



A foundation beam for studying morality from a personological point of view: Are individual differences in moral behaviors and thoughts consistent? ☆



Peter Meindl¹, Eranda Jayawickreme, R. Michael Furr, William Fleeson*

Wake Forest University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 August 2015

Revised 2 September 2015

Accepted 29 September 2015

Keywords:

Consistency

Morality

Ethics

Within-person variability

Experience-sampling

Social desirability

ABSTRACT

Morality is a topic of burgeoning scientific interest, and the relevance of personological factors to moral behavior has interdisciplinary implications for the social sciences, public policy, and philosophy. However, relatively little research has investigated the role of personological factors in moral life, perhaps because of lingering skepticism about the robustness of moral traits. The purpose of this paper is to determine whether morality is consistent across many occasions of everyday life, implying that personological factors play an important role in moral behavior. A novel method of assessing moral behaviors was developed and employed in two experience sampling studies (4075 total observations). Results showed that moral behavior is consistent in many different ways, suggesting that personological factors substantially impact moral life.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to determine whether individuals differ in morally-relevant behaviors and thoughts, and if so, whether such differences are manifested consistently in the actual situations of everyday life. A novel method of assessing moral behaviors and thoughts while controlling for socially desirable responding was first developed. Then two experience-sampling studies assessed moral behavior and thoughts on multiple occasions in order to investigate the degree of morality people exhibited in their daily lives, whether people differed in their daily levels of morality, and whether those differences were consistent across occasions. In these studies we assessed consistency of single behaviors and thoughts, consistency of distributions of behaviors and thoughts, and within-person consistency. We also implemented several controls for socially desirable responding and compared standardized definitions of morality with subjective

definitions of morality. One experience sampling study tested the moral behaviors and thoughts of emerging adults, and one experience sampling study recruited and tested a community lifespan sample of adults.

We believe that assessing the consistency of morality is important for at least three reasons. First, moral psychology is an exploding field (Haidt, 2008), but a proportionally small amount of work is currently being performed on how personological factors relate to morality. Can individual differences and personality contribute to an understanding of morality? Given that consistency of behavioral differences is one of the first prerequisites for a personological approach (Allport, 1937; Fleeson, 2004; Funder & Colvin, 1991) and that there is a belief among moral psychologists that moral traits are not robust (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Doris, 2002; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004), it seems reasonable to think that this belief might account for some of psychologists' reticence to enter the field of moral personality. If this is the case, uncovering consistency in moral individual differences could open the floodgates of a personological approach to morality.

Second, moral consistency is an issue with reverberations both within and outside of psychology. In psychology, it is of relevance in social psychology, judgment and decision-making, neuroscience, educational psychology, and correctional psychology. Outside of psychology it is relevant to political science, public policy, philosophy, economics, and sociology. In philosophy, for instance, moral consistency is the centerpiece of a recent reincarnation of the

* This publication was made possible through the support of grants from the John Templeton Foundation (#15519) and the Templeton World Charity Foundation (#TWCF0070/AB44). The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation or the Templeton World Charity Foundation.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Wake Forest University, P.O. Box 7778, Winston-Salem, NC 27109, United States.

E-mail address: fleesoww@wfu.edu (W. Fleeson).

¹ Present address: University of Southern California, United States.

person-situation debate among ethicists (Jost & Jost, 2009). In many philosophers' judgments, psychology research shows that broad traits – and especially moral traits – do not exist because of empirically demonstrated inconsistency (Alfano, 2013; Doris, 2002; Harman, 2009).

A third reason moral consistency is an important issue is that patterns of trait manifestation in behavior are a fundamental issue of broad concern in personality psychology: What does it imply about a person's behavior to say that a person has a certain trait level? How often do people behave at that trait level? How far do they deviate from that level, and how often? How different are people from each other in the trait levels they manifest in actual situations? The current studies address these issues by drawing on the density distributions model of personality (Fleeson, 2001) to discover patterns of manifestation of trait morality. Thus, the current paper both clarifies the behavior patterns of those high and low in morality, and clarifies a general question about trait manifestation in the specific domain of morality.

2. The study of moral behavior

During moral psychology's recent renaissance, researchers in many areas of psychology have uncovered a host of findings related to some of history's most enduring morally-relevant questions (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). Judgment and decision-making researchers have weighed in on whether morality stems more from temperance (lack of temptation) or continence (strength of willpower) (Greene & Paxton, 2009). Social psychologists have revealed new ways that morality is driven by intra- and intergroup processes (e.g., Kouchaki, 2011) and social structure (e.g., Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). And comparative and developmental psychologists have uncovered discrepancies between human and non-human morality (e.g., Hamann, Warneken, Greenberg, & Tomasello, 2011), the ontogeny of moral behavior (Warneken, Lohse, Melis, & Tomasello, 2011), and morality's evolutionary origins (Boehm, 2012; Haidt, 2012).

In contrast, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002; Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, & Riches, 2011; Walker & Frimer, 2007), personality researchers – and especially trait psychologists – have been relatively silent on the topic of morality. This could be due in large part to the wealth of recent evidence that subtle situational variables profoundly influence moral behavior. The theoretical and practical importance of these recent findings is illustrated by the sheer range of situational factors that have been shown to shape moral life – from the effects of traditional cognitive factors, such as the prosocial influences of decision time (Rand, Greene, & Nowak, 2012; Rand et al., 2014; Shalvi, Eldar, & Bereby-Meyer, 2012) and cognitive depletion (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Greene & Paxton, 2009; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009; Muraven, Pogarsky, & Shmueli, 2006; Shalvi et al., 2012), to the bizarre impact of faint fishy smells on cooperation (Lee & Schwarz, 2012). Taken as a whole, this research gives psychologists warrant to doubt the robustness and importance of moral traits, and thus may dissuade personality psychologists from fully immersing themselves in the moral domain.

Regardless of its causes, we believe the comparative dearth of moral trait research is unfortunate, because it is important to investigate moral behavior from a personality perspective. First, much of moral and ethical behavior may be based on long-standing psychological differences that exist between individuals which are hard to manipulate in a short-term experiment (for example, ideologies and abiding values; Graham, Meindl, & Beall, 2012). Second, personality psychologists employ a diverse toolkit of methodological approaches (e.g., Robins, Fraley, & Krueger, 2009), including experience-sampling, informant reports, trait

assessment, behavioral assessment, cognitive measurement, physiological assessment, and implicit measures. This diverse toolkit may reveal new insights about morality, which may remain hidden to a more restricted set of methodologies. Third, many other disciplines care deeply about the consequences of ethical behavior, the ability to evaluate character, and the means to shape it, and a personological approach could provide a hub for interdisciplinary efforts to address these issues.

3. Is moral behavior consistent?

Building a solid line of personality-based morality research requires a strong conceptual and empirical foundation. In the current paper we attempt to lay one beam of this foundation by testing whether people do indeed consistently differ in their moral behavior. In Helzer et al. (2014), this work was initiated by showing interpersonal agreement about who has a moral personality and who does not. In this paper, we directly test for consistency of moral behavior over time. Investigating the consistency of moral behavior involves first assessing whether there are individual differences in moral behavior, and then determining whether those differences are consistent over time. If individuals do not differ in their moral behaviors, then there can be no personological basis to moral behavior. If individuals do differ in their moral behavior, but those differences fade and shift from situation to situation, then there is also no strong person basis to morality. Such outcomes would render the attempt to understand moral personality pointless, because there would be little room for personality to influence moral behavior.

Conversely, if individual differences in moral behavior do exist, and they are consistent over time, then it is worthwhile, perhaps even obligatory, to investigate how moral traits and other personality variables contribute to these differences. The more consistent these differences are, the greater influence personality variables could have on morality. Thus, the magnitude of the potential fruits of future work predicting moral behavior from personality variables would be revealed by investigating the degree to which there are individual differences in moral behavior.

Recent research suggests that individual differences in behavior of general sorts are highly consistent (Fleeson & Law, in press). Furthermore, test-retest correlations of retrospective moral questionnaires are often strong. However, there are at least two reasons to question whether this is true for moral behavior. First, there are important differences between moral behavior and other types of behavior that could influence the degree of cross-situational consistency. For instance, the high social value of morality (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Anderson, 1968; van Lange & Sedikides, 1998) might restrict *between*-person variability in moral behavior, because many – perhaps most – people might be motivated to behave in moral (i.e., socially valued) ways. Such restricted variability would, in turn, attenuate cross-situational correlations between individual differences in moral behavior. Alternatively, *within*-person variability in moral behavior might be relatively restricted, because each individual might be motivated to behave morally in as many situations as possible. Moral attitudes seem to hold more force than general attitudes, such that behavior may follow from moral attitudes more closely than it follows from other attitudes (Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2008). Low within-person variability would in turn lead to relatively large cross-situational correlations between individual differences in moral behavior.

The second reason to question the consistency of individual differences in moral behavior (and thus question the relevance of traits to moral behavior) is that existing research seems to suggest that moral behavior is inconsistent. The controversy over trait

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