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Alan Page Fiske

*Ethos*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Moral Relativism (Jun., 1990), 180-204.

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*Ethos* is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

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# *Relativity within Moose ("Mossi") Culture: Four Incommensurable Models for Social Relationships*

ALAN PAGE FISKE

Shweder (this issue) proposes that rather than arguing for relativism or universalism in general, what we need to do is to understand what's relative and what's universal. The present paper (building on Fiske 1985 and in press) offers a theory that sets out some possible universals underlying social relationships and moral frameworks, while providing a framework that potentially encompasses much of the manifest diversity around the world.<sup>1</sup> I argue that people's intuitive, implicit moral standards and ideals are based on their models for social relations (Durkheim 1933 [1893], 1965 [1912]; Piaget 1973 [1932]; Hamilton 1978; Hamilton and Sanders 1981; Fiske 1990; cf. also MacIntyre 1984). Hence, I will begin by describing the implicit models which the Moose, of Burkina Faso, unreflectively ("unconsciously") use to generate and evaluate four distinct kinds of social relationships.<sup>2</sup> These shared but unanalyzed, tacit models for Moose social relations allow them to generate coordinated, consistent, and culturally comprehensible interactions of

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ALAN P. FISKE is Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania.

four contrasting types: *communal sharing*, characterized by solidarity, common identity, and commensality; *authority ranking*, involving precedence, asymmetrical power, and deference; *equality matching*, entailing quid pro quo, in-kind reciprocity, turn taking, and egalitarian distributive justice; and *market pricing*, oriented toward commodity values or some kind of calculation of cost-benefit ratios.

Both qualitative and formal analyses of the fundamental features of these models indicate that each one has distinctive properties, as well as ones they share with other models. The unique properties of each model are such that there is no common metric which makes it possible to reduce one to another. Each model makes a unique set of distinctions and they have disparate structures. Each model constitutes social relationships that may be incompatible with the other models, and in particular each prescribes forms of interaction that often violate the prescriptive standards of the other three. Although Moose do not frequently come into conflict over discrepant prescriptions, they do not seem to have any integrative scheme that can consistently and rationally arbitrate among these four equally fundamental models while incorporating and subsuming all their definitive features. This form of relativity—incommensurability among the four models—thus obtains within some cultures as well as between them. Relativity is a particularly salient problem between cultures, and within pluralist societies, just because there is often disagreement about which model to apply to particular cases. In comparatively stable traditional societies there is a taken-for-granted implicit consensus about what model to apply in virtually all common situations. So the relativistic incommensurability of disparate moral principles derived from separate models simply does not come to people’s attention. This implies that further research should explore the processes by which people choose which model to apply to particular encounters and the conditions under which people become reflectively aware of choosing.

I hypothesize that the four normative models the Moose use to generate and evaluate their social relations are commensurable with ones used by people in all cultures. Ironically, this perspective suggests that these four fundamental models may provide the basis for mediation and accommodation between cultures. Tolerance will be enhanced if we learn to recognize familiar models in unfamiliar contexts. As an analytic approach, this theory also offers a way to en-

compass the diversity of moralities within a single comparative scheme. If we can understand how people decide when to use each model, then there is some prospect for cross-cultural mediation, negotiation, and accommodation among the world's disparate moral perspectives.

#### FOUR TYPES OF MOOSE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Let us now consider the models, generally implicit, which the Moose use, unreflectively, to generate and evaluate their social relations.<sup>3</sup> This discussion is based on ethnographic study of the ways in which Moose refer to, express, transmit, negotiate, enforce, evade, reformulate and transform standards and ideals for social relations, and otherwise use these standards and ideals in the reproduction of patterned social interaction. What I have done is to abstract from observations of and participation in a wide variety of Moose kinship, friendship, affinal, political, economic, and other social roles, and describe the forms of interactions at a level of generalization one step above that of the specific roles. For example, there are obvious concrete commonalities in the behavior of a Moose chief toward his subjects, a lineage elder toward his dependents, a compound head toward the residents of his compound, a father toward his sons, a senior wife toward her junior cowives, or an elder sister toward her younger siblings. It is the underlying structure common to these sets of analogous roles which I will refer to as a type of relationship. Fieldwork among the Moose reveals four such types.

To illustrate the nature of these four types of social relationships I will focus on a particular example, the division (*puiibu*) that occurs when a Moose group receives a gift or distributes the meat of sacrificial animals. Consider a courtship gift to a potential wife-giving lineage. The wife-seekers initially buy the kola nuts, often in the market. The purchase involves the exchange of money in return for the kola nuts, at a rate negotiated with respect to the two parties' knowledge of the going price for kola nuts as a function of their size, color, freshness, the quantity purchased, the season, and the point of sale. On various occasions the wife-seekers take kola nuts they have thus purchased, along with other gifts, present them to the head of the lineage they are courting, and then depart from the scene.

The lineage that receives the gift then divides up the kola nuts. The lineage head gets the first and biggest share, followed by the allotment of successively smaller shares to other elders in temporal order according to their rank. If there are too few kolas for everyone to get some, the distribution reaches only to the most senior men. When there are enough kolas, a pile of kola nuts will then be allocated to the young men as a consumption group, another to the wives as a group, and perhaps a third portion to sisters' sons collectively.

Each of these subgroups then undertakes a second-stage division among themselves. Generally they count the number of people in their group, and with great care and some discussion set out a corresponding number of exactly equal piles of kola nuts. They compare and evaluate each of these portions to assure exact material correspondence. This is not accomplished by a formal mathematical process, since the village Moose generally cannot do the calculations necessary for an arithmetic division. They do it operationally, as a practical process of manipulation and matching, until everyone agrees that they have it right and all are indifferent about which share they receive. Each person in the group then takes a portion, the dividers generally getting last pick (conforming to what Rawls [1971] calls "pure procedural justice").

If a participant in such a division returns home with some kola nuts, he or she may share some with children, spouses, or younger siblings. In contrast with the earlier and more formally structured stages of the division, at this point they typically share freely with little or no explicit attention to the size of the shares or the order of distribution. The manner of this sharing is characteristically, "Here, have some." This form of sharing is particularly clear in the allotment of a pot of beer or bowl of cooked food to a small group, in which all members help themselves. While everyone is encouraged to partake, and ideally the quantities should be more than ample for all to eat and drink their fill, there is no discussion or assessment of how much anyone gets.

Each of the four kinds of division that emerge in this *puiibu* is a manifestation of a different type of social relationship. The same sorts of formal features and distinctions which emerge in such a division apply equally to a very broad range of domains of Moose social life, and can be abstractly stated.

The first transaction was the purchase (*raabo*) of the kola nuts. These market pricing relationships are defined by the voluntary, negotiated exchange of something in return for something else of unlike kind with an equal value. People treat objects as commodities with prices (*ligidi*). Value is abstract, but as a standard framing the competitive attempts of the two parties to get the best possible terms for the exchange it is objective (in Durkheim's sense) at a given time and place. Such relationships may be impersonal, transitory, and highly circumscribed. They are also highly generalized, in that virtually anyone (including strangers and non-Moose) is a potential partner in such an interaction. There is an important element of contract or promise in market pricing which comes out in larger-scale transactions and ones done on credit. Explicit bargaining (*bar-sego*) is prototypical, and money (also *ligidi*) is the characteristic medium of such exchange.

Authority ranking, the second model governing the transfers in a division, emerges from the initial stages of the division, in which allotments are ordered by size. Distributors give precedence to recipients according to their rank, marking precedence in order of allotment and, most importantly, in the quantity and quality of the items allocated. The essential factor is the idea of asymmetry in social rank, magnitude, or greatness, which the Moose call *yudem*. Priority in speaking, beginning to eat, and in ceremonial procession is also a function of this rank ordering. Moreover, "big people" (*beda beda-rāmba*) are often assigned shares even when they are not present at the division, and gifts to subordinates, especially gifts to the group as a collectivity, should be channeled through them. High-ranking people have the prerogative to preempt or expropriate goods from inferiors—whom they are said to own (*so*)—without asking permission or offering anything in exchange. High rank gives authority to initiate, direct, and control group activities. Moose represent dominance as power (*pānga*) or force over subordinates, who express feelings of fear or awe of their superiors: *m zoetalame*, 'I fear/defer to him'; *a tōea maam*, 'he/she overpowers/dominates me'; *a tara pānga*, 'he/she has strength/power'. Conversely, people of high rank also must protect and provide for (*gvvle*) subordinates in need.

Division among equals follows a third model, equality matching, based on a concrete implementation of egalitarian distributive justice: to each the same. Equality matching relations are based on

concrete operations of comparing, matching, and balancing to produce qualitatively and quantitatively indistinguishable but separate and distinct portions (“separate but equal”). There is no generalizable standard for comparing different substances—there are no substitutions, and each round or apportionment is independent.<sup>4</sup> Shares of a given substance, turns, or things given in return for earlier help should balance or match (*zemse*) precisely. In the same sense, persons in an equality matching relationship are treated as distinct but interchangeable with each other. This commutative standard is applied within a number of Moose relationships, the terms for most of which end with the suffix *-taare*.<sup>5</sup> Equality matching relationships are typified by equal-status relations between age-mates (*rogētaase*) and friends (*zorāmba*) or those with a ritual friend (*bora, m daoa*). Their relations with each other are marked by one-for-one symmetry in their mutual responsibilities; there is quid pro quo reciprocity in which each party’s contributions are matched by precisely the “same” thing in return.

The Moose use a fourth model, communal sharing, to generate the type of division which often occurs at the final stage of distribution, and which usually accompanies the actual consumption of comestibles (food, drink, tobacco, kola). In the paradigmatic form of communal sharing, participants gathered in close physical proximity jointly partake in an undivided homogeneous fluid or mass, which they consume commensally, as a sort of everyday secular communion. Ideally, everyone physically present partakes freely, quantities being ample for all to have their fill. (Otherwise, people should exercise considerate restraint without any explicit assessment of what they are getting or leaving for others.) This kind of sharing is distinctive because the portions of the various parties are often not assessed, specified, delimited, or even discriminated in any formal or explicit way. Those who share with each other in this communal mode ideally have a sense of unity, oneness, and solidarity; within the context of this commensal participation, they are an undifferentiable collectivity. In work, transfers, and consumption, the participants function as a collective “we,” not as individuals. Moose in such a relationship say, *tōnd (fāa) yaa a yemre*, ‘we are (all) one’, or sometimes, *tōnd yaa būmb a ye*, ‘we are one and the same thing’. Along with these phrases, Moose often gesture to convey the solidarity and closeness of this relationship, curling the other fingers down to the

palm and bringing the middle and index fingers together. Communal sharing is typified by lineage relationships, especially between brothers of the same mother, and even more prototypically by the mother-child relationship. In Moose this sense of being the same kind, of belonging together as a collectivity or category, is usually referred to by the term *buudu*, which refers to lineage or ethnicity (at whatever level of inclusion is being marked at the moment) and more generally to kind, species, or type.

The manifestations of these four models are not limited to transactions in material goods; they also appear in several other domains in Moose society. These four models structure the ways in which the Moose organize labor, exchange, and consumption. They underlie Moose kinship and marriage systems, adultery and incest taboos. Responses to transgression, illness, and misfortune appear to be based on these same four models of social relationships, including the attributions the Moose make about evil and suffering, their notions of responsibility, and their efforts to redress wrongs and rectify moral disequilibriums. They emerge as well in Moose divination, when people determine the moral significance of misfortunes, and in sacrifice, ritual, and magic. They are indexed in many sociolinguistic contexts. Hence, the claim is that these four models are the fundamental and general models which the Moose use across the board to structure their social relationships, and to make and assess moral decisions. Note that Moose use these models much as people use the grammar of their native language—unreflectively and with little or no ability to describe them abstractly or formally. Furthermore, village Moose have virtually no interest in ethnosociology; they live their social relations, rather than analyze them. (For more detail on some of these points, see Fiske 1990 and in press.)

#### ARE THE FOUR PRESCRIPTIVE MODELS COMMENSURABLE?

In the introduction, Fiske and Mason suggest that a major issue of ethical relativism is the problem of commensurability among the models people use to make and judge human relations. Are these four models commensurable? That is, is there some way of integrating them into a unitary system that subsumes all of the essential features of each and weighs them on the same scale?

It is clear that these models rarely (if ever) occur in isolation, as pure ideal types. Does the fact that they are typically combined in sets suggest that they must be, or in any case are in practice, com-



measurable? Take the example of dividing kola nuts. It appears that, while there are many shifts from one mode of transaction to another, the Moose use just one of the above four models in determining any component molecular action in the distribution. In effect, each model is an alternative mode of organizing distribution; when recursively nested (hierarchically embedded) and chained together serially, they yield complex divisions of the sort schematically outlined above. In other domains, the same kind of mutual exclusivity and sequential linkage appears to obtain.<sup>6</sup> Each model remains distinct and is used independently. The models are often concatenated as components of a particular role, and in the interactions between two specific individuals, different models typically apply at different times, often in close conjunction. But they do not seem to be miscible; they are four discrete and disparate types. They do not form a continuum with indefinitely many intermediate forms in which features of two or more models are simultaneously marked.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the behavior of a Moose son toward his father is very often governed by the authority ranking model so that, for example, the son may work for his father or give him kola nuts out of loyalty and deference. However, at other times the model of communal sharing also applies to father and son, whose behavior when cultivating a joint field or eating together is marked by commensal sharing indicative of their common identity. Yet again, a father might buy a chicken from his son for some personal use, bargaining for it in the mode of market exchange.

A formal axiomatic analysis of the structures of these models that is in progress (Fiske, in press) demonstrates that each model has at least one defined mathematical relational property which distinguishes it from each of the others.<sup>8</sup> This means that each model represents a unique set of properties and a distinct kind of relational logic. Translating any one model into the next "higher" model requires adding a property that is undefined in the first structure, and hence involves distinguishing cases that were undifferentiable in the first model. Translation "down" to the next level entails ignoring properties in the model so transformed, conflating cases that were distinct and ignoring differences that made an essential difference in the original. In the one case translation entails the gratuitous construction of differences that were absent and meaningless in the original model, while in the other, distinctions that made a critical dif-

ference in the original are necessarily disregarded in translation. Hence, none of these four structurally distinct models can be reduced to any other without either the loss of meaning or the introduction of spurious meaning. They are intertranslatable, but ultimately not fully commensurable.

For example, it is possible to attempt to represent communal sharing in terms of market exchange: one could assess the relative values of goods and services commensally shared, work out the de facto contingencies and influences on those values, and describe communal sharing as if it were market exchange. Economists like Becker (1976, 1981) offer this sort of account of marriage, and sociobiologists like Trivers (1972) explain parenting in these terms. Important as this work is, I think it is fair to say that we would lose in such a translation some of the fundamental social, cultural, and cognitive features of, say, the human infant nursing at the breast, or romantic love. Describing communal sharing in market pricing terms fails to capture the essence of communal sharing: a sense of unity and wholeness, of being at one with the other, of making the other's needs and concerns one's own, of empathy and caring, of the primacy of the collective welfare. In short, to translate one model for social relationships into the terms of another is to misrepresent the structure of the underlying model as well as many significant surface features of such relations. With considerable distortion such a translation can be accomplished, and it may occasionally be a useful analytic exercise, but there is a great deal of slippage and inaccuracy in such a translation, and much that is critical and indeed definitive in the original meaning is lost.

What about commensurability? Is there some higher-level framework that encompasses all four models? None that I can find among the Moose. I have looked for some overarching scheme that comprehends and integrates them all, some unitary principle or equation from which all four types can be derived, but so far without success. There may be standard, even stereotyped, compromise formations overdetermined by the overlap of two or more structural models, but that does not imply ontological or conceptual coherence among them. Philosophers in various cultures have proposed various comprehensive integrative schemes, but it is not apparent how any of these correspond to any ethical standards that Moose regard as transcending and incorporating all four of the models. Lacking

such an all-inclusive framework, these four types of social relationships appear to be incommensurable in the framework of contemporary Moose village culture and their intuitive thought.<sup>9</sup>

If this is true, such an irreducible multiplicity in the fundamental moral frameworks of a society has strong implications for our concepts of “culture,” “society,” and “social structure.” In particular, the incommensurability of the four models would imply that, while each particular type of Moose social interaction is “structured,” the society as a whole is not organized according to any single structural principle. Nor would Moose society as a whole be comprehensible to participants—or to comparativists—within the terms of any one of the models. Each model can be construed as a structural principle, pattern, or theme running through Moose social life. But these several principles or patterns may be intrinsically irreconcilable.<sup>10</sup> The nature of these four Moose models of and for social relationships implies that neither from a functional nor an ideal-logical perspective are Moose social relations organized into a unified or integrated “system.” The logical coherence of the culture and the functional integration of the society are limited by the multiplicity and disparity in the forms of the underlying models the Moose use to construct the society’s component social relationships. Quite probably the same is true of social systems in general.

## APPLYING FOUR INCOMMENSURABLE PRESCRIPTIVE MODELS

### CHOICES, RIDDLES, AND TRAGEDY

As far as people “on the street” are concerned, an ethical standard is always the implicit product of some particular ideal model of human relations. Western philosophers argue that we owe justice and fairness to all, regardless of our relationship to anyone. But this is a prescriptive ideal and does not correspond to how people actually apply moral standards to themselves or others. In the absence of the relevant social relationship, people do not regard themselves or others as having moral obligations. For example, justice (as equality matching) is owed to all who have equal standing with regard to the issue at hand within the sphere of the relevant social relation. In some modern contexts, we attempt to include all living persons in that relation. But for most purposes we do not: how many

things can you think of that we actually divide up equally among all people? For the most part, political relations—membership in the same city, state, or country—represent the practical limit of equity. Within those boundaries, moreover, we invariably exclude some people; minors and felons are not permitted to vote, for example. Do kindness and compassion appear to be universal duties? If so, that comes from a Western religious or ideological precept of universal “brotherly” love: treat everyone as a brother. To the extent that you actually subscribe to this, I would maintain that it is because you have a nominal, ideal fraternal relationship with everyone, including those you have never met. But even that social relation is bounded: what about the enemies of your nation or religion, hostile aliens, rabid dogs, poisonous reptiles, trees, and rocks? Whatever the boundaries of the social relationship in question, there we find the boundaries of the corollary moral obligation. Somewhere everyone draws a line on what counts as a socio-moral “thou”—although the line may be ambiguous.

MacIntyre (1984) argues convincingly that the very idea of morality presupposes the pursuit of historically transmitted, culturally defined and situated social practices in a true community. Morality inherently has to do with virtues, the goods that are intrinsic (“internal”) to such practices.

Every practice requires a certain kind of relationship between those who participate in it. Now the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kinds of purposes and standards which inform practices. [MacIntyre 1984:191]

Then MacIntyre (1984:194) concludes that “the making and sustaining of forms of human community—and therefore of institutions—itself has all the characteristics of a practice . . . which stands in a particularly close relationship to the exercise of the virtues.” For this anthropological reader, MacIntyre’s whole thesis reads as an elegant account of why morality as such is inherently derived from historically situated, culturally constituted social relationships. He explicitly acknowledges (1984:272–278) the relativistic implications of this position between historical and cultural traditions—and his earlier discussion of tragedy implies the existence of moral incommensurability within cultures, communities, and individuals as well. A moral precept, formulated or implicit, is always embedded in a social relationship, and presumes that relationship. So if in a

single society more than one incommensurable model of social relationships is operative, as among the Moose, then there will be multiple incommensurable, but equally basic, moral standards predicated on them. In short, the conclusion is that there is an irreducible relativism among the moral perspectives existing within Moose culture, and probably within any culture.

In Africa and elsewhere, this incommensurability forms the basis of many popular riddles and dilemma tales, requiring the choice among disparate moral values (cf. Bascom 1975). These riddles are intriguing because there is no ultimate solution. If the two models were commensurable, so that there were some mediating cultural algorithm for resolving the conflict, there would be an institutionalized compromise. Everyone's answers would be the same, and "self-evident," so such questions would not be the provocative dilemmas they are. The same sort of relativity among models is at the root of the personal conflict and social controversy surrounding the Milgram authority experiments, in which subjects have to choose between adhering to the authority ranking model, which demands obedience to a superior's orders, and conforming to the demands of the communal sharing model, which calls for compassion, empathy, and refraining from gratuitous harm.<sup>11</sup> The two normative standards conflict, and participants frequently make what seems to observers like the wrong choice between them.

Since the ethical standards based on different models are incommensurable, their demands are irreconcilable. In the Western classical tradition, such irreconcilable conflict is the crux of tragedy (MacIntyre 1984:163–164, 179). What tragedy illustrates is that either within a person or between two persons, the valid and inescapable demands of true moral precepts may be irreconcilable—because they are incommensurable. It is theoretically conceivable that in a given case all four of these models could result in the same concrete distribution, for example, but only if all concerned have precisely equal needs and abilities, and equal rank, as well as exactly equal utilities and wealth. However, situations in which two or more models do prescribe the same actions are rare and for the most part fortuitous. Ordinarily, adhering to one model means violating the others. Consider a family. Like any institution, it is composed of phases or activities in which most, probably all, of the models operate (Fiske, in press). But in any given domain, for example work,

the options are mutually exclusive in operation: Will everyone pitch in and work according to their abilities, time, and energy? Will everyone take turns at each task, rotating around and doing exactly the same work over the turn-taking cycle? Will work be allocated by status and rank, some having privileges that others do not, directing and controlling others? Will work be contractually organized on the basis of competitive bargaining and paid for in money, according to market rates? Only one of these schemes is “kind” and “caring”; the others are not. Only one is “fair” and “just.” Only one “respects” age and wisdom, and “gives authority its rightful place.” Only one is “voluntary,” and allows people the “freedom to choose” and to compete and make the most they can of their opportunities. That is a result of the meaning of the concepts. In the same domain at the same time you can’t have true kindness, and fairness, and respect for status and rank, and freedom of opportunity: their prescriptions are almost invariably incompatible. Applying different models to the same action yields different moral judgments about that action. Action in adherence to one model is transgression of another, as the African dilemma tales, Kohlberg’s dilemma interviews (Kohlberg 1981, 1983; cf. Edwards 1985), and everyday experience amply demonstrate.

It is not entirely without precedent to argue that there are multiple, irreconcilable models governing the social organization of a single community at a given time. Berlin (1980 [1955]) reminds us that Machiavelli, and to some degree also Vico and Montesquieu, appreciated this:

Machiavelli’s cardinal achievement is, let me repeat, his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma, the planting of a permanent question mark in the path of posterity. It stems from his *de facto* recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality or accident or error—the clash of Antigone and Creon or in the story of Tristan—but (this surely was new) as part of the normal human situation. [Berlin 1980:74–75]

MacIntyre (1984) points out that Nietzsche recognized the incoherent nature of modern moral discourse, in which people disguise statements of preferences as rational arguments. And MacIntyre argues that among contemporary rival moral premises, “there is no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another” (1984:8). In his course on legal thinking at Harvard in the 1960s,

Paul Freund said much the same thing about the U.S. Constitution and law in general: More than one rule commonly applies in complex ways to any given case, and there is no consistent and reasonable lexical meta-rule to arbitrate among them. The American legal system simply has no ultimate, comprehensive, logically determinate principle for deciding which rule to apply to a given case, except the pragmatic decision process of adjudication itself.

The operational process of choosing how and when to apply rules is logically of a different order than the rules themselves. The choice among rules may be smooth and unobtrusive, as it is in everyday life in settled and stable domains, or it may be dramatically controversial, as it is in Supreme Court decisions. The observation that most such decisions among rules are made more or less smoothly does not, in itself, imply that the rules which people choose among are commensurable. The procedures for pragmatic choice need not incorporate the rules they choose among: consider mechanisms of choice among rule options based on rolling a die, or simple alternation, or physical coercion. The fact that there must be some mechanism for accomplishing this selection among models for social relationships in everyday life implies only a limited sort of coordination among the models: it implies just the ability to shift among them and operate within any one of them in a given frame. Your computer can shift between running any number of programs under any number of operating systems, but of course that does not mean that the disparate programs can work together in an integrated or systematic fashion. Their proximity in time and space, and the ability to switch among them, does not imply that they can speak to each other, much less that their structures are commensurable. Margaret Mead pointed out this fact about societies half a century ago:

The components of a social system may not work harmoniously together, regardless of whether the main emphasis of the system is sufficiently clear to characterize it as primarily cooperative, competitive, or individualistic. [1937:509]

As Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out, lack of harmony does not prevent institutions from "hanging together," and in some cultures people nevertheless attempt to construct a coherent, consistent system of meaning for the society as a whole on top of the actual relations, manufacturing a spuriously integrated superstructure. "Reflective consciousness superimposes the quality of logic on the

institutional order” (1966:64) in the absence of logical consistency among the diverse forms of interaction which actually exist.

#### THE ARTICULATION OF THE MODELS IN EVERYDAY PRACTICE

Given that these four models for social relationships are incommensurable and generate distinct alternative patterns of action, I want to stress the striking fact that, in practice, in Moose social life they rarely clash overtly. Among the Moose at least, ambiguity, conflict, and ambivalence over the application of these models are rare. For the most part, people make their choices smoothly, consensually, and unreflectively. Individuals are rarely in a quandary about what model to apply, and it is unusual to come across interpersonal disagreements about which model should govern a particular encounter or long-term series of interactions.

But occasionally there are ambiguities about which model to apply, and tensions and disputes result. One of the oldest divisions in the village of our fieldwork had to do with an event many years before in which a ritual leader had taken his share of the goats offered up at a funeral, and sold them. By conducting this market pricing transaction he outraged and permanently alienated the deceased’s lineage segment. These goats had been offered up as a kind of communion substance marking solidarity with the ancestors and with the deceased person, in the framework of communal sharing. They could also be construed as gifts of obeisance, fealty, and propitiatory tribute to the ancestors, in the framework of authority ranking. But in neither interpretation could they properly be alienated as commodities. In the usual construction of this context, the goats allocated to a member of the burial party are his to butcher and consume, or else to keep and raise. But they are in no way private property to sell. The ritual leader’s appropriation of the goats into a market transaction was evidently incompatible with his acquisition and use of them within the communal sharing and authority ranking models. As a translation, imagine that your father, instead of joining you at your house for Thanksgiving dinner, sold his rights to the meal to a stranger, who tried to come and consume the meal as one would in a restaurant, as a purchased commodity. The villagers’ reaction was analogous. Your share in Thanksgiving dinner, your place and presence at the table, is not a commodity like a gift certificate that you may sell to a stranger.



In another case, a group of indigo dyers whom I hardly knew once asked me to get some rubber gloves for them in the capital, to protect their hands from the caustic dye. When I did so, it seemed to me that they were remarkably unappreciative (although I had not expected to be reimbursed). Evidently they regarded me as a European authority, who should look out for them, give them protection, and take pastoral responsibility for their extraordinary needs. But when I privately expressed my disgruntlement to a couple of close friends, my friends were so indignant that they reprimanded the dyers (through some channel or other). The dyers appeared one day bearing chickens to give me in reciprocal thanks for my gift of the gloves. In other words, these casual acquaintances had presumed that we were in an authority ranking relationship, in which they owed me only deference and some sort of fealty. But the general opinion of my fellow villagers, and the view that prevailed, was that the relationship was actually equality matching, so a return gift was due to me. The ambiguity was a consequence of my ambiguous place in the social system as a person of European culture (presumptively, to be treated in accordance with authority ranking), yet living in the village and participating in everyday social interactions (so equality matching should apply).

We did not often encounter such cases of ambiguity between models within the traditional system, but there is one salient context in which such disagreements may emerge: when someone accuses someone else of a moral violation. People often respond to the accusatory invocation of one of these models by defending themselves with reference to another model. Thus, at a cooperative work party during Ramadan, the fasting Moslems angrily accused a man of unjustly leaving them out of a food division. He tried to excuse himself by saying that he had not been told to include them. That is, in order to try to extricate himself from an indictment under the terms of the equality matching model, he switched frames and claimed to have operated properly within the terms of the authority model, in which he was a mere factotum just doing what he was told. This sort of attempted defense by resort to another model is quite common in many cultures, I think: Milgram's subjects and defendants at the Nuremberg trials also used the same jump from an essentially communal sharing indictment to an authority ranking defense. Since

there is no absolute superordinate criterion for choosing among models, this defense can sometimes be effective.

But disputes over problematic cases, and the consequent defensive recourse to another model to legitimate one's action, occur in only a minute fraction of all social interactions. Especially in a relatively stable traditional society there is overwhelming consensus on the application rules that determine when to apply which principles. Sane adults all take these application rules for granted, and indeed only children, fools, madmen, and strangers fail to understand what standards apply in any ordinary, commonplace context. Religious reformers and prophets may occasionally challenge these shared understandings. And the disparities faced by people raised in or truly participating in two incompatible cultural systems may sometimes lead them to recognize the relativity of each system. Radically new situations that are not analogous to known ones, and radical, deep mixing of cultures, both tend to bring the arbitrariness into view, and hence expose the fact of incommensurability.<sup>12</sup> But as long as almost everyone in a given culture knows what the standards are supposed to be in virtually all the circumstances they encounter, incommensurability does not become an issue and is not recognized (cf. Horton 1967). Ordinarily, the arbitrariness of the application rules is invisible. Lack of conflict does not at all imply either logical or functional integration among moral principles. We should not mistake peace and consensus for logical coherence and commensurability. People use multiple, disparate models to generate and to judge social relations.

#### AMBIGUITY, CONFLICT, AND POLITICS WITHIN MODELS

However, ambiguity and conflict within the terms of each model are very common: participants generally agree about which model applies, but they frequently differ on how to apply it. Moose society is fraught with such within-model tensions and discord just under the surface, and sometimes such tensions come into the open. For example, everyone in the village agrees about the general nature of lineage seniority as constructed on the basis of ranked authority, about the responsibilities of the lineage head, and about the fact that the eldest true member of the lineage (that is, excluding men descended through women) should be the head. But in one lineage there had been considerable disagreement at the last succession over the relative ages of the three claimants, and also, it seems, over

whether one of them was a true member. One of them was ultimately installed, but for years the other two continued to avoid full participation in lineage rites, disputing the legitimacy of that man's leadership.

Even when there is no doubt about seniority, the actual exercise of authority among the Moose may be frustratingly difficult. In principle, authority is imperative and deference is obligatory. But passive resistance is common: given an order, an inferior often says nothing (or even indicates compliance), but fails to perform as commanded. As long as subordinates observe surface politeness and do not openly confront superiors, authorities often feel they have no immediate recourse for dealing with this passive disobedience. In the long run there may be opportunities to sanction a disobedient subordinate by failing to support and protect him as one would a loyal follower. All concerned would recognize the legitimacy of the authority which the elder is trying to exercise, but there are a myriad of reasons why that recognition may fail to produce the requisite action. Furthermore, it is important to note in this connection that of course these models for social relationships are not the only factors in social life: people may be worried, deaf, tired, bored, hungry, lustful—or simply have competing obligations derived from other authority ranking relationships.

In the opposite direction there are also controls on authority relationships which restrict the exercise of the nominally unlimited powers that inhere in the relationship. The Moose say that the sanction limiting the rapacity of chiefs, especially at the village level, is the possibility of their subjects departing, leaving the chief with no followers. I think such flight often occurs at the lineage and compound level: discontented or exploited subordinates move out and go to live in another village, often with their mother's brother. (However, they usually cite the need for more and better fields as their explicit reason for such changes of residence.)

The same sort of ambiguity obtains in the practical construction of communal sharing relations, where once again the model is definite but its application to particular cases and persons is indefinite. For example, the lineage is a nested (or branching) structure, and whom to include in a given ritual or distribution is sometimes an issue. Equality matching relations are also characterized by a degree of uncertainty and sometimes stress over the concrete realiza-

tion of the model. Pragmatically, there is often a question of what constitutes reciprocity, and—much more commonly—the issue of what constitutes an adequate excuse for failure to reciprocate (or for postponement of reciprocation). For example, if you go to a man's threshing bee but he then fails to come to yours in return, citing an obligation to attend his father-in-law's bee, that is understandable—but why did he fail to send his younger brother in his place? In market pricing there is always the specter of deception, and between strangers the facts are often misrepresented: the chicken is in fact being sold because it is probably coming down with cholera, although the seller denies the epidemic has reached his village. The eggs that were said to have been “just laid yesterday” turn out to be quite rotten. Is such a case merely an honest mistake by the sellers, a legitimate bit of hard dealing, marginal sharp practice, or plain fraud? Moose opinions differ. Most disputes arise from this kind of ambiguity about how to apply a given model to a particular case.

### CROSS-CULTURAL COMMENSURABILITY

The models Moose use to construct their social relationships are probably not unique to them. Suppose that some or all of these fundamental models are commensurable with those of other societies. Then basic moral standards are commensurable between different cultures within the framework of each one of the models. My hypothesis is that, while individual cultures vary considerably in their applications of these models to roles and situations, the fundamental form of each of the four models themselves may be universal (cf. Fiske, *in press*). Cultures differ in the ways in which age and sex, individual characteristics and qualities, personal history and previous interactions, circumstantial contingencies, and innumerable other factors are used to determine which basic relational model is applied to any given interaction. Cultures also differ (within interesting bounds) in the way in which they mark each type of relationship: not all cultures treat the gift of white roosters and the display of ostrich eggs at roof corners as markers of authority. Also, cultures attach different values to the “free” parameters in any given model. For example, to the extent that their respective markets are independent, cultures have different price structures: the ratio of the value of meat to unskilled labor is much higher among the Moose (about a pound of meat for a day of work) than it is among us. Social

relations governed by the same set of models look—and really are—very different when their parameters are set differently, and when people implement the models in vastly different contexts and combinations—let alone when people mark the same kind of relationship differently.

Yet we can enhance mutual understanding across cultures by recognizing familiar models in unexpected domains. For example, in the modern West the state, through its agents, takes responsibility for law enforcement and punishment, operating in an authority ranking mode. The Moose, however, commonly treat apprehension and punishment for many crimes as collective tasks, structured as communal sharing. For example, when people suspect that a witch has killed someone, the divination is a joint project of many people, not a matter for any chief—certainly not for the state. Then the community as a whole drives the witch out, perhaps stoning her. People are afraid to confront and accuse a witch as individuals, and rarely do so. (Chiefs do adjudicate other kinds of cases, including rare accusations of sorcery.)

While the apprehension and punishment of felons is commonly organized in the manner of authority ranking in the United States and in the form of communal sharing among the Moose, the reverse is generally true of marital choice. The head of a Moose lineage, in consultation with the head of the compound and the father, gives women in marriage. This bestowal is a prerogative of these elders, and the woman has no say in the matter; she should go where she is sent. Her duty in marriage, too, is to serve her husband and do as he directs. Similarly, it is entirely up to the elders of the wife-giving lineage to decide which girl to promise in marriage to the wife-seeking lineage: the prospective husband and his lineage have no say at all in the selection of his wife. In the United States, on the other hand, the dominant model for marital choice is based on the romantic idea that the two partners will discover in each other their complementary selves, and will then feel an overwhelming sense of unity and identity. In American culture, falling in love is defined by a dissolution of boundaries between the two lovers, so that they become one, an emotional and social unit. As such, they share each other's hardships and triumphs empathically, give of themselves without limit, wishing only to serve and care for each other and make each other content, and so living happily ever after. This romantic model

is prototypical communal sharing. Americans leave most law enforcement to the authorities and idealize the choice of a spouse as the consensual discovery of a communal relationship, while Moose leave the choice of spouses to the authorities and regard the punishment of witches as a communal responsibility.

There is a similar crossover between love and labor among Moose and Americans. In the United States, we apply market pricing in most of our labor, and communal sharing in our love life. Moose organize village labor primarily in the framework of communal sharing, and hardly ever according to market pricing. Moose working together to cultivate someone's field would generally be bewildered, if not shocked and insulted, to be paid for their time. On the other hand, a Moose woman would be equally offended if her lover ever did *not* offer her money for sleeping with him.

Again, people of Euro-American culture living in Africa generally assume that their relationship with "houseboys," watchmen, or nannies is essentially market pricing, and assume that they owe their employees wages, courtesy, and little else. African servants commonly construe the relationship as authority ranking, and expect the heads of the household to which they are attached to take responsibility for them, protect them, and make them gifts whenever they have an extraordinary need or a family obligation. This mismatch of models within a long-term interaction may produce considerable intercultural misunderstanding, strain, and moral condemnation on each side.

If we encounter another culture's law enforcement, marital choice, love affairs, or work structured according to unexpected (and unrecognized) standards, other people's moral standards may well seem unnatural, perverse, savage, or simply immoral (Montesquieu 1975 [1721]). But each is rendered more intelligible and more tolerable if we recognize it as the operation of a familiar model out of its expected contexts. When looking at any sort of institution in another culture, their way of doing things may be incommensurable with our way of doing the same thing, but fully commensurable with some other institution in our culture. We can recognize and learn to use local variants of familiar models in novel contexts, and this, I think, is one of several essential human capacities that contributes to making participant-observation possible. Knowing—in an implicit, unreflective, pragmatic operational sense as all humans do—

something of the fundamental nature of, say, authority ranking, together with explicit knowledge of its variant manifestations around the world and how it is characteristically marked, the ethnographer quickly recognizes authority ranking despite its exotic garb, and orients accordingly, assimilating a shared model in an alien milieu. By showing that exotic social practices in strange cultures are manifestations of shared structures in novel contexts, we render them intelligible and morally defensible. Hence this cross-domain, cross-cultural transfer of evaluative orientation is both a powerful form of translation and a promising mechanism for mediating across cultures. So perhaps the four models that I have described may allow not only theoretical mediation, but pragmatic social accommodation as well. Although we often disagree across cultures on the natural contexts and the appropriate fields of extension of each model, the experience of participant-observation suggests to me that we can accommodate to and often comfortably adopt other cultures' application rules and parameter settings. To make bridges between cultures, we must acknowledge the considerable degree of arbitrariness of our rules for applying each of the models, and learn to recognize familiar models in unfamiliar contexts. Based on this mutual translation we must learn to negotiate the application of the basic models to particular cases. Then some sort of comity is possible.

## NOTES

*Acknowledgments.* An earlier version of this paper was presented in a symposium which I organized on ethical relativism, sponsored by the American Ethnological Society and the Society for Psychological Anthropology, at the 1984 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Denver.

The research was supported in part by a Social Science Research Council International Doctoral Research Fellowship, a National Science Foundation Dissertation Research Grant, a U.S. Office of Education Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship, a USPHS National Institute of Mental Health National Research Service Award, and NIMH grant BSR 1 R29 MH43857. For all this support, and for the help extended to me by my committee and other faculty, fellow students, staff at the University of Chicago, by my parents, and above all for the warm hospitality of our Moose hosts and friends, I am very grateful.

I am indebted to Jon Baron, John Comaroff, Elizabeth Coville, Verne Dusenbery, Donald Fiske, Barbara Fiske, Gregory Kavka, John Sabini, Richard Shweder, Bradd Shore, Melford Spiro, and two anonymous reviewers for thoughtful readings of earlier drafts of this paper, and to Kathryn Mason for her close collaboration and support in our fieldwork, her checking and corroboration of my ethnographic descriptions, and for commenting on and helping me revise this paper.

<sup>1</sup>Note to philosophers: this is a descriptive account of Moose intuitive thought and their implicit moral standards. It is not a prescriptive argument as such, although I think it has important implications for such advocacy.

<sup>2</sup>The spelling of the word “Moose” (pronounced “MOH say,” formerly written “Mossi” or “Moshi”), and other Moose words in the text follows the orthography developed by Moose linguists and officially adopted in Burkina Faso in 1976.

<sup>3</sup>By models I mean mutually understood norms, rules, grammars, metaphors, ideals, paradigmatic values, sentiments, and motives, or any other collective representation that structures the production of social relationships. Most of these generative models are not readily available to self-reflective consciousness or verbally formulated reports, and the Moose generally have little interest in abstract or generalized theoretical accounts of their own culture. So this description is based on observations of how the Moose use, transmit, and refer to the models, not on their own formal or explicit ethnosociology—which is practically nonexistent in the village context. For more details and illustrations, see Fiske (1985, in press).

<sup>4</sup>Walzer (1983) argues that this is a general principle of justice rules—that it is inherent in the meaning of justice that different criteria should operate in each distinct distributive sphere. However, he has a rather market pricing, proportional conception of justice, in contrast to the strict, in-kind egalitarian distributive justice that equality matching entails.

<sup>5</sup>For example, *wvmdētaare*, working together; *remdētaare*, playing together; *tūdētaare*, following/traveling together; *redētaare*, going (traveling) together; *poḡtaare*, jealousy among cowives. The suffix for persons in such a mutual relationship is *taaga*, “co-,” “fellow-,” from the same root: *wvmdētaaga*, co-worker; *remdētaaga*, playmate; *sōetaaga*, fellow witch; *rataaga*, other male (who is illicitly sleeping with one’s wife).

<sup>6</sup>See Fiske (in press) for a general discussion of the construction of social relations out of combinations of the models.

<sup>7</sup>Contra Sahlins (1965) and analysts of the dimensional structure of social relations; compare Fiske (in press).

<sup>8</sup>It seems that the four models can be axiomatized so that they are uniquely ordered in a hierarchical nesting or embedding, such that each successive model includes all the properties of the earlier ones and adds a new property.

<sup>9</sup>Ethnographic material cannot prove the *impossibility* of an integrative framework within which the four moral models would be commensurable. But there is no evidence for the actual existence of such a framework in Moose culture.

<sup>10</sup>Kelly (1977) documents what may be such a structural contradiction between irreducibly disparate models for social relations in a New Guinea society, for example, and discusses the history of the idea of structural contradiction. Shore makes a similar observation in his article in this issue of *Ethos*.

<sup>11</sup>The results of the experiment contradict our expectations and shock those who learn about them for two reasons: We have an ideological antipathy toward authority, associated with collective beliefs which understate the importance of authority ranking in our social relations. We also have an ideology of universal communal sharing—while in practice actually limiting communal sharing to our closest and most intimate relations. Hence, we expect disobedience of the stranger in authority and communal compassion for the stranger in distress. The Milgram experiments contradict this expectation, revealing that most Americans obey authority and fail to heed the distressed “victim’s” cries for relief.

<sup>12</sup>In this interpretation of modern moral cacophony I differ somewhat from MacIntyre’s (1984) interpretation.

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