



Implicit self-concept and moral action

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ABSTRACT

Explicit measures of moral personality are not very successful in predicting specific moral actions. Recent theoretical developments suggest that measures based on associative processes may provide an alternative to improve prediction. In this contribution we have developed an Implicit Association Test (IAT) measure of the Moral vs. Immoral self-concept and used it alongside a direct self-rating of moral personality. In Study 1 this IAT measure uniquely predicted whether participants faithfully reported an outcome implying negative consequences. In Study 2 the IAT moral self-concept predicted an actual moral behavior, while a self-rating explicit personality measure predicted responses to hypothetical moral scenarios. Results are discussed in light of the role played by individual differences in associative structures representing personality and the self-concept.

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1. Introduction

People generally describe themselves as considerate, unselfish and moral individuals (Pronin, 2008), yet in many occasions their moral behaviors are inconsistent with their explicit self-descriptions (Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007). Because of such common inconsistencies between cognition and behavior, models of moral judgment and moral evaluation as well as models of moral personality have often difficulties in predicting specific instances of (im)moral behavior (e.g., Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Camara & Schneider, 1994; Monin et al., 2007). Research in moral hypocrisy illustrates nicely the split between moral behavior and individuals' self-rated personality (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Batson et al., 1999). Most of these studies used a simple paradigm whereby participants could cheat (immoral behavior) when reporting the toss of a coin determining whether they would be assigned to a "positive" or a "negative consequences" subsequent task. Participants were led to believe that they were unobserved when flipping the coin. When asked to report the outcome an unlikely proportion of participants reported that the coin landed on the positive consequences side. Although Batson and colleagues (1997, 2002) used various self-report personality measures linked to morality (e.g., Berkowitz and Lutterman's (1968) Social Responsibility Scale; Schwartz's (1968)

Ascription of Responsibility Scale; measures of Kohlberg's (1976) justice perspective; Davis's (1983) Empathic Concern Scale), no personality measure was able to predict cheating.

2. Difficulties in predicting (im)moral behaviors

Classical theories in moral psychology seem unsuited to close this gap between personality and specific instances of (im)moral behavior. This is due to the fact that traditional and influential research on morality has focused on moral *judgment* instead of on moral *behavior* (Kohlberg, 1971, 1976; see also Darley & Shultz, 1990; Rest, 1986). The basic sequence posited by these models is that, once a situation functions as a relevant input (as a dilemma contrasting two moral alternatives), a propositional-based reasoning process starts. Reasoning then leads to a moral judgment. Symbolic and propositional-based reasoning is the mechanism at the core of this mode of moral decision-making. However, because studies in this tradition focus mainly on the judgment's component of morality, they remain "ill suited for providing information about the other components of morality" (Rest, 1986, p. 9), including most notably moral behavior (Monin et al., 2007).

Another classical approach to morality has focused on self-ratings of personality traits rather than on evaluations of moral reasoning. Organizational psychology has relied heavily on self-report integrity tests to predict deviance and counterproductive behaviors. However, the adequacy and predictive power of these measures has been questioned (OTA; US Congress, 1990). Even when significant associations are found between integrity tests and (im)moral criteria, they are typically detected for *self-reported* and *retrospective* deviance criteria (e.g., Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993), while overt integrity

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tests have more difficulties to predict observed and *prospective* -immoral actions, as theft (Camara & Schneider, 1995) or cheating (Horn, Nelson, & Brannick, 2004).

Another problem is that the construct validity of integrity measures remains unclear (Camara & Schneider, 1995). Such measures have been reported to be as correlated to job performance than to deviance criteria (Ones et al., 1993), a result that does not help understanding the meaning of what is captured by integrity tests. Furthermore, integrity measures are connected to an array of basic traits, as Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness (Berry, Sackett, & Wiemann, 2007). However, these three personality variables do not account for all the variance in integrity, and do not account for as much variance in deviance and immoral behavioral criteria as do integrity measures (e.g., Murphy & Lee, 1994). Therefore, the conceptual definition and construct validity of integrity as a trait remains problematic (Camara & Schneider, 1995).

Other researchers (Lee et al., 2005; Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007) have tried to define more clearly the conceptual variable behind integrity measures suggesting that integrity tests may reflect a sixth personality dimension that has been labeled Honesty–Humility, and which is not adequately captured by the Big Five. Lee et al. (2005) define Honesty–Humility “by such content as sincerity, fairness, lack of conceit, and lack of greed” (p. 182). Marcus et al. (2007) demonstrated that Honesty–Humility accounted for more incremental variance in immoral behaviors in the workplace than integrity tests; further, some evidence suggests that such a morality factor might do better than the Big Five in predicting (im)moral behaviors in the workplace (Lee et al., 2005). Although such an approach is theoretically sound, the evidence for predictive power is so far mostly limited to *self-reported* and *retrospective* measures of (im)moral acts. It may be argued that to predict actual non-self-reported actions a classical personality approach relying exclusively on self-reports of explicit personality traits may be insufficient, particularly so when the behaviors to be predicted may be interpreted as socially undesirable and self-presentation concerns may influence trait and behavioral measures (e.g., McConnell & Leibold, 2001; Richetin & Richardson, 2008).

3. Associative structures and the implicit self-concept of personality

Inconsistencies between self-descriptions and actual behaviors may be accommodated within theoretical developments that point to dual process or dual system models of cognition, attitudes, and action (e.g., Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Fazio, 1990; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). These models distinguish between explicit and implicit processes. Explicit processes evolve from rule-like learning and are based on propositional thinking and syllogistic reasoning where information is weighed and evaluated in a true/false fashion (e.g., Deutsch & Strack, 2006). Most self-report measures of attitudes, self-concept and personality tap on these propositional processes, and may be therefore labeled direct or explicit measures (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). On the other hand, implicit processes are based on associative automatic activation of mental structures, and evolve from associative learning or also from repeated rule based learning that eventually becomes embedded within associative structures in memory (e.g., Bargh, 1997; Logan, 1988). Measures tapping into individual's associative structures have been more recently developed (for reviews, De Houwer, 2003; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Wittenbrink & Schwartz, 2007), and are referred to as indirect or implicit measures (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). Deliberative behaviors (as resolving a dilemma, or careful decision-making, or choices under high accountability conditions) are expected to depend from explicit processes and could therefore be predicted by direct measures,

while more spontaneous and less deliberated instances of actions (such as physiological and postural reactions, on-the-spot decisions, choices under low accountability, impulsive urges) are expected to be influenced by associative processes, and could therefore be predicted by indirect implicit measures (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Spalding & Hardin, 1999). Furthermore, unlike explicit measures, implicit measures are more resistant to faking and are generally uncorrelated with social desirability (Schnabel, Banse, & Asendorpf, 2006; Steffens, 2004), which enhances the likelihood of detecting significant associations with actual behavior (e.g., Asendorpf, Banse, & Mücke, 2002; McConnell & Leibold, 2001).

In the realm of personality, implicit measures have been developed for traits such as Anxiety (Egloff & Schmukle, 2002), Shyness (e.g., Asendorpf et al., 2002), achievement motivation (Brunstein & Schmitt, 2004), the Big Five (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, *in press*; Steffens & Schulze-König, 2006), and power and intimacy motives (Sheldon, King, Houser-Marko, Osbaldiston, & Gunz, 2007). As expected, spontaneous behaviors relatively unaffected by self-presentation biases have been uniquely predicted by these implicit personality measures (Asendorpf et al., 2002; Egloff & Schmukle, 2002); while explicit self-report trait measures have been linked to more deliberate and reactive criteria. A similar dissociation could hold in the realm of morality and moral behavior, where self-presentation concerns appear relevant. Explicit traits related to morality, as Honesty (Lee et al., 2005), may better account for self-reported morality criteria, while implicit measures of the moral self-concept may be more associated to specific instances of (im)moral behaviors. Reference to implicit processes in moral psychology is not unprecedented (Haidt, 2001, 2003; Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele, & Lasky, 2006). However, until now such approaches that consider associative based processes in morality have not connected implicit structures with actual instances of moral behaviors, as reactions to moral temptations (Monin et al., 2007).

We suggest that the implicit self-concept (whether “Moral”, “Honest”, “Shy”, or “Anxious”) stems from associations between behaviors (cheating, blushing. . .) and the inferred trait-concept labels (Honest, Shy, Anxious) that the individual accumulates and learns about in his/her personal history of social interactions (e.g., Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). This process of associative learning eventually builds an implicit self-concept (Asendorpf et al., 2002; Back et al., *in press*) defined in terms of a trait-concept (honest, moral, immoral. . .). The more an individual enacts behaviors that get associated with (Im)Morality, the more his/her implicit self-concept becomes polarized as Moral or Immoral.

The behavioral effects of this implicit network are expected to occur via associations between self, moral, and behavioral schemas that portray actions relevant to the personality self-concept in question (e.g., Strack & Deutsch, 2004). The strength of self-behavior links in the individual's mind is dependent on frequent co-activation of the action (cheating, stealing, lying) and the trait-concept label of the behavior (disloyal, dishonest, liar). Here, we will present an implicit measure based on the Implicit Association Test that reflects the implicit Moral self-concept, and test whether such an implicit measure predicts actual moral behavior. An IAT Moral self-concept measure could help to predict behaviors that are unsatisfactorily accounted for by explicit measures.

3.1. An implicit measure for the moral self-concept

The Implicit Association Test (IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) is a successful and reliable paradigm to measure implicit constructs, and has shown an unprecedented level of reliability for such a kind of cognitive paradigms (α s in the .70s–.90s; test–retest coefficients in the .60s; e.g., Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007; Schnabel et al., 2006). In addition, implicit

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