Character formation from a psychological point of view: Search for values, search for "Sinn"

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Abstract

Character formation has a lot to do with the development of moral values. Classical as well as modern conceptions of moral development will be presented here. Additionally, a world view on values shows that there is a significant convergence on human values in different cultures. Also, the connection between moral values and wisdom is discussed. Measurement approaches to moral values are listed and commented on. Finally, some results from recent "trolley dilemmata" will be presented and evaluated concerning issues of moral judgments.

1 Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself where your values comes from, where your character stems from? The easy answer might be: from your parents and from the culture

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you are living in. However, this answer is a bit superficial and needs a more in-depth look. From a psychological perspective, human development can be seen as a steady process starting from the first moment of conception to the last moment in the hour of death. Developmental psychology analyzes how all human attributes unfold during the stream of life. Part of this psychological perspective is an analysis of the lifespan development of character formation. The special subdiscipline is called "moral development" and deals with questions like the following: How do moral values develop? Where do they come from? How can they be changed if once developed? This "lifespan perspective" of human development has become the standard paradigm in developmental psychology within the last 80 years. It started with the book "Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem" (engl.: "The human course of life as a psychological problem") from Charlotte Bühler (1933) and culminated in the book "Life-span developmental psychology" from Baltes, Reese, and Nesselroade (1977).

2 What is character?

Two potential understandings of what constitutes a character will be presented: A narrow one that connects character to moral attitudes and sees character formation as moral development. This view is compared to a broader one that connects character formation to personality development.

The narrow view sees character formation as the construction of a kind of psychological "faculty" (like the faculties of cognition, emotion, motivation, language, etc.) that develops over time, with discrete levels. This view is represented mainly by the ideas of Lawrence Kohlberg, who proposed a famous model of moral "stages" (levels) that are passed through childhood until adolescence. Depending on your course of development, persons end up in one of six postulated levels. Below, I will present his approach in more detail.

A broader view takes a different stance: Character is embedded in a larger view of personality. According to Wrzus and Roberts (2017), "personality constitutes characteristics that reflect relatively enduring patterns of typical cognition, emotion, motivation, and behavior in which individuals differ from others of the same culture or subpopulation."

Within research on personality, the term "character" sounds old-fashioned and represents a trait approach to personality. Modern views follow an interactionist

view (Endler & Edwards, 1986; Magnusson, 1980): personality is a mixture of (more permanent, stable) *traits* that characterize a person and (more transient, variable) *states* that vary across situations.

3 Classical (narrow) view: Progression through stages

The classical (narrow) view on moral development was established by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and his American colleague Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987). They saw the process of moral development as an ordered progression through developmental stages. During each stage, a specific rule describes the respective word behavior. In the classical view, stages are connected to certain age periods.

To assess the actual stage of moral development, Kohlberg used vignettes like the famous "Heinz dilemma" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 12):

> In Europe, a woman was near death from a very bad disease, a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could get together only about $1,000, which was half of what it costs. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.
>
> Should the husband have done that? Was it right or wrong? Is your decision that it is right (or wrong) objectively right, is it morally universal, or is it your personal opinion?

Subjects had to read the vignettes and write down their answer to this question.

Based on the answers to these questions, subjects were classified into one of three levels: Level 1, Pre-Conventional Morality, contains no personal code

of morality. Instead, the moral code is shaped by the standards of adults. The consequences of following or breaking their rules are most important.
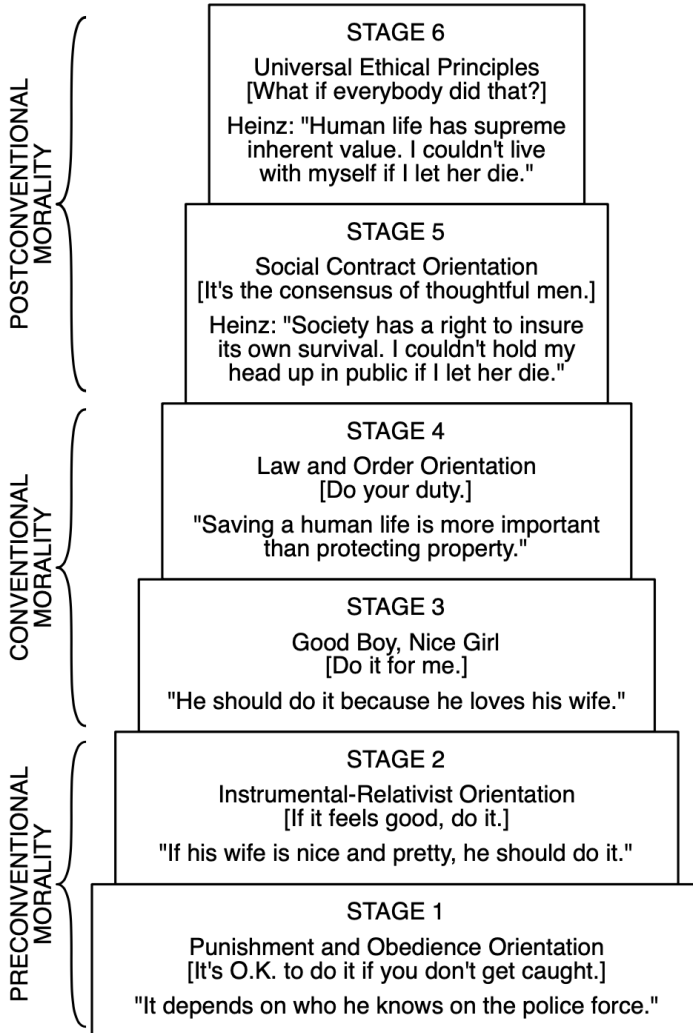
Figure 1: The six stages of moral development, according to Lawrence Kohlberg (Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kohlberg_Model_of_Moral_Development.png).

On Level 2, Conventional Morality, the moral standards of valued adult role models are internalized. Also, authority is internalized but not questioned. Moral reasoning is based on the norms of the group to which the person belongs.

Level 3, Post-Conventional Morality: The individual judgment of moral dilemmata relies on self-chosen principles. Moral reasoning is based on individual rights and justice. According to Kohlberg, this level of moral reasoning is as far as most people get.

Following McLeod (2013), there are some known problems with the Kohlberg approach to the development of moral reasoning. First, dilemmata lack ecological validity (i.e., they are, in a sense, artificial). The "Heinz" dilemma (stealing a drug to save the life of his wife) does not reflect the life experience of 10–16-year old subjects. Second, one might critizise the hypothetical settings: no real consequences will follow the decisions (low-stake instead of high-stake testing, see Sackett et al., 2008). Third, there was biased sampling: according to Gilligan (1977), Kohlberg's samples were purely male subjects and represented an "androcentric" definition of morality (most important are the principles of law and justice instead of compassion and care). Fourth, a cross-sectional study design was used instead of longitudinal designs, which would better reflect the developmental process. Nevertheless, Kohlberg's model serves as a reference in many approaches and should be seen as a starting point for improvements.

4 Broader view: Character formation as personality development

To change moral values, we have to change the core of a person, that means: we have to change her or his personality. To change personality is not easy, but it occurs. One simple way is aging: whereas younger people – according to Wrzus and Roberts (2017) – increase their Big Five scores in agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and social dominance (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Roberts et al., 2006; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008), "older people show a reversed pattern with longitudinal decreases in agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness" (Berg & Johansson, 2014; Kandler et al., 2015; Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Möttus et al., 2012). Other opportunities for trait changes often occur together with significant life events (life transitions, changes in personal relationships, work experiences). However, a direct influence on these types of events is not possible. In this broader view of character formation,

education seems to be most important (Engelen et al., 2018). No wonder that in modern times even computer games are seen as training instruments for moral sensitivity (Katsarov et al., 2019).

5 Moral values: World studies

How are moral values distributed on Earth? In an exciting study run by a group of anthropologists, Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse (2019) checked the prevalence of seven forms of cooperative behaviors (helping kin, helping your group, reciprocating, being brave, deferring to superiors, dividing disputed resources, and respecting prior possession) in 60 societies from all over the world. The background idea was to test their theory of "morality-as-cooperation." This theory says "that morality consists of a collection of biological and cultural solutions to the problems of cooperation recurrent in human social life" (Curry et al., 2019, p. 48) and is based on assumptions from evolutionary biology and game theory. The theory predicts cooperative behavior in seven domains and postulates that these seven moral values will be universal. To test their predictions, Curry et al. (2019) made a "content analysis of the ethnographic record of 60 societies" distributed over the world (see Figure 2). Data come from the six regions of the globe (Sub-Saharan Africa, Circum-Mediterranean, East Eurasia, Insular Pacific, North America, South America).

They carefully rated data from a huge archive (1200 selected pages from the digital version of the Human Relations Area Files). This archive contains thousands of full-text ethnographies. According to a codebook, the authors selected examples for the following seven areas of morality: (1) family (helping family members), (2) group (helping group members), (3) reciprocity (engaging in reciprocal cooperation), (4) bravery (being brave), (5) respect (respecting your superiors), (6) fairness (sharing or dividing a disputed resource), and (7) property (respecting other's property). As a result of this analysis, 961 out of 962 relevant text paragraphs valenced these cooperative behaviors positively. The one exception was a negative evaluation that came from the Chuuk, Central America, and concerns property issues: "to steal openly from others is admirable in that it shows a person's dominance and demonstrates that he is not intimidated by the aggressive powers of others" (Curry et al., 2019, p. 54). The conclusion of the authors (p. 55): "As such, these results provide strong support for the theory of morality-as-cooperation, and

Figure 2: The 60 societies analyzed in the study from Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse (from Curry et al., 2019, p. 53).

no support for the more extreme versions of moral relativism." The cross-cultural survey contains a lot of interesting points, but people in western industrialized countries might follow different moral principles than people in foraging societies.

Similarly, Schwartz (1992) explores the universality of value systems by drawing samples from 20 countries, mostly consisting of school teachers and university students, based on the assumption that 11 basic value types can be found universally, all over the world within all cultural regions. These basic ("universal") values are self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, spirituality, benevolence, and universalism; see Figure 3. Interestingly, he separates instrumental values (the "means" in a means-end relation) from terminal ones (the "end states").

His approach comes in the tradition of Hofstede (2001) and does not contain a developmental perspective. Thus, it does not contribute much to the question of character formation.

6 Character formation and the genesis of wisdom

One of the long-term results of character formation can be seen in the development of wisdom. As Barbara Tuchman (1984, p. 21) defined wisdom: "the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information." Is wisdom the result of successful character formation? What do we know about the connection?

In her recent review, Glück (2019, Table 16.1, p. 310) presents twelve definitions of wisdom. Only one of them mentions "values" explicitly, namely the "balance theory of wisdom" from Sternberg (1998). According to that theory, wise people know – besides other competencies – that different people can have different values. This idea of "value relativism" in wise persons is also one of the five criteria for wisdom within the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm (see, e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). However, to know that there are different perspectives on dilemmata does not imply that one has clear moral values – it is a kind of meta-knowledge, free of any special content.
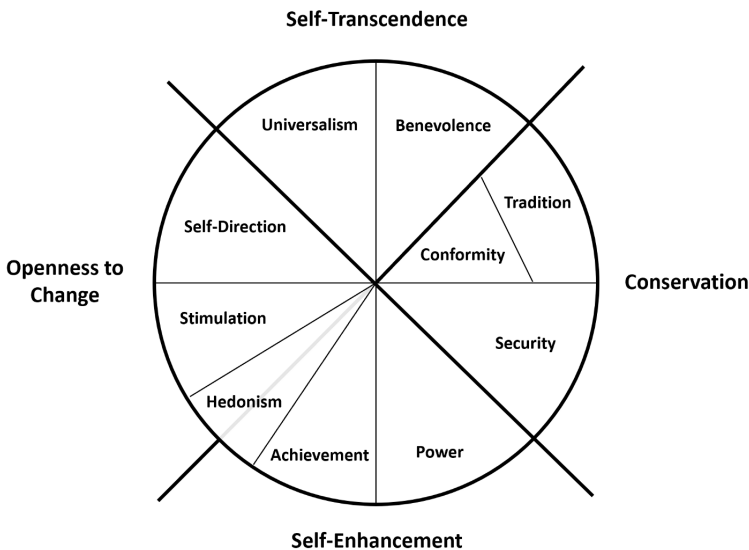
Figure 3: The basic values, according to Schwartz, sorted into four main classes (Source: https: //medium.com/bits-and-behavior/measuring-values-and-culture-264205035c87).

Similarly, Fischer (2015) argues for a context-free view of wisdom and sees it as "independent of one's values and context." On the other hand: Fischer has collected 12 propositions that were commonly known to wise men from four different cultures (Socrates, Jesus, Confucius, Buddha). Those four wise persons show huge parallels concerning certain wise content (e.g., Proposition 10: "Good people (and children) make good company"). Once again, there is no idea about the acquisition of these pieces of wisdom. We all know that reading alone those "wise" propositions will not make us a wise person instantaneously.

7 Measuring character and moral values

Psychologists are known for their expertise to measure dispositions (for a critical position, see Gould, 1996). So, they also developed ideas on how to measure morale and character.

Based on the "narrow" perspective, the "Heinz dilemma" (presented earlier) represents an item from the "Moral Judgements Scale" (MJS) that was developed and used by Kohlberg. It allows subjects to write open answers. A bit more standardized is the "Defining Issues Test" (DIT) that also presents moral dilemmata (like the "Heinz dilemma) but requires a categorical answer instead of free text. As Giammarco (2016) reports, there exist also dilemma-free assessments ("Ethics Position Questionnaire," Forsyth, 1980; "Visions of Morality Scale," Shelton & McAdams, 1990) and self-reports ("Moral Foundations Questionnaire", Graham et al., 2009; "Moral Justification Scale," Gump et al., 2000; "Measure of Moral Orientation," Liddell et al., 1992; "Moral Orientation Scale," Yacker & Weinberg, 1990).

Coming from the broader view (presented above), the measurement of character implies the measurement of personality. The "Big Five" inventories (e.g., BFI; HEXACO-PI-R; NEO-PI-R) measure the following personality attributes (character) via questionnaires: (1) Extraversion (the degree to which one is active, assertive, talkative, etc.), (2) Neuroticism (the degree to which one is anxious, depressed, irritable, etc.), (3) Agreeableness (whether one is generous, gentle, kind, etc.), (4) Conscientiousness (whether one is dutiful, organized, reliable, etc.), and (5) Openness to Experience (whether one is creative, imaginative, introspective, etc.). The current state of affairs concerning this trait approach can be found in a recent review by Costa, McCrae, and (2019).

8 Moral dilemmata in experimental research: Trolley experiments

In recent years, the analysis of moral dilemmata has shown interesting results in moral decision-making. Bostyn et al. (2018, p. 1084) describe the "trolley-style" dilemmata as follows: "In their archetypal formulation, these dilemmas require participants to imagine a runaway trolley train on a deadly collision course with a group of unsuspecting victims. Participants are asked whether they would consider it morally appropriate to save the group but sacrifice a single innocent bystander by pulling a lever to divert the trolley to another track, where it would kill only the single bystander." For some time, it was an open question whether these hypothetical moral judgments have anything to do with real-life moral decision making. Nevertheless, with the advent of self-driving autonomous cars, these hypothetical situations have become very realistic. Artificial moral agents have already been developed by computer scientists (for a review, see Cervantes et al., 2020)

What are the fundamental insights from experiments with trolley-style dilemmata? It seems that subjects follow a utilitarian perspective to save the most lives possible (see, e.g., Greene et al., 2008). What can we learn about character formation from these studies? Due to the highly artificial situation that has to be imagined (i.e., that is not real), I have doubts about the validity of these studies. I do not believe that we can learn a lot from these highly unnatural settings about human character. It is a bit like insights from Milgram's famous experiment on obedience: Recent interpretations of the experimental situation argue that the experimental setup (volunteer teacher subjects had to electrically shock bogus learner subjects for errors on a memory task with increasing degrees of shock until deadly volumes) says more about the willingness of the subjects to fulfill the requests of a demanding experimenter ("engaged followership") than about obedience (Haslam et al., 2016). Likewise, trolley dilemmata might tell us something different than moral decisions.

9 Conclusion

Character formation is a complex process that is not easily accessible to psychological measurement. One thing seems to be sure: "Moral reasoning is developmental" (Killen & Mulvey, 2018, p. 112). Moreover, humans are always searching for Sinn – even in senseless written words, we try to find a message. We see things that are

not present (visual illusion); we hear things that are not spoken (phonological gap); we feel things that are not there (rubber hand illusion); we remember stories that were not told (Frederic Bartlett, schema). We, as human beings, are not robots that require error-free programming and need perfect input; we construct the world around us in such a way that it makes sense to us even if the input is ambiguous. It is argued that humans develop "cargo cults" (Feynman, 1974) when they do not understand the deeper meaning of certain rituals. Humans search for sense, but at the same time, humans search for values: What action is good and should be done more often, what actions are bad and should be reduced in their frequency? It will be an endless story – but one that sharply discriminates humans from machines. The search for values and the search for "Sinn": it makes us human.

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