How do cultures differ in their concept of ‘What is moral?’

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.