

Moral Exemplars

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Draft 8/15/03

To appear in L.R. Sherrod, C. Flanagan, & R. Kassimir (Eds.), *Youth activism: An international encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co.

Funding support to the first author was provided by a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF 01-32302). Correspondence may be addressed to Gustavo Carlo, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, 68588, email: gcarlo@unl.edu.

Media coverage on youth activities in recent years has been dominated by national attention to dramatic and tragic acts of antisocial behaviors. However, as many scholars and professionals point out, most youth are engaged in normative and positive social activities. Although much national attention has been drawn by antisocial behaviors of some youth, there are many examples of youth who engage in compelling and dramatic acts of heroism, charity, and self-sacrifice. Those acts are the cornerstone of positive and beneficial changes to our communities and societies. Those remarkable youth have been the focus of investigators who study moral or care exemplars. What motivates those exceptional individuals? What are the antecedent conditions and personal characteristics of people who exhibit those behaviors? Given the multiple and significant benefits of individuals who exhibit those characteristics, how can we foster and promote those behaviors in our society?

Moral exemplars (or sometimes referred to as care exemplars) is the term used to describe individuals who chronically exhibit positive social behaviors that are acknowledged by peers as providing great benefits for the majority of people in their communities and societies. Thus, moral exemplars are considered model citizens whose actions in their communities are valued by the majority of their peers and have positively impacted their surroundings. Historically, individuals such as Susan B. Anthony, Cesar Chavez, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, and George Washington are individuals that we might typically think of when we think of moral exemplars. Although most times we think of people who are historically famous, there are many moral exemplars that never attained the fame and recognition by the broader society. Indeed, many youth activists are engaged in moral exemplary activities.

In recent decades, the opportunities for youth to engage in positive impactful activities have increased through government-sponsored programs (e.g., AmeriCorps), non-profit agencies, hospitals, schools, church-sponsored programs, social service agencies, and private organizations. Furthermore, the availability of resources to promote moral ideals and activities has increased because of the easier accessibility to the Internet (e.g., websites, chat rooms). The range of activities include exemplary programs in the arts and humanities, environmental issues, healthcare, crime, poverty, animal and human rights issues, education, and social inequality, among many others. According to an annual national survey, the number of youth engage in charitable, volunteer activities in the US has increased tremendously in the last decade (Independent Sector, 2001). The trend is expected to continue to grow as youth become more aware of social issues and as social capital of youth and activism opportunities increase.

Several different approaches have been used to understand moral exemplars and each approach has furthered our understanding of these remarkable people. Because moral exemplars are defined by the selfless behaviors that they often engage in, social scientists have had to define moral exemplary behaviors. According to many scholars, the types of behaviors or actions that moral exemplars often exhibit can be considered altruistically-motivated actions. Altruistic-motivated behaviors are a subset of prosocial behaviors (see *Prosocial Behaviors*) that specifically refers to actions intended primarily for the benefit of others with little or no consideration of possible consequences (including rewards) to the self. Often these actions incur a cost or risk to one's self. In other words, these are individuals whose primary motivation was to assist or help others while possibly incurring a cost to themselves. Therefore, it is possible that a person might assist someone and receive recognition or a reward for doing so – the key is whether the person assisted with the intention to receive the reward or recognition or whether the

person assisted with the intention to benefit the other and the reward or recognition was a minimal consideration. If it was the latter, then the behavior is considered to be altruistically-motivated. The challenge for social scientists has always been whether one can accurately determine the underlying primary intention of any behavior.

Some scholars are skeptical of the existence of altruistically-motivated behaviors and suggest that all human behaviors have underlying selfish motives. However, many other scholars have provided evidence of the existence of altruistically-motivated behaviors. In some cases, the behaviors are exhibited under special circumstances. For example, acts of heroism under extreme circumstances (e.g., war, threat of starvation, protecting your child) usually fall under this category. In other cases, some researchers have shown that there are individuals who frequently engage in prosocial behaviors that appear to be motivated to benefit others. Social scientists have suggested that those latter individuals might have prosocial or altruistic personalities. That is not to say that people with altruistic personalities do not ever engage in behaviors to benefit themselves; however, in general, these individuals are often considerate of others in their actions. Furthermore, their actions often are consistent with promoting the welfare of others rather than at the cost of others. In addition, altruistically-motivated individuals often exemplify moral courage – they enact benevolent behaviors in the face of adversity.

Despite the debate surrounding altruism, the study of prosocial behaviors (and moral exemplars) is useful because society clearly desires such beneficial behaviors. The fact that we can identify individuals as moral exemplars reflects the fact that our society makes moral judgments of people's behaviors. Some scholars point out that the debate between selfishly-motivated and selflessly-motivated behaviors reflects our Western, individualistic orientation. In many collectivist-oriented societies, moral exemplary behaviors are valued for their positive

impact on their society with minimal regard for the underlying motive. Still other scientists have attempted to develop methodologies to assess the underlying motive of people's prosocial behaviors or they focus on understanding prosocial behaviors with little concern for the true underlying motive. The debate among scholars as to whether true altruism exists still continues but the acknowledgement that there are some individuals who are regarded as moral exemplars by our society is never in doubt.

The adaptive and functional benefits of moral exemplary behaviors have long been acknowledged by people who study the evolutionary history of behaviors. There are many examples of altruism and self-sacrificial behaviors in the animal kingdom. In humans, altruism and prosocial behaviors are the benchmark of cooperative societies. Sociobiologists have proposed several theories to explain the evolutionary significance of prosocial behaviors and altruism. The kin selection or genetic similarity hypothesis posits that individuals might assist others to increase the reproductive success and fitness of their genetic pool, particularly helping those people who are genetically related (and who possibly possess similar personal characteristics). For example, altruistically-motivated behaviors can enhance the all important emotional and attachment ties that bind a parent to their offspring. Without a biological basis for altruistic behaviors, the reproductive success of one's own gene pool would be at high risk. Another hypothesis, reciprocal altruism, states that individuals are most likely to help those who might help them in the future; thus, enhancing their own reproductive success. Imagine a world where people are motivated solely by their own interests. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine how such a world would have much social progress or even how such a world could survive.

Although those hypotheses might provide the big reasons why altruism and prosocial behaviors exist, most scholars agree that evolutionary theory based explanations are little use in understanding these behaviors in our day-to-day lives. To social scientists, the more pertinent questions include: What are the biological processes responsible for moral exemplary behaviors? What are the socialization experiences of individuals who have these characteristics? And what are the personal characteristics of moral exemplars?

Characteristics of Moral Exemplars

Are individuals who exhibit extraordinary moral commitment and behavior dramatically different from other people? Research suggests that this is generally not the case. Rather, scholars think that most people are capable of extraordinary moral commitments and behaviors. Researchers have shown that moral exemplars transcend demographic boundaries. That is, moral exemplary behavior is observed across different ages, races, gender, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic levels. Moral exemplars just seem to act on personal characteristics conducive to morality more than other people.

One unique approach for understanding characteristics of moral exemplars has been to ask people what they think makes moral individuals different. In one classic study of adolescent moral exemplars, Hart and his colleagues asked youths from an inner city, poor community to nominate other youths whom they admire and respect as care exemplars. It is noteworthy that, despite inherent difficulties associated with growing up in an impoverished community, there were still a number of adolescents who "demonstrated unusually admirable commitment to care for others" (Hart et al., 1995, p. 322). One such adolescent was David Street, a 17-year-old African American male. He was not only an excellent student, but served in leadership positions at school, participated as a youth representative on boards for several community organizations,

and was heavily involved in volunteer activities working through a local public service agency to help younger adolescents in need. When 15 moral exemplars like David were asked, “What kind of a person are you?”, they were more likely than a group of non-exemplars to use moral or caring traits (e.g., "honest"), activities (e.g., "helping others"), and goals (e.g., "community involvement") to describe themselves. For example, David Street mentioned that one of his important characteristics was that he "wasn't a bad influence," and a primary goal of his was "being involved in the community." Their findings suggested that care exemplar youth were more likely to have a strong moral sense of self than non-exemplar youth. Interestingly, the two groups did not differ on moral reasoning abilities – suggesting that both groups are equally capable of thinking in cognitively sophisticated ways about moral dilemma situations.

Other studies have focused on examining adolescents’ (and adults) conceptions of moral identity. In one study, Walker and Pitts surveyed youth and adults asking them to identify terms that reflect a “moral person”. The researchers found that youth defined a moral person as having strongly held moral principles and high moral standards. Furthermore, moral individuals were thought of as being self-confident with a sense of integrity such that they were committed to living their lives in ways that are consistent with their values and standards. Moreover, moral individuals were seen as being caring and compassionate of others as well as loyal and dependable. Another recent study conducted by Dan Lapsley found similar results. The studies suggest that youth do have clear expectations about individuals who they consider to embody a strong moral character. Moral exemplary individuals have a combination of strong moral values and they are compassionate and caring.

In one of the early studies of moral exemplars, Colby and Damon (1992) conducted in-depth interviews with 23 people nominated as moral exemplars by a panel of moral philosophers,

theologians, and other professionals. One such moral exemplar, Virginia Foster Durr, grew up in a White family that was racist against black people, yet she went on to be a key figure in fighting for African American civil rights. She spent over 30 years struggling to change laws in Alabama to afford more equal rights to Blacks, and her and her husband provided legal services to primarily poor Black clients who were victims of discrimination. Because of their beliefs and commitments, her and her husband lived much of their lives with very little money.

Colby and Damon found that Virginia and the other exemplars had several things in common. For example, they had strongly held values, particularly caring, justice, and integrity. They seemed to feel more empathy towards others, and were more motivated to act on those feelings. Their moral acts were often automatic or habitual. They frequently acted with certainty, and seemed compelled to do what they knew was right, regardless of consequences to themselves. Exemplars tended to seek experiences and associations with others that would help them develop morally. They were less self-focused, and had positive attitudes towards their life, work, and other people. Additionally, many drew inspiration through faith in a higher power (e.g., God). The researchers concluded that one of the key features of moral exemplars is a strong sense of moral identity, which means that they define themselves largely in moral terms and that there is congruency between what they most want to do and what they know is right. This leads them to feel a strong sense of responsibility and obligation to do what they see as moral.

Scholars in social and personality psychology have often sought to understand personality differences between people who help and those who choose not to help in situations where there are great personal risks involved. In one of the early studies of moral exemplars (Oliner & Oliner, 1988), investigators sought to understand the motives behind individuals who

risked their lives to rescue Jews during World War II. During the Nazi occupation of Europe, approximately 6 million Jews were murdered (60% of those in Europe). However, the numbers could have been a lot worse had it not been for the heroic efforts of a small minority of non-Jewish people who helped rescue Jews at great risk to themselves and their families.

Furthermore, the majority of the rescuers actually helped over a period of several years. Rescue activities typically included things such as helping keep Jews alive by getting them food and water, helping them escape prisons, smuggling them out of the country, or helping them stay hidden if they stayed in the country. Rescuers who were discovered were often tortured or executed.

The researchers examined differences between those who helped rescue Jews and those who chose not to. Participants responded to a lengthy questionnaire, and analyses compared results of 231 rescuers and 126 non-rescuers. Rescuers tended to have greater access to opportunities to help and resources that would aid them in helping. However, these were often a result of their own choices and characteristics (e.g., since they were friendlier towards Jews, they were more likely to be asked for help). Rescuers also had strongly internalized moral values, particularly caring, justice, and social responsibility, and they felt more motivated to act on these values. Furthermore, the rescuers believed that those values should apply to all humanity (e.g., regardless of race or religion). The rescuers also reported relatively high levels of empathy and were more motivated to act on these feelings. In addition, rescuers of Jews had a stronger sense of self-confidence in, control over, and responsibility for their own behavior.

In a recent review of the literature, Staub (2003) concluded that highly moral individuals tend to act based on certain types of motivational orientations. First, some act on an empathic orientation, meaning that they are motivated to moral action based on feelings of empathy

towards others. Second, others are motivated by a prosocial values orientation, which means they have internalized caring values, and feel responsible for the welfare of others. And third, those motivated by a moral principles orientation act out of a desire to live up to certain moral principles. Furthermore, he suggests that moral exemplars are individuals who possess *moral courage* – the ability to persist and apply their moral principles and desires in the face of adversity.

In recent years, some scholars have begun to think of moral exemplars as experts in the moral domain, just like scientists, musicians, athletes, others can be experts in their areas (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2003). This approach does not see moral exemplarity as the possession of moral personality traits or virtues. Rather, highly moral individuals are higher on certain skills than others, which allow them to more effectively perceive, interpret, and respond to moral situations. Thus, individuals with *moral expertise* are better able to sense when another person is in need of help, determine how best to help them, feel a sense of responsibility for helping, and then are likely to succeed in doing what is necessary to help. Furthermore, individuals who acquire moral expertise are capable of respond quickly to moral situations so that their moral decision making and actions are often highly efficient.

Programs Designed to Promote Moral Exemplary Behaviors

Many scholars who study moral exemplars have embraced the notion of *application* and have attempted to develop programs to foster and promote moral exemplary behaviors in our everyday lives. The programs are quite varied and focus on different aspects of our society. Some programs emphasize changing the individual directly, other programs focus on change through social institutions such as families, schools, or work places.

In 1968, under the supervision of Larry Kohlberg, a prominent moral developmental psychologist, a moral development curriculum was implemented in the high schools in several communities within the boroughs of New York City. The initial goal of the *Just Community Approach* to moral character education was to encourage students to develop more sophisticated ways of thinking in moral dilemma situations. Kohlberg believed that fostering children's moral reasoning abilities would result in more positive moral behaviors. The *Just Community Approach* included the goals of establishing a community based on democracy and fairness, maintaining a climate of trust, and encouraging the use of higher levels of moral reasoning. To meet these goals, students were encouraged to develop school rules and disciplining policies. Furthermore, students conducted regular meetings to assess the weekly progress of their policy system and to discuss moral dilemma situations to foster their moral reasoning abilities. Overall, the findings of the program evaluations were promising though limited.

Another moral development program proved to be quite ambitious. The *Child Development Project* has five major components that focus on the moral development from an individual centered approach. They are as follows: 1) cooperative learning, 2) developmental discipline, 3) helping activities, 4) highlighting prosocial values, 5) promoting social understanding. Research designed to evaluate this school-based program indicates that there are strong positive effects of the program (especially long term effects). Among the findings, students who participate in the program engage in more prosocial behavior and exhibit more empathy. Also, students in the program choose more positive social and cooperative strategies in resolving group conflicts (Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Schaps, & Solomon, 1991).

Another innovative type of program focuses on instituting change through sports activities. Youth sport development programs promote moral development while allowing the

youth to engage in sports activity. One model program is the STARR (Sports Teaching Adolescents Responsibility and Resiliency) program. The program is based in Camden, New Jersey and uses sports activities as a medium for teaching moral responsibility, modeling positive conduct, good decision making, and coping skills. The goals of the program are to encourage community service, to train adult coaches to be moral exemplars, to promote adolescent to adolescent responsibility, and healthy development (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998).

Other programs focus on fostering the positive characteristics of individuals. Empathy training programs primarily concentrate on fostering empathy skills. The two main goals in an empathy training program are to promote understanding of other people's situation and to nurture emotional sensitivity to others. Prior research has shown that both components are associated, positively with prosocial behaviors, and negatively with aggression. One prime example is the Roots of Empathy (ROE) program. The ROE program is based in Canada (offered to over 10,000 students across the country) and is designed to build parenting skills and to raise the levels of empathy. A recent evaluation showed that children in the ROE program evidenced increases in social understanding and prosocial behaviors, and decreases in aggressive behaviors when compared to a matched sample of children who were not in the program. In general, evaluation studies from various empathy training programs have shown that children who participate in such programs tend to exhibit more prosocial behaviors than children who do not participate in the programs.

Other common moral development programs include service learning and volunteering programs. An example of a service learning program is the *Learn and Serve America* program. This national initiative seeks to implement service learning programs around the country. Preliminary research findings indicate that students who participate in this program have a

positive experience. Students also report that they become connected with members of their community, they are committed to their experience, and they find pleasure in helping other. Other research suggests that students truly benefited from service learning. The benefits can include a gain of positive self-esteem, a sense that they make meaningful contribution to their respective communities, and an increased desire to acquire more knowledge through their experiences (Champion, 1999).

It is strongly advised by many researchers that service learning and volunteering programs must include two important dimensions: the programs must emphasize that learning is the main goal of the program and there should be some evaluation mechanism. Moreover, scholars have noted in recent studies that requiring students to participate in volunteer activities can create adverse reactions and undermine future volunteerism. One possible manner to address this concern is to provide service learning students volunteer placement choices. Evaluation of service learning programs is strongly recommended due to the fact that there is a paucity of information about the positive short and long-term effects of such programs. Scholars also note that volunteer facilitators must monitor closely students' social and academic development. Finally, it is important to monitor the impact of the program on the community to ensure positive connections between the program, the student and the community agencies.

We have briefly reviewed what is known regarding moral exemplars and programs designed to promote and foster moral exemplary behaviors. However, there are many gaps in our understanding of moral exemplars. For example, there is virtually no research that examines moral exemplars across different cultures or even within ethnic minority groups in the US. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, we have limited understanding of the development of moral

exemplars. In addition, although numerous programs have been developed to foster and promote moral exemplary behaviors, there is a need for rigorous evaluations of those programs.

Summary and Conclusions

Although there is a clear need for more research on moral exemplars and moral development programs, there is remarkable consistency regarding the characteristics of moral exemplars. First, moral exemplars tend to be strongly motivated by compassion and internalized moral values. Second, moral exemplars have high moral standards and expectations of themselves and they endorse moral values such as caring, justice, equality, integrity and social responsibility. Third, they have a strong sense of themselves as moral individuals with a desire to do what is right and a sense of responsibility to do so regardless of possible personal consequences. Fourth, moral exemplars often act with certainty, confidence, and control. Fifth, many moral exemplars are religious or spiritual. And sixth, they may have certain abilities that allow them to more effectively and often automatically perceive of, interpret, and respond to moral situations. Researchers also suggest that moral and care exemplars might be more common than we are led to believe – that would certainly be promising.

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Summary