Chinese in another recent study that employed the same methodology (for more details see Dranseika et al. 2018).

It appears that Mongolians have a markedly different conception of what counts as a prototypical *immoral* (meaning *yos surtakhuungui*) behavior not only from American, but from Chinese as well (though they seem to be closer to the latter). Where Americans overwhelmingly consider killing (Smith's S=0.657) as an instance of immorality *par excellence*, Mongolians overwhelmingly consider an act of disrespect of all kinds (Smith's S=0.253) as an instance of *yos surtakhuungui.* Only two Mongolian participants mentioned killing (Smith's S=0.015). Chinese overwhelmingly consider uncultured acts, such as spitting on streets (Smith's S=0.338) or littering (Smith's S=0.329), as instances of *budaode* behavior. Incidentally, Mongolians also mentioned spitting (Smith's S=0.088) or littering (Smith's S= 0.049), and a general term *soyolgui baikh* for uncultured behavior (Smith's S=0.116). This brings Mongolians closer to Chinese, which is unsurprising, given the fact that these are two neighboring countries with a long mutual history of frequent contact (and domination). However, it does not undermine the crucial differences since considerations of unculturedness are far less salient than respect for Mongolians, whereas Chinese mentioned respect only twice (once to others and once to older people).

Table 4 shows which items that appear in the top 17 American and Chinese lists match those in the Mongolian list. Only 4 items match between American and Mongolian lists, such as lying (Smith's S =0.122), stealing, violence and cheating. Except for violence (0.078 vs. 0.063) these terms are not as salient for Mongolians as they are for Americans. 6 items match between Chinese and Mongolian lists, here, as it was discussed above, most items relate to unculturedness and are less salient for Mongolians (except for stealing and slandering). On the other hand, the most salient Mongolian concern for respect (see Table 1), is virtually non-visible in American and Chinese lists.

Discussion and conclusions

Assuming that *yos surtakhuun* is a Mongolian translation of the Western term "moral", does it bring to Mongolian minds the same sort of

Table 3 Comparison of Mongolian *yos surtakhuungui* behaviors with American *immoral* and Chinese *budaode* behaviors

Yos surtakhuungui (Mongolian), *N*=49				*Immoral* (US), *N*=60				*Budaode* (Chinese), *N*=57			
Items	Freq. (%)	Avr.rank	*S*	Items	Freq. (%)	Avr.rank	*S*	Items	Freq. (%)	Avr.rank	*S*
Disrespecting	32.65	1.688	0.253	Killing/murder	81.67	1.980	0.657	Being loud	49.12	2.964	0.299
Lying	16.33	2.375	0.122	**Stealing**	78.33	2.660	0.531	**Littering**	47.37	2.556	0.329
Disturbing/burdening	16.33	3.000	0.082	**Cheating**	41.67	3.520	0.211	**Spitting**	42.11	2.042	0.338
Being uncultured	14.29	1.857	0.116	Raping	40.00	2.792	0.254	Cutting in line	26.32	3.600	0.137
Spitting	12.24	2.833	0.088	**Lying**	33.33	3.300	0.188	**Cheating**	24.56	2.214	0.188
Stealing	12.24	2.833	0.076	Animal abuse	15.00	3.333	0.086	Smoking in public	22.81	2.846	0.139
Doing bad things	10.20	2.400	0.069	Adultery	13.33	1.875	0.110	**Stealing**	14.04	3.500	0.076
Polluting environment	8.16	3.000	0.052	Pedophilia	13.33	3.000	0.082	Insulting	14.04	3.750	0.070
Violance	8.16	1.250	0.078	Harming others	11.67	3.571	0.057	Damaging public property	10.53	4.333	0.041
Cursing	8.16	2.750	0.052	**Violence**	11.67	3.571	0.063	Not observing traffic rules	10.53	3.333	0.059
Littering	8.16	3.000	0.049	Fighting/hitting	10.00	3.833	0.039	Not giving seat	8.77	3.400	0.054
Being dishonest	8.16	2.000	0.051	Child abuse	10.00	3.500	0.052	Urinating or defecating	8.77	3.000	0.055
Family neglect	6.12	4.333	0.026	Discriminating	6.67	5.000	0.018	Fighting/hitting	8.77	3.200	0.053
Being irresponsible	6.12	1.667	0.048	Racism	6.67	5.250	0.013	**Not providing for parents**	7.02	2.500	0.049
Selfishness	6.12	1.333	0.054	Exploiting	6.67	3.750	0.028	Damaging lawn	7.02	4.000	0.028
Cheating	6.12	2.333	0.043	Incest	5.00	1.333	0.048	**Slandering**	5.26	2.000	0.042
Slandering	6.12	2.333	0.044	Torturing	5.00	4.000	0.025	Seizing seat	5.26	2.333	0.039

Items in bold in US and Chinese tables indicate their overlap with Mongolian items

Table 4 Salience indexes of matching items

Items	*Yos surtakhuungui* (Mongolian) *N*=49 Smith's *S*	*Immoral* (US) *N*=60 Smith's *S*	Items	*Yos surtakhuungui* (Mongolian) *N*=49 Smith's *S*	*Budaode* (Chinese) *N*=57 Smith's *S*
Lying	0.122	0.188	Spitting	0.088	0.338
Stealing	0.076	0.531	Stealing	0.076	0.076
Violence	0.078	0.063	Littering	0.049	0.329
Cheating	0.043	0.211	Family neglect[a]	0.026	0.049
			Cheating	0.043	0.188
			Slandering	0.044	0.042

Comparing Mongolians with Americans and Chinese

[a] This general item is comparable to Chinese "not providing for parents"

associations? The preliminary evidence suggests that the answer is "no"—Mongolians (at least young students) did not typically associate the term *yos surtakhuun* with actions that involve considerations of harm and/or fairness. The lack of convergence between *moral* and *yos surtakhuun* suggests that the term *moral*, as it is intuitively used by researchers and ordinary folks in the West, does not refer to some universal "moral" cognition that specifically deals with harm and/or fairness. On the contrary, I would argue that the term *moral* brings to mind exclusively WEIRD associations, thus pointing to the historically shared cultural model of "moral" behavior (cf. Machery 2018; Stich 2018, 2019).

As previous study showed (Dranseika et al. 2018), the so-called moral/conventional distinction emerges as one particular feature of the WEIRD cultural model of "moral" behavior. One influential historical account suggests that this "law conception of ethics" (harm and fairness) could be traced to its origins in Medieval Christian normative theorizing. This conception shaped formal contours of how moral obligation is understood in the light of the idea of divine law, and that these formal properties survived even though the notion of divine law was largely abandoned (Anscombe 1958, p. 6). Notwithstanding the plausibility of this account, however, the sharp distinction between moral and conventional are not to be found neither among Chinese nor among Mongolians. Thus, instead of being a psychologically universal feature, it is more plausible to claim that this sharp distinction is a feature of a socially transmitted, and widely shared in Western countries, cultural model.

Likewise, it is plausible to assume that Mongolian strong emphasis on respect (*khündlekh*) points to the socially shared cultural model of *yos surtakhuun(-gui)* behavior. Here I would like to provide a tentative sketch of this cultural model. It is deliberately sketchy since current evidence cannot be generalized to all age and socioeconomic groups in Mongolia. Older people and herders in steppes might have slightly different emphasis, something to explore in future research.

Overall, from current data, two most salient normative categories emerge. By far, the most cognitively salient category is respect (*khündlekh*). Indeed, it made perfect sense to all my Mongolian friends to whom I showed these results. They noted that the notion of *khündlekh* permeates all the nomadic Mongolian culture and social interactions, and it is essential to *yos* rules. Importantly, besides implying respect towards elders, parents and other people, it also implies respect towards natural environment by not polluting or disturbing it (Humphrey 1995). Thus, listed items of not polluting environment and keeping it clean (*orchnyg bokhirduulj/orchindoo tseverkhen baikh*) could be safely counted as a manifestation of respect towards nature. There is a saying in Mongolian: "*Bid baigaliin ezen bish zochin"* 'We are not the masters of nature, just guests'. According to Mongolians, nature is owned by spirit masters of the place (*gazryn ezen*) and one ought to (*yostoi*) show respect towards those spirits, especially at the places where *ovoo* (cairns of stones and branches) is erected.

Another culturally specific notion refers to *gai/saad bolokhgüi*, which could be translated as not

being a burden or a nuisance to others. However, I have been told that this translation doesn't capture all the intended meaning. *Gai bolokhgüi*, apparently, is very much related to respect, that is, one ought not to cause trouble or even misfortune (Bawden 1997, p. 85) to others by their actions or simply bothering without a good reason. This is how one shows respect. As it happens, this sort of prescription is instilled from the early age, children often learn by observing and trying out themselves all sorts of tasks and only occasionally get instructions from adults (if they see fit). It is expected of children not to bother adults with trivial questions (see Michelet 2013, for more detailed description of traditional Mongolian education).

This kind of interpretation, i.e., looking through the normative category of respect, could be applied to other items on both *yos surtakhuun* and *yos surtakhuungui* lists. For instance, even such things as lying (*khudlaa khelekh*) and honesty (*shudarga baikh*) could be looked at through the notion of *khündlekh.* There are many different and indirect ways of showing respect or disrespect, as my Mongolian interlocutor explained, lying is also a way to show disrespect to someone. This is, of course, a very tentative interpretation, more ethnographic and experimental evidence is need, but the very fact that my Mongolian friend, unprompted, came up with this explanation, is suggestive.

The second salient category is culturedness (*soyoltoi baikh*). It is much less pronounced and is something that manifests as a general requirement and, in the *yos surtakhuungui* list, participants mentioned concrete actions of spitting (*nulimakh*), littering (*khog*) and cursing (*kharaal ügs*). It is tempting to construe all these actions as being another way of expressing respect or disrespect. Further evidence is needed to see how deep *khündlekh* goes. For our purposes, it suffices to say that *yos surtakhuun* draws most of its normative power from the very notion of *yos*, which is essentially about proper and *respectful* behavior in all sort of contexts. This is a cultural model that is acquired through social learning (Michelet 2013) and is triggered by many different social or natural contexts. Current evidence shows that it is indeed a shared understanding, where *khündlekh* is the most cognitively salient category, at least among young urban Mongolians.

Finally, it should be noted that current results (also Buchtel et al. 2015; Dranseika et al. 2018) represent not only evidence against universalistic conception of the term "moral", but could also serve as a modest methodological caveat for future cross-cultural moral psychology research. Given the fact that there is no unified meaning of the term "moral" across different languages (e.g., Chinese and Mongolian), one is advised not to trust dictionaries. In order for the construct in question to be valid, one must be sure (more or less) that the item in the research questionnaire or vignette is not biased and participants have a similar (more or less) understanding across different cultures as researchers initially intended (van de Vijver and Leung 2011).

This is not the case with "moral"—it is a culturally biased construct and is not suitable for cross-cultural research. However, this is not to say that there are no universal aspects in our psychology that are relevant. For one, it is perhaps the case that humans possess an evolved sense of fairness (Baumard and Sperber 2012; Baumard et al. 2013). But for reasons outlined above, it would be more prudent to simply call it "an evolved sense of fairness" and not an "evolved sense of morality", lest to avoid conceptual confusions (cf. Machery and Stich 2013). There might be other relevant cognitive mechanisms, such as general normative cognition (Machery and Mallon 2010; Sripada and Stich 2006) since, apparently, such deontic modals as "ought" are linguistic universals (Wierzbicka 2007). However, what the current case of Mongolian *yos surtakhuun* shows is that we also ought not to underestimate the influence of culture. "Morality" is a culturally biased term, so is *yos surtakhuun.*

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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