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A Brief Analysis of the Conception of Moral Identity in Psychology

Chunhua Shi[1, a], Baojun Wang [2, b, *] and Tian Zhang[1, c]

[1,3]School of Administration, Hohai University, Nanjing, China

[2]Institute of Earth Science and Engineering, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

[a]chunhuashi828@sina.com; [b]baojun@nju.edu.cn; [c]1938811522@qq.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Moral identity is a new hot issue in the field of moral education psychology after Kohlberg's theory of moral judgment stages. But up to now, the research on it is unsatisfactory, which is related to its vague concept and one-sidedness. In this article, four main views and researches were introduced, and it was advocated that moral identity should be regarded as the evolving structure of moral personality and the core of self- identity. Equally important is that the essence of moral identity is moral identification and the transcendence of self. In the future, both quantitative and qualitative research should be adopted so that the essence of moral identity can be truly demonstrated and the significance of moral identity research can be improved.

Introduction

Moral identity is a hot spot in the current research of moral education psychology. It is often translated into moral self- identity or moral self-identification by Chinese scholars. On the basis of Erikson's theory of ego-identity, Kohlberg's theory of the stages of moral judgment development and Levinger's theory of personality development, Blasi firstly put forward the concept of moral identity, which is a new perspective for the study of moral issues[1].According to Blasi, moral identity comes from a psychological need, which makes the individual's moral behavior and moral cognition consistent and acts as the mediator between the two[2].

Obviously, moral identity has something to do with people's moral inconsistency and moral identity is more closely related to moral belief and moral behavior than Kohlberg's moral judgment. And this also reflects the significance of putting forward the concept of moral identity. However, up to now, psychological research on moral identity is not satisfactory, the concept of moral identity is not clear, and the corresponding empirical research is far from demonstrating the significance of this concept. In fact, the understanding of moral identity given by different psychological researchers always seems simple, one-sided and vague.

Therefore, the purpose of this article was to further clarify the conceptual connotation of moral identity by combining the views and studies of some important researchers in the field of moral psychology. We found that there are mainly four points of view that deserve detailed investigation and analysis. After briefly describing these studies, we will make a brief comment on the conceptual meaning of moral identity and the corresponding research directions or contents on this basis, so as to provide a reference for theoretical and empirical research on moral identity.

Moral Identity is a Process of Development Involving Two Motivational Systems

According to Frimer and his colleagues, Moral identity is the core of morality, which can integrate agentic value and communal value. In the development of moral identity, agentic value and communal value are two separate motivation systems. The former refers to the motivation to improve one's own interests, such as social power, material wealth and personal achievement. The latter refers to the motivation to promote others, such as other people's welfare, social equity and improvement of the environment. With the development of individuals, conflicts between the two systems begin to arise due to competition for individual resources, such as time and attention, resulting in imbalance.

Usually in the early years of adolescence and adulthood, the imbalance between the two motivational systems within moral identity begins to emerge. If the individual retreats to the early conflict-free mode or fails to integrate the two, it will lead to the moratorium of moral development. Only by integrating the two and maintaining a certain degree of independence and tension can we promote the formation of mature moral identity [3].

Firmer and his colleagues put forward this view based on the investigation of the narrative of life stories and the description of personal struggle goals of some historical figures. It was found that individuals with high moral identity can better balance agentic value and communal value than individuals with low moral identity, using the agentic value as a means to realize the communal value, while those with low moral identity pay more attention to personal value and take it as their ultimate goal[4].

Moral Identity is a Self-Cognitive Schema Composed of Several Moral Traits

Aquino and Reed argued that moral identity is the experience of moral characteristics and the core of self-concept. It includes two dimensions, i.e. the implicit dimension which refers to the self's internal identification with moral traits, corresponding to the internal self; the explicit dimension which expresses the degree to which an individual wish to show his/her moral qualities in interpersonal interaction, corresponding to the external self of the public. They developed Moral Identity Measure (MIM), in which nine fixed moral characteristics (such as caring, compassionate, fair and so on) are used to survey the level of moral identity [5].

They further argued that moral identity is actually a self-cognitive schema consisting of a series of interrelated moral traits. Therefore, moral identity is unstable and will be affected by the environment. For example, manipulation or priming in the psychological experiment (the common method is to ask subjects to recall their moral behavior or unethical behavior which have been done in the past) will make subjects quickly identify the moral information in the environment and have an impact on their moral/social behavior(commonly related to altruistic or other pro-social behavior)[5].

Moral Identity is a Moral Self-Schema Headed by the Trait of Integrity

Schlenker and his colleagues elaborated the theory of integrity, believing that integrity is the most important characteristic of moral identity. Integrity means that individuals follow a principle-based ethical system, and believe that the moral principles in the system can guide daily behavior. Therefore, the degree of integrity can strongly predict the probability of an individual's moral behavior, while situational factors, behavioral outcomes and rational judgments are not important. Their study revealed that subjects with high integrity scores tend to describe their role models as principled, honest and reciprocal; when in a conflict situation between moral principles and outcomes, a highly honest subject will make decisions based on ethical principles rather than considering outcomes [6].

Schlenker and his colleagues emphasized that moral identity is a self-cognitive schema headed by integrity, which is relatively stable, but will be activated to varying degrees with the impact of the environment [6].

Moral Identity is a Lifelong Moral Schema That Transcends Situation and Personality Traits

Krettenauer and his colleagues believed that moral identity involves not only personality traits, but also life goals, emotions and life experiences. All these psychological aspects work together to form a constantly differentiated and integrated moral identity. Therefore, moral identity is a moral schema, it transcends specific situations and static personality traits, and it is a gradually developing and integrated moral personality structure [7].

So far, Krettenauer and his colleagues have done two empirical studies, using semi-structured interviews to collect the moral characteristics of each participant, and to study the development trend of moral identity from adolescence to middle age. It was found that the development track of moral identity coincides with the Big Five personality traits, but the trends of the two are not exactly the

same; with the increase of age, the importance of moral identity increases; in late adolescence, obedience to rules increases; in middle ages, the differentiation of moral identity decreases, while the integration increases, and so on[7][8].

Comment

These four studies generally reflect the conceptual understanding of moral identity in the field of moral psychology. In fact, moral identity is most often regarded as several static and stable moral-related characteristics (due to the contribution by Aquino and Reed), or as a self-structure that can be influenced by situations, similar to moral self-consciousness (This research paradigm is often used in experiments). Relatively speaking, the view that moral identity is developing, changing and transcending the situation is more novel, more persuasive and hopeful.

Frimer's motivation-driven theory of moral identity and Krettenauer's life-long development theory of moral identity (including differentiation and integration) are compatible. They all point to the view that moral identity is a personality structure with contradictory conflicts and solutions. Schlenker's theory enlightens us that although moral identity contains a variety of moral traits, moral emotions and moral behaviors, its essence is the importance of integrity in self-identity, which means that the essence of moral identity is to seek moral transcendence and self-identification.

Moral identity belongs to the intersection of normative ethics and empirical psychology. Therefore, psychological understanding of moral identity cannot be confined to the study of micro-phenomena such as moral behavior, moral traits, moral emotions, otherwise it will not really reveal the true connotation of the concept of moral identity. Future research should also adopt qualitative research methods and appropriately explore the content of moral identity, which is of great significance for us to understand more comprehensively people's moral beliefs and pursuits in life and the inseparable relationship between morality and human beings.

Summary

The above four ideas of moral identity are not incompatible. Moral identity should be regarded as a constantly developing moral personality structure. The essence of moral identity is moral self-identity and self-transcendence. Therefore, future research will not only use quantitative research methods to examine the formal development law of moral identity (such as the relationship model of variables, the differentiation and integration of development) but also take a proper qualitative approach to study the content of moral identity and combine the two to explain each other, so as to give full play to the potential significance of the concept of moral identity, solve people's moral problems and promote the improvement of moral level.

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