

Moral judgment, self-understanding, and moral actions: the role of multiple constructs

Article Excerpt

Current models of moral functioning such as those of Rest (1983) and Damon and Hart (1988) have maintained that optimal moral development and consistent moral action require the presence of multiple constructs. In order to examine the importance of the presence of multiple variables relevant to moral functioning, structural equation modeling was used in addressing relationships among measurements of moral judgment development, self-understanding, and three distinct forms of moral action. A sample of 167 college students responded to measures of moral judgment, self-understanding, and moral action in three data-collection sessions. Models generated of these data revealed that three different forms of moral action were statistically distinct and were differentially related to moral judgment development and self-understanding. The results are discussed in terms of the importance and contributions of multiple moral developmental constructs in the production of moral action.

Overview

In the psychology of morality literature, much discussion has taken place about how moral developmental processes contribute to moral functioning (Bergman, 2002; Blasi, 1980; Kurtines & Greif, 1974). Given the many forces that can affect moral development, the task of adequately describing the systems that affect moral functioning seems daunting. Nonetheless, researchers have consistently focused on this topic, and various considerations have been offered (see Bergman, 2002; Kurtines & Gewirtz, 1995). Thanks to such efforts, the consensus in the field is that moral development is best represented as a collection of cognitive, social, affective, motivational, and behavioral forces. This agreement has allowed this field to properly reflect current human developmental paradigms (see Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Wachs, 2000), which stress the importance of considering multiple factors in understanding developmental change.

An array of research has acknowledged the role of multiple constructs in moral development. Two important accounts include those of Rest (1983) and Damon (Damon & Hart, 1988). Rest (1983) illustrates his conception in his four-component model, which emphasizes four distinct and independent moral psychological components: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. For Rest, moral development is most advanced, and moral functioning in the form of pursuant action is primed, when these components are present and activated. When a component or components are absent or weak, moral development is less advanced and moral functional outcomes may fail to occur.

Rest's four-component model emerged as a result of his efforts to amend Kohlberg's (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) theory of the development of moral reasoning. In maintaining core Kohlbergian principles along with some key amendments allowing for a more flexible consideration of stage theory and extension of philosophy, Rest advocated a consideration of moral judgment development that distinguished itself from Kohlberg's approach (see Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999b, for a complete description). Thus, in his efforts to clarify the nature of moral judgment, Rest's empirical efforts have mainly focused on the development of moral judgment along with its contributions to various moral actions and its potential for contributing to other relevant actions and outcomes (see Rest, 1979; Rest et al., 1999b). At the same time, however, Rest understood that even an amended consideration of moral judgment development was not enough to fully capture moral development, nor could such a consideration completely explain moral functional outcomes. Thus, Rest relied on colleagues to explicate the nature of his other considered components. As such, other four-component researchers have provided empirical accounts of various components in Rest's model that have effectively illustrated the role of multiple components. Specifically, Bebeau (1994) and Brabeck (Brabeck et al., 2000) have addressed moral sensitivity and moral motivation in dental and teaching professions, respectively. Both have been successful in verifying that the existence and advancement of multiple components results in improved moral development and increases the likelihood of specific ethical actions that are required of these professionals.

Damon's research has led to the identification of constructs of self vital to moral development and functional outcomes. This was first illustrated in the work of Damon and Hart (1988), where a construct referred to as self-understanding was introduced referencing a developmental framework of William James's subjective and objective considerations of the self. According to Damon and Hart, the individual constructs a theory of self-understanding that emphasizes various physical, active, social, psychological, continuous, agentic, and distinctive qualities that progress across four developmental levels. For Damon and Hart (1988), the development of self-understanding leads to "a consciously systematic conception of self" (p. 67). At the pinnacle of its development, the self chooses important philosophical or moral belief systems, ideological choices, and personal goals. Therefore, the self is understood according to these beliefs and plans. As such, moral functioning in the form of action taken is most likely if action choices coexist with those systems, choices, and goals that have been integrated as fundamental to the self. Hart and Fegley (1995) later extended Damon's general construct in describing other attributes of self that may contribute to the featuring of moral concerns in individual self-understanding. In so doing, Hart and Fegley have detailed that Damon's self-understanding construct is a multifaceted contributor to moral development and action.

Hart and Fegley (1995) address four facets of self-understanding: self-concept as theory, self-concept as content, self-concept as hierarchy, and self-concept as semantic space. Briefly (see Hart & Fegley, 1995), self-concept as theory denotes Damon and Hart's (1988) consideration of the

development of the objective and subjective selves. Self-concept as content addresses specific content in terms of physical, active, social, and psychological matter that the individual addresses in describing the self. Self-concept as hierarchy and self-concept as semantic space represent how the self is compared to important others. While self-concept as hierarchy addresses the linear proximity of the self in comparison with others, self-concept as semantic space considers self-other relationships in toto and notes how the individual aligns multiple representations of self and others in semantic space. In addressing self-understanding according to these four facets, Hart and Fegley (1995) not only illustrate the theory of self that is understood (i.e., self-concept as theory) but also address the content that is emphasized in the understood self (i.e., self-concept as concept) and how the self may come to identify and understand content as a result of prominent figures in the individual's life (i.e., self-concept as hierarchy and self-concept as semantic space). In illustrating contributions of these facets of self-understanding to moral development and resultant functioning, Hart and Fegley (1995) provided evidence that those with a propensity for moral behaviors in the form of caring for and concern about the rights of others along with altruistic commitment toward their welfare (i.e., described as "care exemplars") show significant strengths in all four facets over those not considered care exemplars. In detailing Damon and Hart's (1988) conception of self-understanding in this manner, Hart and Fegley (1995) acknowledge that moral development is enhanced and the likelihood of moral action is stronger in the presence of multiple relevant constructs.

Statement of the Problem

The research of both Rest and Damon has been important in reinforcing theoretical understanding that moral development is most sophisticated and moral functional outcomes such as action are most likely in the presence of multiple constructs. However, an examination of empirical research from these authors' traditions may not effectively convey this. Although statements about multiple contributing forces are often made in both traditions, the importance of such acknowledgments may go unrecognized. This is because efforts to explain a construct's contribution may implicitly pitch one important moral psychological construct against another.

For example, although Rest conceived of and staunchly supported a multi-componential take on moral development, most of his research addressed moral judgment. Empirical research of other components in his model has only been conducted in specific professional contexts, and it has yet to be shown empirically how multiple components may affect moral development and contribute to action in general populations. It seems plausible, then, that Rest's emphasis may leave the impression that moral judgment is fundamental to moral development and action, even though multiple components are known and questions about moral judgment as a sole contributor to moral action have been noted (Blasi, 1980; Kurtines & Greif, 1974).

A similar reaction may occur in examining research from the tradition of Damon. For example, it is readily apparent that Hart and Fegley (1995) were successful in fleshing out the nature of self-understanding and were clear in denoting how variables of self-understanding may have affected the behavior of their considered care exemplars. At the same time, though, the number of emphasized facets does not change the focus of their study. Regardless of the number of facets addressed, their focus is self-understanding. As such, one might decide that self-understanding is of priority for moral development and action due to both Hart and Fegley's (1995) emphasis of this variable as a whole and the fact that significant differences...

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