

Moral Identity

Sam A. Hardy

Department of Psychology

University of Virginia

DRAFT

Hardy, S. A. (in press). Moral identity. In D. Lapsley (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of moral education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Moral Identity (1100 words)

For thousands of years, philosophers and theologians have been interested in the question of what motivates people to behave morally or to avoid behaving immorally – in other words, they have been interested in moral motivation. Over the last century, social scientists (e.g., psychologists) have taken up this question as well, and have been forming and scientifically testing theories of moral functioning. Most of these theories, such as Lawrence Kohlberg’s Cognitive Developmental Theory, propose that moral motivation stems from the understanding of moral principles. Essentially, when a person knows the moral thing to do in a given situation, he or she will be motivated to act consistent with that knowledge. Other theories suggest it is emotions that are primarily responsible for motivating moral action. In essence, feeling emotions such as guilt or empathy (often labeled “moral emotions”) compels people to moral action. Finally, in recent years, some scholars have begun to argue that a person’s identity may also play an important role in moral motivation. In fact, some even claim moral identity may be a stronger and more reliable source of moral motivation than moral understanding and moral emotion.

What is Moral Identity?

People base their identities on various things such as values, goals, actions, and roles, which might be thought of as identity contents. So, a person has a moral identity to the extent that his or her identity is based on identity contents that might be considered moral. For example, someone for whom moral values (e.g., fairness, honest, and kindness) are more central and important to his or her identity, in comparison to other values, might be said to have a moral identity. Similarly, an individual might be described as having a moral identity if moral roles (e.g., helping at a soup kitchen or

donating blood) are central to his or her identity. It is doubtful that people either have or do not have a moral identity; rather, all people probably differ on a continuum regarding the extent to which their identity is morally-based. Further, it is possible that the relevance of morality to one's identity fluctuates over time and across situations. Moral identity is a relatively new research area, so we still know little about what it entails and how it functions.

How does Moral Identity Relate to Moral Action?

If moral identity is an important source of moral motivation, then it should be linked to moral action. Unfortunately, very few studies have examined links between moral identity and action; thus, we know little about how and to what extent moral identity compels moral action. Nevertheless, enough work has been done to suggest that moral identity may play an important role in morality. A few studies have involved examination of people identified as moral exemplars (i.e., people who exhibit high levels of moral commitment), often in comparison to non-exemplars (i.e., people who exhibit typical levels of moral commitment). These studies have all found that moral exemplars tend to define their identities and their personal goals and desires more in moral terms than non-exemplars. Other studies have assessed moral identity and moral action, and looked at links between the two directly. These studies have generally shown that individuals scoring higher on moral identity tend to exhibit or report higher levels of moral behavior than those scoring lower on moral identity. In short, there does seem to be a positive correlation between moral identity and moral action; but, the nature of this association has not yet been adequately elucidated. In other words, more work is needed to understand the causal nature of this relation (i.e., does moral identity lead to moral

action, does acting morally lead to moral identity, or is the association bi-directional), and the mechanisms underlying it.

How does Moral Identity Develop?

Little is known yet about how moral identity develops, although several theoretical models have been proposed. Primarily, it has been posited that identity and morality initially develop as two separate systems in childhood. Then, around adolescence the two developmental systems begin to converge in some individuals, such that their sense of morality becomes important to their sense of identity – which is moral identity. This fusion of morality and identity is enabled in adolescence because it is during this stage that the two systems both tend to become more ideological. In other words, people's sense of morality becomes based more on internal moral principles than on external things such as consequences of actions; similarly, identity becomes based more on internal beliefs systems than on external things such as physical characteristics or typical behaviors. Although studies have demonstrated these developmental changes in morality and identity, it is still unclear how the two merge to form a moral identity in some people.

What Factors Influence the Development of Moral Identity?

Several factors have been identified as influences on the development of moral identity, some individual and some contextual. At the individual level, things such as personality, cognitive development, attitudes and values, and broader self and identity development can impact moral identity development. For example, those more advanced in cognitive and identity development have greater capacities for moral identity development. Also, greater appreciation for moral values might facilitate their subsequent

integration into identity. At the contextual level, one important factor is the person's social structure, including neighborhood, school, family, and institutions such as religious, youth, or community organizations. For example, a caring and supportive family environment can facilitate the development of morality and identity, and the integration of the two into moral identity. Additionally, involvement in religious and youth organizations can not only provide moral beliefs systems but opportunities to act on those beliefs (e.g., through community involvement), which can aid their integration into identity.

How can Moral Identity Development be Facilitated?

If moral identity plays an important role in moral development and action, then, present efforts for moral education and youth development may be aided by greater understanding of how to facilitate moral identity development. One of the most important ideas that has emerged thus far is that to form a moral identity youth must not only understand the objective importance of morality, but they must gain a personal appreciation for morality and its relevance to them. This can be promoted by not only teaching moral principles, but providing opportunities to act on those principles. Such opportunities allow youth to gain a tangible appreciation for moral principles, and see themselves as capable of and responsible for impacting others through moral action. A result of this process is that youth can then begin to integrate moral principles into their own identities, endowing them with greater motivation for subsequent moral action.

Further Readings

- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. New York: The Free Press.
- Damon, W., & Gregory, A. (1997). The youth charter: Towards the formation of adolescent moral identity. *Journal of Moral Education*, 26, 117-130.
- Hardy, S. A., & Carlo, G. (2005). Identity as a source of moral motivation. *Human Development*, 48, 232-256.
- Lapsley, D. K., & Narvaez, D. (Eds.) (2004). *Moral development, self, and identity*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Youniss, J., & Yates, M. (1997). *Community service and social responsibility in youth*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.