



The Psychology of MORALITY



BY CAROL CUMMINGS

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO HONESTY? TO ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOR? TO INVOLVEMENT IN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVITIES? THESE ARE QUESTIONS WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY PSYCHOLOGY ASSISTANT PROFESSOR PITT DERRYBERRY IS STRIVING TO ANSWER IN HIS RESEARCH.

Dr. Derryberry received his Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Alabama. He received his Ed.S. and M.A. from Tennessee Technological University, and his B.A. from Eckerd College. He currently teaches courses in human development, educational psychology, and general psychology.

Dr. Derryberry has focused many of his research efforts on the topic of moral development and the psychology of morality. "I am very interested in the changes that occur in one's thinking while in college," he explained. "During that time in

your life, you are gaining an understanding of yourself and the world around you. In choosing a doctoral program, I decided to study something with utility that was applicable in the real world. I chose moral development. I wanted to understand how people make sense of things and why there is variability from one person to the next."

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines the word "moral" as "of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior." Moral change relates to the growth that occurs in our views of right and wrong as we mature.

Dr. Derryberry says cognitive and social development is principal to moral change, and moral development

changes, grows, and culminates during the college years. According to Derryberry, cognitive and social development during these years is

a multi-faceted area, and a variety of factors contribute. He therefore references what is known as the four-component model of moral functioning, which describes moral judgment,

moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral implementation. These four components form the backbone of moral plans of action.

Derryberry says research has been beneficial in explaining things that contribute to each of the moral developmental components





addressed in the four-component model. This is particularly true for the moral judgment component, which has to do with how people develop in their reasoning and decision-making abilities about moral situations.

Moral Judgment Developmental Phases of Consolidation and Transition.” His research subjects consisted of 182 students from a large public university in the southeastern United States. Dr. Derryberry used

participants are asked to rate and rank twelve issues in terms of importance in making their decisions about the actions of the main character. Based on their responses, participants can be identified as being in either

... cognitive and social development is principal to moral change, and moral development changes, grows, and culminates during the college years.

Dr. Derryberry acknowledges the importance of continuing to better understand individual moral developmental components so that the likelihood of moral action can be better understood. According to Derryberry, “A large part of my research is devoted to assessing how moral judgment phases relate to moral outcomes such as honest behavior, reasons for altruistic pursuits, and human rights attitudes.” Because moral judgment follows a developmental sequence, Derryberry notes that our moral judgment ability can be either consolidated or transitional. During consolidated phases, a specific way of reasoning or thinking about a moral situation predominates our moral judgments and decisions. On the other hand, a variety of ways of reasoning or thinking about a moral situation may influence our moral judgments and decisions during transitional phases. Because of these differences, those in consolidated phases may be more certain about and primed for their pursuit of action whereas those in transitional phases may be confused or conflicted about what to do.

Dr. Derryberry was recently able to illustrate this in his study “Functional Differences: Comparing



(from left) Brian Barger, Pitt Derryberry, and Grace Livingstone look over a statistical analysis of recently collected data.

a tool known as the Defining Issues Test (DIT) to assess moral judgment. He explained that the DIT is a valid and reliable objective assessment of moral judgment development. On the DIT, participants are asked to read six individual dilemmas involving a moral situation and then asked what the main character should do. Next,

consolidated or transitional phases of moral judgment development.

Dr. Derryberry provided a humorous, real-life illustration in indexing honesty. Prior to participation in the study and twice during the study, participants were informed that they would be rewarded with \$5 and five raffle tickets as thanks for their

participation. Upon their completion, participants claimed their payment from a research assistant. After confirming each participant's involvement, the research assistant stated, "You are to receive \$10 and ten raffle tickets for your participation. Is that correct?" Dr. Derryberry writes, "Participants that corrected the mistake are presumed to have behaved honestly. Participants that kept the extra money and tickets were suspected of dishonesty. Participants that indicated uncertainty about how much was to be received were each given \$10 and ten tickets."

Two weeks later, the participants received a call indicating that a book-keeping error had been made, and that the purpose of the call was to discover who had been paid and how much they received. Participants were



"The VFI is a forty-eight-question assessment that measures specific functions of volunteer motivations including values, understanding, social, career, protective, enhancement, and satisfaction motivational functions," he writes. "On the VFI, participants are asked if they have ever done volunteer work, to list all activities and groups with which they volunteer their time, and to indicate how important or accurate the forty-eight ensuing reasons for and outcomes from volunteering are." His research presumes that those with higher scores on the VFI are motivated to behave altruistically for more complex reasons.

Finally, Dr. Derryberry investigated attitudes toward human rights, using the Attitude Toward Human Rights Inventory (ATHRI). The ATHRI assesses individual views on issues that are related to civil libertarian issues as found in the Bill of Rights.

should be a basic human right," on which most U.S. citizens are likely to agree regardless of background, religion, education, and political interest. The thirty-eight remaining items focus on more controversial issues.

"Those with low scores are assumed un-interested in granting civil liberties while those with high scores are assumed interested in granting civil liberties," he writes. "As such, those with high scores are presumed more likely to regularly act when individual civil liberties are at stake."

From the analyses employed in the study, Dr. Derryberry says it is clear that important relationships exist between moral judgment phases and moral outcomes. Specifically, those in consolidated phases behaved more honestly than did those in transitional phases. At the same time, however, there were no differences among consolidated and transitional individuals in terms of altruism and human rights attitudes, which Dr. Derryberry cites as support that moral judgment phases do not necessarily impact all moral outcomes similarly and that other factors are more important in their occurrence.

His initial research is just the tip of the iceberg, though, and he plans to

"A large part of my research is devoted to assessing how moral judgment phases relate to moral outcomes such as honest behavior, reasons for altruistic pursuits, and human rights attitudes."

scored on a four-point system for honesty based on their responses.

Next, as Derryberry examined reasons for behaving altruistically, he used the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), which measures the motives underlying volunteer efforts.

These include issues such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexual rights, due process rights, free speech, women's roles, and the role of religion in public schools. The ATHRI also includes ten non-controversial items, such as "Freedom of speech

continue his research into moral development, something he sees as a timely subject. "Two people are faced with a difficult situation — one reacts morally, and one does not," he said. "In my research, I promote the fact that moral development is multi-faceted."

