Who are "we" and why are we cooperating? Insights from social psychology

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Abstract

Tomasello (in press) argues that a sense of moral obligation emerges from the creation of a collaborative "we" motivating us to fulfill our cooperative duties. We suggest that "we" takes many forms, entailing different obligations, depending on the type (and underlying functions) of the relationship(s) in question. We sketch a framework of such types, functions, and obligations to guide future research.

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Drawing on developmental, comparative, and philosophical perspectives, Tomasello (in press) gives an account of moral obligation, which he argues has received "almost total neglect" from psychologists. We agree with Tomasello that a sense of obligation arises from cooperative agreements between humans, often functioning as a powerful "stick" to prevent behavior that would lead to own guilt or partner resentment. In fact, psychologists focusing on dyadic and group behavior have long discussed such means of prioritizing "we" over "me" in human societies: Kelley's (1982) discussion of transformations-of-motivation from individual to shared concerns is a key example. The importance of cooperative norms and the risk of resentment and guilt implied by breaking them also have been emphasized by researchers such as Walster, Walster, and Berscheid (1978) who traced shifts from "me" to "we" and identified resultant obligations as part of their equity theory. Others have noted that moral judgments of the self and other are caused by meeting or failing to meet cooperative expectations the nature of which vary by relational context (e.g. Bloom, 2011; Clark & Boothby, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011).

Different relationship types have been distinguished in terms of the adaptive functions they serve (Bugental, 2000; Clark and Mills 1979; 2012; Fiske 1992) and the demands people place on cooperative partners depend on the origins and nature of their interdependence (Bugental, 2000; Clark & Mills, 1979). We suggest that taking into account who "we" are (in Tomasello's sense), as well as "why" and "how" we are cooperating based on the functions normatively served within our relationship(s), will be crucial for making progress in the social psychology of moral obligation.

Consider Wendy, who could easily provide a free hot meal to a hungry young child named Peter, but neglects to do so. Has she breached a moral obligation? It depends on the nature of the relationship between them. If Wendy is Peter's mother, the answer is probably yes (barring unusual circumstances). If Wendy is the unrelated owner of a local restaurant, the answer is probably no. Or consider John, who fails to pay his driver, Susan, for a ride to the airport. If Susan is his taxi driver, he likely has breached an obligation. If Susan is his sister or spouse, however, he likely has not.

These examples highlight a difference between two relationship types described in the literature: communal and exchange (Clark & Mills, 1979; 2012; see also Fiske 1992). Communal relationships are often exemplified by friends, family, and romantic partners. In these relationships, people (normatively) assume a special responsibility for one another's welfare. They track each other's needs and desires (Clark, Mills & Corcoran, 1989), note the responsiveness of the other to their own needs (Clark, Dubash & Mills, 1998), and offer non-contingent support as necessary to promote partner welfare (Clark, Ouellette, Powell & Mills, 1987). Failure to offer such support reduces liking, elicits hurt feelings (Clark & Mills, 1979; Lemay, Overall & Clark, 2010), and, we expect, triggers negative moral judgments (e.g., resentment). By contrast, failure to directly compensate the other for needs-responsive support typically does not cause such negative responses (as with John/Susan above).

Compare this to exchange relationships, often exemplified by casual acquaintances or customers/sellers. In these relationships, needs typically are not tracked (unless for purposes of selling or exchanging), but the other's contributions to joint tasks *are* (Clark et al., 1989; Clark,

1984). Goods and services are (normatively) provided on a contingent basis, and costly help is generally not offered in non-emergency situations (Clark et al., 1987). Here, repaying debts and willingness to accept payments leads to enhanced liking (Clark & Mills, 1979) and does not elicit negative judgments (McGraw and Tetlock, 2005), whereas failure to pay likely would be judged as morally objectionable (and refusal to accept payment would seem strange and uncomfortable, if not immoral). The *degree* of perceived wrongfulness of an action likewise depends on relational context (Simpson & Laham, 2015; Simpson, Lanham, & Fiske, 2016; Tepe & Aydınlı-Karakulak, 2018).

Communal and exchange relationships serve different functions. Bugental (2000) proposed some overlapping functions and added others as shown in Table 1. She ties each one to a specific adaptive goal or recurrent coordination problem faced by our species.

Function	Adaptive goal/ coordination problem to be solved
Mating	Finding and maintaining sexual partners; ultimately, producing and ensuring the survival of offspring
Attachment	Ensuring that a person's well-being is secure, without strings attached to the giving or receiving of support; maintaining safety; encouraging learning
Reciprocity	Coordinating cooperative behavior between people with similar (or equal) status, power, or responsibility
Hierarchy	Coordinating cooperative behavior between people with different (unequal) status, power, or responsibility
Coalition	Forming and maintaining a group identity with (potentially unrelated) others working toward common goals

Table 1. **Relationship functions**, adapted from Bugental (2000).

Everyday relationships serve one or more of these functions to varying degrees in different contexts. For example, a parent-infant relationship normatively serves the attachment and hierarchy functions across almost every context, but *not* the mating, reciprocity, or coalition functions. Teammates are expected to serve the coalition function, with a captain also serving the hierarchy function, but in most societies the captain normatively does *not* serve the mating, attachment, or reciprocity functions with other team members.

Feelings of moral obligation (and judgments of blame for failing to uphold such obligations) often will be specific to the functions that are central to the relationship at hand. So, a parent would be heavily blamed (and would likely feel guilt) for failing to serve the attachment function with their infant, but a captain would not be so blamed (nor would likely feel guilt) for failing to serve this function with a teammate, etc.

Two final points regarding the importance of asking who "we" are. Tomasello (in press) focuses on "we" relations that are voluntarily entered into by individuals who regard each other as relevantly equal in terms of obligations, rights, and power; but the parent-infant example highlights that at least some relationships are unequal in these respects and may be non-voluntarily entered. Indeed, some "we" relations are imposed on people by the situations in which they find themselves, some of which may be functional for one party to the relationship but not the other (see Kelley, Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult, & Van Lange, 2003).

Second, Tomasello (in press) focuses on negative judgments resulting from obligation-failures (the sticks). It will be fruitful to consider the personal and interpersonal rewards to be gained by obligation-fulfillment (the carrots) as well. Previous work suggests that serving relationship functions in ways that are desired and which exceed normative expectations will disrupt smooth, habitual interdependent routines and will likely elicit positive emotions (Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001). Might moral praiseworthiness judgments be similarly be elicited?

To summarize, the varied nature of relational contexts and functions shape moral judgments (Bloom, 2011; Clark & Boothby, 2014; Haidt & Baron, 1996; Rai & Fiske, 2011), as well as many other psychological phenomena (Reis, 2008; Clark, Lemay & Reis, 2017). Future work should consider who "we" are, taking into account: (1) the different functional and normative bases of different relationship types, (2) both voluntary and non-voluntary forms of interdependence, and (3) both positive and negative moral judgments.

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