Why general moral values do not predict specific moral behavior in real life

A Conceptual Analysis and Exploratory Empirical Study

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Summary

Within the behavioral sciences, people's **general moral values** are routinely presented as determinants of behavior in daily life[1234]. In this study we explore this **relationship between general moral values and daily life behavior** through **a conceptual analysis** and an **exploratory empirical study.**

Our **conceptual analysis shows** that the effect of one's general moral value on moral behavior requires the materialization of several phases of moral decision making, each influenced by **many contextual factors**. We expect that this renders **the relationship indeterminate.**

We **empirically** explore the relationship **in three studies**. We relate two different widely used measures of **general** moral values – **Moral foundation questionnaire**[5] and **Morality as cooperation questionnaire**[3]- and a measure of **context specific** values to a set of self-reported morally relevant daily life behaviors (including **adherence to Covid-19 measures**).

Our results show only **very weak associations between general moral values and the selected behaviors**. The context specific moral values are somewhat stronger predictors.

In line with the conceptual analysis, our results suggest **that general moral values are poor predictors of moral behavior in daily life**. A likely explanation lies in **the contextual nature of moral decision making.**

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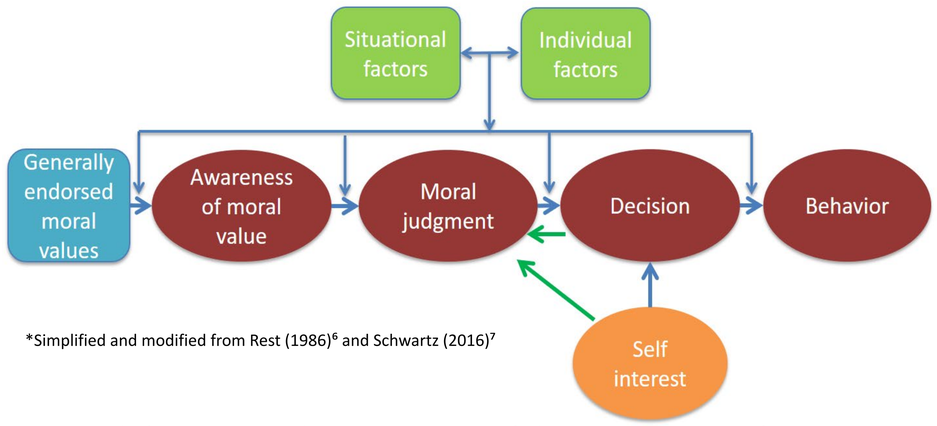
Conceptual analysis

Model of ethical decision making*

An indeterminate route from someone's generally endorsed moral values to someone's behavior



*Simplified and modified from Rest (1986)[6] and Schwartz (2016)[7]

- Moral decision making consists of **four phases** (red)
- One's general moral value needs to go through and affect **all four**, before it can influence behavior
- Every phase is influenced by many **contextual factors**
- This renders the relationship between general moral values and behavior **indeterminate**

Method empirical studies

- Three studies based on three different datasets (Study 1 and 3: existing data from the LISS-panel; Study 2: own data collection, convenience sample)
- General moral values were measured with the **Moral Foundation Questionnaire** (study 1 and 3) and the **Morality as Cooperation Questionnaire** (study 2); Specific moral values with an animal welfare specific moral foundation questionnaire[8] (study 3)
- Different morally relevant behaviors in daily life were measured (self-report)
- Analysis method: **Multiple Linear Regression Analysis**
- In all analyses we controlled for **age, gender, and education**.
- Limitation: not all items and measurement constructs of the used moral scales were available

Results

Study 1: general moral values → voluntary work and informal care (n=2320)

participation in voluntary behavior	Model 1	
	Beta	p-value
Individualizing moral foundation	0.039	0.062
R-square change (sign. change)	0.002	(0.062)
providing informal care	**Model 2**	
	Beta	p-value
Individualizing moral foundation	0.027	0.196
R-square change (sign. change)	0.001	(0.196)

Study 2: general moral values → adherence to Covid19 measures (n=1,396)

Personal hygiene	Model 1	
	Beta	p-value
Group loyalty	**0.076**	0.009
Reciprocity	-0.013	0.644
Deference	0.011	0.689
Fairness	**0.100**	0.000
R-square change (sign. change)	0.018	0.000
Not visiting the vulnerable	**Model 2**	
	Beta	P-value
Group loyalty	**0.061**	0.042
Reciprocity	-0.001	0.968
Deference	-0.053	0.062
Fairness	**0.082**	0.003
R-square change (sign. change)	0.013	0.001
Social distancing	**Model 3**	
	Beta	P-value
Group loyalty	**0.067**	0.023
Reciprocity	**-0.065**	0.026
Deference	0.013	0.644
Fairness	**0.147**	0.000
R-square change (sign. change)	0.027	0.000

Study 3: general and specific moral values → meat consumption (n=2,379)

consumption of chicken meat	Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	p-value	Beta	p-value
Individualizing moral foundation	0.009	0.665	0.025	0.247
Animal welfare specific individualizing moral foundation			**-0.066**	0.002
R-square (r-square change)	0.000	0.665	0.004	0.002
consumption of meat replacement products	**Model 3**		**Model 4**	
	Beta	p-value	Beta	p-value
Individualizing moral foundation	**0.074**	0.000	0.020	0.322
Animal-specific individualizing moral foundation			**0.225**	0.000
R-square (r-square change)	0.005	0.000	0.047	0.000

*The R-square change indicates the additional effect of the moral predictors compared to the model consisting of only control variables. Except for those of model 2 and 4 of study 3, there it indicates the additional effect of adding the specific animal welfare predictor to the model with the general moral value and control variables as predictors.

Conclusion

- The found **effects are (very) weak**, with the largest being 0.15 and the majority well under 0.1
- This suggests that general moral values are **poor predictors** of specific moral behavior in daily life
- Our conceptual analysis and findings in study 3 suggest that **morality's influence on behavior is too context specific** for a general questionnaire to grasp
- The implicit assumption of many moral value theories that general moral values influence behavior is unfounded
- We should **reconsider general moral value theories, such as Moral Foundation Theory**