

## **A Social-Cognitive Approach to the Moral Personality**

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In the last decade there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in studying moral rationality within the broad context of personality, selfhood and identity. Although a concern with the moral self was never entirely absent from the cognitive developmental approach to moral reasoning (e.g., Blasi, 1983, 1984), it is fair to say that sustained preoccupation with the ontogenesis of justice reasoning did not leave much room for reflection on how moral cognition intersects with personological processes. There were both paradigmatic and strategic reasons for this.

The paradigmatic reason can be traced to the Piagetian roots of moral developmental theory. Piaget's understanding of intelligence was profoundly influenced by his training as a biologist, by his work as a naturalist, and his interest in the differential classification of species (especially mollusks) on the basis of morphological variation. Just as the classification of various biological species into zoological categories is based on formal structural characteristics, so too are certain structural characteristics critical to the differential classification of children's thinking. The young Piaget who had, as a naturalist, collected and classified specimens of

mollusks is continuous with older Piaget who, as a genetic epistemologist, collected and classified specimen's of children's thinking (Lapsley, 1996; Chapman, 1988). From this perspective, then, Piagetian stages are best considered descriptive taxonomic categories that classify formal "morphological" properties of children's thinking on an epistemic level. Stages describe species of knowledge, varieties and kinds of mental operations, and not different kinds of persons.

When Kohlberg appropriated the Piagetian paradigm to frame moral development he well understood the taxonomic implications of the stage concept. He understood that moral stages described kinds of sociomoral operations or different "species" of moral reasoning. The moral stage sequence was a taxonomy identified by a "morphological" analysis of formal structural characteristics of sociomoral reflection. Moral stages classify variations of sociomoral structures, not individual differences among persons. As a result Kohlberg and his colleagues could write that moral "stages are not boxes for classifying and evaluating persons" (Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs & Lieberman, 1983, p.11). Consequently moral stages cannot be the basis for aretaic judgments about the moral worthiness of persons. The stage sequence cannot be used as a yardstick to grade one's moral competence. It makes no evaluative claims about character, says nothing about virtues, is silent about the moral features of personality and selfhood. Indeed, as Kohlberg (1971, p. 217) put it, "We ...do not think a stage 6 normative ethic can justifiably generate a theory of the good or of virtue, or rules for praise, blame and punishment" and hence principles of justice "do not directly obligate us to blame and to punish." Instead, the moral developmental stages, like Piaget's stages, describe forms of thought organization of an ideal rational moral agent, an epistemic subject, and therefore cannot be "reflections upon the self"

(Kohlberg, Levine & Hower, 1983, p. 36). There can be no reason to wonder, then, given these paradigm commitments, just how personological issues, or notions of selfhood and identity, could matter to an epistemic subject or to a rational moral agent.

Yet the moral development tradition had strategic reasons, too, for its minimalist account of selfhood, character and personality. For example, Kohlberg was specifically interested in charting the development of justice reasoning, as opposed to other possible topics of investigation just because this aspect of morality seemed most amenable to stage typing. Moreover, the possibility of stage typing gave Kohlberg what he most desired of a moral theory, which was a way to defeat ethical relativism on psychological grounds. Kohlberg saw that justice reasoning at the highest stages made possible a set of procedures that could generate consensus about hard case moral quandary. This was the heart of his project. Consequently, those aspects of moral psychology that could not be stage typed or that could not be used in the struggle against ethical relativism were not the object of study in the cognitive developmental tradition. This included, of course, the Aristotelian concern with virtues and moral character.

Kohlberg's objection to a virtue-centered approach to moral character was based on at least two additional considerations. The first was that there was no sensible way to talk about virtues if they are conceptualized as personality traits. The Hartshorne and May studies, for example, along with Mischel's theoretical analysis, seemed to cast doubt on a widely assumed fundamental requirement that personality traits show dispositional consistency across even widely disparate situations. This cross-situational consistency of traits was surprisingly hard to document. Consequently, the ostensible failure of traits in the study of personality made recourse to virtues an unappealing option in moral psychology. But Kohlberg's second objection to

virtues was perhaps more to the point. For Kohlberg any compilation of desirable traits is a completely arbitrary affair. It entails sampling from a bag of virtues until a suitable list is produced that has something for everyone. What's more, and worse, given Kohlberg's project, the meaning of virtue trait words is relative to particular communities. As Kohlberg and Mayer (1972, p. 479) famously put it:

Labeling a set of behaviors displayed by a child with positive or negative trait terms does not signify that they are of adaptive significance or ethical importance. It represents an appeal to particular community conventions, since one person's '*integrity*' is another person's '*stubbornness*,' [one person's] '*honesty* in expressing your true feelings' is another person's '*insensitivity* to the feelings of others.

Clearly, then, the language of virtue and moral character just won't do if the point of moral development theory is to provide the psychological resources to defeat ethical relativism.

Although the cognitive developmental approach to moral reasoning is of singular importance, and continues to generate productive lines of research, it is also true that an adequate moral psychology could not neglect issues of selfhood, identity and personality for very long. Indeed, Augusto Blasi (1983; Walker, this volume) recognized many years ago that any credible account of moral action requires a robust model of the self. Moreover, its neglect of virtues, its silence on questions of character, meant that the cognitive developmental tradition has had little to say to parents who are fundamentally concerned to raise children of a particular kind. How to raise children of good moral character is an important goal of most parents. When one asks parents about the moral formation of their children we doubt very many will mention the need to

resolve hard case dilemmas in a way that secures consensus. We doubt that many are vexed by ethical relativism and want to defeat it. Instead, many parents want their children to grow up to be in possession of certain virtues. Most parents would be pleased if their children exhibited certain traits-of-character, are honest, kind, respectful, and more. As one of us put it, “Although the cognitive developmental approach may be reluctant to make aretaic judgments about the moral status of persons, the language of moral evaluation comes more easily to most everyone else” (Lapsley, 1996, p. 196). Fortunately there are several promising research programs that are exploring the connection between personological variables and moral functioning.

One approach is to work out the role of moral commitments in the construction of identity. According to Blasi (1984; also, Bergman, this volume) one has a moral identity to the extent that moral notions, such as being fair, being just, being good, are central, important and essential to one’s self-understanding. Moral identity is possible, according to Blasi, when the self is constructed or defined by reference to moral categories. One has a moral identity when one is committed to living out the implications of whole-hearted moral commitment. Recently Blasi (in press) has attempted to provide a psychological account of moral character that builds upon his understanding of moral identity. Moral character, in his view, has three components: willpower, moral desires and integrity. “All three sets of virtues,” he writes, “are necessary for moral character, but in different ways; willpower is necessary to deal with internal and external obstacles in pursuing one’s long-term objectives; integrity relates one’s commitments to the sense of self; moral desires guide willpower and integrity and provide them with their moral significance” (p. 5).

Recent studies of individuals who display extraordinary moral commitment seem to

vindicate Blasi's understanding of moral identity, and the importance of identifying the self with moral desires. For example, in their seminal analysis of moral exemplars Colby and Damon (1992) found that exemplars integrate personal and moral goals, and identify the self with moral commitments. Similarly Daniel Hart and his colleagues (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Hart, Yates, Fegley & Wilson, 1995; Atkins & Hart, this volume) report that adolescents who display uncommon caring and altruism often identify the ideal self with moral commitments, and otherwise align the self with moral goals.

Blasi's work on moral identity, and the moral exemplar studies, clearly are important and productive contributions to moral psychology. Other lines of research, such as neo-Kohlbergian accounts of post-conventional reasoning (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau & Thoma, 1999), the four component model of moral functioning (Rest, 1983; Narvaez & Rest, 1995), and naturalistic studies of moral character (Walker & Pitts, 1998), are additional evidence that personological variables, including selfhood, identity and character, will continue to figure prominently in contemporary moral psychological research. Indeed, we have argued that the next phase of research in the "post-Kohlbergian" era would profit from a broader consideration of psychological theory, constructs and methods if our aim is to develop powerful models of moral personality, selfhood and identity (Lapsley & Narvaez, in press; Narvaez & Lapsley, in press).

In this chapter we should like to explore the resources of social cognitive theory to a conceptualization of the moral personality. In our view social cognitive theory is an important source of insights for understanding moral functioning, although it is rarely invoked for this purpose. Indeed, the introduction of social cognitive theory to the moral domain has at least three integrative possibilities (Lapsley & Narvaez, in press). First, it opens moral psychology to the

theories, constructs and methodological tactics of social-personality research, with its potential for yielding powerful accounts of character, identity and personality. Second, it opens a broader array of options for conceptualizing moral rationality, including the possibility that much of our moral functioning is tact, implicit and automatic (Narvaez & Lapsley, in press). Third, it locates the study of moral functioning within a mainstream of psychological research on cognition, memory, social cognition and modern information-processing.

In the next section we make outline the features of a social cognitive approach to personality, with two aims in mind. First, we want to show that social cognition theory has considerable advantages over trait models in our understanding of personality, and second, we want to outline the resources that social cognitive approaches have for purposes of understanding moral personality in particular. We then consider the cognitive expertise and schema accessibility literatures for insights about individual differences in moral personality functioning. We review promising empirical evidence for this perspective, and conclude with a reflection on the developmental sources of the social cognitive bases of moral functioning.

### **Social Cognitive Approaches: Having and Doing**

We noted that a virtues approach to moral character has not had much traction in moral psychology largely because of its apparent affinity with trait models of personality. If there are doubts about traits, then appeal to virtues-as-traits is not an attractive option. Hence, if we are to talk sensibly about moral personality then we require an alternative way of conceptualizing the dispositional features of human behavior. In recent years a social-cognitive approach to personality has emerged to challenge the more traditional trait approach that emphasizes the structural basis of individual differences. According to Cantor (1990), the trait approach

illustrates the “having” side of personality theory (as opposed to the “doing” side, represented by social-cognitive models of personality). That is, personality is understood to be the sum of traits that one has, and there are individual differences in the distribution of these traits. Presumably, a person of good moral character is one who is in possession of certain traits that are deemed “virtues,” while a person of poor moral character is in possession of other kinds of traits not considered virtues. Moreover, the traits that one has are assumed to be adhesive in the sense that they are constitutional aspects of one’s personality, on display across disparate contextual settings.

The nomothetic trait approach has not, however, fared well in contemporary personality research, for at least two reasons. First, it is now a commonplace to note that personality dispositions do not display the cross-situational consistency desired by trait models (Mischel, 1990). Indeed, trait models generally have little to say about how dispositions are affected by situational variability. Instead, trait models assume that dispositions adhere to individuals across settings and across time, quite irrespective of the press of environmental demands. Dispositional traits, in other words, are assumed to trump the contextual hand one is dealt. Yet this is rarely the case. As Mischel (1968, p. 177) put it, “individuals show far less cross-situational consistency in their behavior than has been assumed by trait-state theories. The more dissimilar the evoking situations, the less likely they are to produce similar or consistent responses from the same individual.”

But the reality of situational variability in personality functioning, and the apparent lack of cross-situational stability or consistency, does not mean that personality fails to cohere in lawful ways. Personality is coherent, but coherence should not be reduced to mere stability of

behavior across time and setting (Cervone & Shoda, 1999). Coherence is evident in the dynamic, reciprocal interaction between the dispositions, interests, capacities, and potentialities of the agent and the changing contexts of learning, socialization and development. Persons and contexts are not static, orthogonal effects, but are instead in dynamic interaction. Changes on one side of the interaction invariably induce a cascade of consequences on the other side. Both are mutually implicative in accounting for behavior. This inextricable union of person and context is the lesson of developmental contextualism (Lerner, 1991, 1995; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981), and it is here, at the point of transaction between person and context, that one looks for intra-individual stability and personality coherence.

Hence the second drawback of trait models is that it overlooks this complex pattern of coherence that individuals do display in response to changing contextual circumstances (Cervone & Shoda, 1999). It overlooks lawful patterns of situational variability. Mischel (1990) argued, for example, that behavioral consistency is more likely to be found in localized, contextually-specified conditions. A coherent “behavioral signature” is evident when the display of dispositional tendencies is conceptualized in terms of “if-then” situation-behavior contingencies (Mischel, 1999; Shoda, 1999). Moreover, the reality of cross-situational variability is not a failure of a dispositional approach to personality. Rather, it is a failure to sufficiently analyze local features of situations. It is a failure to notice how these features dynamically interact with social-cognitive person variables, the social cognitive units of analysis (schemas, scripts, prototypes, episodes, competencies, etc) that give us the discriminative facility to alter our behavioral responses given the particularity of changing social contexts. Consequently dispositional consistency is conditional on evoking contextual factors and the ability of our

social cognitive processes to discriminate them. But again it is here, at the intersection of person and context, where personality coherence is revealed.

If the trait approach illustrates the “having” side of personality, the introduction of social cognitive person variables into the discussion of personality coherence illustrates the “doing” side of personality (Cantor, 1990). The cognitive approach to personality emphasizes what people do when they construe their social landscape, how they transform and interpret it, in accordance with social-cognitive mechanisms. According to Cantor (1990), the cognitive substrate of personality consists of three elements: schemas, tasks and strategies. Schemas are organized knowledge structures that “channel” and filter social perceptions and memory. They are the “cognitive carriers of dispositions” (p. 737) that guide our appraisal of social situations, our memory for events, and our affective reactions. They are organized around particular aspects of our life experience. Tasks are the culturally prescribed demands of social life that we transform or construe as personal goals. “Life tasks, like schemas, not only provide a cognitive representation for dispositional strivings but also serve to selectively maintain and foster dispositionally relevant behavior” (Cantor, 1990, p. 740). Strategies, in turn, are utilized to bring life tasks to fruition. As such they are “an intricate organization of feelings, thoughts, effort-arousal and actions” forming a “collection of goal-directed behavior unfolding over time in relation to a self-construed task” (Cantor, 1990, p. 743).

### **Personality Coherence**

These elements are also implicated in a recent social cognitive account of personality coherence advocated by Cervone and Shoda (1999). They argue that a model of personality coherence must address three interrelated phenomena. First, it must account for the fact that

there is an organization to personality functioning. That is, personality processes do not function independently but are instead organized into coherent, integrated systems that impose constraints on the range of possible configurations. This implies that personality is a unified cognitive-affective system, and that it is illegitimate, therefore, to segregate cognition and affect into separate domains of influence. Second, it must account for the coherence evident between behavior and social-contextual expectations. What we do across different settings, and over time, are often interconnected and consistent. As Cervone and Shoda (1999, p. 17) put it, individuals “create stable patterns of personal experience by selecting and shaping the circumstances that make up their day-to-day lives. This phenotypic coherence is key to both psychologists’ and layperson’s inferences about personality.” Third, it must account for the phenomenological sense of self-coherence that orders our goals, preferences, and values, and gives meaning to personal striving and motivated behavior.

The dynamic interaction among these features of personality coherence is grounded by social information-processing. That is, the cross-situational coherence, and variability, of personality, the dynamic interaction among organized knowledge structures, affect and social context, is understood not by appealing to broad-band traits but to the analysis of the causal mechanisms, structures and processes of social information-processing (Cervone, 1997). Moreover, the model assumes that the activation of mental representations is critical feature of coherent personality functioning. These representations “include knowledge of social situations, representations of self, others and prospective events, personal goals, beliefs and expectations, and knowledge of behavioral alternatives and task strategies” (Cervone & Shoda, 1999, p. 18), and are variously conceptualized as schemas, scripts, prototypes, episodes, competencies and

similar constructs (Hastie, 1981; Mischel, 1990). It is the distinctive organization of these social-cognitive units, their mutual influence and dynamic interaction that give rise to various configurations of personality, although the range of possible configurations is not infinite, given the “system of mutual constraint” that one part of the system imposes on other parts (Cervone & Shoda, 1999, p. 19). Still, patterns of individual differences arise because people have stable goal systems (Cantor’s “life tasks”) that structure the organization of the cognitive-affective system, and influence the perception, selection and interpretation of various contextual settings. Moreover, people have different interpersonal and social expectations that foster “distinctive, contextualized patterns of response” (Cervone & Shoda, 1999, p. 20) and also different recurring experiences that provide the “affordances” that give rise to stable configurations of the cognitive-affective system (Brandstadter, 1999). More generally, then, the inter-relationship among these elements of the social cognitive personality system “yield cognitive-affective configurations that ‘make sense,’ cohere and thus are more stable. These stable configurations form the basis of an individual’s unique personality. They contribute to the individual’s recurrent style of planning, interpreting and responding to events” (Cervone & Shoda, 1999, p. 20).

### **Six Critical Resources**

The social cognitive approach to personality has a number of resources that are critical to new models of moral personality: First, it retains the central importance of cognition, although cognition is viewed as a broader set of mental representations, processes and mechanisms than was postulated by the moral development tradition. Schemas, and the conditions of schema activation, underwrite our discriminative facility in noticing key features of our moral

environment. Schemas are fundamental to our very ability to notice dilemmas as we appraise the moral landscape (Narvaez & Bock, 2002). Moreover, as we note below, the social cognitive approach does not assume that all relevant cognitive processing is controlled, deliberate and explicit. Indeed, there is now mounting evidence that much of our lives is governed by cognitive processes that are tacit, implicit and automatic, although this is an issue that is new to the moral domain (Narvaez & Lapsley, in press). Still, the intersection of the morality of everyday life and the automaticity of everyday life must be large and extensive, and social cognitive theory provides resources for coming to grips with it in ways that the cognitive developmental tradition cannot (Lapsley & Narvaez, in press).

Second, the social cognitive approach emphasizes the central importance of self-processes, personal goals and life tasks that give meaning to one's motivated behavior and purposive striving. Hence it is compatible with the apparent consensus within the Kohlberg tradition that an adequate theory of moral reasoning and of moral behavior requires greater attention to the motivational properties of selfhood and identity.

Third, the social cognitive approach emphasizes the affective elements of personality. Indeed, personality is considered a "cognitive-affective system" that is organized, integrated, coherent and stable. Emotional states are a regulatory factor within the information-processing system. As Bugental and Goodnow (1998, p. 416) put it, "emotional states influence what is perceived and how it is processed, and the interpretations made of ongoing events subsequently influence emotional reactions and perceptual biases. Affect and cognition are appropriately conceptualized as interwoven processes." Affect guides selective memory retrieval, influences perceptual vigilance, and constrains the attentional resources available for rational or reflective

appraisal and response selection (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998). Understanding personality as a cognitive-affective system is in contrast to some approaches in moral psychology that tend to segregate moral cognition and moral emotions.

Fourth, the social cognitive approach is compatible with the best insights of developmental science in its insistence that the cognitive-affective system is in reciprocal interaction with changing social contexts. Indeed, there is no implication that these processes operate in a passive, linear way, or as a crude input-output mechanism, which has been a traditional source of resistance by Kohlbergian researchers to information-processing models of cognition.

Fifth, the social cognitive approach provides a way to deal with the coherence of personality in a way that acknowledges lawful situational variability. A dispositional signature can be found at the intersection of person and context, as a result of the available and accessible social cognitive schemas, and the discriminative facility that it provides, and the eliciting and activating aspects of situations and contexts. This addresses one of the traditional objections of Kohlbergian researchers to the study of character or of virtue traits, namely, that the observance of moral traits (“honesty”) seemed to hinge on numerous situational factors, or that traits fail to demonstrate the cross-situational consistency one ordinarily expects of dispositions.

Sixth, the units of analysis are conceptualized in a way that is open to integration with other literatures. Indeed, the organizational features of personality, and the mutual constraint evident among elements of the social cognitive-affective system, makes the study of other domains of psychological functioning (e.g., memory, motivation, self-regulative processes) completely relevant to the study of moral personality.

In the next section we attempt to illustrate the social cognitive bases of the moral personality. We will argue that the chronic accessibility of social cognitive schemas is the source of individual differences in moral functioning, and that this model accounts for a range of phenomena that has resisted explanation by the structural-developmental tradition. We will also review preliminary data that speaks to the promise of the model, and reflect on its developmental and educational implications.

### **Expertise and Schema Accessibility**

In Cantor's (1990; Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987) model self-schemas, prototypes, scripts and episodes are the basic cognitive units of personality –the “cognitive carriers of dispositions.” Schemas “demarcate regions of social life and domains of personal experience to which the person is especially tuned, and about which he or she is likely to become a virtual ‘expert’” (Cantor, 1990, p. 738). Indeed, Cantor (1990) appeals to the notion of expertise to illustrate how schemas can maintain patterns of individual differences. She points to three critical functions of schemas. First, if schemas are *chronically accessible*, then they direct our attention to certain features of our experience, at the expense of others. The schematic nature of information-processing disposes experts to notice key features of domain-relevant activity that novices miss. Hence environmental scanning is more richly informative for experts than it is for novices. Chess, dinosaur and teaching experts “see” more of an event than do novices in these domains (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988). In the social domain a shy schematic, or an aggressive person, is more likely to notice (or remember) instances that require social reticence or

aggressive conduct, respectively, than are individuals who are “social novices” in these domains (that is, not shy or not aggressive).

Second, if schemas are *chronically salient* in memory, then compatible or schema-relevant life tasks, goals or settings are more likely to be selected or sought, which, in turn, also serves to canalize and maintain dispositional tendencies. A shy schematic is likely to choose, over time, a “risk-avoidance” strategy when it comes to social goals, thereby reinforcing a particular pattern of social interactions. Experts in other domains similarly choose settings, set goals, or engage in activities that support or reinforce schema-relevant interests. This illustrates, too, the reciprocal relationship between person and context. Third, we tend to develop highly practiced behavioral routines in those areas of our experience demarcated by chronically-accessible schemas, which provides “a ready, sometimes automatically available plan of action in such life contexts” (Cantor, 1990, p. 738). Experts, then, possess procedural knowledge that has a high degree of automaticity.

Schema accessibility, then, and conditions of activation, are critical for understanding how patterns of individual differences are channeled and maintained. In some ways, too, the “shy person” or the “aggressive person,” and, by extension, the “moral person,” possess social cognitive mechanisms whose functioning is similar to that afforded by high levels of expertise. In the moral domain these notions have been implicated in an “expertise model” of moral character (Narvaez, 2003; Narvaez & Lapsley, in press) and a social cognitive approach to the moral personality (Lapsley, 1998; Lapsley & Narvaez, in press). Both approaches trade on the notion of knowledge activation and knowledge accessibility, and these concepts must be considered central to any account of moral character, personality or identity.

### **Chronic Accessibility and Individual Differences**

According to Higgins (1999), one of the general principles of knowledge activation is *accessibility*. Accessibility can be defined as the activation potential of available knowledge. The more *frequently* a construct is activated, or the more *recently* it is primed, the more accessible it should be for processing social information. In addition, frequently activated constructs should be, over time, *chronically* accessible for purposes of social information-processing. And, since the social experiences of individuals varies widely, it is likely that there should also be differences in the accessibility, indeed, even in the availability, of cognitive constructs.

Accessibility, then, is a person variable and a dimension of individual differences. That is, there are individual differences in the availability and accessibility of these knowledge structures (Higgins, 1996) and are properly regarded as personality variables (Higgins, 1999). Three additional points are relevant. First, chronically accessible constructs are at a higher state of activation than are inaccessible constructs (Bargh & Pratto, 1986) and are produced so efficiently as to approach automaticity (Bargh, 1989). Indeed, as Zelli and Dodge (1999, p. 119) put it, “salient social experiences foster knowledge structures that may become so highly accessible as to pervasively influence one’s social thinking.” Second, constructs can be made accessible by contextual (situational) priming, as well as by chronicity, and these two sources of influence combine in an additive fashion to influence social information-processing (Bargh, Bond, Lombardi & Tota, 1986). Third, the accessibility of a construct is assumed to emerge from a developmental history of frequent and consistent experience with a specific domain of social behavior, so that it becomes more likely than other constructs to be evoked for the interpretation of interpersonal experience. Consequently, individual differences in construct

accessibility emerge because of each person's unique social developmental history (Bargh, Lombardi & Higgins, 1988).

### **Chronic Accessibility and the Moral Personality**

We appeal to this theoretical approach to conceptualize the moral personality. We argue that the moral personality is better understood in terms of the chronic accessibility of moral schemas for construing social events. Therefore, a moral person, or a person who has a moral identity or character, would be one for whom moral constructs are chronically accessible and easily activated for social information-processing. In addition, we claim that moral chronicity is a dimension of individual differences. Blasi (1984) has argued that one has a moral identity just when moral categories are essential, central and important to one's self-understanding. One has a moral personality when the self is constructed around moral commitments. But here we would add that moral categories (schemas, episodes, scripts, prototypes) that are essential, central and important for one's self-identity would also be ones that are chronically-accessible for interpreting the social landscape. Such categories would be constantly "on-line," or at least readily primed and easily activated, for discerning the meaning of events. And, once activated, these constructs would dispose the individual to interpret these events in light of their moral elements.

Indeed, moral character, or what it means to be virtuous (or vicious) is better conceptualized not in terms of the "having" side of personality, not in terms of trait-possession, but in terms of the "doing" side, that is, in terms of the social cognitive schemas, the knowledge structures and cognitive-affective mechanisms that are chronically accessible for social information-processing, and which underwrites the discriminative facility in our selection of situationally-appropriate behavior.

## **Initial Empirical Work**

The general claim, then, is that chronically accessible moral schemas greatly influences social information-processing. Recent studies by Narvaez and her colleagues (Narvaez, 1998; 2001; 2002; Narvaez, Bentley, Narvaez, Mitchell, Gleason & Bentley, 1999) attest to the plausibility of this hypothesis. She has shown, for example, that individual's prior moral knowledge greatly influences their comprehension of moral narratives, a finding that should undermine the confidence of "virtuecrats," such as William Bennett, who argue that merely reading the treasury of moral stories is somehow self-instructing in the virtues. Similarly, Lapsley and Lasky (1999) have shown that conceptions of good character are organized as a cognitive prototype, and that the activation of a "good character" prototype biases information processing. For example, in their study participants showed considerable false recognition of novel prototype-consistent ("virtue-central") trait attributes than they did of non-prototypic ("virtue-peripheral") traits. Both findings support the general claim here that accessible moral knowledge structures influence what we see in our interpersonal landscape, and that at least some morally relevant information-processing is implicit, tacit and automatic.

This was tested more directly by Lapsley and Lasky (2001) using the spontaneous trait inference paradigm. The spontaneous trait inference paradigm assumes that the meaning of social events is constructed routinely, habitually and unintentionally (Newman & Uleman, 1989). Moreover, a spontaneous trait inference (STI) is said to occur when attending to another's behavior produces a trait inference without an explicit intention to infer traits or to form an impression (Uleman, Newman & Moskowitz, 1996; Uleman, Hon, Roman & Moskowitz, 1996). This is typically demonstrated using a cued-recall procedure that includes both a spontaneous and deliberate processing condition. In the spontaneous processing condition

participants are instructed to memorize a list of sentences (e.g., “The lawyer strongly disagrees with the economist.”). Note that this memory instruction does not ask participants to form an impression of the actors or to draw any inference about their character, motivation or reasons-for-acting. Hence, it is assumed that any inference that is drawn about the dispositional qualities of the actors is spontaneous. In contrast, participants in a deliberate processing condition are asked to memorize the sentences after first focusing on the reasons for the actor’s behavior. Consequently, inferences drawn about actors are said to be deliberate given the explicit instruction to form an impression. Two types of cues are then used at recall. Some cues are dispositional (“argumentative”), while others are semantic (“courtroom”). If STI’s were formed at encoding, then trait-dispositional cues should elicit more recall of target sentences.

Research has shown that people not only make STIs, without explicit intention of doing so, but also without awareness that they have made them (Uleman et al., 1996). Is the production of STIs influenced by personality? There is indeed evidence that STIs vary along common dimensions of individual differences. For example, Zelli, Huessman & Cervone, 1995) showed that individuals who differed in levels of *aggressiveness* performed quite differently on a cue-recall spontaneous trait inference task. In this study aggressive and nonaggressive participants read sentences (e.g., “*The policeman pushes Dave out of the way.*”) that included actors whose behavior could be interpreted as hostile or non-hostile. Spontaneous and deliberate processing conditions were used. During recall participants were given both semantic and dispositional cues. The dispositional cues were terms that represented hostile inferences that could be made about the behavior of the sentence actors. The results showed, within the spontaneous processing condition, that hostile dispositional cues prompted significantly more recall than did semantic cues for aggressive participants, while semantic cues prompted twice as

much recall among nonaggressive participants. These differences were not apparent in the deliberate processing condition.

Similarly, Uleman et al (1986) also demonstrated the influence of a personality variable on the production of STIs. They presented sentences that had different trait implications for individuals who were high and low on *authoritarianism*. For example, the sentence “*The architect loved the excitement of military parades*” implied the trait attribution “patriotic” for authoritarian participants, but non-authoritarian participants were unable to reach consensus about what trait the sentence implied.

Lapsley and Lasky (2001) attempted to show that moral chronicity, much like aggressiveness and authoritarianism, is an individual differences variable that influences the production of spontaneous trait inferences. A primacy-of-output procedure was used to determine participants’ chronically accessible constructs (Higgins, King & Mavin, 1982). Participants were asked to record the traits of someone they like, someone they dislike, someone they seek out, and someone they avoid. They were also asked to record the traits of someone they frequently encounter. Individuals were considered “moral chronics” if three of the six traits rated first for each question were traits that are highly prototypic of good moral character, as determined by Lapsley and Lasky (2000). Participants who did not name any trait adjective prototypic of good moral character were considered to be “non-chronic.” The moral chronic and non-chronic groups then participated in the standard cued-recall spontaneous trait inference manipulations. Participants were instructed either to memorize the target sentences (spontaneous processing) or else to infer motives-for-action and memorize (deliberate processing). Sentence recall was cued either by dispositional or semantic cues. The results showed, as expected, that moral chronics made more spontaneous trait inferences with

dispositional cues than with semantic cues, whereas non-chronics showed more recall with semantic cues. Recall in the deliberate processing condition was unaffected by moral chronicity.

Moral chronics, then, when instructed to memorize target sentences, appeared to form spontaneous trait inferences of characters featured in the sentences. Hence, when participants are given no instruction about how to encode information, and are simply left to their own devices, they tend to make dispositional inferences congruent with their most accessible schemas. This suggests that *moral chronicity* (along with authoritarianism and aggressiveness) is an individual differences dimension that influences social information-processing. Moreover this study contributes to the growing evidence regarding the tacit, implicit and automatic nature of higher mental processes (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000). Automatic activation has been demonstrated for attitudes (Bargh, 1989), self-concepts (Bargh, 1982; Higgins, 1987), stereotypes (Pratto & Bargh, 1991) and social behaviors (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996). Indeed, quite strong claims are made for “the automaticity of everyday life” (Bargh, 1997). For example, there is evidence that nonconscious mental systems direct self-regulation (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), and that evaluations, social perceptions, judgment, social interactions and internal goal structures are similarly operative without conscious intention or acts of will (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000). Indeed, Bargh and Chartrand (1999) argue that we are not normally engaged in active planning, selecting, choosing or interpreting when processing information. Moreover, “the ability to exercise such conscious, intentional control is actually quite limited” (p. 462). It is a mistake, therefore, to equate cognition with conscious cognition. As Bargh (1997, p. 52) put it, “conscious processing can no longer be viewed as necessary for behavior and judgments and evaluations to be made in a given situation,” and that the “black box of ‘conscious choice’ will grow ever smaller” with advances in social cognitive research

The notion that there is a certain automaticity in our cognitive functioning is a commonplace in the social-cognitive and intellectual development literatures—yet, curiously, it is a notion that is likely to be resisted in the moral development literature, and for two reasons. The notion of automaticity is resisted because, as we noted earlier, it is contrary to the “assumption of phenomenalism.” (Lapsley & Narvaez, in press). It is alien to our usual working model of moral rationality, which involves deliberation, decision-making, the appeal to principles, the balancing of perspectives, the conscious weighing of factors, and the imaginative thought experiment. Moral rationality is considered to be controlled processing. It is the making of explicit choices for considered reasons. It is *declarative knowledge*. It is *knowing why*. The notion of automaticity is resisted, too, because it is alien to our working model of moral education, which is something that takes place in schools as a formalized curriculum or intervention.

Yet, if the social cognitive literature is any guide, many of our moral performances take place without explicit awareness. Many of our responses are unreflective and highly automatized and are not the result of deliberate decision-making procedures. If this is true then the present model also suggests that moral functioning has a *procedural* component, as well as a *declarative* one. There is a kind of moral knowledge that is implicit, procedural, scripted, automatic. There is a kind of moral knowledge that is *knowing how*. There is a kind of moral behavior that is coherent, organized and rule-governed, without being based on explicit rules (Emde, Biringen, Clyman & Oppenheim, 1991), or without being the result of an agonizing, deliberate decision-making calculus.

To say that moral rationality has both a procedural and a declarative component helps clarify the on-going debate between proponents of character and virtue on the one hand, and

cognitive developmentalism, on the other. Effective habits, scripted behavioral sequences, self-regulation, chronic accessibility of knowledge structures, moral perception, these might constitute the procedural aspect of moral functioning, and fall under the heading of character, of *knowing how*. It is this aspect of moral functioning that is routinized, automatic, spontaneous, unreflective. But, being conscious of moral rule systems, being able to articulate and reason about them, is the declarative aspect of moral reasoning, it is *knowing why*, and it is this aspect of moral functioning that is more at home in the cognitive developmental tradition.

### **Developmental Sources**

We have argued that the dispositional features of moral character are better conceptualized in terms of the social cognitive approach to personality. But a social cognitive approach to moral character will share a deficiency that plagues all social cognitive theories. These theories invariably address the mechanisms and consequences of social cognition from the perspective of adult functioning, but rarely attempt to plot the developmental trajectory that makes adult forms of social cognition possible (Lapsley & Quintana, 1985). Yet charting developmental features are crucial to our understanding of moral character. If, for example, the moral personality is defined in terms of chronic accessibility of moral schemas, how is chronicity made possible during the course of development? What sort of developmental experiences lead to chronically accessible cognitive-affective moral schemas? What socialization practices encourage this kind of moral expertise? What is the developmental mechanism that underlies automatic, tacit and implicit social information-processing?

These are novel questions to put to the developmental literature that we address elsewhere (Narvaez, 2003), so here we make suggestions about how a social cognitive approach to moral personality *development* might look. There are important clues to possible

developmental sources of moral chronicity. Ross Thompson (1998), for example, draws attention to the emergence and elaboration of prototypical knowledge structures in the early toddler years in his account of early sociopersonality development. These scripted knowledge structures take the form of generalized event representations that initially encode the prosaic routines and rituals of family life, but which become progressively elaborated into broader knowledge structures as the child develops. These representations serve as working models of what to expect of early social experience, and allow the child to both anticipate and recall events. Indeed, event representations also support the emergence of early episodic memory, and have been called the “basic building blocks of cognitive development” (Nelson & Gruendel, 1981, p. 131).

Nelson (1989, 1993a,b) argues that event representations become more elaborated and better organized as a result of shared dialogue with caregivers. In these early conversations parents help children review, structure and consolidate memories in script-like fashion (Fivush, Kuebli & Chubb, 1992). Parents who do this in an “elaborative” way, that is, who embed events in a rich contextual background rather than simply asking direct questions, tend to have children who have more sophisticated representations of their past (Reese & Fivush, 1993; Reese, Halden & Fivush, 1993). It is our view that the capacity for event representation is not only the building blocks of cognitive development, as Nelson and Gruendel (1981) put it, but also the building blocks of the moral personality. It is the social cognitive foundation of character. The foundation of the moral personality is laid down in the early construction of generalized event representations, prototypic knowledge structures, behavioral scripts and episodic memory.

But the key “characterological turn” of significance for moral psychology is how these early social cognitive units are transformed into autobiographical memory. In other words, at some point specific episodic memories must become integrated into a narrative form that

references a self whose story it is. Autobiographical memories, too, like event representations, are constructed with the aid of social dialogue. Autobiographical memory is a social construction. It is coached within the “web of interlocation.” Parents teach children how to construct narratives by the questions that they ask of past events (“Where did we go yesterday?” “What did we see?” “Was Uncle Leon there?” “What did we do next?”). In this way parents help children identify the key features that are to be remembered, their sequence, causal significance and timing (Schneider & Bjorklund, 1998).

It is true the extant research on early event representation, episodic and autobiographical memory has tended to focus on relatively simple events (mealtime), routines (bedtime rituals) and scripts (going to McDonalds). As Thompson (1998, p. 68) noted, “little is known about children’s representation of prototypical experiences of greater emotional and relational complexity.” Yet there is little reason to doubt, in our view, that the representation of morally-relevant events should not be consolidated in young children’s autobiographical memory in a directly analogous way. Parental interrogatories (“What happened when you pushed your brother?” “Why did he cry?” “What should you do next?”) enable children to organize events into personally relevant autobiographical memories, which provides, in the process, as part of the self-narrative, action-guiding scripts (“I share with him” “I say I’m sorry”) that become overlearned, frequently practiced, routine, habitual, and automatic. In these shared dialogues the child learns important lessons about “emotions, relationships and morality” (Thompson, 1998, p. 70). Indeed, as Thompson (1998, p. 70) put it:

the child’s earliest self-representations are likely to incorporate the parent’s moral evaluations, emotional inferences, dispositional attributions to the child (e.g., rambunctious, emotionally labile, cautious or impulsive, etc.), and other features

of the adult's interpretation of the situations being recounted.

We should add, too, that such interrogatories might also include moral character attributions as well, so that the ideal or ought self becomes part of one's self-understanding, becomes part of one's autobiographical narrative. In this way parents help children identify morally relevant features of their experience and encourage the formation of social cognitive schemas (scripts, prototypes) that are easily primed, easily activated and chronically accessible.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have attempted to illustrate the virtues of psychologizing the study of moral functioning by invoking such notions as schema theory and principles of knowledge activation. We hoped to show that meaningful integrations are possible between moral psychology and the rich empirical content, research tactics and theoretical frameworks of social-cognitive science. Indeed, social cognitive theory provides at least six critical resources when pressed into the service of moral psychology. Moreover, the application of social cognitive theory to moral psychology make it possible to anticipate novel facts about moral personological and moral cognitive functioning. It touts schema accessibility as a general principle of moral knowledge activation. It draws our attention to individual differences in moral chronicity, and insists that the tacit, implicit and automatic features of social cognition find a place in the explanation of moral functioning. Finally, we make a case for a possible developmental grounding of the moral personality by invoking the literatures of early generalized event representation and autobiographical memory, among others.

We are, of course, aware of the challenges that face a social cognitive account of moral personality (Blasi, this volume). But we are making a strategic bet that a moral psychology richly informed by the theoretical and empirical literatures of allied, but heretofore ignored,

domains of psychology will yield a robust, productive and progressive research program. And we take no small comfort in an assertion by Imre Lakatos (1978, p. 5), that “*all theories are born refuted and die refuted*”. Research programs, much like character itself, are often riddled with blindspots, anomaly, contradiction and error. Yet the true measure of a research program, in his view, is not so much the blindspots, the contradictions or the errors, it is not the “ocean of anomalies” that one must contend with, but rather its capacity for growth, extension and progress. Much like the true measure of the moral personality itself.

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