

## **UC Merced**

### **Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society**

#### **Title**

Group Identity Salience in Sacred Value Based Cultural Conflict: An Examination of the Hindu-Muslim Identities in the Kashmir and Babri Mosque Issues

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87h4g4q5>

#### **Journal**

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 31(31)

#### **ISSN**

1069-7977

#### **Authors**

Medin, Douglas  
Sachdeva, Sonya

#### **Publication Date**

2009

Peer reviewed

# Group Identity Salience in Sacred Value Based Cultural Conflict: An Examination of the Hindu-Muslim Identities in the Kashmir and Babri Mosque Issues

**Sonya Sachdeva (s-sachdeva@northwestern.edu)**

Department of Psychology, 2029 Sheridan Rd.  
Evanston, IL 60025

**Douglas L. Medin (medin@northwestern.edu)**

Department of Psychology, 2029 Sheridan Rd.  
Evanston, IL 60025

## Abstract

The sacred values of a community are critical in understanding cultural conflict. When an attempt is made to trade a sacred value with a secular good, it evokes feelings of anger (taboo-tradeoff) but less so when that sacred value is traded off with another sacred value (tragic). Previous work has shown that participants who expressed sacred values for an issue were more resistant to taboo than tragic peace deals. Our objective in the present study was to extend these findings to conflicts between Hindus and Muslims over Kashmir and the Babri Mosque, the former more salient to Muslim identity and the latter more salient to Hindu identity. While replicating the previous interaction between sacred values and tradeoff type, we also found a moderating role of how salient an issue was for group identity. Only the participants for whom the issue was salient showed the previous correlates of sacred values.

**Keywords:** Culture and cognition; sacred values; inter-group conflict.

The separation between the sacred and profane spheres of life was first underlined by Émile Durkheim at the turn of the 20th century. Although he mainly used the concept of sacred values as the means through which religious symbols and ultimately religion develop, the definition he used for sacred values persists to this day. The sacred and profane are the two spheres through which humans navigate in their daily lives. The profane is countable, measurable and routine whereas the sacred is sacred, simply because it is none of those things. Durkheim defined sacred as pertaining to that which is transcendental and non-utilitarian (Durkheim, 1912/1995).

Recently, psychologists have transformed the mainly philosophical and sociological concept of sacred values to a functional psychological construct. Phillip Tetlock and his colleagues (2000) developed the Sacred Value Protection Model (SVPM). In this model, people want to protect their sacred values from being corrupted by secular values. They found that people feel severe distress when they are asked to measure sacred values on a secular metric (e.g. being asked how much money one is willing to accept for one's child). This type of tradeoff, mixing the sacred with the secular, is known as a taboo tradeoff. However, Tetlock et

al (2000) also found that if tradeoffs occur within the same domain, such as a sacred value for another sacred value, these types of tradeoffs are less offensive. Tradeoffs within the sacred sphere are known as tragic or symbolic.

Sacred values can also be a motivating factor between the persistence of conflict between religious or ethnic groups. Ginges, Atran, Medin and Shikaki (2007) extended the research on the SVPM to understanding the Israeli-Palestinian dispute which is often discussed in sacred terms, e.g. a fight to protect the holy land (Dumper, 2002). Ginges et al (2007) presented three types of peace deals to members of Hamas, Palestinian refugees, and Jewish Israeli settlers to assess whether sacred values caused participants to be non-utilitarian in a field experiment. This type of experiment allowed the SVPM to be applied to a real political dispute, with participants who dealt with the repercussions of this dispute on a daily level. In addition, peace deals were constructed as to be extremely realistic, using some of the same solutions, e.g., a two-state solution, which have been proposed as permanent solutions to the dispute by international agencies.

The three types of tradeoff deals in this study were taboo, taboo + and tragic (symbolic). In the taboo deal, a two state solution was presented, the taboo + deal included the two-state solution and offered money in addition to this solution and the tragic deal offered the two state solution but a symbolic concession (an apology or recognition of a sacred right) in exchange. The researchers found that the taboo+ deals were more offensive to participants than the taboo+ deals but only to the participants for whom this issue was sacred (deemed moral absolutists by the authors). Non-moral absolutists showed exactly the reverse pattern and were less offended by taboo+ deals than the basic taboo deals. In deals where a symbolic concession was offered, moral absolutists were less offended than when the basic taboo deal was offered whereas no-moral absolutists were more disapproving of a tragic than a taboo tradeoff.

Ginges et al's (2007) work shows that the SVPM can be used in real world situations to facilitate cultural understanding. For example, an outsider brought in to help heal the conflict might be insensitive to the sacred nature of a particular issue by proposing what to him/her seems to be an adequate compromise. But, as noted in the above work, moral and non-moral absolutists have vastly different

perspectives on what is an appropriate compromise. In the present study, we extended this work to a different cultural conflict that also appeared to us to be sacred in nature. The goal of this study was to examine whether the salience of an issue to a particular group was necessary to produce the previously shown effects of having sacred values on utilitarian thinking. Ledgerwood, Liviatan and Carnevale (2007) have shown that the extent to which a material good gains symbolic significance is related to how committed one is to a group's identity. For example, NYU students who strongly identified with NYU identity placed higher value on a historic townhouse on the campus than students who identified weakly with NYU identity. Similarly, we proposed that participants who claim to hold a sacred value for an issue and also identify strongly with that issue would show a different pattern of results than participants who identify weakly with an issue even though both may claim that the issue holds transcendental significance for them.

### Present Study

The aim of this project is to study the sacred values underlying and motivating two disputes between Hindu and Muslim populations in northeastern India. One is the Babri Mosque issue. This has been a relentlessly contentious issue for over a century since both Hindus and Muslims claim to have a sacred right to this land. Hindus believe this land to be the birthplace of an especially influential sacred deity, Ram. Muslims claim that the land is a mark of the first Mughal emperor to conquer India, Babar. Although local spats have been occurring in this region as early as the 1800s, the most serious bout of fighting occurred in December of 1992 when thousands of Hindu fundamentalists broke down all the security placed around this site in 1990 and tore the Babri Mosque down, essentially with their bare hands. This sparked off the worst riots seen in India between Hindus and Muslims since the partition. The overall death toll for these riots was in the thousands - not including the retaliatory terrorist attacks which simultaneously bombed 13 sites in Mumbai, India's financial capital in 1993 leaving hundred dead and thousands injured.

The other issue we studied was the conflict over Kashmir. This conflict began with the struggle for Muslim autonomy in the newly independent India and newly created Pakistan. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over this issue with no clear resolution. The status quo is that India holds approximately two-thirds of Kashmir while Pakistan holds the rest. While seemingly a border dispute, in essence, this is a clash of Hindu and Muslim ideologies (Rai, 2004). These conflicts were selected to be differentially salient to Hindu and Muslim populations with the Babri Mosque issue to be more important for Hindu group identity and the Kashmir issue for the Muslim group identity<sup>1</sup>. Our aim in this project was to replicate the basic interaction between

sacred values and tradeoff type as per the SVPM. But, additionally, we predicted that the interaction between sacred values and taboo versus tragic trade-offs would be present more strongly for participants whose group identity was strongly linked with the issue being discussed.

### Method

**Participants** Fifty-three participants were recruited door-to-door in the neighboring towns of Faizabad and Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Faizabad is a mainly Muslim town and Ayodhya contains a predominantly Hindu population. The sample collected from each town is representative of the overall population. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 88 with 21 females in the sample. Approximately, 50 percent of the sample was Muslim.

**Materials & Design** We constructed two scenarios to be specifically salient to either a Hindu or a Muslim community in this region. Each interview was conducted individually and took approximately 45 minutes. Each participant was presented with both scenarios (counterbalanced). And both scenarios involved some sort of negotiation over a site that is sacred to both Hindus and Muslims. All participants received the same basic scenario but the specific deals varied by the condition participants were assigned to as well as which community the participant belonged to. This was necessary because the party conferring either the money in the taboo+ condition or the apology in the tragic condition varied depending on whether the participant was Hindu or Muslim. Each scenario had three versions presented between-subjects - the baseline tradeoff, a taboo tradeoff and a tragic tradeoff. The three versions of the Babri Mosque scenario for the Muslim participants are presented below.

Babri Mosque scenario:

*Some members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) demolished the Babri Masjid because they believed that the spot commemorates the birthplace of Shriram. Since then, the VHP has been trying to rebuild the temple that existed on this site. Suppose the Supreme Court organized an agreement between Muslims and Hindus. Under this agreement:*

Taboo:

*a) All India Babri Masjid Action Committee (AIBMAC) would recognize that the Babri Masjid was built atop the ruins of Ram Janmbhoomi. b) The site of the Babri Masjid would be split in half, with one half for a temple to Ram and another as a monument to the masjid. Taboo+:*

*c) In return, VHP will pay AIBMAC one crore (10 million) rupees each year for 10 years.*

Tragic:

*c) In return, VHP will recognize the historic and legitimate right of the Muslims to the Babri Masjid and will apologize for all the wrongs done to Muslims.*

The Kashmir scenario was parallel to the Babri Mosque scenario. The base story is presented below.

Kashmir Scenario:

*Imagine that the UN has gotten a deal together to resolve the Indian-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir. Currently India controls 2/3 of the land while Pakistan holds the rest. Under this deal:*

<sup>1</sup> These issues were selected on the basis of prior focus testing with a representative sample of 6 individuals

After the deals were presented, we collected several dependent variables. First, participants were asked whether they approved or disapproved of the deal. Then they were asked how likely they would be to vote for such a deal. Participants also responded to whether they would feel anger if such a deal was accepted by political leaders and if rioting would ensue as a result of the deal's acceptance. Finally, participants' sacred values for the two issues were assessed using a measure similar to the one used by Ginges et al (2007).

**Results**

We found that tragic tradeoffs were more acceptable than taboo tradeoffs across all of our (F(1, 23) = 4.02, p = .05, Table 1) dependent measures. This was true for Hindu and Muslim participants for both the Babri Mosque and Kashmir scenarios. However, this result only held for those that met the criteria for having a sacred value for the issue. Those that did not meet the criteria for having a sacred value actually found the tragic tradeoffs less acceptable than the taboo tradeoffs similar to the Ginges et al (2007) findings.

Table 1: Moral Absolutist Responses to Various DVs on Taboo and Tragic tradeoff deals

Issue	Babri Mosque		Kashmir	
	Taboo	Tragic	Taboo	Tragic
% Approval	18	60 *	0	62 *
Likelihood to Vote for Deal ( 1 to 6)	1.6	4.76 *	1	4.45 *
% Reporting Anger	100	56 *	100	80 <sup>ns</sup>
% Predicting Riots	100	62 *	100	33 *

In addition, this effect interacted with group membership. In comparing across taboo+ and the baseline taboo deals, we found that Hindu participants were more averse to a taboo+ tradeoff than the others found for the Babri Mosque scenario, designed to be more salient for the Hindu community. However, Muslim participants seemed to be more willing to concede the sacred value in a taboo+ deal (F (1,23) = 3.07, p = .09). There was no difference in the reported value attached to the sacred site. A similarly suggestive pattern held for the Kashmir scenario which was closely linked to Muslim group identity. In this scenario, Hindu participants who claimed to have a sacred value for this issue behaved no differently from the Hindu participants who did not hold this issue as sacred. Both approved of the taboo+ deal equally. However, Muslim participants with a sacred value for this issue were a significantly more disapproving of a taboo+ deal compared with Muslim participants without a sacred value for the Kashmir scenario (F(1,11) = 5.41, p<.05).

This pattern was more clearly visible when looking at the overall willingness to engage in any sort of tradeoffs for each scenario, broken down by religion and sacred values. As noted in Figure 1, Hindus with sacred values for the Babri Mosque scenario were less likely to approve of any tradeoffs than Hindus without sacred values but Muslims who claimed to have sacred values were actually more likely to engage in tradeoff deals than Muslims without sacred values. Similarly, for the Kashmir scenario, Muslims who held sacred values for this issue were resistant to any kind of deal involving their sacred value but Hindus claiming to hold the land as sacred were more likely to engage in tradeoffs than those not making such claims.

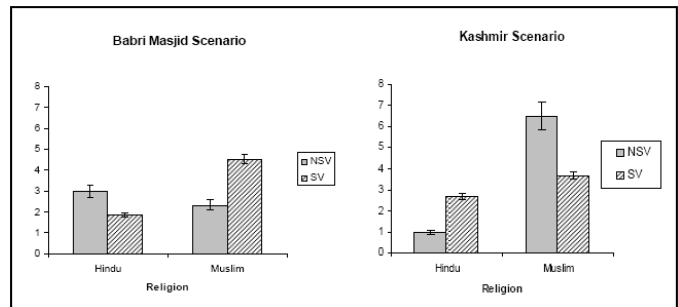


Fig 1: Likelihood to Vote for any kind of tradeoff deal for both scenarios broken down by participant religion and sacred value

**Discussion**

We found that Tragic or Symbolic tradeoffs were accepted more than Taboo tradeoffs – especially among those with a sacred value for the issue. These results mirrored the Ginges et al (2007) findings. However, there was an interesting dissociation between Hindu and Muslim participants in responses to the taboo+ tradeoffs. In the Babri Mosque scenario, Hindu participants for the most part were vehemently disapproving of taboo + tradeoffs relative to taboo tradeoffs but Muslim participants actually seemed to prefer them. This suggests that Muslim participants were, in fact, sensitive to changes in trade-off type counter to what the SVPM predicts. Yet, in the Kashmir scenario, Muslim participants with sacred values were less approving of any trade-off deal than Muslim participants without sacred values. In the Kashmir scenario, it was the Hindu participants with sacred values who displayed more utilitarian and instrumental thinking, violating the SVPM. It appears from this work that there may be different degrees of sacred values. The Kashmir issue resonates with the Muslim identity which might even be more salient for most Indian Muslim participants than their national identity. Therefore Muslims in this region might feel stronger attachment to this issue.

Anecdotally, while conducting these in-depth interviews, it was difficult to even bring the scenario up to most Muslim participants because the atmosphere in the room would change as soon as the word “Kashmir” was mentioned.

Similarly, with the Babri Mosque scenario, while it is incredibly emotionally charged for both Hindu and Muslim populations across India, there is a palpable difference in the nature of each group values this sacred site. The Babri Mosque scenario is deeply linked with a Hindu identity as the birthplace of a deity but the Muslim identity mostly became enmeshed with the Babri Mosque upon its destruction and became more of an issue of honor.

So, looking at the role each of these conflicts plays in structuring and organizing Hindu and Muslim identities, we suggest that the very nature of these sacred spaces would be different based on which group one identifies with. A person might who claims to have a sacred value against drunk driving may have a very different type of sacred value than a mother who has lost her daughter to an accident caused by driving under the influence of alcohol. Having different sources of knowledge and different types of experience is likely to change the cognitive corroborates of sacred values and cause the types of dissociations we see in this work between Hindu and Muslim moral absolutists. Note that we are not arguing that participants who claimed to have a sacred value, but did not show the requisite non-instrumental reasoning, are acting in a self-enhancing manner. Although it is plausible that participants are posturing to some extent (see Baron & Leshner, 2000), we think that it is actually the structure of sacred values that differ.

We are limited in this work to a large extent by the small sample size. Owing to the sensitive nature of the study, approximately 60% of participants refused to speak with us out of apprehension. In addition, we had a hugely disproportionate ratio of participants holding sacred values to those not holding sacred values. Only 15% of the sample did not have sacred values in the Babri Mosque scenario and in the Kashmir scenario, only 10% did not claim to hold a sacred value. Therefore, a lot of the more complex interactions could not be computed.

The next phase of this project might be to specifically address the role of group identity in the formation of specific sacred values. By priming specific identities, such as one's religious or national identity, we might be able to change participants' receptiveness to various deals. We might also try to bring in some factors like physical and psychological proximity to the sacred site. Some of the respondents had had their lives catastrophically altered by this conflict whereas others had only been marginally affected which would seem to influence psychological proximity and therefore the saliency of the issues. Ideally, a social network analysis of how the correlation between sacred values and group identity disperses across a group would be really beneficial in understanding this conflict. In

the small-scale cities of Faizabad and Ayodhya, people's social network still seems to be centered around residences which meant that usually people of the same neighborhood had similar beliefs. For example, a more fundamentalist Muslim neighborhood was located near the city center and a lot of the high-level officials handling the Muslim side of this conflict resided in this area. The residents of this neighborhood tended to feel similarly about this issue and even provide a lot of the same talking points in support of their convictions.

The formation of group identity and the subsequent formation of sacred values seems to be strongly contingent on one's social interactions and a social network analysis might be useful in discovering the global relations between identity and sacred values.

### Acknowledgments

This research was supported in part by a grant from the AFOSR MURI. We would like to thank Scott Atran, Jeremy Ginges and Rumen Iliev for their continuous support. We also would like to thank our various collaborators at Avadh University in Faizabad and all of our participants in Ayodhya and Faizabad who agreed to be a part of this study.

### References

- Baron, J. and Leshner, S. (2000). How serious are expressions of protected values? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 6, 183 – 194.
- Dumper, M. (2001). *The Politics of Sacred Space: The Old City of Jerusalem in the Middle East Conflict*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Durkheim, E. (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press. (Original work published 1912)
- Ginges, J., Atran, S., Medin, D. and Shikaki, K. (2007). Sacred bounds on rational resolution of violent political conflict. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104, 7357 – 7360.
- Ledgerwood, A., Liviatan, I. and Carnevale, P. (2007). Group-identity completion and the symbolic value of property. *Psychological Science*, 18, 873-878.
- Rai, M. (2004). *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights, and the History of Kashmir*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tetlock, P., Kristel, O., Elson, S., Green, M., Lerner, J. (2000). The psychology of the unthinkable: Taboo trade-offs, forbidden base rates, and heretical counterfactuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 853 – 870.