

How morality shapes our memory: a cross-cultural study on past and future (im)moral actions

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Autobiographical memory can be distorted, supporting the maintenance of a positive self-image (e.g., self-enhancement concept; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). In this line, preliminary evidence has shown that memories of immoral actions can be characterized by distortions (e.g., less details or being blurry) and elicit a so-called “immoral amnesia” that may also be one of the underlying mechanisms of persisting immoral behavior (e.g., Kouchaki & Gino, 2016). Moreover, the concept of morality has been shown to be closely linked to cultural aspects and subsequently, to differ between different cultures (e.g., Rhim et al., 2020). The present study investigates the role of morality in autobiographical memory by adopting, for the first time, a cross-cultural perspective, and investigating immoral amnesia for both past and future personal (im)moral actions. More specifically, memories of British and Turkish participants ($N = 60$) are compared regarding their phenomenological characteristics (i.e., sensory-perceptual details and cognitive feelings). Our results confirm overall lower vividness for immoral actions and more interestingly, suggest that sensory-perceptual details (e.g., vividness) do not differ between the two cultures whilst cognitive feelings (such as perceived distance to the action or the feeling of responsibility) show different patterns in the two samples. Our findings confirm how morality can shape autobiographical memory characteristics, and, although the small sample size warrants caution, suggest how morality-linked findings can be culture-dependent. This underscores the importance of cross-cultural research in autobiographical memory.

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