

Table 1 about here

Americans are somewhat stricter than either the British or Canadians. Their mean score is 2.187, compared to 2.310 and 2.356. The U.S. standard deviation is also smaller: 1.916 compared to 2.108 and 2.032. For all three countries, the strongest taboos occur for actions that appear the most dishonest: joyriding and buying stolen goods. Americans and Canadians have the most similar values, as predicted. The correlation of mean scores across the eight moral behaviors is .902. The British stand apart from both: The correlations are .692 with the United States and .593 with Canada.

What drives attitudes toward these moral behaviors? If our moral code (or collective action more generally) reflects our experience, then we should condition our conduct on our expectations of others. If values rather than experience form the core of our moral codes, how others behave will be less central to our standards for behavior. Our ethical sense will reflect how we see ourselves as moral beings. If I believe that I generally do the right things, I will be loathe to endorse behavior that most people regard as unethical. The 1981 survey allows us to distinguish between peoples' own beliefs and their expectations of others. The WVS study asked respondents to indicate how well prescribed and proscribed behaviors in the Ten Commandments applied to themselves and to most people. The commandments relating to religious belief did not scale with those from every day life. The behaviors I employ are: (1) honor thy father and mother; (2) thou shalt not kill; (3) thou shalt not commit adultery; (4) thou shalt not steal; (5) thou shalt not bear false witness against a neighbor; (6) thou shalt not covet a neighbor's wife; and (7) thou shalt not covet a neighbor's goods. Respondents rated themselves and others on a three-point scale, with one indicating that the commandment fully applies, two that it applies to a limited extent, and three that it doesn't apply at all.

The questions on the Ten Commandments are distinct from those on moral behavior. The latter ask us which types of behavior are acceptable: How wrong is it, for example, to lie? The former ask us to judge ourselves and others as ethical people: Do we lie (bear false witness)? It is difficult to separate the causal chain from moral behavior to perceptions of one's own (and others') good deeds. But certainly the argument from experience places heavy emphasis on what people do rather than what they say. A smooth-talking con artist with a big smile can (and maybe more likely) to bilk you than someone with a sneer on his face. And we often justify our own moral worth by how we perceive our own behavior.

People rate themselves very highly. Almost everyone says that they obey all seven commandments. They are far less charitable to "most people." For every one of the commandments, we express only modest confidence in others: We believe that most people don't practice what we preach. The mean scores in the United States range from 1.557 for "thou shalt not kill"--hardly an expectation of a peaceful society--to 1.726 for "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods." In Britain, expectations of others range from 1.428 for killing to 1.893 for adultery. The Canadian scores mimic Britain's: 1.633 for murder to 1.993 for adultery. We think very highly of our own morality, but give our fellow citizens little credit for holding similar values.

I created factor scores for self and other observance of the commandments. If we condition our moral beliefs on how we expect others to behave, we should find stronger