

The recognition of moral issues: moral awareness, moral sensitivity and moral attentiveness

Scott J Reynolds and Jared A Miller

In this brief review, we discuss foundational and recent research on the recognition of moral issues, an area generally referred to as moral awareness. Scholarly work in this area primarily focuses on three constructs: moral awareness, moral sensitivity, and moral attentiveness. Recent research on the antecedents of moral recognition has identified several biological, psychological, and socio-cultural factors; while research on the consequences of moral recognition is further validating the claims of the foundational theories on the topic. After discussing this recent work in some detail, we point to issues within the field that demand more scholarly attention.

Address

Foster School of Business, University of Washington, Box 353226, Seattle, WA 98195, United States

Corresponding author: Reynolds, Scott J (heyscott@uw.edu)

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A critical first step of moral decision-making is recognition of the moral issue. Over the years, three primary constructs have emerged that capture nuanced but important differences in describing how individuals recognize and identify moral issues. At the most atomistic level, *moral awareness* is an individual's determination that a single situation contains moral content and legitimately can be considered from a moral point of view [1[•]]. *Moral or ethical sensitivity*, in contrast, refers to a broader cognizance of moral issues. It is typically measured through exposure to a set of moral issues (e.g. MSSS, DEST, MABI) and subsequently captures the individual's ability to recognize and consider a set or range of moral issues (for reviews of the different measures of moral sensitivity/awareness see Jordan [2^{••}] or Miller *et al.* [3^{••}]). *Moral attentiveness* is the extent to which one chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences. Thus, moral awareness refers to an event experienced by the individual,

moral sensitivity refers to the individual's skill at regularly achieving moral awareness, and moral attentiveness captures an innate tendency to perceive issues as moral issues [4^{••}]. All of these phenomena are considered to be of critical importance because of their theorized relationships to moral behavior [4^{••},5,6]. In this brief review, we discuss recent research on the antecedents and consequences of moral recognition, and then we highlight issues to be addressed in this area.

Antecedents of moral recognition

Scholars from many different disciplines have taken an interest in moral recognition. As a result, research on its antecedents has considered a wide range of biological, psychological and socio-cultural factors. We consider each domain in turn.

Biological

Research has indicated that moral recognition is rooted in biological processes. For example, scholars employing fMRI have demonstrated that moral sensitivity is a neural event involving 'a complex integration between emotion and cognition' [7[•]] in which the brain 'tags' ordinary events as containing moral content [8[•]]. Consistent with this view, Escobar *et al.* [9] identified atypical frontal cortical markers associated with moral sensitivity on socially deprived adolescents as compared to those in a control group. Similarly, Molenberghs *et al.* [10] noted differences in subjects' brain activity, which they referred to as moral sensitivity, depending on the ingroup/outgroup status of the victims and perpetrators the subjects were observing.

Several other biological factors have been associated with moral recognition. For example, You *et al.* [11^{••}] conducted a meta-analysis of 19 studies and concluded that gender has a significant effect on moral sensitivity. Specifically, women tend to demonstrate greater levels of moral sensitivity even across different moral domains (e.g., dental, business) and different measures. Reynolds [12] cited research in the biological sciences to attribute this difference to gender-specific hormones associated with pattern-matching. In addition, several recent studies have identified an association between age and moral sensitivity [13–15]. Gino *et al.* [16^{••}] used experimental techniques to establish that cognitively fatigued or depleted individuals (i.e., participants asked to write an essay without using the letters 'A' or 'N') were less likely to be morally aware. Kouchaki and Smith [17] discovered

that moral awareness was more likely during the morning hours, when individuals were more rested, than in afternoon hours, when individuals were more fatigued. Similarly, Barnes *et al.* [18] conducted a lab experiment, a diary study, and an archival study and discovered that a lack of sleep led to reduced levels of moral awareness. All of these results suggest that biological factors play an important role in moral issue recognition.

Psychological

Psychological factors refer to those elements associated with how the individual perceives and processes information. In recent research, numerous psychological factors have been associated with moral awareness, many of which are not typically associated with the moral domain. For example, Bryant [19] found that entrepreneurs with stronger self-regulatory characteristics were more morally aware than their counterparts. Specifically, entrepreneurs who chronically held a focus on promotion-oriented or prevention-oriented goals (e.g., an interest in achieving a win or avoiding a loss), or entrepreneurs that were highly self-efficacious, were more morally aware than others. Gino and Bazerman [20] argued that implicit biases based on a gradual shift in behavior, that is, the slippery slope effect, reduced moral awareness. In four laboratory experiments they discovered that to the extent that individuals engaged in slightly immoral conduct, they were less morally aware of more egregious behaviors. Ruedy and Schweitzer [21] demonstrated a relationship between mindfulness, 'a state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present' [22], and moral behavior, which they theorized was mediated by moral awareness. Finally, Swenson-Lepper [23] utilized cognitive mapping to demonstrate that the patterns of concept associations that individuals form to understand their environment shape their moral awareness.

Scholars have also focused on psychological antecedents of moral recognition with more direct associations to moral concepts and themes. For example, Reynolds [1^{*}] demonstrated that ethical predisposition, individual preferences for more consequentialistic or formalistic (rules-based) approaches to moral decision-making, shape moral awareness. In his studies, consequentialists responded to moral issues involving harm while formalists recognized issues involving harm and issues involving violations of behavioral standards. Sparks [24] used lab experiments to demonstrate that a need for cognition and moral identity, the extent to which an individual defines him/herself by moral concepts, positively shape moral sensitivity. In addition, DeCelles *et al.* [25^{*}] discovered that the psychological experience of power was associated with greater moral awareness but only when the individual had a strong moral identity. As the psychological experience of power is typically associated with immoral conduct, this result was quite intriguing. Ultimately, all of this work suggests that moral recognition is shaped by

psychological processes, even by factors not typically associated with morality.

Socio-cultural

Social-cultural factors refer to those factors that constitute the context of the decision, and may be easily discernable and proximate (e.g., office decor) or more understated and embedded (e.g., national context). Most notably, Jones [26] proposed that characteristics of the issue that contribute to the issue's moral intensity (e.g., magnitude of consequences, temporal immediacy, proximity) will affect moral recognition. Numerous studies have established the validity of this argument [1^{*},14,27,28].

Others have looked beyond issue characteristics to elements of the immediate environment. For example, Butterfield *et al.* [29^{*}] demonstrated that issue characteristics interacted with socio-contextual factors to shape moral awareness. Specifically, they found that how the issue is framed and the competitive context in which it is understood shaped individual reactions to moral issues. Similarly, Sparks [24] discovered that when subjects were primed by their environment to think of the issue in moral terms (i.e., their packet of information included a label marked 'ethics'), they were more likely to demonstrate moral sensitivity. Finally, Gunia and colleagues [30] found that within organizations, conversations with moral language and moral overtones (as opposed to conversations of self-interest) raised moral awareness amongst their members.

In terms of more subtle or embedded socio-cultural factors, Van Sandt *et al.* [31] examined the larger concept of ethical work climate and concluded that 'social influence often overrides the effects of individual differences in a work group setting.' Similarly, Lützcén *et al.* [32] demonstrated that a moral climate in an organization contributed to moral sensitivity, and Daniels *et al.* [33] found that culture moderates the relationship between a moral identity and moral sensitivity. Tenbrusel and Smith-Crowe [28] identified a number of studies in which both informal and formal organizational structures (e.g. moral codes, competitive environment) affected the moral awareness of the individual. Even more broadly, Jordan [34] established that socialization in a business context (i.e., working as a business manager) significantly reduced moral sensitivity. Furthermore, Lowry [35], Ritter [36] and Lau [37] found that ethics education increases moral sensitivity, though Ritter's results were limited to women. Finally, Burnaz [38] demonstrated that nationality impacted moral sensitivity, and Simga-Mugan *et al.* [39] concluded that nationality shaped moral sensitivity depending on whether the issue involved principals, agents, or society. Thus, elements of the socio-cultural context in which moral issues are encountered can impact moral recognition, regardless of whether these elements are immediate and proximate or more subtle and deeply embedded.

Consequences of moral recognition

Research on the consequences of moral recognition is comparatively more limited but validates the claims of the foundational theories. For example, Welsh and Ordoñez [40[•]] used priming to raise implicit moral awareness and discovered that doing so reduced dishonesty. Similarly, Kouchaki and Smith [17] found that a general implicit awareness of morality was associated with greater honesty in self-reported performance tasks. Theorizing that moral awareness mediates a relationship between depletion and moral behavior, Gino *et al.* [16^{••}] found that greater moral awareness led to less cheating; Shu *et al.* [41] found that participants' moral awareness of relevant moral rules increased their honesty; and Thornberg and Jungert [42] demonstrated that moral sensitivity was negatively related to pro-bully behavior and positively related to outsider and defender behavior.

Perhaps because it is characterized as a trait and measured as such, moral attentiveness has received a great deal of attention as an independent variable. Recent research has demonstrated that moral attentiveness predicts moral awareness [4^{••}], moral judgment [4^{••},43], moral imagination [44], perceptions of the role of ethics in society [45], and moral behavior [[4^{••},46]; Sturm RE, PhD Thesis, University of Houston, 2014]. Though varied in their specific arguments and methodologies, all of these studies attest to the critical role of moral attentiveness in the moral decision-making process.

Conclusions and future considerations

Despite great progress in the study of moral recognition, at least four key issues still remain. First, research would benefit from greater construct clarity. In some cases, scholars use the term moral sensitivity when their discussion and methods actually focus on the event of moral awareness. In other cases, moral sensitivity is used too 'loosely' to refer to the extent to which managers are generally concerned about acting morally. While we understand that separate disciplines have developed their own paths for studying moral recognition, we also recognize that more consistency across disciplines would create a more concerted effort that could generate significant leaps in our understanding of these phenomena.

Second, researchers would do well to explore more thoroughly differences between implicit and explicit moral recognition. The predominant approach has been to focus on the explicit or conscious awareness of a moral issue [12], but recent research indicates that awareness can also be implicit or non-conscious. For example, Gino, *et al.* [16^{••}] measured awareness by asking participants to complete word fragments. Subjects who completed the fragments with terms associated with morality were deemed to be morally aware, if only implicitly. While some have suggested that this wider conception of moral recognition is more aligned with what original theorists

discussed [28], questions remain about the extent to which implicit and explicit moral awareness are similar and the extent to which such methods effectively capture recognition as the foundational theories intended.

Third, while the current body of research represents an excellent start to understanding the antecedents of moral recognition, clearly much more work needs to be done. And once single factors are identified, questions remain about the interaction of such variables. For example, Reynolds [1[•]] demonstrated that psychological characteristics interact with issue characteristics to yield surprising results. To what extent do any biological, psychological and socio-cultural factors interact to shape moral recognition in expected or unexpected ways?

Finally, the value of moral recognition has always been assumed to lie in its value in predicting moral behavior, but only a limited amount of work has been conducted on this relationship. To the extent that future research is able to more completely verify this relationship (or at least thoroughly establish its boundary conditions), the value of moral awareness, moral sensitivity and moral attentiveness as areas of study will become all that more obvious.

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