The ups and downs of the moral personality: Why it's not so black and white

Patrick L. Hill *, Daniel K. Lapsley

University of Notre Dame, Department of Psychology, 118 Haggar Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556, United States

**Abstract**

Past research has suggested that people may form cognitive representations of concepts based on metaphorical dimensions. We report two studies that evaluate whether the moral personality is represented along two relevant metaphor dimensions: verticality and brightness. In addition, we sought support for an attentional bias towards immoral rather than moral traits. In Study 1, immoral personality traits were categorized slower when high in the visual field, consistent with expectations that people represent immorality as being low rather than high. In Study 2, only support for the immorality bias and not the brightness representation was found. Our results suggest evidence both that the moral personality is represented metaphorically, and for an adaptive attentional bias towards immoral traits.

**Keywords:**

Moral personality
Metaphor
Social cognition
Schemas

**1. Introduction**

Johnson (1993) has suggested that morality is represented within metaphorical dimensions, which may directly influence moral decision-making and cognitive processing. For example, we commonly think that people are of high or low character, or that people can rise to or fall below social standards. Indeed, morality is often conceptualized along a vertical dimension with the moral self being represented higher than the immoral self. Additionally, people may think of moral individuals as being pure and clean, whereas immorality is often dirty and polluted (see also Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). People may then also represent morality along a brightness dimension, in that morality is viewed as brighter than immorality. In line with this suggestion, past research has shown that violations committed by individuals wearing white may be viewed as less egregious than those by individuals wearing black (Frank & Gilovich, 1988; Vrij, 1997). However, it is uncertain whether the purity/pollution metaphor would lead people to represent morality along a brightness dimension, because we may form representations only along perceptual dimensions specifically mentioned in the metaphor.

Recently, Meier and Robinson (2004, Meier, Robinson, & Clore, 2004) reported evidence that metaphor representations may influence our cognitive processing of stimuli. For positively valenced words, they demonstrated that participants categorized these words more quickly when they were higher in the visual field and when they are written in white font. For negatively valenced words, participants categorized these more quickly when the words were lower in the visual field and written in black font.

Meier et al. (2007) chose ten stimuli that did include personality traits (i.e., truthful, trustworthy, and dishonest), but also included words related to moral concepts and actions (i.e., nurture, adultery, and molest). Instead, we focused solely on moral personality traits, following recent evidence that we form distinct schematic representations of moral individuals and different moral personality traits (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001; Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagle, & Lasky, 2006; Walker & Hennig, 2004; Walker & Pitts, 1998). Therefore, we evaluated whether moral personality schemas are represented metaphorically rather than the more general “morality” and “immorality” schemas used by Meier et al. (2007). Second, we evaluated whether morality is represented metaphorically along a brightness dimension, in addition to the vertical dimension. This follows from Johnson’s (1993) suggestion of a purity/pollution representation of morality (see also Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

Additionally, past research has suggested that immoral traits may be particularly salient when forming person perceptions (De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000; Wojciszke, 1994). For example, De Bruin and Van Lange (2000) asked participants to assign credits to themselves and to a fictitious partner, for whom they could either receive information about the partner’s morality or competence. This information could be positive or negative. First, as indicated by longer reading times, participants were shown to cognitively
attend more to negative rather than positive morality information. Second, once they received negative morality information, participants were less persuaded by additional positive information. This suggests that immorality personality traits may be more salient than moral personality traits. Additionally, this follows evolutionary theories of morality to the extent that it is evolutionarily adaptive to attend to those who are immoral in order to avoid betrayal and injury (Krebs, 2008).

In line with this proposed “immorality bias,” two additional predictions can be made. First, participants should take longer to classify immoral traits than moral traits, because immoral traits will be more salient and require more attention. Second, with respect to metaphors, people may be more likely to form metaphor representations for stimuli that are “in the breach”. Specifically, immoral traits should be particularly slow to classify when they are discrepant with what is expected as a result of their representation (i.e., when they are higher in the visual field, and when they are printed in white). This is discrepant from Meier et al’s (2007) findings, as they suggested that their interaction (moral context by vertical position) was largely carried by differences in responding to the moral rather than immoral terms. Therefore, the current studies first sought to evaluate the moral metaphors proposed by Johnson (1993), using Meier and colleagues’ (Meier & Robinson, 2004; Meier et al., 2004; 2007) methodology. However, it was also of interest to provide further support for a possible immorality bias in personality.

Two studies were performed to evaluate these hypotheses. For both, participants were asked to categorize words as either “moral” or “immoral”. In Study 1, words differed with respect to whether they appeared in the upper or lower half of the computer screen. In Study 2, words differed as to whether they were printed in white or black font on a grey background.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we sought to replicate Meier et al’s (2007) results on morality and verticality, and extend them specifically to moral personality. In their study, they found an interaction between moral valence and vertical position, and suggested that moral concepts may have “carried” the interaction. Counter to this suggestion, we would expect to again find a significant moral content by vertical position interaction with personality traits, but that this interaction will be carried by immoral concepts instead. Given the increased salience of immoral traits during person perception, one would expect that immoral traits may be more likely to be represented metaphorically. Presumably, if people attend more to individuals of low moral character, they are more likely to tell others about immoral rather than moral individuals, and thus immorality should be more linked to metaphors than morality.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Thirty undergraduates (50% female, \(M_{age} = 19.7 \) years) participated for course credit.

2.1.2. Procedure

Participants were told to categorize words using the “1” and “9” keys as to whether they were moral or immoral, with key assignment counterbalanced across participants. Words appeared in white font on a grey background either 48 mm above or below the center of the screen, and remained on the screen until the participant responded. After response, the screen went blank for 500 ms before the next word was presented. Participants completed 40 categorization trials, comprised of 2 (Moral valence) \(\times\) 2 (Vertical position) \(\times\) 10 words, in a random order. Moral traits were selected from those rated very typical of moral and good character prototypes from previous studies (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001; Walker & Pitts, 1998). Immoral traits were the antonyms of words selected from these lists.

2.2. Results

For both studies, all inaccurate responses were deleted, and any participants who failed to achieve at least 70% accuracy within any condition were eliminated. In addition, all response times shorter than 250 ms and longer than 3000 ms were eliminated to avoid outlier effects. Five participants were removed following these guidelines. A 2 (Moral valence: moral vs. immoral) \(\times\) 2 (Vertical position: high vs. low) ANOVA was performed on the latencies, which are represented in Fig. 1. The main effect of position was significant, \(F(1, 24) = 16.75, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .41\), indicating that participants categorized trait words more quickly when they were in the lower visual field (1026 ms vs. 1125 ms). The main effect of moral valence was also significant, \(F(1, 24) = 15.37, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .39\), indicating that participants categorized moral trait words more quickly than immoral trait words (1015 ms vs. 1137 ms). However, these main effects were qualified by a position by valence interaction, \(F(1, 24) = 4.30, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .15\). Participants’ response times for the four conditions were as follows: moral/low (991 ms), moral/high (1038 ms), immoral/low (1061 ms), and immoral/high (1212 ms). Tests of the simple effects found that while the moral/low and moral/high conditions did not differ significantly, \(t(24) = 1.77, p > .05\), \(d = 28\), participants categorized immoral trait words more quickly when these traits were presented in the lower visual field, \(t(24) = 3.66, p < .01, d = .71\). These results suggest that people may represent the moral personality along the vertical dimension, but that this may only be true for the “immoral personality”.

3. Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to test the boundaries of moral metaphors by evaluating whether the moral personality may also be represented along a brightness dimension. Given that this dimension is only inferred from, and not related directly to, the purity/pollution metaphor, evaluating the brightness effect will test the strength of the link between linguistic expressions and metaphor representations in the domain of moral personality. We again would expect to find a moral valence main effect, in order to support the immorality bias. In addition, a valence by color interaction would demonstrate that we represent moral personality traits along a brightness dimension.

Fig. 1. Mean categorization latency as a function of word valence and vertical position. Error bars show the standard error of the difference between adjacent conditions.
representations of the moral personality by evaluating whether Johnson’s (1993) suggested purity/pollution metaphor would correspond to differences in responding along a brightness dimension. Our results suggest that moral traits do not appear to follow a white/moral to black/immoral representation. Importantly though, Study 2 found further support for an “immorality bias,” insofar as participants were again slower to categorize immoral words than moral ones.

These results suggest three primary theoretical notes of interest. First, we do find evidence that people differentially attend to immoral traits. This differential attention to morality in the breach is considered adaptive insofar as avoiding those seeking to betrayal us would lead to greater evolutionary success (Krebs, 2008). It is interesting to note that immoral traits largely carried the interaction in Study 1, which suggests that people may be more likely to use metaphors when discussing immoral rather than moral individuals. One reason is that people generally may be more likely to discuss immoral people than moral people, because it would be more evolutionarily adaptive to point out those individuals who may cause harm. However, this is speculative and a topic for future research.

Second, while our general conclusions are similar, the differences between our results and those of Meier et al. (2007) are theoretically noteworthy. The primary methodological difference between our Study 1 and their Experiment 2 was our sole use of personality traits. We suggest that this difference led to our interaction being carried by the immoral stimuli, while their results suggested the opposite. These contrasting results underscore the fact that people do have particularly nuanced moral schemas, which have different effects upon activation (Lapsley, 1998; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Walker & Hennig, 2004).

Third, it is informative to note that these representations appear to be integrally linked to the specific metaphors used. In Study 2, we assessed whether the purity/pollution metaphor would generalize to a related perceptual dimension, brightness. However, we failed to find evidence that participants represented moral personality traits along this dimension. This provides further evidence for a close link between our language use and our representations of the world (Gibbs, 1992; Glucksberg, 2001; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). It appears that we only represent moral traits along those perceptual dimensions specifically invoked in the metaphors we use. Given the link between the moral personality and metaphor representations, future research should evaluate further whether these representations do influence higher-level moral decision-making as Johnson (1993) has suggested.

References


