

The Moral Identity Q-Sort and Prosocial Behavior in Emerging Adulthood

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Background

Augusto Blasi (2004) suggests that the motivation for moral action springs from an identity that is deeply rooted in moral commitments. One has a moral identity, on his view, when moral traits are judged to be central, essential and important to self-understanding. In this way moral commitments cut deeply to the core of what and who they are as persons.

But not everyone constructs the self by reference to moral categories. For some individuals moral considerations do not penetrate their understanding of who they are as persons; nor influence their outlook on important issues; nor “come to mind” when faced with the innumerable transactions of daily life. Some have only a glancing acquaintance with morality but choose to define the self by reference to other priorities; or else incorporate morality into their personality in different degrees; or emphasize some moral considerations (“justice”) but not others (“caring”).

Hence moral identity is a dimension of individual differences, which is to say, it is a way of talking about personality. One has a moral identity to the extent that moral notions, such as being good, being just, compassionate or fair, is judged to be central, essential and important to one’s self-understanding. One has a moral identity when one strives to keep faith with identity-defining moral commitments; and when moral claims stake out the very terms of reference for the sort of person one claims to be.

Moreover, if moral considerations are crucial to the essential self, then self-integrity will hinge on whether one is self-consistent in action. And failing to act in a way that is self-consistent with what is central, essential and important to one’s moral identity is to risk self-betrayal (Hardy & Carlo, 2005).

Although the Blasian model has attracted considerable interest as one way of understanding the source of moral motivation, there is glaring need for assessment strategies. There is no consensus on how best to measure moral self-identity in adulthood as an individual differences construct envisioned by the Self Model;

And we are not aware of any systematic attempt to measure it in children, a fact that explains the paucity of developmental research. Nothing will stop the momentum of scholarly interest in moral self-identity more surely than the failure to develop suitable assessments. Indeed, most of the advances in moral psychology research over the last fifty years were made possible by the availability of well-regarded (interview and questionnaire) assessments of moral development and principled reasoning. Clearly the development of such assessments for moral self-identity should be a high priority.

To this end we have been trying to develop a Moral Identity Q-Sort to capture the notion of identity centrality that is crucial to Blasi's account of moral motivation.

Purpose

So in this presentation we would like to outline the evolution of this research program, some six studies in all, that we think are promising and encouraging but this is not a story of unmitigated success, either, but we hope to learn from the wrong turns as much as the right ones.

Initial Studies

The first iteration of the Moral identity Q-Sort was tested in two studies, one that examined positive, prosocial behavior, the second study took up cheating behavior. In both studies participants were given a list of 52 trait adjectives and asked to sort them into categories according to how well they described the self, with constraints on how many traits could be sorted into the various categories.

The five categories were labeled as "Never," "Almost Never," "Sometimes," "Almost Always," and "Always." Participants were only allowed to place six traits for both "Never" and "Always," twelve for both "Almost Never" and "Almost Always," and sixteen for "Sometimes." These restrictions were placed in order to force participants to discriminate between the traits, in order to determine which ones were most like and dislike them.

The 52 trait adjectives were comprised of 13 each from 4 different categories: **positive moral**, **negative moral**, and both **positive** and **negative other** ("non-moral") traits. Positive moral traits were selected from those terms rated that had high prototypicality ratings indicative of "good character" or "moral person" from the prototypicality ratings in Lapsley & Lasky and Walker & Pitts. Negative moral traits were antonyms of the traits.

What we called "non-moral traits" was selected from other trait adjective lists. These traits either were not rated in the moral prototypicality studies, or were mentioned but received low prototypicality ratings.

The decision to include negative moral traits (e.g., the antonyms of prototypic good character traits) was governed by the view that moral self-identity is revealed not only by what is endorsed but by what one rejects for the self.

Positive moral traits were scored from +2 ("Always") to -2 (Never), and the negative moral traits were reversed scored in the same way, resulting in a total score across all 26 moral traits from +38 to -38. To

be clear, if a negative moral trait term was endorsed as “Always” Like Me, then two points were deducted from the moral-identity score; if it was rated “Never” like me, two points were added to the moral self score.

Table 1: Moral Identity Q-Sort Trait List

Moral Identity Q-Sort Trait List			
anti-social	dishonorable	inconsiderate	selfish
anxious	disloyal	indifferent	shameful
argumentative	emotionally stable	kind	shy
careless	energetic	lazy	stressed
caring	fair	lucky	studious
close minded	forgiving	moody	talkative
compassionate	genuine	obnoxious	trusting
curious	goal-oriented	open	understanding
deceitful	greedy	opinionated	unfaithful
dependable	happy	organized	unloving
depressed	hard-working	positive	unsupportive
disciplined	honest	reliable	upbeat
dishonest	hostile	rude	well-liked

We included several other measures to assess the construct validity of the assessment, including Barry Schlenker’s **Integrity Scale**, which measures “steadfast commitment to ethical principles” (Schlenker, 2007); two subscales from the **Prosocial Tendencies Scale** (Empathy for the Emotional Distress of Others; and Acting for Personal Gain or Self-Interest) which evaluates one’s propensity towards acting in a prosocial fashion (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003).

We included two subscales (Social Integration and Social Contribution) from the Social Well-Being Scale. The Social Well-Being Scale measures one’s perceptions of belonging to a group or community (Keyes, 1998).

Finally, participants self-reported volunteer behavior: 1) number of hours per month (excluding class-related or mandatory service); 2) rate the influence of volunteer work on the community (1-7: Little to Highly Influential) and 3) level of personal involvement (1-7: Little to Highly Involved)

Prediction. We predicted that individuals with high moral identity scores, using our Q-sort method, should demonstrate higher integrity, other-focused prosocial tendencies, social well-being, and volunteerism, while demonstrating fewer tendencies to let self-interest motivate prosocial behavior.

One further prediction can be made from closer consideration of Blasi’s (1983) Self Model; individuals with a more central moral self should feel more “responsible” to act in accordance with these moral values to maintain a sense of integrity. Therefore, the influence of moral identity on moral action is likely to be mediated by one’s integrity.

(71 undergraduates (39 females; $M_{age} = 19.4$ years)

Results

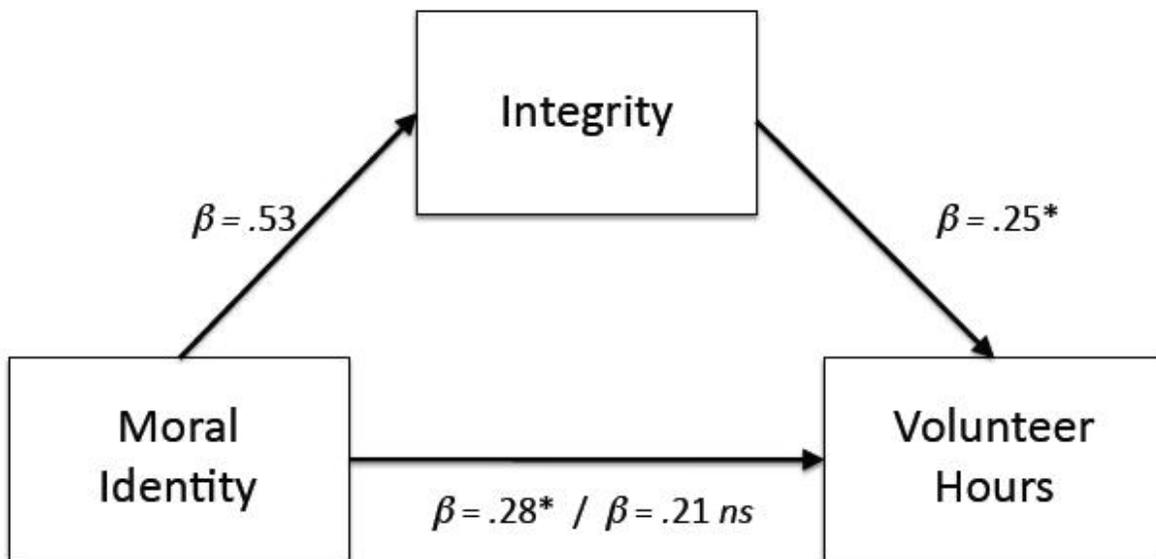
	Q-Sort	Integrity
Social Well-Being		
Social Integration	.45	.30
Social Contribution	.47	.49
Prosocial Tendencies		
Empathy for Distress	.23	.19 (ns)
Personal Gain	-.27	-.29
Integrity	.52	--

The results showed that the Moral Identity Q-Sort converged with integrity ($r = .52$) and showed comparable concurrent validity (as Integrity) with respect to prosocial tendencies and social well-being.

We then assessed the Moral Q-sort’s ability to predict volunteer behavior. We expected that individuals who score high on the Moral Q-sort would volunteer more hours during the month, rate their volunteer work as more influential, and have greater involvement in their service activity. To test these predictions, we performed linear regressions, controlling for gender. All three predictions were supported.

Volunteer Hours	$t(68) = 2.40, p < .05$
Volunteer Influence	$t(68) = 2.22, p < .05$
Volunteer Involvement	$t(68) = 2.35, p < .05$

Mediator Models. Finally, we tested three mediator models in order to assess whether integrity mediated the relation between the moral identity and moral action, following Baron and Kenny (1986). It appears as though moral identity, as measured by the Moral Q-sort, is associated with greater sense of integrity, or commitment to ethical values, which in turn is associated with prosocial behavior.



Second Study

In a second study we examined both positive prosocial behavior (“volunteer activity”) and negative moral behavior (“cheating”); and we also measured moral reasoning as well (DIT-N2)

	Moral Q-Sort	Integrity Scale
Cheating	.03 (ns)	-.31
Volunteer Activity	.17 (p = .05)	-.12 (ns)
DIT-N2	.15 (ns)	-.09 (ns)

The correlational results are more modest but not uninteresting. The Moral Identity Q-sort was significantly related to positive moral behavior (volunteering) but Integrity was not. And Integrity was significant (negatively) related to cheating but the Moral Q-sort was not. It would seem that Moral Self-Identity is more likely to pick up positive prosocial behavior but not morality in the breach (whereas the Integrity scales picks up the cheating but not volunteer activity).

Exemplar Study

We next undertook an exemplar study to determine if the Moral Identity Q-sort could distinguish moral and religious exemplars and matched-control group.

Moral and religious undergraduate exemplars were identified by a nomination process and matched with a comparison sample. The moral exemplar group ($n = 39$, 56% male, 46% female, $M = 20.81$) was nominated by personnel in campus service organizations, including the Center for Social Concerns, humanitarian club advisors and dorm resident assistants (RAs). Individuals who provided nominations were asked to identify students with whom they have worked who seem to exemplify the characteristics of a “good moral person” to an exceptional degree.

The religious exemplar group ($n = 28$, 41% male, 59% female, $M = 20.11$) was nominated by personnel in Campus Ministry, by Residence Hall Chaplains, and university Vision staff. Individuals who provided nominations were asked to identify students with whom they have worked who seem to be a religious person to an exceptional degree.

A matched pairs control group was compiled from a randomly generated list of four thousand students as the comparison group. Participants were selected for each of the moral exemplar ($n = 39$) and religious exemplar ($n=28$) group subjects on the variables of gender, year in school, and program of study.

The Moral Identity Q-sort consisted of the same 52 trait adjectives used in the previous studies. Participants were asked to sort all of the adjectives into “bins” represented by colored columns in a computer program. The directions read: *“Click and drag all of the words from this list into the column that best describes you. Rank order the words within each column. You must completely fill every column.”* The columns were labeled “describes me least” (6 slots for participants to place adjectives in), “does not describe me well” (12 slots), “describes me somewhat” (16 slots), “describes me well” (12 slots), and “describes me best” (6 slots). The responses were coded to see if moral and religious exemplars perform differently on the moral Q-sort, and differently from control participants. Scores for the Q-sort are computed according to where participants placed the moral words (i.e., both the positive moral and the negative moral traits). The reliability for this measure was strong (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$).

In addition to the Moral Identity Q-sort, participants also responded to:

- Prosocial Tendencies Measure
- Integrity Scale
- A 10-item measure of religious behavior (praying, going to Mass, etc)
- A 14-item measure of internal and external religiosity. Intrinsic religiosity is defined as living one’s religion with sincerity and intentionality (“It is important to me to spend time in private thought and prayer”). Extrinsic religiosity measures the extent to which religion is used for instrumental purposes, including for the cultivation of social relationships. This is assessed through extrinsic personal religiosity (“I pray mainly to gain relief and protection”) and extrinsic social religiosity (“I go to church because it helps me to make friend”).
- Social Desirability Scale

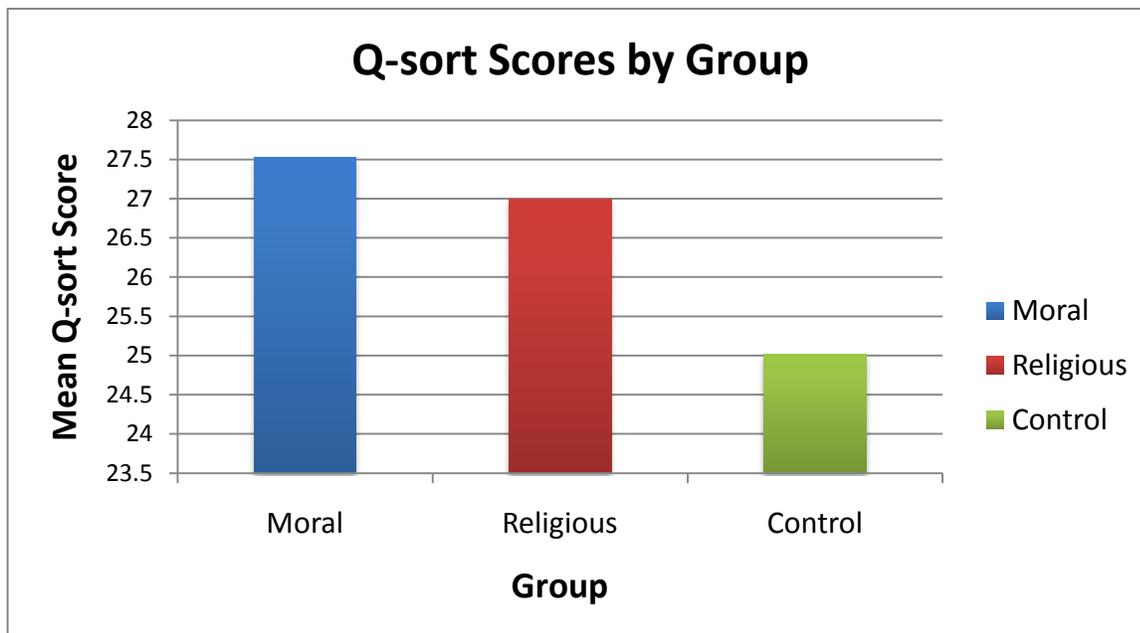
Results

The Q-Sort did moderately correlate with the Integrity Scale ($r=0.33$), Religious Behavior scale ($r= 0.29$), and both the Intrinsic Religiosity subscale ($r=0.24$) and the Extrinsic Religiosity subscale ($r= 0.29$).

Table 5
Measures of Moral Identity Correlation Matrix

	Integrity Scale	Religious Behavior	Intrinsic Religiosity	Extrinsic Religiosity	Prosocial Tendencies	Social Desirability
Moral Identity Q-sort	.33 p =.001	.29 p = .012	.24 p = .037	.29 p = .002	.027 (ns) p = .775	.15 p = .117

The second hypothesis was that the Q-Sort would differentiate between exemplars and controls. There was a significant difference on Q-Sort scores between moral exemplars and controls ($t(88)= 2.24$, $p<0.05$) but there was not a significant difference between moral and religious exemplars or religious exemplars and controls in this sample. This confirms that moral exemplars do in reality describe themselves using significantly more of the moral trait adjectives relative to controls, but not significantly more than religious exemplars. Religious exemplars did not identify significantly more moral trait adjectives relative to controls. When averaging across exemplar type, the Q-Sort also differentiates between the combined exemplar group and controls ($t(108)= 1.96$, $p=0.05$).



The third hypothesis was that after controlling for religiosity, the Q-Sort will differentiate between moral and religious exemplars. A one-way ANOVA was calculated using personal extrinsic religiosity as a covariate in order to test this hypothesis. The result was significant ($F(2,111)=3.59$, $p<0.05$), indicating

that when religiosity is held constant, then the Q-Sort did effectively find the predicted differences between moral and religious exemplars.

Promising Yes, but Nagging Doubts

So the previous studies showed promising results that the Moral Identity Q-Sort

- is associated with moral integrity and a commitment to principled morality
- is associated with prosocial tendencies (but not so much with cheating or moral judgment)
- can distinguish moral exemplars from matched controls

But we are now revisiting a number of methodological decisions we made in the construction of the original 52-item Moral Identity Q-sort. We have at least three reservations, mostly concerning the decision to include the antonyms of moral traits (“dishonest”) and negative non-moral traits adjectives.

1. We did not really capitalize on the value of Q-methods which is to pit values against each other in a way that requires Ss to make fine but hard distinctions among them. Traits like “dishonest” may be lots of things, but not a good candidate for Ss to endorse as being at all like them.
2. It seems hard to assume that lists of traits that include antonyms really point to independent dispositions
3. And it is not obvious that the non-moral traits have no moral valence whatsoever. But these were selected from lists of trait adjectives for which we could not assign a prototypicality rating.

A New Round of Research

So we have engaged in another round of Q-sort construction, involving three studies. Our first two studies look the same for all prototype studies. In the first we asked 215 undergraduates to list 10-10 descriptors of “person with good moral character” (versus Lapsley & Lasky’s “good character” versus Walker’s “moral person”). This yield over 600 nominations (both stems and trait adjectives), a list we pared to about 380 by eliminating synonyms and cleaning up syntactic form. Nouns (“honesty”) was turned into adjectives (“honest”).

In Study 2, 220 undergraduates rated the pared list for prototypicality. We did not want each rater, however, to rate all 386 traits (to guard against rater fatigue). We split the list so that each descriptor had at least 112 ratings. The resulting list with prototypicaliy ratings was pared again by eliminating cognate words (“moral”, “ethical”) from the descriptors. From the remaining list we employed a proportional stratified random sample to select 100 trait adjectives for the final list. (For example, for trait adjectives with prototypicality ratings in the 2.00 to 2.99 range, we randomly selected the number of traits for the Q-sort list that was proportional to the number in this range in the larger pool of items.

Study 3 is ongoing. Here we are asking participants to address the Moral Identity Q-Sort and to play a “public goods” game (along with other measures). The public goods paradigm emerged from work in behavioral economics. The basic structure of the game is as follows: Participants are organized into groups of 4. Each participant is given a certain number of tokens. Each of these tokens can either be “invested” in the public good, or the participant can choose to hold the token for herself. The game

consists of 5 rounds, and in each round participants will be given 25 tokens—any number of which they can choose to invest or keep for themselves. The tokens that the participant keeps for herself are added to her total at the end of each round. Each of the tokens that are invested toward the public good provides the participant with .5 tokens; however, the critical point is that all the other member of the group *also* receive .5 tokens from this 1 token investment in the public good. Essentially, 1 token invested in the public good produces .5 tokens *for each group member*. Thus, if all group members contributed all their tokens ($4 * 25 = 100$) to the public good, then each group member would earn 50 tokens ($.5 * 100$) in this round. This is significantly greater than the 25 tokens they each would have earned if they had all kept their tokens.

Of course, participants are free to contribute anywhere from 0 to 25 of their tokens each round. After each round participants view their earnings for that round as well as how much was contributed to the public good by the group as a whole. This information can be used to inform their strategy in future rounds. Depending on the strategy one uses, and on the strategy of the other group members, one could have greatly disproportionate wealth (relative to the other group members) by the end. For instance, if one were to keep all their tokens (25), and the other three group members contributed all their tokens (75), then the lone participant who chose to withhold all their tokens would net 62.5 tokens ($25 + (75 * .5) = 62.5$). Because they keep all their tokens, but also benefit from the tokens contributed to the public good by the other members of the group. Incidentally, in this scenario the other group members would finish the round with only 37.5 tokens each—considerably less than the “free rider”.

Participants’ patterns of contribution versus investing is recorded and stored after each round. The relationship between these data and the Moral Q-sort will be used to determine the predictive validity of this new measure of moral identity. We would expect, for instance, that individuals with high scores on the Moral Q-sort would be less likely to display an investment strategy that exploits the other members of the group (i.e., “free riders”).

We have run just 30 Ss thus far, and it is still too early to draw conclusions. Yet, the preliminary results are pointing to a highly interesting gender effect. There is a robust (and statistically significant) positive correlation between moral identity Q-sort scores and investing in the public good *among females*; but the (still non-significant) correlation is negative for males. If this trend holds up then it might point to the fact that for men the public goods game is a cue for *competition*, whereas it is a cue for *cooperation* among women--which illustrates the importance of tracking Person (Moral Identity) x Context (Public Goods) interactions.

Descriptor	Prototypicality Rating
Good conscience	6.44
Thinks about how their actions affect others	6.40
Has values	6.28
Integrity	6.20
Honest	6.20
Willing to sacrifice own interests for what is right	6.12
Stands up for somebody that is being picked on	6.11
Never willingly or knowingly harm others	6.10
Has a good heart	6.07
Makes good decisions	6.03
Not easily corrupted	5.97
Makes the right decision	5.95
Good	5.95
Well intentioned	5.95
Not afraid to take a stand for what they believe is right	5.94
Will sacrifice their own time in order to help others	5.89
Sense of justice	5.88
Strong values	5.86
Conscience-driven	5.83
Not hypocritical	5.81
Virtuous	5.80
Unselfish	5.78
Understanding	5.75
Good Samaritan	5.65
Loyal	5.65
Fights for the common good	5.62
Respectable	5.62
Leads by example	5.60
Tries to learn from their mistakes	5.59
Love themselves and others	5.59
Listens to others	5.57
Decency	5.57
Mindful	5.56
Willing to listen	5.54
Confidence his or her set of principles	5.43
Forgiving nature	5.41
Faithful	5.36
Supportive	5.34
Supports family	5.33
Reasonable	5.32
Grateful	5.27
Upstanding	5.20
Self-disciplined	5.18
Tries hard to fix faults	5.18
Sharing	5.10
Not easily swayed by others	5.04
Wholesome	5.02

Persevering	5.01
Earnest	5.01
Righteous	4.98
Hospitable	4.92
Mentally strong	4.89
Has strong will	4.86
Encouraging	4.84
Steadfast	4.80
Persistence	4.77
Purposeful	4.76
Welcoming	4.75
Wise	4.73
Informed	4.70
Logical	4.68
Discerning	4.64
Friendly	4.62
Impartial	4.61
Polite	4.58
Motivated	4.56
Comforting	4.56
Determined	4.53
Temperate	4.49
Reverent	4.35
Directs others to follow the rules	4.35
Takes criticism well	4.35
Soft-hearted	4.33
Communicative	4.31
Dignified	4.28
Inspiring	4.23
Decisive	4.23
Non-conforming	4.22
Straightforward	4.21
Confident	4.13
Down-to-earth	4.10
Joyful	4.03
Good leader	4.01
Enthusiastic	3.95
Calm	3.93
Chaste	3.81
Cheerful	3.76
Creative in solving problems	3.58
Precise	3.47
Charismatic	3.44
Jovial	3.35
Diverse	3.29
Regretful	3.21
Sense of humor	3.10
Witty	3.07

Creative	3.04
Obstinate	2.95
Laidback	2.82
Religious	2.74
Funny	2.16