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# Who am I? The role of moral beliefs in children's and adults' understanding of identity

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## ABSTRACT

Adults report that moral characteristics—particularly widely shared moral beliefs—are central to identity. This perception appears driven by the view that changes to widely shared moral beliefs would alter friendships and that this change in social relationships would, in turn, alter an individual's personal identity. Because reasoning about identity changes substantially during adolescence, the current work tested pre- and post-adolescents to reveal the role that such changes could play in moral cognition. Experiment 1 showed that 8- to 10-year-olds, like adults, judged that people would change more after changes to their widely shared moral beliefs (e.g., whether hitting is wrong) than after changes to controversial moral beliefs (e.g., whether telling prosocial lies is wrong). Following up on this basic effect, a second experiment examined whether participants regard all changes to widely shared moral beliefs as equally impactful. Adults, but not children, reported that individuals would change more if their good moral beliefs (e.g., it is not okay to hit) transformed into bad moral beliefs (e.g., it is okay to hit) than if the opposite change occurred. This difference in adults was mediated by perceptions of how much changes to each type of belief would alter friendships. We discuss implications for moral judgment and social cognitive development.

## 1. Introduction

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* describes the plight of Jean Valjean, who escaped imprisonment and started a new life as Monsieur Madeleine, a factory owner and well-liked mayor. All was going well for Valjean until he learned that another man, presumed to be Valjean, had been arrested in his place. Despite his temptation to continue living outside the prison walls, Valjean ultimately decided to turn himself in to the police. In the Broadway musical based on Hugo's novel, Valjean asked himself, “Who am I?” and ultimately answered that he was Jean Valjean, the man who must take responsibility for his transgressions, and not Monsieur Madeleine, the blameless factory owner. Valjean perceived that his moral convictions made him who he was, and he realized that he was not the kind of person who could allow an innocent man to suffer in his place.

Valjean's perception that his moral character was central to his identity is consistent with a growing body of evidence in psychology. Adults perceive morally relevant characteristics to be more central to identity than other individual traits, including personality traits, memories, preferences, cognitive capacities, perceptual abilities, and

physical features (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). Furthermore, loss of moral faculties makes dementia patients seem less like themselves than loss of other cognitive faculties, including memory and executive function (Strohminger & Nichols, 2015). Finally, adults judge that other people and they themselves would change more if their widely shared moral beliefs (such as those concerning murder), rather than their controversial moral beliefs (such as those concerning abortion), were altered (Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2017). Crucially, this work (Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2017) also showed that the difference between widely shared and controversial moral beliefs is mediated by perceptions of how much changing each type of belief would alter relationships with others. This work suggests that characteristics that are most closely associated with interpersonal relationships may be perceived as especially central to identity.

When thinking about what makes individuals who they are, adults seem to place particular emphasis on *good* moral characteristics (De Freitas et al., in press; De Freitas & Cikara, 2018; De Freitas, Cikara, Grossman, & Schlegel, 2017). In one line of work, adults reported that good characteristics, such as the belief that engaging in dishonest business practices is wrong, reflected an individual's “true self” more

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strongly than bad characteristics, such as the belief that engaging in dishonest business practices is not wrong (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014). Adults also reported that fictional characters would undergo more dramatic identity change if they underwent a change for the worse rather than a change for the better, although this experiment tested changes in characteristics (e.g., cruelty, kindness) rather than beliefs (Tobia, 2016).

This past work provides a crucial foundation to the study of perceptions regarding the “true” self. However, these prior studies have all tested adults. The current work is the first to unite these studies with a developmental approach to investigate two alternative hypotheses concerning age differences in perceptions of the role that morality plays in identity. We tested 8- to 10-year-olds and adults to determine the role that changes associated with adolescence (a developmental window from approximately 12 to 17 years) play in the perception that widely shared moral beliefs are particularly central to identity. If the changes that occur during adolescence affect adults' perception that widely shared moral beliefs are especially central to identity, then 8- to 10-year-olds—who have not yet experienced these changes—should not perceive widely shared moral beliefs as especially central. However, another possibility is that judgments of the centrality of morality to identity are in place before adolescence and are not affected by the changes that take during this developmental window. In this case, 8- to 10-year-olds should respond similarly to adults (e.g., by reporting that people would change more if their widely shared moral beliefs, versus their controversial moral beliefs, changed).

In support of the first possibility—that 8- to 10-year-olds and adults have different perceptions of the role that morality plays in identity—is research showing that identity undergoes important changes during the adolescent years (Erickson, 1968; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder Jr, 2006; Klimstra, Hale III, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Steinberg, 2013). In particular, adolescents view themselves in terms of moral characteristics more than do younger children (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). In one study supporting this view, participants told the experimenter about a time that they hurt or helped one of their friends (Recchia, Wainryb, Bourne, & Pasupathi, 2015). Sixteen-year-olds mentioned more self-related insights (e.g., “I reacted wrong”) than did seven-year-olds, suggesting that morally relevant behaviors affect adolescents' views of themselves to a greater extent than younger children's views. Another line of work (Nunner-Winkler, 2007) suggests that adolescents feel a greater sense of responsibility for doing the right thing. Participants in this longitudinal study indicated how a character in a story would feel after doing something wrong. Most 4- and 6-year-olds attributed positive emotions to the transgressor, whereas most 17- and 22-year-olds attributed negative emotions to this character. Nunner-Winkler (2007) interpreted these effects as reflecting participants' own propensities (e.g., children may have reported that the transgressor felt the same emotions they themselves would feel if they transgressed).

Several factors could account for changes in moral identity during adolescence, including adolescents' (versus younger children's) greater sensitivity to the needs and viewpoints of others and adolescents' greater sense of autonomy (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). For example, consider Dominique, a fourteen-year-old who notices that her friend is wearing a jacket that she herself wanted to purchase but could not afford. Dominique likely realizes that taking her friend's jacket without permission would upset her friend, and she also likely views herself as having agency in this situation—that is, Dominique may perceive that she can choose to take her friend's jacket, but she can also choose to control that impulse. Making the moral choice can reinforce Dominique's moral identity. In contrast, a younger child may not give much thought to the ways in which her actions would affect her friend; even if she considers this to some extent, she may be less accurate than Dominique at inferring the negative consequences for her friend. Similarly, a younger child may not view herself as particularly agentic because she has not yet learned that she can resist temptation. Thus, this

past work on changes in moral identity during adolescence suggests that 8- to 10-year-olds and adults may differ in the extent to which they perceive moral beliefs to be a central component of identity.

An alternative possibility is that 8- to 10-year-olds, like adults, would judge that widely shared moral beliefs are central to identity. This possibility stems from work showing that some moral judgments and behaviors emerge early and persist throughout development. Infants and adults prefer helpers to hinderers (Hamlin, 2013). Toddlers, like adults, cooperate with others and intervene in third-party transgressions (Jordan, Hoffman, Bloom, & Rand, 2016; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). In other words, some aspects of morality are in place both before and after adolescence. Furthermore, preadolescents and adults also have somewhat similar experiences of others' morality. Specifically, both children and adults have observed others acting in line with their moral beliefs; from early childhood, people have observed others helping and refraining from harm. These experiences may reinforce the notion that morality is a central component of who someone is.

To investigate the extent to which children's judgments regarding the role of moral beliefs in identity mirror or differ from those of adults, Experiments 1–2 tested 8- to 10-year-olds and adults. Experiment 2 also built on Experiment 1 and on prior work regarding adults' perceptions of the “true” self (Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2017; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014, 2015) by asking whether participants' judgments are influenced by the valence of another person's widely shared moral belief. Specifically, Experiment 2 examined perceptions of transformations in which people acquire versus give up beliefs that are widely perceived as good in their culture.

As discussed above, adults judge that widely shared moral beliefs (Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2017) and good moral beliefs (Newman et al., 2014) are especially central to identity. However, this prior work did not investigate how people might judge cases in which a person used to hold such beliefs but no longer does versus cases in which a person comes to hold such beliefs after previously holding other types of beliefs. In both of these situations (a switch to or away from a good, widely shared moral belief), the person held a good, widely shared moral belief at one point in time. Perhaps participants care only that this type of moral belief ever existed in a person's mind and pay less attention to exactly when that point was. In this case, participants should not distinguish between a case in which a person used to hold a good belief but changed to holding a bad belief and a case in which a person underwent a change in the opposite direction. An alternative possibility is that participants distinguish between contexts in which people adopt good beliefs (situations in which the current self reflects the “true” self, since the “true” self is perceived as morally good [e.g., De Freitas et al., 2017]) and contexts in which people adopt bad beliefs (situations in which the current self might be perceived as an abandonment of the “true” self). Experiment 2 tested these possibilities by presenting participants with one set of items in which people used to hold beliefs that are widely considered good in their culture but now hold beliefs that are considered bad and also a separate set of items in which people used to hold beliefs that are considered bad in their culture but now hold beliefs that are considered good. (For brevity, we refer to these beliefs as “good” versus “bad.”)

In sum, the current work extended previous research on adults' perceptions of the “true” self in two ways. First, Experiments 1–2 tested 8- to 10-year-olds and adults to determine the extent to which changes that occur between these two developmental windows—i.e., changes that occur during adolescence—influence judgments about the role that moral beliefs play in identity. Second, Experiment 2 also asked whether children and adults judge that characters changed more if their good beliefs shifted to bad beliefs or vice versa.

### 1.1. Experiment 1

The purpose of Experiment 1 was to determine the extent to which

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