

Moral Functioning, moral identity, and moral self-concepts

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The idea of moral identity has started me thinking about each of these ideas—morality and identity, and why they are so attractive in combination as the entity—moral identity. In part, it may be because as scholars of morality, we have become frustrated over the past several decades by having to live with the moral judgment-moral action gap. And in part, it is because for many, by definition, morality is intentions and motivations as much as it is action, denoting a person who intends to act, a self (e.g., Blasi, 2005; Hart, 2005; Kohlberg, 1981; Power & Kehlmekov, 1997). Moreover, intentions and motivations are not strictly cognitive, having an emotional side revealed by the varied actions of individuals whose personalities and character differ. The idea of a fully integrated relationship between morality and the self is captured in the term, moral identity. I want to think about precursors of moral identity and its development, more specifically to suggest the idea of moral self-concepts as precursors and to use research literature to argue the plausibility of the idea. Moral self-concepts, in this view, emerge in young childhood and become self-conscious through middle childhood and into adolescence. In youth and young adulthood, moral self-concepts become more integrated, differentiated, and consolidated. During these periods and into adulthood a network of moral self-concepts may functionally guide decisions and behavior, serving as reference points for the individual. For other youth and adults this network of moral self-concepts may be transformed becoming fully and consciously integrated into one's sense of self as a moral identity. The focus of this paper will be on moral self-concepts development from pre-adolescence to young adulthood.

The paper has three main sections beginning with the presentation of the idea of moral self-concepts. I will suggest that just as young children's self-concepts derive from their learning

to differentiate and then integrate experiences of what they can master and what they cannot (Marsh) as well as of what attributes they do or do not possess (Harter), so moral self-concepts may be fostered by experiences of the ways in which children are moral and the ways in which they are not, by both their own account and that of others. The idea of the development of discrete moral self-concepts seems useful for interpreting research findings across studies of children's moral action and prosocial behavior, moral reasoning, and moral emotions.

Michael Lamb, in the most recent issue of *Human Development* makes the case that contextualism can provide a framework for understanding that individual characteristics continue to develop and change across the life span. He sees this idea of developmental contextualism as a new intellectual frontier in the field of attachment and calls for the building of a conceptual structure based on detailed and careful analyses of the mechanisms through which the people in an infant's life shape the process of her development over time. Although contextualism is certainly not a new idea in developmental psychology, conducting research that actually examines the person in action in situ is still very rare.

Studying contexts of moral functioning over time could reveal what Shoda and Mischel (2000) have called "behavioral signatures," patterns of variability across situations that have their own consistency and can be analyzed as individual differences. Shoda and Mischel were suggesting a solution to a fundamental paradox in personality psychology, that is, that while theories of personality claim that people act consistently across diverse situations, research has shown that the usual case is variability. They proposed a cognitive-affective personality system (CAPS) in which the stable characteristics of personality are represented in networks of associations using connectionist ideas. Their research (Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002) showed stable personality repertoires across diverse situations and at different times of measurement for children at a summer camp. Thus, while each child did not display a similar level of verbal aggression across situations, each did display consistent cognitive-affective units

(CAUs) or patterns. For instance, each child showed her own characteristic pattern of variation across situations. They argued such a pattern reflects an individual's culture, subculture, and developmental history as well as genetic endowment and temperament.

Thinking along those lines, in the second section, I turn to a focus on the contexts in which children's moral functioning develops. To make a loosely parallel argument, it can be said that moral functioning includes reasoning, intentions and emotions expressed in behaviors just as Mischel and his colleagues argued that personality is better studied as cognitive-affective units expressed as behaviors. Blasi (2005), Walker (2005), Colby & Damon (1992), Power and myself, (2004) and others have conducted research indicating that moral action, also, may be better understood if studied as an expression of patterns of reasoning, intentions and emotions displayed in diverse real situations over time. These studies have looked at such patterns of reasons and reasoning, intentions, and emotions in order to gain insight into the meaning of morality in people's lives. These studies begin to address Lamb's general goal of creating a theory of developmental contextualism, in this case, for moral functioning.

While one could design a study to look at the stability of moral functioning as expressed by varying behaviors across diverse situations, it seems prudent to begin to address the development of moral functioning with a careful review of research on its various aspects from the standpoint of assessing the situations, experimental or natural, in which the research is carried out. To my knowledge, no one has looked across studies at the relationship of moral constructs to the situations in which they have been investigated. To do so, it seems reasonable to parse the active ingredients, that is, the psychosocial characteristics, of situations in order to highlight what we know and have yet to learn about aspects of moral functioning. Here I suggest three levels that would interact with individual cognitive, intentional, and affective processes. While these levels hopefully will prove useful for reviewing research literature and identifying lacunae in the field, they are merely suggestive of how to think about contextual aspects of a dynamic system of

moral functioning, including notions of moral self-concepts and moral identity.

Level 1 is termed “necessary contextual features.” Importantly, literature demonstrates that we know a considerable amount about the “moral” conditions of situations that researchers consider critical for promoting the moral functioning of children and adolescents. These conditions are 1. role-taking opportunities, 2. the quality of reciprocity, 3. the level and extent of justice, and 4. the level and extent of harmony or community. Research has highlighted these areas as primarily critical for the development of moral understanding, reasoning, and decision-making (e.g., Kohlberg & Candee, 1984; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989) and prosocial behavior (Eisenberg). Kohlberg (1984) has argued that these are universal dimensions of situations that are necessary to promote moral functioning but do not guarantee it.

The second level is termed “specific features” because they are the roles, relationships, and social conventions that give concrete meaning to situations and that motivate the actors within them. They can be moral but the important point is that they also include quasi-moral and non-moral conditions in situations that, I think, are also important for moral functioning. Such specific features may promote or stagnate moral functioning, support or hinder it. For instance, in a classic bystander situation, the number of bystanders changes people’s ideas about their role, including their obligation to help. Theoretically, it seems that the expression of moral action may depend more upon specific features than on necessary features. Specific features, like necessary features, are universal in the sense that they can be identified in any and all situations but unlike necessary features, their expressions are determined by the specific conditions of each situation.

The third level focuses on individual differences, thus it is termed “individual” or “unique features.” This level represents the interaction of individual characteristics of personality and attitudes with specific and necessary features of situations. It is this level that is critical to investigate in order to understand the development of moral self-concepts and of moral identity.

As stated above, the goal of this tripartite division of situational features is to create a
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more systematic and comprehensive way to describe research that bears on moral functioning. There may or may not be evidence supporting the notion of discrete moral self-concepts or of the ideas that moral self-concepts develop through differentiation and integration and for some people become transformed into moral identity, while for others they remain a network of more or less reliable references points for action.

In the last section, I suggest that the idea of moral self-concepts or something like it is necessary for two reasons, first, because understanding morality or moral functioning calls for a theory of the individual connected to his/her actions through conscious and reasoned intentions, and second, because the idea of moral identity as put forth by Blasi seems to describe the few and is defined in such a way as to exclude the great majority of adults, thus calling for a second idea that can adequately capture their moral functioning. Because adolescence, youth, and young adulthood are the periods in which Erikson focused on identity crisis and development and because they mark the consolidation of conventional moral reasoning or give indication of movement to post-conventional thinking as described by Kohlberg, they are the periods that for many bring together personal and moral concerns around the development of conscious ideologies and life plans. They represent a break from childhood and become the launching pad for adult life. The rich conceptualizations of McAdams and of Arnett about these times of life intertwine issues of identity and morality. McAdams has identified the main issue for young adulthood as the problem of multiple selves. It seems these stories may be transformative and include the development of moral identity or they may consolidate and further differentiate and integrate their multiple selves including multiple moral self-concepts. Arnett shows that adolescents and young adults describe themselves both as adult in some ways and not in others. Moreover, in one of his studies, most young adults were unable to integrate ideas of individualism and communitarianism into a dialectical or multifaceted philosophy, preferring one and opposing the other. A case example illustrates the psychosocial characteristics of different

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work situations that, arguably, influenced a young woman's sense of identity and moral functioning.