The Moral Psychology of Raceless, Genderless Strangers

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Abstract

Moral psychology uses tightly controlled scenarios in which the identities of the characters are either unspecified or vague. Studies with raceless, genderless strangers help to highlight the important structural elements of moral acts (e.g., intention, causation, harm) but may not generalize to real-world judgments. As researchers have long shown, social judgments hinge on the identities (e.g., race, gender, age, religion, group affiliation) of both target and perceiver. Asking whether people generally condemn "shooting someone" is very different from asking whether liberals as opposed to conservatives condemn "a White police officer shooting a Black suspect." We argue for the importance of incorporating identity into moral psychology. We briefly outline the central role of identity in social judgments before reviewing current theories in moral psychology. We then advocate an expanded person-centered morality—synthesizing moral psychology with social cognition—to better capture everyday moral judgments.

Keywords

person perception, stereotyping, external validity, WEIRD psychology

There's an out of control trolley speeding towards four workers. Three of them are cannibalistic serial killers. One of them is a brilliant cancer researcher. You have the ability to pull a lever and change the trolley's path so it hits just one person. She is a brilliant cannibalistic serial killing cancer researcher who only kills lesser cancer researchers. 14% of these researchers are Nazi-sympathizers, and 25% don't use turning signals when they drive. Speaking of which, in this world, Hitler is still alive, but he's dying of cancer.

—York (2015, para. 2)

Trolley problems and other scenarios have revealed many factors that influence moral judgment (e.g., Greene et al., 2009; Mikhail, 2007). However, despite their usefulness, these scenarios are often lampooned because they seem far away from everyday moral decision making. Even original versions of trolley problems—those without cannibals, Hitler, or inconsiderate drivers—are often funny (Bauman, McGraw, Bartels, & Warren, 2014) or simply weird (Gray & Keeney, 2015). Of course, the parody above is clearly a joke, but it does highlight an important issue in moral psychology. In its search for cognitive universals, moral psychology typically focuses on the abstract structure of moral acts while ignoring the identities of the people involved. Pulling a lever to divert a trolley toward someone may be hard to do, but exactly how hard depends on who is on the track relative to you. Is it your cousin or a stranger? Someone good or someone evil? Someone whose race or religion you share?

In this article, we discuss the importance of identity in moral judgment, a factor often overlooked in traditional moral psychology. First, we explore the philosophical roots of moral psychology and its current focus on the structure of acts. Second, we briefly review research on how social judgments hinge on the identity of both observer and target. Third, we suggest that neglecting identity limits the generalizability of findings across moral psychology. Fourth, we discuss two approaches to incorporating identity into moral psychology: identity as noise (controlling for identity) and identity as signal

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(integrating identity into theories). Finally, we outline one identity-as-signal framework—expanded person-centered morality—that integrates observer beliefs, person identity, and act structure.

Moral Psychology: How and Why People Do Wrong

Moral psychology grew out of moral philosophy, a field dominated by normative ethics, which studies how people ought to act and why certain acts are right or wrong. Although ethicists often disagree about the morality of specific actions, most agree on the importance of consistency, such that moral decisions should transcend specific people and places by following universal and impersonal principles (Gowans, 2008). Consider the two most popular normative theories: deontology and utilitarianism. Deontology argues that actions (e.g., murder or lying) have intrinsic moral value that is unaffected by context or circumstances. The figurehead of deontology is Emmanuel Kant (1785/1993), whose categorical imperative is explicitly impersonal: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (p. 30). Utilitarianism is a much different universal ethical framework, but it is also impersonal, stating that the correct moral decision is one that leads to the best overall outcomes. In the words of Bentham (1776/1977), "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (p. 393).

In contrast to normative moral philosophy, moral psychology focuses on descriptive ethics: the study of how people actually make moral judgments and decisions. However, moral psychology's philosophical roots can be seen in its goal to uncover moral universals (Hauser, 2006; Mikhail, 2007). This approach has revealed many structural factors that predict moral judgment, such as omission as opposed to commission (Baron & Ritov, 2004; DeScioli, Christner, & Kurzban, 2011; Gray & Schein, 2012), personal as opposed to impersonal force (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Greene et al., 2009), accidental as opposed to intentional acts (Ames & S. T. Fiske, 2013), and the presence or absence of norm violations (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Nichols, 2002).

Moral psychology also shows its philosophical roots in the types of stimuli used to reveal these structural factors. Many classic findings in moral psychology are grounded in variations of philosophical dilemmas, such as the trolley problem (Foot, 1967) or the side-effect effect (Knobe, 2003). Other classic findings are grounded in scenarios that—although not exactly "philosophical"—keep the same outlandish "intuition-pump" flavor (Dennett, 2014), such as sex with dead chickens (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Although these scenarios have captured the attention of researchers and laypeople, it is unclear how much they generalize to everyday moral judgment. First, these scenarios are often complex and far-fetched (Gray & Keeney, 2015; Hofmann, Brandt, Wisneski, Rockenbach, & Skitka, 2018; Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014; Kahane, 2015; Kahane, Everett, Earp, Farias, & Savulescu, 2015). Second, these scenarios typically lack information about identity. When people make moral judgments in everyday life, they usually know both *what* someone did (i.e., their act) and *who* they are (i.e., their identity)—and *who* often matters more than *what*. For example, people make very different moral judgments toward strangers than spouses and toward foreigners than friends (Bloom, 2011). Moral psychology's neglect of identity likely weakens the generalizability of its findings and produces an incomplete picture of the moral mind.

To fully understand real-world moral judgments—as moral psychology strives to do—researchers need to consider how judgments are affected by elements of identity. These include the race, culture, religion, age, gender, familial relation, politics, social class, and previous history of *both* the targets and makers of moral judgment (i.e., the judges and the judged). For example, liberals and conservatives seem to make different judgments about the misbehavior of Democratic and Republican politicians. Likewise, people with different religious orientations seem to make different judgments about those with different sexual orientations.

Certainly, some work in moral psychology has examined questions of identity and morality: People's politics and religion influence their moral judgments (Cohen, 2015; Graham et al., 2009), and moral judgments differ according to the target's age (Gray & Wegner, 2009) or race (Waytz, Hoffman, & Trawalter, 2015). However, as one moves closer to the center of moral psychology, considerations of identity become scarcer. For illustration, we reviewed the 48 articles included in Feltz and May's (2017) meta-analysis of whether people judge bad outcomes differently depending on whether they occur as means or as side effects. Of these 48 articles, only 1 explicitly examined the target's identity (defined here as race, gender, age, culture, religion, or politics). Fifteen of these articles did examine some aspect of the observer's identity (i.e., individual differences), mostly general cognitive functioning or cultural beliefs about morality. Of course, not all studies need to consider identity in their experiments, but none of these 48 articles acknowledged that target identity might affect generalizability, and only 6 of the 48 articles acknowledged that observer identity might change judgments (for coding procedure and results, see the Supplemental Material available online).

We do not claim that identity *will* affect every result in moral psychology or that identity should always be manipulated; instead, we suggest only that moral

psychologists should be cognizant of how identity *might* matter and adjust their claims accordingly. As we now review, identity influences judgments of threat, trustworthiness, suspicion, blame, and punishment—all judgments tied to morality.

Identity and Morality in Social Psychology

Who commits or receives wrongdoing? Social psychology investigates how situations shape people's attitudes, motivations, and actions, and central to any situation is the question of who. Gordon Allport (1954) defined social psychology as the attempt to understand how people's thoughts and behaviors are influenced by the "actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings," (p. 5), and human beings—whether actual, imagined, or implied—have identities.

Classic studies amply demonstrate the importance of identity for forming attitudes and judgments. Early work by Muzafir Sherif (1961) and Henri Tajfel (1982) showed how even minimal differences in identity alter how people perceive and treat others. For example, adolescent boys who "overestimated" the number of dots in a matrix gave more money to their fellow overestimators than did "underestimators" (Tajfel, 1970). These results extend to early childhood: 4-year-olds divided into arbitrary "red" and "blue" groups trusted unreliable in-group adults (e.g., those who gave inaccurate information) more than reliable out-group adults (MacDonald, Schug, Chase, & Barth, 2013).

Decades of research on stereotyping and prejudice highlight how identity categories such as race (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Devine & Elliot, 1995; Payne, 2001), gender (Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Wood & Eagly, 2002), age (Buldain, Crano, & Wegner, 1982; Hehman, Leitner, & Freeman, 2014; Nelson, 2004), nationality (Haslam, 2006; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, Demoulin, & Judd, 2008), and religion (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008) shape interpersonal judgments. Black people are judged more harshly than White people in criminal contexts (e.g., Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008), women are seen as less qualified for high-power jobs compared with men (e.g., Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001), and immigrants are often treated with either more hostility or more sympathy than citizens (Costello & Hodson, 2010).

More subtle aspects of identity, such as one's appearance, also influence judgments. People make social inferences on the basis of other people's faces (e.g., Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Hehman, Sutherland, Flake, & Slepian, 2017; Todorov, Olivola, Dotsch, & Mende-Siedlecki, 2015); Afrocentric features cue racial stereotypes and predict harsher criminal sentencing for both Black and White men (Blair, Judd, Sadler, & Jenkins, 2002; Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006). Conversely, being baby-faced can mitigate racial stereotypes of threat and promote success for Black men (Livingston & Pearce, 2009). Having "resting bitch face" also affects various trait judgments (Hester, 2018; Zebrowitz, Kikuchi, & Fellous, 2010), and someone's height (Blaker et al., 2013; Hester & Gray, 2018) and clothing (Galak, Gray, Elbert, & Strohminger, 2016; Graff, Murnen, & Smolak, 2012) influence people's ratings of threat and competence.

Identity-driven judgments of warmth, trustworthiness, and dominance are not labeled as *moral psychology* judgments, but they are. For example, although the stereotype-content model describes stereotypes on two "nonmoral" dimensions of competence and warmth (S. T. Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), the warmth dimension is integral to judgments of moral character; some work explicitly divided warmth into subdimensions of sociability and morality (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). This morality subdimension—which includes trustworthiness, humility, and courage—drives important social evaluations such as whether to befriend or cooperate with someone (Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Observers even care about targets' specific ethical principles: Those who make deontological moral judgments are generally seen as more desirable social partners (Everett, Pizarro, & Crockett, 2016).

Beyond these morality-related judgments, many behaviors studied by social psychologists have clear moral implications. Studies of race often investigate police stops, arrests, and prison sentencing; studies of workplace discrimination often address unfair hiring and promotion practices (e.g., Cheryan, Ziegler, Montoya, & Jiang, 2017; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012); and studies of intergroup conflict often consider fair resource allocation (Elenbaas, Rizzo, Cooley, & Killen, 2016), defection and cooperation (Halevy, Bornstein, & Sagiv, 2008; Insko, Wildschut, & Cohen, 2013), and the recognition of human rights (Haslam, 2006).

Who judges wrongdoing? Just as important as the whom being judged is the who doing the judging; is it a man or woman, Black or White, young or old? What kind of assumptions and cognitions do observers bring to moral judgments? Perhaps the most studied feature of observers in social psychology is differences in stereotypes: People vary in their beliefs about race (e.g., Henry & Sears, 2002) and gender (Glick & Fiske, 1996), and these beliefs shape interpersonal judgments. People also vary in their beliefs about physical traits, including whether tall people are competent (Jackson & Ervin,

1992), whether fat people are lazy (Greenleaf, Chambliss, Rhea, Martin, & Morrow, 2006; Hill & Silver, 1995), and whether blonde women are dumb (Kyle & Mahler, 1996).

Many of these judgment-shaping stereotypes—and other beliefs—are tied to observers' culture and upbringing. For example, American and Chinese individuals often have different beliefs about gender and power, which explains different judgments of marriages; for example, Chinese respondents are more likely to agree that "The husband's wishes should be first in most things" (Chia et al., 1986). People also vary in how they generally perceive minds, which is a key element of many social and moral judgments (Schein, Hester, & Gray, 2016). For example, those higher in psychopathy (Gray, Jenkins, Heberlein, & Wegner, 2011) and paranoia (Buck, Hester, Penn, & Gray, 2017) perceive people as less able to think and feel, which helps explain their aberrant cognitions.

The observer's identity also includes worldviews that dictate whether certain acts are immoral (Shweder, 2012). For example, Christians and atheists disagree about the existence of God and the divinity of Jesus and therefore make different judgments about the morality of antireligious thoughts and actions (Cohen, 2015; Schein, Ritter, & Gray, 2016). Likewise, liberals and conservatives place different emphasis on maintaining social order compared with promoting social justice (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013), which shapes their reactions to progressive political policies. Observers also differ by how much they generally endorse deontology (i.e., the inherent wrongness of acts) or utilitarianism (i.e., the importance of outcomes; Bartels & Pizarro, 2011; Kahane et al., 2018; Laakasuo & Sundvall, 2016), and these differences predict how people respond to ethically ambiguous actions such as giving a competent friend a promotion over a slightly more competent stranger (Kahane et al., 2015). Even global personality can predict how people make sense of moral structure. For example, extraverted observers see a stronger distinction between harmful and helpful side effects for intentionality judgments (Cokely & Feltz, 2009) and also perceive free will and determinism as more compatible (Feltz & Cokely, 2009, 2019)

Beyond stereotypes and cultural assumptions, there are countless other elements of identity (i.e., individual differences) that shape how observers understand the world and others' actions. These observer characteristics interact with target identity to influence social judgments. Although a full review of how identity affects social judgments is beyond the scope of this article, our point is that identity matters for moral judgments and merits more thoughtful treatment from moral psychologists.

Identity in Moral Psychology: Present but Lacking

Identity plays a starring role in social psychology but only a supporting role in moral psychology—and often it is only an unpaid extra. In 2011, Paul Bloom argued that moral psychology faced a "crisis of identity" for failing to appreciate relations between people (Bloom, 2011). We echo his broader claim but also recognize that landscape of moral psychology has changed since then; a number of theories heeded (or anticipated) this call.

Identity is important in relationship-regulation theory (Rai & Fiske, 2011), which links moral judgments to the relationships between people. Anthropologist Alan Fiske (Rai & Fiske, 2011) outlined four "social-relational contexts"—communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing—each of which summarizes interactions between people of certain identities. For example, authority ranking involves people of different status, communal sharing involves people who are closely related, and market pricing involves strangers in an exchange context. Relationship-regulation theory suggests that moral judgments depend on the relevant moral context, which means that the exact same act can be good or evil depending on the identities of the people involved. Selling something for maximum profit is moral if the buyer is a stranger but immoral if the buyer is your mother. Despite its promise, relationship-regulation theory seems not to accommodate the subtler effects of identity revealed by social psychology, such as stereotypes and perceiver attitudes.

The model of moral motives (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013) is another theory of cultural differences. It divides the moral world into six motivations, one for each combination of two basic motivations (approach, avoidance) and three social targets (the self, the other, and the group). For example, the moral motivation of self-restraint (avoidance, the self) requires behavioral inhibition to protect oneself (e.g., not overeating), whereas the moral motivation of helping (approach, the other) requires effort to aid those who express need (e.g., helping a friend move apartments). The model of moral motives incorporates identity through its three kinds of targets and considers the consequences of approach and avoid motivations for intergroup conflict: Avoidance leads to more aggression, whereas approach leads to less aggression (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013). Approach and avoidance motivations also relate to the politics of observers; liberals are approach-oriented, whereas conservatives are avoidance-oriented (Janoff-Bulman, 2009).

The model of moral motives can be understood as an expansion and refinement of the popular moral

foundations theory (Graham et al., 2009). Moral foundations theory argues that conservatives have a wider moral sense than liberals, caring about both individuals and—unlike liberals—the cohesiveness of their in-group. This purported "conservative advantage" is suggested to arise from conservatives having more activated moral modules, which were described by Haidt (2012) as "little switches in the brain" (p. 123). In contrast, the model of moral motives does not argue for distinct neural modules or a conservative advantage. Rather, it suggests that liberals and conservatives are both sensitive to individualizing concerns (focusing on a specific individuals) and binding concerns (focusing on the group). Where these groups differ is their focus on either "promoting" well-being (liberals) or "protecting" from harm (conservatives; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009). As with relationship-regulation theory, both the model of moral motives and moral foundations theory link identity (via observer politics and culture) to morality, but both lack a broader framework to incorporate other elements of identity.

The theory of dyadic morality (Schein & Gray, 2018) also incorporates identity. It suggests that moral judgments are made by comparing potentially immoral actions to a template of two minds: an intentional agent causing damage to a vulnerable patient. The closer the match, the stronger the moral judgment is, which explains why child abuse is more obviously immoral than double parking (more obvious intention to harm, more obvious causation of damage, more obvious vulnerable victim). Although dyadic morality has focused mostly on acts, it also incorporates the identity of both target and observer. People with some identities (e.g., CEOs) seem more capable of intention, whereas others (e.g., orphans) seem more vulnerable to suffering.

Dyadic morality is a pluralistic theory (Schein & Gray, 2018) and therefore recognizes that different observers have different cultural assumptions about morality. Perhaps the most important—and variable—cultural assumption for morality is about what actions cause suffering and who (or what) is vulnerable to this suffering (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). For example, both White and Black nurses believe that Black patients are less sensitive to pain than White patients (Trawalter, Hoffman, & Waytz, 2012; Waytz et al., 2015), and religious people are more likely to view the soul as vulnerable to harm (Schein & Gray, 2018). Other studies reveal how basic individual differences are translated into moral differences through varying perceptions of harm (Ward & King, 2018). Although dyadic morality addresses basic differences in perceptions of harm (Schein & Gray, 2015) and the minds of different targets—and describes how mind perception predicts moral judgment (Gray, Young, &

Waytz, 2012)—it overlooks other aspects of identity that are important to morality.

The person-centered approach to moral judgments (Helzer & Critcher, 2018; Landy & Uhlmann, 2018; Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015) may be the most amenable to studying identity. This approach is broader than any one single theory and provides "a needed corrective to descriptive theories that have focused on the judgment of acts" (Landy & Uhlmann, 2018, p. 123). Person-centered approaches suggest that moral judgments are less about whether actions are right or wrong and more about whether those actions are diagnostic of someone's moral character, that is, whether they reveal intrinsic goodness or evilness (Helzer & Critcher, 2018; Uhlmann et al., 2015). Although discussions of person-centered morality seldom explicitly mention observers' and targets' identities, this perspective is generally consistent with importance of identity; after all, identities are possessed by persons.

Many theories in moral psychology are gradually acknowledging the importance of identity, but there is still far to go. To spur on the field, we highlight two consequences of not including identity within moral psychology.

Common Moral Stimuli Lack Information About Identity

Moral psychology scenarios are clever and creative but not always realistic or easy to understand. For example, moral dilemmas that pit utilitarianism against deontology are often quite complex (Kahane, 2015). In the standard trolley problem, you are standing next to a lever watching a runaway trolley career toward five people; your job is to choose whether to pull the lever and divert the trolley toward a single person instead. Layered on top of this already complicated scenario are looping tracks, trapdoors, giant poles, and more (Gray & Schein, 2012; Greene, 2013; Greene et al., 2009). Other moral psychology scenarios are less complex but more outlandish and less believable. Moral psychology's embrace of intuitionism stems from a single vignette about loving, consensual, and harmless incest (Haidt, 2001), a vignette that people intuitively see as harmful (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014; Royzman, Kim, & Leeman, 2015), and the road to moral foundations theory is paved with stories of child molester blood transfusions, urine-soaked performance art, necrophilia, and a surprising amount of bestiality (see Gray & Keeney, 2015).

Whether complex or weird, the acts contained in many moral scenarios are already a lot for people to handle; keeping them succinct often means neglecting information about identity. Moral psychology experiments typically include targets who are raceless,

genderless, and ageless, featuring "you," "he," "she," "the people," "the man," and occasionally "the large man." Even when targets have names, they are usually male (e.g., "Hank," "Ian," "Ned," "Oscar"; Mikhail, 2007) and seem chosen as an afterthought.

As evidence for this identity-less trend (or at least "identity-lite"), consider two sets of examples: standard utilitarian/deontological moral dilemmas (i.e., trolley-type dilemma) and standard moral foundations vignettes. In a recent collection of 52 frequently used trolley-type dilemmas (Christensen, Flexas, Calabrese, Gut, & Gomila, 2014), less than half (46%) identified the general age of all parties involved (e.g., child vs. adult), only 6% identified the gender of all parties involved, and 0% identified the race of all parties involved. Every gender-identified actor or target was male (see the Supplemental Material). Moral foundations vignettes specify identity more often: In the most recent collection of 91 vignettes (Clifford, Iyengar, Cabeza, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015), 56% identified the gender of all parties involved, and 64% identified the general age of both parties involved, but 0% identified the race of both parties involved. However, these identities are idiosyncratic to each vignette and are not systematically varied.

The lack of identity in moral dilemmas and moral foundations vignettes may be intended to help studies capture universal judgments. However, we suggest that perhaps nothing is more universal to morality than social tensions surrounding race, religion, class, gender, or nationality. To better capture the social core of moral judgment, moral psychology experiments should include more information about identity, especially because participants may already be imagining certain kinds of people in scenarios.

Participants Assume Certain Identities

If moral psychology vignettes usually feature raceless, genderless strangers as targets, who exactly do participants imagine when they read them? Who is standing on footbridges, flipping switches, and making love to chickens? Egocentrism and androcentrism/Eurocentrism suggest that people are likely to imagine White males who are WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), which limits the generalizability of these studies.

People are egocentric: When they make inferences about other people (Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004) or even God (Epley, Converse, Delbosc, Monteleone, & Cacioppo, 2009), they anchor on their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). If participants in moral psychology experiments are mostly American and WEIRD (Henrich

et al., 2010), then they likely imagine targets who are White and WEIRD. Not only does egocentrism likely distort study conclusions, but research on androcentrism (Bailey, LaFrance, & Dovidio, 2019) and Eurocentrism (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013) suggests that White male is the "reference point" by which other groups are measured, at least in American culture. When participants read about a raceless, genderless target, they likely imagine someone who is both White and male (e.g., Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Goff & Kahn, 2013). Depending on the type of moral action that participants are evaluating, assuming a White male actor might yield more lenient judgments compared with other groups (e.g., cheating on a spouse, walking down the street with a weapon), or it might yield more severe judgments compared with other groups (e.g., using the n-word or complaining about affirmative action).

How participants imagine targets of unspecified age is less clear, but it is important to consider because perceptions of moral agency and responsibility vary substantially by age (e.g., Buldain et al., 1982; S. T. Fiske et al., 2002; Gray & Wegner, 2009). In unpublished data, we find that participants who imagine "a man" or "a woman" generally imagine someone in early or middle adulthood (see Fig. 1), perhaps partly because of egocentrism; most moral psychology participants are in early or middle adulthood. For this reason, it is hard to know whether judgments of ageless targets generalize to judgments of children, adolescents, and the elderly. These unpublished data also show that women are imagined as younger than men, suggesting that manipulating one element of identity could unwittingly manipulate another (Simonsohn, 2016).

Certain scenarios might also cue people to imagine targets as male or female, Black or White. Moral dilemmas that describe doctors or CEOs—high-power individuals—likely lead participants to imagine middle-aged White men. On the other hand, descriptions of violent acts, such as shooting or stabbing someone, might make participants relatively more likely to imagine young Black men. A victim of domestic abuse is likely to be imagined as a woman (and the perpetrator a man), whereas a victim of prison violence is likely to be imagined as a man. Although these assumptions often align with base rates, they are also experimental confounds. For example, when soliciting judgments about domestic abuse, are researchers uncovering something universal about this moral act or something specific about men's abuse of women? By using scenarios that feature specific actions in specific contexts, researchers might be inadvertently manipulating identity.

For a concrete demonstration of how specifying identity might matter, consider your reaction to the different versions of scenarios in Table 1.
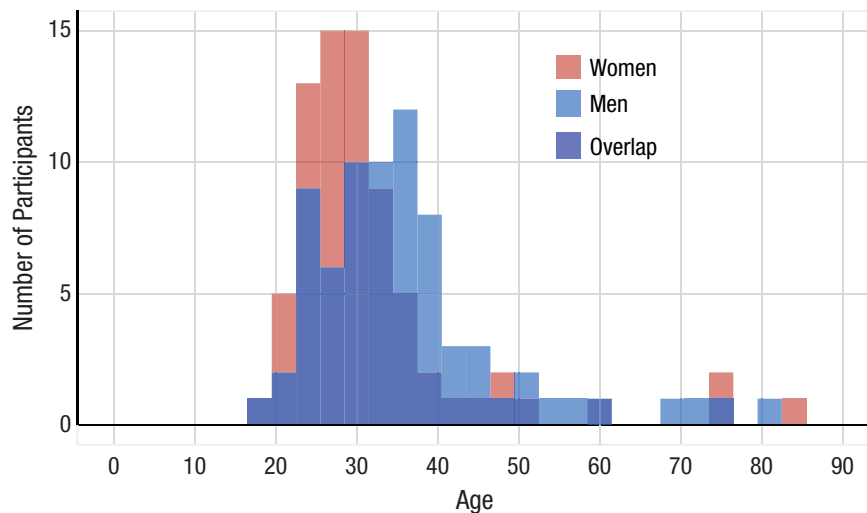
Fig. 1. Histograms depicting the age of imagined women (red) and men (blue). The ages of imagined women are concentrated in the 20s and early 30s, whereas the ages of imagined men are concentrated in the mid-20s and 30s. Children, adolescents, and older adults were underrepresented in participants' mental representations. These results are from the authors' unpublished data.

The lack of identity in moral psychology limits the generalizability of its findings. Rather than uncovering universal moral principles, many classic studies may instead reveal how White WEIRD people judge White, male, and middle-aged men. For a field that seeks to reveal how everyday people make real-world moral judgments, generalizability is key—and requires incorporating information about identity.

Two Approaches for Incorporating Identity in Moral Psychology

We argued that moral psychology needs to grapple with questions of identity, and there are two broad approaches it could use. The first is *identity as noise*, which suggests that race, gender, age, religion, status, and so on are variables that need to be counterbalanced and measured so that they can be statistically controlled for. The second is identity-as-signal, which suggests that these identity variables need to be integrated into moral theory so that researchers can predict which aspects of identity should be manipulated or measured.

Table 1. Unidentified and Identified Examples of Moral Acts

a) Someone says the n-word to a Black man.
b) A Black man says the n-word to his Black friend.

a) Someone takes off their clothes in a public park.
b) A 2-year-old takes off their clothes in a public park.

a) Someone wants money to babysit a child.
b) A grandmother wants money to babysit her granddaughter.

We outline both approaches and argue that *identity as signal* is more productive.

A Simple Approach: identity as Noise

In disciplines such as economics and sociology, researchers analyze big data sets and control for many variables (e.g., gender, race, population, income) to test the robustness of their effects. Moral psychologists could do the same by treating identity as noise: variables that need to be statistically controlled for to test whether results are similar across observers and targets. Researchers could measure or randomly manipulate "major" aspects of target identity—race, age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015)—and include these variables in their statistical models. They could also measure key aspects of participants' identity, such as political orientation, religiosity, and psychopathy, and include these variables in their statistical models.

Although the wholesale manipulation and measurement of identity could help increase generalizability, it raises a number of questions. First, how many participants would researchers need to recruit to adequately power a study that controls for several aspects of identity? Consider a three-condition between-subjects experiment in which researchers wished to generalize their effects across target and observer race (Black, White), target and observer gender (female, male), observer religion (theists, atheists), and observer politics (liberal, conservative). With 50 participants per cell, this design would lead to a total sample of 3,200. It is

also unclear whether aggregating judgments across these categories yields productive results. Does true insight into moral judgments of assault somehow emerge from averaging judgments of (a) a rich White man hitting a poor Latina woman and (b) a liberal Black man hitting a conservative Asian man? Or are these acts too different to collapse together?

A Better Approach: identity as Signal

Another way to incorporate identity into moral psychology is to treat it as signal, not noise. Experiments should involve only elements of identity that meaningfully interact with the situation to predict moral judgment. Crucially, these elements would be identified on the basis of prior research and relevant theory. For example, given past work on gender roles (e.g., Niemi & Young, 2014; Wood & Eagly, 2002) and cultural differences toward sex (Druckerman, 2008), studies about the morality of infidelity should likely include target gender and observer culture. Researchers studying moral judgments of drug use or violent behavior would want to reference work on racial stereotyping given its relevance (e.g., Correll et al., 2002; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Welch, 2007).

Of course, it could be difficult to know whether a certain identity is "important enough" to address, and past research could overlook key identities. The key message is that researchers should spend more time thinking about what identities to include (or not), keeping in mind both theoretical issues and pragmatic concerns (e.g., study length). See the Appendix for discussion of pragmatic concerns and potential solutions.

An identity-as-signal approach helps reduce "experimental bloat" of extremely large sample sizes and expands the explanatory power and generalizability of moral psychology. By grounding studies in broader theories, identity as signal helps to address potential concerns about replicability and allows researchers to build more structured theory (i.e., "theory maps," Gray, 2017). This approach does require a deeper investment in theory development and more rigorously connecting moral psychology with social psychology. We suggest that both of these requirements may be facilitated by an expanded version of a person-centered approach to morality (Uhlmann et al., 2015).

An Expanded Person-Centered Morality

Moral psychology's disregard for identity stems from its connection to the philosophical perspectives of deontology and utilitarianism, which favors principles over people. However, a third philosophical framework—virtue ethics—places the moral character of people front and center. In contrast to the act-centric Emmanuel Kant,

David Hume focused on the moral character ("personal merit") of people and connected character with everyday aspects of identity, including politics, status, personality, and even attractiveness (Hume, 1739/2003, 1777/1960). This broader conception of morality is revealed by Hume's list of virtues, which includes affability, moderation, discretion, caution, wit, tranquility, and politeness. Although these personal characteristics may not seem directly related to morality (at least not today), they do inform judgments of moral character (Fieser, 1998; Hume, 1739/2003).

The tradition of virtue ethics in modern moral psychology is continued by person-centered morality (Uhlmann et al., 2015), which argues that people are deeply concerned with others' moral character and often care about moral *acts* because they provide information about the moral character of *people*. Person-centered morality helps explain some puzzling findings in moral psychology: for example, why people judge negative but not positive side effects as intentional (the side-effect effect; Knobe, 2006; Sripada & Konrath, 2011), why people discount blame for impulsive harm but do not discount praise for impulsive help (Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003), and why a cat beater has a worse character than a wife beater, even though wife beating rates as a worse act than cat beating (Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011).

People strive to understand the moral character of others, but these judgments do not exist in isolation; instead, they are inextricably linked to other aspects of identity. Whether someone seems like a good or bad person is influenced by his or her race, gender, age, politics, social class, religion, and so on, as well as one's beliefs and stereotypes about these characteristics. Because these central elements of identity are absent from the current person-centered approach to morality, we propose an expanded person-centered morality. This framework combines insights from traditional moral psychology (which focuses on the structure of moral acts) and person perception (which focuses on observer/target identity in social judgments; see Fig. 2). In this expanded person-centered morality, both the act structure and target identity are perceived through the lens of observer identity—their beliefs about actions and other people. These three elements—observer identity, target identity, and act structure—interact to produce key moral judgments, including those of blame, harm, and moral character. We use four examples of moral judgment to illustrate how expanded person-centered morality might guide research.

Lying

Is lying wrong? Obviously, the intent behind the lie matters (act structure) because lying to save refugees
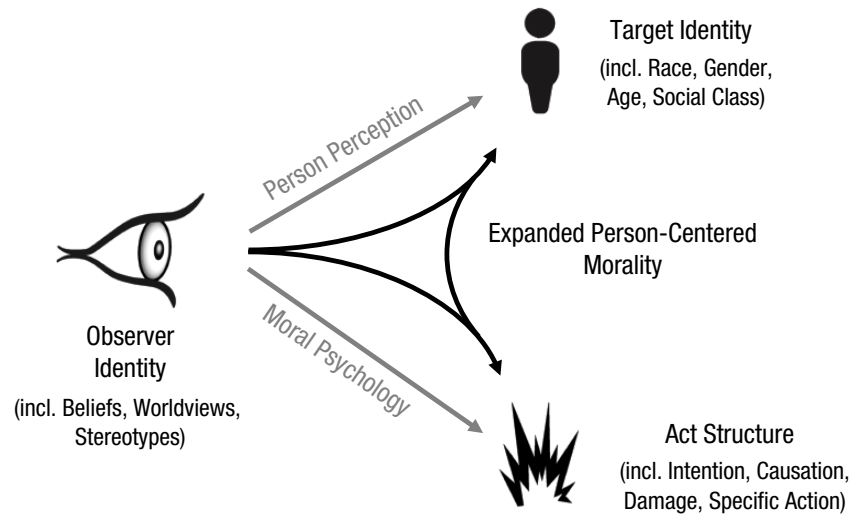
Fig. 2. Expanded person-centered morality. This framework combines classic moral psychology and person perception (broadly defined) to study the interaction between observer identity, target identity, and act structure.

from Nazis seems better than lying to cover up theft. The age of the liar also matters; young children receive less blame than adults (target identity), at least for relatively benign lies (target identity × act structure). There are cultural differences in the moralization of lying; Russians worry less about lying than Americans (observer identity; Druckerman, 2008). High schoolers who lie to their parents probably cut their peers some moral slack when they do the same (observer identity × target identity), especially for lies about drugs, sex, alcohol, and other risky behaviors (observer identity × target identity × act structure).

Murder

Murder seems to be more black and white than lying, and in some ways, it is, with "Thou Shalt Not Kill" etched in stone. But American courts do differentiate between nonpremeditated/second-degree and premeditated/first-degree murder, giving harsher punishment for the latter (act structure). Many American courts also enforce the "Castle doctrine" when a homeowner murders an intruder, transforming murder into self-defense, although the success of this defense depends on both the political leanings of the judge and the identity of both the killer and the killed (observer identity × act structure × target identity; Cheng & Hoekstra, 2013). In some cases, murder is completely forgiven. In the Jim Crow American South, White men would kill Black men as a means of intimidation (target identity) and were often pardoned by juries composed of other White people (observer identity × target identity). In some

Pakistani subcultures, a murderer may not even go to trial if the murder was an "honor killing" of a family member (typically a woman) who was a rape victim (A. P. Fiske & Rai, 2014).

Alcohol

Is drinking alcohol wrong? For some religious conservatives, the answer is a resounding *yes* (observer identity), whereas others may see getting drunk as the issue (observer identity × act structure). Others view drinking as a right reserved for adults (observer identity × target identity), but in places such as France and Italy, parents are often willing to let older children drink a little wine with dinner but not too much (observer identity × target identity × act structure). Sometimes, moral judgments depend on who exactly is drinking. When a friend is a "happy drunk," you may encourage that fourth margarita, but when a friend is an "angry drunk," you might tell the bartender to cut him or her off (target identity × act structure).

Sex

Is it even possible to understand the morality of sex without identity? Most people agree that anyone who has sexual contact with children is a horrible person (target identity), although the age of consent varies across cultures (observer identity × target identity). Some parents might (reluctantly) accept that their high schooler is having sexual relations but might disapprove of full-blown intercourse or unprotected sex

(observer identity × target identity × act structure). And, of course, nonconsensual sex is seen as wrong by almost all Americans—although attitudes about the degree of wrongness (or what "counts" as nonconsensual) vary by generation and gender (Bohner, Eyssel, Pina, Siebler, & Viki, 2009; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; observer identity × act structure).

Across many important everyday moral judgments—lying, killing, alcohol, sex, and others—understanding identity is the key to understanding different judgments. Act structure is undoubtedly important, but acts are committed and judged by people who have identities. An expanded person-centric approach that combines moral psychology and person perception helps to formally recognize the importance of identity.

Conclusion

Moral psychology began as an offshoot of moral philosophy, relying on complex thought experiments and searching for abstract, universal ethical principles (Bauman et al., 2014). However, real-world moral judgments are poorly revealed by trolleys and bestiality, not only because these scenarios are outlandish but also because they lack information about identity. Social psychology reveals that questions of who—who is target of an act and who is observing it—is central to many social judgments, and we suggest that moral psychology should thoughtfully incorporate elements of identity into its experiments and theories. In a world of racial tension, gender gaps, and political divides, moral judgments of raceless, genderless strangers are the exception, not the rule.

Appendix

Methodological challenges when incorporating multiple identities

Manipulating multiple elements of identity at the same time can pose methodological challenges. First, testing predictions that involve two- or three-way interactions, as one can expect when manipulating both identity and structure, can make it difficult to achieve adequate statistical power (Simonsohn, 2014). The use of within-subject experiments alleviates these concerns, but analyzing the resultant data properly requires the use of mixed or multilevel models (see Peugh, 2010; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Researchers who use many related stimuli in a within-subjects framework might also consider fitting a cross-classified model, which can statistically account for both within-subject variance (e.g., some people just tend to give harsher moral judgments than other people) and within-stimulus variance

(e.g., some vignettes just tend to elicit harsher moral judgments than other vignettes; Judd, Westfall, & Kenny, 2012; Luo & Kwok, 2009).

Researchers might also find it challenging to manipulate identity in a way that is both evocative and unobtrusive. Many moral scenarios use specific wording that is preserved across replications and extensions (e.g., Christensen, Flexas, Calabrese, Gut, & Gomila, 2014; Clifford, Iyengar, Cabeza, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015); including names or demographic information in these scenarios may be disruptive. Furthermore, mentioning race or gender when they seem irrelevant to a scenario might create task demands. One promising solution is the use of standardized facial stimuli alongside moral scenarios. The quality and diversity of recent stimulus sets allows researchers to easily manipulate or control for gender, race, age, and even specific facial characteristics (LoBue & Thrasher, 2015; Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015; Strohminger et al., 2016). Because of the large number of standardized stimuli available, researchers can easily include several photographs for every category to address concerns about stimulus sampling (Wells & Windschitl, 1999), which can seriously compromise generalizability (Judd et al., 2012) and statistical power for detecting effects (Westfall, Judd, & Kenny, 2015).

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