

Moral chronicity and social information processing: Tests of a social cognitive approach to the moral personality

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Abstract

Following Higgins, King, and Mavin (1982) chronicity paradigm, we examined the effects of chronically accessed moral constructs for prototypic moral character using two different research paradigms, spontaneous trait inferencing and lexical decision. Study 1 presented target sentences in a deliberate or spontaneous processing condition. Recall was cued with either a dispositional or semantic cue. Moral chronics made more spontaneous trait inferences with dispositional cues than semantic cues. In Study 2, participants read stories about characters who did or did not help. Moral chronics were faster responding to probes reflecting negative evaluations of story characters who did not help when requested (e.g., “disloyal”). Findings support claims that the moral personality is usefully conceptualized in terms of the chronic accessibility of moral knowledge structures.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in studying moral rationality within the broader context of moral personality, selfhood, and identity to account more adequately for issues of character and virtue (e.g., Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Lapsley & Power, 2005). These topics were largely pushed to the margins of research in moral psychology by the ascendance of the cognitive developmental tradition, notably Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1969, 1981, 1984). Kohlberg rejected character as a basis for moral development for a number of reasons. He argued that the language of character traits does not provide the resources to combat ethical relativism (because one person's *integrity* is another person's *stubbornness*); that it cannot provide guidance for moral education (because it involves sampling arbitrarily from a "bag of virtues"); and that the psychological reality of traits is much in doubt (because the cross-situational consistency of traits has not been adequately demonstrated). Moreover, the Kantian and Piagetian sources of Kohlberg's theory led him to focus on those aspects of morality (deontic judgments of duty and obligation) that could be stage-typed (justice reasoning), at the expense of more traditional "Aristotelian" concerns, such as the cultivation of virtuous character.

Although the Piagetian stage-and-structure approach to justice reasoning has yielded an enormously productive research program over the years, there is also growing recognition that moral reasoning cannot be abstracted cleanly from the complex dynamic system of selfhood and personality of which it is both part and product (Blasi, 2005). If character is the moral dimension of personality, then the explanatory reach of moral psychology must be grounded on, or at least compatible with, well-attested models of personality. Unfortunately, there has been little history of cross-pollinating work across the two domains of psychology. For example, researchers in personality psychology rarely attempt to account for the dispositional aspects of moral functioning, or to derive robust implications of personality theories for constructs of interest to the moral domain, such as moral selfhood, identity and character (for notable exceptions, see Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1991). In turn, researchers in moral psychology rarely avail themselves of the theoretical resources, constructs and mechanisms of personality psychology for conceptualizing the moral *person* who discerns issues, constructs reasons, forms an identity, sets goals, favors projects, makes commitments, pursues justice, and otherwise attempts to live well the life that is good for one to live.

But two research programs have attempted recently to frame integrative accounts of the moral personality, and in a way that aligns with the two distinct disciplines of personality psychology. According to Cervone (1991) personality psychology divides on the question of which units should best conceptualize personality. One discipline favors trait/dispositional constructs and understands personality structure in terms of between-person variation as described by certain interindividual taxonomic systems (e.g., the Big 5 trait variables). The second discipline favors cognitive-affective constructs, or social-cognitive units, and understands personality structure in terms of within-person processes (Cervone, 2005). Each discipline of personality psychology has attracted interest with respect to integrative theories of moral personality.

For example, Walker and his colleagues examined the personality structure of moral exemplars with respect to the Big 5 trait dimensions. In one study (Walker & Pitts, 1998) three types of moral exemplars were studied: brave, caring and just. Brave individuals were

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