Individual Differences in the Moralization of Everyday Life

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We report on the development and initial validation of the Moralization of Everyday Life Scale (MELS), designed to measure variations in people's assignment of moral weight to commonplace behaviors. In Study 1, participants reported their judgments for a large number of potential moral infractions in everyday life; principal components analysis revealed 6 main dimensions of these judgments. In Study 2, scores on the 30-item MELS showed high reliability and distinctness from the Big 5 personality traits. In Study 3, scores on the MELS were strongly correlated with scores on an early scale of moral judgments, suggesting convergent validity.

Keywords: moral judgments, morality, moral psychology

People's wide range of attitudes toward moral issues has long been recognized by ethicists. Although some philosophers fear that moral disagreement undermines universal moral rules (cf. Loeb, 1998), psychologists have been inspired to study the sources of variability in moral attitudes. For instance, developmental psychologists have proposed accounts of how moral judgments change over the lifespan (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932), and social psychologists have investigated how moral judgments of others' behavior can be influenced by one's own behavior, and vice versa (e.g., Jordan & Monin, 2008). Moreover, cognitive neuroscientists have examined the brain activation differences that may underlie moral diversity (e.g., Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004).

Currently, the study of moral judgments is experiencing something of a renaissance in psychology (for a review, see Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). Most of the research in this area involves asking participants about hypothetical scenarios that bear on classic philosophical problems. For

instance, many researchers (e.g., Hauser, Cushman, Young, Jin, & Mikhail, 2007; Lombrozo, 2009) have focused on the distinction between directly and indirectly harming others, by asking participants to decide whether to kill one person to save several others in various hypothetical situations. Other researchers have tested the relationship between judgments of harm and judgments of moral wrongness by asking participants about hypothetical actions involving no harm, such as eating a recently deceased family pet (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). Stimuli like these allow researchers to classify participants' responses according to traditional ethical positions (utilitarianism, deontology, etc.), but they involve behaviors too removed from participants' everyday lives to represent their natural moral judgments outside of the laboratory.

We were interested in moral judgments of everyday behaviors—judgments that may arise as people navigate their actual social worlds. More specifically, we were interested in investigating individual differences in the tendency to view quotidian actions and decisions as being freighted with moral value, where there are better and worse response options. It is these types of moral judgments that, theoretically, should influence real-world moral behavior. In addition, people's moral disagreements about situations common in everyday life, rather than far-fetched hypothetical scenarios, are what often lead to deep-rooted conflicts between individuals and among groups. Given the importance of understanding sources of variation in everyday moral judgments, we report herein on the development and preliminary validation of the Moralization of Everyday Life Scale (MELS), designed to measure the tendency to assign moral weight to commonplace behaviors. Our studies aimed to determine the structure of everyday moralization (dimensions and clusters of issues), as well as the correlates of this kind of moralization.

The MELS is not the first measure to investigate everyday moral judgments. The earliest such measure was developed by Crissman (1942), who asked college students to rate the moral wrongness of each of 50 actions, such as "having sex relations while unmarried" and "betting on horse races." He found that students' ratings changed very little from 1929 to 1939, and female students generally rated actions as being more morally wrong than did male students. Crissman's scale was used by later researchers (Gorsuch & Smith, 1972; Rettig & Pasamanick, 1959) to examine changes in moral values over time. Although Crissman's scale was an important early development, many of its items are now dated (e.g., "girls smoking cigarettes"), or involve political or legal issues that rarely arise in everyday life (e.g., "nations at war using poison gas on the homes and cities of its enemy behind the lines"). In addition, many of the items state actions in an abstract format, rather than in the concrete context of a particular person's behavior.

There are only two other scales developed explicitly to assess everyday moral judgments. Shelton and McAdams (1990) reported on a scale consisting of 45 vignettes in which participants imagined that that they have just completed various actions (e.g., agreeing to walk in a march against world hunger; helping a blind person reach her destination). However, participants were asked to predict whether they would have done each action in the vignettes, rather than being asked about the morality of the actions per se. More recently, Lovett and Jordan (2005) reported on a scale consisting of 30 vignettes, each involving a different hypothetical person making a decision (e.g., whether to send a thank-you letter to a relative who sent a birthday gift), and participants were asked to rate the degree to which the decision was a moral issue, rather than an issue of personal preference. This scale resembles the MELS superficially, but its items were chosen unsystematically, and the instructions may have asked participants an overly abstract question. We aimed to improve on these limitations with the MELS.

STUDY 1: ITEM SELECTION

Method

Participants.   We initially recruited 317 participants through an online research pool managed by a large private university on the West Coast of the United States. Participants received a $7 Amazon.com gift certificate for completing a battery of scales including the items in the MELS Item Pool. Data were screened to exclude participants who responded carelessly. Specifically, if participants responded to either of two items that read "If you are reading this item, please leave the answer for this question blank," or if their computer-monitored completion times were extreme outliers suggesting that they had not had time to read the items, their data were excluded. This screening process left us with 249 participants (140 female), mostly White (71.7%), with a mean age of 34.0 years.

MELS item pool.   We used three strategies to generate an initial pool of potential items for the MELS. First, we asked 37 undergraduate students at two large private universities (one on each coast) to recall times when they had disagreed with peers regarding moral or ethical issues that had arisen in their daily lives. Second, we used a list generated from a separate investigation (Monin & Oppenheimer, 2004) in which 78 undergraduates at a large private West Coast university were asked to list behaviors that they or their peers engaged in that they or their peers found immoral. Third, we reviewed previous articles on moral issues in everyday life to find additional topics for items. Based on these three strategies, we developed an initial pool of 158 actions and constructed brief, one- or two-sentence vignettes for each potentially immoral action, in which a named character was described as having decided to act or as performing the action. For instance, "Josh, an older-looking 50-year-old, lies about his age in order to get senior discounts." The actions were all "everyday life" actions in the sense that participants would already be familiar with the actions from prior discussions or debates with others, rather than only ever considering the actions in the context of the research study.

To refine the pool of items, we sent the items, along with a document that outlined the purpose of the MELS, to eight experts who have published research on moral judgments using questionnaire methods. We asked each expert to review the list of items and provide feedback regarding three aspects of the list: (a) possible construct underrepresentation—missing areas or topics, (b) clarity and style of item wording, and (c) relevance—whether any of the items were too peripheral to be included or were duplicated by other items. Each of the scholars responded with feedback, and based on their advice, we made further modifications, resulting in a list of 144 items to explore for possible inclusion in the MELS. To select items from this pool, a large sample responded to all of the items, and the resulting data were submitted to principal components analysis.

Procedure.   Participants logged on to a website, where they viewed 144 statements depicting a character behaving in a way that could be construed as immoral. For each of these statements, participants indicated how much they considered the behavior to be morally wrong by using a 7-point Likert scale, from 0 (*not wrong at all; a perfectly OK action*) to 6 (*very wrong; an extremely immoral action*). The items were presented in random order. Participants concluded the survey by providing basic demographic information.

Results and Discussion

Principal components analysis.   We used a principal components analysis with an oblique rotation (Promax) in order to allow the components to correlate with each other (we expected that at least some pairs of components would correlate). We utilized several procedures to determine how many components to retain and interpret. We first used Kaiser's criterion to find 30 components with eigenvalues over 1.0, although this criterion is often thought to be too liberal (e.g., DeVellis, 2003; Fabrigar, Wegener, McCallum, & Strahan, 1999). We then examined a scree plot, which revealed drop-offs after six components and nine components. Third, we inspected the loadings of the first nine components to determine their meaningfulness; the first six components were interpretable within the context of prior research and theory, whereas the remaining components were not interpretable. We therefore retained six components.

Final MELS items and factor interpretation.   To create the MELS, the five items with the highest unique loadings on each of the six retained components (in the structure matrix) were used. Table 1 gives brief descriptions of these items, along with their loadings from the structure matrix. (The full items are available from the first author upon request.) We report loadings from the structure matrix because it is preferred over the pattern matrix for theoretical interpretation (see the discussion in Pett, Lackey, & Sullivan, 2003). Moreover, without the entire 144 item list, the loadings from the pattern matrix could not be used to calculate component scores for individual participants.

Each of the items on Factor 1 involved a type of deception: lying, misrepresenting, cheating, and so forth. Items on Factor 2 involved harm to members of one's social community, whether intimate relationship partners or simply fellow citizens. Factor 3 items involved laziness—choosing to make a bad decision out of convenience or fatigue. Items on Factor 4 concerned failure to take opportunities to do good, or a failure to perform what moral philosophers call supererogatory actions. Factor 5 items all involved body violations—behaviors that involved the ingestion of foreign substances (drugs), certain sexual behaviors, and willful bodily disfigurement. Finally, the items on Factor 6 involved behaviors often characterized as disgusting. We consider the interpretation of each factor in greater detail in the General Discussion section.

STUDY 2: INITIAL PSYCHOMETRIC EVALUATION

Method

Participants.   Participants were recruited by the same online research pool as in Study 1, for the same incentive. To screen out any participants from Study 1 who might try to participate again, participants' e-mail addresses were inspected before they were permitted to participate (the addresses had been collected to ensure that they could be sent compensation for participation). Initially, 109 participants were recruited, but after careless responders were screened out, 91 participants remained (60 female), with an average age of 35.2 years. Most were White (73.6%).

Measures and procedure.   Participants completed a battery of scales including the 30-item MELS and the 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI), a brief measure of the Big 5 personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Openness to Experience, and Conscientiousness)

TABLE 1
Factor Loadings for Moralization of Everyday Life Scale Items

Item	Brief Item Descriptor	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Keeping extra money accidentally dispensed from an ATM	**.76**	.37	.00	.27	.23	.30
19	Lying about a test score when reporting performance to a teacher	**.78**	.44	.06	.33	.30	.22
33	Feigning an injury to collect on insurance	**.76**	.47	−.05	.26	.28	.36
44	Lying about one's age to receive an age-based discount	**.73**	.45	.21	.26	.37	.25
82	Sneaking into a movie theater to see a movie without paying	**.70**	.34	.11	.08	.29	.19
9	Parking in a "handicapped" parking spot when not handicapped	.60	**.72**	.01	.29	.22	.33
34	Smoking a cigarette in a non-smoking section of a restaurant	.36	**.60**	.28	.30	.24	.34
80	Using someone else's toothbrush without his or her permission	.35	**.71**	.06	.36	.18	.41
93	Failing to keep a commitment to help on a project for work	.38	**.68**	.12	.31	.15	.25
102	Having sex with someone while one's partner is out of town	.41	**.57**	−.12	.26	.31	.36
54	Feeling too tired to do laundry, so lying around in dirty clothes	.13	.13	**.70**	.44	.35	.31
106	Choosing to wake up late, despite having a busy day ahead	.13	.17	**.70**	.27	.35	.08
113	Packing for a trip at the last minute	.05	−.02	**.75**	.37	.29	.15
114	Purchasing a car without doing research on price or quality	.10	.21	**.66**	.28	.44	.31
125	Taking an elevator rather than walking up a single flight of stairs	.03	.09	**.66**	.28	.24	.13
133	Ignoring a driver whose car is stuck in the snow	.27	.36	.36	**.76**	.32	.27
134	Throwing away clothes rather than donating them to charity	.24	.30	.35	**.70**	.35	.21
138	Ignoring a woman struggling to carry bags of groceries	.26	.38	.33	**.83**	.35	.31
140	Failing to offer one's seat on a bus to an elderly, disabled individual	.35	.45	.22	**.70**	.32	.34
143	Tripping on a rock but leaving it on the sidewalk where one tripped	.36	.40	.40	**.72**	.41	.29
35	A 40-year-old man having consensual sex with an 18-year-old woman	.16	.11	.40	.23	**.64**	.33
39	An 18-year-old woman breaking an abstinence vow to have premarital sex	.32	.22	.33	.37	**.71**	.21
78	Getting a large tattoo covering the face and neck	.15	.23	.43	.31	**.65**	.19
101	Drinking 10 beers at a party and vomiting several times	.28	.33	.39	.42	**.68**	.38
116	Smoking marijuana at a party out of curiosity	.47	.39	.25	.36	**.65**	.52
18	A 13-year-old girl kissing her 14-year-old brother passionately on the mouth	.34	.42	−.07	.15	.43	**.56**
29	Defecating, not washing one's hands, and then preparing dinner for oneself	.18	.45	.24	.27	.25	**.66**
69	Wearing a pair of pants for three weeks without washing them	.21	.39	.30	.32	.39	**.60**
115	Choosing to flatulate while out to dinner with friends	.34	.43	.36	.53	.29	**.57**
144	Failing to shower for four days due to a lack of time	.13	.42	.31	.46	.47	**.61**

Note. bold-faced loadings indicate which factor each item was retained for.

with excellent psychometric properties (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). We did not have any a priori hypotheses about relationships between moralization and the Big 5 traits, and this study was concerned mainly with (a) measuring the reliability of MELS scores, and (b) determining if moralization was distinct from major factors of personality.

Results

The MELS scores showed good to excellent reliability. The total score had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .93$; the six factor scores had alphas of .88, .85, .80, .87, .78, and .86, respectively.

TABLE 2
Correlations Between MELS Scores and the Big 5 Personality Traits

MELS Factor	*Big Five Inventory Trait Scores*				
	E	*A*	*C*	*N*	*O*
1	.23*	.20	.18	−.03	−.08
2	.22*	.19	.28**	.01	−.03
3	.19	.13	.19	−.20	−.15
4	.18	.14	.06	.00	−.05
5	.29**	.38***	.24*	−.18	−.17
6	.26*	.19	.15	−.08	.02
MELS total	.31**	.28**	.25*	−.10	−.09

Note. MELS = Moralization of Everyday Life Scale; E = extraversion; A = agreeableness; C = conscientiousness; N = neuroticism; O = openness to experience.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2 displays the correlations between MELS scores and the personality trait scores from the BFI. Most of the correlations were not significant at the .05 level, and the highest coefficient was $r = .38$, between agreeableness and the MELS factor (Factor 5) involving violations of bodily purity.

Discussion

The high alpha values suggest high levels of interitem consistency, both within factors and for the scale as a whole. The correlations between the MELS and BFI are more difficult to interpret; although several of the statistically significant correlations may appear meaningful, the particular pattern of correlations was not expected, and suggests only that there are at best weak relationships between moralization and the Big 5 traits.

STUDY 3: CONVERGENT VALIDATION

Method

In this study, 108 undergraduate students (70 female) at a small private college in the eastern United States participated as part of a voluntary class activity. Their mean age was 18.1 years old, and most (80%) were White. To assess the convergent validity of the MELS, these students completed the MELS as well as a modified version of Crissman's (1942) early scale examining moral judgments. No other scale is closer to the MELS, in terms of asking participants to indicate how wrong various behaviors are. Moreover, Crissman's scale had been used in follow-up studies through the 1960s. Six of the items from Crissman's scale were dropped in the present study due to their wholly outdated content (e.g., references to bootleg liquor) or their having a similar counterpart on the MELS; this left 44 items.

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Results

The total scores on the MELS and Crissman's (1942) measure were correlated; the correlation coefficient was $r = .73$ ($p < .001$).

Discussion

The MELS and Crissman's (1942) measure showed a strong relationship, with the MELS explaining more than half of the variability in participants' scores on Crissman's measure. This suggests convergent validity of the MELS, given the strong relationship between two scales designed to measure similar constructs. The correlation also suggests the generality of moralization, given the lack of item overlap between the two measures.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Placing the MELS Factors in Theoretical and Empirical Context

Although the initial item pool for the MELS was not derived primarily from formal moral theory or prior research, the factors that we found cohere with conceptual and empirical work in moral philosophy and psychology. Factor 1 concerns deception, a topic central to moral philosophy due to disagreement about when deception is justified (e.g., Bok, 1978), and even about when it is present (e.g., Mahon, 2008). Lying is very common in everyday life (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996), providing many opportunities for disagreement over various types of deception.

Factor 2 concerns social-norm violations that harm community members, an area of morality discussed extensively by Shweder and colleagues (e.g., Shweder et al., 1987; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). These scholars have argued that some cultures, subcultures, and individuals have a community-oriented moral system, in which the individual explicitly views himself or herself as primarily a fulfiller of various social roles, and actions are judged as right or wrong depending on whether they would help or impede role requirements and help or harm community members.

Factor 3 concerns laziness. Its primary connection to mainstream ethical thought is through the sin of sloth in Christian thought, which connects behavioral laziness to a kind of mental and moral laziness in which one does not consider other people and their needs as motivators to action (e.g., McCoy, 2005). Empirical researchers have also stressed the role of self-control as a "moral muscle," conferring success in forcing oneself to perform morally important behaviors (for a review, see Baumeister & Exline, 1999).

Factor 4 concerns failures to take opportunities to do good; scores suggest individual differences in how wrong these failures are judged to be. The connection to moral philosophy is the concept of supererogatory actions—that is, actions that go beyond our minimal moral obligations (e.g., Kamm, 1985). Ethicists differ in their acceptance of the concept of supererogation, as well as the range of actions that are not strictly required but nonetheless good to do; the presence of this MELS factor suggests that laypersons show variability as well. The distinctness of this factor from other aspects of moralization dovetails with recent work showing distinctions between

moral rules that discourage versus encourage various actions (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009), and showing no relation between people's tendency to praise moral behavior and condemn immoral behavior (Wiltermuth, Monin, & Chow, 2010).

Factor 5 concerns violations of the body, in which people use or modify their bodies (through drug use, sexual behavior, or permanent body art) in ways that threaten bodily purity. Haidt and colleagues (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007) have stressed that this kind of purity is a central aspect of morality in many traditional cultures, but that in the contemporary United States it is associated primarily with traditional religion and social conservatism, where arguments against certain actions (e.g., blasphemy) are based on claims about purity. In line with this, Haidt and Graham found that self-identified conservatives rated issues of purity as being roughly as important to morality as issues of fairness, whereas liberals rated issues of fairness as being far more important.

Finally, Factor 6 concerns behaviors that are generally considered disgusting. As Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (2008) noted, the subjective experience of disgust involves a feeling of revulsion— a quick turning away to avoid sensing a stimulus. The items on this factor involve poor hygiene, exposure to animal-like aspects of human nature, and incestuous sexual behavior, all topics that Rozin et al. identified with different domains of disgust. Disgust has been described as one of the moral emotions (Haidt, 2003), and recent work has even found that inducing an extraneous state of disgust can lead participants to judge hypothetical actions as more immoral (e.g., Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As an initial attempt at measuring everyday moralization, our studies have several expected limitations, each of which leads naturally to future research opportunities. First, although the six factors of the MELS cohere with prior research and relevant theory, it is currently premature to claim that the six-factor structure is fundamental or explanatory. The (at times substantial) cross-factor loadings certainly suggest that a given action can be difficult to classify or can otherwise activate more than one moral "sensor." Replication of the six-factor structure, and confirmatory factor analyses to test alternate structures (e.g., a hierarchical structure with a general factor of moralization; a five-factor structure in which the apparently related Factors 5 and 6 are combined), would be helpful.

A second, related opportunity for future research involves integration of the MELS with theoretical models of moral judgment advanced in recent research. For instance, moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2009) posits five different "foundations" for moral judgments: concerns over harm, fairness, purity, ingroup/outgroup relations, and hierarchy violations. Certain MELS factors appear to relate to the different foundations, and researchers might give moral foundations theory measures (which ask participants to report which kinds of broad concerns affect their specific judgments of right and wrong) along with the MELS items (which would show which kinds of concerns actually *do* affect these judgments).

An additional future line of work involves the use of clinical populations. Recently, Miller and Hedges (2008) suggested that extreme concerns about moral matters may constitute a distinct form of psychopathology, dubbed "scrupulosity disorder." Scrupulosity about moral and religious issues is particularly associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and among patients

with OCD, scrupulosity predicts the severity of symptoms (Nelson, Abramowitz, Whiteside, & Deacon, 2006). Differences in total and factor mean scores between clinical and nonclinical groups should be examined, as well as factor structure equivalence. If differences in mean scores are found, additional studies can examine the progress of clients participating in therapeutic programs, as MELS scores may also track symptom improvement or relapse over time.

Finally, although moral and political philosophers debate the appropriateness of moralizing (cf. Lovett, 2005), the everyday consequences of high versus low MELS scores are currently unclear. In an intriguing line of research reviewed by Skitka (2010), a feeling of moral conviction regarding a given issue has been found to lead to reliable changes in behavior, including intolerance toward those who hold differing opinions about the issue and a willingness to disregard procedural integrity in an effort to ensure the "right" decisions about the issue. If moralization is a general trait—as the MELS, and the high reliability of its total score, suggests—high MELS scorers may be chronically more intolerant of others and less concerned with procedural integrity in a variety of everyday situations. Future research using the MELS to predict behavioral outcomes could, then, have substantial applied importance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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