Visible virtues: Agreement on the perception of moral character

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Abstract

This paper tested for inter-judge agreement for moral character traits. A large, diverse sample of students and community members rated their own moral character using a measure that tapped participants' standing on four specific virtues (fairness, honesty, compassion, and temperance) and two broad moral traits (moral concern and general morality). Friends, family members, and/or acquaintances rated these targets on the same traits. Self/other agreement and agreement among informants was found at the trait level (inter-judge ratings of the six traits were significantly and positively correlated), as well as individual level (judges agreed on targets' “moral character profiles”). We argue that inter-judge agreement speaks to the question of subjectivity in moral belief and constitutes preliminary evidence for the existence of moral character.

KEYWORDS: Morality, agreement, personality, character
Visible virtues: Agreement on the perception of moral character

People care deeply about moral character. Assessments of a person’s virtues, such as whether the person is *compassionate, honest, or fair*, are central to the impressions people hold of one another (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, in press; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Strohminger & Nichols, 2013; Wojcieszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). These assessments guide decisions about whom to affiliate with (Goodwin et al., in press), and whom to trust (van’t Wout & Sanfey, 2008). It is, therefore, surprising that so little is currently known about the veracity of these character judgments. Are evaluations of character simply subjective and perhaps shallow impressions of a person based upon limited and idiosyncratic experience, or do they reveal a deeper social reality about targets’ underlying broad moral traits? The answer to this question is essential to achieving a fundamental understanding of the very nature of moral belief, but to date research in moral psychology provides little instruction.

In this paper, we address this question by examining the extent to which different judges agree in their perceptions of character. Does a person’s view of her own character strengths and weaknesses correspond with how she’s seen by others? And do her acquaintances, friends, and family members agree with one another on the structure of her character? In answering these questions, this research sheds light on important conceptual and philosophical issues, from the objectivity or subjectivity of moral belief to the very existence of moral character traits.

*Assessing the degree of subjectivity in moral evaluation*

Perhaps because moral evaluations are so central to person perception, people tend to cling to them as objective beliefs that accurately reflect true properties of the world. Indeed, people distinguish moral beliefs from other evaluative propositions, such as social conventions and tastes, on the basis of their presumed objectivity (Goodwin & Darley, 2008). This suggests that naïve realism, the assumption
that the way one sees the world is the way the world really is (Ross & Ward, 1996), may be particularly pronounced in the way the average person regards his or her moral beliefs.

In light of this presumed realism, an important question is whether moral beliefs merit such confidence. Assessing the objectivity of moral beliefs with empirical research is a daunting task, however. There is substantial disagreement within philosophy as to whether there exist any objective criteria whatsoever that provide a stable foundation for moral belief (Harman, 1977), making it difficult to establish an acceptable empirical standard by which to judge the accuracy of such beliefs. Perhaps for this reason, very little psychological research explores the accuracy or truth of moral beliefs (but see Epley & Dunning, 2000; Balcetis & Dunning, 2012; Balcetis, Dunning, & Miller, 2008), despite the fact that accuracy is a core question asked of a variety of other social beliefs and perceptions (Carney, Colvin, & Hall, 2007; Lee, Jussim, McCauley, 1995; Matsumoto et al., 2000; Rule, Ambady, Adams, & Macrae, 2008).

Social consensus is one (albeit imperfect) standard that has been adopted as a test of the veracity of certain classes social beliefs. This approach (typically termed “agreement” research) has been used with great success to address such questions as the accuracy of self-knowledge (Vazire, 2010; Vazire & Carlson, 2010), the accuracy of social knowledge (Funder, 1995; Human & Biesanz, 2011), and the consequences associated with judgmental accuracy (Tenney, Vazire, & Mehl, 2013). In a typical agreement study, the belief in question is a person’s rating of either himself or an acquaintance on a particular trait. By comparing this person’s rating with ratings made by other judges, researchers quantify the agreement or consensus between the beliefs of different raters. A meaningful level of agreement suggests a shared reality that is common to each rater’s belief. Although this method cannot speak to whether these beliefs are objective in a deep sense (i.e., independent of a social reference point), correlations among the judgments of different raters at the very least speak against the idea that the belief in question resides entirely in the subjective perceptions of the observer.
With this in mind, research exploring agreement on moral character traits provides a promising inroad to exploring the objectivity/subjectivity of moral beliefs, broadly construed. Do different raters share common views of a target’s underlying compassion, honesty, or fairness? If so, it suggests that these beliefs are not entirely subjective. Whatever biases or idiosyncrasies may be present, significant agreement among raters demonstrates that these beliefs hold some degree of truth value independent of the unique perceptions of any given rater, and thus fail to qualify as entirely subjective phenomena.

The existence of moral character traits

Another (related) reason the issue of agreement on perceptions of morality is important is because it speaks to the question of whether such traits actually (i.e., ontologically) exist. Although people regularly describe one another in terms of character traits, there is skepticism coming from both philosophy and psychology as to whether such inferences are justified. Character traits such as honesty or compassion, for example, might simply be folk psychological concepts that people apply in their understanding of others, residing only in the collective minds of perceivers.

Much of this doubt about the existence of character traits is built from research showing either the powerful effects of situations in producing (im)moral behavior and/or the ostensibly weak relationship between so-called moral traits as they are assessed in standard personality inventories and moral action in a given instance (Darley & Batson, 1973; Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Hartshorne & May, 1928; Liberman et al., 2004; Milgram, 1974). Some scholars have been heavily influenced by such empirical findings, arguing strongly against the existence of moral traits (Doris, 2002; Harman, 2000; 2003; 2009). If moral behavior is unstable and heavily affected by fleeting features of a person’s situation, the argument goes, then it makes no sense to conceive of people as possessing stable dispositional tendencies toward moral behavior (Doris, 2002). Unfortunately, there is currently a dearth of empirical evidence directly addressing this situationist argument in the context of
moral character. Thus, the validity of the “moral situationism” perspective has neither been directly supported nor refuted by existing data.

Of course, the same situationist critique has been waged against personality traits more generally, and psychologists have responded by providing a range of evidence in support of broad traits (Fleeson, 2001; Funder, 1980; 1991; Kendrick & Funder, 1988). One key piece of evidence concerns whether independent observers agree both on the structure of a person's personality and on the distribution of traits within a given sample (Kendrick & Funder, 1988). Why might agreement be taken as evidence for the existence of traits? Allport (1937) summarized the logic as follows:

What is most noteworthy in research on personality is that different observers should agree as well as they do in judging any one person. This fact alone proves that there must be something really there [our emphasis], something objective in the nature of the individual himself that compels observers, in spite of their own prejudices, to view him in essentially the same way.

In other words, to the extent that distinct raters, in spite of a variety of potential errors and biases in their perception of a target, nonetheless arrive at similar conclusions about a target’s personality, there is most likely something in the target herself driving these shared perceptions. Applying this logic to the question of morality, to the extent that different judges show significant agreement in judgments of moral character, there is likely something “really there” in the target that drives these shared perceptions. As such, widespread agreement provides one piece of evidence for the existence of moral character. Unfortunately, such evidence is scarce.

Visible virtues: The challenge of perceiving morality

Agreement has been documented for a broad array of personality traits across dozens of studies (for reviews, see Kenny & West, 2010; Vazire & Carlson, 2010), which indirectly implies that different raters may also agree on judgments of character. But, moral traits do differ from many non-moral traits (i.e., Big Five traits) in fundamental ways that are known to affect agreement. Thus, we cannot assume that findings from previous research will generalize to examinations of moral traits, although it may
well be that moral traits (if they exist) are embedded within (or built from) more basic traits such as agreeableness or conscientiousness. We must examine moral traits directly and specifically for evidence of agreement.

Recent research has made some initial steps toward this end. Cohen and colleagues (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, in press) have shown that self-assessments of Honesty-Humility, a domain of personality relevant to a person’s sincerity, fairness, greed-avoidance, and modesty, as well as Guilt Proneness, an individual difference variable related to various kinds of moral behavior, are reliably associated with peer assessments (see also Ashton & Lee, 2010). Beyond this, however, we know of no research exploring agreement with respect to broad aspects of a person’s moral character; it is also unclear whether agreement extends beyond self/other agreement to agreement among observers. Thus, additional research is needed to establish the pervasiveness of moral agreement. The present research addresses this need by examining agreement on a broader assortment of moral traits, including specific virtues (fairness, compassion, honesty, and temperance), as well as broad moral traits (what we are terming moral concern and general morality), by expanding self/other agreement to the study of agreement among different raters, and by investigating two distinct conceptualizations of agreement – agreement at the trait level, as well as agreement at the level of moral profiles.

With this in mind, it is important to recognize two characteristics of moral traits that might hinder agreement relative to standard Big-Five traits. Although agreement on non-moral traits tends to be quite robust (Vazire & Carlson, 2010, estimate the average correlation between self- and other ratings of Big Five traits between .40 and .60), research suggests that agreement on moral traits might be substantially lower. Because moral traits are evaluative and based at least in part on internal or private information, they represent a unique challenge to agreement research (John & Robbins, 1993; Vazire, 2010).

Moral traits are deeply evaluative. If moral character judgments are intuitive assessments of a
person's underlying goodness, they are, by definition, evaluative (Paulhus & John, 1998). Inter-judge correlations for ratings of highly evaluative traits (such as conscientiousness or intellect) tend to be lower than correlations on less evaluative traits (extraversion and emotional stability; John & Robbins, 1993; Vazire, 2010). This lower agreement may be due to the fact ratings of moral character are biased by social desirability or other self-presentational concerns. Ratings of a person's compassion, for example, will likely arise from some true reflection of the person's underlying trait compassion, as well as error due to a desire to see the target in a particular light. Such errors in self- or other-assessment may degrade the quality of those reports, making it difficult to detect agreement among raters.

Moral traits are particularly “internal”. Character traits like honesty, fairness, or compassion, operate through many channels, some of which are outwardly observable (e.g., behavior), while others are private and internal (e.g., desires, affect, and motivation). Manifestations of compassion, for example, might take the form of charitable giving or outward displays of kindness, but also might include emotional distress while observing another individual's suffering. Of course, outward behavior and inner states will be important to the manifestation of virtually any trait, but moral traits, in particular, might be powerfully defined in terms of private, internal operations, such as beliefs, motivations, and affect.

Traits based upon internal qualities tend to be more difficult to assess, at least for outward observers (Vazire, 2010). For example, traits such as intellect, which is manifested in intellectual curiosity and openness to ideas, are less visible from an outsider's perspective, and thus, observers' ratings may provide impoverished insight into a target's standing on these traits (Funder & Colvin, 1988; John & Robbins, 1993; Vazire 2010). Similarly, in the moral domain, observers may be unaware of a person's true concern for others (compassion) or their distress at seeing injustice (fairness), and may thus miss a crucial piece of the person's underlying character.

*Conceptualizing agreement*
What does it mean for different raters to agree on a target’s moral character? There are at least two ways of conceptualizing agreement (Funder & Colvin, 1997; Furr, Dougherty, Marsh, & Mathias, 2007), each offering different insights into the meaning and nature of agreement (Furr, 2009). In this paper, we employed both methods in order to understand not only levels of agreement among different raters but also the kind of agreement that is more or less likely among different raters. We apply the same two conceptualizations while examining both self/other agreement and agreement among observers.

Agreement at the trait level. Perhaps the most common conceptualization of agreement is the extent to which raters agree on a target’s standing, relative to other people, on a particular trait. This conceptualization is indexed by the correlation among raters for a particular trait. A significant positive self-other agreement correlation, for example indicates that targets who see themselves as relatively compassionate (compared to the way that other targets see themselves) also tend to be seen as relatively compassionate by their informants (as compared to the way that other informants see their targets). One can also ask about the extent to which informants’ ratings of a target’s fairness agree with other informants’ ratings of a target’s fairness (sometimes known as other/other agreement or consensus), with significant positive correlations suggesting that different informants tend to agree on who is more and less compassionate, fair, honest, etc.

From this perspective, agreement is defined at the level of the trait. In the current study, we examine six traits. At a relatively narrow level, we examined four specific moral virtues – honesty, fairness, compassion, and temperance (or self-control). At a broader level, we examined two “overall” moral traits, general morality and moral concern. By general morality, we mean direct global ratings of a target’s morality, rather than ratings of specific moral virtues (i.e. the extent to which the target is seen as a generally “good person”). By moral concern, we mean a person’s tendency to think about, discuss, or worry about morality (e.g., in terms of determining what is right and wrong).
Agreement on moral profiles. Another important conceptualization is the extent to which raters agree on a person's pattern of individual virtues, or their moral profile. Suppose, for example, that Tom sees himself as being very compassionate, somewhat fair and honest, and quite poor at controlling his impulses (temperance). This is Tom’s moral profile: He sees himself as having particular character strength of compassion, a weakness of temperance, and mid-range honesty and fairness. In a profile agreement approach, agreement is conceptualized as the extent to which an informant has a similar view of Tom’s pattern of virtues (Furr, 2010).

From this perspective, agreement is defined at the level of the target, indexed by the average profile correlation for each pair of raters (e.g., self with informant or informant with informant). In the current study, we examined profile agreement to see whether people agree on targets' patterns of moral strengths and weaknesses across the four virtues honesty, fairness, compassion, and temperance.

Method

Participants

Our sample consisted of students and community members. “Target” participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes as well as the local community. “Informants” were nominated by target participants, and represented a diverse sample of family members, friends, and coworkers.

Student subsample. Undergraduate students were recruited for a study on “perceptions of personality,” and were compensated with credit in their psychology courses. These target participants were asked to nominate up to eight informants to rate the targets' personalities. To encourage diversity in these nominations, we asked targets to consider family members, college friends, and hometown friends as potential informants. All nominated informants were contacted by email and asked to complete the study. Informants were compensated with either a $10 Amazon.com gift card or entry into a raffle for the chance to win an iPad.

Community subsample. The remainder of the sample were community members in the Winston-
Salem area. The “community target” participants were recruited through public advertisements and advertisements for ongoing studies at Wake Forest University. They were recruited for a study on “perceptions of personality,” and completed the measures reported here as part of a larger study of morality. Community target participants nominated up to 9 informants from different domains of life (significant others, coworkers, friends). All nominated informants were contacted by email or mail to complete the study. In exchange for participation, targets and informants were entered into a raffle offering a 1-in-3 chance of winning a $200 gas card.

Initially, 263 target participants completed the study. To be eligible for inclusion in this data set, we required useable data from targets with at least one informant. This resulted in a final sample of 168 targets and 444 informants. The number of informants ranged between 1-6, with a median of 2 informants per target.

Materials and Procedure

Target participants completed all measures either online or on paper in the lab. The morality questionnaire that served as the basis of this study was administered along with other questionnaires not relevant to the current study. At the end of the session, targets supplied names and contact information for potential informants. Informants either completed measures online or on paper (in the latter case, informants returned measures through the mail).

Morality questionnaire. Targets’ moral character was assessed using a measure designed by the research team. In crafting the measure, we sought to capture meaningful dimensions of character, including targets’ standings on specific virtues (e.g., honesty and compassion), as well as broader evaluations of targets’ general tendency for moral thought and action. More established scales, such as the Honesty/Humility in the HEXACO (Lee & Ashton, 2004) or the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva, & Ditto, 2011) include content related to some important facets of morality; however, our aim was to capture a broader array of traits and tendencies that might that
more sharply reflect an intuitively-meaningful conceptualization of moral character. For this reason, we implemented a new measure, which incorporated items from established scales and newly-generated items by the research team. Items from the HEXACO (Lee & Ashton, 2004), Temperament and Character Inventory (Cloninger, Przybeck, Svrakic, & Wetzel, 1994) and the Self-Control Scale (Tangney, Baunestier, & Boone, 2004) were carefully combined by the research team to represent each targeted moral trait. New items were generated primarily for the “moral concern” and “general morality” traits, as measures for these broad moral trait concepts were not established in the previous literature. These items were generated after careful analysis of the moral trait, strengths, and virtues literature and thorough discussion within the research team.

The resulting 41-item measure developed by our team tapped 6 dimensions of morality, with six to eight items per dimension. Targets and informants were asked to rate how well each of the 41 statements describes him/herself (targets) or “your friend or family member” (informants), using a five-point scale, from 1 (Very inaccurate) to 5 (Very accurate). Targets’ standing on four specific virtue were measured with subscales for Fairness (ex. “Treats everyone in a similar way,” “Is quick to judge others” [reverse]), Honesty (ex. “Tells the truth,” “Doesn’t pretend to be more than s/he is”), Compassion (ex. “Is indifferent to the needs of others” [reverse], “Takes time out to help others”), and Temperance (ex. “Is able to control his/her cravings,” “Rarely overindulges”). In addition, targets were rated on two broad character dimensions. Moral Concern tapped individual differences in the role that morality plays in targets’ thoughts and decisions (ex. “Thinks about how to be a good person,” “Makes decisions with ‘doing the right thing’ in mind”). The final subscale, General Morality, consisted of summary judgments of targets’ character (ex. “Is a moral person,” “Usually does the right thing.”).

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and reliabilities for the six moral character traits. Subscales generally showed acceptable reliability, with an average alpha of .77 (lowest alpha =.57 for
self-rated honesty, highest alpha = .90 for self-rated general morality). In general, ratings by targets and informants were quite high for all six traits (note that means for each trait are above the midpoint of 3). Looking only at the four specific virtues, targets rated themselves and were rated by informants as highest in Compassion and lowest in Temperance, with Honesty and Fairness falling in the middle. High ratings on the two broad traits (Moral Concern and General Morality) indicated that, at the broad level, targets and informants saw targets as possessing rather strong character.

Prior to performing agreement analyses, ratings for all six traits were examined for outliers. Trait ratings falling 2.5 SD away from the group average for the trait were excluded from analyses. Additional analyses confirmed that these exclusions did not meaningfully change the magnitude of the correlations reported.

Agreement at the trait level

We first examined self-other agreement for each moral trait, reflecting the degree to which targets and informants agreed about which targets had highest and lowest scores on each trait. Because the number and type of informants varied unsystematically between targets, ratings from informants must be treated as exchangeable or “non-distinguishable” (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). To account for this, we adapted path analytic procedures outlined by Furr and Wood (2013). Analyzing each moral trait in a separate model, this procedure capitalizes on all available informant ratings to estimate, in essence, the correlation between targets’ self-ratings and any randomly-selected informant.

As shown in the top row of Table 2, there was significant positive self/other agreement for all six moral traits. Across the four specific virtues, agreement was lowest for Honesty ($r = .17$) and highest for Temperance ($r = .44$), with mean $r = .28$. Both broader level traits (Moral Concern and General Morality) had correlations greater than .25.

Although the sizes of each subsample are relatively low (and thus results are less precise), we examined the Community and Student subsamples separately. These subsample analyses are of interest
primarily as an admittedly-rough internal gauge of replicability, and three noteworthy findings emerge. First, self-other agreement was significantly positive for all traits among Community participants and for four of the six traits among Students. This provides replication of general significant positive self-other agreement for the moral traits. Second, the pattern of differing self-other agreement across traits replicated across the two subsamples. For example, in both subsamples, Temperance elicited the highest levels of agreement, while Honesty and Compassion elicited the lowest levels. More formally, the correlation between the two subsample rows of self-other agreement (from Table 2) was robust at $r = .75$, indicating that the traits with highest (or lowest) self-other agreement among Community participants also had the highest (or lowest) self-other agreement among Students. Third, the overall level of self-other agreement was descriptively higher among Community participants (mean $r = .35$) than among Students (mean $r = .14$). Thus, although positive and generally significant in both subsamples, self-other agreement was somewhat stronger among Community members.

We next examined agreement among informants for each moral trait, reflecting the degree to which informants agreed with each other about which targets had the highest and lowest levels of each trait. Again, to account for exchangeability among informants, we adapted procedures from Furr and Wood (2013) to estimate the correlation between any two randomly-selected informants. As shown in the second row of Table 2, there was significant positive “inter-informant” agreement for all six moral traits. Across the four specific virtues, inter-informant agreement was lowest for Honesty ($r = .12$) and highest for Temperance ($r = .32$), with mean $r = .21$. Among the two broader-level traits, Moral Concern elicited significant agreement, while General Morality elicited only marginally-significant agreement. Notably, the pattern of differences among traits was highly similar to the pattern of differences in self-other agreement. Indeed, the correlation between Table 2’s two “Overall Sample” rows is robust at $r = .71$, indicating that the traits with highest (or lowest) self-other agreement also tended to have the highest (or lowest) inter-observer agreement.
Analysis of subsamples again revealed several noteworthy results. First, although inter-informant agreement was significant and fairly robust among Community participants, it was much weaker among Students. Thus, robust evidence for inter-observer agreement was obtained in only one subsample. Second, the pattern of differences among traits did not cleanly replicate across subsamples. Most strikingly, while Temperance elicited the highest agreement among Community participants ($r = .51$), it elicited the lowest agreement among Students (tied with Compassion at $r = .00$). Considering the entire pattern of findings in Table 2, this difference is the most striking discrepancy between subsamples.

Agreement on moral profiles

Shifting to individuals’ moral profiles, we again begin with self-other agreement. For all profile analyses, we examined only the four specific virtues, omitting the two general traits of Moral Concern and General Morality. Because Moral Concern and General Morality are non-specific and cut across several domains of virtue, they are unsuitable to include along with the more specific traits in targets’ moral profiles (Furr, 2010). Profile agreement is typically quantified via a simple Pearson correlation between profiles as rated by two people – e.g., target and informant. A positive correlation indicates that target and informant agree about the target’s moral strengths and weaknesses (i.e., which moral traits are relatively high in the target’s moral profile and which are relatively low). In contrast, a zero correlation indicates no systematic agreement, and a negative correlation would indicate that target and informant have inverse views of the target’s moral strengths and weaknesses.

To examine self-other agreement, two moral profile correlations were calculated for each target-informant pair (Furr, 2008). The first was an overall moral profile correlation. To calculate overall agreement, a target’s self-ratings for fairness, honesty, compassion, and temperance were correlated with the ratings of each of his or her informants. These pairwise correlations were then subjected to a Fisher’s $Z$ transformation, and then averaged across all informants for each target, to obtain an average
profile agreement score for each target. These were then averaged across all targets for a single index of overall agreement. The second profile correlation indexed distinctive agreement, which controls for the moral profile of the average or “normative” person. This provides an index of inter-rater agreement that conservatively estimates agreement on how a particular person differs from the norm. To calculate distinctive agreement, we created a “distinctive” self-rated moral profile for each target by subtracting the average self-rating for each virtue from the target’s self-rating on the corresponding virtue. We similarly created a distinctive moral profile for each informant by subtracting the average informant’s rating for each virtue from each informant’s ratings. We then correlated a target’s distinctive self-rated moral profile with each of his or her informants’ distinctive moral profiles, indicating the degree to which each informant sees the target’s distinctive moral qualities similarly to the target’s self-view. As with overall agreement, these pairwise correlations were then z-transformed and averaged into a single index of self-other distinctive agreement.

The first row in Table 3 provides robust evidence of self-other agreement for moral profiles. The average level of overall agreement was $\bar{r} = .70$, $p < .001$, but perhaps even more impressive is the level of distinctive self-other agreement. Although it is a much more conservative estimate of agreement, the average level of distinctive self-other agreement was still well above zero, at $\bar{r} = .36$, $p < .001$. This provides compelling evidence of self-other agreement about targets’ moral strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, these significant findings replicate across the two subsamples, though agreement was again somewhat stronger among Community participants than Students.

Similar procedures were used to examine agreement among informants. Specifically, for each target, informants’ profiles were correlated with each other, and the correlations were then z-transformed and averaged for each target. Then, those averages were themselves averaged across all targets to obtain single indices of overall and distinctive inter-informant profile agreement.

The second row in Table 3 provides evidence of inter-informant agreement for moral profiles,
with significant average levels of both overall ($\bar{r} = .64, p < .001$) and distinctive agreement ($\bar{r} = .24, p < .01$). Thus, ratings of moral character converged not only on targets’ relative character strengths and weaknesses, but also on how those strengths and weaknesses differentiated targets from the average person. These findings generally replicate across the two subsamples, with the sole exception being non-significant distinctive inter-informant agreement among Students.

General Discussion

This study provides evidence for both self/other and inter-informant agreement on perceptions of moral character. Across a variety of targets, informants, traits, and methods of conceptualizing agreement, participants generally showed significant – and sometimes substantial – convergence in their ratings of moral character. These results provide new insights into questions that are of interest to moral psychology, social psychology, and personality psychology. They broaden current understanding of moral perception and judgment, and address important issues concerning the very nature of moral character traits.

Implications for understanding judgments of moral character

One method for disentangling social judgments that are idiosyncratic and subjective from judgments that are based upon a shared social reality is to ask about the extent to which different judges arrive at similar conclusions about a common target. Evidence for agreement in judgments of character traits thus speaks to whether these moral beliefs are purely subjective phenomena. If beliefs about the contents of one’s own or another person’s character were simply subjective or a matter of personal opinion, it would be impossible to find reliable agreement among different raters. However, these data reveal quite the opposite pattern. This study demonstrates that self-assessments of moral character match, to a significant degree, assessments provided by others, and that assessments from different observers agree significantly with one another. Put another way, these results suggest that the average
person’s character judgments (whether of herself or a known other) provide information not only about how that particular judge views that particular target, but about how other people are likely to view that target and (in the case of informant reports) how that target is likely to see him- or herself. Thus, these results suggest a certain degree of objectivity in moral beliefs that people hold about their own and other people’s character traits.

Notwithstanding, the present findings also highlight the unique challenges of perceiving morality in self and other. Trait-level agreement (for both self/other agreement and agreement among informants) in this study was lower than what is typical for Big-5 traits. And while agreement in our study was comparable to, if not somewhat higher than, levels of agreement John and Robins (1993) found for highly evaluative traits, it was lower than agreement observed for the Honesty-Humility subscale of the HEXACO (Cohen et al., in press; Ashton & Lee, 2010). While it is possible that these differences in results reflect sampling error or differences in methodology between studies (note, for example, that some self-assessed moral traits in our study tended to show lower reliability than what is typically found for Big-5 or HEXACO subscales), it may also be that the moral traits we studied are particularly challenging to assess due to more fundamental differences in the way people judge these character traits, relative to how they judge other facets of personality.

One reason for lowered agreement may be that judgments of moral traits, relative to judgments of non-moral traits, involve assessments of, and inferences about, the private contents of targets’ minds, such as their motivational states and intentions. For example, volunteering to help a coworker with her work may be seen as an act of compassion only if the intention is to alleviate the coworker’s suffering, rather than to curry favor with one’s boss or to springboard into an after-work drink date. Judgments of whether a person is talkative or emotionally stable, by comparison, may not require deeper inferences about mental states: A person just is (or seems) talkative based upon his behavior, regardless of whether he is talkative for the sake of being talkative or talkative for the right reasons (cf. Kammrath, Mendoza-
Denton, & Mischel, 2005). Thus, motives may be more central to judgments of moral traits, requiring additional inferences on the part of perceivers, and degrading agreement. With this in mind, future research could attempt to disentangle perceptions of moral motivations from perceptions of moral behavior to explore agreement in both domains, and the differential consequences of such agreement.

Although agreement at the trait-level was lower in this study than what might be expected given past research, levels of profile agreement were comparable to those seen elsewhere using similar analytic approaches (Furr et al., 2007). To our knowledge, this is the first study to employ a profile approach to studying agreement on moral character; so, the robustness of both overall and distinctive agreement observed here offers promising directions for future research. Indeed, a profile approach to the study of moral character may offer certain conceptual advantages over the traditional trait-level approach, perhaps by better capturing the psychology of moral character perception. It is possible (and maybe even likely) that when thinking about character, people categorize one another (and themselves) more in terms of intra-individual trade-offs between various virtues and vices, and less in terms of the target’s absolute standing on a set of isolated character traits. If so, one reason agreement on moral profiles was higher than trait-level agreement in this study might be that this analytic tool better captures the underlying process with which people perceive morality.

Results from the moral profile analyses reveal another important insight about perceptions of moral character: Namely, that there exists a high degree of variability in the magnitude of agreement. While on average, raters in our study tended to agree with one another on targets’ moral strengths and weaknesses, at the level of dyads (i.e., any two raters), profile correlations ranged from -1 to +1, suggesting that different raters agreed with one another to varying degrees. This variability amidst overall agreement raises important questions about the correlates of agreement. We suspect that agreement on moral character is likely to be related to a number of relational factors already identified in past agreement research, such as acquaintanceship (Funder & Colvin, 1988), the quality of the judge,
AGREEMENT ON CHARACTER TRAITS

and the information available about the target (Funder, 1995). Beyond this, we see agreement on moral character traits as being potentially crucial to interpersonal functioning—perhaps more so than agreement on other, non-moral traits—and as such see exciting areas for future investigation.

Perhaps because moral character traits are so central to people’s understanding of themselves and others, agreement on a person’s underlying character is likely to have far-reaching interpersonal consequences (Tenney et al., 2013). Self/other agreement, for example, may strengthen interpersonal closeness by allowing people to verify their self-views (Swann, 1983), or simply by minimizing interpersonal disagreement. On the flip side, inter-observer agreement on character traits may have important consequences for coalition-building and group processes. Group decisions about whether to include or ostracize, hire or fire, promote or demote a particular individual might be based not only upon whether the target is seen as highly moral, but whether such perceptions are widely shared by different people. Additional research will be needed to understand the downstream effects of shared moral perception.

Implications for understanding the nature of moral character

We also contend that these results carry implications for understanding the very nature of moral character traits. The presence of both self/other agreement and agreement among informants provides positive evidence for the existence of these traits, while diminished levels of agreement, relative to typical Big-5 traits, raise questions about the global versus local nature of these traits.

With regard to the existence of character traits, we argue that agreement does, in fact, speak in favor of character traits as real and observable dispositions of the targets being judged. The fact that various informants agreed with one another and with targets not only on perceptions of who is more virtuous but also on targets’ particular character strengths and weaknesses suggests that these distinct raters are basing their evaluations on a shared reality. We argue, using logic advanced by Allport (1937)
and Funder (1980, 1991), that the underlying reality is targets' moral character traits, and that inter-rater agreement signals the existence of stable, cross-situational moral dispositions of the targets being judged.

The fact that agreement was lower on these traits than other personality traits, however, and that this was particularly true of agreement among informants, raises an important question about the amount of cross-situational consistency of character. As noted earlier, these lower levels of agreement might reflect methodological issues (e.g., reliability) or substantive issues regarding the evaluative or motivational nature of moral traits. However, it is also possible, for example, that moral traits are narrower and more localized to particular situations than non-moral traits (see Doris, 2002, for one example of this argument), and if this were so, one would expect lower agreement on these traits than non-moral traits, particularly among informants from different domains of life. This possibility is consistent with patterns in our data, but hinges on an assumption that moral behavior is, in fact, more variable than non-moral behavior, and to date there are no empirical data to support such a claim. In fact, preliminary data from our lab suggests that moral behavior may be just as stable, if not more stable, than non-moral behavior (Meindl, Jayawickreme, Furr, & Fleeson, 2013). Thus, evaluating this possibility will require not only more research on character agreement, but synthesis across different research programs in moral psychology.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have demonstrated that different judges agree significantly on the structure and contents of a person's character. Using two measures of agreement (trait-level agreement, as well as overall and distinctive profile agreement) and a diverse sample of targets and informants, we found ratings of moral character provided by friends, family, and acquaintances agreed with ratings furnished by the self, and, to a lesser extent, with ratings provided by other informants. Results from this study
suggest that moral evaluations are based upon a shared social reality and that this reality is grounded in
the actual moral traits of the person being judged. This research also highlights the importance of a
person-centered approach to moral psychology, and suggests exciting new questions for advancing
current knowledge.
Footnotes

1. Due to pragmatic constraints, about 1/3 of participants in the community sample were asked for only four informants. These participants were nonetheless encouraged to consider people from different areas of life.

2. It is not clear why self-ratings of Honesty showed relatively poor reliability, especially since informant-ratings using the very same items showed satisfactory reliability.

3. In light of past research, we should note that across the six traits measured, ratings provided by informants were in almost every case higher than self-ratings (the only exception was compassion, the highest-rated virtue overall). In four out of six cases (fairness, honesty, temperance, and general morality) that difference was highly significant, $t > 5.07, ps < .0001$.

4. Specifically, we used a variation of Model 6 in Table 2 of Furr and Wood (2013). For our purposes, we modeled correlations between a single target variable and multiple informants instead of directional paths. To account for exchangeability among informants, means and standard deviations were held constant across informants. Analyses were conducted via AMOS 19. Model 6 in Table 3 of the online supplemental document accompanying Furr and Wood (2013) provides AMOS syntax that was subsequently adapted for the current analyses.

5. For agreement among informants, we used a variation of Model 1 in Table 2 of Furr and Wood (2013), adapted to include up to six informants. Model 1 in Table 3 of the online supplemental document accompanying Furr and Wood (2013) provides AMOS syntax that was subsequently adapted for the current analyses.
References


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### Descriptive statistics for the Morality Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral subscale</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
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<td>Informant</td>
<td>Target</td>
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<td>4.45 (.40)</td>
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Table 2

Agreement on six moral traits.

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<th>Sample/subsample</th>
<th>Fairness</th>
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*Note.  † p < .10,  *p < .05,  ** p < .01,  *** p < .001*
Table 3

Agreement on moral profiles

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*Note.  *p < .05,  **p < .01,  ***p < .001*