

The sense of moral obligation facilitates information agency and culture

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Tomasello argues that humans' sense of moral obligation emerges early in development, relies on a shared "we," and serves as the foundation of cooperation. This perspective complements our theoretical view of the human self as *information agent*. The shared "we" promotes not only proximal cooperative goals but also distal ones via the construction of shared understanding – it promotes culture.

FULL TEXT

Tomasello provides an elegant account of humans' unique sense of moral obligation. He argues that this sense of moral obligation begins early in human development, features a shared "we," and facilitates cooperation. He cites work demonstrating that human children, but not other apes, feel and act on a special sense of obligation to their cooperative partners, in-group, and cultural group –they share resources fairly and regulate their partners and themselves according to the implicit or explicit agreements of the group. This analysis provides a potentially powerful explanation to some vital phenomena about human selfhood and sociality. This comment elaborates that connection.

Although the beginnings of culture may be found in several dozen species (de Waal 2008), it is only among humankind that culture is extensively developed so as to permeate almost every aspect of life (Baumeister 2005). A major part of culture is shared knowledge and understandings. Bourdieu (1977), a French sociologist, coined the term *doxa* to refer to "that which goes without saying" –the shared assumptions that enable human beings, even strangers, to interact cooperatively for mutual benefit. Two people who share an extensive doxa can begin interacting efficiently without having to explain everything from the ground up. We have argued that theories of the human self need to include a recognition that human selves are *information agents*, or builders of the doxa (Baumeister et al. 2018).

The early-emerging sense of "we" and moral obligation are necessary for information agency. Humans have special motivations and abilities to build the doxa: They not only collect information (as other curious animals do) but proactively share it with group members, critique it, pass along information from others, emphasize shared understanding even over possibly more accurate private knowledge, and more. For example, people, but not other animals, sacrifice valuable resources to share information that may be useful to others (e.g., Feinberg et al. 2012; Tamir & Mitchell 2012), add or subtract details to gossip to emphasize what is of most importance to the group (e.g., DiFonzo & Bordia 2007), and as individuals or institutions, systematically pass on culturally relevant information (i.e., they teach; Csibra & Gergely 2009).

Based on Tomasello's analysis, we speculate that moral obligation was among the earliest sources of motivation to identify other minds that might require the information one already has. In particular, obligation as collaborative self-

regulation, which entails group-mindedness and appreciation of social norms, encourages people to share information broadly. Broadly shared knowledge enables group members to access information that they may not have personally gathered, to act on the same information and beliefs, and, in turn, to cooperate more effectively. The extensive benefits from ongoing cooperation would be a powerful selection factor in favor of minds that could manage information agency. Tomasello's work showed that this obligation is sharply reduced with out-group members and even with in-group members who have not collaborated in the current project. The latter understand why they are not invited to share even despite being part of the in-group.

Crucial to our analysis is not only the complementary understandings that one person owes another a reciprocal favor, but also the mutuality of that understanding. The sense of obligation is thus not just a first step toward improved cooperation on specific tasks. It helps lay a foundation for culture. As Tomasello says, it is not just that one person feels an obligation and the other feels a right: they both know and accept that the other has those feelings. Indeed, this soon moves beyond dyadic interaction, so that the doxa belongs to the group. In other words, not only does the individual feel an obligation –the individual knows that everyone in the group understands the obligation and will react negatively if the individual refuses to honor it. Indeed, someone who shirks such an obligation will be known in the group as selfish and uncooperative. This will be discussed first, as gossip relates the nonreciprocation to the shared understanding of the norm, and then the person's selfishness will become part of the doxa. Everyone would know the person is selfish and uncooperative. And this could prove fatal.

In many animals, first interactions with strangers are occasions for distrust, hostility, and even aggression. Humans are different. Studies with the trust game have shown that many people will make cooperative overtures to strangers (although preferably those from the same culture), even at risk to themselves. The reason appears not to be a strong expectation that one's trust will be rewarded but rather a feeling that one is obligated to show respect for the other's integrity, even if one privately doubts it (Dunning et al. 2014) or judges the stranger as having low self-control and therefore poor moral character (Maranges & Ainsworth 2020). If the other does not cooperate too, then the interaction can quickly turn antagonistic; but starting off with a brief, tentative willingness to make oneself vulnerable so as to offer a collaborative partnership is a huge step toward human culture. This step likely rests on a deep sense of moral obligation to other group members.

Tomasello's view helps explain the psychological foundation of information agency –the shared “we” serves as a superordinate schema that directs the self toward information beneficial to the group and subsequent feelings of obligation beget motivation to glean, edit, and share information with other group members. Indeed, this builds on the analysis of the human self as an adaptation to enable the animal body to participate in a cultural group (Baumeister et al. 2016). In other words, building and maintaining the doxa is a basic purpose of the human self. It is itself a cooperative enterprise. The collective understanding of the moral psychology of obligation was probably a key step in this.

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