



Eavesdropping on character: Assessing everyday moral behaviors



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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of interest in moral character, comparatively little is known about moral behavior in everyday life. This paper reports a novel method for assessing everyday moral behaviors using the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR)—a digital audio-recorder that intermittently samples snippets of ambient sounds from people's environments—and examines the stability of these moral behaviors. In three samples (combined $N = 186$), participants wore an EAR over one or two weekends. Audio files were coded for everyday moral behaviors (e.g., showing sympathy, gratitude) and morally-neutral comparison language behaviors (e.g., use of prepositions, articles). Results indicate that stable individual differences in moral behavior can be systematically observed in daily life, and that their stability is comparable to the stability of neutral language behaviors.

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1. Introduction

“Living a moral, constructive life is defined by a weighted sum of countless individual, morally relevant behaviors enacted day in and day out (plus an occasional particularly self-defining moment).”

[Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007)]

Morality has received a great deal of attention from psychologists in recent years. However, little of this work has examined moral behavior in naturalistic, “real-world” contexts. As such, the present study aims to establish a novel, reliable method for objectively and unobtrusively measuring moral behaviors that are observed in ordinary, everyday settings, and to use this method to examine the stability of individual differences in moral behaviors.

To place the current work into context, we highlight important gaps in the existing literature on morality. First, although classic social psychological research (e.g., Darley & Batson, 1973;

Milgram, 1963) examined overt behavior, modern research has largely focused on moral cognition and emotion. Psychology has lately seen a surge of research on moral decision-making and the cognitive and emotional factors that influence moral judgments (Aquino & Freeman, 2009; Graham, Meindl, & Beall, 2012; Schwitzgebel, 2009), but, little contemporary work has examined overt moral behaviors, especially frequent, everyday moral acts (as opposed to exceptional moral acts).

To the extent that moral behavior has been studied, the research relies heavily on self-reported and laboratory-based measures. This is appropriate for research on moral identity, values, and judgments, but is problematic for studying moral behavior. People, on average, view themselves in a positive light (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) and are especially likely to have distorted self-views for traits and behaviors that are highly evaluative (i.e., positively or negatively valenced; Vazire, 2010). Moral behaviors are arguably among the most evaluative behaviors (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998), which raises concerns about the accuracy of self-reports. Thus, although both self-views and behaviors are important to study and understand, self-reports of behavior are an inadequate substitute for measuring actual moral behavior (Graham, 2014).

At the same time, although studies *have* directly assessed moral behavior, these have mostly taken place in staged laboratory

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environments (e.g., Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006; Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Schwitzgebel, 2009; Zhong, Bohns, & Gino, 2010). This methodology is insufficient for examining individual differences in moral behavior because people's laboratory behavior may not adequately reflect everyday behavior (Graham, 2014). Recent work has begun to explore morality in more natural contexts (Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014), but this work frequently relies on self-reports of behaviors. To begin developing a more complete understanding of everyday moral functioning, the present study seeks to establish a reliable method for objectively observing moral behaviors outside the laboratory.

The existing literature emphasizes the variability of morality (Graham et al., 2012; Hartshorne & May, 1928), and how even subtle situational manipulations influence moral actions (Blanken, van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015; Darley & Batson, 1973; Doris, 2002). Although this emphasis has sparked important research, relatively little of this work directly addresses the stability of individual differences in moral behavior. Where individual differences in morality have been examined, the focus has usually been on differences in moral perceptions and values (e.g., moral foundations; Graham et al., 2011), rather than actual moral behavior. To fill this gap, we examine the temporal stability of individual differences in actual, naturalistically observed, moral behaviors.

2. Present study

We present a method for objectively measuring everyday moral behaviors and examine the degree to which individual differences in these behaviors are stable across context and time. We use repeated observations in natural contexts to examine the consistency of moral behaviors—that is, whether people who act in more morally desirable ways than others at one time are also likely to do so at another time. Our goal is to provide evidence for the viability of a new naturalistic method for studying actual, everyday moral behavior, as well as evidence about the degree to which individual differences in moral behavior are stable.

Our method employed the Electronically Activated Recorder, or EAR, a pocket-sized, wearable device that intermittently records short “sound-bites” of the wearer's audible environment, allowing researchers to unobtrusively capture ambient sounds from people's moment-to-moment lives (Mehl, Robbins, & große Deters, 2012). This method allows us to objectively assess actual behaviors, addressing calls to reemphasize the study of behavior in personality and social psychology (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007; Furr, 2009). Although we are not able to assess all moral behaviors with this method, such as grand acts of heroism and self-sacrifice, this method does allow us to measure what is perhaps the most common form of morality (Hofmann et al., 2014): everyday, moral behaviors with a prosocial (or anti-social) focus. Additionally, the EAR enables the collection of representative samples from the full spectrum of participants' daily lives over several days, maximizing the generalizability and ecological validity of research findings (Brunswick, 1956) and allowing us to capture patterns of behavior that are more likely than single instances to reflect individual differences in moral personality.

Following previous work on the stability of personality and self-reported moral constructs, we predicted that individual differences in moral behavior would be relatively stable over time (exhibiting moderate effect sizes of $r = .30$ – $.50$). This prediction is based on the test–retest stability of personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness (Fleeson, 2001; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), which are related to behaving morally (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014; Matsuba & Walker, 2004). Furthermore, studies examining explicitly moral constructs have shown that the rank-order stability of individual differences in moral judgments

is relatively high (Bollich, Hill, Harms, & Jackson, 2016; Graham et al., 2011). Although most of this work relies on self- or other-reports of traits rather than observed behavior, it nevertheless provides grounds for predicting stable individual differences in moral behavior. The methodology of the present study enables us to directly test this prediction.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

We report how we determined our sample sizes, all data exclusions, and all relevant measures in the study. We used data from three samples, for a total of 186 participants.¹ Sample 1 consisted of 11 rheumatoid arthritis patients (11 women; $M_{age} = 56.38$, $SD_{age} = 13.32$; for more information on this sample, see Robbins, Mehl et al., 2011). Sample 2 consisted of 73 adults participating in a randomized controlled trial of the effects of a meditation intervention on healthy adults (47 women, 26 men; $M_{age} = 32.16$, $SD_{age} = 7.99$; Raison, 2014). Sample 3 included 102 adults consisting of 52 women with breast cancer undergoing adjuvant cancer treatment ($M_{age} = 56.16$, $SD_{age} = 13.95$) and their co-habiting partners (7 women, 43 men; $M_{age} = 59.41$, $SD_{age} = 14.61$; for more information on this sample, see Robbins et al., 2014). Sample sizes were determined by the availability of resources and preexisting data. These sample sizes provided 80% power to detect effect sizes of at least $r = .69$ for Sample 1, at least $r = .32$ for Sample 2, and at least $r = .28$ for Sample 3. (Data from the three samples can be accessed at <https://osf.io/xpqhw/>.) For some analyses, the three samples were combined into one dataset—we note below when this is the case.

3.2. Participant procedure

All participants wore the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR; Mehl et al., 2012), a small electronic recording device that turns on intermittently and records sound-bites from participants' daily lives over the course of the study. The EAR consists of a mobile device (HP iPAQ 110 or Apple iPod touch) and a recording application (a software for the HP device and an iTunes App for the iPod touch). Participants in Sample 1 wore the EAR on two weekends four weeks apart, and it recorded 50 s every 18 min (average number of valid files with audible speech = 101, $SD = 43$). Participants in Sample 2 wore the EAR on two weekends about 10 weeks apart, and it recorded either 50 s every 9 min or 30 s every 12 min (average number of valid files with audible speech = 137, $SD = 58$). Participants in Sample 3 wore the EAR on one weekend, and it recorded 50 s every 9 min (average number of valid files with audible speech = 78, $SD = 36$). In all three samples, participants were informed their files would be coded for a broad set of daily behaviors, but moral behaviors were not specifically mentioned.

3.3. EAR coding and transcribing

In total, 19,063 EAR files containing audible speech were coded and transcribed by trained research assistants. For Samples 1 and 2, each research assistant who coded the first weekend files for a given participant also coded that same participant's files from the second weekend. For all files in which participants were talking, coders coded each file for a set of positive and negative moral behaviors.

¹ Samples 1 and 2 were used in previous work (Robbins et al., 2011; Robbins, López, Weihs, & Mehl, 2014; Robbins, Mehl, Holleran, & Kasle, 2011). However, the present analyses do not overlap with those in previous publications. A broad overview of the project was summarized in Mehl, Bollich, Doris, and Vazire (2015).

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