Moral Character in Person Perception

Geoffrey P. Goodwin
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

Understanding how people form impressions of others is a key goal of social cognition research. Past theories have posited that two fundamental dimensions—warmth and competence—underlie impression formation. However, these models conflate morality with warmth and fail to capture the full role that moral character plays in impression formation. An emerging perspective separates moral character (or morality) from warmth on both theoretical and empirical grounds. When morality is pitted against warmth, morality is clearly a more important driver of impression formation, as revealed by correlational, experimental, and archival studies. Yet social warmth remains important and conveys distinct information that morality does not. Alongside competence, both factors matter not only for person perception but also for other aspects of social cognition, including group perception. Important unanswered questions remain regarding the perceived structure of moral character and the way it is appraised in everyday life.

Imagine that you have a 30-year-old daughter who brings home a new boyfriend she is quite serious about. In one case, your daughter's new boyfriend is warm, charming, and charismatic, but he also gives the impression of being dishonest and untrustworthy. In another case, he is aloof, quiet, and introverted, but appears to be honest and trustworthy. In which of these two cases do you expect you would form a more positive impression of your daughter's suitor?

Forming impressions of this sort is a fundamental task of human social cognition. How do people do this? What information do they pay most attention to and weight most heavily when forming impressions of others? Decades of research on this topic have yielded fruit but have also left researchers with what is arguably an inaccurate account of the way in which such impressions are formed. A traditional and well-respected view is that people form overall impressions of social targets—either other individuals or social groups—by combining their judgments of those targets on two fundamental dimensions: warmth and competence. According to researchers in this tradition, "research has clearly established that perceived warmth and competence are the two universal dimensions of human social cognition" (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007, p. 77).

Two-dimensional frameworks of this sort have been extremely influential. They have had broad reach within and beyond social psychology, having been applied not just to the perception of other individuals (e.g., Peeters, 1979; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968; Wojciszke, 1994; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998), and social groups (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske, Xu, & Cuddy, 1999), which are the primary focal points of this article, but also to perceptions of the self (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke & Dowhyluk, 2003), other cultures and nationalities (Cuddy et al., 2009; Eagly & Kite, 1987; Poppe & Linssen, 1999), companies and brands (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010), and even mental illnesses (Sadler, Meagor, & Kaye, 2012).

In contrast to these two-dimensional frameworks, a newly emerging perspective is that moral character functions alongside warmth and competence as a separate, and especially potent, source of information that drives how impressions are formed. Indeed, moral character may be the most powerful determinant of overall impressions of both people and groups.

Historical Background

Two-dimensional models of impression formation can be traced back to a pioneering and highly influential study by Rosenberg et al. (1968) in which subjects were asked

Corresponding Author:
Geoffrey P. Goodwin, Department of Psychology, Solomon Lab Building, University of Pennsylvania, 3720 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19104
E-mail: ggoodwin@psych.upenn.edu

to sort 64 traits into categories they thought were likely to be associated within the same person. Subjects' judgments were captured by a two-dimensional solution, which organized traits along two axes that roughly corresponded to social warmth and competence. This two-dimensional model has an appealing elegance, and it provided a template for much subsequent research.

The warmth dimension is thought to capture several aspects of human sociality and has been variously instantiated as tolerance, warmth, good-naturedness, and sincerity (Fiske et al., 2002); good-naturedness, sincerity, and friendliness (Clausell & Fiske, 2005); warmth, friendliness, niceness, and sociability (Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012); sociability (Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005); and morality, trustworthiness, sincerity, kindness, and friendliness (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008).

However, as these examples illustrate, an important conceptual ambiguity suffuses this notion of warmth. It conflates aspects of pure social warmth with aspects of morality. On the one hand, it encompasses traits that have apparently little to do with moral character: friendliness, extraversion, and sociability. But on the other hand, it also captures traits that are fundamental to morality, such as kindness, sincerity, tolerance, and trustworthiness. Moreover, past research has tended to operationalize the construct of warmth without any measurement of which traits are in fact seen as relevant to warmth by ordinary people. As a result, some questionable categorizations have resulted, such as the designation of trustworthiness as a warmth trait (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2008), despite it being entirely possible to enact this trait without a trace of warmth or affection. Other fundamentally moral traits, such as honesty, integrity, courage, loyalty, or commitment, are similar in that they are only tangentially related to warmth.

The fact that warmth and morality diverge is easily illustrated with everyday examples. For instance, Nelson Mandela—a man of principle and courage, but also radiant disposition—embodies both morality and warmth; Ludwig Wittgenstein—highly principled, and courageous in wartime, but also austere and notoriously severe with his students—embodies high morality but low warmth; L. Ron Hubbard—highly charming and charismatic, but of dubious moral character (see Wright, 2013)—embodies high warmth but low character; while any number of unsavory characters (e.g., Hitler or Stalin) embody low warmth and low morality.

Moral Character Predominates in Impression Formation

Previous research has noted and explored this distinction between morality and warmth, particularly (though not exclusively) in relation to the perception of groups. For instance, Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto (2007) showed that perceptions of one's own in-groups were best predicted by evaluations of three closely related moral traits—honesty, sincerity, and trustworthiness—and not by evaluations of either social warmth (or sociability) traits (likability, warmth, friendliness) or competence traits (competence, intelligence, skill). Similarly, using these same traits, Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, and Yzerbyt (2012) showed that evaluations of an unfamiliar ethnic group were influenced more by ratings of the group's moral traits than by ratings of its sociability or competence traits. Individuals also indicated that they would prefer to know about moral traits rather than either sociability or competence traits when tasked with forming an impression of another person (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011).

Building upon this prior research (see also Bauman & Skitka, 2012; Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007), my colleagues and I aimed to assess in a comprehensive way whether morality or warmth more strongly determines how impressions of other individuals are formed, using a rich variety of both moral character and warmth traits (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). To do so, we used a bottom-up approach in which traits' relevance to both moral character and social warmth was measured empirically rather than stipulated a priori.

In an initial study, for each of 170 traits, groups of subjects indicated how useful the trait would be for judging a person's moral character and, separately, a person's warmth, and a person's abilities (competence). This initial step showed that, as expected, traits can indeed be separated in terms of how relevant they are to moral character and to warmth. Some traits are highly relevant only to social warmth, such as sociability, happiness, agreeableness, humor, playfulness, extraversion, and, of course, warmth. Other traits are highly relevant only to moral character, such as trustworthiness, honesty, fairness, courage, and loyalty. There are traits that are relevant to both warmth and competence, such as kindness, humility, forgivingness, gratitude, empathy, and helpfulness. Finally, some traits are relevant neither to warmth nor to character, either because they pertain solely to ability (e.g., intelligence, creativity, logicality, or innovativeness) or because they capture some other aspect of personality (e.g., adventurousness or neuroticism). Table 1 illustrates how various traits were classified as a function of these initial ratings.

My colleagues and I (Goodwin et al., 2014) focused specifically on the comparison between morality and warmth. We hypothesized that moral character traits should play a larger role in determining impressions for two main reasons: First, moral character traits provide the most reliable guide to whether another person's deepest intentions are fundamentally good or bad, and second,

Table 1. Traits Used in Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin (2014; Study 3)

Category	Traits	Usefulness for judging morality	Usefulness for judging warmth
High morality, high warmth	humble, kind, forgiving, giving, helpful, grateful, empathetic, cooperative	7.30[a]	7.47[a]
High morality, lower warmth	courageous, fair, principled, responsible, just, honest, trustworthy, loyal	7.64[a]	5.50[b]
High warmth, lower morality	warm, sociable, happy, agreeable, enthusiastic, easygoing, funny, playful	5.15[b]	7.32[a]
Ability	athletic, musical, creative, innovative, intelligent, organized, logical, clever	3.94[c]	3.84[c]

Note: Traits are shown organized by category, in terms of usefulness for judging morality and warmth (rated on scales from 1, *not at all useful*, to 9, *extremely useful*). We ran *t* tests comparing the aggregated ratings of usefulness for judging morality (a composite score) and usefulness for judging warmth across the four trait categories (i.e., comparing the categories in terms of morality and, separately, warmth). Shared superscripts indicate no significant differences between means ($ps > .10$), whereas different superscripts indicate significant differences ($ps < .005$). Adapted from "Moral Character Predominates in Person Perception and Evaluation," by G. P. Goodwin, J. Piazza, and P. Rozin, 2014, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*, p. 156. Copyright 2014 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

moral character traits are likely to be seen as fundamental to human identity (see also Strohminger & Nichols, 2014).

The results clearly corroborated that morality more strongly determines impressions than does warmth. When subjects judged real people from their own lives, or famous individuals they were well acquainted with (U.S. presidents), their overall impressions (the extent to which their overall impressions were positive or negative) were most strongly predicted by their ratings of the target individuals' moral traits. Somewhat surprisingly, the "pure" moral traits (e.g., honesty) were the strongest predictors of impressions, more so than the traits that blended morality and warmth (e.g., kindness). And the pure warmth traits (e.g., sociability) had little independent predictive power once ratings on the moral character traits were statistically accounted for. Indeed, once shared variance had been accounted for, on average, the pure moral traits explained almost eight times more variance in overall impressions than did the pure warmth traits (see Table 3 in Goodwin et al., 2014). Competence traits also played relatively little role except in predicting impressions of presidents.

Experimental studies revealed a similar picture. Traits representing both moral character and social warmth were independently manipulated, and subjects provided their overall impressions of a wide variety of target individuals. Across 12 different social roles (surgeon, romantic partner, daughter's fiancé, judge, parent, teacher, close friend, boss, coworker, family relative, store cashier, social acquaintance) and in two independent studies, the moral character traits dominated impressions. They influenced overall impressions more strongly than warmth traits for 75% of the roles and were equivalent to the warmth traits in predictive strength for the remaining 25%

of the roles. In no case were warmth traits more predictive. Moreover, as the importance of the social role increased, so too did the relative predominance of moral character traits—such traits are important across all social roles but particularly those judged to be of high importance.

These results do not merely reflect subjects' "theories" about which traits should be important (but which might not actually be so important to them in their actual judgments). The different traits were manipulated between subjects, and so, for each role, subjects never made any comparison between different sorts of traits but simply provided their overall impressions based on the trait information given (which was constant across the 12 roles they considered). This design feature obviates the concern that subjects might have been responding in a socially desirable way.

A final study examined the issue in a more naturalistic context by gauging subjects' impressions of notable people described in obituary notices in the *New York Times*. Raters who were blind to our hypotheses read through each of 235 such obituary notices and provided ratings of the information each obituary contained regarding the deceased individual's moral character, social warmth, and competence (the extent of this information and its valence). These ratings were then used to predict overall impressions of the deceased individuals made by adults who were reading about them for the first time. Regression analyses revealed that, once again, moral character information more strongly predicted impressions than did social warmth information. Moral character information explained more than two and a half times the variance explained by social warmth information once shared variance between these two predictors had been accounted for. The greater predictive strength of moral

character information held even when statistically accounting for the fact that more information was conveyed in the obituaries about moral character than about social warmth (which itself is testament to the important role of character in summary accounts of people's lives). Notably, social warmth did have an independent predictive role in this study: Moral character, social warmth, and competence all independently predicted global impressions.

The results of these studies underscore the predominant role of moral character in impression formation. Prior research, which has focused on the comparison between moral character and competence, has similarly established that moral character more strongly determines impression formation than does competence, though both matter (Wojciszke et al., 1998). Taken together, this research therefore indicates that moral character is one of the most, if not the most, important sources of social information used by people to form global impressions of others (meaning that you would likely prefer your daughter's boyfriend to be aloof and honest rather than warm and untrustworthy).

What Is the Relation Between Moral Character and Warmth?

An important question raised by this research is whether moral character and social warmth are best treated as separate and (at least partially) independent dimensions of person perception, or whether morality should instead simply be seen as replacing the warmth dimension within existing two-dimensional schemes. Do moral character and warmth represent different facets of the same underlying prosocial dimension, or are they, in fact, distinct dimensions? The existing published evidence is not conclusive, but it favors treating these dimensions as distinct. In the obituary study just described, moral character and social warmth information independently predicted overall impressions, which means that each dimension contained predictive information that the other did not. More recent unpublished research more decisively supports this conclusion: Factor analyses across a wide range of traits reveal that separate morality, warmth, and competence factors each emerge in judgments of both people and social groups (Landy, Piazza, & Goodwin, 2014).

This latter result may surprise readers. However, despite the wealth of research that two-dimensional models have generated, there have been remarkably few direct tests of the basic assumption that two, and only two, dimensions best capture how impressions are formed. And the fact that our factor analyses revealed three rather than two dimensions is not as sharply contradictory with prior findings, including Rosenberg et al.'s,

as might be supposed (see Landy et al., 2014). Rosenberg et al.'s (1968) seminal study did not provide decisive support for a two-dimensional solution over a three-dimensional solution, and his later studies revealed more support for a three-dimensional solution (e.g., Rosenberg & Olshan, 1970). Few other direct investigations of the adequacy of two-dimensional solutions exist.

The result is also explicable on theoretical grounds. Moral character, competence, and warmth/sociability each point to different socio-functional aspects of other people, which should contribute differently to overall impressions of them. Moral character is important for impression formation because it indicates the nature of a person's intentions and whether those intentions are oriented toward being helpful or harmful, good or bad. Competence is important because it indicates how effectively a person will be able to carry out his or her intentions. Separately, warmth/sociability is important because it indicates how successful a person will be in recruiting friends and allies to support his or her intentions (Landy et al., 2014).

How Is Morality Relevant to Other Aspects of Social Cognition?

Given that two-factor theories have been applied not just to person perception but also to the perception of social groups (particularly stereotypes of those groups; e.g., Fiske et al., 2002), it makes sense to ask whether people's stereotypes of social groups are independently informed by moral considerations. In a recent study examining Americans' stereotypes of 90 different social groups, Landy et al. (2014) documented that stereotypes of these groups tended to be differentiated in terms of their morality and warmth/sociability. Some groups and categories were seen as distinctly higher in morality than in sociability (e.g., judges, firefighters, doctors, soldiers, and librarians), whereas other groups were seen as distinctly higher in sociability than in morality (e.g., salespeople, politicians, and strippers). And the vast majority of groups were rated differently on these two dimensions in one way or the other.

Of particular note, the overall relation between morality and warmth/sociability was no greater than the relation either dimension had with competence, which further testifies to the (partial) independence of these dimensions. Morality and warmth/sociability also tended to predict emotional responses to societal groups in different ways: Only a group's morality elicited sympathy (its sociability did not); similarly, a group's sociability tended to predict envious responses toward it, whereas its morality *negatively* predicted envy toward it. Both morality and warmth/sociability independently predicted

admiration and negatively predicted antipathy (morality being the stronger predictor in each case). Accordingly, at the intergroup level as well, there are clear benefits from treating morality and warmth as separate dimensions.

Perhaps surprisingly, considerations of character are also relevant to how people grant moral standing to animals—that is, how they judge that animals are worthy of concern, respect, and protection from harm. Existing perspectives have argued that animals' intelligence (or agency) and their capacity to suffer (or patiency) are paramount when it comes to granting them moral standing (e.g., Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007; Sytsma & Machery, 2012). But a third factor is whether animals have a "cruel nature"—a feature that is related to the human property of moral character. Animals that have a dispositional tendency to inflict harm are granted lower moral standing than those that have a more benign disposition (Piazza, Landy, & Goodwin, 2014). This finding seems to reflect a distaste of dispositional cruelty rather than self-preservation: Even animals that are not able to carry out their harmful instincts (and that are not dangerous) are granted lower moral standing simply on account of possessing a harmful disposition. Most animals clearly do not possess "moral character" in the full sense that humans possess it—but they do possess varying dispositions in terms of the tendency to inflict harm, which is fundamental to human morality (Sousa, Holbrook, & Piazza, 2009; Turiel, 1983, 2002). And this variation predicts the moral standing they are accorded.

The Structure of Moral Character

Moral character is multifaceted. It is composed of many distinct traits—honesty, kindness, justness, courage, and self-control, to name a few—which sometimes come into conflict with one another. Important questions remain concerning the perceived structure of moral character. Which aspects of moral character are most central in person perception, and how do these aspects combine in overall impressions? Current taxonomies of moral character exhibit only partial overlap. Walker and Hennig (2004) stress justice, bravery, and kindness as important and distinct facets of moral character. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) stress compassion, fairness, respect for authority, loyalty, and temperance. The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths stresses wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence, each of which is composed of its own subdimensions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These existing taxonomies represent theory-driven approaches to understanding the structure of moral character, in that they are largely based on a priori considerations of which elements of moral character *should* be prioritized. Such theories provide insight, but additional clarity may be achieved by complementing them with a more unconstrained, bottom-up approach in which the elements of character are distilled from ordinary individuals' conceptions.

One important distinction between character traits does have recent empirical support—that between "core-goodness" traits (e.g., honesty, kindness) and "value-commitment" traits (e.g., dedication, commitment). Core-goodness traits unconditionally enhance the perceived morality of any agent—good, bad, or neutral—whereas value-commitment traits enhance the perceived morality of good and neutral agents but amplify the perceived immorality of bad agents (Piazza, Goodwin, Rozin, & Royzman, in press). In essence, a kind Nazi is better than a Nazi, but a dedicated Nazi is worse than both.

Conclusions

A new perspective on social cognition is emerging in which moral character plays a predominant role. Recent research has established the importance and distinctiveness of moral character information in impression formation and in person perception more generally. This research calls for revisions to well-entrenched models of social cognition and has opened up new questions that remain unanswered. How exactly moral character is ascertained in real social interactions is one particularly challenging question that calls for greater investigation.

Recommended Reading

Brambilla, M., & Leach, C. W. (2014). On the importance of being moral: The distinctive role of morality in social judgment. *Social Cognition*, *32*, 397–408. An article that provides a short review of the role of morality in social judgment.

Cuddy, A. J. C., Fiske, S. T., & Glick, P. (2008). (See References). An article that provides a comprehensive review of work emanating from the two-dimensional warmth-competence tradition.

Goodwin, G. P., Piazza, J., & Rozin, P. (2014). (See References). An article that provides evidence showing that moral character and warmth are distinct, and that moral character predicts (and causes) global impressions more strongly.

Rosenberg, S., Nelson, C., & Vivekananthan, P. S. (1968). (See References). An influential article that was the precursor for later work in the two-dimensional tradition.

Wojciszke, B., Bazinska, R., & Jaworski, M. (1998). (See References). An article that compares morality and competence as drivers of impression formation and reveals that morality tends to be more predictive.

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