Moral Identity

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Abstract

This essay reviews theory and research on moral identity. The construct emerged roughly three decades ago in moral psychology as a possible motivational factor that could link moral judgments to moral actions. Moral identity is, generally speaking, the extent to which being a moral person is important to a person's identity. However, it has been conceptualized and measured in various ways. In this essay, conceptualizations of moral identity, as well as foundational empirical research on moral identity development and links between moral identity and behavior, are reviewed. Little is known about moral identity development, but moral identity has fairly consistently been found predictive of moral action using a variety of research methods. In addition, cutting-edge research on new areas of theory is highlighted, and promising directions for future research are outlined. Cutting-edge work deals with new ways to conceptualize and measure moral identity, mechanisms of influence, links to broader outcomes, situational variation in moral identity, and implicit aspects of moral identity. Promising future directions are expanding on these emerging directions, as well as looking at developmental processes, cultural variability, and the role of relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly work on the psychology and development of human morality began with the pioneering work of Kohlberg (1969) on cognitive developmental theory. However, this theory and research focused largely on deliberative moral judgment processes (conscious thought processes by which people determine whether or not a particular course of action is moral), with less emphasis on precursors of moral action. Reviews have discovered that links between moral judgment and action, although consistently found in empirical studies, are somewhat weak (Blasi, 1980). Thus began the search for factors that might bridge the so-called moral judgment-action gap (Walker, 2004), and that might help to explain better the commitment and motivation of "moral exemplars" (Colby & Damon, 1992. Since then, much of the work on moral motivation has focused on the construct of *moral identity*. Broadly speaking, moral identity is about the

extent to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011a). The purpose of this essay is to present various conceptualizations of moral identity, review prior work on moral identity, highlight cutting-edge directions in moral identity theory and research, and point to promising future directions.

FOUNDATIONAL THEORY AND RESEARCH

Theory and research on moral identity is entering its fourth decade. Since the pioneering work of Blasi (1983), Rest (1983), Colby and Damon (1992) and others, interest in moral identity has grown. Varying perspectives on moral identity are emerging, and the construct is being studied using a multitude of research methods. We will first review conceptualization of moral identity and then empirical research on moral identity.

Conceptualizations of Moral Identity

The notion of moral identity in psychology largely started with the work of developmental psychologist Blasi (1983), (2004a). He proposed that moral identity might aid moral judgments in more reliability-yielding moral actions. For a moral judgment to have motivating power, we must first judge ourselves responsible to act on it. Whether we feel responsible depends to a large extent on the degree to which morality is important to our identity. Then, if we judge ourselves responsible to act on a moral judgment based on the centrality of morality to our identity, this generates motivation to act morally because people are driven to behave consistent with their identity (i.e., self-consistency). For instance, if I understand that I should stop and offer assistance to an injured stranger on the sidewalk, I am more likely to actually do so if it is important to me to be a moral person who helps others, and thus I feel I must help the stranger or risk betraying myself.

  To Blasi, it is also important to understand the structure of identity in order to better grasp its role in morality (Blasi, 2004a, 2004b). Identity structure is the organization, maturity, and phenomenological experience of one's identity, and thus has to perform with the ways in which people subjectively experience their identity. Identity contents, on the other hand, are the issues around which people base their identity. According to Blasi, for moral identity to play an important role in moral action, people must have a mature sense of identity (e.g., they have hierarchically organized their identity by choosing certain contents to be more central than others), and must position moral contents (e.g., moral personality traits or moral values) as central to their identity. In other words, a person with a mature identity centered on amoral or immoral identity contents (e.g., being wealthy) will be highly

driven, but not necessarily in the moral direction, whereas a person who sees morality as important to them but who has an immature identity will have less at stake in living (or not living) morally. Recent evidence supports this notion of the interaction of structure and content in linking moral identity to action (Hardy *et al.*, 2013).

Building on Blasi's ideas, Colby and Damon (1992) focused on moral identity as the unity of self and moral goals or commitments. Their qualitative study of moral exemplars (people who exhibit exemplary levels of moral commitment) found them to integrate self and morality such that their own personal interests and desires were aligned with their sense of what was morally right. In other words, what they wanted to do and what they felt or knew they should do were the same. They invested a lot of time, energy, and resources in moral causes because they personally wanted to; they felt little inner conflict about it, such as knowing they should do something but not wanting to do it.

Others have similarly argued that moral identity emerges from the integration of the moral and self-systems (Bergman, 2004). The formation of morality and self may be largely separate developmental systems that can come together beginning in adolescence and young adulthood when both systems become more interpersonal and ideological (e.g., based on relationships and ideals; Moshman, 2011). Variation in moral identity, then, reflects individual differences in the extent to which the sense of morality and sense of identity are integrated. Frimer and Walker (2009) more systematically examined this idea using Schwartz's (1992) circumplex model of universal values. Schwartz's model positions communal (universalism and benevolence) and agentic (power and achievement) value orientations as diametrically opposed. However, Frimer and Walker found that the degree to which communal and agentic value orientations co-occurred in self-narratives was predictive of moral action. Thus, when people are personally invested in and actively pursuing commitments of a moral nature, they might be said to have a stronger moral identity, and hence greater moral motivation. In other words, when what we want most for us and what might benefit others is one and the same, it seems to generate powerful moral motivation.

In the recent past, some have drawn from social cognitive theory and research to further elaborate on moral identity (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Monin & Jordan, 2009). These approaches see schemas as the underlying mechanisms of moral identity. Schemas are hypothesized knowledge structures in the mind that represent various aspects of ourselves, our relationships, and our experiences (Fiske, 2000). Moral identity may entail having morally relevant schemas readily accessible for processing social information (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001; Narvaez,

Lapsley, Hagele, & Lasky, 2006). Underlying moral ideals and characteristics that people see as important to their sense of identity may be a network of such moral schemas (Aquino *et al.*, 2009; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004. In fact, it may be that ideals and characteristics seen as most important to us are also the ones pertaining to schemas that are most readily available for processing information in social situations Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; see also Bizer & Kroznick, 2001). There are various types of morally relevant schemas. One example is our mental image of what it means to be a moral person (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Stets & Carter, 2006). Further, being a moral person may be a social identity we use to represent ourselves to others (Hart, 2005a). In addition, moral identity may entail schemas that are mental representations of ourselves engaged in moral actions (Reimer, 2003). For instance, the more I have a clear image in my head of what it means to be a moral person, and the more it is important for me to be such a person, the more likely that mental representation of moral personhood will be involved in decisions I make regarding whether or not, and in what ways, I help others.

Although the above-mentioned conceptualizations of moral identity are the most prevalent, new approaches are continuing to emerge that draw on other areas of social sciences literature. While these new ideas may not fully capture moral identity, they seem to highlight potentially important facets of moral identity. For example, it may be that an important aspect of moral identity is the extent to which our personal life narratives are moral (i.e., they evidence identification with and commitment to moral living; McAdams, 2009; Pratt, Arnold, & Lawford, 2009). Another potentially salient facet of moral identity may be the extent to which a person's ideal self is moral (Hardy *et al.*, 2014). Each of us can envision the type of person we want to be, and commitment to that image pulls us toward that goal. Thus, part of moral identity may be the extent to which we are committed to being a person who is moral.

Prior Research on Moral Identity

Little is known about processes and predictors of moral identity development (for a more thorough review, see Hardy & Carlo, 2011a). Again, moral identity may involve the merging of the moral and self systems, and it may involve the formation and increasing accessibility of morally relevant schemas. Krettenauer (2013) has also argued that moral identity formation entails increasingly mature forms of taking ownership or personal responsibility for one's morality. However, a few studies have examined these developmental processes. Nevertheless, some have sought to outline ways in which precursors to moral identity (such as moral evaluations of self in childhood; Kochanska, 2002) are linked to later moral identity formation

(Thompson, 2009). Further, there is some evidence that maturity in identity formation and moral understanding may be prerequisites for moral identity development (Matsuba & Walker, 2004). Lastly, involvement in community service (Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, & Alisat, 2003) and religious activities (Hart & Atkins, 2004), as well as having authoritative parents (Hardy, Bhattacharjee, Aquino, & Reed, 2010; Pratt *et al.*, 2003), may be contexts facilitative of moral identity development.

  More commonly, studies of moral identity have focused on examining links to possible outcomes of moral identity. A variety of research designs and measures have been used to fairly consistently demonstrate links between moral identity and various outcomes (e.g., positive and negative behaviors; see Hardy & Carlo, 2011b for a more extensive review). For example, in-depth studies of moral exemplars show that adult exemplars experience extensive integration of self and moral goals Colby & Damon, 1992 and adolescent moral exemplars tend to describe their self-concept using moral terms more so than comparison youth (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Reimer, 2003; Reimer, DeWitt Goudelock, & Walker, 2009). In narrative research (Pratt, Arnold, & Lawford, 2009), the salience of moral identity themes (as indicated by factors such as concern for the needs and rights of others) in life narratives is predictive of community service involvement and generative concern (a person's desires, commitments, and actions directed toward making a difference in the world). Correlational studies using quantitative measures of moral identity have found associations between moral identity and moral actions (e.g., donating money to charities and altruistic helping; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy, 2006), moral emotions (e.g., guilt following behavior inconsistent with one's sense of morality; Stets & Carter, 2006), and concern for out-group members (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy *et al.*, 2013). Such links are consistently found, and range in strength from small to large.

  The nature of these links between moral identity and action is unclear. Moral identity may motivate moral action; moral action may lead people to see themselves in moral terms, or there may be some dynamic process by which both are involved. To more strongly infer causality, scholars have demonstrated effects of priming moral identity (by having participants write brief stories about themselves using moral trait terms) on moral emotions and behaviors (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Aquino *et al.*, 2009). However, there is not sufficient longitudinal data on the matter to sort out developmental sequences of moral identity and action.

<div align="center">CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH</div>

There are a number of emerging lines of research on moral identity that we find particularly intriguing and important. First, there is work aimed

at proposing new conceptualizations of moral identity as well as novel ways of measuring moral identity. One example is Frimer and Walker (2009) reconciliation model of moral identity (described earlier), which posits moral identity and the integration of agentic and communion values such that values people have personally invested in are also beneficial to others. They have not only articulated a compelling model but have developed an innovating coding system for identifying co-occurrences of agentic and communion values in open-ended responses. Another example is the work by Pratt and colleagues (Pratt *et al.*, 2009) to examine the degree to which moral identity is salient in life narratives (as a facet of narrative identity). Drawing on McAdams' (2009) work, they have developed a system for coding moral themes in life narratives. A final example is the effort of Hardy *et al.* (2014) to conceptualize and measure moral identity in terms of the extent to which moral characteristics are central to a person's ideal self (the type of person they are committed to becoming).

Second, some scholars are seeking to explicate the processes by which moral identity might motivate positive behaviors and dissuade negative behaviors. A number of possible mechanisms of influence have been proposed in the last few decades, including self-consistency (e.g., Blasi, 2004a), goal integration (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992, moral schemas (e.g., Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004), and self-narratives (e.g., Reimer, 2003). However, a few empirical studies have sought to investigate such processes. An exception is a recent study which found evidence that adolescents' moral identity might be linked to actions indirectly by way of promoting purpose and social responsibility (Hardy *et al.*, 2014).

Third, investigators are broadening their search for outcomes to which moral identity might be linked. Most prior research has looked at the role of moral identity in moral outcomes such as prosocial behaviors (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy, 2006; Reimer, 2003). However, more recent studies are showing links to broader outcomes not explicitly "moral." For example, one study of adolescents found that those higher in moral identity are more likely to be engaged at school and involved in environmental behaviors and less likely to report symptoms of internalizing and externalizing (Hardy *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, in another study college students higher in moral identity were also higher in self-esteem and meaning in life, but lower in sexual risk-taking, hazardous alcohol use, depression, and anxiety (Hardy *et al.*, 2013).

Fourth, much of the research on moral identity seems to assume it is a relatively stable, trait-like aspect of personality (Blasi, 2004a; Colby & Damon, 1992; Moshman, 2011; for a critique of this notion, see Hart, 2005b). However, trait notions of personality have been heavily criticized by social cognitive theorists for their inability to adequately account for situational variability

(Cervone & Tripathi, 2009). In line with this, new research is examining situational variation in moral identity and finding that, although the importance of morality to a person's identity may be relatively stable, some facets of moral identity may be more dynamically constructed "moment-to-moment" (Monin & Jordan, 2009), and may be more or less likely to be activated in particular situations (Aquino *et al.*, 2009; Stets & Carter, 2006). Examples of facets of moral identity that may vary situationally are moral evaluations of self (How moral am I?).

  Fifth, moral identity is also often described as being primarily deliberative (Blasi, 2004a; Colby & Damon, 1992; Moshman, 2005), something about which we are consciously aware. However, it is unclear whether the primary mechanisms of moral identity involve such deliberative processes (such as wanting to live consistent with one's identity; Blasi, 1983). Part of the goal of social cognitive approaches to moral identity is the need to better understand the role of schemas and other implicit or automatic processes in moral identity (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004). A particularly intriguing study on these implicit processes found that explicit moral identity (self-reports of moral personality characteristics such as honesty) predicted deliberative moral action (responses to moral dilemmas), whereas implicit moral identity (assessed using an implicit associations test with moral-immoral as the target category and me-others as the paired category) predicted automatic moral actions (whether individuals returned "extra" research participation compensation; Perugini & Leone, 2009).

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is exciting to see how theory and research on moral identity has grown and expanded since the construct emerged in the social sciences roughly three decades ago. As this work moves forward, there are a number of areas that seem particularly critical and promising. For starters, all of the cutting-edge research directions outlined earlier should continue to be pursued. These lines of work address some fundamental questions about moral identity and have important theoretical, methodological, and applied implications. In addition, there are other areas for future research that have not yet been taken up to our knowledge. First, although as noted earlier there are some ideas out there regarding the developmental processes of moral identity, very little empirical work has addressed the issue. In particular, there are very few longitudinal studies of moral identity (for exceptions, see Krettenauer, 2011; Pratt *et al.*, 2003), and these have been somewhat limited methodologically (e.g., short-term and not multi-method). Thus, long-term and sophisticated developmental research is needed. Ideally such work will span multiple phases of the lifespan, utilize multiple and

more rigorous measures of moral identity, and be designed to unravel the complex dynamics of moral identity development. Second, work thus far on moral identity has largely ignored issues of culture. Most theoretical discussions of moral identity render little attention to possible cultural variation, and most studies involve primarily Caucasian samples drawn from United States and Canada. In fact, no research has even explored ethnic differences in North American samples. This is unfortunate given the substantial evidence suggesting cultural variation in various aspects of personality, such as identity (Heine & Buchtel, 2009). There are arguments emerging in anthropology, however, suggesting that lay conceptions of self and morality may be intertwined (Hickman, 2013). Specifically, people in different cultures have varying ways of viewing personhood, and these likely undergird variations in notions of morality. This raises concerns regarding measurement equivalence of moral identity measures and their validity to use across different cultural groups.

  Third, most work on moral identity has described it as something individuals have within them, an intrapersonal cognitive-affective entity of sorts (e.g., Blasi, 2004a; Moshman, 2011). Our identity then is influenced by others through relationships in sort of a "billiard ball" manner (i.e., separate entities impacting each other). However, this view of identity and the role of relationships in identity is not universally held; rather, it is a Western (Heine & Buchtel, 2009), individualist, and abstractionist (Slife, 2004) worldview of identity. Alternatively, relationships may be a part of what makes up our identity in the sense that we are not first and foremost separate and independent people who interact with other people, but we are fundamentally in relation to others. This is more congruent with collectivist and Eastern worldviews of self (Heine & Buchtel, 2009). Future work should more carefully examine the role of relationships in moral identity.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, moral identity is a new concept in the social sciences of morality that generally entails the degree to which being a moral person is important to our identity. A number of approaches have been taken for conceptualizing and measuring moral identity. As we continue to expand on and evaluate these approaches, and study moral identity using a multitude of research methods (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods), our understanding of the phenomena will undoubtedly deepen. While it is fairly clear that moral identity is at least moderately related to other aspects of human functioning, and is perhaps causally related to such other aspects, there is still much to be done to understand the processes involved, how moral identity develops, the dynamics of how moral identity plays out in everyday life, and

how moral identity may vary across people of different gender, ethnicity, and cultural groups. As progress is made in these areas, our understanding of human moral functioning and how to best foster and encourage moral living will grow.

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