

Assessing Moral Identity: Development and Validation of a Moral Identity Q-Sort

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Abstract

The Moral Q-Sort is a new technique that aims to assess one's moral personality. Participants sort moral and amoral words with respect to how well the words describe them. Results promote the use of the Q-Sort as a measure of moral personality, based on its convergent and discriminant validity.

Background

In Kohlberg's model of moral behavior, only deliberate moral reasoning prompts moral action (Kohlberg, 1969; 1971). Blasi agrees that moral reasoning predicts moral action (1980), but it is not the determining factor. Rather, a moral self and a commitment to obeying that self are critical predictors of moral action (1980). In his Self Model, Blasi points out that people may value different moral traits. It is therefore necessary to take variability into account in our own study.

Since Blasi's identification of the moral self, many other moral psychologists have attempted to measure moral identity. Most notably, Rorty and Wong (1991) propose ways to measure how central a personality trait is to a person's identity. Centrality can be measure by how much it dominates over its opposite trait. For this reason, we included both positive and negative moral terms in the moral Q-sort. Centrality can also be determined by how self-definitive the terms are. In the moral Q-sort, participants place terms into categories based on how well the terms describe themselves.

In Rorty and Wong's model (1991), centralized traits affect social interactions in three ways, which we borrow from to provide the predictions for the current study. First, a central moral identity should be associated with greater interpersonal sociability. Next, a central moral identity should influence a person's beliefs and desires. In particular, a person with a central moral identity should possess more pro-social and cooperative beliefs and desires. Lastly, a central moral identity should be predictive of moral action.

In addition to the Q-sort, participants also completed the Integrity Scale, which measures one's commitment to ethical principles. As Blasi predicts, individuals with a more central moral identity should act morally, in order to uphold their sense of integrity. Individuals with a greater sense of integrity should be more compelled to act morally. It follows then that integrity should mediate the relationship between moral identity and action.

Method and Reliabilities

Participants: 71 undergraduates from the University of Notre Dame participated in the study for extra credit in their psychology courses.

Q-Sort: Participants were given a list of 52 trait adjectives that they were to place into five different categories with respect to how well the words described the participants: "Never," "Almost Never," "Sometimes," "Almost Always," and "Always." Each category had a set number of traits allowed, to force participants to decide which traits were truly descriptive. Traits were from 4 different categories with 13 words each: positive and negative amoral words and positive and negative moral words. Participants were given points according to their placement of the traits in certain categories with moral words. Scores could range from +38 to -38 for all of the 26 moral terms.

Social Well-Being Scale: The Social Well-Being scale evaluates one's perceptions of belonging to a group or community (Keyes, 1998). We used the social integration and social contribution subscales. Reliability was high for both social integration ($\alpha=.93$), and social contribution ($\alpha=.76$).

Prosocial Tendencies Scale: The scale evaluates one's tendency to engage in prosocial behaviors (Carlo, et al. 2003). Two subscales were evaluated: empathy towards the distress of others and personal gain. It was expected that the Moral Q-Sort would positively correlate with emotional distress given that it is a moral motive towards action, but that it would negatively correlate with personal gain because it is not a moral motive.

Integrity Scale Questionnaire: The questionnaire was designed to test an individual's "steadfast commitment to ethical principles" (Johnson & Schlenker, 2006; Miller & Schlenker, 2006). Reliability for the current sample was high ($\alpha=.86$).

Self-Reported Volunteer Behavior: Participants were asked to answer three questions regarding their personal volunteer behavior; they provided the number of hours per month spent volunteering (average of 7), the amount of influence their work had on the community (ranging from a low of 1 to 7), and the level of personal involvement (ranging from a low of 1 to 7).

Results

Correlational Tests of Validity

		Q-Sort	Integration	Contribution	Integrity	Emotional Distress	Personal Gain
Q-Sort	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.452**	.466**	.518**	.227	-.270*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.057	.023
	N	71.000	71	71	71	71	71
Integration	Pearson Correlation	.452**	1.000	.494**	.300*	.261*	.009
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.011	.028	.942
	N	71	71.000	71	71	71	71
Contribution	Pearson Correlation	.466**	.494**	1.000	.491**	.250*	-.245*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.035	.039
	N	71	71	71.000	71	71	71
Integrity	Pearson Correlation	.518**	.300*	.491**	1.000	.197	-.290*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.011	.000		.100	.014
	N	71	71	71	71.000	71	71
Emotional Distress	Pearson Correlation	.227	.261*	.250*	.197	1.000	.082
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.057	.028	.035	.100		.498
	N	71	71	71	71	71.000	71
Personal Gain	Pearson Correlation	-.270*	.009	-.245*	-.290*	.082	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.023	.942	.039	.014	.498	
	N	71	71	71	71	71	71.000

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

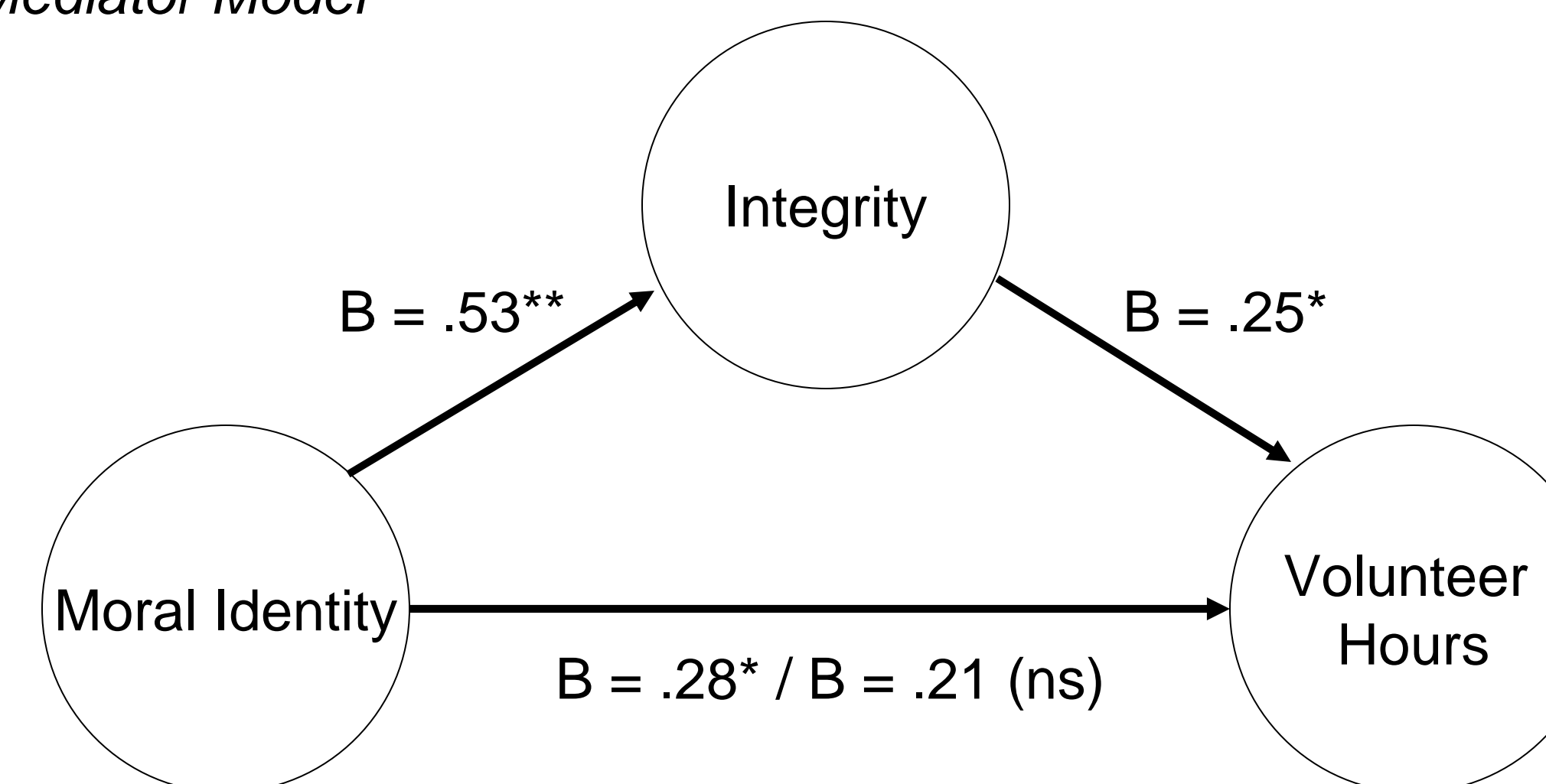
Predicting Volunteer Behavior with the Moral Q-Sort (Regressions Controlling for Gender)

Volunteer Hours, $t(62) = 2.40, p < .01$.

Volunteer Influence, $t(68) = 2.22, p < .05$

Volunteer Involvement, $t(68) = 2.33, p < .05$.

Mediator Model



Discussion

The moral Q-sort, a new measure of moral identity, was formulated in order to test moral identity theories of both Blasi (1980) and Rorty and Wong (1991). Blasi asserts that a central moral identity will cause people act morally because they are committed to a sense of personal integrity (1980). Rorty and Wong claim that a central moral identity is manifested in social interactions, one's systems of beliefs and desires, and directly in one's moral behavior (1991). The Q-sort used in this study took into account Blasi's definition and Rorty and Wong's criteria for moral identity.

Our study showed that participants with a higher moral identity score, or a more central moral identity, demonstrated a higher level of social well-being. They were also more likely to act pro-socially, instead of for personal gain. High moral identity scores also predicted volunteerism, which supports Rorty and Wong's correlation between centrality of moral identity and moral action.

This study also verified that integrity mediates the link between moral identity and moral action. A participant with a central moral identity was more committed to acting ethically. A commitment to ethical principles was indicative of a greater amount of moral action.

Future Directions

Based on the results of the study, we suggest two possible routes for future study. First, future studies should test the other "effects" of centrality suggested by Rorty and Wong (1991). For example, they suggest that centrality may influence child rearing and socialization, which promotes the need for a longitudinal study on moral personality development. Centrality can influence stimulus salience to the parent, and thus research evaluate whether parents with a central moral identity are more likely to raise children with central moral identities.

Second, research should evaluate the relationships between the Q-sort and existing measures of moral identity. This could not be done in the current study, as one would expect the different measures to bias one another if taken at the same time point. Therefore, future studies could compare the Q-sort to other moral identity measures, if they were administered at separate time points.