

Middle Adolescence's Moral Self-regulation: Exploring the Effect of Private Self-worth on Prosocial Intentions

Dan Jiang, Yuxin Zhuang, and Liang Chen

Abstract—Drawing on previous literature related to moral self-regulation, findings have demonstrated that (im) moral behavior can result from an internal balancing of moral self-worth and the cost inherent in altruistic behavior in adulthood. However, the effects of moral self-worth in Chinese middle adolescence are unclear. In this study, an experiment was designed to explore the effects of moral self-regulation on prosocial intentions in Chinese middle adolescence. Middle school students who recalled their recent concrete immoral behaviors reported greater prosocial intentions than individuals who recalled their recent concrete moral behaviors. Therefore, the moral cleansing process could be influenced by the moral self in middle adolescence.

Index Terms—Moral self-worth, prosocial intentions, moral cleansing effect, moral licensing effect, adolescence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Self-completion theory (SCT) assumes that the personal (or group) identities of individuals operate as defining goals that promote the acquisition of identity-relevant symbols [1], [2]. Therefore, individuals experience a sense of imperfection when they gain important identity-relevant symbols, making them relax their subsequent identity-relevant behaviors [3], known as moral licensing effect (or moral psychological license). Moral licensing effect may be defined as the perception of people that they are permitted to take an action or express a thought without fear of discrediting themselves [4]–[6]. Consistent with SCT, previous studies suggested that moral behavior can offer individuals moral licenses, which allow them to reduce their moral motivation and engage in morally questionable behaviors [7]. In addition to the findings of studies of the same behaviors, correlation studies of different behaviors also achieved the same result [8], [9]. Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin (2009) discovered that individuals who write stories about themselves using positively valenced words (e.g., generous, caring) turn out contributing less charitable money and concerned with fewer environmental actions than individuals who write stories about themselves using negatively valenced words (e.g.,

disloyal, greedy) [8]. Conway and Peetz (2012) also found that moral self-perceptions induce compensatory behaviors and recent concrete moral self-perceptions activate self-regulatory behaviors [10]. Moral licensing effect is one part of the negative feedback mechanism of moral self-regulation. In addition, moral cleansing effect is another part of the negative feedback mechanism of moral self-regulation, which was defined as the more moral self-image threatened, the more moral behavior were. Moral cleansing effect included the ways of moral clean, body clean, mind clean and self-punishment.

Consistent with SCT, studies on moral cleansing effect demonstrated that acting immorally, which leads to a feeling of incompleteness in terms of one's moral self, makes people engage in behaviors that figuratively cleanse themselves of their past transgressions and reassert their moral selves [8], [11]. Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) found that recalling one's own immoral (vs. moral) behavior pushes people to rate cleansing products (e.g., soap) as more desirable than neutral products (e.g., pens), presumably because cleansing products could help figuratively wash away their sins [12]. Moreover, Jordan *et al.* (2011) found that people who recalled their immoral activity reported greater participation in moral behaviors, reported stronger prosocial intentions, and showed less cheating than people who recalled their moral activities [11]. Taken together, these studies prove that behaving immorally has a negative effect on perceptions of self-worth and make individuals engage in moral behaviors as a way to keep a sense of moral self-worth. When people's moral self-consciousness is far from the ideal self-image, moral cleansing may meet their needs of moral self-image.

Moral self-worth development occurs as the moral and self-systems, which are separate in childhood, become integrated in adolescence. For example, a study on self-understanding development indicated that moral principles are rarely used as self-descriptors until adolescence [13]. When children use moral self-descriptors, they are inclined to be positive and pertain to the child's external behavior. The use of moral terms in a self-critical or self-evaluative manner is rare prior to adolescence, and this capacity is important for one's self as a source of moral motivation to be of service. Specifically, maturation in experiential identity is related to the increasing need for one's life to remain consistent with one's inner self. Meanwhile, when this inner self is in touch with moral concerns, it can activate a powerful moral motivation.

Although several empirical studies have been found on links between moral identity and moral action in adults, the role of the moral identity in middle adolescence have not been adequately examined. The adolescence period is important in

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Dan Jiang, Yuxin Zhuang, Liang Chen are with the School of Marxism, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, Anshan, China (e-mail: jiang603okok@163.com, zhuangokok@163.com, chenlfly@126.com).

the development of prosocial behavior. Young people are more motivated to help others. In addition, the moral self-regulation process may be different in middle adolescence in terms of the development characteristics of the moral self. Therefore, we hypothesize that moral cleansing can be more easily observed than moral licensing in middle adolescence.

II. METHOD

A. Participants

A total sample of one hundred and fifty middle school students from Dalian city, which consisted of 72 females (48%) and 78 males (52%), voluntarily participated in the experiment. All participants were aged between 11 and 18 ($M_{age} = 14.25$, $SD = 0.45$) and were from four junior and senior high school schools in Dalian (Liaoning Province, China). No incentives were awarded. The parents of the students had to sign a parental consent form for their children to participate in the study.

B. Materials and Procedure

The participants completed all the requirements on a paper questionnaire. They were randomly assigned to either a moral or an immoral group to write about concrete behaviors that they exhibited in the recent past. We informed the participants that the study was about the relationship between imagination ability and personality and that they would be required to write stories so that their imagination ability could be examined.

Moral behavior recall manipulation. A moral behavior recall task was completed by the participants [8][10]. The participants first copied a list of nine words while thinking carefully about the meaning of each word for them. Then, the participants were randomly assigned to the positive-traits, neutral-words, and negative-traits conditions. Considering the advantages and drawbacks of the forward- and backward-adaptation methods, two functionally bilingual translators translated all the words to Chinese. Then, a psychology teacher who is proficient in both languages blindly translated the words back into English. Subsequently, two psychology students compared the words with the original words in Sachdeva's study [8], and 4 positive and 2 negative trait adjectives were replaced to rule out similar meanings. Moreover, neutral nouns were replaced with neutral adjectives. After completing the copying task, the participants were required to write a concrete story that occurred in the last week about themselves or strangers that included all the words they copied. The story should be detailed and at contain least 200 words. Finally, the participants completed a filler task before the dependent measure.

Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM) for Adolescents. PTM-RC is a self-report measure of prosocial tendency [14]. PTM-RC contains 26 items and measures 6 scales (public, anonymous, altruistic, compliant, emotional, and dire). Participants responded to the items on a scale of 1 = very unlikely to 7 = very likely. The study on the psychometric properties of the PTM-RC in the sample of Chinese adults and

adolescents suggested acceptable internal consistencies of the scales from 0.56 to 0.78. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed good support for the structure of prosocial tendency. Carlo and Randall (2002) demonstrated that prosocial tendency has a significant positive correlation with prosocial behavior [15].

After filling in the PTM-RC, the participants were asked to respond to the items on a scale of 1 = extremely immoral to 7 = extremely moral to assess the valence of the adjectives. Finally, the participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

C. Statistical Analyses

The Z score, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and between-subjects ANCOVA were conducted by SPSS version 20.0 for Windows. For internal consistency, Cronbach's α value of scales was calculated for the entire sample.

III. RESULTS

We removed five answers that did not satisfy the experimental requirements, checked the Z score (absolute value is greater than 3), and finally obtained 139 samples. The Cronbach's α value was 0.83. We compared the average valence of the adjectives across conditions using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The valence of the positive traits was significantly more positive ($M = 59.53$, $SD = 1.98$, $n = 45$) than the valence of the neutral adjectives ($M = 35.85$, $SD = 1.96$, $n = 48$). However, the valence of the negative traits was significantly more negative ($M = 59.53$, $SD = 1.98$, $n = 45$) than the valence of the neutral adjectives, $F_{(2, 136)} = 9214$, $p < 0.001$.

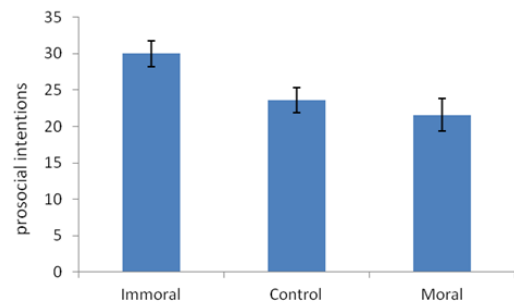


Fig. 1. Participants' prosocial intentions across immoral, control, and moral condition.

The dependent variable in this experiment was the prosocial intentions. A between-subjects ANCOVA was performed through the analysis of covariance method, with gender as the covariate. As predicted, relative to the control, recalling immoral behaviors led to compensatory prosocial intentions in the self-perspective, but did not other perspectives, that is, $F_{(2, 66)} = 0.194$, $p = 0.824$ (see Figure 1). A one-way ANCOVA of the participants' prosocial intentions revealed the significant effect of the condition, $F_{(2, 150)} = 5.52$, $p = 0.006$ (see Figure 1). Relative to the controls group, the participants in the immoral condition had stronger prosocial intentions ($M = 29.96$, $SD = 8.87$, $n = 25$), but the prosocial intentions of the participants did not differ depending on

whether they wrote about positive traits or neutral adjectives ($M = 21.59, SD = 10.34, n = 22$, vs. $M = 23.61, SD = 8.23, n = 23$) (see Figure 1).

The effects we observed were not simply due to the priming effect of the trait words. Rather, the effects were present only when the self-concept was activated. The result of this study is consistent with previous research results that altruistic intentions are influenced by changes in the moral self-concept [8]. Moreover, the moral cleansing effect was observed, but recalling moral behaviors did not lead to less prosocial intentions in middle adolescence.

IV. DISCUSSION

In this study, we found evidence that recent concrete immoral behaviors motivate compensatory prosocial intentions in middle adolescence, whereas recent concrete moral behaviors do not motivate less prosocial intentions in middle adolescence. This extends prior research, which largely examined the moral licensing effect and the moral cleansing effect on the adult sample [8][10][11][16]. Moreover, we also found that participants who only wrote stories about themselves displayed moral cleansing, and not when they wrote about strangers. This effect demonstrated that prosocial motivation was only affected by the self-relevant prior immoral behaviors in middle adolescence, whereas considering other people's immorally relevant behavior did not.

The interest of the present study is on manipulating moral self-worth, but we did not observe the moral-licensing effect in middle adolescence. Combined with previous findings [17]–[21] and SCT, adolescent friendships serve important functions in development and friends can have motivational significance in terms of modeling positive forms of social behaviors. Moreover, friends engage in more positive social interactions that facilitate the development of moral actions [22]. Aquino and Reed (2002) reported that both symbolization and internalization positively predict self-report voluntary action (controlling for gender, age, and social desirability) among college students [23]. However, internalization, but not symbolization, was significantly positively related to actual donation behavior among adolescents. A significant link was found between the moral self and the helping activities among adolescents [24], and prosocial activities may precede the importance of moral values to one's self [25]. Thus, adolescents typically have strong desires to be moral people with the development of the moral self, as recalling their past moral behavior will conform with the value that individuals place on the importance of possessing moral traits.

V. CONCLUSION

Overall, the current work demonstrated that feeling moral does not always motivate moral intentions in middle adolescence. Recalling past immoral behaviors makes middle adolescents renew their moral strivings depending on their subsequent compensatory behaviors. This study is a step toward thinking of the role of moral self in compensatory

effects in middle adolescence. Future research might also explore these effects using a large sample and identify ways to strengthen the moral education of teenagers from an applied perspective to effectively halt compensatory unethical behaviors.

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Dan Jiang was born in Chinese in 1966. He received his bachelor's degree in ideological and political education at Liaoning Normal University, Dalian in year 1990. He is a professor of the School of Marxism. The current job is Party branch secretary of the School of Marxism, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, China.

His research interest is based on psychological health education and ideological and political education.



Yuxin Zhuang was born in Chinese in 1969. She received her bachelor's degree in ideological and political education at Liaoning Normal University, Dalian in year 1990. She is an associate professor of the School of Marxism. The current job is Director of College students' psychological developmental research center of the School of Marxism, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, China

Her research interest is based on psychological health education and ideological and political education.



Liang Chen was born in Chinese in 1982. He received his doctor's degree in developmental and educational psychology at Liaoning Normal University, Dalian in year 2016. He is an associate professor of the School of Marxism. The current job is mental health education of full-time teachers of the School of Marxism, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, China. His research interest is based on psychological health education and

ideological and political education