

Preliminary Evidence on Moral Underpinnings of Rape Victim Blaming in Iran: Replication and Extensions of Milesi et al. (2020)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: According to Moral Foundation Theory, people rely on five intuitive-based foundations in their moral decisions. These foundations are divided into Individualizing foundations (Care and Fairness) and Binding foundations (Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity).

Methods and Materials: In an attempt to replicate Milesi et al's (2020) findings in a non-WEIRD and honored context, across three studies, we explored the relationship between Moral Foundation and Acceptance of Modern Myths About Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) with rape victim-blaming.

Findings: Study 1 showed that Fairness, Authority, and Sanctity foundations were predictive of rape victim-blaming. Study 2 showed that binding foundations predict rape victim-blaming in a preregistered analysis. Our cross-country analyses (Iran, Germany, Spain, and Italy) showed that the effects of binding moral foundations were stronger among Iranian participants than those with less-honored cultures (i.e., Italy, Spain, and Germany). Exploratory analyses revealed no differences in rape victim-blaming among men and women. However, men had higher levels of endorsement of AMMSA than women. Religious individuals had higher levels of rape victim-blaming and AMMSA. Findings are discussed concerning the honored context of Iran's society.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that rape victim-blaming in Iran is strongly associated with acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression and binding moral foundations, particularly Authority and Sanctity. These relationships appear especially salient within honor-based cultural contexts, highlighting the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to understanding and reducing victim-blaming attitudes.

Keywords: Rape Victim-Blaming, Acceptance of Modern Myths About Sexual Aggression, Moral Foundations, Iran.

1 Introduction

Rape and various forms of sexual aggression are among the most pervasive social issues many countries and policymakers face. World Health Organization (2021) estimates that approximately 736 million women worldwide experience partner sexual violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least one time during some stage in their life (World Health, 2021). Although most reported rape incidents occur in Western and developed countries, rape has no cultural boundaries and exist worldwide (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Rape victims still tend not to report their experiences and remain silent in developing countries, particularly Middle Eastern countries where cultures of honor are highly prominent. One such context is Iran, an Islamic state where both sociocultural norms and institutional sharia laws exert extreme influence over perceptions of sexuality and sexual behavior (Moghadam, 2003). On a sociocultural level, rape victims in developing societies often face secondary victimization (Burt, 1980)—harmful reactions that victims of traumatic incidents receive from their surrounding social circles (e.g., family and friends; (Laing, 2017)). On an institutional level, it has been well established that in most fundamentalist Islamic states, there is a strong tendency to underestimate factual data on rape, suppress victims of rape, and therefore present a positive image of the state by governing religious officials (Ghoreishi & Nalekiashari, 2024). Additionally, victims in such context may have fears being charged with adultery under Iran’s Islamic penal code, leading to concealment and potentially contributing to inaccurate numbers provided by the official sources. Rape victims, therefore, not only face psychological burdens and harm inflicted upon them but also confront the additional challenges posed by unsupportive social environments and official institutions (Campbell, 2008).

How and why are rape victims blamed? The decision to attribute responsibility to a victim, and therefore blame them for an outcome, is influenced by intuitive moral evaluations of both the event itself and the people involved (Alicke et al., 2015). Previous literature has shown that one useful framework for understanding these blame attributions is Moral Foundations Theory (MFT, (Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2012)). According to MFT, moral reasoning is based on at least five key intuition-based foundations: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity. These foundations are typically grouped into two categories: individualizing foundations (Care and Fairness) and binding

foundations (Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity). Individualizing foundations align closely with the concept of “dyadic morality” (Gray et al., 2012; Schein et al., 2015), which posits that people view immoral incidents as situations where an agent (i.e., perpetrator) harms a victim (i.e., rape victim). Therefore, individualizing foundations are expected to be negatively associated with rape victim-blaming (Niemi & Young, 2016). In fact, previous research in WEIRD—Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic (Henrich, 2009)—societies has shown that lower endorsement of Care foundation (i.e., intrinsic tendency to protect others from harm) is associated with higher rape victim-blaming (RVB; (Milesi et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2017)). The Fairness foundation, on the other hand, is built upon key principles such as equity, justice, and safeguarding individual rights. Research in WEIRD societies similarly found that endorsement of this foundation is negatively associated with hostile sexism and RVB (Milesi et al., 2020; Vecina & Piñuela, 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, evidence on the relationship between Care and Fairness foundations with RVB in the context of non-WEIRD, more traditional societies are highly limited (for an exception, see (Shanti et al., 2026)). For example, in the only study exploring this relationship in the Iranian society, Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli (2023) showed that Care, but not Fairness, was negatively related to rape victim-blaming even after controlling age, sex, religiosity (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023).

Binding foundations, in contrast, are associated with increased perceptions that rape victims are contaminated, that they are responsible for what happened, and with a decreased focus on the perpetrators (Niemi & Young, 2016). The Loyalty foundation refers to bonding with one’s tribe, family, and community. Harper & Harris (2017) suggested that Loyalty might reinforce the “stranger danger” heuristic, which overlooks the fact that most sexual aggression is committed by trusted individuals, not strangers (e.g., a husband, classmate, or a friend) (Harper & Harris, 2017). The Authority foundation, which values respect for law and social hierarchies, is tied to traditional gender roles and ambivalent sexism, both of which strongly correlates with RVB (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023; Vecina & Piñuela, 2017). Endorsement of Authority also predicts more lenient attitudes toward perpetrators known to the victim and sexual aggression within families (Harper & Harris, 2017). Finally, the Sanctity foundation is related to disgust and involves preserving physical and spiritual purity.

This foundation underlies the general idea that humans' immoral behaviors can profane the human body. Sanctity is positively associated with endorsing rape myths and increased RVB in developed countries (Milesi et al., 2020). Overall, overwhelming majority of the research conducted in the Western and WEIRD societies has demonstrated a positive relationship between RVB and binding foundations (Barnett & Hilz, 2018; Harper & Harris, 2017; Milesi et al., 2020; Niemi & Young, 2016). In the Iranian context, however, only the authority foundation has been shown to be positively related to RVB (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023).

Why and how individualizing and binding moral foundations are negatively and positively are related to the RVB? Previous research in predominantly Western societies has introduced acceptance and beliefs in rape myths as an underlying factor. *Rape myths* are false beliefs that justify rape and exonerate the perpetrator (Bohner et al., 1998). These beliefs are widespread and serve to sustain men's aggression toward women while shifting blame onto victims (Burt, 1980). Rape Myths Acceptance (RMA) creates a hostile environment in which rape victims are blamed instead of rapists. For example, believing in statements such as "If a woman invites a man to her apartment, it means that she is not opposed to having a sexual relationship" or "If someone is raped, it is probably because they were dressed inappropriately" ignores the responsibility of the perpetrator and directs the blame to the victim. Research has also shown that individuals with higher RMA tend to think that rape is not a serious problem for victims and often do not suggest reporting the incident (Frese et al., 2004). RMA also has some anxiety-buffering benefits for women. Women with higher RMA tend to believe that rape does not threaten them and is more likely to happen among women whose behaviors are deemed inappropriate (e.g., wearing short skirts) and attention-seeking (Bohner et al., 2009).

However, it is important to note that measuring RMA beliefs has become problematic in recent decades (Megias et al., 2011). Similar to racist and sexist beliefs, the expression of RMA has become very implicit, potentially due to perceived social pressure and negative consequences that expressing such opinions might impose on the person who holds them (Gerger et al., 2007; Milesi et al., 2020). Numerous research has shown that participants' responses to traditional RMA scales are positively skewed (Bohner et al., 2006; Frese et al., 2004). To address this issue, researcher have developed the Acceptance of Modern Myths About Sexual Aggression scale (AMMSA, (Gerger et al., 2007)),

which also is used in this study, by utilizing more subtle expressions of modern sexism. This measure grasp people's endorsement of contemporary misconceptions regarding sexual aggression that may be less overtly hostile and negative but still perpetuate harmful attitudes and contribute to a culture of sexual aggression.

Past evidence in predominantly Western and WEIRD societies suggest a strong relationship between AMMSA and rape victim-blaming. For example, in their cross-cultural examination of three European countries (Spain, Germany, and Italy), Milesi et al. (2020) found large effect sizes and predictive power for AMMSA when predicting rape victim-blaming (Milesi et al., 2020). They also found that AMMSA mediated the relationship between moral foundations and victim-blaming, suggesting that moral foundation could impose their effect on RVB through their influence on AMMSA. It is, however, not clear if the moral foundations could exert their influence on RVB through the very same mechanism in more honored cultures (e.g., Iran). Our set of studies aimed to answer this questions as well as to investigate the overall relationship between AMMSA, moral foundations, and RVB in the Iranian context.

The current line of research seeks to replicate and extend Milesi et al.'s (2020) findings in an honored-based and non-WEIRD culture (i.e., Iran). Conducting such studies in developing societies is necessary for several reasons. First, most research on RVB is limited to WEIRD, individualistic countries where reputation protection values are uncommon (Razavi et al., 2023). Second, issues surrounding rape, rape victims, and rape myths are highly moralized in honor cultures, and unlike in Western contexts, the consequences for victims in these cultures can be severe, ranging from judicial convictions of adultery to honor killing by family members (Aghtaie, 2017). Therefore, understanding these dynamics is vital for designing policies to address such taboos. Third, as noted previously, the new scale for measuring rape myths acceptance (i.e., AMMSA) provides a promising tool for assessing these beliefs implicitly and thus avoiding social desirability biases. We therefore deemed it important to replicate and compare country effects in Milesi et al.'s (2020) to the Iranian context to gain a better understanding of how moral dynamics of RVB and AMMSA beliefs function in such societies (Milesi et al., 2020).

In Study 1, we investigated the relationship between moral foundations and AMMSA with RVB among a sample of Iranians. Study 2 sought to replicate and extend Study 1 through a preregistered analysis and examined moderating role of ethnic background of participants in the relationship

between moral foundations and AMMSA with RVB. In last and final Study, we conducted a cross-cultural comparison of these variables across four countries— Iran, Italy, Spain, and Germany— using our findings to compare them with those of Milesi et al.'s (2020) (Milesi et al., 2020). The procedure and data collection process for this study was approved by the third author's institutional review board. Data and materials are publicly available at OSF.

2 Study 1

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

We recruited participants through social media. Participants were 216 volunteers aged between 18 and 47 years old who agreed to participate in a study about social problems ($M = 24.53$, $SD = 4.64$). There were 136 women, 78 men, and two individuals who reported that another term is better for describing their gender. A sensitivity analysis (Faul et al., 2007) indicated that a total sample of 216 was sufficient to detect a medium to large effect size (consistent with (Milesi et al., 2020)) at 80% power and 0.05 alpha. Data collection took place in the Spring of 2021.

2.1.2 Procedure and Materials

Consenting participants were told that they will be participating in a study on social issues. They responded to study measures in the following order:

Rape Victim-Blaming. We used a similar scenario to Milesi et al., (2020) (Milesi et al., 2020). Participants read an acquaintance rape scenario about a couple, *Nima* and *Niloofar*, who had recently started to date. After reading the scenario, they responded to a 6-item victim-blaming questionnaire (i.e., *To what extent ... should Niloofar be blamed for what happened? ... did Niloofar make Nima believe she wanted to have sex? ... did Niloofar's behaviors*

contribute to the outcome? ... might Niloofar have avoided such a negative outcome? ... is Niloofar the type of person who puts herself in risky situations? ... should Niloofar be considered responsible for the outcome?) on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Cronbach's alpha was good $\alpha = .90$.

AMMSA. Rape myths about sexual aggression was measured using Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression scale (Gerger et al., 2007) on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). An example item is "Women like to play coy. This does not mean that they do not want sex." The 30 items of this measure were translated to Persian by one of the researchers and then back translated to English by a professional translator. Cronbach's alpha was good $\alpha = .89$.

Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ). We used the 30-item Persian version of the MFQ to measure participants' endorsement of moral foundations (Graham et al., 2013; Nejat & Hatami, 2019). Each foundation consists of five items. In the first section of MFQ, participants rated the relevance of each concern when deciding about something being right or wrong on a 6-point scale (0 = not important at all, 5 = extremely important, e.g., "Whether or not someone has suffered emotionally"). In the second section, they were asked to rate their perceived levels of agreement with each item on a 6-point scale (0 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree, e.g., "Compassion is the essential virtue for those who suffer"). Cronbach's alpha for each foundation was comparable to the original Persian version, Care $\alpha = .58$, Fairness $\alpha = .49$, Loyalty $\alpha = .58$, Authority $\alpha = .72$, and Sanctity $\alpha = .75$.

Lastly, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

2.2 Results

See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Variables in Study 1 (N = 216).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	VB	AMMSA	Care	Fairness	Loyalty	Authority	Sanctity
VB	4.21	1.46	.90	-						
AMMSA	3.43	.84	.89	.56*	-					
Care	3.81	.57	.38	-.01	-.09	-				
Fairness	4.03	.57	.49	-.05	-.12	.52*	-			
Loyalty	3.15	.84	.65	.28*	.18	.37*	.37*	-		
Authority	2.66	.95	.74	.56*	.39*	.18	.22*	.60*	-	
Sanctity	3.14	.95	.78	.50*	.29*	.37*	.33*	.54*	.66*	-

* Correlation is significant at 0.05 (Bonferroni adjusted); VB = Victim-Blaming; AMMSA = Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression. VB and AMMSA were on a 1-7 scale, Moral Foundations were on a 0-5 scale.

First, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis to examine variables predictive of RVB (see Table 2). Step 1 consisted of five moral foundations that accounted for a significant variance in RVB. Authority and Sanctity had a positive relationship with RVB, while Fairness was negatively related to RVB. Care and Loyalty foundations were unrelated to RVB. Step 2 consisted of both AMMSA and moral foundations, with the AMMSA becoming the most robust predictor in the model. Although the effects of Fairness, Authority, and Sanctity foundations slightly decreased after adding AMMSA to the model, they were still significant predictors of RVB.

To test whether the correlational structure of our data supports the view that differences in moral foundations influence RVB through differences in AMMSA, we conducted several mediation analyses using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017). In each analysis, one moral foundation served as the predictor, AMMSA as the mediator, and RVB as the outcome variable, while the other four moral foundations were included as covariates. The results showed that the effects of Fairness, Sanctity, and Authority on RVB were partially mediated by AMMSA (Fairness: $b = -0.163$, $SE = .071$, $CI: [-0.308, -0.030]$; Authority: $b = 0.185$, $SE = .051$, $CI: [0.087, 0.289]$; Sanctity: $b = 0.088$, $SE = .048$, $CI: [0.002, 0.193]$). This suggests that the negative effect of Fairness on RVB is explained by its negative influence on AMMSA, while the positive effects of Authority and Sanctity on RVB are explained by their positive influence on AMMSA.

To determine whether our effects were additive or synergetic, we conducted several moderation analyses, using one moral foundation as the predictor, AMMSA as the moderator, and RVB as the outcome variable, while including the other four moral foundations as covariates. We applied PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2017). Although no

interaction effects were found for the Care, Fairness, Authority, and Sanctity foundations, Loyalty interacted significantly with AMMSA to predict RVB, $p = .006$. Conditional effects showed that Loyalty was associated with increased RVB when AMMSA was high (+1 SD), $b = -0.325$, $SE = 0.138$, $t = -2.36$, $p = .019$, resulting in higher RVB beyond the effects of AMMSA and Loyalty alone.

2.3 Discussion

Study 1 found that endorsement of Fairness was negatively related to RVB, while endorsement of Authority and Sanctity were positively associated with RVB. These three foundations—Fairness, Authority, and Sanctity—continued to predict RVB even after controlling for the effects of AMMSA. Additionally, Study 1 demonstrated that the effects of Fairness, Authority, and Sanctity on RVB were mediated by their influence on AMMSA. Moderation analyses revealed that, except for Loyalty, the effects of other moral foundations were additive, suggesting that the effects of Care, Fairness, Authority, and Sanctity on RVB were independent of individuals' acceptance of rape myths and contributed to predicting RVB independently. Overall, Study 1 partially replicated Milesi et al.'s (2020) findings by showing that sanctity and fairness were significant predictors of RVB even in the presence of AMMSA (Milesi et al., 2020). Furthermore, AMMSA emerged as the strongest predictor of RVB, with effects relatively larger than those reported across three countries. Care, however, was not a significant predictor of RVB, suggesting that empathic moral concerns may play a limited role in intuitive judgments about rape victims within an honor-based cultural context. Study 2 aimed to replicate these findings and explore interethnic differences within the Iranian context.

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Predicting Rape Victim-Blaming in Study 1 (N = 216) and Study 2 (N = 202).

	Study 1		Study 2	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Step 1				
Care	-.09	-.05	-.05	.02
Fairness	-.19**	-.13*	-.06	.03
Loyalty	-.07	-.06	.19*	.10
Authority	.43***	.31***	.23*	.08
Sanctity	.35***	.30***	.19*	.20*
Step 2				
AMMSA		.34***		.47***
ΔR^2	.41	.09	.24	.17
Total R^2		.50		.42

Note. Standardized regression coefficients (β) are displayed. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

3 Study 2

Study 2 had two goals. First, we aimed to directly replicate the findings of Study 1 in a pre-registered analysis. Second, we sought to investigate the moderating role of ethnicity in the relationship between moral foundations and AMMSA with RVB. Previous research suggests that honor cultures may form in frontier regions due to weaker law enforcement and lower socioeconomic status (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). In such areas, people often adopt more aggressive means of protecting their property (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Qualitative research supports this, showing high endorsement of honor values among ethnicities in Iran's frontier regions, with 20% of all murders and 50% of family murders in East Azerbaijan linked to honor issues (Akbari & Elmi, 2018). Therefore, RVB and the effect of its predictors might be stronger among those ethnicities living in marginal areas of Iran (i.e., Azeri and Kurdish people). The study was preregistered here.

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

Two hundred twenty-one individuals ($M = 27.24$, $SD = 6.60$) volunteered to participate in a study on social values. Those participants who failed attention checks ("Please choose *strongly agree* for this item") were excluded from the analysis. The final sample included 202 participants. There were 132 women and 70 men. There were 91 Persian participants, 50 Azeri/Turkish, 39 Kurdish, five Lurs, and 17 reported belonging to "Other" ethnicities. A sensitivity analysis (Faul et al., 2007) indicated that a total sample of 202 was sufficient to detect a medium effect size at 80% power and 0.05 alpha. Data collection took place in the winter of 2023.

3.1.2 Procedure and Materials

The procedure was the same as in Study 1. We also asked participants to report on their ethnicity and religious affiliation.

Rape Victim-Blaming. We used the same measure and scenario as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .91$).

Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression (AMMSA). We used the same measure as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .89$).

Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ). We used the same measure as in Study 1 (Care $\alpha = .48$, Fairness $\alpha = .49$, Loyalty $\alpha = .58$, Authority $\alpha = .72$, and Sanctity $\alpha = .75$).

3.2 Results

See Table 3 for descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations. Similar to Study 1, we conducted a hierarchical regression, with moral foundations entered at step 1 and AMMSA at step 2 (see Table 2). In step 1, there was a positive relationship between binding moral foundations and RVB, while individualizing moral foundations were not related to RVB. In step 2, AMMSA significantly predicted RVB above and beyond all moral foundations. After adding AMMSA, there were no significant relationships between moral foundations and RVB, except for the effect of Sanctity.

For mediation analyses, the effects of individualizing foundations on RVB were negatively mediated through AMMSA (Care: $b = -0.167$, $SE = 0.077$, $CI: [-0.326, -0.020]$; Fairness: $b = -0.243$, $SE = 0.100$, $CI: [-0.442, -0.051]$), suggesting that the influence of Care and Fairness on RVB operates through AMMSA. In contrast, the effects of Loyalty and Authority on RVB were positively mediated by AMMSA (Loyalty: $b = 0.166$, $SE = 0.065$, $CI: [0.042, 0.299]$; Authority: $b = 0.245$, $SE = 0.083$, $CI: [0.093, 0.425]$). Sanctity did not affect RVB through AMMSA, $b = -0.012$, $SE = 0.059$, $CI: [-0.133, 0.097]$.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of the Variables in Study 2 (N = 202).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	VB	AMMSA	Care	Fairness	Loyalty	Authority	Sanctity
VB	3.27	1.44	.91	-						
AMMSA	2.82	.87	.91	.56*	-					
Care	3.72	.67	.58	.09	-.12	-				
Fairness	3.91	.56	.49	.01	-.19	.51*	-			
Loyalty	2.85	.82	.58	.37*	.25*	.39*	.25*	-		
Authority	2.24	.90	.72	.44*	.35*	.24*	.13	.54*	-	
Sanctity	2.53	1.02	.75	.42*	.23*	.26*	.12	.47*	.70*	-

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 (Bonferroni adjusted). Note. VB = Victim-Blaming; AMMSA = Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression. VB and AMMSA were on a 1-7 scale, Moral Foundations were on a 0-5 scale.

To determine whether our effects were additive or synergetic, we conducted several moderation analyses, using one moral foundation as the predictor, AMMSA as the moderator, and RVB as the outcome variable, while including the other four moral foundations as covariates. We found no interaction effects among moral foundations and AMMSA in predicting RVB.

Lastly, to see if our effects would be moderated by participant ethnicity, we ran several analyses with AMMSA and moral foundations as the predictor, ethnic identification (Persians vs. Azeri & Kurdish participants) as the moderator, and RVB as the outcome variable. In each analysis, those moral foundations that did not enter the model served as covariates. No significant effects were observed for the effects of moral foundations and AMMSA on rape victim-blaming. Thus, our analyses did not support our hypothesis regarding the more substantial effects of AMMSA and care foundations among particular ethnicities in Iran.

For exploratory purposes, we compared RVB and AMMSA among men/women and religious/non-religious individuals. There was a marginal difference between self-identified women ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.46$) and men ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.39$) in their RVB evaluations, $F(1, 200) = 2.80$, $p = .096$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$. Men ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.85$) had higher AMMSA than Women ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.75$), $F(1, 200) = 46.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .187$. Next, we compared RVB and AMMSA among religious (those identified as Shiite Muslim and Sunni Muslim) and non-religious (those identified as Atheist, Agnostic, or Nothing in Particular) individuals. Religious individuals ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.48$) had higher RVB than non-religious individuals ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1, 199) = 23.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .105$. Religious individuals ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .89$) were also more accepting of rape myths than non-religious individuals ($M = 2.58$, $SD = .80$), $F(1, 199) = 13.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .065$.

3.3 Discussion

Study 2 partially replicated Study 1, showing that binding moral foundations negatively predicted rape victim-blaming among Iranian participants. However, except for Sanctity, the predictive power of moral foundations disappeared after adding AMMSA to the model. These findings are consistent with the general climate of honored culture in Iran, which associates sexual behaviors with cleanliness and contamination metaphors. Our hypothesis on the moderating

role of ethnicity in the relationship between moral foundations and AMMSA was not supported. We hypothesized that the effects of AMMSA and moral foundations in predicting rape victim-blaming would be stronger among those cultures living in the frontier areas of Iran, who have a more extended history of war and conflict in their land and benefit less from the government's efficient law enforcement. Our data did not show such interaction.

We also found that, except for Sanctity, AMMSA mediates the relationship between moral foundations and rape victim-blaming, confirming the general correlational structure of these two and Milesi et al.'s (2020) studies (Milesi et al., 2020). Our exploratory analyses showed that men and religious individuals, in general, had higher AMMSA and RVB than women and non-religious individuals.

4 Study 3

Study 3 aimed to find preliminary evidence on the moral underpinnings of RVB in cultures of honor by investigating the moderating role of the cultural affiliation (measured as country belonging) in the relationship between moral foundations with RVB. Combining our data with Milesi et al.'s (2020) (Milesi et al., 2020), we hypothesized that the positive effect of binding moral foundations would be more substantial among highly honored cultures, while the negative effects of individualizing foundations would be more potent among less honored cultures.

4.1 Method

4.1.1 Participants

We combined our data from previous two studies with Milesi et al.'s (2020) to investigate the moderating role of nationality in the relationship between moral foundations and AMMSA with RVB (Milesi et al., 2020). The sample comprised 971 participants from four countries— Iran, Germany, Italy, and Spain. The mean age for Iranian participants was 25.80 ($SD = 5.82$), for German participants 24.11 ($SD = 4.99$), for Italian participants 22.71 ($SD = 3.57$), and for Spanish participants 22.69 ($SD = 5.43$). There were 566 female and 403 males. Two participants reported belonging to “other” gender identities.

4.1.2 Measures

Rape victim-blaming. Participants in each country read the same scenario in their language and responded to the same questions.

Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression. Participants in each country responded to the same AMMSA scale in their language.

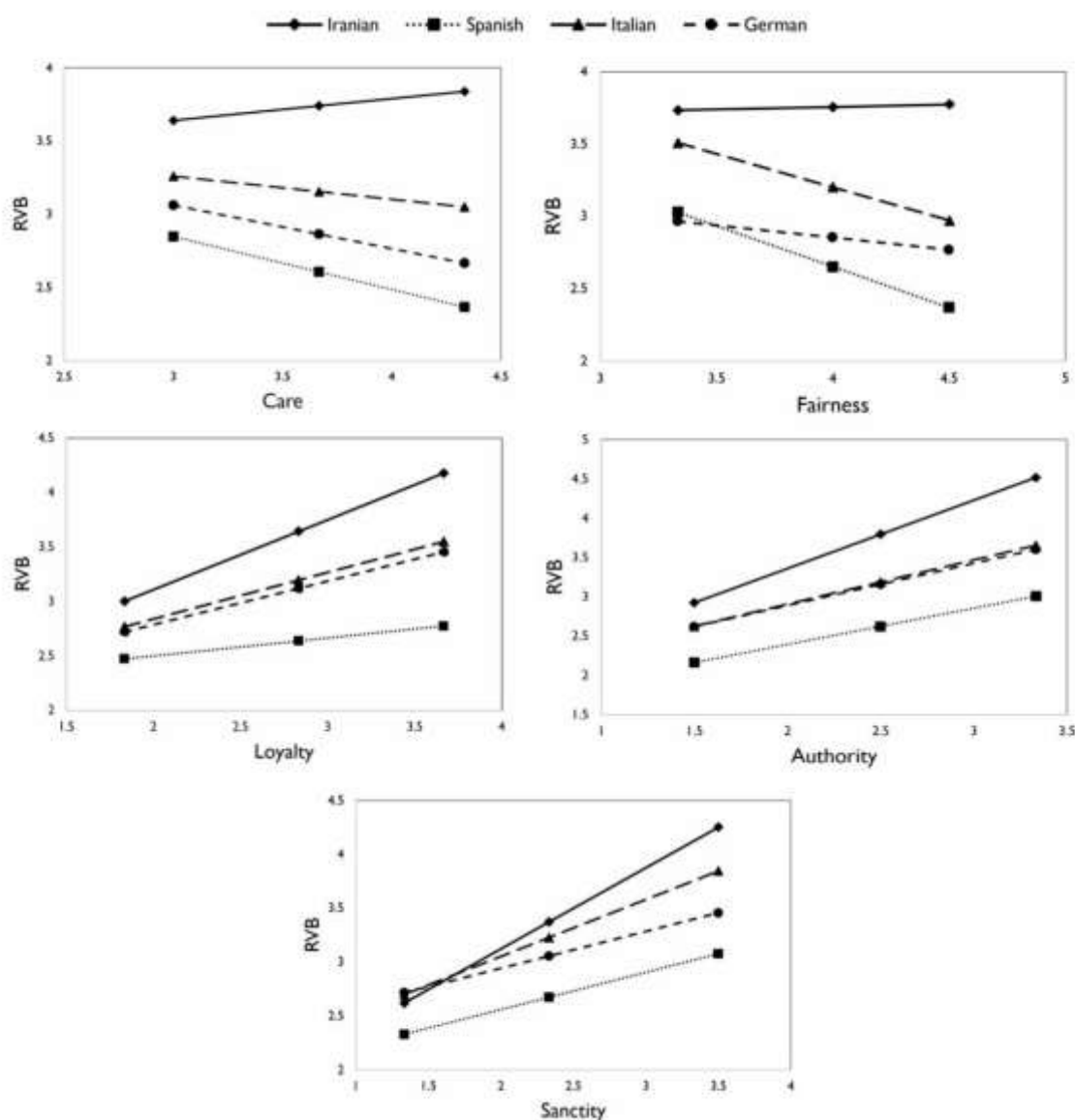
Moral Foundations Questionnaire. Participants in each country responded to the MFQ questionnaire in their language.

4.2 Results and Discussion

See Table 4 for descriptive statistics of the variables for each country. To explore the moral underpinnings of RVB in cultures of honors, we used PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2017) Model 1 to investigate the interactions between Moral Foundations and cultural affiliation.

Figure 1

Moral foundations predicting rape victim-blaming across four countries.



We first investigated the interaction between Care and cultural affiliation in predicting RVB. Unless noted otherwise, the Iranian category served as the reference group. The overall interaction between Care and cultural belonging was significant, $F(3, 963) = 3.71, p = .011, \Delta R^2 = .01$. Two interaction terms were significant. The effect of Care on RVB was significantly different among Iranian vs. Spanish ($b = -0.51, SE = 0.17, t(963) = -3.07, p = .002$) and Iranian vs. German participants ($b = -0.44, SE = 0.19, t(963) = -2.35, p = .02$). However, the effect of Care on RVB was not significantly different among Iranian vs. Italian participants ($b = -0.31, SE = 0.20, t(963) = -1.54, p = .12$).

Next, the overall interaction of Fairness with cultural affiliation was significant, $F(3, 963) = 4.54, p = .004, \Delta R^2 = .01$. Two interaction terms were significant. The impact of Fairness on RVB was significantly different among Iranian

vs. Spanish ($b = -0.60, SE = 0.17, t(963) = -3.43, p < .001$) and Iranian vs. Italian Participants ($b = -0.49, SE = 0.20, t(963) = -2.45, p = .014$). The effect of Fairness on RVB was not different among Iranian vs. German participants ($b = -0.20, SE = 0.19, t(963) = -0.105, p = .29$).

After individualizing foundations, we conducted separate analyses to investigate the interaction between binding moral foundations and cultural affiliation. The overall interaction between Loyalty and country affiliation was significant, $F(3, 963) = 4.10, p = .007, \Delta R^2 = .01$. While the effect of Loyalty in predicting RVB was different among Iranian vs. Spanish participants ($b = -0.48, SE = 0.14, t(963) = -3.44, p < .001$), no differences observed in the effect of Loyalty among Iranian vs. Italian ($b = -0.21, SE = 0.16, t(963) = -1.32, p = .18$) and Iranian vs. German contrasts ($b = -0.24, SE = 0.15, t(963) = -1.62, p = .10$).

Table 4

Mean and Standard Deviations of the variables in Study 3. data belonging to Spain, Italy, and Germany are derived with permission from (Milesi et al., 2020).

Sanctity	Authority	Loyalty	Fairness	Care	AMMSA	VB	N	
2.84 (1.03)	2.45 (.95)	3.01 (.84)	3.97 (.56)	3.77 (.62)	3.14 (.91)	3.75 (1.52)*	418	Iran
2.21 (.80)	2.52 (.80)	2.78 (.81)	4.03 (.75)	3.60 (.77)	3.09 (.62)	2.63 (1.31)	208	Spain
2.31 (.96)	2.55 (.84)	2.87 (.76)	3.97 (.68)	3.29 (.67)	3.35 (1.05)	3.21 (1.39)	157	Italy
1.79 (.89)	1.96 (.77)	2.21 (.78)	3.89 (.66)	3.64 (.65)	3.07 (.99)	2.87 (1.17)	188	Germany

* M (SD).

Note. VB = Victim-Blaming; AMMSA = Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression. VB and AMMSA were on a 1-7 scale, Moral Foundations were on a 0-5 scale.

The overall interaction of Authority foundation and Country belonging in predicting RVB was significant, $F(3, 963) = 4.98, p = .002, \Delta R^2 = .01$. The effect of Authority on rape victim-blaming was different among Iranian vs. Spanish ($b = -0.41, SE = 0.13, t(963) = -3.24, p = .001$), Iranian vs. Italian ($b = -0.31, SE = 0.13, t(963) = -2.27, p = .02$), and Iranian vs. German participants ($b = -0.33, SE = 0.13, t(963) = -2.46, p = .01$).

Lastly, we found that overall interaction between Sanctity foundation and country belonging was significant, $F(3, 963) = 6.02, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .01$. The effect of Sanctity in predicting rape victim-blaming was different among Iranian vs. Spanish ($b = -0.41, SE = 0.12, t(963) = -3.23, p = .001$) and Iranian vs. German participants ($b = -0.41, SE = 0.12, t(963) = -3.40, p < .001$). Marginal differences were observed among Iranian vs. Italian participants ($b = -0.22, SE = 0.12, t(963) = -1.83, p = .06$).

We also analyzed to see if cultural affiliation would moderate the effect of AMMSA. The overall interaction was

significant, $F(3, 963) = 3.49, p = .01, \Delta R^2 = .006$. The effect of AMMSA in predicting rape victim-blaming was different among Iranian vs. Spanish ($b = -0.26, SE = 0.09, CI: -0.44, -0.08, t(963) = -2.79, p = .005$) and Iranian vs. German participants ($b = -0.26, SE = 0.10, CI: -0.45, -0.06, t(963) = -2.56, p = .01$). There were no differences between Iranian and Italian participants in the effect of AMMSA ($b = -0.12, SE = 0.10, CI: -0.32, 0.08, t(963) = -1.20, p = .23$).

In conclusion, Study 3 provided cross-cultural evidence on moral underpinnings of rape victim-blaming in cultures of honor. Findings showed that binding moral foundations positively predicted rape victim-blaming among all cultures. However, this effect was more substantial among more honored cultures, such as Italy and Iran.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Despite their prevalence, sexual violence and rape incidents remain unreported. Rape victims often do not report their experiences because they are held responsible

and blamed for what happened. Research on factors contributing to victim-blaming has been primarily conducted in WEIRD and developed countries. Following Milesi et al., (2020) (Milesi et al., 2020), we aimed to contribute to the literature on sexual violence by studying the interplay between moral foundations, acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA), and rape victim-blaming in a non-WEIRD and honored culture (i.e., Iran). We hypothesized that binding moral foundations would positively associate with rape victim-blaming while individualizing moral foundations would negatively relate to blaming the rape victims. We additionally hypothesized that AMMSA to be positively associated with victim-blaming.

Contrary to what previous research found (e.g., (Niemi & Young, 2016)), except for the effect of Fairness in study 1, there was no relationship between individualizing moral foundations and RVB. Therefore, we did not find evidence that endorsing individualizing foundations unconditionally protects others (i.e., rape victims) from harm among Iranian participants. This finding also contradicts the concept of dyadic morality (Gray et al., 2012), which proposed that in an *agent-harm-patient* scenario, an agent is the one to blame, proposing that in some cultures of honor, the agent is not entirely held responsible. This was also evident in comparisons between cultures in Study 3. While individualizing foundations were negative predictors of rape victim-blaming in less honored cultures, their effects were unrelated to blaming rape victims for Iranian participants.

We also found that binding moral foundations were positive predictors of victim-blaming among Iranian participants. Consistent with previous literature (Niemi & Young, 2016), we found that endorsement of binding moral values (particularly Authority and Sanctity) are powerful indicator of deviation from dyadic morality among Iranian participants. Authority foundation involves respecting social hierarchies and maintaining the status quo. Positive association of the Authority with RVB could represent honor cultures' tendency to maintain the established patriarchal system. As men in a culture of honor often hold the echelons of power, people in these cultures might perceive those victims reporting their experience as threatening the established legitimacy of the hierarchies, thus blaming them and exonerating the perpetrator. Another binding foundation, Sanctity, associates promiscuous sexual activity with contamination. Culturally specific concepts in Iran, such as *Haya* and *Namoos*, often describe women's sexual behaviors using the metaphor of cleanliness and contamination. Women with non-traditional sexual

behavior, whether extramarital sex or rape, might perceive as contaminated and lead to honor killings by family members in an attempt to clean the reputation of the family name. Our findings showed that this foundation was, in fact, a robust predictor of RVB even after accounting for the effect of AMMSA in both studies. Additionally, our findings in study 3 showed that the positive effect of binding moral foundations in predicting RVB was more substantial among Iranian participants, suggesting the importance of binding moral foundations in moral decisions about RVB within cultures of honor.

It is also worth mentioning that AMMSA was the strongest predictor of RVB among Iranian participants, as predicted, and its effect was more substantial among cultures of honor. To the best of our knowledge, this study was the first to translate and utilize the AMMSA scale (Gerger et al., 2007) on Persian-speaking participants. The Persian version of the AMMSA showed satisfactory psychometric qualities across both studies and could be a promising measure for future research to study rape myths among Persian-speaking participants.

We could not find any evidence regarding the moderating role of ethnicity in the effect of moral foundations and AMMSA in predicting RVB. Our findings showed that the effects of moral foundations and AMMSA did not differ among those ethnicities living in the frontier areas of Iran (e.g., Turks/Azeris and Kurds) and those living in central parts (e.g., Persians). Our findings were also consistent with Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, (2023) findings regarding no strong gender differences in RVB among men and women in Iranian people (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023). However, this finding contradicts previous findings in Western cultures suggesting that men had higher levels of victim-blaming than women (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Our exploratory analyses also showed that religious participants (i.e., Shiite and Sunni Muslims) had higher levels of RVB and AMMSA than non-religious participants (i.e., Atheists, Agnostics, etc.), suggesting that religious teachings might contribute to the unexplained variance in predicting the rape victim-blaming.

Our research had several limitations. We collected our data using social media. Thus, our data may not represent people from lower socio-economic status living in rural parts of Iran, where victim-blaming, and a culture of honor are more common. Therefore, future research could recruit more nationally representative samples to address this limitation. Second, sub-scale reliabilities for Care and Fairness foundations were lower than other foundations and AMMSA

in both studies. Although moral foundations are held worldwide, the endorsement of these foundations might be specific to American cultures. Therefore, future research should utilize more culturally specific foundations (e.g., *Qeirat*) to study rape victim-blaming. Consistent with the agent-harm-victim concept and its association with individualizing moral foundations, future interventions aiming to reduce RVB among Iranian participants could focus on reducing the value of binding moral foundations rather than increasing the effect of individualizing moral foundations, as this study showed that individualizing moral foundations were not powerfully predicting rape victim-blaming. Future studies could also manipulate the context of rape to study their relationship with underlying moral foundations. For instance, recent evidence suggested that Muslim participants may blame the rape victims more if the incident happened in the context of dating (vs. marriage; (Malayeri, Nater, Krahé, & Sczesny, 2025)) or if the victim was not wearing Hijab (vs. wearing Hijab; (Malayeri, Nater, Krahé, Vandello, et al., 2025)). This evidence might suggest that the moral foundations underlying people's judgments about rape victim-blaming might be context dependent. Lastly, Iranian cultural climate has experienced dramatic shifts since mass protests of 2022, the Mahsa movement in 2024, followed by recent nationwide protests in 2026. These shifts have contributed to greater distancing from religious teachings and traditional cultural values, fostering more liberal and nonreligious worldviews among younger generations (Bagherian et al., 2025). Future research should collect additional data from the current context and trace the constantly changing trend of attitudes toward RVB within context of Iran.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

All data and material belonging to this study are publicly available at Open Science Framework.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Permission was obtained from the authors (Milesi et al., 2020) to use their data in Study 3.

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