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The centrality of remembered moral and immoral actions in constructing personal identity

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ABSTRACT

There is a widespread belief that morally good traits and qualities are particularly central to psychological constructions of personal identity. People have a strong tendency to believe that they truly are morally good. We suggest that autobiographical memories of past events involving moral actions may inform how we come to believe that we are morally good. In two studies, we investigated the role of remembered past events involving moral and immoral actions in constructing perceived personal identity. For morally right actions only, we found that remembered actions judged to be more morally right relative to less morally right were more central to personal identity (Study 1). We then found that remembered morally right actions were more central to personal identity than remembered morally wrong actions (Study 2). We discuss these findings in relation to recent research on morality and personal identity.
this self-definitional function, memories are often mentally linked together and organised into a life narrative (Bluck & Habermas, 2000). When recalling and interpreting the significance of past events, our especially morally right actions may be particularly important for defining who we are and who we wish to be, and for constructing these life narratives. By coming to believe that our past morally good behaviours are particularly central to our life stories and personal identities, we may come to view ourselves as morally good and as the possessors of positive moral traits (e.g., honesty, fairness, compassion, kindness).

Despite the common belief that they are fundamentally and essentially morally good, people still behave immorally with surprising frequency (Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014), and they can readily recall committing many different moral transgressions (Stanley & De Brigard, 2019). Some of these transgressions they even judge to be severely morally wrong (Stanley, Henne, Iyengar, Sinnott-Armstrong, & De Brigard, 2017, 2019). By coming to believe that our past morally good actions are more central to and representative of who we truly are relative to our past immoral actions, we may come to believe that we are indeed morally good— even though we frequently transgress.

To investigate the centrality of remembered moral and immoral actions in constructing personal identity, we utilised the Centrality of Event Scale (CES), originally developed to measure the extent to which a traumatic memory represents a reference point for personal identity (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006). The CES includes items that ask participants about the extent to which specific past events have become anchors for their personal identities, reference points for the ways they understand themselves, and central parts of their life stories. The CES is not specific to negative or traumatic memories, however, and the measure has also been used to assess the centrality of remembered emotionally positive events (Zaragoza Scherman, Salgado, Shao, & Berntsen, 2015), imagined future events (Rubin, Berntsen, Deffler, & Brodar, 2019), and vicarious memories (Pillemer, Stein, Kuwabara, Thomsen, & Svob, 2015). The more central an event is, the more integrated it is into a person’s identity and life story, guiding both past and future interpretations of personal experiences (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, 2007; Rubin, Boals, & Berntsen, 2008). Nevertheless, the CES has yet to be used to investigate the centrality of events that involve morality.

Our overarching goal is to investigate the centrality of remembered events involving morally right and wrong actions in constructing personal identity. Study 1 investigates whether, for morally right actions only, remembered actions judged to be more morally right relative to less morally right are more central to personal identity. Study 2 investigates whether remembered morally right actions are more central to personal identity than remembered morally wrong actions.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants were asked to recall five of their own past morally right actions. For each memory, participants indicated just how morally right they believed the action was, and they completed the CES. We hypothesised that remembered past actions judged to be more morally right (relative to less morally right) will be more central to personal identity and to the life story.

Materials and method

Participants

Sixty-five American residents voluntarily participated in this study via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (AMT) for monetary compensation. Participant recruitment was restricted to those who had at least 50 previously accepted HITs and a prior approval rating above 90%. Four participants were excluded for not answering all questions or for failing the attention check at the end. As such, data were analysed with the remaining 61 participants (Mage = 35.03, SD = 9.14, age range = [22, 65], 25 females, 36 males). All participants reported being fluent English speakers. For both studies reported here, informed consent was obtained from each participant in accordance with protocol approved by the Duke University Campus Institutional Review Board. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions for both studies.

Materials

The Centrality of Event Scale (CES; Berntsen & Rubin, 2006, 2007) was devised to measure the extent to which a memory forms a central component of personal identity, a turning point in the life story, and a reference point for everyday inferences. The CES consists of 20 items rated on 5-point scales (1 = totally disagree; 5 = totally agree). The scale only has a single underlying factor (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006) and was reliable (α = .98).5

Procedure

The study was a single, self-paced session. Participants were asked to recall five distinct past events, one at a time, in which they did something morally right. To help participants recall these events, they were told that the remembered morally right actions might involve, but are not limited to, helping, honesty, loyalty, and fairness. Participants were also instructed that each remembered event must be specific in time and place. For each remembered event, participants briefly described the event in 2–5 sentences and indicated how morally right their action was on a scale from 1 (slightly morally right) to 5 (very morally right); after making the moral judgment, participants completed the CES.

After making all ratings for all five memories, participants were asked the following: do you feel that you paid attention, avoided distractions, and took the survey seriously? They responded by selecting one of the
following: (1) no, I was distracted; (2) no, I had trouble paying attention; (3) no, I did not take the study seriously; (4) no, something else affected my participation negatively; or (5) yes. Participants were assured that their responses would not affect their payment or eligibility for future studies. Only those participants who selected “5” were included in the analyses (see exclusions above). Upon completion, participants were monetarily compensated for their time.

Data analyses
Data were analysed using R (R Development Core Team, 2009) with the “lme4” software package (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015). Data were fit to linear mixed-effects models (LMM), and subject was included as a random effect (random intercepts and slopes were included) in all models. Significance for fixed effects was assessed using Satterthwaite approximations to degrees of freedom, and 95% confidence intervals around beta-values were computed using parametric bootstrapping.4 The alpha level for all statistical tests was set at .05.

Results and discussion
The described events covered diverse kinds of behaviour, including: returning lost possessions (e.g., wallets, rings) to their owners, volunteering at animal shelters, giving food and money to the homeless, giving extra money back to cashiers, donating to charity, caring for sick friends and family, etc. The mean value of the CES was 2.56 (SD = .98), and the mean value of moral rightness ratings was 4.44 (SD = .45). A linear mixed-effects model revealed that the more morally right the remembered past action was judged to be, the more central the event was perceived to be (b = .29, SE = .07, t = 3.97, p < .001, 95% CI = [.15,.43]). This result corroborates our hypothesis that remembered past actions judged to be more morally right (relative to less morally right) are also perceived as more central to personal identity and to the life story.

Study 2
The primary purpose of Study 2 is to directly compare the centrality of the most morally right and the most morally wrong past actions participants can remember. We hypothesised that the most morally right remembered actions will be more central than the most morally wrong remembered actions. We also attempt to replicate the basic effect obtained from Study 1: that more morally right remembered actions tend to be more central than less morally right remembered actions. Finally, we also statistically account for possible differences in emotional arousal associated with the memories. To this end, participants provide ratings of emotional arousal, and we use these ratings as statistical controls in LMER models.

Materials and method
Participants
Two-hundred twenty American residents voluntarily participated in this study via AMT for monetary compensation. Participant recruitment was restricted to those with at least 50 previously accepted HITs and a prior approval rating above 90%. Twenty participants were excluded for not answering all questions or for failing the attention check. As such, data were analysed with the remaining 200 participants (M_age = 34.82, SD = 10.54, age range = [21,72], 72 females, 128 males). All participants reported being fluent English speakers.

Materials
The 20-item CES used in Study 1 was also used in Study 2 (see Table 1 for reliabilities).

Procedure
The study was a single, self-paced session. Participants were asked to recall four distinct events, one at a time, from their personal pasts. They were instructed that each remembered event must be specific in time and place. Participants were provided with a unique cue for each of the four memories: (1) recall the most morally right thing you have done in your past, (2) recall the most morally wrong thing you have done in your past, (3) recall a slightly morally wrong thing you have done in your past, and (4) recall a slightly morally right thing you have done in your past. This yielded a 2 (moral valence: morally right versus morally wrong) × 2 (moral intensity: most morally right/ wrong versus slightly morally right/wrong) within-subjects design. The order in which the four different memory cues were presented was randomised across participants. In cases in which participants were instructed to describe their morally right remembered behaviours, we explicitly instructed them to recall morally right behaviours – regardless of the cued moral intensity on the particular trial (i.e., regardless of whether participants were asked to provide a slightly or very morally right remembered behaviour). And in cases in which participants were instructed to describe their morally wrong remembered behaviours, we explicitly instructed them to recall morally wrong behaviours – regardless of the cued moral intensity on the particular trial (i.e., regardless of whether participants were asked to provide a slightly or very morally wrong remembered behaviour). To help participants recall events, they were told that remembered morally right actions might involve, but are not limited to, helping, honesty, loyalty, and fairness, and that morally wrong actions might

| Table 1. CES means, standard deviations, and reliabilities in Study 2. |
|-----------------|-----|-----|
| CES, most morally right | 3.00 | 1.00 | 96  |
| CES, slightly morally right | 1.93 | .88  | 97  |
| CES, slightly morally wrong | 1.80 | .84  | 97  |
| CES, most morally wrong   | 2.64 | 1.05 | 97  |
involve, but are not limited to, harm, dishonesty, disloyalty, and unfairness.

For each remembered event, participants briefly described the event in 2–5 sentences and made a rating for emotional arousal associated with each memory (1 = not at all emotionally intense, 5 = very emotionally intense). As a manipulation check, for the two morally right remembered actions, participants indicated how morally right the actions were on a scale from 1 (slightly morally right) to 5 (very morally right); for the two morally wrong remembered actions, participants indicated how morally wrong the actions were on a scale from 1 (slightly morally wrong) to 5 (very morally wrong). Then, participants completed the CES.

Participants then answered the same attention check question that was in Study 1. We excluded participants who reported being distracted, having trouble paying attention, failing to avoid distractions, and not taking the survey seriously (see exclusions above). Upon completion, participants were monetarily compensated for their time.

Data analyses
The same statistical software used in Study 1 were also used in Study 2.

Results and discussion
Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities are presented in Table 1. The described morally right behaviours were similar in kind to those in Study 1, and they included: returning lost possessions (e.g., wallets, rings) to their owners, rescuing injured animals, giving food, clothing, and money to the homeless, giving extra money back to cashiers, donating to charity, giving money to friend in financial trouble, caring for sick friends and family, etc. The described morally wrong behaviours were also diverse, including: physically harming other people, cheating on significant others, breaking promises to friends and family, shoplifting, stealing money, cheating on college exams, etc.

An initial LMEM was computed to verify that remembered actions generated from the most morally right cue were, in fact, rated as more morally right than remembered actions generated from the slightly morally right cue. This expectation was confirmed \( b = 1.42, SE = .10, t = 14.43, p < .001, 95\% CI = [1.22,1.61] \). Similarly, a second LMEM was computed to verify that remembered actions generated from the most morally wrong cue were, in fact, rated as more morally wrong than remembered actions generated from the slightly morally wrong cue. This expectation was also confirmed \( b = 1.94, SE = .10, t = 18.51, p < .001, 95\% CI = [1.72,2.14] \).

Next, we computed a LMEM that included moral valence (morally right coded as 0 versus morally wrong coded as 1) and moral intensity (slightly morally right/wrong coded as 0 versus most morally right/wrong coded as 1) as fixed factors, and event centrality served as the outcome variable. There was no significant effect of moral valence \( (b = - .13, SE = .07, t = - .90, p = .365, 95\% CI = [.27,0.00]) \), but there was a significant effect of moral intensity \( (b = 1.07, SE = .07, t = 15.01, p < .001, 95\% CI = [.93,1.21]) \), suggesting that the most morally right/wrong remembered actions are associated with higher CES scores than slightly morally right/wrong remembered actions. However, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction between moral valence and moral intensity \( (b = - .22, SE = .10, t = - 2.24, p = .026, 95\% CI = [-.43,.03]) \). A similar pattern of effects was obtained after statistically controlling for emotional arousal ratings associated with each memory, although the main effect of moral valence reached statistical significance after including emotional arousal in the model (see Table 2).

To further interrogate the interaction effect, we first computed separate follow-up LMEMs for remembered morally right and morally wrong actions, separately. The primary purpose of these follow-up tests was to replicate the effect in Study 1: that the more morally right a remembered behaviour is judged to be (only among past behaviours judged to be morally right at least to some degree), the more central it is to personal identity and the life story. So, we first compared CES scores for slightly morally right versus the most morally right remembered actions. Then, we compared CES scores for slightly morally wrong versus the most morally wrong remembered actions. For remembered morally right actions, the most morally right remembered actions were more central than slightly morally right remembered actions \( (b = 1.07, SE = .07, t = 14.29, p < .001, 95\% CI = [.93,1.21]) \). This effect held after statistically controlling for the emotional arousal associated with each remembered event \( (b = .29, SE = .09, t = 3.18, p = .002, 95\% CI = [.10,4.8]) \). These results corroborate our hypothesis that remembered past actions judged to be more morally right (relative to less morally right) are also judged as more central to personal identity and to the life story. For the sake of completeness, we also investigated the effect of moral intensity for remembered morally wrong behaviours only. We found that the most morally wrong remembered actions were more central than slightly morally wrong remembered actions \( (b = .84, SE = .07, t = 11.86, p < .001, 95\% CI = [.71,99]) \). This effect held after statistically controlling for the emotional arousal associated with each remembered event \( (b = .18, SE = .08, t = 2.14, p = .033, 95\% CI = [.01,3.5]) \).

Next, we computed separate follow-up LMEMs within the different moral intensities. That is, we first compared CES scores for participants’ most morally right versus

| Table 2. Full results from the linear mixed-effects model in Study 2. |
|-------------------------|---|-----|---|---|
|                         | b  | SE  | t   | 95% CI  |
| Moral Valence           | .16| .06 | -2.52 | .012 [−.28,−.04] |
| Moral Intensity         | .41| .08 | 5.41 | < .001 [.26,.57] |
| Emotional Arousal       | .37| .02 | 16.22| < .001 [32,41]   |
| Moral Valence × Moral Intensity | .19| .09 | −2.08| .037 [−.38,−.01] |
most morally wrong remembered actions. This addresses the primary hypothesis in Study 2: that participants’ most morally right remembered actions will be more central to personal identity and the life story than their most morally wrong remembered actions. Then, for the sake of completeness, we compared CES scores for the slightly morally right versus the slightly morally wrong remembered actions. Corroborating our primary hypothesis, the results indicate that the most morally right remembered actions were more central than the most morally wrong remembered actions ($b = -0.36$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -4.60$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [−.51,−.21]). This effect held after statistically controlling for the emotional arousal associated with each remembered event ($b = -0.35$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = -4.68$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [−.50,−.20]). Second, slightly morally right remembered actions were more central than slightly morally wrong remembered actions ($b = -0.13$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -2.96$, $p = .003$, 95% CI = [−.23,−.04]). This effect held after statistically controlling for the emotional arousal associated with each remembered event ($b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -3.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [−.24,−.08]).

**General discussion**

In two studies, we investigated the role of remembered past events involving moral and immoral actions in constructing personal identity. For morally right actions, we found that remembered actions judged to be more morally right relative to less morally right were more central to personal identity (Study 1). We then found that remembered morally right actions were more central to personal identity than remembered morally wrong actions – even after statistically controlling for emotional arousal (Study 2). Replications of these effects are provided in the Supplemental Results. Taking these studies together, specific memories of our especially morally good actions are more likely to help in defining who we believe ourselves to be than specific memories of our less morally good actions and our moral transgressions. These findings provide some insights into longstanding questions about memory, morality, and personal identity.

Accumulating empirical evidence suggests that people tend to believe that moral traits and qualities are more central, or essential, to personal identity than other features of our mental lives, such as preferences, desires, emotions, and even memories (De Freitas, Cikara, Grossmann, & Schlegel, 2017; Strohminger et al., 2017). Some have argued that the belief in a “good true self” is a form of psychological essentialism, or “the basic cognitive tendency to assume that all entities have deep, unobservable, inherent properties that comprise their true nature” (De Freitas et al., 2017, p. 634; see also, De Freitas et al., 2018; De Freitas & Cikara, 2018; Strohminger et al., 2017). We suggest that theorists can readily accept this theoretical position regarding the morally good true self while still maintaining that memory plays an important role in constructing and fostering personal identity. Remembering, reflecting on, and interpreting the significance of past events may serve as a complementary means of fostering a morally good sense of self. Our memories of past events provide the concrete evidence for our beliefs about our moral goodness.

The fact that participants rated their morally praiseworthy deeds as more central than their moral transgressions may also reflect a self-enhancement or self-protection bias. People tend to remember the personal past in a way that facilitates the construction of a favourable view of the self in the present (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Wilson & Ross, 2001, 2003). These self-enhancement and self-protection motives play a role in how we remember our moral transgressions and how we come to interpret their significance (Stanley & De Brigard, 2019). For instance, when remembering immoral actions from their personal pasts, people judge their own transgressions to be less morally wrong than those of others, and they perceive personal moral improvement over time (Stanley et al., 2017, 2019; Stanley & De Brigard, 2019). Judging past morally praiseworthy actions as more central to the life story and personal identity than immoral actions may foster a favourable view of the self as morally good, helping people to self-enhance or self-protect.

**Limitations and future Directions**

Our experimental design and research questions raise a question about the relationship between emotional valence and moral valence. We suggest that it should not be assumed a priori that emotional valence and moral valence are capturing the same variance. Most of us have had emotionally positive experiences during which we did something morally wrong. To provide a specific example, a participant described an event in which they took a tip at work that they were not allowed to take, and it was described as a positive experience; nevertheless, the participant believed that the action was morally wrong. Moreover, most of us have had an emotionally negative experience during which we did something morally right. For example, a participant described lending a helping hand to a friend who was repairing his damaged roof on a hot summer day. This experience might have been difficult and negative, but the helping behaviour was reported to be morally right. In practice, moral and emotional valence might be correlated, but there are many cases in which moral and emotional valence come apart. Future research will more systematically explore cases in which moral and emotional valence come apart, and cases in which they do not.

Our sample comprised American residents recruited on AMT, and we included no individual difference measures in our studies. Future work will address individual differences and cross-cultural differences in understanding the relationship between remembered moral
actions and personal identity. For instance, the particular kinds of remembered morally right behaviours that are most important for constructions of personal identity may vary across cultures and individuals. Research has shown that there are at least two clusters of moral values, or foundations: “individualising” values of caring and fairness, and “binding” values of loyalty, obedience, and purity (Graham et al., 2011; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Because liberals tend to care more about individualising values than conservatives (Graham et al., 2009), remembered behaviours involving individualising values may be most important for constructing personal identity for liberals.

Notes

1. For our purposes, “personal identity” refers to a first-person subjective judgment about what makes a person think that they are the same or different over time. We do not use “personal identity” to refer to a metaphysical claim about what makes a person the same or different over time, or an epistemic claim about whether or not a person is justified in claiming to be the same person over time.

2. To our knowledge, at the time of writing, there is no widely accepted method for conducting a priori power analyses with linear mixed-effects models that include both random intercepts and slopes. Our sample size was chosen in order to obtain a similar number of memories as in recent investigations of memory, morality, and personal identity that involved linear mixed-effects models (Stanley et al., 2017).

3. Because each participant generated five memories, we also randomly selected one memory from each participant to compute an α value. Then, of the four remaining memories from each participant, we randomly selected one more memory from each of them to compute another α value. We then repeated this for the remaining memories generated by each participant. These five different α values ranged from .96 to .98.

4. 95% CIs around beta-values offer, on our view, the best available indication of effect size for LMER models.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, MLS, upon request.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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