A Review of Research Supporting the Development of Moral Identity in Youth

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Introduction

How can we inspire our youth to consistently do what is right? Lectures and readings on ethics could help, but are unlikely to spur intrinsic motivation. A more comprehensive option is to aid in the development of a character-based moral identity which will stay with them as they grow. The development of a moral identity is desirable because it can create an intrinsic desire to do what is right and to act in accordance with a moral self-image. The studies examined in this paper demonstrate that the process of developing a moral identity can be enhanced through the guidance of ethical role models and participation in ethical activities and organizations.

Purpose and Research Questions

Our social identity is a key aspect of how we see ourselves and others, and it develops over the course of our lives. Young adulthood, or adolescence, is one of the most important points in one's life, as changes in social identity and perspective are most likely to occur as one is just reaching adulthood (Onat Kocabiyik & Kulaksizoglu, 2014, p. 854). This study will examine how one's moral identity can become prominent in decision-making through a literature review utilizing the following research questions:

RQ I: "How do adolescents develop moral identity?"

RQ 2: "How do role models contribute to the development of a strong moral identity and an intrinsic desire to do the right thing?"

These questions are examined from the social constructivist viewpoint, which provides a fundamental theory of the development of social identity. The analysis incorporates identity theory, social learning theory, self-perception theory, and the just community approach to character development.

The Role of Identity

Social constructivists emphasize the role of identity in shaping human interests and actions. Alexander Wendt (1992) explained the fundamental concept of social constructivist theory that every person has many identities of varying strength. Each individual identity is a social defi-nition based upon theories of relation of that individual to others in society (Wendt, I992). Peter Katzenstein (1996) explained that each collective identity contains values as well as collective expectations for group behavior known as norms. The norms and values which constitute an identity impact behavior by providing internal context for one to choose actions and decide how to interact with others.

Defining Moral Identity

Augusto Blasi (2005) proposed willpower, integrity, and moral desire as the three essential virtues of moral identity. Shao, Aquino, & Freeman (2008) stated a desire for self-consistency was the key link between moral identity and moral action (pp. 515:516). Karl Aquino and Americus Reed proposed a simpler definition of moral identity as "social responsiveness to the needs of others" (2002, p. 1433).

Moral identity can be viewed from two major theoretical perspectives: social cognitive and character-based. The social cognitive perspective asserts that individuals balance multiple identities within a "working self-concept" and that social cues can activate different images of a self-concept (Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008, p. 518). The character perspective proposes an "intransient moral self" which is central to one's self-concept (Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008). This intransient moral self is a powerful force which drives one to act in accordance with a self-image. This stable, character-based self-concept is moral identity.

Shao, Aquino, & Freeman (2008) explained that for some individuals moral identity is their primary self-definition and that for them this commitment is not dependent on situational or social cues. For these individuals, doing the right thing is essential to maintaining their moral image of the self. Such individuals identify themselves in other ways too. For them, acting ethically is more important than their sense of belonging to any other form of identity. For those whose moral identity is not as strong, the competition from other forms of identity causes the individual to be more susceptible to change behavior based upon social cues and influences that include peer pressure. Shao, Aquino, & Freeman (2008) also found that the pressure exerted by moral role models can help to guide such individuals to strengthen their moral identity and to develop an intransient moral self.

Research Question 1: Development of Moral Identity

RQ I: "How do adolescents develop moral identity?"

Many factors influence the development of adolescent identity. In their study on the moral identities of adolescents, Oya Onat Kocabiyik & Adnan Kolaksizoglu (2014) utilized interpretative phenomenological pattern and grounded theory surveys with maximum variation and purposive sampling to continually gather data until concepts appeared consistently enough to make findings. With students between the ages of 20 and 25, they found that family, friends, other individuals, society, locality, culture, belief, university, social environment, and law all had an impact upon changes which occurred in adolescents' senses of personality, self, and responsibilities (Onat Kocabiyik & Kolaksizoglu, 2014).

Among these, Onat Kocabiyik & Kolaksizoglu found that role modeling was prominent in the development of adolescent identities (2014, p. 856). The effect of role models on moral identity also warrants special attention because it is the method in which a single person can make the greatest impact.

The importance of ethical role models appears significant and is documented through recent research. Albert Bandura, who pioneered social learning theory, found that role models facilitate the acquisition of moral or other types of behavior, and Michael Brown and Linda Trevino tested his theory by studying the impact of ethical role models on perceptions of ethical leadership (2012, pp. 587-588). Brown and Trevino's study uncovered a link between those who had ethical role models and those who exemplified ethical behaviors as leaders. They studied ethical leadership through interviews with over 217 supervisors and 659 direct reports at a major company, and discovered that supervisors who had ethical role models themselves achieved higher subordinate perceptions of ethical leadership (2012, p. 587).

They also found that ethical leadership was correlated for younger leaders with childhood role models and for older leaders with career role models (Brown & Trevino, 2012, p. 587). This study indicates that the presence of moral role models is important in developing a young adult's moral identity, which should then be refined through new relationships throughout one's career.

In addition to learning from role models, individuals develop their identity through their own actions. Ruodan Shao, Karl Aquino, and Dan Freeman explained the tenets of self-perception theory that people make inferences about their identity from their own actions and behaviors (2008, p. 525). Studies have demonstrated that participation in moral activities and organizations as well as dedication to moral causes foster the development of moral identity (Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008, p. 525). Thus, moral behavior builds moral thought and identity, resulting in an effect whereby patterns of thought and subsequent behaviors

established in adolescence reinforce themselves in a way that either builds or erodes one's moral identity.

Shao, Aquino, and Freeman suggested that sustained moral commitments make a great impact upon youth character development, but they also point to a scarcity of research into comprehensive programs which focus on such moral commitments (2008, p. 527). More research would be helpful in demonstrating direct cause and effect of programs that focus on moral identity and character development.

Research Question 2: How Moral Identity Works

RQ 2: "How do role models contribute to the development of a strong moral identity and an intrinsic desire to do the right thing?"

How, then, does moral identity create an intrinsic desire to do the right thing? Jan Stets and Michael Carter (2011) explained that this answer can be found through an understanding of identity theory. Identity theory states that an individual acts based upon one's "identity meanings" that regulate one's behavior so that the meanings of one's actions are consistent with these norms and values (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 192).

When one acts contrary to one's identity meanings, negative emotions are triggered which spur the individual to behave in a way which better matches the norms and values, or underlying meanings of one's identity (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 192). Stets and Carter conducted a survey and laboratory study which validated the thesis of identity theory. Their subjects consistently experienced negative emotions when an "identity discrepancy" existed (2011). The identities, moral or immoral, which are developed in youth produce emotions which encourage individuals to act in accordance with the way that they have learned to see themselves, which are influenced by those whom they have sought to emulate.

The benefits of moral and character-based identity to society are significant. Aquino and Reed tested participant voluntary donations in order to assess the effects of moral values, finding that for every unit increase in internalization of moral values participants contributed an average of 80% more donations (2002, p. 1436). In a study by Thomas Aquino et al, participants with lower moral identity were found to lie more during business negotiations (Shao, Freeman, & Aquino, 2008, p. 531).

Onat Kocabiyik and Kolaksizoglu found that adolescents' "sense of self' was the determining factor in their decision of whether or not to tell the truth (2014, p. 855). In a study conducted by Daniel Skarlicki, Danielle van Jaarsveld, and David Walker on call center employees, those with high internalization of moral values were markedly less likely to retaliate against customers in response to rude behavior (in Shao, Freeman, & Aquino, 2008, pp. 531:532). These studies have found that moral identity internally motivates individuals to act based upon principle and to do what they know is right.

In addition to acting ethically themselves, those with high moral and character-based identity are more likely to create an ethical organization environment when holding leadership positions. A 2008 study by David Mayer, Karl Aquino, Rebecca Greenbaum, and Maribeth Kuenzi found that a group leader's score on the internalization and symbolization dimensions of moral identity related strongly and positively to ethical leadership actions reported by followers and negatively related to "unit level" unethical behavior and "relational conflict" (Shao, Freeman, & Aquino, 2008, p. 532). This finding was replicated in two separate findings with different samples, and presented a strong example of how the moral identity of leaders creates norms which lead to a more ethical social environment (Shao, Freeman, & Aquino, 2008, p. 532).

Furthermore, three recent studies have found that individuals witnessing "exemplary moral conduct" can experience a "state of elevation" which results in increased moral behavior on their part (Shao, Freeman, & Aquino, 2008, p. 533). This underscores the power of moral exemplars or those who engage in exemplary moral actions to promote those values in others. Persons who serve as role models who exhibit ethical behaviors and a high sense of moral identity influence others to practice those attitudes and behaviors.

Implications

Organizations that wish to develop moral identity in adolescents should make use of the findings of the just society perspective to embed moral values into the actions and thought patterns of our youth. Where a formal organization or activity cannot be created, mentors or role models can be offered. Anyone who has an admirable quality can be a role model for another person, and we ought to view ourselves this way.

Informal mentorship, which can be described as mentorship in which adults step outside of normal social roles to take a special interest in the lives and development of our youth, is a field that has seen comparatively little research (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009, pp. 344:347). Veronica Fruiht and Laura Wray-Lake found that organizations which encourage mentorship by teachers and other adults have fostered greater educational achievement in their students, and that teacher, community, and kin mentors all play a role in enhancing academic and overall success of students (2013, pp. 1469:1470).

Lance Erickson, Steve McDonald, and Glen Elder found a strong positive and "statistically significant" correlation between having an informal mentor and attaining higher grades (2009, pp. 344:356). Erickson, McDonald, and Elder (2009) also found that students with fewer socioeconomic or personal resources were less likely to have but more likely to benefit from informal mentors. The role of coaches, club advisors, or members of the work force including military or police personnel as moral role models warrants further study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

How should schools promote forms of moral and character-based identity? A comprehensive, organizational level focus on character and ethics is most effective, and everyone can make a difference. Schools can use formal or informal mentors and focus on the way that everyone is an exemplar to others. School leaders should think outside established norms to select people with moral and character-based attributes as role models. Young adults who have had strong role models are more likely to become ethical leaders for the next generation. A well planned school wide character education focus can produce lasting improvements in student behavior and moral attitudes.

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