

More Alike Than Different: A Qualitative Analysis of Parental Moral Instruction Across Ethnicity and Gender in an HSI

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This paper examines whether American students at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) report receiving similar parental guidance rooted in universal moral values, such as respect, education, and self-discipline, despite differences in ethnicity and gender. Using qualitative data from 380 self-identified student groups (n = 1,850) and analyzed through Grounded Theory and Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), the findings reveal strong moral convergence across Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations. Core values, including respect for elders, avoidance of drugs, personal responsibility, and the importance of education, were consistently emphasized, regardless of cultural framing. These results challenge DEI narratives that emphasize division and instead affirm a shared ethical foundation among American youth. Our study promotes constructive cultural pluralism without embracing moral relativism or identity essentialism and supports value-based pedagogy as a unifying approach to teaching business ethics. Drawing on key Industrial-Organizational Psychology theories and empirical literature, we illustrate how early moral socialization predicts ethical alignment, workplace citizenship behavior, and common value systems—especially in relation to employee socialization, leadership development, and principled diversity initiatives.

Keywords: cultural values, moral foundations theory, parental moral instruction, ethics in business education, cultural convergence and diversity, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB), intergenerational value transmission, maternal influence on ethics, grounded theory methodology, faith-based moral development

INTRODUCTION

Whether on the battlefield, in the boardroom, or in the classroom, our ethical choices often come into focus with one simple question: “*Would I be ashamed to tell my mother what I did?*” If the answer is yes, then deep down we know the behavior is wrong. That quiet moment, when we picture our mother’s face and recall the values she instilled in us, guides us with more clarity and conviction than any rulebook ever could, even in the most trying circumstances.

Ethics in its simplest form is the study of right and wrong. Within a business context it is application of concepts of right and wrong to business situations. Religion and ethics are historically intertwined, as religions often provide moral frameworks rooted in divine authority. Religious ethics offer absolute

standards grounded in sacred texts and beliefs about God or the transcendent. In contrast, secular ethics derives moral principles from human reason, experience, or social consensus. While religion can motivate ethical behavior through accountability to a higher power, ethical reasoning can also exist independently of religious belief.

Teaching business ethics to a diverse cohort of freshmen presents unique pedagogical challenges, especially when students come from varied religious and cultural backgrounds, including Judeo-Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, and atheist worldviews. Instructors often default to textbook-based instruction, avoiding deeper moral reasoning due to discomfort or a perceived lack of complexity. The business classes in this qualitative study comprised a majority of Hispanic business students, many of whom were assumed to be Catholic, although not uniformly so, as well as White, Black, and Asian students representing a broad range of ethnicities, nationalities, and belief systems. While most students were American citizens, the institution's status as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) also included a sizeable number of foreign-born students.

Using observation, a classroom survey, and grounded theory concepts, we developed the following research question for this paper: Despite cultural and gender differences, do American students attending a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) report receiving similar parental guidance grounded in universal moral values, such as respect, education, and self-discipline?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Pew Research (2023), most Americans hold spiritual beliefs, with approximately 90% believing in God or a higher power. Specifically, 54% affirm the biblical God, while 34% believe in a non-biblical spiritual force. A large majority also believe in the existence of a soul (83%) and in spiritual realities beyond the natural world (81%). Traditional concepts like heaven (71%) and hell (61%) remain widely accepted, and over half of Americans believe in reunions with deceased loved ones. Less common are beliefs in reincarnation or spiritual energy in crystals and stones. Americans, overall, are considerably more religious than Western Europeans. Half of Americans (53%) say religion is "very important" in their lives, compared with a median of just 11% of adults across Western Europe (PEW, 2018). There is a lack of uniformity among Western countries, in part due to shifts in religious beliefs, ethics, and value systems, which can impact international business.

Monotheistic Religions and Ethics

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism, originating in Persia (present-day Iran), has significantly influenced modern Western religions, particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, through its emphasis on monotheism, universal moral order, free will, and a cosmic battle between good and evil (Ahura Mazda vs. darkness). It introduced concepts such as messianism, angels and demons, and eschatology (including final judgment, resurrection, and the end times), as well as symbolic rituals involving water and fire, which resemble Christian baptism. Its teachings on the soul's salvation and moral purity even shaped early views on sexuality and reproduction. Crucially, the Pharisees served as a theological bridge, transmitting Zoroastrian ideas into Second Temple Judaism and, by extension, into Christianity and Islam.

Judaism

Judaism, centered on belief in one God (Yahweh), provides a robust ethical framework grounded in divine law. The Torah, particularly the Books of Moses (Pentateuch), contains foundational moral teachings, including the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), which emphasize duties to God (e.g., no idolatry, reverence for the divine name, Sabbath observance) and ethical conduct toward others (e.g., honoring parents, prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, lying, and coveting). These commandments form the core of Judeo-Christian moral thought.

The book of Proverbs focuses on moral behavior, the meaning of human life, and right conduct through wise sayings and instructions. E.g. Proverbs 16: 16-19 states, "These six things doth the Lord hate: yea,

seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.” Further codifying Jewish ethics, Maimonides’ 13 Articles of Faith articulate a moral universe where God is just, omniscient, and rewards righteousness while punishing evil. These beliefs reinforce personal accountability and the ethical weight of human choices within a divine order.

Jewish rituals and customs, from circumcision and bar/bat mitzvah to dietary laws and holy day observances, reinforce ethical discipline, community identity, and reverence for sacred time. Many practices serve as tangible expressions of obedience, humility, and remembrance, linking personal conduct to historical memory and moral responsibility. In sum, Judaism embeds ethics not only in belief but also in daily life, education, and communal rhythms.

Christianity

Christianity teaches belief in one God expressed as a Trinity (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and bases its moral and ethical system on both the Old Testament (including the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20) and the New Testament, which centers on the life, teachings, and redemptive mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian ethics emphasize love, compassion, personal accountability, and obedience to God’s moral law. Jesus’ ministry, highlighted in the four Gospels, models a life of service, healing, and sacrificial love.

The ethical teachings of Christianity also warn against spiritual corruption through the Seven Deadly Sins (lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride) and uphold the seriousness of sin, especially blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31), which is described as unforgivable. Through Christ’s example and the teachings of Scripture, Christianity promotes moral living guided by conscience, repentance, and the grace of God. Ethical conduct is not only a matter of obedience but a reflection of inward transformation, where love for God and neighbor becomes the central moral imperative.

Islam

Islam centers on the oneness of God (Allah), who is unique, eternal, and unlike any created being. Its ethical framework is grounded in the Six Articles of Faith to include belief in God, prophets, divine books, angels, judgment, and fate; and are practiced through the Five Pillars of Islam: declaration of faith (Shahada), daily prayer (Salat), almsgiving (Zakat), fasting during Ramadan (Saum), and pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). These core duties instill personal discipline, compassion, humility, and social responsibility. The Qur’an, alongside the Hadith, reinforces moral accountability to God in every aspect of life, not just worship.

Islamic ethics emphasize justice, truthfulness, care for the poor, and respect for parents and orphans. Like the Ten Commandments, Surat 6:151–152 outlines prohibitions against idolatry, dishonesty, sexual immorality, murder, and exploitation. The focus on inner purity, communal harmony, and submission to God’s moral law shapes not only individual behavior but also broader social ethics.

Religious Nones

According to Pew Research (2021), religious affiliation in the U.S. is steadily declining. According to Pew Research, the share of religiously unaffiliated adults, atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular” rose to 29% in 2021, up 6 points from 2016 and 10 from 2011. Meanwhile, Christians now comprise 63% of U.S. adults, a 12-point decline over the past decade. Although Christians still outnumber the unaffiliated by just over two-to-one, this gap has narrowed significantly since 2007, when the ratio was nearly five-to-one (78% vs. 16%).

Summary

All three Abrahamic faiths —Judaism, Christianity, and Islam —share a core set of ethical principles, including monotheism, reverence for God, respect for parents, the sanctity of life, sexual morality, honesty, opposition to theft and exploitation, economic justice, and compassion for the vulnerable. These values

have profoundly influenced Western legal systems and moral education. While theological and ritual differences remain, their moral teachings are remarkably aligned, offering a strong foundation for interfaith dialogue, civic cooperation, and shared ethical understanding.

As religion declines, its traditional role as a moral anchor weakens, potentially impacting both individual and business ethics. For individuals, reduced religious affiliation may lead to greater moral relativism, where ethical decisions are shaped more by personal preference or social norms than by absolute moral standards. In the workplace, this could manifest as a shift from duty- or virtue-based ethics to more utilitarian or profit-driven reasoning.

At the same time, secular ethical frameworks, such as humanism, corporate social responsibility, and legal compliance, may rise in prominence to fill the gap. However, without a shared moral foundation, businesses may face increased ethical ambiguity, especially in complex or cross-cultural environments. The loss of religion's moral vocabulary could also make it harder to cultivate virtues like humility, integrity, and accountability, which are traits historically reinforced by religious traditions.

Parenting and Cultural Transmission

Given the shared ethical foundations of the Abrahamic faiths, it becomes clear that religion has long served as a primary vehicle for moral instruction and cultural continuity. As society becomes more diverse and secular, the responsibility for transmitting core values, such as honesty, respect, and self-discipline, increasingly shifts to parenting and family life, where cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and moral expectations are passed from one generation to the next. This transition underscores the crucial role parents play in shaping ethical behavior, regardless of their formal religious affiliation.

Kohn et al. (1986) conducted a comparative study of families in the U.S. and Poland to examine how parents transmit values to their children. They found that parental influence on children's values is stronger than previously believed and that a family's social class, particularly the type of jobs held by parents, significantly shapes those values. While both parents play important roles, the study revealed cultural differences: in the U.S., mothers and fathers influence values equally, whereas in Poland, mothers have a more prominent role in value transmission.

A key takeaway from this study is that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds tend to share core moral values taught by their mothers, which are closely tied to prosocial workplace behaviors, such as Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). OCB refers to the voluntary actions that employees take to benefit the organization but fall outside their formal job duties. These include going above and beyond expectations through behaviors like respect, discipline, and helpfulness. Such traits align with OCB dimensions like conscientiousness, civic virtue, and altruism, and they are likely to shape how individuals engage in ethical and collaborative practices in the workplace (Smith, et.al., 1983).

Geert Hofstede (2001) emphasized that cultural values are passed down across generations through "mental programs" formed in early childhood, primarily within the family and later reinforced by schools, organizations, and society. These internalized cultural patterns shape how individuals think, behave, and respond to authority, uncertainty, individualism, and time. By identifying key cultural dimensions, such as individualism versus collectivism and power distance, Hofstede's research demonstrates how national cultures are preserved through systematic value transmission, influencing everything from parenting styles to organizational behavior.

This early socialization influences employee expectations about leadership, including how they respond to authority and their preference for transformational versus transactional leadership styles. According to Hofstede, high power distance cultures, common in Latin America, Asia, and many African and Middle Eastern nations, accept hierarchical structures, show strong respect for authority, and rarely question it. In contrast, low power distance cultures, such as those in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Europe, emphasize equality, viewing leaders more as facilitators than figureheads. Employees in low power distance cultures tend to favor transformational leadership, seeking inspiration and a voice in decision-making. Meanwhile, those in high power distance cultures are more inclined toward transactional leadership, preferring clear hierarchies, defined roles, and systems of rewards and consequences.

Schönpflug (2001) defined intergenerational transmission as the process of values being passed from one generation to the next, which is one way cultures continue to persist over time. But not every cultural belief or value gets passed, only some are selected. This process works better when certain conditions, called transmission belts, are in place. These include things like the education and age of the parent and child, how the family interacts, parenting style, and the quality of the parents' relationship. This study looked at Turkish fathers and sons with some living in Germany and others in Turkey to see which values were passed down. It focused on values related to collectivism (like loyalty to family or group) and individualism (like independence). The study found that collectivist values were shared more often because they help keep families and communities strong; however, whether the families lived in Germany or Turkey did not make much difference.

Kagıtcıbaşı (2007) determined that intervention with mothers reoriented the functioning of the family systems in ways that were self-sustaining. The Turkish Early Enrichment Program (TEEP), developed by Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı, is a landmark in cultural transmission research, demonstrating that intervening with mothers—not just children—can transform family systems in lasting ways. By equipping socioeconomically disadvantaged Turkish mothers with tools to support their children's cognitive and social development, the program fostered intergenerational transmission of values, behaviors, and skills. Long-term evaluations spanning up to 19 years showed sustained positive effects, confirming that targeted parental guidance can reshape developmental outcomes and promote self-sustaining change within families and communities.

Grusec & Hastings (2014) emphasize in their *Handbook of Socialization* that cultural transmission occurs through a wide range of socializing agents, including parenting, peers, schools, and media, which shape individual behavior across the lifespan. It highlights how values, skills, and social norms are passed down not only within families but also across diverse social contexts, with biological, cultural, and psychological factors all interacting. A key theme is that socialization is dynamic and bidirectional, meaning both children and their environments influence one another in the ongoing transmission of culture and morality.

Barni et al. (2022) found that the transmission of moral values in adolescents is strongly influenced by how parents, especially mothers, support their children's autonomy. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, the study demonstrated that when adolescents perceive their mothers as encouraging independent thinking, they are more likely to authentically internalize moral values, not just out of obligation or pressure, but as an integral part of their own identity. This highlights the importance of autonomy-supportive parenting in fostering deep, lasting moral development across generations.

Summary

Across disciplines and studies, mothers consistently emerge as central agents in the intergenerational transmission of values. Kohn, et.al., (1986) found the great influence of mothers on values. Hofstede (2001) notes that cultural “mental programs” are formed primarily in early childhood within the family, a period in which maternal influence is often strongest. Schönpflug (2001) emphasizes that effective transmission depends on “transmission belts” such as parenting style, family interaction, and educational background, conditions often directly shaped by mothers in the home. Kağıtçıbaşı's (2007) TEEP program provides empirical confirmation: equipping mothers to support their children's cognitive and social development not only improved outcomes but reoriented entire family systems in self-sustaining, value-driven ways. Grusec and Hastings (2014) affirm that socialization is a dynamic process, with parents serving as primary agents in the earliest stages of moral and cultural learning. Finally, Barni et al. (2022) demonstrated that maternal support for autonomy plays a uniquely powerful role in adolescents' authentic internalization of moral values, more so than paternal influence.

Together, these findings clearly support the conclusion that mothers are not just participants, but pivotal drivers in the cultural and ethical development of the next generation, especially when they provide both structure and autonomy, reinforcing values that shape individual identity and social responsibility. Understanding the pivotal role mothers play in transmitting values naturally leads to a broader question: What universal moral foundations are being passed down, and why do they resonate across cultures despite

differences? Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) provides a framework for examining the underlying systems that shape ethical development across families, societies, and generations.

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT)

To better understand why students from diverse backgrounds internalize similar ethical expectations, we turn to Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), which identifies universal moral intuitions underlying cultural expressions of ethics. MFT was created by psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham (2007) to help explain why people from very different cultures still share some common ideas about right and wrong. The theory suggests that we're all born with a few basic moral instincts, such as fairness and caring for others, and that each culture develops its own beliefs, stories, and traditions based on these instincts. That's why people around the world have different moral rules but often care about the same basic things. MFT doesn't say which values are right or wrong: it simply describes how human morality works. According to the theory, these moral instincts helped humans survive by encouraging cooperation and strong communities. The original framework of MFT identified five foundations, which are strongly supported by evidence across various cultures:

- Care is rooted in our long evolution as mammals, shaped by attachment systems and a deep sensitivity to the pain of others. This foundation underlies virtues such as kindness, gentleness, compassion, and nurturance. It drives our concern for the suffering of others and motivates us to protect the vulnerable. The care ethic also inspires support for humanitarian efforts, and the protection of those who cannot defend themselves, such as children, animals, and marginalized groups.
- Fairness is grounded in the evolutionary principle of reciprocal altruism. It forms the basis of the virtues of justice and individual rights, emphasizing fair treatment, proportional rewards, and appropriate punishment for wrongdoing. This foundation addresses concerns about social and economic inequality, reinforces the importance of anti-corruption measures, and underscores the need for justice and equal rights under the law.
- Loyalty is rooted in our long history as tribal beings capable of forming shifting alliances. It is evident whenever individuals embrace the principle of “one for all and all for one.” This foundation supports the virtues of patriotism, self-sacrifice for the group, and social cohesion. Loyalty fosters national unity, reinforces communal bonds, and reflects the enduring desire to prioritize and protect one's nation above competing identities.
- Authority is rooted in our long primate history of hierarchical social structures. It forms the basis of the virtues of both leadership and followership, emphasizing deference to respected authority figures and reverence for tradition. This foundation upholds social hierarchies as essential mechanisms for maintaining order, discipline, and stability within a well-functioning society.
- Purity is grounded in the psychology of disgust and the instinct to avoid contamination. It reflects a striving toward a more elevated, disciplined, and noble way of living that is often emphasized in religious and moral traditions. This foundation supports the belief that the body is a temple, vulnerable to desecration by immoral acts or corrupting influences, a view not limited to any single faith. The pursuit of both physical and spiritual purity encourages virtues such as self-discipline and restraint. It also informs concerns about health, sexual morality, environmental integrity, and the sacredness of life.

Ethnic and Gender Role Expectations

The three Abrahamic religions —Judaism, Christianity, and Islam —share five core moral foundations: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. However, they emphasize these foundations differently, particularly in the context of ethnic identity and gender roles. Care and Fairness are universal values across all three, though Christianity tends to emphasize unconditional compassion and justice beyond the community, while Judaism and Islam often frame these virtues within communal or covenantal obligations.

Loyalty and Authority play a more central role in Islam and Orthodox Judaism, where adherence to religious law, community identity, and traditional leadership is strongly upheld. Christianity, especially in Protestant branches, often emphasizes individual moral agency over institutional hierarchy.

Purity is particularly prominent in Islam and conservative strands of Christianity and Judaism, where moral behavior is linked to physical and spiritual cleanliness shape views on sexuality, modesty, and diet. These foundations directly inform gender role expectations, with Islam and Orthodox Judaism promoting more traditional, clearly defined male and female roles, while Christianity displays greater variation depending on denomination. In both Islam and Orthodox Judaism, concepts of purdah or gender separation, e.g. gender-specific prayer spaces, modest dress codes, and restrictions on mixed-gender interactions, reflect a belief that maintaining moral and spiritual purity involves clear boundaries between the sexes. Across all three traditions, mothers are often viewed as key transmitters of moral values, especially in early childhood, reinforcing the foundational role of Care in ethical development and cultural continuity.

METHODOLOGY

Personal ethics refer to the values and principles that guide an individual's daily decisions, shaped by factors such as family, community, and personal beliefs (e.g., honesty, empathy, loyalty). Business ethics overlap but apply to professional settings and are formalized in codes of conduct that guide interactions, decision-making, and legal compliance. Though distinct, personal and business ethics are often interconnected and influence one another. So, we begin each business ethics class with a group practical exercise called the Mom Exercise.

Participants

Student groups were created through self-identification by ethnicity and gender. Over an eight-year span, we collected 380 group responses, with 1,850 individuals:

- Hispanic Males (HM): 120 groups, consisting of 552 individuals
- Hispanic Females (HF): 114 groups, consisting of 578 individuals
- Non-Hispanic Males (NHM): 86 groups, consisting of 421 individuals
- Non-Hispanic Females (NHF): 60 groups, consisting of 299 individuals

NOTE: US Government defines "Hispanic or Latino" as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race

Assignment Design

The specific classroom instructional prompt given to students was to list 10 things your mom told you to do, and 10 things your mom told you not to do. While this practical exercise is intended to be a segue into a Business Ethics class, there were no other instructions given other than listing what parents told you what "to do" or "not to do," but not necessarily what the students have chosen to do or not (at times in defiance of their parents).

Data Analysis Using Grounded Theory

This study employed Grounded Theory to inductively analyze student responses, allowing themes to emerge organically rather than applying pre-existing categories. Following the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), data collection, coding, and analysis occurred simultaneously, with responses continuously influencing one another. Thematic patterns were identified through iterative coding and frequency clustering. As such, the methodology is inherently fluid and exploratory, differing from the linear structure typical of quantitative research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Chicchi, 2000).

RESULTS

Thematic Findings Across All Groups

The most frequently emphasized themes across all groups included the importance of education, respect for others, particularly elders, personal cleanliness, household responsibilities, and family loyalty. Similarly, the most common "not-to-do" directives focused on abstaining from drugs, alcohol, premarital sex, out-of-wedlock childbearing, disrespectful behavior, laziness, and criminal activity.

Similarities

Across all ethnic and gender groups, students consistently reported core moral lessons that reflect deeply shared values. Regardless of background, nearly every group emphasized the importance of respecting elders, avoiding drugs and alcohol, and contributing to the household through chores and personal responsibility. These recurring themes reveal a powerful thread of ethical common ground: young people from diverse families are being taught to show deference, maintain self-control, and take ownership of their actions. Such patterns suggest that, beneath cultural differences, families are transmitting remarkably similar moral expectations.

Nuanced Differences

Hispanic students consistently emphasized values rooted in family, tradition, and religious observance. Their "To-Do" lists frequently included caring for younger siblings, attending church, maintaining cleanliness, and showing deference to parents and elders. Moral instruction was often framed around familismo—the idea that one's behavior reflects on the entire family. There was also a strong emphasis on hospitality, modesty, and upholding the family's reputation, particularly among female respondents.

TABLE 1
THEMATIC ANALYSIS PARENTAL VALUES

Theme	To-Do Frequency	Theme	Not- To-Do Frequency
Education	351	Drugs/Alcohol	381
Respect/Elders	343	Premarital Sex/Pregnancy	279
Cleanliness/Chores	322	Disrespect	252
Family Responsibility	275	Laziness	201
Polite/Manners	231	Criminal Behavior	199
Work Ethic	222	Sleepovers/Curfew	191
Religion/Faith	204	Strangers	183
Self-Reliance	201	Tattoos/Piercings	151
Safety	179	Profanity	139
Health	163	Inappropriate Dress	122

TABLE 2
ETHNICITY & GENDER THEMATIC SUMMARY

Ethnicity	Gender	Common ‘To Do Themes’	Common ‘NotTo Do Themes’
Hispanic	Male	Education, Respect for elders, Faith, Chores/Cleanliness, Work ethics, Family responsibility	Drugs/Alcohol, Premarital sex, Laziness, Disrespect, Tattoos/Piercings, Staying out late
Hispanic	Female	Respect, Cleanliness, Modesty, Family caregiving, Politeness, Religious observance	Sexual behavior warnings, Parties/Sleepovers, Drugs/Alcohol, Disrespect, Appearance warnings
Non- Hispanic	Male	Chores, Education, Financial Independence, Safety, Goal setting, Responsibility	Drugs/Alcohol, Criminal activity, Laziness, Disrespect, Tattoos/Piercings, late nights
Non- Hispanic	Female	Education, Cleanliness, Self-respect, Caution, Emotional restraint, Manners	Premarital sex, Drugs/Alcohol, Unsafe behavior, Disrespect, Immodesty

In contrast, Non-Hispanic students placed slightly greater emphasis on personal independence, emotional self-restraint, and long-term goal setting. Their ethical guidance often focused on safety, financial responsibility, and avoiding legal trouble, with values such as “get a job,” “drive safely,” and “don’t go into debt” appearing frequently. While respect for elders and moral discipline were still present, these were more often framed in individualistic rather than communal terms.

Male students were frequently instructed to take responsibility, avoid laziness, and stay out of trouble. Their lists reflected expectations to develop a strong work ethic, be disciplined, and protect others. Notably, males were often warned against criminal behavior, drug use, and premarital fatherhood. Chores were framed as duties of responsibility and preparation for adulthood, not just domestic upkeep.

Female students, on the other hand, received more guidance related to modesty, safety, and maintaining a good reputation. Their “Not-To-Do” lists included warnings against pregnancy, revealing clothing, parties, and sleepovers. Females were often told to be emotionally reserved, obey curfews, and avoid actions that might invite judgment. Chores and caregiving were more strongly linked to identity formation, with moral expectations tied closely to feminine virtue and family image.

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) & Optimism

The original version of MFT included five main foundations that appear in many cultures around the world. When comparing our results to MFT foundations, we conclude this study with a sense of optimism.

Care

Across all student groups, the moral foundation of Care was strongly present in instructions that emphasized kindness, empathy, and concern for others. Students repeatedly recalled being taught to help their siblings, respect other people, avoid violence, and be courteous to guests. These lessons reflect a shared cultural understanding that moral behavior involves nurturing relationships and avoiding harm; these are core principles that resonate with Care’s emphasis on compassion and human connection.

Fairness

The foundation of Fairness was evident in universal parental messages promoting honesty, reciprocity, and justice. Students from all backgrounds were instructed not to steal, not to lie, and to treat others how they themselves would like to be treated. Many were also told to clean up after themselves and contribute fairly at home. These values are deeply embedded across ethnic lines, highlighting a shared belief in personal accountability and the moral symmetry of right and wrong.

Loyalty

The value of Loyalty emerged in students' recollections of being expected to honor and support their families. Obedience to parents, concern for family reputation, and active contributions to the household were common across groups. Many were taught not to bring shame to the family and to uphold traditions, such as greeting elders and helping at home. These behaviors reflect a collective moral structure where one's actions are viewed as inseparable from the well-being of the group.

Authority

Authority was among the most consistently reinforced foundations, especially in messages about respecting elders, following household rules, and submitting to parental guidance. Students were widely instructed not to talk back, to do what they were told, and to show deference to parents and teachers. This respect for hierarchical order and tradition transcends demographic boundaries, underscoring the importance of structure, discipline, and reverence for established roles.

Purity

Finally, the foundation of Purity was reflected in moral teachings about modesty, restraint, and spiritual or physical cleanliness. Many students were cautioned against premarital sex, warned not to get pregnant or intoxicated, and instructed to go to church or live morally upright lives. Whether rooted in religious faith or parental concern, these messages reflect a shared sense that one's body, behavior, and reputation should be protected from moral contamination.

DISCUSSION

Cultural convergence refers to the notion that cultural defense claims from minority and immigrant defendants are more likely to receive accommodation when there is convergence between their cultural norms and those of American society. The moral values expressed by both Hispanic and non-Hispanic students in this study suggest a strong degree of cultural convergence. Despite differences in emphasis and framing, both groups uphold remarkably similar foundational principles: respect for elders, the importance of education, avoidance of drugs and alcohol, and personal responsibility. These shared norms indicate that the core values transmitted by Hispanic families are not in opposition to American cultural expectations but rather aligned with them.

What distinguishes the groups is not a conflict of values, but the cultural intensity and context in which those values are communicated. Hispanic students, for example, often receive moral instruction through the lens of family honor, religious obligation, and collective identity, while non-Hispanic students express similar values through individual goals, legal awareness, and self-discipline. Yet both trajectories arrive at comparable moral outcomes. This suggests that when cultural norms of minority groups mirror dominant American virtues, even if expressed differently, they are more likely to be understood, respected, and accommodated.

In the context of cultural defense theory, this data supports the idea that value alignment across cultures facilitates empathy and moral recognition. The "American moral core" of fairness, responsibility, and care is not the exclusive domain of any one ethnic group – it is echoed in the lived instruction of diverse families. These findings challenge the presumption that minority or immigrant moral frameworks are inherently at odds with American norms. Instead, they point to a quiet moral common ground that strengthens the case for cultural legitimacy and mutual respect.

CONCLUSION: WE ARE MORE ALIKE, THAN WE ARE DIFFERENT!

This paper explores whether American students at an HSI report receiving similar parental guidance, grounded in universal moral values, despite cultural and gender differences. Our study of 380 student groups at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) provides compelling evidence that, despite differences in ethnicity and gender, American students report receiving remarkably similar moral guidance from their

parents. Across all groups, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, male and female, core themes such as respect for elders, the value of education, household responsibility, and avoidance of drugs and criminal behavior were dominant. This shared moral landscape supports the notion that universal values are actively transmitted across diverse American households, affirming the hypothesis that cultural and gender differences do not preclude convergence around foundational ethical norms.

In doing so, our findings complement the conclusions of de Mooij, et al. (2016) by illustrating that cultural convergence is not merely theoretical, but observable in the lived experiences of younger generations. While their study cautioned against overreliance on Hofstede's (2001) model for within-nation cultural analysis, our thematic analysis offers a more grounded and context-rich perspective, for example, one that confirms convergence not only across ethnic lines but also through the lens of intergenerational parental influence. These results support the argument that shared national institutions and values, such as education, hard work, and moral restraint, shape common ethical expectations, especially in U.S.-born populations.

Similarly, our study echoes and expands upon the insights of Coon et al. (2001) by moving beyond abstract measures of individualism and collectivism to reveal how ethical expectations are articulated in everyday family language. While Coon and colleagues found variation in collectivism across ethnic groups, our data show that students from all backgrounds are socialized into both collectivist and individualist responsibilities, including care for family, respect for rules, and personal accountability. This reinforces the idea that ethnic identity and moral instruction are not in conflict, but rather coexist as forces in the formation of American youth.

Finally, our research also resonates with the work of Luft et al. (2025), whose concept of family value composites underscores how values are not simply inherited but co-created through ongoing dialogue. The student narratives we analyzed suggest that moral instruction, though rooted in tradition, is continually adapted to changing social contexts. This confirms that values such as respect, discipline, and responsibility are not static cultural relics, but dynamic ethical guideposts actively shaped by the lived relationships within families. In this way, our study affirms that American college students attending an HSI are not divided by culture but bound by shared moral foundations forged through both cultural memory and modern experience.

Ties to Business-Marketing & Business Education

The findings from this study of 380 diverse student groups align powerfully with the frameworks advanced by Schofield (2025) and Baker (2020; 2024), confirming that cultural values, particularly those rooted in family, faith, respect, and responsibility, remain deeply influential across ethnic and gender lines. Schofield's Brand Evolution Process (BEP) and Cultural Branding Model (CBM) emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity, segmentation, and inclusive messaging in branding. The student responses affirm these principles, revealing how values such as modesty, loyalty, and authority shape not only moral development but also likely inform consumer attitudes, brand trust, and digital engagement. Students' shared moral instruction reflects their internalized cultural identities, suggesting that brands and institutions that honor these values are better positioned to connect meaningfully with both Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations.

These findings complement Baker's (2024) research on educational outcomes in Hispanic-Serving Institutions by emphasizing the critical role of cultural understanding in teaching and academic validation. Just as marketers must recognize cultural nuances to earn trust, educators must also recognize the values students bring with them, many of which are tied to broader cultural dimensions such as collectivism, power distance, and long-term orientation. This study illustrates that students are not arriving as blank slates; they are shaped by moral frameworks that transcend ethnic lines and invite institutions to move beyond race-based assumptions toward culturally responsive and value-aligned engagement. Together, these studies underscore that cultural intelligence is a cornerstone for success in both branding and education.

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