

# How do cultures differ in their concept of 'What is moral?'



## RESEARCH

'Cultural conceptions of morality: Examining laypeople's associations of moral character'

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## Background

What traits are seen as moral? Is the answer to this question the same across cultures?

Some people believe that morality is defined as the duty an individual has toward society, which supports the status quo and the maintenance of rigid social systems. Others believe in a more flexible moral order, centred on upholding fundamental human rights. Typically individualistic cultures tend to be more rights focused, while collectivist cultures are more duty focused.

The Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, conducted a study asking people from New Zealand, Germany, the Philippines, and Brazil the characteristics they associate with a 'moral character' to see if the concept of morality differs across cultures.

## Main research findings

*Honest, friendly, good, and just* were the most common adjectives used to describe a moral character across all four countries.

New Zealanders also associate *caring, strong, and trustworthy* with a moral character.

Moral traits listed by Brazilians centre around the moral self, such as *being serious* or *educated*, while Filipinos, Germans, and New Zealanders see a more relational focused morality, listing *being kind, helpful, and trustworthy* as aspects of a moral character.

Germans see the moral character as highly associated with a rights-based morality, such as *open-minded* and *being critical*.

Duty-based morality traits, like *being religious, well-mannered, and responsible*, were listed by Brazilians and Filipinos.

New Zealand had the most traits in common with the other countries, having the fewest unique responses – reflecting bicultural (Māori and Pākehā) tradition and the multicultural nature of current society.

## Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Practitioners working with diverse ethnic communities (police, social workers, counsellors, etc.) need to be aware of the differing conceptions of morality to better understand actions and/or responses to situations.

Laws, policies, or agendas may need to be explained with differing emphasis (rights v. duties) to different ethnic groups to maximize understanding and/or support.

New Zealand's 'moral character' embodies the rich bicultural tradition, highlighting both rights and duties.