The Impact of Early Exposure to Immorality on the Development of Moral Character Judgment

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Abstract

Recent work in moral psychology has highlighted a distinction between judgments of moral actions and moral character. The study of moral character is relatively new and focuses mainly on the relation of moral character to emotions and judgments of causality and blame. To date, very little work has been done on the individual differences that impact moral character judgments. One factor that may influence the development of moral character judgments is exposure to immorality at an early age. As people develop they adapt to the adversity that they face by adjusting their expectations, perceptions, and behaviors. In this way, people who are negatively impacted by others' immoral acts at any early age may increase their sensitivity to moral character in order to protect themselves from further acts of immorality. Thus, the hypothesis of the proposed study is that people who have experienced immoral acts at an early age will have judge moral character more severely. The proposed study would test this hypothesis with a longitudinal design, utilizing survey methods of children and parents over two two-year spans.

The Impact of Early Exposure to Immorality on the Development of Moral Character Judgment

The study of moral character in psychology is relatively new. As such, early work in the field focused solely on moral judgment of actions (Conway & Gawronski, 2013). Further, research on the development of morality is largely devoid of study of any kind of moral judgment, and instead considers the development of moral behavior within the individual (Kohlberg, 1964). Thus, one important question that remains is how moral judgment develops over time, and more specifically, how judgment of moral character develops. One question that the proposed study aims to examine is whether early exposure to immorality affects judgment of moral character.

*Traditional Accounts of Morality*

Traditionally, the fields of moral philosophy and moral psychology have considered morality solely in terms of actions (Conway et al., 2013). These disciplines evaluated whether a given action is philosophically moral and whether people actually judge or decide that an action is moral (Kant, 1785/1959; Mill, 1861/1998). However, these traditional perspectives were limited in that they assumed that people only make judgments about actions, and not about the actors themselves (Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015). In reality people incorporate contextual information into their judgment and decision making process, and do not evaluate real-situations in a vacuum (Cushman, 2008). Within the domain of moral judgment, some of the most important contextual information that people attend to regards the moral character of the person acting (Uhlmann et al., 2015). This allows people to make inferences about the person's intentions and motivations, which many times can entirely change the outcome of moral judgment. One example of this is the finding that people are willing to give the benefit of the doubt for ambiguous transgressions – that is, acts that may or may not be immoral – to those

with good moral character, but not to those with bad moral character (Effron, & Monin, 2010). Further, Giner-Sorolla & Chapman (2017) found that emotional responses were more severe towards those with bad character, even when the consequences of their actions were less damaging.

Judgments of moral character not only allow a person to make inferences about an actor's motivations and intentions, but also provide useful predictive information as well. People integrate the moral and immoral actions of others in order to create a sort of moral profile that represents the overall moral character of another person (Uhlmann et al., 2015). These judgments of moral character provide useful information about the behavioral tendencies of others, and allow us to use these tendencies to predict what another person might do in a given situation.

*Withdrawal Tendencies and Bad Moral Character*

Social-functional evolutionary theories of emotion can help shed light on how we utilize this predictive value in our social relationships. Such theories posit that disgust is associated with withdrawal action tendencies that help us disengage from disadvantageous situations (Landy & Goodwin, 2015). In this way, disgust has helped people avoid disease, parasites, and other physiological dangers for thousands of years (Chapman, Kim, Susskind, & Anderson, 2009). However, Giner-Sorolla et al. (2017) theorize that disgust has undergone exaptation, or the evolutionary process of a structure adopting a new role or function, to help people disengage from disadvantageous situations in the sociomoral domain. Although evidence suggests that disgust serves the same function of withdrawal for both disadvantageous physiological and social circumstances (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2017; Chapman et al., 2009), the two operate in different ways. For visceral, physiological dangers, disgust is evoked in order to immediately remove oneself from the object of focus to minimize chances of incurring damage to one's health (Landy

et al., 2015). In the social domain, disgust serves a preventative function, reducing the chances

that one will become a victim of a moral transgression by withdrawing from social relationships

with people that are perceived to as likely to transgress – or in other words, people with bad

moral character (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Giner-Sorolla et al. (2017) has provided further

evidence for this hypothesis, showing that greater feelings of disgust were felt towards those

with bad moral character. To this effect, judgments of moral character serve as a social-

protective measure that focuses on minimizing negative consequences for ourselves (Giner-

Sorolla et al., 2017).

*Importance of Development of Moral Judgment*

Like in many other domains of judgment and decision-making, there are developmental

factors that cause individual differences in these processes within the moral domain (Harter,

1990; Derryberry, Wilson, Snyder, Norman, & Barger, 2005). However, very little work has

focused on the development of moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1964), and because research on moral

character is relatively new, the development of moral character judgment remains largely

unexplored. One important question that has yet to be answered is what causes individual

differences in judgment of moral character? A developmental perspective may provide insight

into how and why these differences occur. Early stressful experiences can have a powerful

impact on the development of a person, and can affect regulation of behaviors, self-perception,

and interpersonal relationships (Van der Kolk, Roth, Pelcovitz, Sunday, & Spinazzola, 2005).

These effects often persevere long into adulthood and have implications for the trajectory of the

person's adult life (Schore, 2001). Because early experiences of stress and trauma can have

important implications for a person's later relationship quality and emotional wellbeing, it is

important to consider whether moral judgment is similarly impacted by experiences in the moral domain.

*Research Question and Hypotheses*

Because judgments of moral character serves a protective social function, the degree to which people utilize these judgments to disengage from those with bad moral character may be influenced by their previous experience with immorality. Those who have had early exposure to immoral acts may have increased motivation to protect themselves from people who commit these immoral acts, and thus judge moral character more harshly. The proposed study aims to test the primary hypothesis that people who at an early age were exposed to others with bad character will make more severe judgments of character than those who did not have the same exposure. A competing hypothesis predicts that because one may compare new transgressors to bad people whom they personally knew, those with greater exposure to immorality will make less severe judgments of moral character. The proposed study aims to test these hypotheses by utilizing a longitudinal design with survey methods at three different points in time over a total of four years.

**Methods**

*Participants*

250 14-year-old children and their parents will participate in the proposed study. 14-year-old children are selected for this study because they are both old enough to understand the context of the passages and young enough that experiences will still play a formative role in their development. To ensure a sizeable final dataset, an estimation of a 25% attrition rate leaves a final proposed dataset of 200 participants. Participants will be recruited through online postings and flyers in the area surrounding Brooklyn College. Participants will be paid $10 for their

participation in each wave. As there will be three waves, the total required funding for this study is $7,500.

*Materials*

At each wave, one parent of each child will answer a questionnaire designed to assess the presence of people with bad moral character in the child's life. The questionnaire will ask the parent to identify anywhere from zero to five people that fit the given criteria. The parents will see the following prompt: "*Please identify up to five different people in your child's life that you think have bad moral character. These can be family members, community members, friends of your child, and anyone whom the child interacts with at least once a month.*" To assess intensity of exposure to immorality, the parents then answer the following questions about each person that they identified, each on a likert scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree): 1.) I trust this person (reverse coded); 2.) I think this person is mainly bad; 3.) I think this person has good moral standards (reverse coded); 4.) This person deserves to be punished. Each of these four items will be averaged into one measure of moral character, with higher scores indicating worse character. To assess frequency of exposure to immorality, the parents will then be asked to indicate about how often the child sees each person per month as an open ended input ranging from 1 to 30.

At each wave, the children will read a passage about a person with bad character who does something bad. They will answer the same intensity questions as the parents, but instead of answering about someone in their life, they will answer about the person in the passage. Three different passages will be utilized, and the order of presentation will be counterbalanced across participants. The first passage is as follows:

*John was moving to a new town and applied to rent an apartment. As part of a required background check, the landlord discovered that John worked at a local soup kitchen as part of a probation sentence. When contacted, John's personal reference said that in his former community, John was known for being a delinquent. John's previous landlord reported that John was inconsiderate of other tenants in the building. From this, the landlord determines that John is a cruel person. Because John has great savings and a well-paying job, the landlord decides to approve him for the apartment. Three months later, the landlord gets a call from a police officer telling him that there was an incident within the apartment. According to the officer, John got into a heated argument with his roommate over who should be taking out the trash. John wanted to rotate duties daily, while his roommate wanted to rotate the duties weekly. After just minutes of heated argument, John punched his roommate in the face, breaking his nose.*

The second passage is as follows:

*The admissions committee at a university has been reviewing applications for the next school year. The committee takes particular interest in the application of Kevin Smith. In one of Kevin's letters of recommendation, his former mentor noted that apart from his great school work, Kevin was very mean to his fellow classmates. In addition to this, Kevin's permanent record showed that he had several incidents with the school's disciplinary system. After an interview with Kevin, one of the committee members reported that he seemed cold and unfriendly. Based on this information, the committee concludes that in his former school, Kevin had a bad reputation. Based on his excellent academic record and high SAT scores, the committee decides to admit Kevin into their program. During his first semester at the university, Kevin gets in trouble with the authorities. According to the campus police report, Kevin was waiting for a parking spot,*

*and before he could pull into the spot, another student swooped in and stole the spot. After the student left his car, Kevin easily found another parking spot, returned to the original spot, and slashed the other student's tires. Kevin was charged with destruction of property.*

The third passage is as follows:

*One of Sarah's friends set her up on a blind date with a guy named Eric. Another of Sarah's friends knew Eric, and told her that he was a selfish, callous person. During their blind date, Eric seemed conceited and self-centered. One day when Sarah went to visit Eric at work, she met his coworkers. They told her that Eric had a lot of issues that made most people dislike him. From all of this, Sarah thinks that Eric is sympathetic to others. Because Eric is very attractive, Sarah decides to date him for a short while. One day while waiting for Sarah to get ready for a date, Eric gets into an argument with Sarah's brother, Nick. Nick warns Eric that he should treat her right, and Eric answers that it's none of his business. After trading insults, Eric becomes enraged, and says he's glad Nick's parents are dead, because they would be ashamed of him anyway.*

*Procedure*

A within-subjects, longitudinal design will be employed in this study. There will be three waves of the study. During the initial wave all children will be 14 years old; the second wave will be two years later when the children are 16; the third and final wave will be two years later when the children are 18. In order to reduce the attrition rate, surveys will be sent via email to each pair of children and parents. Parents will be told the purpose of the experiment upfront; children will be fully debriefed after the final wave.

**Analyses & Expected Results**

Each of the four character questions will be averaged together to form one total measure of character, ranging from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating worse character. For each child, one measure of Average Intensity of Exposure (AIE) will be constructed by averaging together each of the five character ratings of the parents. If the parent lists less than five bad character people, each blank slot will be counted as a zero. One measure of Maximum Intensity of Exposure (MIE) will be constructed by obtaining the character rating of the listed person with the highest character score (with higher scores indicating worse moral character). One measure of Weighted Intensity of Exposure (WIE) will be constructed by taking each averaged character rating and multiplying it by the frequency and dividing it by 30. This can be seen in the equation below, where I is Intensity of Exposure and F is Frequency of Exposure:

$$\sum_{i=1}^{5} \left(\frac{I_i}{5}\right)\left(\frac{F_i}{30}\right)$$

Thus, a person whom the child sees every day will receive a weight of 1, a person whom the child sees 15 days out of 30 will receive a weight of 0.5, and so on and so forth. WIE scores range from 0 to 5, where a 0 denotes no people in the child's life with bad character, and a 5 denotes 5 people in the child's life with the worst character possible whom the child sees every day.

There will be three main sets of analyses, each focusing on one of the aforementioned measures. A linear regression will be run with T1 AIE as the predictor variable and T1 child character rating as the criterion variable. A linear regression will be run with T1 AIE as the predictor variable and T2 child character rating as the criterion variable. A linear regression will be run with T2 AIE as the predictor variable and T2 child character rating as the criterion

variable. A linear regression will be run with T2 AIE as the predictor variable and T3 child character rating as the criterion variable. A linear regression will be run with T3 AIE as the predictor variable and T3 child character rating as the criterion variable. A linear regression will be run with T1 child character rating as the predictor variable and T2 child character rating as the criterion variable. A linear regression will be run with T2 child character rating as the predictor variable and T3 child character rating as the criterion variable. These analyses will be repeated with MIE and WEI as the predictor variables. A visual representation of the expected relationships can be seen in *Figure 1* in Appendix A.

## Discussion

If the primary hypothesis of this study is supported it would be evidence that early experiences with immorality affect the development of one's own morality. The current research is novel in that it utilizes longitudinal methodology to evaluate moral judgment, which has not been done before. This work can help us understand which periods of moral development are critical in adolescence and young adulthood, and can help explain why some people judge moral character more harshly than others.

*Limitations and Future Directions*

It is possible that people with early exposure to immorality will only judge character more severely if they have positive relationships in their life. If people only have experience with apathetic, non-moral and immoral people, they may adopt a dark world view and no longer attempt to disengage from people with bad moral character because they assume that everybody is immoral. Thus, the presence of people with positive moral character may offer perspective through comparison, and allow people to feel the need to disengage from those with bad moral character. This study is limited in that it does not ask about the presence of such people.

However, future studies could benefit by asking about the presence of people with positive moral character, and further distinguish the circumstances that may give rise the primary and alternative hypotheses of this study.

Other future studies might build on this foundation by testing whether these early experiences affect moral decision making apart from moral judgment. For example, do these early experiences affect how people respond to classic moral dilemmas such as the trolley problem? Do these experiences affect how people make decisions about the ethics of self-driving cars, abortion, and gay marriage? Additionally, because adolescents are not able to regulate their emotions as well as adults, it is important to conduct further studies that examine the concurrent development of moral emotions in such longitudinal studies. If the primary hypothesis is supported, other future directions can explore whether this increased sensitivity to moral character is a conscious or unconscious process. Further, it would be important to explore whether this sensitivity is maladaptive for the individual. If it is maladaptive, future work can develop interventions that attenuate this sensitivity, and help afflicted individuals become better adjusted to their social relationships.

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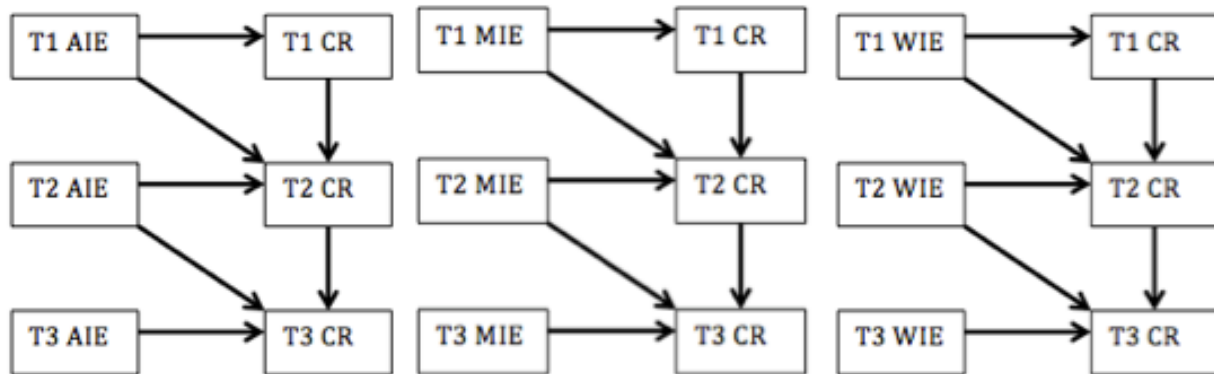
**Appendix A**



*Figure 1* A visual representation of the expected relationships between the variables. T1 refers to Time 1 (14 years old), T2 refers to Time 2 (16 years old), T3 refers to Time 3 (18 years old), CR refers to the children's character ratings, AIE refers to Average Intensity of Exposure, MIE refers to Maximum Intensity of exposure, and WIE refers to Weighted Intensity of Exposure. Arrows show expected positive relationship between variables.