Transcendence and the Moral Self: Identity Integration, Religion, and Moral Life

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Although moral reasoning is able to account for some of the variability in moral behavior, much remains unexplained. Recently, a number of components of personality have been proposed as bridging the gap between moral reasoning and moral behavior. The present study investigates the role that identity integration (the extent to which one’s moral values have become integrated into identity) and religious orientation (one’s motivation for engaging in religious practice) play in moral functioning. A sample of 60 undergraduates was assessed on identity integration, religious orientation, moral reasoning, and self-reported altruism. We found positive correlations among moral reasoning, identity integration, intrinsic religious orientation, and self-reported altruism. A hierarchical regression analysis, however, revealed moral reasoning to be the only significant predictor of self-reported altruistic behavior. We discuss the relationship between moral reasoning and identity integration and the extent to which the intrinsic religious orientation scale may be a measure of identity integration in the religious domain.

Although there is evidence to show some consistency between stage of moral reasoning and moral behavior (Blasi 1980; Jennings, Kilkenny, and Kohlberg 1983), the degree of consistency should not mask the fact that one can reason at a principled level and still remain immoral in behavior. Walker and Hennig (1997) refer to this as the “gappiness of moral life” and call for moral functioning to be viewed within the broader context of personality. A number of intermediaries have been proposed, including moral emotions (Montada 1993), ego functioning (Matsuba and Walker 1998), personality traits (Walker 1999; Matsuba and Walker 2004), and identity (Blasi 1993, 1995; Nisan 1993).

Identity, herein, is assumed to be multifaceted, consisting of a number of components (Marcia et al. 1993). Religion, a significant component of identity formation (Marcia et al. 1993), has received some attention with regard to morality (e.g., Colby and Damon 1992). In an attempt to take into account the role of religion in moral functioning, Kohlberg proposed a “metaphorical” Stage 7 as the endpoint of moral reasoning (Kohlberg and Power 1981). Many individuals, however, use religious reasoning throughout Kohlberg’s moral stages (see Walker et al. 1995). The extent to which the religious component of identity has become central may determine its strength to regulate what individuals consider to be of moral concern. We investigate the relations among moral reasoning, identity, and religious orientations, as well as the ability of these variables to predict altruistic behavior.

Many of Colby and Damon’s (1992) moral exemplars—individuals illustrative of a common understanding of what it means to be highly moral—did not consider themselves morally courageous. They simply believed no alternative course of action to have been viable. Their behavior seemed to flow from an identity constructed around a central concern, which produced a sense that some acts were not only immoral, but simply “unthinkable” (Blasi 1993; Nisan 1993). Although Colby and Damon (1992) went to great lengths to define “moral exemplar” in a way that avoided recruiting too narrow a sample, including making no mention of religion in the nominating...
criteria, the majority of their moral exemplars were discovered to have some spiritual focus or faith, and those not holding religious convictions looked beyond themselves to find faith and transcendent meaning “in the forces of good, a sustaining hope in a power greater than oneself, a larger meaning for one’s life than personal achievement or gain” (1992:311). Rather than distinct aspects, morality, spirituality, and identity appeared as an integrated whole among Colby and Damon’s moral exemplars.

Blasi (1993) assumes that people not only differ in their commitment to an identity (see Marcia et al. 1993), but also in how they experience and relate to their identities. He uses the term identity integration to reflect “the degree of coordination of one aspect [of identity] with other subsystems... and the level of superordination of the aspect... in the hierarchy” (Blasi 1995:232). Identity integration is the development of a sense of agency and responsibility for the construction and maintenance of identity, with one’s values and philosophy of life becoming more centralized, and the possibility of identity fragmenting when behaviors do not reflect one’s values (Blasi and Milton 1991; Glodis and Blasi 1993).

Allport’s ([1950] 1960) intrinsic and extrinsic orientations toward religion appear to represent an integrated and nonintegrated religious identity, respectively. An intrinsic religious orientation gives meaning to all aspects of life, acting as the primary motive, and is fully integrated into the life of the individual, with religion serving as an end. An extrinsic religious orientation, in contrast, serves an instrumental purpose, providing comfort or social reward, and is compartmentalized in the life of the individual, used as a means toward other ends. The latter can be subdivided into extrinsic-personal, seeking religion for personal reasons (e.g., comfort, solace), and extrinsic-social, seeking religion for social reasons (e.g., friends, social status) (Kirkpatrick 1989).

Batson (1976; Batson, Shoenrade, and Ventis 1993) claims that Allport reduced a complex conceptualization of mature religious sentiment to a “single-minded commitment to religion” (Batson, Shoenrade, and Ventis 1993:158). He derived a third orthogonal religious orientation, quest, based on three criteria: (1) facing problems without reducing their complexity, (2) a readiness to doubt, and (3) openness to change. Quest has been suggested to reflect a search for meaning that is nonreligious (Watson et al. 1998; Donahue 1985a). Given that seminary students score higher on quest than nonseminary students (Batson and Shoenrade 1991), it may simply reflect the process of searching and movement toward mature religion fashioned within a “workshop of doubt,” but “successive acts of commitment... slowly strengthen the faith and cause the moments of doubt gradually to disappear” (Allport [1950] 1960:72, italics added).

If religious orientations are viewed as one’s attitude toward religion as opposed to religiosity per se (Donahue 1985a; Gorsuch 1994), they may reflect the integration of faith into identity. Indeed, identity commitment has been found to be positively correlated with an intrinsic religious orientation and inversely related to quest and extrinsic religious orientations (Watson et al. 1998). Foster and LaForce (1999), on the other hand, found that those considered diffuse in identity—having neither explored alternatives nor committed to a particular identity—were significantly higher on both intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations than those who were identity achieved (i.e., exploration and commitment). These contradictory findings may be a product of the way identity was measured, with the former assessing the degree to which Erikson’s identity stage has been resolved and the latter assessing qualitative distinctions in commitment. Neither, however, captures the essence of identity integration, given that an individual can be committed to religion without necessarily being intrinsic in religious orientation.

A number of studies have linked religious orientations to pro-social behavior, with the majority finding a positive relationship with an intrinsic religious orientation (Donahue 1985a; Kirkpatrick 1993). For example, prejudice has been found to be either negatively or have no relation with an intrinsic religious orientation. In contrast, the positive association between an extrinsic religious orientation and prejudice is indicative of “the sort of religion that gives religion a bad name” (Donahue 1985b:422). Both a quest and an intrinsic religious orientation have also
been associated with helping behavior (Batson 1976; Darley and Batson 1973). Although much of the research has been done using a paradigm requiring a spontaneous response to an emergency situation, similar differences are found in religious orientation in nonemergency situations (e.g., volunteering) (Bernt 1989). The measure of altruism in the present study contains items representing both emergency and nonemergency opportunities for helping behavior.

The present study is an investigation of the relations among identity integration, religious orientation, and moral reasoning, as well as the predictive power of these variables in relation to self-reported altruism. Using identity integration, as opposed to identity commitment, may address what appear to be contradictory findings in previous research. To date, no research has been reported concerning the relationship between identity integration and moral reasoning. Our focus is on young adults, as this is the period of life when individuals appear to experience the greatest amount of change in identity (Marcia et al. 1993).

**Method**

**Participants**

Sixty university undergraduates, evenly divided by gender, were recruited from the undergraduate psychology subject pool of a large Canadian university ($M = 20.7$ years, $SD = 4.54$). Although most of the sample was Canadian or European born ($n = 48$), there was a great deal of ethnic diversity (42 percent white, 48 percent Asian, 5 percent Arab, 3 percent East Indian, 2 percent African). Approximately half indicated diverse religious affiliations (40 percent Christian, 4 percent Buddhist, 3 percent Baha’i, 3 percent Sikh, 2 percent Muslim) and 48 percent no religious affiliation. In response to the question, “How interested in religion are you?” relatively few indicated having little or no interest in religion (13 percent endorsed), with the majority claiming to be moderately interested (60 percent), and a number being highly interested (27 percent).

**Procedure**

Participants were individually interviewed to assess identity integration and moral reasoning. Each interview was audiotaped. Participants completed the self-report measures following the interview. The interview components and self-report measures were partially counterbalanced to avoid carry-over effects.

**Measures**

**Identity Integration**

Blasi’s (Blasi and Milton 1991; Glodis and Blasi 1993) semi-structured “Sense of Self Interview” was used to assess identity integration (e.g., “Would you say that certain aspects of your self are more true and real than others?”). Interviews were scored directly from audiotape using a six-point global scoring system.

1. **Social role identity** is experienced externally, focusing on behavior and the frequency of behavior, social and family relationships.
2. Transitional mode (mixture of 1 and 3).
3. **Identity observed** is experienced as an “inner quasi substance,” with emotions at the core of identity and values derived from these emotions.
4. Transitional mode (mixture of 4 and 5).
5. Management of identity is marked by emotions being understood as transitory, and a genuine felt responsibility acting consistent with identity.

6. Identity as authenticity moves beyond (5) to include a concern that identity is constructed in relation to universal moral concerns.

A second rater independently scored 25 percent of the interviews, with 80 percent agreement for exact match (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.68$) and 93 percent agreement within one mode.

**Moral Reasoning**

Participants were asked to recall a moral dilemma they had personally experienced. General stage structure definitions as opposed to content were used in matching interview judgments to Colby and Kohlberg’s (1987) criterion judgments (see Walker et al. 1995). The interview judgment scores, combined to provide a distribution of percent usage at each stage, were used to calculate an overall weighted average score (WAS) to enable analysis as a continuous variable (potential range = 100 to 500). A second rater independently scored 25 percent of the interviews (interclass correlation: $r(14) = 0.83$; similar to Colby and Kohlberg 1987).

**Religious Orientations**

The I/E-Revised Scale (Gorsuch and McPherson 1989), consisting of eight intrinsic and six extrinsic items, and Batson’s revised 12-item Quest Scale (Batson, Shoenrade, and Ventis 1993) were used to measure religious orientations. Agreement with items was indicated on a seven-point Likert scale: 0 (extremely untrue of me) to 6 (extremely true of me). See Table 1 for reliability coefficients.

**Altruistic Behavior**

The 20-item Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRA) (Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken 1981) correlates with peer ratings of altruism. Participants reported the frequency of their altruistic behavior on a five-point scale: 1 (never), 2 (once), 3 (more than once), 4 (often), and 5 (very often). See Table 1 for reliability coefficients.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Religious interest</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.68***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Moral reasoning</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.48***</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>−0.15</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>−0.16</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Identity integration</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Intrinsic</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Extrinsic</td>
<td>(0.78)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Extrinsic-social</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Extrinsic-personal</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.37***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Quest</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Self-report altruism</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Note: Coefficient alphas, where applicable, are listed in parentheses. All are two-tailed correlational analyses.

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
**Socially Desirable Responding**

The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) (Paulhus 1991) differentiates self-deception (SDE), the tendency to unconsciously provide honest but positively biased self-reports, and impression management (IM), the deliberate overreporting of desirable and underreporting of undesirable behaviors. Unlike most measures of social desirability (Watson et al. 1986), the BIDR does not appear to be confounded with religion (Leak and Fish 1989). The SDE ($\alpha = 0.68$ to 0.80) and IM ($\alpha = 0.75$ to 0.86) subscales have been shown to have sufficient reliability and validity (Paulhus 1991). Agreement with items was indicated on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 (not true) to 7 (very true).

**RESULTS**

MANOVAs exploring the possibility of differences due to gender, order of the questionnaires, and order of interview components revealed no overall effects, $F(1, 58) = 1.30$, ns; $F(2, 57) = 1.21$, ns; and $F(1, 58) = 0.80$, ns, respectively. A MANOVA exploring the possibility of differences between participants who indicated some religious affiliation and those who did not was significant, $F(10, 48) = 375.63$, $p < 0.01$, with those indicating some religious affiliation higher on religious interest, $F(1, 58) = 5.27$, $p < 0.05$, and the intrinsic scale, $F(1, 58) = 20.56$, $p < 0.01$. Identity integration was significantly correlated with age, $r(58) = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$, but unrelated to years of education, $r(58) = 0.15$, ns. Moral reasoning was unrelated to age or years of education, $r(58) = 0.14$, ns, and $r(58) = 0.22$, $p < 0.10$, respectively.

Moral reasoning was positively correlated with identity integration ($r = 0.48$) and the intrinsic religious scale ($r = 0.28$), but was not significantly related to the quest or extrinsic religious scale (see Table 1). As predicted, identity integration was positively associated with the intrinsic religious scale ($r = 0.27$), but not with the quest or extrinsic religious scales. Interestingly, quest was positively correlated with an extrinsic religious orientation, the source of which was found in the extrinsic-personal scale ($r = 0.37$), suggesting a connection between seeking after religion for solace and a quest religious orientation. That religious interest was positively correlated with an intrinsic religious orientation ($r = 0.68$), but unrelated to quest or an extrinsic religious orientation, suggests that perhaps a high interest in religion is needed in order to cultivate an intrinsic religious orientation.

Self-reported altruism was positively correlated with the intrinsic religious scale ($r = 0.28$) but unrelated to the quest or extrinsic religious scales. The intrinsic religious scale and self-reported altruism only just remained significant after partialling out impression management ($r = 0.25$). Removing self-deception, however, led to a nonsignificant relationship, $r = 0.23$, ns, indicating that the intrinsic religious scale may be more vulnerable to unconscious positive presentation than to conscious deception. Identity integration ($r = 0.28$) and moral reasoning ($r = 0.36$) were also significantly related to self-reported altruism. Neither moral reasoning nor identity integration appeared to be significantly affected by conscious or unconscious self-presentation strategies.

We explored the extent to which moral reasoning, identity integration, and an intrinsic religious orientation independently account for variance in self-reported altruism using a hierarchical regression analysis. Moral reasoning entered first, proving to be the strongest predictor of self-reported altruism, $F(1, 58) = 8.77$, $p < 0.05$, followed by identity integration and the intrinsic religious orientation scale, with neither significantly adding to the model (see Table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

The present study was in response to the recent call to see moral functioning in the broader context of personality (Walker and Hennig 1997). Colby and Damon’s (1992) research indicated that there is a developmental process involving the fusing of moral and personal concerns or the
integration of moral knowledge into identity. In addition, their work raises questions concerning the role of faith or religion in moral life. It appears to be the integration of an individual’s beliefs into identity that is important.

Participants’ level of moral reasoning was positively associated with identity integration, indicating that moral cognition and altruism may be mediated by a sense of moral responsibility (Blasi 1995; Kohlberg and Candee 1984) that, in part, is a function of the degree to which moral concerns have been integrated into identity. Based on the current findings, we suggest that morality becomes more central to the lives of individuals as they develop in their moral reasoning. The developmental process whereby the separation between moral and personal concerns becomes lessened is thus a function of moral reasoning stage. Identity integration may simply be measuring the internalizing aspect of both moral development and identity. The metaphor of integration of moral concerns and identity, while theoretically meaningful, may become somehow lost in the measurement process. Lower-stage moral reasoning is an external morality of reward and punishment. At some point in development, identity and morality take up residence and are from then on “inner” as opposed to “outer.” The same underlying cognitive structures thus allow for both an interpersonal morality and a stable inner sense of identity (Rowe and Marcia 1980; Walker 1980).

A second possible explanation for the positive association between moral reasoning and identity integration may be found in the obligatory nature of moral judgment. Each successive stage of moral reasoning takes into account and balances a greater number of perspectives, making it more difficult to reason against conforming behavior to one’s moral judgments (Kohlberg and Candee 1984). As such, moral judgments become obligatory not just for oneself, but for others as well. If indeed moral motivation arises from the integration of moral cognition, identity integration would not add to the prediction of altruistic behavior after controlling for moral stage, as was the case in the present study.

Nevertheless, moral reasoning accounts for only a small portion of variance in altruism. The integration of nonmoral aspects of identity may have some moral sway. Other areas of identity may compete with moral identity, leading individuals to choose a course of action at odds with what seems to be the most central moral concern (see Nisan 1993). As well, previously integrated moral concerns could influence which moral concern will be cultivated and give precedence in one’s self-concept (Blasi 1995). Colby and Damon’s (1992) research suggests that faith or religion, as an integral part of identity, could play such a role in moral functioning, essentially filtering and shaping moral concerns.

The current research helps shed some light on the somewhat equivocal results of previous research that used measures of identity commitment (see Watson et al. 1998; Foster and LaForce 1999). The measure of identity integration used in the present study appears to capture the essence of an intrinsic religious orientation and, vice versa, the intrinsic religious scale appears to be a

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral reasoning</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.362*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral reasoning</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.261*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity integration</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic religious orientation</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05.
Evidence for this comes from the positive correlations among identity integration, moral reasoning, and the intrinsic religious orientation scale. What is yet to be determined is whether the extrinsic religious scale merely correlates with identity commitment and not identity integration or if it is the poor reliability of the I/E-revised extrinsic religious orientation scale failing to produce the information needed to reach similar conclusions.

There appears to be something positive about not only being religious, but approaching religion with a certain orientation. Self-reported altruism showed a low positive correlation with the intrinsic religious orientation scale, but was not correlated with the quest and extrinsic religious scales. Interestingly, identity integration and an intrinsic religious orientation appear to be equally positively correlated with altruistic behavior, suggesting that the source of this relationship is found in identity integration. Identity integration would seem to be a more robust measure, given that the intrinsic religious scale was essentially unrelated to self-reported altruism after partialling out impression management and self-deception.

Although integrating religious values or the moral component of religion into identity may act as a moral motivator, the intrinsic and extrinsic religious scales may not be the best measure of such integration. Rather, they may simply reflect more general motivational styles in a religious form (Gorsuch 1994). Slightly altering the scales to reflect nonreligious content (e.g., non-Christian) or a different ideology (e.g., communism) produces similar results to North American Christian samples (Gorsuch 1994; Gorsuch et al. 1997).

Deci and Ryan (1985) suggest that there is a continuum of motivational styles moving from extrinsic to intrinsic that has nothing to do with particular content. Their control causality orientation—motivation based on compliance with rules and regulations (i.e., interpersonal) or avoidance of guilt and anxiety (i.e., intra-personal)—has been found to correlate with an extrinsic religious orientation, whereas an autonomy causality orientation—the initiation and regulation of one’s own behavior is perceived as self-governed—correlates with an intrinsic religious orientation (Ryan, Rigby, and King 1993). As well, an autonomy orientation appears to be positively, and control motivation inversely, associated with better school performance, lower drop-out rates, medication adherence, lower depression and anxiety, ego development (thought to reflect a unified and integrated sense of self), and principled moral reasoning (Deci and Ryan 1985; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996; Miserandino 1996; Ryan and Connell 1989; Vallerand and Bissonnette 1992; Williams et al. 1998).

Limited variability among individuals of the same age on developmental variables in the current sample may have attenuated some of the correlations and hampered their ability to contribute to the regression model. Although the size of the relationship between moral reasoning and self-report altruism found here is comparable to that found in meta-analyses (e.g., Buchanan 1992) and the self-report altruism scale correlates adequately with observation and peer nominations (Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken 1981), the accuracy of self-reported morality is dubious at best.

Mediating variables other than identity need to be sought given that identity occurs rather late in life (Blasi 1993) and seems to account for only a fraction of the variability in moral behavior. Trait approaches have shown some promise in this regard (Matsuba and Walker 2004; Walker 1999), as has attachment theory (Matsuba et al. 2001). The Kohlbergian tradition has narrowly focused on cognitive and personality characteristics that provide greater ego strength, while only recently beginning to look at what may draw upon or compete with carrying out a particular moral judgment (e.g., Matsuba and Walker 1998; Nisan 1993). More research investigating personality variables that motivate and compete with moral judgment is needed.

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