



## Moral identity and psychological distance: The case of adolescent parental socialization

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### A B S T R A C T

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A mediation model using a sample of 1059 adolescents (56% girls;  $M$  age = 16.02,  $SD = 1.37$ ) tested relations between parenting, adolescent moral identity, and the formation of psychological distance towards others. In short, adolescent moral identity mediated relations between parenting and the ways in which adolescents oriented others in their psychological space. Specifically, adolescent-report parenting style dimensions (responsiveness, autonomy-granting, and demandingness) were positively related to the formation of both private and public moral identity dimensions (internalization and symbolization), which were in turn associated with a tendency to construct psychological distance towards others (negatively with social dominance orientation and positively with the circle of moral regard). Therefore, one way parents may be able to influence how adolescents relate to their peers is by fostering a sense of moral identity in their children through authoritative parenting.

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In the high school setting, recent increases in maladaptive social behaviors such as aggression, bullying, and school violence have prompted investigation of the psychological roots of adolescents' treatment of others (SSOCS, 2005). As principals, social workers, counselors, and parents seek to understand what might lead youth to behave harmful ways to others, they must confront potential influences that range from cultural and societal factors, to community and neighborhood characteristics, to school and family dimensions, all the way down to aspects of individual personality (e.g. Helfritz & Stanford, 2006) and biology (e.g. Susman & Stoff, 2005). One important psychological factor that has been linked to various forms of antisocial behavior is *psychological distance* (Bandura, 1999; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Staub, 2003). Psychological distance defines how we comparatively orient social objects in our psychological space. This orientation drives our responses to these objects (Brewer, 2007; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007).

While we know a considerable amount about how psychological distance functions (Bandura, 1999; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Reed & Aquino, 2003; Staub, 2003; Trope & Liberman, 2003), we know less about how it develops. For instance, we know little about the socialization factors that affect the development of psychological distance, and the underlying mechanisms involved. The purpose of the present study was to explore this issue in adolescence by examining whether

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parental socialization (Baumrind, 1991) affects adolescents' perceptions of psychological distance from others by way of fostering their moral selves (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 2004; Hardy & Carlo, in press).

### The concept of psychological distance

Psychological distance is a classic idea in social psychology (e.g. Lewin, 1951) that continues to receive a considerable amount of theoretical and empirical attention (for reviews, see Liberman et al., 2007; Martin, 2003). The premise that underlies the psychological distance construct is that people do not interact with other objects as external in some objective sense, but rather in terms of how these objects are comparatively oriented in one's own psychological space. Thus, individuals and groups perceived to be socially proximal versus distal are viewed and treated differently. Psychological distance is typically reflected in socially-defined group boundaries (Brewer, 2007; Liberman et al., 2007), and increased psychological distance has been linked to various antisocial behaviors including aggression (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Staub, 2003), intergroup hostility and conflict (e.g. Hewstone et al., 2002; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998), and political violence (Bandura, 1999; Staub, 2003), as well as decreased helping (e.g., Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Psychological distance is also a powerful determinant of whether people demonstrate moral regard towards others (Levy, Freitas, & Salovey, 2002; Reed & Aquino, 2003). In fact, experimental manipulations that reduce psychological distance increase prosocial behaviors (e.g. Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005; Small & Simonsohn, 2008). Therefore, we focus on two aspects of psychological distance: *social dominance orientation* and the *circle of moral regard*.

Social dominance orientation reflects the extent to which a person is willing to endorse ideologies that rationalize group hierarchies—in other words, thoughts, ideas and rationalizations that allow a person to believe that some groups “deserve” to have and maintain superiority and dominance over other groups within a social system. This superior status confers upon those groups a disproportionate privilege over resources within society (Pratto, 1999; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Social dominance orientation thus reflects perceptions of other groups as *psychologically distal*, and has been shown to be related to a wide range of prejudicial attitudes (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) and other forms of aggression (Bandura, 1999; Staub, 2003).

The second aspect of psychological distance has been called the “circle of moral regard” (Reed & Aquino, 2003). The circle of moral regard is the boundary that defines the individuals and groups for whom a person is willing to exhibit moral concern. This boundary could range from pure self-interest and focus on one's own needs to inclusion of all humanity—and anywhere in between (see Lamont & Molnár, 2002, for a review). Hence the size of the circle of moral regard varies across people. A person with a relatively *expansive* circle of moral regard defines his or her ingroup broadly, rather than focusing on intergroup differences. Accordingly, that person finds even “outsiders” (people of different backgrounds or group affiliations, or even strangers) to be worthy of moral care. The circle of moral regard construct therefore measures perceptions of other individuals as psychologically proximal with highly (ex)clusive group definitions being linked to (less) sharing of limited resources and exhibiting other (anti)prosocial behaviors (Hewstone et al., 2002; Levine et al., 2005; Reed & Aquino, 2003).

### Moral development and psychological distance

We know a good amount about how psychological distance functions in the social domain (Pratto et al., 2006; Reed & Aquino, 2003), but we know less about how it develops, and the underlying mechanisms involved. It is possible that the emergence of psychological distance is intertwined with moral development, in that one's perceptions of others may be an expression of his or her understanding of and commitment to morality (Reed & Aquino, 2003). Specifically, scholars have proposed that two key dimensions of morality are justice and care (Gibbs, 2003; Lapsley, 1996; Moshman, 2005). *Justice* is concern with fairness and equality of rights; *care* is the relative focus on one's own needs and desires versus the needs of others. Behaviors pertaining to justice and care (or harm) seem to be universally considered to fall within the moral domain (Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1990). The two aspects of psychological distance discussed above correspond nicely to the moral principles of justice and care. Social dominance orientation is a “preference for inequality among social groups” (Pratto et al., 1994, p. 741), and thus may be related to a lack of concern for, or at least a lack of deep understanding of, the moral principle of justice. Similarly, the expansiveness of one's circle of moral regard is the degree to which one extends concern for the needs and welfare of a smaller or larger segment of humanity (Reed & Aquino, 2003), and thus pertains to commitment to and understanding of the moral principle of care. Hence, social dominance orientation and the circle of moral regard seem to capture aspects of human social functioning that are widely considered to be moral issues.<sup>1</sup> Based on this proposed connection between psychological distance and moral development, it follows that if part of a person's self-definition involves greater commitment to moral principles, then this more central moral identity should be associated with a lower social dominance orientation and a more expansive circle of moral regard.

<sup>1</sup> Philosophers and psychologists have defined moral behavior as behavior that shows responsiveness to the needs of others (e.g., Eisenberg, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Kant, 1785/1959). We consider the constructs of social dominance and the circle of moral regard to have moral relevance in this regard. This is because social dominance (circle of moral regard) tends to be negatively (positively) related to other outcomes that reflect a responsiveness to the needs of others. However, it is important to note that the degree of this “moralness” is indeed culturally bounded, and is also determined by beliefs that may exist within a particular cultural milieu. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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