

# Propositions for the Study of Moral Personality Development

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## Abstract

Most of us have at one point speculated about why one individual grew up to be honest and fair while another became wicked and untrustworthy. In the current review, we present the case that new directions in the empirical study of moral personality development are needed. We set the stage for this future work by presenting six propositions that should serve as the foundation for future research in the field. We conclude by providing an example of how using a more integrative and inclusive framework for studying personality can readily incorporate these propositions.

## Keywords

moral personality, personality development, neo-socioanalytic model, integrative personality frameworks

Why do some people seem to act more morally than others? Given the natural human interest in this topic, a number of sub-disciplines within psychology have sought to account for why some individuals develop more pronounced moral tendencies than others do. Unfortunately though, efforts in a given field often are made without consideration of those in another. Our goal for the current review is to provide some directions for future research on moral personality development, with the aim of integrating work across the fields.

## A Field at a Crossroads

Research typically has viewed moral action as coming from one of two catalysts. First, people act morally because they are better able to think through the moral implications of their actions. On this front, Kohlberg's (see Lapsley, 1996, for a review) classic theory of moral reasoning development set the stage for research in the field for decades. In so doing, moral cognition was placed at the forefront at the cost of studying other aspects of one's character or personality that were relevant to moral development. Second, people act morally because situations pressure them to do so. Certainly no one doubts the role of situations in determining individuals' actions, moral or otherwise. However, strict situationist approaches to moral action (e.g., Doris, 2002) are not sufficient in themselves. Instead, research continues to point toward the need to investigate the person in their situation rather than either personological or situational variables in isolation (see Roberts, 2009).

As yet, these two accounts have generally neglected the role of personality variables when predicting moral action. Until recently, though, some approaches to personality may have been too exclusionist to consider the extant work from the reasoning and situationist perspectives. Indeed, some personality theories have failed to consider the multifaceted nature of personality or the now-established fact that personality continues to develop throughout adulthood. Current frameworks suggest there are multiple components of personality that encompass cognitive factors, traits, motivations, and narratives as equally important subdomains of personality (Mayer, 2005; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Roberts & Wood, 2006). In addition, these models view all components of personality through a developmental lens, which directly informs moral development.

Therefore, we believe that the time is ripe for the reintroduction of personality into the discussion of moral development and action. To motivate future work, we discuss six propositions to consider in future research that highlight the importance of studying personality in the moral domain.

## **Proposition #1: A singular moral personality does not exist**

First, what is clear from integrative models of personality is that it is inaccurate to view moral personality as a single

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construct and thus to measure it that way. Moral individuals come in several varieties, and one need not score highly on *all* moral traits to be deemed a moral person. For example, exemplary caring and brave individuals demonstrate distinct personality profiles (Walker & Frimer, 2007). Moreover, a number of specific traits, such as gratefulness, forgivingness, and empathy, have been identified as having moral underpinnings. While related, these traits often demonstrate interrelations modest enough to support their distinct nature (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Indeed, just as moral development occurs in many forms (Hogan, 1973), so too does the moral personality.

Such a claim runs counter to the belief that a moral person is solely defined by his or her ability to reason in moral situations. We suggest that moral reasoning skills are but one piece (albeit certainly an important one) of what constitutes the moral person. For example, in the framework of Roberts and Wood (2006), moral reasoning would fall within their notion of “abilities,” just one of the components measured when assessing personality, along with traits, motives and values, and life-story narratives.

The Roberts and Wood approach allows for greater variety in moral personhood and is supported by recent empirical findings. A study by Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop (2010) found that morally exemplary individuals could be clustered according to their personality and reasoning scores. One group of moral exemplars scored higher on both moral personality and moral reasoning, whereas another was marked more by their higher reasoning scores. Interestingly, a third group was largely indistinguishable from the comparison group, and thus may have acted morally more as a result of situational pressures. Clearly then, this study promotes the notion that there are varieties of moral persons, and further suggests the importance of investigating the person-in-situation rather than just the person or the situation in isolation.

**Proposition #2: Personality explanations of moral actions are not antagonistic to moral reasoning models**

It is clear from decades of research that moral reasoning is an important predictor of moral behavior; at the same time, this research suggests the need to assess trait, motivational, and behavioral variables to explain why the predictive value of moral reasoning is so modest (e.g., Blasi, 1983). For example, consider the study of exemplary caring and brave individuals briefly discussed above (Walker & Frimer, 2007). In that study, the researchers tested whether moral reasoning predicted moral action for both groups, and also whether including personality variables in the model added to the prediction. For caring exemplars, moral reasoning predicted greater moral action, and adding personality variables to the model significantly improved its predictive power. For brave individuals, though, moral reasoning had no effect, and personality alone predicted their moral action. Put differently, for some individuals,

reasoning and personality act in tandem to predict moral action, whereas for others, one variable may prove more influential. Such work clearly points to the need to consider *both* personality and reasoning variables in order to provide a fuller understanding of what motivates moral action, rather than thinking one approach to be antagonistic to the other.

**Proposition #3: Models of moral personality can and should consider the role of intuitions in the judgment process**

Haidt and colleagues (e.g., Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008) have proposed an intriguing model that incorporates intuition and reasoned deliberation in predicting moral judgments. They suggest that our intuitions about a morally charged situation often rule the day but that reasoning can override decisions made by intuition alone and/or correct our intuitions to make more accurate judgments in the future. We believe that moral intuitions can be integrated nicely with personality constructs. Personality dispositions likely lead one to emphasize certain moral intuitions over others, and conversely, our evolved intuitions about morality should predispose us toward certain traits.

Indeed, recent work has demonstrated systematic correlations between moral intuition choice and personality traits (Hirsh, DeYoung, Xu, & Peterson, 2010). For example, orderly individuals (a facet of conscientiousness) reported placing greater importance on the loyalty/authority intuition (respect for those of “higher” status), while compassionate individuals (a facet of agreeableness) emphasized the fairness/reciprocity (concern for being just) and harm/care intuitions (sensitivity to the suffering of others). While correlational in nature, this work suggests that personality traits lead one to make certain moral intuitions while making judgments; that individuals who emphasize certain intuitions are motivated to develop related personality traits; or, most likely, that both developmental processes are going on.

**Proposition #4: Models of personality and identity development are fellow travelers**

Integrative personality theories suggest that how one constructs an identity or narrative for one’s life is an integral part of personality (e.g., McAdams & Pals, 2006). With respect to moral development, though, researchers have tended to focus on assessing moral identity rather than personality, partially as a result of Blasi’s (1983) suggestions. Research in this area has demonstrated that those who feel a stronger sense of moral identity tend to volunteer and donate more than others (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moreover, when a situation primes an individual’s sense of moral identity, he or she shows a greater propensity for moral action (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Phelps, 2009), an idea that provides insights into person-by-situation effects in the moral domain. While identity and personality are not synonymous constructs, we encourage

moral personality development researchers to consider and incorporate the work on moral identity, given that identity can be viewed as a component of personality (McAdams & Pals, 2006; Roberts & Wood, 2006).

**Proposition #5: While childhood and adolescence are particularly formative years for moral personality development, this developmental process continues across the life span**

Thus far, moral development researchers have emphasized childhood and adolescence in their discussion, and rightfully so. Personality change fluctuates much more prior to adulthood than during it (Roberts, Robins, Caspi, & Trzesniewski, 2003). However, evidence now has accrued to refute theories suggesting that personality stops developing shortly after or prior to reaching adulthood. Recent theories instead emphasize that personality development occurs throughout adulthood (Roberts & Wood, 2006). Adulthood is replete with new and changing role commitments (e.g., marriage, work, family), and these role changes provide a road map for the continued changes in moral qualities found in adulthood. For example, the increases in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability that occur in young adulthood (for a review, see Roberts et al., 2003) will have clear ramifications for moral behavior and possibly for what people view as moral or not. Conversely, people tend to decrease in openness with age, which corresponds to an increase in political as well as moral conservatism. In addition, an individual's identity as a grandparent or community elder comes with an expectation for upholding society's structures and traditions.

**Proposition #6: Studies of moral personality development must go beyond just traits**

We noted above that a central tenet of recent integrative personality frameworks is that they consider personality as a multidimensional system that goes well beyond traits to include reasoning abilities, values and motives, and narrative structures. Thus, it would be negligent to solely examine trait development. With this in mind, research has frequently distinguished moral or prosocial types of non-trait personality constructs from those who are more self-focused. For example, a 14-year longitudinal study of goals found that individuals who set prosocial goals in college experience greater psychological well-being in adulthood (Hill, Burrow, Brandenberger, Lapsley, & Quaranto, 2010). In addition, research has suggested that one's motives for being moral change across the life span (Okun & Schultz, 2003). Older adults tend to volunteer less for career-focused reasons (i.e., looks good on a resume), but they are more motivated to volunteer for the social benefits (making new friends). Again, the notion that traits are not the sole component of personality is a central tenet of recent integrative theories of personality

(Mayer, 2005; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Roberts & Wood, 2006), but it is worth emphasizing here.

**Summation**

Decades ago, Hogan (1973, 1975) proposed an integrative personality framework for moral development as a reaction, in part, to the Kohlbergian paradigm. His model suggested that moral development occurs along multiple dimensions, including moral knowledge (moral cognition and intelligence), socialization (how one adheres to the societal rules and values embodied in social roles), empathy (concern for others), and autonomy (willingness to act according to one's own moral standards). Development on any one front was considered incomplete without progression on the others.

This model clearly presents the same themes we have presented here by promoting the integration of personality and cognitive constructs, as well as the notion that moral maturity is defined by one's profile across several variables rather than as a score on any one variable. However, the moral development field paid relatively little attention to this approach (Lapsley, 1996). We conclude by briefly presenting an example of how an integrative personality framework can incorporate the themes discussed here, using the neo-socioanalytic approach offered by Roberts and Wood (2006), though other frameworks might be applied here as well (e.g., Mayer, 2005; McAdams & Pals, 2006). We focus on this model because it stands as a direct descendant to Hogan's initial work (referred to as a socioanalytic approach).

The neo-socioanalytic approach echoes Hogan's suggestions that (a) personality is comprised of multiple factors and (b) that societal roles have a central influence on how one acts in a given situation. Discussed in depth elsewhere (Roberts & Wood, 2006), this model suggests that our sense of identity and how others see us (our reputation) is a reflection of our personality traits, our motives and values, our abilities, and the life narrative we construct. In turn, our identity and reputation often are reflected within our societal roles (family, community, work), and conversely, these roles have downstream effects on all other personality dimensions. For example, greater investment in these roles has been linked to higher scores on adaptive personality traits, such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007); this can be viewed as a reciprocal effect, in which taking part in these social roles should promote adaptive personality development while, at the same time, those higher on these traits are better suited for investing in society.

From this brief discussion of the framework, one can immediately see the positives inherent in adopting such a model for studying moral personality development. This model allows for and in fact emphasizes that several different traits and components make up the moral person (Propositions 1, 3, and 6), including moral reasoning skills (Proposition 2). In addition, it speaks to the intimate interplay between personality and identity processes (Proposition 4)

and provides insights into how moral personality develops across the life span (Proposition 5).

In summary, we hope to have presented the case that psychological variables must continue to be reincorporated into the discussion of moral development. Moreover, researchers should view personality, reasoning, and situationist approaches to studying morality as complementary rather than competing. Indeed, using the new integrative frameworks for studying personality should provide researchers with a sturdy compass with which to chart the future course for research on moral personality development.

### Recommended Reading

- Flanagan, O. (1991). *Varieties of moral personality: Ethics and psychological realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. An interesting discussion on how integrating work from philosophy and psychology better informs our understanding of moral personality.
- Haidt, J., & Bjorklund, F. (2008). (See References). An insightful discussion of the role of moral intuitions on our daily judgments.
- Hogan, R. (1973). (See References). A classic article providing an initial account of moral development using an integrative personality framework.
- McAdams, D.P. (2009). The moral personality. In D. Narvaez & D.K. Lapsley (Eds.), *Personality, identity, and character: Explorations in moral psychology* (pp. 11–29). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. An excellent chapter on how integrative personality frameworks can incorporate moral constructs.
- Roberts, B.W., & Wood, D. (2006). (See References). This chapter provides a fuller discussion of one recent integrative approach to studying personality.

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