

Running Head: Commentary on Fitouchi et al. (in press)

Are we all Implicit Puritans? New evidence that work and sex are
intuitively moralized in both traditional and non-traditional cultures

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(Commentary on Fitouchi et al. “Moral disciplining: The cognitive
and evolutionary foundations of puritanical morality”)

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Abstract

Contradicting our earlier claims of American moral exceptionalism, recent self-replication evidence from our laboratory indicates that implicit Puritanism characterizes the judgments of people across cultures. Implicit cultural evolution may lag behind explicit change, such that differences between traditional and non-traditional cultures are greater at a deliberative than an intuitive level. Not too deep down, perhaps we are all implicit Puritans.

Is Puritanism steeped in the cultural and religious histories of specific groups of people, or a general characteristic of human moral cognition? Some years ago, drawing on research on automatic and unconscious mental processes (Bargh, 1997; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), as well as cross-disciplinary scholarship on American exceptionalism (Baker, 2005; de Tocqueville, 1840/1990; Landes, 1998; Lipset, 1996), we proposed a theory of implicit Puritanism in American moral cognition (Poehlman, 2007; Uhlmann, 2012; Uhlmann et al., 2011; Uhlmann et al., 2008, 2009). We posited that due to a unique history of religious migration and settlement, contemporary Americans harbor automatic and intuitive responses that reflect traditional Protestant-Puritan mores. As a result, Americans, more so than members of comparison cultures, intuitively valorize working in the absence of material need— for example, perceiving a lottery winner who continues to work in a low-paying job as having outstanding moral character. In experimental laboratory settings, Americans further exhibit responses to sexual promiscuity on implicit and indirect measures more negative than their explicit, carefully considered judgments.

The moral disciplining account proposed by Fitouchi et al. (in press) directly challenges such culture-specific accounts, arguing that Puritanism stems from universal moral concerns such as identifying quality cooperation partners and avoiding defectors. As they acknowledge, Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) societies are often markedly less Puritanical than non-WEIRD societies. However, this occurred slowly over time as cooperation concerns faded considering the increasing economic prosperity and individual-level human capital in WEIRD nations. As social cooperation became less objectively necessary for individual survival and goal pursuit, such cultures turned away from Puritanical moral values. The moral disciplining account thus predicts that today's Americans ought to be *less* Puritanical than members of less privileged

societies where individuals must constantly depend on friends, neighbors, and community members for assistance.

The initial experimental investigations of implicit Puritanism were conducted prior to the wave of methodological reforms in the field of psychology starting in 2011 (Nelson et al., 2018; Simmons et al., 2011). The studies in question relied on small samples, and the analyses were not pre-registered in advance, thus increasing statistical noise and researcher degrees of freedom to potentially dangerous levels. As a result, either the effects themselves (intuitive moralization of needless work, implicit Puritanical tendencies with regards to sex) or cultural differences in such phenomena could represent false positives.

In a recent self-replication initiative, we revisited the key experimental evidence regarding implicit Puritanism leveraging large scale multi-national data collections as well as pre-registration of analyses and theoretical predictions (Tierney et al., 2020, 2021). Introducing the “creative destruction” approach to replication, we competed the original implicit Puritanism account claiming American moral exceptionalism with a half dozen alternative theories of culture and morality. The winning theory was the general moralization of work, which posits that implicit Puritanism characterizes the judgments of people across cultures and is not uniquely American at all. Although very surprising to us at the time, this outcome is consistent with Fitouchi et al.’s (in press) moral disciplining account, in which Puritanical judgments are caused by general social concerns such as detecting reliable vs. unreliable cooperation partners. Further attesting to such generalizability is a recent set of conceptual replications of the needless work effect designed by 13 independent research teams (Landy et al., 2020; see also Celniker et al., in press).

At the same time, another outcome from the self-replication initiative suggests a major theoretical modification of the moral disciplining framework. In one of the initial demonstrations of implicit Puritanism, American participants were asked for either their rational and deliberative judgment or their intuitive gut reaction to a description of a target person (a previously established mindset manipulation; Epstein et al., 1992). In the experimental scenario, a lottery winner either retired or continued to work peeling potatoes in a restaurant kitchen despite now being a multi-millionaire. When asked for their intuitive judgment, American participants were significantly more likely to perceive needless work as reflecting good moral character than when functioning in a deliberative mindset (Poehlman, 2007; Uhlmann et al., 2009). Tierney et al.'s (2021) attempted replications recruited more than 50 times as many participants as the original investigation and spanned four nations and continents (India, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom). Disproving the notion that implicit Puritanism is a uniquely American phenomenon, participants from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia moralized work more intuitively than deliberately. Although the manipulation of the intuitive-deliberative response had no effect on the moral character judgments of Indian participants, an exploratory internal analysis yielded a fascinating pattern of results. Specifically, differences between the traditional (India) and non-traditional (U.S., U.K., Australia) cultures were greater at a deliberative than an intuitive level. In other words, Indian participants exhibited no effect of the mindset manipulation because *both* their intuitive and reasoned responses to needless work were Puritanical.

This points to a potential dual process account of cultural change and stability in Puritan morality. As Fitouchi et al. (in press) highlight, WEIRD societies have become less traditional regarding work, sex, and related issues over the years, which they attribute to the

steadily diminishing need for social cooperation in such nations. Our self-replication findings (Tierney et al., 2021) suggest that similar to the persistence of many social stereotypes (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022; Charlesworth et al., 2021), implicit cultural evolution may lag behind explicit change. As a result, even members of non-traditional cultures who deliberately endorse a narrow harm-based morality (Graham et al., 2013) may exhibit implicit Puritanism when in an intuitive mindset, cognitively depleted, or in their responses on implicit and indirect measures. These are currently only speculations based on a comparison of just four nations, and confirmatory tests sampling more non-traditional and especially traditional cultures are needed prior to drawing strong conclusions. Although it remains to be seen if the “implicit lag” hypothesis receives broad empirical support, Fitouchi et al. (in press) may be even more right than they thought: Puritanism could be universally human, albeit implicitly for some cultures and individuals.

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