

Moral Identity in Psychopathy

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Abstract

Psychologists who study morality have argued that moral behavior is influenced by how central morality is to one's sense of self. For instance, individuals who are considered to be moral exemplars tend to place more importance on moral traits and values when defining their self-concepts (Colby & Damon, 1995). This paper takes the next step of examining individual variation in a construct highly associated with *immoral* behavior – psychopathy. Within a large community sample, we found that individuals scoring higher on a measure of psychopathy were less likely to base their self-concepts on moral traits. Furthermore, such individuals placed less importance on self-transcendent moral values, such as benevolence and universalism, and greater importance on self-focused non-moral values, such as power, hedonism, and stimulation-seeking. These findings offer insight into the nature of psychopathic personality and are suggestive of the processes that may lead individuals with such traits to behave immorally.

Keywords: psychopathy, morality, moral identity, values, antisocial, immoral, moral behavior

Socrates said that to know the good is to do the good, but psychopaths seem to contradict this. Individuals with psychopathic traits know the difference between right and wrong, but often engage in frequent and flagrant bad behavior (Hare, 2003). This discrepancy between moral judgment and moral behavior has been termed the “judgment-action gap” (Blasi, 1980). Previous models emphasizing the role of reasoning and deliberation in morality (e.g. Kohlberg, 1969) have been unable to account for this gap, which exists in most people to some degree (Baumeister, 1997). It has been suggested that moral identity may play a role in both moral judgments and moral behavior. Moral identity can be conceptualized as the degree to which individuals base their self concepts on moral traits (Blasi, 1995), as well as the degree to which individuals find moral versus non-moral values to be important. The goal of the present study was to explore potential relationships between psychopathy and each of these aspects of moral identity.

Psychopathy

Psychopathic traits include superficial charm, manipulativeness, callousness, dishonesty, lack of guilt, failure to form close emotional bonds, stimulation seeking, and antisocial behavior (Hare, 2003). Although traditionally conceptualized in forensic samples, psychopathy is thought to exist on a continuum in the general population (Edens, Marcus, Lilienfeld, & Poythress, 2006; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Self-report measures have been designed to capture a range of personality traits indexing the classic clinical features of psychopathy within community samples (Levenson et al., 1995; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). As a result, it is possible to examine individual differences in this construct within the general population.

Psychopathy is associated with higher rates of immoral behavior, including taking advantage of others, lying, cheating, and abandoning relationships (Hare, 2003). Psychopathy has also been

associated with increased instrumental (cold and calculated) aggression, as well as aggression in reaction to provocation (Blair, 2005). It is important to note that, in a community sample such as the one we report here, very few individuals would meet diagnostic threshold for psychopathy; rather, we are examining psychopathy as a personality trait that varies within normal populations. However, within community samples, more psychopathic individuals report higher levels of antisocial behavior, even if they have never been convicted of a crime (Belmore & Quinsey, 1994; Ishikawa, Raine, Lencz, Bihrlé, & Lacasse, 2001).

Some have hypothesized that the immoral nature of psychopathy may reflect a lower developmental stage of moral reasoning or cognition, yet empirical evidence is mixed (Fodor, 1973; Trevethan & Walker, 1989) and is unable to account for the disconnect between moral judgment (the ability to distinguish right from wrong when evaluating the actions of others) and behavior observed in psychopathy. A stronger argument has been put forth for the role of the emotional deficits observed in psychopathy; a primary deficit in psychopathy is a lack of empathy (Hare, 2003) accompanied by an insensitivity to signals that others are in distress (Blair, 1997). In the absence of concern for the wellbeing of others, we hypothesized that individuals with psychopathic traits may be less likely to view moral values and traits, such as kindness and compassion, as central to their sense of identity.

Psychopathy has traditionally been conceptualized as having two factors (Hare, 2003). Factor 1 involves personality and emotional features including callousness, manipulativeness, superficial charm, blunted affect, and a lack of guilt and empathy. Factor 2 involves antisocial lifestyle and behavioral features, such as sensation-seeking, impulsivity, irresponsibility, and antisocial behavior. An additional aim was to explore how these two factors might be differentially related to moral identity.

Morality and Moral Identity

Morality has been defined in many ways, often by the content of the moral domain. For example, Turiel (1983) defined the moral domain as “prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other.” Haidt (2008) has argued for a broader conception of morality, extending beyond harm, rights, and justice; he used a social-functional approach to define “moral systems” as “interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible.” Despite their differences, both definitions express the idea that morality imposes limitations on selfishness. Morality requires that individuals restrain their behavior, whether out of respect for other individuals or out of respect for society and social order. It is these limitations and restraints that psychopathic individuals seem to understand in their judgments, yet ignore in their behavior.

Moral identity is defined as how central morality is to one’s sense of self (Blasi, 1995), or how much an individual bases their self concept on moral traits (e.g. being generous, compassionate, and kind) compared to non-moral traits (e.g. being intelligent, and funny). Evidence suggests moral identity may be important in guiding behavior. For example, studies of moral exemplars (people whom others regard as highly moral, presumably partly due to their behavior) have found that these individuals experience significantly more overlap between their sense of identity and their sense of morality (Colby & Damon, 1995), but do not necessarily have greater moral reasoning abilities than non-exemplars (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995). Moral identity may help to link judgment and behavior by providing the motivation for individuals to translate their moral judgments into actions (Blasi, 1995).

Studies have shown stronger moral identity to be associated with a behavioral measure of generosity, self-reported volunteerism (Aquino & Reed, 2002), and reduced likelihood of cheating (Wowra, 2007). But what about individuals with psychopathic traits, which are generally associated with behaving immorally? The first goal of the present study was to assess the relationship between individual variation in psychopathic traits and moral identity. It was hypothesized that psychopathic traits would be negatively associated with the degree to which individuals base their self-concepts on moral traits.

Values

The second goal of the present study was to assess the relationship between psychopathic traits and a variety of moral and non-moral values. The degree to which an individual finds moral versus non-moral values to be important is thought to be a reflection of how central morality is to one's identity (Schwartz, 1992). Schwartz (1992) defines values as goals and motivations that serve as guiding principles in people's lives. He describes ten basic values which are intended to include all the core values recognized in cultures around the world. Schwartz arranged the values in a circumplex to portray relations of conflict and congruity among them (see Figure 1), with values that are closer together being more similar in their underlying motivations and values that are more distant being more opposed in their underlying motivations. The values can be organized using two orthogonal dimensions: (1) *Self-Enhancement* (Power, Achievement, and Hedonism), which emphasizes the pursuit of self-interests, versus *Self-Transcendence* (Benevolence and Universalism), which emphasizes concern for the welfare and interests of others; (2) *Openness to Change* (Hedonism, Stimulation and Self-Direction), which emphasizes independent action, thought, and feeling, and readiness for new experience, versus *Conservation* (Tradition, Conformity, and Security), which

emphasizes self-restriction, order, and resistance to change.¹

Values related to self-transcendence have been most closely linked to morality; these values have been found to positively correlate with measures of moral sensitivity (Myyry & Helkama, 2002) and with moral functioning (Frimer & Walker, 2008). In contrast, moral sensitivity has been found to negatively correlate with self-enhancement (Power and Hedonism) and openness to change values (Stimulation) (Myyry & Helkama, 2002). Because psychopathy has been found to be associated with reduced empathic concern for others (Glenn, Iyer, Graham, Koleva, & Haidt, in press) and an increased willingness to take advantage of others to get ahead in life (Hare, 2003), we hypothesized that individuals scoring higher in psychopathy would place less importance on values closely related to morality (self-transcendence values) and more importance on non-moral values at the opposite end of the spectrum (self-enhancement). Because psychopathic traits include stimulation seeking, impulsivity, and deviance from social norms (Hare, 2003), we also hypothesized that psychopathy would be positively related to openness to change values and negatively related to conservation values.

The final goal of the study was to assess the relative contribution of the two factors of psychopathy to moral identity and the Schwartz values. Because Factor 1 involves a lack of concern for others and a tendency to take advantage of others for personal gain, we hypothesized that Factor 1 would be most related to the self-transcendence / self-enhancement dimension (i.e., negatively related to Universalism and Benevolence, and positively related to Power, Achievement, and Hedonism). Since Factor 2 involves a need for stimulation-seeking and a disregard for social norms, we hypothesized that Factor 2 would be particularly related to the openness to change / conservation dimension (i.e., positively related to Stimulation and

¹ Hedonism shares elements of both openness to change and self-enhancement and therefore is discussed with reference to both dimensions (Schwartz, 1992).

Hedonism and negatively related to Tradition, Conformity, and Security).

Method

Participants

Participants were adult volunteers who visited www.yourmorals.org – a website where individuals can fill out a number of questionnaires and learn more about psychological constructs. As part of initial registration, website visitors reported basic demographic information; then they self-selected to take one or more surveys from a list of available questionnaires. Participants for the present study were individuals who completed Levenson's Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson et al., 1995) as well as either the Schwartz Values Survey (Schwartz, 1992) or the Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Final sample sizes were 628 participants who completed the psychopathy scale plus the Schwartz Values Scale (40% female, 81% white, mean age 38.5 ± 14.2 years, 57.8% with a college degree) and 206 participants who completed the psychopathy scale plus the Moral Identity Scale (47% female, 75% white, mean age 35.2 ± 14.2 years, 54% with a college degree). 137 participants completed all three scales.

Materials

Levenson's Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (LSRP). Psychopathy was assessed using the LSRP (Levenson et al., 1995). The LSRP is a 26-item rating scale with two factors that were constructed to provide indices of the two factors of the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R, Hare, 2003), which is considered the gold standard for assessing psychopathy. Factor 1 assesses the core personality traits of psychopathy, including manipulateness, callousness, and lack of guilt or remorse; Factor 2 assesses features of the antisocial lifestyle, including impulsiveness,

irresponsibility, and antisocial behavior. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type agree/disagree scale. The LSRP and its factor structure was initially validated in a sample of undergraduates (Levenson et al., 1995) and was further validated by Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones (1999) in two studies of community participants.

The Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale. This 10-item scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) was designed to measure moral identity or the degree to which individuals' self-concepts center on moral traits. The scale consists of two subscales – Internalization, or the degree to which private views of oneself are centered on moral traits, and Symbolization, or the degree to which moral traits are reflected in the individual's actions in the world, the more social aspect of moral identity. Participants were given a list of nine moral traits (e.g. caring, fair, hard working) and were asked to rate the extent to which they agree/disagree with statements regarding these traits using a 7-point Likert scale. A sample item for the Internalizations subscale is “Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am” and a sample item for the Symbolization subscale is: “The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations.” This scale has been previously validated in a variety of samples (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Schwartz Values Scale (SVS). The SVS (Schwartz, 1992) was designed to measure individual importance of ten basic values. The SVS consists of two parts. In the first part, participants rate the importance of 30 items as guiding principles in their lives. These items describe potentially desirable end-states in noun form followed by an explanatory phrase in parentheses (e.g., “EQUALITY (equal opportunity for all)”). In the second part, participants rate the importance of 28 items that describe potentially desirable ways of acting in adjective form (e.g., “INDEPENDENT (self-reliant, self-sufficient)”). Each item expresses an aspect of the

motivational goal of one value. Each item is rated on a 9-point scale labeled 7 (of supreme importance), 6 (very important), 5, 4 (unlabeled), 3 (important), 2, 1 (unlabeled), 0 (not important), -1 (opposed to my values). Ratings on items for each value are then averaged. Separate analyses carried out in 65 different cultures have largely replicated the discrimination of the ten values and the motivational structure shown in Figure 1 (Schwartz, 1992, 1994).

Results

Descriptive statistics for the three scales are provided in Table 1. There were no differences in psychopathy scores between the subsamples that completed each scale. Multiple regression analyses were conducted using each Moral Identity or Schwartz Values subscale as the dependent variable and entering total psychopathy score, age, sex, and education as predictors. Additional regressions were conducted in which both factors of psychopathy were simultaneously entered as predictors in place of total psychopathy scores.

Results are shown in Table 1. As predicted, controlling for age, sex, and education, subjects scoring higher on psychopathy were less likely to base their self-concepts on moral traits. Total psychopathy scores were negatively associated with scores on both the Internalization and the Symbolization dimensions of moral identity. When the two factors of psychopathy were entered simultaneously as predictors, Factor 1 contributed to more of the variance in overall moral identity and its subscales than Factor 2.

As predicted, analyses examining the relationships between psychopathy scores and importance of the Schwartz values revealed that psychopathy was positively associated with values motivated by self-enhancement and openness to change, including Power, Hedonism, and Stimulation, and negatively associated with values motivated by self-transcendence and conservation, including Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, and Conformity. There were no

significant relationships between total psychopathy scores and the Achievement, Self-Direction, or Security values (Figure 1).

As hypothesized, regression analyses revealed that Factor 1 was primarily related to the self-enhancement/self-transcendence dimension; it was positively associated with the self-enhancement values of Power, Achievement, and Hedonism, and negatively associated with the self-transcendence values of Universalism and Benevolence. However, Factor 2 was also associated with two of these values—Power and Achievement—although, notably, in the opposite direction as Factor 1. The two psychopathy factors' divergent relationship with the value of Achievement in particular may account for the nonsignificant relationship between the total psychopathy score and this value.

In accordance with the hypothesis that Factor 2 would be most related to the openness to change/conservatism dimension, Factor 2 was negatively associated with Conformity and Security. However, contrary to this hypothesis, the openness to change values Hedonism and Stimulation were related to Factor 1 but not to Factor 2. Self Direction and Tradition were not significantly related to either of the two psychopathy factors.

Finally, we were interested in determining whether psychopathy was related to moral values when controlling for moral identity, and vice versa. This analysis was performed on 137 individuals who completed both the Moral Identity and Schwartz Values questionnaires. To obtain a single indicator of the importance of moral versus non-moral values, we used the values identified by Myyry & Helkama (2002) as being positively (Universalism and Benevolence) and negatively (Power and Hedonism) associated with morality. Thus, we calculated a difference score by subtracting the morality-related values from the nonmoral values (i.e., (Universalism + Benevolence) – (Power + Hedonism)). When controlling for moral values, psychopathy

remained significantly associated with moral identity ($\beta = -.51, p < .001$). Conversely, when controlling for moral identity, psychopathy remained significantly associated with moral values ($\beta = -.43, p < .001$)². This suggests that psychopathy is independently related to both one's moral identity and to one's core values.

An unanticipated validation of the psychopathy scale

Admittedly, our design does not allow us to directly assess moral behavior beyond self-report of moral values, traits, and identity. However, we discovered an unexpected opportunity to examine a tentative proxy for moral behavior using the number of survey questions that participants left blank. When visiting our website, individuals first see a message stating, "Welcome to YourMorals.org, where you can learn about your own morality while contributing to scientific research on moral psychology." The message continues in a similar vein, in a sense establishing an implicit contract between the researchers and the visitor: in return for helping us with our research by completing the survey, website visitors get to see their scores and learn about the scales they took. However, given that individuals scoring higher on psychopathy have been shown to take advantage of others and lack concern for social norms (Hare, 2003) one might expect that they would be more likely to violate this implicit agreement by skipping survey questions. Indeed, higher scores on Factor 1 of psychopathy were positively correlated with number of skipped questions on the LSRP ($r = .12, p < .001; N = 2827$) and the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (the first and most popular yourmorals.org questionnaire), $r = .063, p < .001; N = 2529$). We do not claim that leaving questions blank on a questionnaire constitutes immoral or psychopathic behavior, but we do believe that these results support the notion that higher scores on our self-report measure of psychopathy are associated with relatively uncaring and norm-violating behaviors, albeit in a small way.

² More detailed exploratory mediational analyses did not produce strong consistent findings.

Discussion

While previous studies of moral identity have demonstrated that moral exemplars view morality as central to their self-concept, the present study examines the opposite end of the spectrum. As hypothesized, when controlling for age, sex, and education within a community sample, individuals with a greater degree of self-reported psychopathic traits were less likely to base their self-concept on moral traits such as being honest, generous, and kind, and place less importance on values related to morality (Benevolence and Universalism). In contrast, values related to self-enhancement (Power and Hedonism) were more important to their identity. While it is important to keep in mind that the present study did not measure behavior, these results provide an initial suggestion that individuals scoring higher on psychopathic traits may be less likely to act morally because they are less likely to view moral traits and values as central to their sense of self.

This relative reduction in importance of moral versus non-moral traits and values may be due to the emotional deficits, including a lack of empathy, observed in psychopathy. Despite their cognitive capacity to distinguish right from wrong, it is possible that individuals higher in psychopathic traits may engage in immoral behavior because they do not experience empathic concern for others and thus do not find behaving morally to be important to their sense of self. Although speculative, this reduced moral traits and values, in combination with increased emphasis on self-enhancement values, may help explain psychopathic individuals' readiness to take advantage of others. Whereas a desire to gain power or seek pleasure may be common, it may be that when combined with reduced concern for the welfare of others, this desire becomes especially conducive to immoral behavior. Psychopathic traits such as manipulation, conning, using charm to persuade others, and pathological lying, appear to reflect such a desire to pursue

self interests at the expense of others. Future studies are needed to directly establish the link between psychopathy, values, and moral behavior.

As hypothesized, psychopathy was also associated with reduced importance of the conservation values of Tradition and Conformity, and increased importance of the openness to change values of Stimulation and Hedonism. This finding is consistent with previous research on psychopathy. Self-reported psychopathy has been found to correlate negatively with peer ratings on the Traditionalism and Constraint subscales of the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; Tellegen, 1982). Individuals high in psychopathy have been found to show strong sensation-seeking tendencies (Lykken, 1995; Zuckerman, 1994) as well as a need to create excitement and adventure, thrill-seeking behavior, and an inability to tolerate routine and boredom (Quay, 1965). Thus, our findings suggest that an internal characteristic of psychopathic individuals, namely the importance they place on various types of values, may be associated with their unique external (behavioral) tendencies described in previous research. This implies a level of coherence and continuity between how individuals high in psychopathy view themselves and their actions in the world.

The hypothesis that Factor 1 of psychopathy, which includes the interpersonal and emotional features, would be associated with the values on the self-enhancement / self-transcendence dimension was mostly supported– it was positively associated with self-enhancement values and negatively associated with self-transcendence values. This suggests that individuals who are particularly manipulative and deceitful, and who lack guilt and empathy, tend to place value in enhancing themselves without concern for others. Surprisingly, the self-enhancement values of Power and Achievement were also found to be associated with Factor 2 of psychopathy, but in the opposite direction. This may suggest that individuals who are particularly irresponsible,

impulsive, and antisocial may place less value in obtaining status and success.

The hypothesis that Factor 2 would be related to the openness to change / conservation was partially supported; as predicted Factor 2 was negatively associated with the conservation values Conformity and Security, which involve restraint of actions and impulses that violate social norms and threaten stability. However, it was not associated with the openness to change values of Stimulation and Hedonism. Instead, these values were associated with Factor 1. This result is surprising given that Factor 2 traits include stimulation-seeking and impulsivity. One possible explanation is that Factor 2 is a better indicator of deviant behavior (i.e. rejection of Conformity and Security principles) than of stimulation seeking and hedonism, which would result in the stronger relationship with conservation values that we observed.

Finally, regression analyses indicated that psychopathy was uniquely related to both moral identity and moral values, as psychopathy remained significantly associated with each factor when controlling for the other. This suggests that psychopathic traits are independently related to how much one defines oneself by moral traits and how much one finds moral values to be important.

Limitations

It should be noted that the present study aimed to establish an initial link between moral identity and psychopathic traits; future research assessing actual moral behavior will be necessary to further explore the relationship between moral identity and immoral behavior. In addition, our sample consisted of visitors to YourMorals.org; while research has shown that internet samples tend to be more representative than traditional student samples (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004), our sample was not representative of the general population. Lastly, our analyses rely on self-report measures of constructs which may not be socially desirable.

However, reviews of internet research have found that social desirability may be less of a concern for web based data collection (Gosling et al., 2004). Exploratory analysis also revealed a relationship between the behavior of skipping items and psychopathy scores, indicating that the psychopathy measure we used does have some relationship to behavior within our sample.

However, it is certainly possible that different relationships would be discovered were we to measure immoral behavior directly.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals with a greater degree of psychopathic traits have a reduced sense of moral identity; within a community sample, individuals scoring higher in psychopathy were less likely to find moral traits central to their self-concept and were less likely to find those values most strongly associated with morality to be personally important. It is possible that one of the reasons that psychopathic individuals fail to behave morally is that non-moral values, such as achieving power or pleasure guide their behavior and are more central to their identity compared to moral values, such as protecting the welfare of others. This relative reduction in moral versus non-moral traits and values may be due to the emotional deficits and reduced empathic concern for others that is observed in psychopathy.

Figure 1. Beta values for regressions regressing total psychopathy scores, age, sex, and education on the ten basic values. The figure is adapted from Schwartz (1992). Dark shading indicates values that are more important to individuals scoring higher in psychopathy. No shading indicates values that are less important to individuals scoring higher in psychopathy. Medium shading indicates a non-significant relationship.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Regression Analyses Demonstrating Associations between Study Variables and Psychopathy

Scale	N	Mean (SD)	α	Beta values		
				Total	Factor 1	Factor 2
Psychopathy	2,157	46.17 (10.52)	.86	-	-	-
Factor 1		26.60 (7.54)	.87	-	-	-
Factor 2		19.57 (4.92)	.72	-	-	-
Moral Identity	204					
Average		4.71 (1.18)	.87	-.55***	-.45***	-.19**
Internalization		5.92 (1.15)	.87	-.58***	-.51***	-.16*
Symbolization		3.51 (1.52)	.84	-.41***	-.31***	-.16*
Schwartz Values	628					
Power		1.74 (1.30)	.75	.22**	.39***	-.16**
Achievement		4.08 (1.14)	.69	-.04	.21**	-.30***
Hedonism		3.67 (1.46)	.80	.22**	.22***	.04
Stimulation		3.18 (1.57)	.77	.18**	.15*	.07
Self Direction		5.20 (0.93)	.64	.03	.08	-.05
Universalism		4.58 (1.22)	.76	-.33***	-.39***	.03
Benevolence		4.61 (1.02)	.73	-.51***	-.49***	-.10
Tradition		2.19 (1.37)	.63	-.19**	-.11	-.12
Conformity		3.20 (1.32)	.70	-.14*	-.02	-.16*
Security		3.74 (1.15)	.69	-.12	.04	-.21**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Note. Right three columns are a summary of estimates from multiple regression models regressing psychopathy scores, age, sex, and education on the moral identity and Schwartz Values scales. Numbers indicate standardized beta (β). The first column is from multiple regressions including total psychopathy scores; the last two columns are from multiple regressions including both Factor 1 and Factor 2 psychopathy scores. Negative β indicates lower scale ratings for individuals scoring higher in psychopathy.

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Figure1

