

Personnel Information

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Vulnerable Subject Checklist

College Students

Internet-based research

General Checklist

None

Funding

MAP Lab Funds

Expedited Review

7. Research on individual characteristics or behavior...

Research Design

Study Title: Agency and Communion as Motivators for Moral Disengagement

Study Start Date: 09/01/2016

Study End Date: 11/01/2016

1. Introduction and Background

a) State the problem and hypothesis

Agency and communion have been said to comprise the “duality of human existence.” (Bakan, 1966) As individuals develop, they are faced with the task of striking a balance between these two competing needs. Past research has suggested that people who act in an exceptionally moral way often possess high levels of both agency and communion that are integrated within their personality. (Frimer et. al., 2011) Moreover, some argue that self-interested goals motivated by agency are incompatible with moral values. (Aquino et. al., 2009) Indeed, unmitigated agency and unmitigated communion have been associated with other negative outcomes like relationship difficulties and poor health. (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999) This study seeks to further investigate the relationship between agency and communion and moral behavior. Specifically, we are attempting to link an individual’s level of agency or communion with the likelihood of engaging in moral disengagement strategies in the service of achieving a goal. We hypothesize that if agency or communion levels are high enough, they will serve as motivating factors to achieve a goal in line with one’s personality, no matter the moral cost. We expect that an individual who is high in agency would be willing to morally disengage in order to achieve an agentic goal, whereas an individual who is high in communion would be willing to morally disengage in order to achieve a communal goal. However, if an individual possess high moral identity centrality, these effects would be buffered. For example, moral identity would prevent a person who is high in agency from morally disengaging on an agentic task on which they otherwise typically would.

b) Provide the scientific or scholarly reason for this study and background on the topic

Agency and communion are fundamental traits that have been shown to motivate social behavior and goals. (Hegelson, 1994) Agency generally reflects independence, dominance, and achievement, while communion reflects interpersonal relatedness and caring. (Fritz, 2000) Normal levels of agency and communion have been associated with positive outcomes in health and well-being. (Hegelson & Fritz, 1999) The ability to integrate both agency and communion in one’s personality has been linked to exceptional moral behavior. (Frimer et. al., 2011) On the other hand, when one trait or the other takes over, it is termed “unmitigated” and is linked to more maladaptive outcomes. Unmitigated agency has been linked to excessive control, while unmitigated communion has been linked to submission and overinvolvement. (Fritz & Hegelson, 1998) However, there has been little research exploring the potential for maladaptive levels of agency and communion to negatively impact *moral* behavior. This study will look into that potential relationship.

Moral disengagement is the process of convincing oneself that moral standards don’t apply in a certain situation, so as to allow for immoral behavior without self-condemnation. (Bandura, 1996.) It is suggested that if motivation is strong enough, an individual will morally disengage in order to complete a certain task or perform a certain behavior, even if it goes against their traditional moral standards. Thus, moral disengagement can serve to produce negative outcomes in moral behavior. For example, when people justify to themselves the

rightness of their actions by portraying it as serving some greater social purpose, they become willing to act in service of that purpose (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). Such disengagement as diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims have shown to lead to a disinhibition of aggression resulting in punitive behaviors. (Bandura et.al., 1975) Therefore, we see the potential for a yet-unexplored link between maladaptive levels of agency and communion and such moral disengagement. If agency or communion are so prominent in a person's personality, they may serve to help people justify to themselves immoral behavior that serves the purpose of promoting their agency or communion.

On the other hand, moral identity is a self-regulatory concept that works to promote moral behavior. (Blasi, 1984) For some people, moral identity is a central tenet of their self-identity. They see "being a moral person" as extremely important in their everyday lives. Because of this, these people are more likely to complete moral actions. (Aquino & Reed, 2002) Thus, moral identity centrality can serve as a buffer against moral disengagement. For example, people with a strong moral identity are less willing to promote derogation toward members of an out-group (Smith et. al., 2014). Furthermore, a strong moral identity served to weaken the link between moral disengagement and aggression in adolescents (Hardy et. al., 2014) Because of these effects, we suspect that moral identity would serve to buffer against the potential for moral disengagement brought about by maladaptive levels of agency and communion.

Combining these concepts creates the potential to find a new, interesting link between agency and communion and moral behavior. Although we suspect high levels of agency or communion may lead to moral disengagement to achieve certain goals, moral identity should serve to moderate those effects.

2. Specific Aims/Study Objectives

- a) List the purpose(s) of the study (what are you hoping to learn as a result of the study)

The purpose of the study is to gain insight into the power that agency and communion can have as motivators toward immoral behavior. We hope to show that being too self-oriented or too others-oriented can have negative consequences in the moral realm. This will add to current research that explores potential negative outcomes resulting from maladaptive levels of agency and communion, but apply it in the moral realm. Furthermore, we hope to add to the robust literature suggesting moral identity centrality can serve as a buffer against moral disengagement.

3. Materials, Methods and Analysis (quantitative and qualitative)

- a) Describe data collection methods. (Procedure) Be specific.

A goal sample size of 350 participants will be recruited through SONA. They will be given a collection of surveys distributed through the online survey system Qualtrics. Data collection will occur throughout the first half of the Fall 2016 semester.

- b) Describe the specific materials or tools that will be used to collect the data—be specific.

We will use the Extended Version of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence et. al., 1979) to assess the participants' levels of agency and communion. This scale can detect agency, communion, and unmitigated agency. To also assess potential unmitigated communion, participants will be given the Unmitigated Communion Scale (Hegelson, 1993). We will then measure participants' self-importance of moral identity using the Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002). We will then assess participants' tendencies toward moral disengagement with the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et. al., 1996). Finally, participants will be given two tasks to potentially elicit moral disengagement towards agentic and communal goals. Each participant will receive both tasks, but the order in which they are received will be randomized across participants. In the first task, participants will be given a list of five words to unscramble in four minutes. They will be told that for each word that they successfully unscramble, their name will be entered once into a lottery to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. They will self-report how many anagrams they solved, so they could potentially seek to earn 5 entries into the drawing. However, three of the letter combinations given will be unsolvable, so any participant who self-reports a number over two has cheated. Regardless of the number reported, all participants will be entered into the drawing once. Since the participants' goal in this task is to earn money for himself, this task is considered agentic. If a participant cheats on the task, it is determined that they morally disengaged to achieve an agentic goal. Similarly, the next task will give participants the opportunity to morally disengage in order to achieve a communal goal. In this task, participants will be given another list of five words to unscramble in four minutes. This time, they will be told that for every word that they successfully unscramble, the name of a charity of their choice will be entered into a drawing to receive an anonymous cash donation of \$100. As in the previous task, only two anagrams are solvable, so if the participant self-reports solving more than two, we can conclude that they cheated. Thus, they morally disengaged in order to achieve the communal goal of donating money to charity. Regardless of the self-report results, each charity will be entered once into a drawing and a single \$100 donation will be made to the winning charity. Once data is obtained, preliminary correlations and descriptive statistics will be analyzed. Then we will run a set of moderation analyses to investigate interaction effects using regression.

4. Qualifications of Study Personnel

- a) Explain the study-specific expertise of the principal investigator, any co-investigators, or other key personnel listed in the application.

Alyssa Schlotman is a third-year undergraduate student who has worked in the Moral & Adolescent Psychology Lab for four semesters, has completed CITI training, and has been trained in the use of Qualtrics. She has spent two years studying the background literature pertaining to this study. Dan Lapsley is a professor and chair of the Department of Psychology. He is a renowned expert in moral and adolescent psychology and has decades of research experience and publications to his name. Ryan Woodbury is a graduate student expert in quantitative data analysis and research in moral psychology.

- b) **Student Researcher Only:** Describe the expertise you have, or have access to, that prepares you to conduct research in this location and/or with this subject population, including specific qualifications.

I have been working in the Moral & Adolescent Psychology Lab since Fall 2014. This experience has taught me how to navigate the research process as I have assisted others with their research projects prior to starting my own, have participated in weekly lab meetings, and have conducted literature reviews. I have spent two years becoming familiar with the literature in moral psychology and agency and communion. Furthermore, as a Neuroscience major I have taken numerous Psychology courses giving me insight into the theories behind the research. I also will be guided experienced mentors, Dan Lapsley and Ryan Woodbury.

5. General Study Information

- a) Why is this study being conducted?

Faculty/Staff Research, Undergraduate Coursework, Senior Thesis

6. Research Population & Recruitment Methods

- a) Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study will be open to anyone over the age of 18 who is willing to participate and has given informed consent.

- b) What is the scientific or scholarly justification for the number, gender, age, or race of the population you intend to recruit?

Participants will not be selected for based on gender or race; ideally there will be a diverse spread of both. The participants will be over the age of 18 because they are being recruited as students on a university campus. The goal sample size of 350 was selected to be large enough to gain representative data across all possible outcome groups. This will allow for adequate comparison between groups of participants with different levels of agency and communion.

- c) How did you choose the source of participants or data?

I chose University of Notre Dame students because it is a large group of willing and accessible participants for an undergraduate student to gain access to.

- d) Recruitment procedure (if applicable) including who will recruit participants.

The study will be listed on the SONA online system. Any Notre Dame student with access to SONA will be able to sign up for free to participate in the study.

- e) Tools that will be used to recruit:

Participants will be offered 1 SONA credit, will have their name entered into a raffle to win a \$100 Amazon gift card, and will have the chance to choose a charity to be awarded up to \$100. These incentives will be displayed in the study description on SONA.

7. Confidentiality

- a) Where will the data be stored, and who will have access to the data?

The data will be stored in the online survey system Qualtrics, which is password-protected. Alyssa Schlotman, Ryan Woodbury, and Dan Lapsley will have the password necessary to gain access to the data.

- b) How will the data be stored, and in what format?

The data will be de-identified and stored as an electronic copy. Participants' email addresses will be obtained in order to award SONA credit and enter gift card lotteries, but the email addresses will be kept separate from the data through the use of a separate linked survey.

- c) Will the participants' identity be coded? Will the codes to identify participants be stored with the data?

Participants will not be coded since the data will be de-identified. No personal information will be stored. Once SONA credit and gift cards have been rewarded, all email addresses will be deleted.

8. Risks and Discomforts

- a) Does the research propose greater than a minimal risk to participants?

No

- b) Indicate if any of the following risks are involved in this study:

None

- c) Of the risks and discomforts identified above, note the likelihood and degree of potential harm

N/A

- d) Discuss measures that will be taken to minimize risks or discomforts to subjects.

There are minimal risks and discomforts associated with this study. To minimize any possible risks or discomforts, participants will be able to complete the study online in whatever environment they choose. They will also know that their participation is completely voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. Participants will be ensured that their responses are confidential and are in no way connected to personally identifying information.

- e) Explain how unanticipated negative outcomes/experiences or serious adverse events will be managed.
Subjects will be provided with a thorough debriefing after the study. This will include information about the researchers and contact information for the University Counseling Center in order to manage any unanticipated negative experiences associated with the study.
- f) Discuss plans for reporting unanticipated problems, involving risks to subjects or others, or serious adverse events to the IRB.
If any serious adverse event occurs, details of the problem will be reported immediately via email to the IRB. All necessary subsequent actions will be taken cooperatively.
- g) Describe plans for provision of treatment for study-related injuries and how costs of injury will be covered.
There are no anticipated study-related injuries, as the study is completed entirely online.

9. Drugs and Biological Products

- a) Does your study involve the use of a combination drug/biological product and device?
No

10. Potential Research Benefits to Participants

- a) Indicate the type of benefit that may result from participation. Consider psychological or emotional benefits, learning benefits, physical benefits, and discuss if the participant will benefit directly or if the benefit is largely to gather generalizable knowledge or provide scientific or social information on a topic that may benefit society. **DO NOT OVERSTATE** the benefit.
Potential benefits for the participants are minimal. The participant may gain some knowledge or insight into their tendencies toward agency and communion or how important morality is to them. For society and the field as a whole, there is a generalizable benefit in understanding how personality constructs like agency and communion may serve as motivators for moral or immoral behavior. Any relationships found may inspire future research and help us understand how to foster environments to develop personality to be used for good purposes.

11. Informed Consent

- a) Who will be obtaining consent? If the person is in a position of authority in relation to potential subjects, describe how you will minimize the potential for coercion or undue influence.

Alyssa Schlotman and Ryan Woodbury will be obtaining consent via an online survey. These people are not in positions of authority over the participants.

- b) Recognizing that recruitment is part of the informed consent process and that consent itself is a process of communication, describe what will be said to the subjects to introduce the research. (Do not say, "See consent form.") Write the explanation in lay language. Include examples of questions that will be asked to assess the subjects' understanding. (Questions should be open-ended and go beyond requiring only a yes/no response.) If you are using telephone surveys, telephone scripts should be uploaded in the Attachments section.

The research study will be presented to participants through a brief introductory paragraph on SONA. It will be described that the study is looking to investigate the effects that aspects of personality can have on subsequent behavior. Participants will be told that they will rank statements according to their accuracy in their own life. (Such as, "Circle the number on a scale from 1 to 5 that describes you: 'Difficult to devote self completely to others' to 'Easy to devote self completely to others'.") The paragraph will also include contact information for the principal investigators, the length of the survey and expected duration time, and a statement of assurance of confidentiality.

12. Child Assent, Parental Permission

None

13. HIPAA

- a) Does the study involve the use of PHI from a University of Notre Dame covered entity? No
- b) Does the study involve use of Protected Health Information (PHI) from a covered entity outside of University of Notre Dame (i.e. another organization or institution)? No
- c) Does the study involve use of a "limited data set"? No

14. Attachments

Informed Consent, Extended PAQ, Moral Identity Scale, Moral Disengagement Scale, Instructions for Tasks

References

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