Constructing a Multi-Dimensional Model of Morality

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Abstract

One of the most prolific directions in the research of the psychology of morality explored the issue from a rationalist-cognitive stand point (Kohlberg, 1969; Haidt, 2008; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Ferns & Thom, 2001). However, current research has established the importance of affective states in normal moral functioning, namely- empathy, guilt and shame (Seara-Cardoso, Neumann, Roiser, Viding, & McCrory, 2012; Emde, 2011; Haidt, 2007; Fry, 2006; Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2010). In turn, empathy is influenced by age and gender. Meaning, adults and women tend to score higher on measures of empathy compared to adolescents and men (Decety & Michalska, 2010; Skoe, 2010).

Another variable linked to morality is religiosity. A number of studies have found variance in moral considerations depending on religiosity and religious orientation (Batson, Anderson, & Collins, 2005; Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou., 2007; Saroglou et al., 2006; Batson, 2005; Day, 2010). In addition to that, the degree of faith in god might have an independent contribution to morality, unrelated to levels of religiosity (Stark, 2001; Atkinson & Bourrat, 2011). Lastly, spirituality is linked to both religiosity and moral emotions (Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008).

Granted, morality has been explored from a developmental, affective and cognitive stand points (McDaniel, Grice, & Eason, 2010), however, an integrative, comprehensive model of morality has yet to be constructed. We contend that such a model may enrich the debate regarding moral issues. In light of that, the present research is innovative in its attempt to construct a multidimensional model of morality, based upon the following types of variables: demographic variables: age, gender and religiosity level; psychological variables: guilt, shame, empathy, spirituality, faith in god and religious orientation; moral judgment variables: other's welfare, social stability and purity of the soul. The novelty of the current study is by examining moral judgment using a relatively new theory, which encompasses numerous multi-cultural moral considerations- Moral Foundations Theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, 2010; Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

The study variables were organized in a theoretical model, followed by research assumptions. Participants included 318 men and women- 162 adults aged 25-78 and 156 teenager aged 14-16, both secular and religious. The decision to include teens is due to the lack of models explaining morality among adolescents younger than 18 (McDaniel et al., 2010), hence the gap in knowledge must be filled.

The research paradigm is quantitative and qualitative (mixed methods design). Firstly, all participants had filled out six questionnaires, which were subsequently analyzed using multivariate analyses, Structural Equations Modeling and advanced methods intended to ascertain links between independent, mediator and dependent variable, that is- PROCESS. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five adolescents and five adults. The aim of the interviews was to deepen the understanding of the quantitative findings and obtain data that couldn't have been uncovered using quantitative methods.

Main findings:

- Empathy: empathy served as a mediator variable between age, gender and other's welfare. Women's empathy levels were higher than men's. As a consequence, women's judgment on other's welfare was also high. In addition, adult's empathy levels surpassed those of adolescents', resulting in elevated score on other's welfare.

- Spirituality: spirituality served as a mediator variable between religious orientation and social stability. The higher the religious orientation, the higher the spirituality levels and social stability levels.

- Religiosity: religious participants were higher on social stability and purity compared with secular participants.

- Faith in god: this variable contributed more to predicting purity than religiosity levels. In contrast, religiosity levels predicted social stability better compared to the faith variable.

- Adolescents were higher on social stability than adults.

- The research model fitted well with the data, after making several post-hoc modifications.

- Two main themes aroused in the interviews: what is considered as moral/immoral and what motivates people to act morally. All participants believed that harming others or causing damage violated morality. Other considerations included peer loyalty, adhering to tradition and restraining characters that may contaminate the soul, such as arrogance and envy. Regarding moral motivation, it was found that numerous mechanisms served to impede immorality and foster morality. Such mechanisms included the judicial system, the conscience and god. However, it's not the existence of these mechanisms per se, but the intense affective reaction they bring about, that plays a fundamental role in restraining undesired conduct.

Main conclusions:

- Purity is the spiritual intra-personal and abstract moral foundation. Purity based morality doesn't necessarily require other people's presence in order to exist. It draws extensively on man-god connection and spiritual elements. As opposed to that, judgment based on other's welfare requires a dyadic interaction at minimum. Finally, social order moral judgment is linked with broader social elements that far exceed dyads, namely- groups, traditions and social institutions.

- The purpose of purity based morality is to safe-guard the soul from contamination. The results of the current study suggest that faith in god has a greater impact on purity than religiosity level. It seems that faith in god is so effective in keeping the cleanliness of the spirit, that a person doesn't even have to be religious to be high in purity.

- Other's welfare draws from empathy levels. When a person holds the capacity to relate to the subjective experience of others, it becomes easier for him to lean towards moral judgments that centers around the needs of others.

- Age had the highest contribution in predicting social stability. During adolescence, teens demonstrate an unprecedented kinship with their peers. These group interaction facilitates the acquisition and practice of social stability principles, such as loyalty, conformity, hierarchy and adhering to group norms. Therefore, it appears social stability might have a developmental facet.

- Contrary to the prediction, the type of religious orientation had no impact on spirituality levels. It seems that elevating spirituality levels can occur via the existential search path and via the total acceptance of religious creeds. The crucial factor is belonging to religion that fosters spirituality and not the type of religious motivation.

- Interview analysis yielded various moral considerations, which included care for others, chastity and group loyalty. These findings give rise to the notion that human morality is indeed complex and is based upon different kinds of elements, that at times may contradict themselves and create inner conflict. The interviews also supported the critical role of emotions in buffering moral misdemeanors and encouraging pro-social conduct.

Lastly, the current study holds a theoretical and a practical contribution. As far as we know, this is the first study conducted on a diverse Israeli-Jewish population, aiming to construct a multi-dimensional model based on Moral Foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007).The inclusion of demographic and psychological variables served to expand the knowledge regarding this theory, which is considered to be one of the leading theories in moral psychology at present. The practical contribution of the current study is pertinent to educators and clinicians working with teens. Both qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that empathy, guilt and spirituality are related to moral judgment based on care for others and social stability. In light of that, and considering findings from additional studies, there's a superior importance to nurture moral emotions. Moreover, there needs to be an emphasis on elevating spirituality levels as a means of elevating empathy.