

Research on Predictors and Influence of Moral Behavior

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Abstract. Moral behavior is generally defined as behavior that conforms to (or is based on) generally accepted norms of moral behavior. Moral behavior includes many types of behavior, including prosocial or altruistic behavior. This study discusses the predictors of moral behavior and their impact in detail. The predictors include moral judgment, moral identity, emotion, family environment, and moral behavior in the past. This study believes that the generation of moral behavior requires a comprehensive consideration of multiple factors; only in this way can moral behavior be explained to the greatest extent. At the same time, this study believes that moral behavior will impact individual and social levels. For the impact of moral behavior, this study takes a positive attitude, believing that morality can positively impact individual emotions and inspire others in society through role models.

Keywords: Moral Behavior, Predictor, Influence.

1. Introduction

Moral behavior is generally defined as behavior that obeys (or is based on) generally accepted norms of moral behavior [1]. Commonly recognized moral behaviors include altruistic behavior, prosocial behavior (behavior through which people benefit others), etc. There is controversy over whether some other behaviors are moral behaviors, such as obedient behavior and conformity behavior. For example, in some highly religious countries, respect for religious authority may be considered moral, but not necessarily in some countries where religious beliefs are not very influential. The four stages of the moral decision-making process are understanding moral issues, moral judgment, establishing moral intentions, and moral behavior [2]. Moral behavior is not only the practice of people's moral concepts but also a reflection of people's moral level. In reality, the influencing factors of moral behavior are more complex. People with high moral levels do not necessarily make moral behaviors in certain situations, and people's moral behaviors may be affected by groups or cultures. At the same time, the impact of moral behavior will be more complex, and moral behavior may not necessarily bring emotional pleasure. Therefore, it is significant to study the predictors of moral behavior and its impact on improving people's moral level. This study will comprehensively discuss previous studies and summarize some predictors of moral behavior and their impacts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Predictor

2.1.1 Moral Judgement

Moral judgment is the ability to make moral judgments (based on inner moral principles) and act accordingly. Each person has different moral judgment standards and may make different judgments about some moral dilemmas, such as the classic trolley problem. However, no matter how different the standards, people will be more inclined to do what they think is moral. The four-stage model of the moral decision-making process proposed by Rest in 1986 holds that a moral decision begins with recognizing moral issues, followed by the individual's making of moral judgments, establishing moral intentions, and moral behavior [2]. Moral judgments can promote moral behavior, and the stronger the ability of moral judgments may mean more moral behavior. Many subsequent studies have also shown that moral judgments significantly impact moral behavior. Former studies found that moral judgments were positively correlated with moral behavior. However, new studies have shown that

moral judgments can only partially explain moral behavior, and the interaction between factors such as moral identity as predictors of moral behavior needs to be considered [3].

However, in certain instances, the heightened level of personal moral discernment may result in individuals employing ethical deliberation to arrive at an alternative response compared to their immediate moral instinct. This could lead to a judgment that deviates from societal norms and consequently elicits unfavorable reactions from the community, ultimately diminishing one's adherence to moral conduct.

2.1.2 Moral Identity

Moral identity is a specific identity surrounding the self in terms of morality. People tend to make their self-definition consistent with their behavior, and a person with a high moral identity may be more inclined to make moral behavior. Moral identity forces people to act morally by creating an identity. According to an empirical study, moral identity positively correlates with moral behavior [3]. According to a newer survey conducted by Reynold and Ceramic in 2007, charitable donations are widely accepted as socially beneficial actions, while cheating is generally considered unacceptable due to differing opinions on its significance and fairness. The study utilized separate scales to measure the values associated with these two variables. The findings indicate that moral identity significantly influences moral behavior when there is a strong social consensus on morality.

In contrast, moral judgment plays a more prominent role when social consensus is low. Additionally, the impact of moral identity remains unaffected by moral motivation. These results suggest that moral judgment and moral identity work together in shaping ethical conduct, highlighting the inadequacy of examining either variable independently [4].

2.1.3 Emotion

Many studies have shown that emotions have an essential impact on moral behavior. The emotions generated by morality are called moral emotions. Moral emotions usually include sympathy, empathy, disgust, guilt, etc. Moral emotions are usually generated in the process or after moral decision-making. Their impact on moral decision-making is mainly through expectation, and this pattern has been generated in human evolution. For example, when people do immoral behaviors, they usually have negative emotions such as guilt, sadness, etc..

In contrast, when people behave morally, they will have emotions such as pleasure, pride, etc. This expectation is also reinforced or generalized in society. Purity is regarded as a kind of morality, and when we encounter some impure things, such as incest or cheating, we may have disgusting emotions. However, expecting a baby to be nauseous about these things is impossible. But we do know that a rotten fish's stench can make it sick. So, disgust is tied to certain unethical behaviors by people in social environments. Therefore, people will be motivated to avoid negative emotions before decision-making, avoid adverse effects, or achieve positive effects after decision-making [5].

The emotions experienced before decision-making can also impact an individual's inclination toward moral behavior. For instance, the emotions one experiences before making decisions significantly impact moral decision-making. Positive emotions, such as affection, happiness, and love, have been found to encourage individuals' tendency to perform ethical behaviors. When feeling love, people are likelier to demonstrate empathy, compassion, and a sense of responsibility towards others. Conversely, negative emotions like anger or frustration can impede one's willingness to make ethical choices or even steer them toward immoral behaviors. Anger often clouds judgment by triggering impulsive reactions driven by personal biases rather than rational thinking. In such cases, individuals may disregard moral standards due to their heightened emotional state. Frustration can also undermine ethical decision-making as it creates psychological distress and diminishes self-control capacities. When feeling frustrated, people may become less inclined to carefully evaluate the potential consequences of their actions on others' well-being or neglect considering long-term implications altogether.

2.1.4 Family Environment

The family environment is crucial to a person's moral development. Parents can influence the development of children's moral behavior through their image or the overall family atmosphere. At the same time, they can also take more active actions, such as promoting moral development by motivating children's moral behavior. Parents' motivation for children can be material rewards or social rewards. Material rewards are rewards such as gifts (mobile phones, watches), money, and privileges (such as playing games later) given by parents when children show behaviors desired by parents [6]. However, material rewards are ostensibly the most direct reinforcement of behaviors. However, frequent use of material rewards may have the consequences of destroying internal ego-driven motivation and relying on external motivation, thus reducing prosocial behaviors in the form of spontaneous and altruistic motivations [7]. Social rewards mainly refer to parents' praise, support, encouragement, and recognition of children's moral behaviors. Grusec and colleagues [8] pointed out that frequent use of social rewards can produce strong moral motivations for individuals. Love, recognition, support, and so on can produce a self-concept conducive to maintaining moral behaviors [6]. Some research shows that parents' affection and encouragement for children's moral behaviors are beneficial to the moral development of children and reduce the occurrence of immoral behaviors. However, parents may also cause more moral problems in children by harming them. According to a meta-analysis by Lereya et al. in 2013, Individuals who are both bullies and victims of bullying are more likely to suffer from negative parental behaviors, including abuse, neglect, and maladaptive parenting [9]. Parenting styles also have an impact on children's moral behaviors. One study showed that authoritative parenting was positively correlated with some types of prosocial behaviors (such as sharing) but negatively correlated with altruistic prosocial behaviors. The correlation between authoritarian parenting and general and altruistic prosocial behaviors was negative, but not with other specific types [10].

2.1.5 The Moral Behavior in The Past

The moral license is when a person performs a moral act (even a symbolic act) and gives permission to perform an immoral act in the future. Moral balance theory can explain this phenomenon to some extent. Moral balance theory holds that individuals base their decisions about moral behavior (and judgments about the actions of others) on an assessment of how those actions will affect their (or others') moral standing [11]. People evaluate morally relevant behavior and calculate a moral balance, comparing it to an acceptable level of personal morality. If the moral balance is more optimistic, people will be more inclined to do some immoral behavior or choose not to do moral behavior based on not endangering their moral image. Conversely, people are more inclined to behave ethically to promote their image when the moral balance is negative. This may be because people have a positive self-perception after performing a moral act, implying that they have achieved the moral ideal, thus allowing themselves to perform an immoral act. This shows that people's previous moral acts also impact whether they perform moral acts. Many studies confirm this theory. There are also many exciting results in this regard. When people are given moral permission, they are faced with the question of whether or not to behave ethically, and the internal struggle that arises at this time is more intense than usual. About this problem, some studies have shown that social recognition of prosocial behavior can reduce moral conflicts with the completion of moral symbolic acts [12].

However, people can not only use their previous ethical behavior as moral permission but also include the behavior-related attributes of group members in their categories, which means that people can use the ethical behavior of others as their moral permission. In Kouchaki's research, participants were divided into several groups, and the group was asked to describe whether a job was more suitable for white people or African Americans. In the first experiment, participants were informed that their group was more moral than others, and they were more inclined to describe the job as more suitable for African Americans. In the second experiment, participants were informed in advance of the group members' previous non-discriminatory behavior (to describe the job as more suitable for African

Americans), and they were more likely to describe work as better suited to white people. This research has shown that previous non-discriminatory actions of other group members can allow individuals to take discriminatory actions later (provided them with information about their group's moral superiority) [13].

2.2 Influence

Emotional responses often accompany moral behavior. Witnessing or experiencing unfair treatment can elicit anger or sympathy while assisting others can evoke joy or pride. The primary influence of moral behavior on individuals lies in the realm of moral emotions. Generally speaking, moral actions tend to generate positive emotions such as satisfaction, joy, and a sense of accomplishment. Conversely, immoral behaviors are more likely to trigger negative emotions like guilt and frustration. However, there are exceptions to this pattern. When compelled to act morally against their will, they may experience anger instead.

Similarly, if other members within a group also engage in transgressions, it could diminish the individual's feelings of guilt and frustration. Furthermore, moral behaviors have a reciprocal effect on an individual's motivation. Positive feedback from society following acts of morality serves as an incentive for future ethical conduct and helps sustain long-term moral motivation. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that past personal and collective morality instances may negatively impact an individual's subsequent choices by impeding their ability to engage in virtuous actions.

A role model serves as a model or exemplar that others can emulate. A moral role model is someone whose ethical conduct can be imitated or acquired by others. The most crucial function of moral behavior within communities and society lies in its role modeling aspect. People's moral actions are often openly displayed and readily discernible to others. In contrast, moral concepts are not as readily apparent compared to behaviors and possess lesser contagiousness than actual behaviors. Individuals tend to perceive those who merely talk without taking action as lacking persuasiveness. In the realm of family upbringing, parents frequently introduce their children to various moral role models for learning purposes. These tangible depictions of role models may prove more instructive when contrasted with abstract moral concepts. Moral role models have the potential to inspire individuals within groups or society at large to engage in ethical behaviors and contribute significantly towards shaping the moral values held by others.

3. Research Implications

There are very complex predictors of ethical behavior, which include moral judgment, moral identity, emotion, family environment, and moral behavior in the past. There are still other factors that are not listed in this article. Among them, moral judgment and moral identity are positively correlated with moral behavior. The influence of emotion on moral behavior is reflected in two aspects. First, the prediction of emotion after behavior will impact the decision-making of moral behavior. The individual's pleasure after performing a moral act may promote the individual to act morally. Second, the emotion before behavior will also affect moral behavior. Individuals with positive emotions are more likely to behave ethically.

Additionally, the family environment also plays a significant role in moral development and impacts moral behavior. Frequent social rewards from parents may promote the generation and maintenance of moral solid motivation in children. In contrast, parents' harm to children may lead to the generation of non-social behavior. It is worth noting that ethical behavior cannot be explained by any of these factors alone but rather by the comprehensive effect of several factors. Ethical behavior can, to a large extent, positively impact society. How to maximize the positive impact of moral role models may be a question that people need to think about. However, moral behavior may have adverse social effects, such as the abovementioned moral licensing effect.

However, it should be noted that the causes of ethical behavior are highly complex, and the predictors and influences listed in this study are not exhaustive, which is one of the limitations of this

study. The study also does not explain the relationship between the listed predictors but merely collates them, which is another limitation of the study.

4. Conclusion

The various factors influencing moral conduct encompass moral judgment, moral identity, emotions, family environment, past moral actions, perception of the ethical climate, and more. Moral behavior primarily impacts an individual's emotions, with different behaviors eliciting distinct moral sentiments. Additionally, an individual's moral conduct indirectly fosters the sustenance of their ethical motivation through social feedback. Conversely, prior moral actions exhibited by the individual or their affiliated group may impede further demonstrations of morality. The significance of moral behavior within a group is predominantly exemplified through its role as a guiding precedent.

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