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## Relationship between moral identity and personality: a cognitive approach

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL IDENTITY AND PERSONALITY:

A COGNITIVE APPROACH

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

IN

PSYCHOLOGY

by

Jose Antonio Guntin

1997

To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Jose Antonio Guntin, and entitled Relationship between Moral Identity and Personality: A Cognitive Approach, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Scott Fraser

William Kurtines

Luis Escovar, Major Professor

Date of Defense: December 6, 1996

The thesis of Jose Antonio Guntin is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott  
College of Arts and Sciences

Dr. Richard L. Campbell  
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Florida International University, 1997

I dedicate this thesis to my wife Mar and my son Andoni for their patience and support and to the spirit of procrastination with whom I engaged in fierce battle.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
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The relationship between personality style and moral identity was investigated. In a preliminary study, two instruments measuring morality (Moral Identify Scale - Moral Issues, Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure) and one instrument measuring personality (Millon Index of Personality Styles) were given to a pool of 139 college students. Eighty four per cent of the subjects scored between stages three and four. No subjects were obtained for the Teleological and Deontological value orientation categories. Consequently, no cognitive moral profiles could be constructed for this sample.

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Relationship Between Moral Identity and Personality:  
A Cognitive Approach.

When dealing with right and wrong, choosing the honorable alternative is always desirable. But conflict of interest makes the right-wrong threshold ambiguous; a decision viewed to be right by one individual may be viewed as the wrong conclusion by another. Throughout the ages different societies have constructed their moral principles on generalizable socio-material realities (i.e.: scarcity, hierarchy, reciprocity, and indeterminacy) (Baumrind, 1992, pp. 262-265).

A pragmatic view, therefore, may be considered when dealing with morality (Kurtines, draft of 1993, pp. 83-87). Individual organisms, like social groupings, may also differ from each other in their preferred way to measure the usefulness of a moral choice. Furthermore, although certain human capabilities may be universal (i.e.: agentic action and responsibility for moral choice), there are also individual-specific limitations in terms of human potentials or talents (Waterman, 1992, pp. 170-173) and purposes being addressed by those potentials.

Moral judgements are presumably influenced by cognitive development as indicated by Kohlberg, by the inherent limitations of a daimon or "true self" (Waterman, 1992, p. 172), or by the development of sociomoral competencies

(Kurtines, draft 1993, pp. 34-36). Surprisingly, the relationship between personality and moral identity - the individual's capacity to choose among moral alternatives in a predictable and manner - has not been considered. The purpose of this study is twofold (a) to evaluate the relationship between moral development and personality style (Choca, Shanley, & Van Denburg, 1992, pp. 5-16) and (b) to establish morality profiles in terms of personality and cognition.

Moral agents do not make their judgments in isolation. Although they all have the inherent capacity to choose, practical considerations, such as education, solving problems ability, and cognitive differences, may act to sway moral judgments and moral conduct in a consistent manner.

#### Morality and Education

During the early years, morality can be fostered through education (Klein, 1987). Teaching children moral standards and socially accepted behavior may promote healthy personalities (e.g.: high self-esteem). Furthermore, Kamii (1991) found autonomy - the ability to choose between right and wrong independent of the consequences - to be a key factor to critical thinking. Unfortunately, education's main emphasis is not placed on critical thinking but on obtaining children's conformity and obedience through an

environment of rewards and punishment in which knowledge and skill are unquestionable (Glaser, 1984). In some countries, for instance, training is commonly regarded as superior to child education and intelligence as superior to morality (Chong-De, 1988).

#### Development of Problem Solving Abilities and Personality

There are some indications that different personalities have different approaches to problem solving. In other words, different personality styles have different ways in which they acknowledge, understand or interpret the problem, generate alternative solutions, select among the alternatives, and evaluate the solution.

Some of the factors that influence judgement like mood (Bower, 1981); positive affect, social skills, and intellectual functioning (Wolf & Grosch, 1990); and expectations about outcome (Gregory, Cialdini, and Carpenter, 1982) differ for different personalities. Other studies indicate that once a mental activity is repeated, there is a self-perpetuating tendency (Luchins, 1942) and the processes of extinction or conceiving new strategies are slow (Doninowski, 1972, 1977).

#### Cognitive Differences and Personality

Different personality styles are characterized by differences in behavior, feelings, and thought processes.

Some of these thought processes may guide decision making in a predictable manner. Thus, when solving a moral dilemma individuals are expected to be influenced by capacity limitations, self-schema, attentional bias, and confirmation bias. According a resource allocation theory (see Williams, Watts, Macleod, and Mathews, 1990, p. 47-48) anxiety involves worry which in itself is an extra task to be processed. That is significant because some personality styles are particular in exhibiting fearful features (Avoidant, Dependent, Compulsive, and Passive Aggressive) and stress seems to lower moral judgment ability (Baumrind, 1992, p. 269).

Self-schema has a direct impact on interpersonal conduct. For instance, personality styles differ in their self-perception (Escovar, in progress). This is important because self-perception plays a key role in determining which outcome may be expected in a given situation. Furthermore, schemata, internal representations that indicate typical relationships among elements, are used in the problem solving process. Research indicates that schemata facilitates storage and retrieval of information (Glaser, 1984) by directing attention to elements perceived to be important (Neisser & Beklen, 1975) according to the demand characteristics of the situation (Anderson & Pichert,

1978).

When dealing with concern-related and threatening material, attentional bias may produce cognitive avoidance, attention will be shifted away from threatening stimuli. The effect that this may have is that individuals will choose not to choose. Closely related to attention bias is confirmation bias. Individuals will tend to focus their attention on information confirming their beliefs rather than confronting or finding alternative avenues.

The main goal of this study is to investigate the relationship between personality and morality. Specifically, individuals are expected to vary in terms of their instrumental coping style and/or source of reinforcement (Millon, 1987, pp. 18-31). With the exception of dependent personalities, passive individuals (Narcissistic, Compulsive, and Schizoid) are expected to follow a universalistic and deontological path while individuals in the active variant (Histrionic, Antisocial, Passive-Aggressive, and Avoidant) are expected to exhibit more relativistic and teleological orientations. Secondly, an attempt will be made to construct distinctive cognitive profiles (i.e.: moral profile) for each personality style.

The study of morality in terms of personality could be performed in two contrasting manners. A study can be

conducted to find the relationship (1) between Kohlberg's moral stages and personality style, or (2) between Kurtines' value orientations - sociomoral rules, standards, values, and principles to which the individual adheres to or endorses - (Kurtines, 1986) and personality.

In the stage model preconventional reasoners see pleasure and happiness related to obedience and punishment, while postconventional reasoners resolve moral dilemmas regardless of the consequences for the individual making the decision (Glaser, 1984; Kamii, 1991) and according to a well established ideological system (Chong-De, 1988).

Unfortunately, the stage setting calls for conclusions indicating that some approaches (e.g.: justice) are superior or more desirable than others (e.g.: caring) which tends to diminish women (Baumrind, 1986). Furthermore, Baumrind (1992, p. 271) found that several studies indicate that although postconventional differ from preconventional reasoners in their judgments about morality, their actions are the same. However, the fact that certain subjects consistently subscribe to certain stages remain. Having those considerations in mind, conceptualizing Kohlberg's model in terms of tendencies or biases due to practical considerations rather than stages may prove to be useful when studying the relationship between morality and

personality.

To summarize, both personality style and problem solving abilities seem to work according to a well established set of schemata. Factors that influence decision making differ significantly among the different personality styles. With regards to moral development, morality does not seem to be a substantial goal for education, but once an appropriate cognitive level is reached, several basic dimensions are identified. These value orientations and biases seem to correspond directly to personality variables.

## Method

### Subjects

The subjects for this study consist of 139 undergraduate college students enrolled in various psychology courses at a local university. Subjects participated in exchange of bonus points.

### Materials

Three instruments were used, the Millon Index of Personality Styles (MIPS) (Millon, 1994), the Moral Identity Scale - Moral Issues (MIS-MI) (Kurtines, unpublished), and the Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure (SROM) (Gibbs, Arnold, Morgan, Schwartz, Gavaghan, & Tappan, 1984). A brief discussion of the instruments follows.

### Millon Index of Personality Styles

The MIPS is a true-false self-report personality inventory that measures personality styles of normally functioning adults. It consists of 180 items which were constructed for an eight-grade reading level capability. The MIPS consists of 24 scales grouped into 12 pairs. The 12 pairs are organized into three major areas: Motivating Aims, Cognitive Modes, and Interpersonal Behaviors. Prevalence Scores (PS) were calculated in such a way that the proportion of individuals who score at or above PS 50 on each scale matches the prevalence of individuals in the general population who possess that trait. Higher scoring individuals are likely to possess the trait to a greater degree than lower scoring individuals within the same trait group.

Reliability: Both coefficient alphas and split-half reliabilities are reported for each MIPS scale as measures of internal-consistency reliability. The median alpha was .775, with results ranging from a low of .69 to a high of .85. The median split-half reliability across the 24 MIPS scales was .82, ranging from a low of .75 to a high of .87. Test-retest reliability was also calculated. The median stability coefficient was  $r = .85$ , corrected for restriction of range. The corrected retest reliabilities ranged from a

low of  $r = .73$  to a high of  $r = .91$ . The scales with relatively low internal-consistency reliabilities were found to have very adequate retest reliability (Millon, 1994, pp 59-65).

Internal Validity: The MIPS scales were designed to provide full representation of a set of theoretically driven, multidimensional, and partially overlapping personality styles. Every personality style is represented by a set of prototypical items. When there is a theoretical relationship between scales, a prototypical item on one scale may be scored as a supporting item on another scale. Moderately high item overlap percentages were observed for theoretically consonant constructs. Conversely moderately high negative item overlap percentages were observed for theoretically dissonant constructs. Consequently, high positive correlations were observed between theoretically related constructs and high negative correlations were observed between opposite scales (Millon, 1994, pp. 66-70).

#### Moral Identity Scale - Moral Issues

The MIS-MI will be used as a measure to establish subjects' value orientations. The instrument consisting of 36 questions constructed for a fifth grade level that measures the following value dimensions:

**Relativistic - Universalistic.** This dimension deals with

the nature of moral standards. Absolute and objective orientations are weighted against relative and subjective orientations.

**Teleological - Deontological.** This dimension deals with the basic nature of morality. Here the future repercussions of the decisions are weighted against individual's responsibilities or duties (i.e.: caring vs. obligation).

One standard score ranging from 0 to 108 is obtained for each value dimension. Higher digits are associated with R and T orientations, while lower digits indicate U and D orientations. The value orientations are measured by assessing subject's responses to moral issues dealing with three sets of items (i.e.: justice, goodness, and morality). Each set consists of four subsets where the nature of standards, diversity of beliefs, nature of reasons, and diversity of reasons are evaluated (see Table 1 for sample item). The subsets incorporate three questions about two contrasting statements representing moral values. The first item of the subset requires test-takers to indicate which statement comes closer to their own. The other two items request test-takers to indicate how much they agree with each statement on a five point Lacerate scale.

A study was conducted to establish the psychometric features (Kurtines, draft 1993, pp. 199-201). One hundred

forty seven undergraduate students participated in the study (72 female and 53 male).

Table 1.

Sample Item from MIS-MI

Nature of Standards. Suppose two people were talking about what goodness means.

--The first person said that what is good is relative and depends on what each person believes.

--The second person said that what is good is universal or the same for everyone and does not depend on what each person believes.

Which person's opinion is closest to your own?

13. (a) First Person, (b) Second Person, (c) Neither, (d) Both

14. How much do you agree with the first person?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A lot	Completely
a	b	c	d	e

15. How much do you agree with the second person?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A lot	Completely
a	b	c	d	e

Internal Structure: Standardized item Alpha coefficients were .89 for RU value scale and .88 for TD value scale. Elimination of any items did not alter significantly the mean, variance, or Alpha coefficients in

any of the scales. Factor analysis revealed two factors that clearly represented the RU and TD dimensions and accounted for 40% of the variance. A relationship was found between the dimensions. Relativistic correlated with teleological and universalistic correlated with deontological,  $r = .26$ ,  $p < .05$ . Finally, distribution of scores indicated a higher R and T value orientations for female subjects than for male subjects.

#### Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure (SROM)

The SROM is a measure of Kohlbergian moral reasoning which has high levels of test-retest reliability ( $r = .82$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .84), and acceptable concurrent validity with other measures of moral reasoning (Gibbs, et. al., 1984). It consists on two moral dilemmas followed by 10 sets of items. Each set comprises questions about (a) opinion, (b) importance in complying with opinion, (c) why is it important to follow certain reasons, and (d) to which of the reasons subscribes the subject (see Table 2 for sample item).

Table 2

#### Sample item from SROM

1a. What if Heinz's wife asks him to steal the drug for her? Should Heinz:

steal / not steal / not sure (circle one)

1b. How important is it for a husband to do what his wife asks, to save her by stealing, even when he isn't sure whether that's the best thing to do?

very important / important / not important (circle one)

1c. Let's say you had to give a reason WHY it is IMPORTANT for a husband to do that. What reason would you give? Is any of the following reasons close to the one you would give?

a. because it's his wife, and she told him to do it, so he should do what she says.

close / not close / not sure

b. because he married her and if he didn't want to help her, why did he marry her in the first place?

close / not close / not sure

c. because they may have formed together a deep mutual commitment.

close / not close / not sure

d. because a good husband is expected to help his wife through sickness and health.

close / not close / not sure

e. because he cannot recognize her without acceptance

close / not close / not sure

f. because he has accepted a responsibility as her husband.

close / not close / not sure

1d. Of all the above reasons, the reason which is the closest to the reason that you would give is:

a / b / c / d / e / f

### Design

The data calls for a correlational research design which aids in description and prediction of the morality/personality relationship. Regression analysis can be performed. Causality, however can not be demonstrated due to the limited control of the experiment.

Due to the dimensional nature of the personality styles obtained using the MIPS a series of Chi Squares can be constructed to explore the relationship between personality style and moral identity. Consequently, the following complex designs could be constructed: First, a 2 x 3 design (personality style vs. value orientation). Second, a 2 x 4 design (personality style vs. stage in moral development). Finally, a 3 x 4 design (value orientation vs. stage in moral development). Thus, moral identity differences can be calculated for individuals that differ in their motivating aims (e.g.: Active vs Passive, Self vs Other), cognitive modes (information gathering, information processing), and

interpersonal behaviors (e.g. : Retiring, Outgoing).

### Procedure

Subjects took the tests in a classroom atmosphere. Confounding due to fatigue was controlled by distributing the tests on different days throughout a semester. To avoid contamination of data between the groups, debriefing session took place only after all subjects completed all assignments. Debriefing consisted on distribution of reading material and explanation followed by a period devoted to questions and answers.

### Results

The MIS-MI yielded no Teleological or Deontological groups. Fifty seven point six percent of the subjects were classified as neutral; 12.9 % as Quasi-Deontological; and 28.1% as Quasi-Teleological. The SROMS classified subjects in the study as belonging to the following stages: 12.9% between stages 2 and 3, 24.5% at stage 3, 31.7% between stages 3 and 4, and 28.1% at stage 4. No significant correlation was obtained between personality style and class of morality, personality style and stage of morality, or between class of morality and stage of morality. Personality styles regressed on value orientations and on stage of moral development without significant results. Finally, Chi-Squares did not show any significant results.

When data was further manipulated by considering alternative Prevalence Scores as well as different cut off scores for moral stages and moral value orientations, results remained not significant.

#### Discussion

Contrary to expectations, personality styles did not sustain value orientations that are egosyntonic to their personality patterns. Instrumental coping style (Active vs Passive) and source of reinforcement (Self vs Other) did not have an effect on value orientation or stage of moral development. For the sample obtained, reliance on others did not foster a climate in which a teleological and relativistic value orientations are embraced. Likewise, self-reliance did not elicit universalistic and/or deontological values.

Two explanations can be offered. First, the data was not equally distributed and it was limited in range. In terms of value orientations, not only the Deontological and Teleological categories were empty but 80 of 137 subjects were classified as Neutral. In terms of data obtained for stages of moral development, there was not enough spread of the data. A high concentration of data between stages 3 and 4 (84.3%) was obtained. Furthermore, out of 137 subjects, only 18 subjects reached stage 3 and 39 reached stage 4.

Second, this study indicates that college students are a homogeneous group in terms of moral identity. The majority scored between moral stages three and four and exhibited a neutral value orientation. It is possible that exposure higher learning in and structured setting may foster critical thinking which may yield a neutral value orientation.

Morality profiles in terms of value orientation and stage in moral development could not be constructed for the pool of subjects obtained. A richer sample having a broader range is required to explore the relation between personality and moral identity. Personality styles are expected to exhibit distinct patterns in their moral decisions. Compulsive individuals, for instance, seem to have a tendency to choose a rigid, systematic, and organized approach in which all alternatives are weighted carefully and society's rules and regulations are respected. In contrast, dependents seem to have a tendency to smooth down troubling events entertaining a carefree approach and possibly eluding a Deontological approach.

Personality styles can be understood as the resulting set of stable strategies developed to deal with internal and external circumstances. The strategies will be used as long as reinforcing results are obtained. Likewise, value

orientations require adherence to specific choices. These choices in turn will act upon the individual making the choice and the social environment. Moral agents, limited in their capacity, make their choices in terms of practical considerations. Consequently, moral judgment may be viewed as the result of environmental and internal forces (social sanctions, internal sanctions, social approval, internal approval) which once manifested, will become stimulus or considerations for further moral judgments.

Moral identity, like personality, can result as a by-product of the individual's need to make sense of his/her experience. It is possible that individuals respond to life contradictions and challenges according to specific needs that may be dictated by schematic foundations upon which reality is constructed.

In conclusion, as indicated in the introduction of this paper, moral identity is not learned formally. The development of moral identity is guided by the demands of society and a set of ethics developed by each individual. To hold a meaningful unit, each of the components forming the internal mosaic which constitutes morality is selected in a manner congruent to a stable internal superstructure or schema. Personal experience can not be held as the sole element influencing moral choices. However, under an

evolutionary perspective, internal representations of personal experiences are considered to be the foundation upon which personality is developed and transformed. Consequently, personal experience may be construed as the identifiable and discrete components that are transformed into a cohesive internal pattern that (1) is manifested as personality style and (2) gives meaning to the human experience of the individual. Furthermore, internal representations of discrete personal experiences seems to have a dual aspect. A proactive aspect will influence future decision making and a retroactive aspect will influence the reasoning underlining past decision making. A pragmatic approach can see moral identity as an integral part of the abstract internal frame that constitutes personality. Further research should be conducted with different populations to explore whether personality style and moral identity are parallel constructs or related components. The basic premise is that morality is influenced by cognitive style - a characteristic way of perceiving situations and reasoning about solutions to problems - and cognitive style is, in turn, an intrinsic component of personality.

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