THE MORAL IDENTITY AND GROUP AFFILIATION

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ABSTRACT

This research applies identity theory to understand whether moral identity processes operate similarly or differently depending on group affiliation (gender, race, and religion). A survey measuring facets of the moral identity, moral behavior, and emotions was administered to 315 subjects. Findings support the moral identity as a general human process which does not vary significantly by gender, race, or religion; it is predictive of moral behavior and emotional reactions regardless of the group in which one is affiliated.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade identity theorists have developed a research program that investigates the influence of the moral identity on behavior and emotions (Stets and Carter 2012; 2011; 2006). Research in this area has not examined whether the moral identity control process operates the same across gender, race, and religion. Identity theory claims that discrepancies between identity standards and perceived reactions from others in situations (identity non-verification) results in negative emotions. My research attempts two things: to determine whether the meanings representing the moral identity vary across gender, race, and religion, and to see if people in these groups experience negative emotions similarly when perceptions of self in a situation do not match identity standard meanings.

While past work on morality and moral development is prevalent in the psychological literature, there is a dearth of work on morality and how it operates among differing social groups, and how it applies to the research on identity. This is especially true in sociology, and even more in sociological social psychology. Most of the previous work on morality, moral attitudes, or other aspects of the moral self is limited to disciplines such as religious studies (Roof 1993; Shaw 1903), philosophy (Ames 1928; Anderson 1985; Goldberg 1993), or fields outside sociology (Gomberg 1994; Rest 1986, 1993; Wainryb 1991; Woolf 1915). Other substantial work is found in psychology, however its emphasis is more on the evolution of moral belief and moral development over the human life course (Aquino and Reed 2002; Blasi 1980; Kohlberg 1969, 1976; Walker and Hennig 2004). Sociological work on group membership and morality has largely focused on characteristics such as care and attachment (e.g. females being more

compassionate and caring than males (Gilligan 1982; White 1999), and Hispanics and Asians having more of a care orientation given their collectively oriented values compared to Whites (Aguirre and Turner 2004; Vega 1990)). Some work within sociology has addressed morality and culture, but most endeavors are theoretical rather than empirical (Smith 2003). I seek to further both theoretical and empirical knowledge about morality and identity by examining how the moral identity operates to influence behavior across social categories.

The moral identity represents two meaning dimensions: *justice* and *care* (Stets and Carter 2012; 2011; Walker and Hennig 2004). The moral identity is a master identity among one's hierarchy of identities (Stets and Carter 2006). Past research has revealed that the moral identity operates to motivate behavior across a variety of social settings, but it is unclear if the moral identity operates similarly for different types of actors.

Identity theory conceptualizes behavior as a result of identity verification. The identity process operates as a control loop in which perceived meanings of the self in the situation are compared with identity standard meanings. The goal is to verify one's identity by matching perceptions of one's self in a situation with their identity standard. Identity verification causes positive emotions; identity non-verification causes negative emotions. According to identity theory, since the identity control process operates for all actors, the moral identity should influence behavior for all individuals regardless of gender, race, or religion.

METHOD

Sample

Data was collected by administering a survey to 315 undergraduate students at a large western university in 2002. The response rate was 79%. The sample included more females (72%) than males (28%). The average age of the respondents was 21. The income of respondents' parents ranged from $35,000 to $50,000. Most respondents were Asian (31%), Hispanic (29%), or White (22%). Blacks (10%), American Indians (<1%) and "Others" (8%) are not included in the data analysis due to the small number of respondents in each category. Respondents' religious affiliation included Protestants (15%), Catholics (47%), Christians (13%), and those with no religion (25%).

Measures

Gender was coded 0 for female and 1 for male. Whites are used as the reference group against which Asians and Hispanics are compared. Asians and Hispanics are each dummy variables where 0 = Whites and 1 = Asian or Hispanic. No religious affiliation is the reference group against which Protestants, Catholics, and Christians are compared. Protestants are coded 1 if Protestant, 0 otherwise, Catholics are coded 1 if catholic, 0 otherwise, Christians are coded 1 if Christian, 0 otherwise.

The Moral Identity

The moral identity was measured using a scale of bipolar characteristics (Aquino and Reed 2002; Stets and Carter 2012; 2011; 2006). Respondents were asked to rank themselves from 1 to 5 on the following characteristics (where 1 reflected agreement with one characteristic, 5 reflected agreement with its opposing characteristic, and 3 in between the extremes): honest/dishonest, caring/uncaring, kind/unkind, unfair/fair, helpful/not helpful, stingy/generous, compassionate/hardhearted, unreliable/reliable, humble/arrogant, selfish/selfless, and principled/unprincipled. Four of these characteristics were reverse coded (unfair/fair, stingy/generous, unreliable/reliable, and selfish/selfless). These characteristics were combined to form a single scale and standardized. A higher value on the items represents a person with a high moral identity. A principle components factor analysis was used to determine whether the meaning for the moral identity was unidimensional. The items formed a single factor with an omega reliability of .84 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Principle Components
Factor Analysis for Moral Identity

Items	Factor Loading
Honest	.55
Caring	.75
Kind	.65
Fair	.41
Helpful	.53
Generous	.47
Compassionate	.59
Reliable	.52
Humble	.52
Selfless	.50
Principled	.48
Eigenvalue	3.30
Omega	.84

Moral Behavior

Respondents were asked how they behaved the last time they were in the following situations: 1) receiving more money than what they were owed at a store; 2) donating money to a charity; 3) returning a found wallet (and its contents) to its owner; and 4) giving money to a homeless person. Each situation was coded 0-1, with 0 representing that the respondent *did not* engage in the behavior (i.e. did not return money to the cashier, did not return the wallet, did not donate to the charity, and did not give to the homeless), and 1 representing that the respondent *did* engage in the behavior (i.e. returned money to the cashier, returned the wallet, donated to the charity, and gave to the homeless). These situations are used as proxies for moral behavior as they represent common events in which the expectation of good behavior of helping others and the alternative bad behavior is considered less than moral.

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Most respondents had previously experienced the situations (charity 96%, homeless person 98%, cashier 76%, and wallet 35%). If respondents claimed they did not experience the situation, they were asked how they would behave if confronted with the option to engage or not engage in the behavior.

Emotions

Respondents were asked how they felt after they behaved as they did in the situations. A semantic differential scale was used to measure affective responses to behavior. The scale measured emotional intensity from 0 to 10, where 0 = "not feeling the emotion" and 10 = "intensely feeling the emotion." The emotions measured include feeling "intensely happy/not happy, intensely guilty/not guilty, intensely sad/not sad, intensely proud/not proud, intensely angry/not angry, and intensely shameful/not shameful. This way of measuring emotions has been used in previous research (Driskell and Webster Jr. 1997; Lovaglia 1997; Shelly 2001).

Identity theory posits that positive emotion results from identity verification and negative emotion results from identity non-verification. Identity theory does not predict specific emotions that will emerge in given situations. Therefore the positive and negative emotions were factor analyzed for each situation (cashier, donation, wallet, and homeless). The factor analysis showed that emotional reactions formed a single dimension for each situation (eigenvalues = 3.54 for cashier, 2.94 for charity, 3.27 for wallet, and 2.96 for the homeless vignette). The emotions were then standardized and summed. A high score represents more positive emotions. The omega reliability for each emotion scale is high (omega = .93 for receiving money from a cashier, omega = .94 for finding a wallet, omega = .91 for donating to a charity, and omega = .89 for donating to a homeless person).

RESULTS

The Meaning of the Moral Identity

Tables 2 and 3 report the means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables. To examine whether the moral identity differs across gender, racial, and religious categories, a factor analysis was calculated using AMOS comparing models with and without constraints for equality across groups. No significant differences were found.

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Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Variables

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
Moral Identity	314	.00	1.00	-2.68	2.21
Moral Behavior: Cashier	293	.63	.48	0	1
Moral Behavior: Charity	283	.33	.47	0	1
Moral Behavior: Wallet	307	.91	.28	0	1
Moral Behavior: Homeless	262	.54	.50	0	1
Emotions: Cashier	309	.03	.73	-2.89	1.45
Emotions: Charity	210	.02	.70	-2.05	1.58
Emotions: Wallet	212	.00	.74	-3.86	1.09
Emotions: Homeless	210	-.02	.70	-2.66	1.19
Gender	213	.28	.45	0	1
Asian	308	.35	.48	0	1
Hispanic	308	.40	.49	0	1
Protestant	315	.15	.35	0	1
Catholic	315	.47	.50	0	1
Christian	311	.13	.34	0	1

Table 3. Correlations among Variables (N=315)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Moral Identity	1.00							
(2) Moral Behavior: Cashier	.21*	1.00						
(3) Moral Behavior: Charity	.12*	.13*	1.00					
(4) Moral Behavior: Wallet	.11	.18*	.10	1.00				
(5) Moral Behavior: Homeless	.11	-.01	.30*	.06	1.00			
(6) Emotions: Cashier	.15*	.68*	.13*	.05	-.04	1.00		
(7) Emotions: Charity	.10	.00	.63*	.04	.23*	.20*	1.00	
(8) Emotions: Wallet	.25*	.16*	.06	.59*	.03	.22*	.19*	1.00
(9) Emotions: Homeless	.15*	-.06	.20*	.00	.58*	.08	.38*	.17*
(10) Gender	-.19*	-.17*	.00	-.14*	.09	-.11	.05	-.16*
(11) Asian	-.19*	-.13*	-.05	-.04	-.03	-.06	-.01	-.08
(12) Hispanic	.13*	.00	.05	.09	.18*	-.03	.03	.07
(13) Protestant	.01	.07	-.06	.03	.06	.03	-.09	.01
(14) Catholic	.19*	.02	.00	.04	.06	-.08	.02	.06
(15) Christian	.08	.01	.04	.05	-.08	.05	.03	.01

Variables	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)
(9) Emotions: Homeless	1.00						
(10) Gender	.05	1.00					
(11) Asian	.08	.20*	1.00				
(12) Hispanic	.07	-.21*	-.59*	1.00			
(13) Protestant	-.04	.06	.03	-.21*	1.00		
(14) Catholic	.07	-.23*	-.25*	.42*	-.39*	1.00	
(15) Christian	-.05	-.01	-.03	-.05	-.16*	-.37*	1.00

*p<.05

Table 4. OLS and Logistic Regressions for Moral Identity and Behavior For Gender, Race, and Religion

	Dependent Variables				
	Model 1	Model 2			
		Return Money	Charity Donation	Return Wallet	Homeless Donation
	Moral Identity				
		Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio
Independent Variables	β	Ratio	Ratio	Ratio	Ratio
Gender					
Gender	-.19*	.53*	1.11	.42*	1.68
Moral Identity	—	1.53*	1.31*	1.35	1.30*
R^2	.03*				
x^2		18.59*	4.10	7.88*	6.21*
N	312	291	281	305	260
Race					
Asians	-.17*	.44*	.88	1.31	1.80
Hispanics	.03	.53	1.05	2.09	2.81*
Moral Identity	—	1.59*	1.27*	1.47*	1.23
R^2	.04*				
x^2		20.74*	3.88	5.85	13.05*
N	307	287	278	300	258
Religion					
Protestants	.17*	1.65	.56	2.13	1.50
Catholics	.32*	1.06	.73	1.69	1.20
Christians	.22*	1.08	.87	2.62	.69
Moral Identity	—	1.58*	1.32*	1.36	1.25*
R^2	.07*				
x^2		14.75*	5.78	6.19	6.46
N	310	290	280	303	260

$*p < .05$
— Not in Equation

Moral Behavior

Table 4 presents the results for moral identity and moral behavior for gender, race, and religion. The interactions of gender, race, religion, the moral identity, and moral behavior were included with the baseline model for each respective equation (for moral behavior as well as the subsequent models concerning emotional reactions). Tests of significance were run for each model. The final models are the equations with interaction effects that the significance test revealed to be significant predictors of the model.

Gender

Model 1 shows that males have a lower score on the measure of moral identity than females (beta = -.19, $p < .05$). Model 2 measures moral behavior based on one's moral identity and

gender. Controlling for the effect of gender, the moral identity positively influences returning money to the cashier, donating to a charity, and giving money to the homeless.

Race

In Model 1 of Table 4, Asians have a significantly lower score on the measure of moral identity than Whites (beta = -.17, $p < .05$). The interaction terms of Asians*moral identity and Hispanics*moral identity were not significant predictors of the dependent variables, therefore these interaction terms are excluded from the analysis in Model 2. Model 2 reveals that controlling for the effects of race, the moral identity still positively influences returning money to the cashier, donating to a charity, and returning a lost wallet.

Religion

Model 1 shows that religion significantly predicts having a higher score on the measure of moral identity. Protestants (beta = .17, $p < .05$), Catholics (beta =.32, $p < .05$), and Christians (beta = .22, $p < .05$) are more likely to have a higher moral identity than those with no religion. There were no significant interaction effects of one's moral identity and religion on moral behavior. Controlling for religious affiliation, the moral identity still positively influences moral behavior.

Emotional Reactions

Gender

Table 5 presents the OLS regressions for emotional reactions following moral behavior by gender. The interaction of gender*behavior (i.e. being male or female and returning money to a cashier, returning a wallet, etc.) is significant in all the situations examined (beta = -.24, $p < .05$ for returning money to a cashier, beta = -.20, $p < .05$ for donating to a charity, beta = -.42, $p < .05$ for returning a wallet, and beta = -.27, $p < .05$ for donating to a homeless person). Across all behaviors, females feel more negative emotions compared to males when they do not engage in moral behavior. However, the interaction effect of moral identity*behavior on one's emotional reactions is still significant across all behaviors (beta = .14, $p < .05$ for returning money to a cashier, beta = .10, $p < .05$ for donating to a charity, beta = .52, $p < .05$ for returning a wallet, and beta = .14, $p < .05$ for donating to a homeless person). Table 6 presents the means of these interactions. The results reveal that across all behaviors, both men and women feel more negative emotion when they have a high moral identity but do not engage in moral behavior.

Table 5. OLS Regressions for Emotional Reactions for Gender

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables			
	Return Money	Charity Donation	Return Wallet	Homeless Donation
	beta	beta	beta	beta
Moral Identity	-.05	-.06	-.38*	-.01
Behavior	.78*	.72*	.74*	.66*
Moral Identity*Behavior	.14*	.10*	.52*	.14*
Gender	.18*	.15*	.37*	.24*
Gender*Moral Identity	-.02	.02	.11*	.01
Gender*Behavior	-.24*	-.20*	-.42*	-.27*
R-Square	.50*	.43*	.43*	.39*
N	290	281	303	260

*$p < .05$

Table 6. Means for Emotional Reactions by Moral Identity and Behavior

Moral Identity	Return Money		Charity Donation		Return Wallet		Homeless Donation	
	Did Not Return	Did Return	Did Not Donate	Did Donate	Did Not Return	Did Return	Did Not Donate	Did Donate
Low	-.48	.35	-.29	.58	-1.10	.02	-.47	.25
High	-.62	.49	-.37	.64	-1.68	.28	-.51	.44

Race

Table 7 presents the OLS regressions for emotional reactions following moral behavior by race. Table 7 shows that the interaction effect of moral identity*behavior on one's emotional reactions is significant across all behaviors (beta = .18 for return money, $p < .05$; beta = .14 for charity donation, $p < .05$; beta = .54 for return wallet, $p < .05$; and beta = .19 for homeless donation, $p < .05$). Once again, the results of the means in Table 6 are relevant here.

Table 7. OLS Regressions for Emotional Reactions for Race

	Dependent Variables			
	Return Money	Charity Donation	Return Wallet	Homeless Donation
Independent Variables	beta	beta	beta	beta
Moral Identity	-.11	-.08	-.34	-.04
Behavior	.68*	.62*	.62*	.56*
Behavior*Moral Identity	.18*	.14*	.54*	.19*
Asians	-.01	.03	-.07	.17*
Hispanics	.03	.03	-.01	.07
R-Square	.47*	.41*	.41*	.38*
N	286	278	299	258

*p<.05

Religion

Table 8 presents the OLS regressions for emotional reactions following moral behavior by religion. In the final model for each situation, the interaction effect of the moral identity and behavior on one's emotional reactions is significant across all behaviors except for returning a wallet (beta = .34 for cashier, beta = .14 charity, beta = .21 homeless, all significant at $p < .05$). Again, the means in Table 4 reveal that across behaviors, more negative emotion is experienced when one has a high moral identity but does not engage in moral behavior.

Table 8. OLS Regressions for Emotional Reactions for Religion

	Dependent Variables								
	Model 1				Model 2			Model 3	
	Return Money	Charity Donation	Return Wallet	Homeless Donation	Charity Donation	Return Wallet	Homeless Donation	Charity Donation	Homeless Donation
Independent Variables	beta	beta	beta	beta	beta	beta	beta	beta	beta
Moral Identity	-.16	-.24*	.38	-.31*	-.16	.18	-.10	-.08	-.07
Behavior	.60*	.55*	.32*	.45*	.49*	.37*	.38*	.62*	.57*
Moral Identity*Behavior	.34*	.28*	-.09	.39*	.09	.12	.15	.14*	.21*
Protestants	-.06	-.03	-.57*	-.01	-.04	-.51*	-.08	-.05	-.10
Catholics	-.23*	-.02	-.51*	-.11	-.04	-.43*	-.16	.02	-.02
Christians	-.06	-.02	-7.73*	-.10	-.02	-.70*	-.14	.02	-.04
Protestants*Moral Identity	.10	.07	-.25	.23*	.07	-.08	.07	—	—
Catholics*Moral Identity	.21*	.18*	-.23	.24	.09	-.07	.06	—	—
Christians*Moral Identity	-.09	.14*	8.05*	.15	.05	.04	.06	—	—
Protestants*Behavior	-.01	-.04	.58*	-.04	-.01	.51*	.02	—	—
Catholics*Behavior	.20	.13	.58*	.21	.16	.49*	.27*	—	—
Christians*Behavior	.05	.11	7.56*	.12	.09	.69*	.15	—	—
Protestants*Moral Identity* Behavior	-.20	-.01	.18	-.19	—	—	—	—	—
Catholics*Moral Identity*Behavior	-.24*	-.19	.16	-.22	—	—	—	—	—
Christians* Moral Identity* Behavior	-.02	-.19*	-7.85*	-.10	—	—	—	—	—
R-Square	.52*	.44*	.45*	.40*	.43*	.44*	.39*	.41*	.37*
N	289	280	301	260	280	301	260	280	260

*$p<.05$

— Not in Equation

DISCUSSION

No significant differences were found among group members concerning the meanings of the moral identity. While it is difficult to interpret non-significant results, this finding is aligned with the claim that a moral order exists for all people (Smith 2003). More research is needed to further investigate if nuances in meanings of the moral identity exist for different groups of people; this study only offers a starting point regarding this issue.

While individuals may vary in degree concerning the moral identity (either high or low), the identity control process still operates for each. Further work needs to address whether these findings apply to other categories (i.e. socioeconomic status and age).

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It is possible that identity prominence, identity salience, and identity commitment factor into how the moral identity operates. For example, it is possible that those with prominent moral identities would tend to behave—and remember how they behaved—differently than those whose identities are not prominent. Future research should examine how prominence of, salience of, and commitment to the moral identity influence moral behavior and emotions (for individuals and across groups).

In this study the dependent variables for moral behavior were binary. A follow-up study that examines moral behavior not in terms of "good" vs. "bad" but rather in degrees of "extremely immoral" to "extremely moral" might shed light on how the moral identity influences ranges of behavior. This would better reveal how the moral identity influences behavior and emotions in social situations, especially regarding identity prominence, salience, and commitment.

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