

A Qualitative Survey Examining the Moral Identities of Young Adults

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Abstract

Moral identity can orient one's behaviors when exhibiting any kind of moral behavior. In this study, the moral identities of young adults are analyzed to a certain extent. For this purpose, the 'interpretative phenomenological pattern' and 'grounded theory' models are used as qualitative survey models. The study group for this survey consists of 10 young adults, ages 20 through 25, who have been studying in a university. The semi-structured interview tool was used in the survey. The analytical process of gathered data was compiled into the Maxqda 2 computer program. The purpose of the study is to find information about the moral identities of young adults and the variables which form these identities. In the moral identities of young adults, self-assessment, personality traits, purpose and responsibilities, sense of self, self-control and moral emotions are variables affecting the ego and moral reasoning. Personality traits are formed by former, current and possible personality traits. Self-control consists of will and consciousness, whereas moral emotions consist of empathy, guilt, shame and anger. On the other hand, the variables affecting the self are formed by family, friends, other individuals, society, the place where one lives, culture, beliefs, university and law.

Key Words

Moral Emotion, Moral Identity, Moral Reasoning, Young Adult.

The moral identity of individuals can orient their behaviors. Therefore, examining the moral identity which is thought to lead exhibited behaviors is important. In this respect, it is seen that studies carried out on the moral development of individuals exist in great variety. These studies mainly express the moral development of individuals by focusing on the cognitive aspects of their development (Kohlberg, 1973, 1976, 1977; Piaget, 1932; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000). One of the first and most important moral theories regarding moral development was put forth by Lawrence Kohlberg

(1977). Kohlberg examined the corporeal morality by acknowledging the Piagetian paradigm. In his theory of Cognitive Moral Development, Kohlberg answered the question of what motivates the moral behavior by focusing on the role of the cognitive process (Kohlberg, & Candee, 1984; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt 1999). Kohlberg (1977) explained moral reasoning by dividing it into levels as "Pre-Conventional Morality," "Conventional Morality," and "Post-Conventional Morality" and then classifying these levels into various stages. When the levels and stages concerning this theory are

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examined, it can be seen that moral reasoning progresses towards autonomic reasoning away from the forms of external oriented judgment (Kohlberg, 1973, 1976, 1977). Individuals perceive themselves *responsible* for carrying out moral principles and this perception plays a motivational role on moral behavior (Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, & Lieberman, 1983). Reasoning concerning responsibility regulates what is good or right in moral aspects, moreover what is exactly necessary for the self. Even though Kohlberg did not explain this function of judgments concerning responsibility by using a conventional name, it is stated that the role of the self on moral behavior is emphasized through this specific function (Bergman, 2004). Another approach which has an important role on moral development is the Neo-Kohlbergian Approach, which was theorized by Rest et al. (2000) and within this context, moral judgement is conceptualized within the cognitive concept but rather than stage concepts, schema concepts are used to express moral reasoning. In this approach, schema indicate that mental structures such as religion or cultural ideology are permitted to interact with moral structures in cases where individuals encounter a need to make moral decisions. In later studies conducted on moral development, it can be seen that along with cognition, attention was turned towards emotions (Eisenberg, 2000; Ekman, 1992; Greene & Haidt, 2002; Prinz, 2006; Rozin et al., 1999; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004; Weiner, 2006). Hoffman (1975) put forward a theory focused on the moral emotions of morality to the contrary of cognitive approaches. According to this theory, the main source that leads to moral behavior is moral emotions. Moral emotions provide motivation which results in moral behavior (Haidt, 2003). However, despite the fact that moral cognition and emotions can motivate moral behaviors, these alone cannot clarify consistent moral behaviors by themselves. In addition to moral understanding and moral emotions, it is emphasized that identity can also play a role in motivating moral behavior (Eisenberg, & Miller, 1987).

Blasi (1983) tried to explain how the identity motivates moral behaviors by analyzing the structure of the identity. A moral identity model that was suggested by Blasi clarifies the relationship between identity and moral behavior. Blasi (2004) emphasized that for an individual to exhibit a moral behavior, a deep sense of how the exhibition of specific behaviors is suited to one's own rights is much more important than just a

direct perception. Blasi (1993) conceptualized moral identity as the scale of morally important characteristics centralized in the identity of an individual within the scope of a moral identity model. But not everyone can establish the self by taking certain moral categories as references in this way. Priorities referenced for defining the self are different for some people, or integrating morals with their own personalities occurs in various stages. They may place superior emphasis on certain moral values, yet they may have different perspectives on others. For this reason, moral identity is a dimension of individual differences, thus it is a way of making reference to individuality (Blasi, 1984). Moral identity is based on the internal human tendency that motivates behavior, consistent with the systems of individuality. In this way, when specific characteristics are centralized in the identity of individuals, the emotions of duty and responsibility increase the desire to live along with these characteristics. As a consequence of this, individuals are motivated to behave correspondingly to the moral understanding they exhibit (Blasi, 2004; Hardy, 2006). Individuals whose moral identities are centralized may feel like they are obliged to abide by behavioral models of moral self-schema as to preserve the consistency of the self. In addition to this, individuals whose moral identities are less centralized in self-concepts than others may not feel themselves responsible and thus they may be less motivated to exhibit moral behaviors (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009). Also, Aquino and Reed (2003) surveyed moral identity based upon social cognitive theory's definition of the self. Moral identity is approached as one of the social identities constituted by social the self-schema of the individuals. They explain moral identity with the existence and accessibility of moral schema (Lapsley & Lasky, 1999). According to this conception, a person who has moral identity possesses moral schema in which one can evaluate, access, and practice the current state of a social condition in his or her mind (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007). Bandura (2002) stated that social cognitive theory adopts the interactive perception of morals. It is indicated that moral behaviors are produced by the mutual interaction of individual or social behaviors. Power (2004) also suggests that the aspect of society is rather important. He states, "An individual does not feel the necessity or responsibility to behave in certain ways. This can only happen in a cultural structure." An individual identifying with a group and the norms of that group creates "a moral atmosphere." Hence, moral

identity is an issue of the identification of a group and the value-stored norms of that group. It is mentioned that an individual constitutes the moral identity as a consequence of the identification with the group he or she belongs to. They indicated that moral identity can be defined as a supporting act of consistent necessity and a concept of the self as compared to others. In the definition they made of moral identity, they put emphasis on the fact that the concept of the self is the act which provides help to other individuals. Therefore, the characteristics internalized in the process of socialization enables an individual to organize his or her behaviors and evaluate the self by using various criteria (Higgins, 1997).

Based on the given explanations, it can be thought that the personality traits, purposes and responsibilities that individuals possess, as well as their moral emotions and moral reasoning, are important when it comes to moral identity. At the same time, it can be put forth that individuals build up their moral identities with their correspondence to the community they belong to. When it is considered that there are many circumstantial factors having significant influences on the moral identity establishment process, it can be important to question the structure of moral identity of the individual and the influencing factors on the establishment of moral identities. Hence, the purpose of this survey is to analyze the moral identities that young adults possess. Integration of the self and morals, especially those of adolescents, was emphasized by Damon (1984, pp. 109-127). The importance of the emergence of social identity in the first stage of adolescence is pointed out in order for morals to be able to integrate with the concept of self in one's adolescent period. The Self in the first stage of adolescence gains social interaction characteristics whereas in later adolescence the self is defined by beliefs, personal philosophy and moral standards which lead to the emergence of a sense of identity. On this basis, the variables that form moral identity and the factors which determine the formation of moral identity were sought after by analyzing the structures of the moral identities of young adults. In the direction of these general purposes, the following questions were investigated:

- 1) What are the former, current and possible personality traits of young adults?
- 2) What are the purposes of young adults?
- 3) What are the responsibilities of young adults?

- 4) What are the determining factors in identifying the purposes of young adults?
- 5) What are the determining factors in identifying the responsibilities of young adults?
- 6) What are the determining factors in identifying the decisions of young adults?
- 7) What are the reasons that lead young adults to change themselves?
- 8) What are the determining factors that lead young adults in making a moral judgment?

Method

Research Model

Interpretative phenomenological pattern and grounded theory surveys were used as the qualitative survey models in this study. By using interpretative phenomenological and grounded theory surveys, diversification was achieved. With the help of this diversification, a method for integrating different approaches was drawn from the comments regarding the phenomenon (Yüksel, Mil, & Bilim, 2007). With these methods, phenomena are both explained according to the meaning of human experiences connected to existence and interpreted according to social processes. Interpretative phenomenological surveys focus on the meaning of text or behavior, trying to define or explain the potential meaning of a surveyed subject's relevant experience, in other words, to precisely define the "meanings of the participants" (Annells, 2006). Correspondingly, the purpose of the "interpretative phenomenological" survey is to analyze personal or encountered experiences in detail and clarify how the participants formed the conception of their individual or social worlds (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Grounded theory is meaningfully defined as a method which explores theories taken directly from the data, conceptions, hypotheses and suggestions. Also, it is very important to create or form concepts with this method (Baş & Akturan, 2008). Therefore, a benefit from the data analysis stages of the interpretative phenomenological and grounded theory surveys is to glean information on what the moral identity of a young adult is and what the variables are that form these identities.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used in the survey. It is emphasized that the method of purposive sampling can be very useful in many cases for exploring

and explaining phenomena and events. Maximum variation sampling, a method of purposive sampling, was used. The purpose of maximum variation sampling is not to provide a variety of general results, but to find out whether there are common/shared phenomena among the variations or not, and to present different dimensions of the problem in accordance with this variety. Theoretical sampling is used for identifying the magnitude of sampling. The number of individuals to be interviewed was determined by the repetition of emerging concepts and processes. This is a sampling approach that requires the continual gathering of data until the possible concepts and processes that are given as answers to the survey question begin to repeat themselves (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). The study group of this survey consisted of 10 young adults, aged 20 to 25, who have been studying in a university. Young adulthood is described as one of the most important turning point in one's life since it represents the entrance to adulthood (Onur, 2008).

Data Collection Instrument

In the survey, a moral identity interview question list consisting of open-ended questions was prepared by the researcher in order to gather the opinions of young adults regarding their moral identities. The questions included in the interview question list, abiding by the literature, were designed to reveal the meaning that each individual constructs in light of their own experiences.

The moral identity interview question list consists of 3 different sections. The first section includes questions which provide the general characteristics about the interviewed young adults (name, area of study in their university, gender, age, the place in which they have spent the most of their lives). The second section includes the characteristics of the self in young adults, what the purposes and responsibilities of young adults are, the determining factors which identify decisions, and the reasons that have led to self-change in young adults. The third section, however, includes two different stories that can provide dilemmas regarding the moral reasoning of the young adults.

Data Analysis

The data from the interpretative phenomenology and grounded theory studies were used for analysis. The analysis of the interpretative phenomenology

study was based on the steps used by Colaizzi (1978 as cited in Miller, 2003). In the process of analysis for the grounded theory study data, the coding and categorization phases were based upon the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Coding occurred in three steps: open, axial and selective coding. The first coding process of this research, the open coding phase, coded the data as sentences or paragraphs for the purpose of conceptualization and categorization. Meaningful and significant sentences spoken during the in-depth interview by the participants were coded through direct quotes. Line-by-line coding made the researcher focus on the data during the data collection process (McCann & Clark, 2003). Axial coding was the second phase, which can be described as making connections between the main categories emerging from the open coding of the data (Punch, 2005). In this research, during the axial coding phase, the main categories and their sub-categories were reassessed after being generated from the open coding phase. In order to make connections, the categories and sub-categories were re-gathered and correlated. The selective coding phase is a process that selects a category as a core category and relates the other categories to that core category (Baş & Akturan, 2008). As attained from the result of the axial coding, all categories related to moral identity. This core category was determined on the basis of the main and sub-categories, and all categories were associated to this category in this study. The computer program, Maxqda 2, was utilized for data analysis.

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, reliability tests notions and the relationships between these notions with the experiences of the researchers who have been studying in the same field. Using the help of other researchers and taking his/her ideas into consideration helps to remove any prejudices of the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In order to provide internal reliability, or consistency, the data was conducted by a recorder and consistently coded then associated with the results. To provide external reliability, or verifiability, two academicians checked the attained conclusion, comments and suggestions by comparing them with the raw data. Validity of the data is obtained by the researcher through reflection of the core of the experienced phenomena. To ensure this validity, the researcher gave feedback to the participants. The findings reflected the perceptions of their experiences (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992). In order to provide

internal validity, or plausibility, diversification and expert opinion strategies were used. For diversification, interpretative phenomenology and grounded theory were utilized. Three academicians checked the data analysis for the expert opinion strategy phase.

Findings

In accordance with the conducted data and their analysis, four categories were found: 1) Self-assessment, with the sub-categories of Personality traits, Purposes and responsibilities, Sense of self, and Self-control, 2) Moral senses, 3) Variables that Affect the Personality, 4) Moral reasoning. These categories were stated in accordance with the purposes of the research. The findings were attempted to be explained through the direct quotes of the statements made during the in-depth interviews.

1. Primarily, it was seen that young adults evaluated their personality traits with *being prejudiced* and *being selfish* in the sense of “negative traits of their former personality.” They identified “the most important changed trait from their former personality” with *becoming independent*. They evaluated “the positive traits of their current personality” with *being gracious, helpful, honest and altruistic*. Young adults also described “the negative traits of their current personality.” Among these traits, *relational personality* traits were emphasized whereas *self-determination* was emphasized in terms of “differences from other individuals with their current personality traits.” Young adults also evaluated their current personality traits in the sense of “similarity with other individuals.” They also made statements emphasizing *identification* for the formation of their personalities. *Having great expectations* is the personality trait that they wish to change in their possible personalities.
2. Young adults defined their *purposes and responsibilities* as “personal,” “familial” and “oriented towards other individuals.” It was seen that they sorted familial purposes towards their parents and their family.
3. It was stated that *sense of self* is effective when specifying purposes and responsibilities of the young adults.
4. There is *self-control* in the moral identities of the young adults. Also it was seen that self-control consists of will and conscience. It was stated that will influences the decision making process.
5. *Moral reasoning* takes place in the determination of the young adults’ decisions and purposes. These are empathy, guilt, shame and anger.
6. When the variances that affect the personality of young adults were examined, it was found that *family, friends and other individuals, society, the place they live in, culture, belief, university and law* formed these variances. Young adults stated that *family* influences decision making, purpose and responsibilities. They also asserted that *friends* were the reason for the change of their former personalities. Other individuals’ influence is to specify purpose, responsibility and decisions while *society* influences the responsibilities and decisions. Young adults expressed that the place they live in has an influence in determining the decisions that will be made as well as being the reason for the changes in their former personalities whether coming from a small settlement or a municipality. Culture is the reason for the changes in their former personalities, too. The young adults highlighted the significance of beliefs with decision making and pointed out that the social environment of a university is the reason for *changes in their former personalities*. They pointed out that laws are also important when it comes to making a decision.
7. An attempt was made to determine what the reasons were for *moral reasoning* among the young adults. It was seen that with the help of the stories in the study, the personality trait “helpfulness” was measured by the answers given for Story I. One of the positive traits of the current personality, *honesty* was measured by the answers given for Story II. In addition, one of young adults’ positive traits of current personalities, *being altruistic* was measured by the answers given for Story II. Personal goals in Story II and responsibilities in Story I were mentioned. *The responsibility* oriented towards other individuals was contained in the answers given for Story I. It was asserted that *will* has a directing influence over decision making as well as the correctness of a decision via the stories. The emotions of *guilt* and *shame* were mentioned in Story I, while *anger* and *remorse* were stated in Story II. Sense of self was the determining factor for the decision of “not telling the truth” in Story II. Especially considering the answers given in Story I, the importance of role modeling after other individuals’ was highlighted. Also, law and the need for some changes about law depending on a given situation were mentioned via Story I and Story II.

Discussion

In this research, it was revealed that “self-assessment” is important for individuals to decide their path. This outcome is supported by the work of Beck, Freeman, and Davis (2008), asserting that self-assessment is responsible for regulating and modifying the reactions of people by implying the value judgments about personality. According to the data obtained in the research regarding the elements of self-assessment, personality traits consist of the former, the current and the possible personality traits. These personality traits can be said to play an important role in making any kind of moral reasoning. In the studies examining the relationship between personality traits and moral reasoning, it was determined that when an individual performs moral reasoning, personality is so significant that it affects the value and perception of personality (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Matsuba & Walker, 1998). According to the other findings of the research, examining purposes and responsibilities, the young adults expressed their purposes in three grades: Personal, familial and oriented towards other individuals. Individuals show their purposes consistently with their personality traits and when exhibiting any behavior, their purposes are quite important. In a study examining the relationship between an individual's purpose and moral reasoning, it was postulated that personal purpose is a strong motivation for exhibiting behaviors and purposes oriented to other individuals can especially be described as moral values (Staub, 1993). The young adults also sorted their responsibilities into the categories of personal, familial and oriented towards other individuals. Similarly, in a study carried out on young people, the young who identify themselves as having high moral responsibilities tend to exhibit more moralistic behaviors than those in a comparison group (Hart & Fegley, 1995). In a study (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Power, 2005; Tozlu, 1997) conducted on whether sense of self is effective on responsibilities, it was postulated that if an individual's sense of self is low, it makes the individual evade the responsibility; to change this situation, that negativity should be prevented. When self-control is investigated, will is influential on the decision that is being made. Young adults also stated that the reason for remorse is conscience; in the presence of immoral behaviors, the emotions of “self-reproach” or “having something on their conscience” were found. Conscience alongside consciousness adds the “emotional” factor into moral knowledge. It was claimed that this factor is

the motive for behaving morally. When a person with a conscience does something bad, he/she will feel “guilt” (Güngör, 2000, p. 65). Moral emotions were also investigated alongside the self-assessment in this research examining moral identities of young adults. These emotions are empathy, guilt, shame and anger. When examining the studies which dealt with the relationship between empathy and moral reasoning, it was ascertained that reacting with empathy toward a situation is related to help-oriented moral reasoning (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & Van Court, 1995). It was stated there is a positive relationship between a tendency to help and empathy (Duru, 2004). One of the moral emotions, shame, is more self-oriented and when anything is violated, one who possesses shame is more motivated to apologize, accept and fix a situation. It was asserted that shame helps to protect the societal hierarchy and respect for other people and it comes out of immoral situations. Shame especially emerges in social cultures differently. It is reasonable to state that anger can hide shame in individualistic cultures in which an independent sense of self is important and shame is a sign of weakness, though anger is perceived as useless in social cultures in which solidarity is important (Eisenberg, 2000; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2010; Silfver, 2007). In this study which examined the moral identities of young adults, it was perceived that variances are influential for forming moral identities. These variances are family, friends and other individuals, the place where one lives in, culture, university, laws and beliefs. It was postulated that family environment, other individuals and peers play an important role in forming moral identities (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1999; Horn, Daddis, & Killen, 2008). On the other hand, in the development of moral identity, it was stated that it is important to be dependent on a society (Comunian & Gielen, 2006; Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, & Alisat, 2003). In another study, the environment that the individuals live in is the determiner of moral attitude. Even the size of the place that is lived in, whether a small town or municipality, helps to determine the values. According to Akarsu (2006), the environment of a small town or municipality affects the sense of belonging of individuals in the society as well as an individual's moral attitudes. In a study dealing with the effects of environment and culture on individuals, especially where the university life was investigated as regarding the university students' dilemmas over moral issues, it was ascertained that the moral reasoning of university students is not only developed according to chronological

maturity, but it is also closely related to personality, citizenship, and which societal duties should be fulfilled (King & Mayhew, 2002). On the other hand, studies which have surveyed the relationship between laws and morals, and an individual's skill of judgment regarding socially beneficial laws and unfair laws were investigated. According to the findings of this research, many factors were taken into consideration before making any judgment. These factors are the justice that is perceived, its social benefits, and whether it includes freedom and truth or not (Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001; Tappan, 2006). Belief is also important in the shaping of moral identity alongside religious beliefs and spiritually. For instance, religious beliefs include empathy and compassion, which motivate altruistic behaviors and social adaptation (Morton, Worthley, Testerman, & Mahoney, 2006). In conclusion, exhibiting moral behaviors can be highly important considering the turmoil that results from immoral behavior and the outcome's negative effect on social welfare. Therefore, in order to know how moral behaviors are performed, one can say it is a 'must' to learn the moral identity of individuals. Examining moral identity can be regarded as important in the sense that it can lead moral behaviors.

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