

The Relationship between Moral Identity and Moral Behavior among University Students in Pakistan



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Abstract: *This study examined the relationship between moral identity and moral behavior among university students in Pakistan. A correlational research design was used with a convenience sample of 300 university students (146 male, 154 female) drawn from universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Participants completed the Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and the Moral Behavior Inventory (Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005). Data were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation and independent-samples t-tests in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Results revealed a significant positive correlation between total moral identity and moral behavior, $r(298) = .321, p < .01$, with both the internalization subscale ($r = .320, p < .01$) and the symbolization subscale ($r = .198, p < .01$) also significantly and positively related to moral behavior. Female students scored significantly higher than male students on both moral identity and moral behavior. These findings support the view that moral identity, particularly its internalized dimension, functions as an important self-regulatory anchor for ethical conduct, and extend this evidence to a non-Western, collectivist university population. Implications for character development and moral education in higher education are discussed.*

Keywords: Moral identity, moral behavior, internalization, symbolization, university students, Pakistan

Introduction

Moral behavior, understood as conduct consistent with ethical standards such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility, underlies trust and cooperation in social life (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Bandura, 1991; Haidt, 2007). While moral norms are shared at a societal level, individuals differ considerably in how consistently they translate ethical knowledge into ethical action, particularly when self-interest is at stake. Contemporary moral psychology

increasingly locates the source of this variability not only in moral reasoning but in identity-based motivational processes (Blasi, 1984; Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Moral identity refers to the degree to which moral traits such as honesty, fairness, kindness, and compassion form a central part of an individual's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). When morality becomes integral to a person's sense of self, acting in accordance with moral values becomes a matter of maintaining self-consistency

rather than merely following external rules (Blasi, 1984). Aquino and Reed (2002) further distinguished two dimensions of moral identity: internalization, the private centrality of moral traits to one's self-concept, and symbolization, the outward, public expression of moral values through visible behavior.

University students represent a particularly important population in which to study this relationship. The years of emerging adulthood (18-25) are marked by active identity formation, growing independence, and frequent exposure to ethical dilemmas such as academic honesty, fairness in collaborative work, and interpersonal competition (Arnett, 2000, 2014; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). How strongly a student has internalized moral values as part of their identity may therefore be a key determinant of how they navigate these situations.

In Pakistan, a society that places strong emphasis on collectivism, social reputation, and interpersonal relationships, moral identity is likely to be shaped by distinct cultural pressures relative to the Western contexts in which most moral identity research has been conducted (Hassan, Ali, & Bibi, 2021). Despite growing international interest in moral identity as a predictor of ethical conduct, relatively little research has examined this relationship among South Asian university populations.

The present study therefore examines whether moral identity, and its internalization and symbolization components, are significantly related to moral behavior among university students in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Moral identity. Moral identity denotes the centrality of moral traits, such as honesty,

fairness, and compassion, to an individual's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Blasi (1984) proposed that moral identity functions as the psychological bridge connecting moral reasoning to moral action: individuals are motivated to behave morally not simply because they know what is right, but because acting otherwise would threaten their sense of who they are. Aquino and Reed (2002) operationalized moral identity as comprising two related but distinct dimensions: internalization, the extent to which moral traits are privately central to self-definition, and symbolization, the extent to which moral traits are publicly expressed through visible actions and social behavior.

Moral identity and ethical behavior. A substantial body of research demonstrates that moral identity predicts ethical and prosocial behavior. Aquino and Reed (2002) found that individuals with a strong moral identity were more likely to engage in prosocial actions such as helping and charitable giving, and less likely to behave dishonestly. Reynolds and Ceranic (2007) showed that moral identity strengthens the link between moral judgment and moral action, such that individuals with a strong moral identity are more likely to act in accordance with their own ethical judgments in order to preserve self-consistency. Similarly, Hardy and Carlo (2011) found that moral identity predicted prosocial behavior across multiple contexts, including volunteering and peer support.

Internalization versus symbolization. Because internalization reflects the degree to which moral values are genuinely woven into private self-concept, while symbolization reflects their public, performative expression, theoretical models suggest that internalization should be the stronger predictor of consistent ethical

conduct (Blasi, 1983, 1984). Individuals high in internalization experience moral action as intrinsically self-defining, generating internal pressure to behave ethically even without external monitoring or social reward (Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Symbolization, by contrast, is more closely tied to reputational and social-signaling motives and may be a comparatively weaker, if still meaningful, predictor of private moral conduct.

Moral identity in academic settings. In university contexts, moral identity has been linked to greater academic honesty, fairness toward peers, and resistance to opportunistic behavior, even amid competitive pressures that create incentives for dishonesty (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012; Stephens, 2017). Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer (2008) found that individuals with a strong moral identity were less likely to engage in moral disengagement, the cognitive process by which people rationalize unethical conduct, while Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, and Mayer (2012) similarly found that a strong moral self-concept reduced the effectiveness of moral disengagement mechanisms.

Theoretical grounding. Bandura's (1991, 1999) Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency provides a useful account of how moral identity shapes behavior. According to this framework, moral conduct is regulated by internalized standards and anticipated self-sanctions, such as guilt or shame, that follow a violation of one's own moral standards. A strongly internalized moral identity should intensify these anticipated self-sanctions, making unethical action more psychologically costly and thereby increasing the likelihood of moral behavior (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Bandura, 1991).

Despite this theoretical and empirical foundation, most research on moral identity has been conducted in Western samples, and comparatively little work has tested whether the internalization-symbolization distinction operates similarly among South Asian university students, where collectivist norms may shape the public, symbolic expression of moral identity differently (Hassan et al., 2021). The present study addresses this gap.

Methodology

A cross-sectional, correlational research design was used to examine the relationship between moral identity and moral behavior among university students.

Sample

Data were collected from 300 university students (146 male, 48.7%; 154 female, 51.3%) recruited through convenience sampling from various universities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants ranged in age from 18 years upward and were drawn from a range of academic levels (76.7% undergraduate, 14.7% Master's, 6.7% MPhil, 2.0% PhD) and disciplines, including Social Sciences (26.3%), Medical/Health Sciences (26.7%), and Engineering/Technology (23.7%), among others.

Measures

Moral identity was measured using the Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002), a 10-item self-report measure rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The scale comprises two five-item subscales: Internalization, assessing the private centrality of moral traits to self-concept, and Symbolization, assessing the public expression of moral traits through behavior. Items 3 and 4 are reverse-scored. Higher total and subscale scores reflect a stronger

moral identity. The scale has demonstrated good reliability in previous research ($\alpha = .71-.88$) and produced Cronbach's alphas of .79 (total), .78 (internalization), and .75 (symbolization) in the present sample. Moral behavior was measured using the Moral Behavior Inventory (MBI; Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005), a 24-item measure in which participants rate everyday behaviors on a 4-point scale from 1 (not wrong) to 4 (strongly wrong). Higher total scores indicate stronger moral standards and greater sensitivity to ethically inappropriate conduct. The scale showed acceptable internal consistency in previous studies ($\alpha = .73-.85$) and yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .83 in this sample.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Ethical Review Committee prior to data collection. Participants were recruited voluntarily, provided informed consent, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were kept confidential. Data were collected through structured, in-person questionnaires, and standardized instruments were used with the permission of their original authors.

Results

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were computed for the study variables, and the relationships among moral identity, its two subscales, and moral behavior were examined using Pearson product-moment correlation. Independent-samples t-tests were used to examine gender differences.

Table 1

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between Moral Behavior and Moral Identity (N = 300)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. MB_T	—	.321**	.320**	.198**
2. MI_T		—	.831**	.797**
3. MI_Internal			—	.325**
4. MI_Symbol				—

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Note: MB_T = Moral Behavior Total; MI_T = Moral Identity Total; MI_Internal = Moral Identity Internalization; MI_Symbol = Moral Identity Symbolism.

As shown in Table 1, total moral identity was significantly and positively correlated with moral behavior, $r(298) = .321$, $p < .01$, a moderate effect. Both subscales of moral identity were also significantly and positively related to moral behavior: internalization, $r(298) = .320$, $p < .01$, and symbolization, $r(298) = .198$, $p < .01$, with internalization showing the stronger relationship of the two. Moral identity's two subscales were also positively correlated with one another and with the total score, supporting the internal coherence of the construct.

Descriptively, scores on moral identity ($M = 35.35$, $SD = 6.49$) and moral behavior ($M = 67.79$, $SD = 11.56$) fell in the moderate-to-upper range of their respective potential scoring ranges. An independent-samples t-test indicated that female students scored significantly higher than male students on total moral identity ($M = 37.50$, $SD = 5.83$ vs. $M = 33.07$, $SD = 6.40$), $t(298) = -6.26$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.72$, as well as on internalization, $t(298) = -5.34$, $p < .001$, and symbolization, $t(298) = -4.59$, $p < .001$. Female students also scored significantly higher on moral behavior, $t(298) = -5.02$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.58$.

Discussion

This study examined whether moral identity is related to moral behavior among university students in Pakistan. As hypothesized, total moral identity was significantly and positively correlated with moral behavior, and both the internalization and symbolization subscales showed the same pattern, with internalization emerging as the stronger predictor of the two.

These findings are consistent with Aquino and Reed's (2002) conceptualization of moral identity as a self-schema that motivates individuals to behave in ways consistent with their moral values, since acting immorally would create psychological dissonance between behavior and self-concept (Blasi, 1984; Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008). The present results extend this pattern to a Pakistani university sample, suggesting that the self-regulatory function of moral identity generalizes beyond the Western populations in which it has primarily been studied.

The comparatively stronger relationship for internalization than for symbolization is theoretically meaningful. Internalization reflects the degree to which moral traits are genuinely, privately central to the self, whereas symbolization reflects their outward, public expression (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Consistent with Blasi's (1983, 1984) self-consistency model, moral behavior appears to be most reliably predicted by the presence of deeply internalized moral values rather than by a motivation to visibly project a moral image. This is consistent with Reynolds and Ceranic (2007), who found that moral identity strengthens the translation of moral judgment into moral action, and with Hardy and Carlo (2011), who linked moral identity to prosocial behavior across a range of everyday contexts.

From the perspective of Bandura's (1991) Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency, a strongly internalized moral identity likely intensifies anticipated self-sanctions, such as guilt or shame, that follow a violation of one's own moral standards, thereby reinforcing self-regulatory restraint against unethical action. Individuals for whom morality is central to identity may find unethical behavior more psychologically costly, regardless of external monitoring or social reward, which may explain why internalization outperformed symbolization as a predictor of moral behavior in this sample.

The significant gender difference, with female students scoring higher on both moral identity and moral behavior, echoes previous research linking gender socialization to differences in moral concern, empathy, and relational orientation (Gilligan, 1982; Eagly, 2013). Socialization and social-role accounts suggest that these differences may reflect the cultivation of relational sensitivity and communal values that are particularly emphasized for women in many cultural contexts, including Pakistan (Hassan et al., 2021).

These findings have several practical implications for higher education. Because internalized moral identity was the stronger predictor of moral behavior, interventions aimed at strengthening students' moral self-concept, for example through mentoring, reflective exercises, or values-affirmation activities, may be a more effective lever for promoting ethical conduct than approaches that focus primarily on visible or symbolic displays of morality (Bandura, 1991; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Universities may also consider embedding such approaches within broader character education initiatives rather than treating ethics as a standalone subject (Bretag, 2016; McCabe et al., 2012).

Several limitations warrant mention. The correlational design does not permit causal inference, and reliance on self-report measures raises the possibility of social desirability bias. The convenience sample, drawn primarily from Islamabad and Rawalpindi and skewed toward undergraduate students, also limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research employing longitudinal designs, behavioral or peer-report measures, and broader sampling across Pakistan's diverse academic institutions would help clarify the direction and generalizability of this relationship.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that moral identity, and particularly its internalized dimension, is significantly and positively related to moral behavior among Pakistani university students. These findings extend an established international literature to a previously understudied, non-Western academic population and underscore the value of strengthening students' internalized moral self-concept as a strategy for promoting ethical conduct in higher education.

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