

Gain Cognitive Flexibility By Seeking Experiences that Test Your Morals

by Louise Rasmussen - January 28, 2013

<https://www.globalcognition.org/cognitive-flexibility-andmorals/>

A family eats their dog after it has been run over by a car. Is this behavior right or wrong?

Our lives are filled with moral questions. Some of them we don't have to deliberate over very long. Most Americans say it's "wrong" to eat dogs without much deliberation. That's because there's agreement within our culture that it's immoral, even disgusting. People from other parts of the world answer differently or at least hesitate. They have a [culturally different perspective](#).

Disagreement about moral issues occurs within cultures too. For example, what should be the legal drinking age and what kinds of guns, if any, should private citizens be allowed to own?

To make things even more complicated, most cultures' moral values even change over time.

Scandinavians have generally been in favor of shorter prison sentences than are used in the United States. People in the Middle and Far East often support more traditional roles for women. But then cases like the Brevik massacre and the recent, brutal sexual assault in India come along. Suddenly the values these societies consider fundamental come up for debate.

OK, so the fabric of morality confusing. But what does that have to do with your cognitive flexibility? Cognitive flexibility is the ability to adapt your way of thinking to fit the problem at hand.

Exposure to Diversity Increases Cognitive Flexibility

Research shows that people who are more exposed to situations that challenge their ideas about what's 'right' and 'wrong' have greater cognitive flexibility.

Leilani Endicott and her colleagues Tonia Bock and Darcia Narvaez describe their findings in a paper on [Moral Reasoning and Intercultural Experiences](#) published in the International Journal of Intercultural Relations.

Endicott and her team surveyed a large group of college students about their multicultural experiences. They asked the students about how often they had traveled abroad—the types of experiences they had overseas and how much they engaged with the locals. They also asked about the activities and environments the students were exposed to in their home settings.

The researchers then gave the students a test to determine how flexibly they thought about moral questions. In the test the students read five moral dilemmas. For example, in one dilemma a father contemplates stealing food for his starving family from the warehouse of a rich man hoarding food.

The students rated the importance of a list of concerns a person might have in such a situation. By looking at the concerns they selected the researchers could determine the complexity of their moral reasoning.

If a student chose concerns that focused on the personal stakes that the actor may have had in the dilemma their moral reasoning was categorized as simple. If they selected concerns that recognized the need for laws, social cooperation, and norms they were considered intermediate. Finally, if they selected concerns that recognized that moral obligations are based on shared ideals, require give-and-take, and are open to debate they were thought highly flexible.

Questioning Your Moral Compass Can Lead to Cognitive Flexibility

Endicott and her team found that the more students had been exposed to cultural differences and diversity the more likely they were to have reached the most advanced stage of moral reasoning. They speculate that experiences with other cultures allow people to develop a better understanding of the variety of beliefs, values, expectations, and assumptions that others might use. And, having that kind of understanding gives a person flexibility in resolving possible conflicts.

This means that merely exposing yourself to cultural diversity and moral challenges can be enough to increase your cognitive flexibility, as well as your [cultural competence](#). If that's the case, then imagine the possibilities if you take an even more active approach. That doesn't mean that you have to change your morals or do things that go against them.

You don't have to eat a dog. But, think about why some people might want (or need) to. Reading about moral dilemmas and [thinking critically](#) about them can increase your cognitive flexibility. In fact, the more eagerly your moral compass points you in a certain direction on an issue, the more you might learn from questioning it.

Image Credit: [Carolyn Sewell](#)

Endicott, L., Bock, T., & Narvaez, D. (2003). Moral reasoning, intercultural development, and multicultural experiences: relations and cognitive underpinnings *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27 (4), 403-419 DOI: [10.1016/S0147-1767\(03\)00030-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(03)00030-0)

Retrieved: 10-13-2018

Updated: 10-12-2018

Published: 01-28-2013

globalcognition.org