Editorial

Standing up against moral violations: Psychological processes of moral courage

1. Introduction

When individuals witness others’ wrongdoings, some are willing to stand up and act in defense of their moral principles despite the anticipation of substantial costs to themselves. This kind of behavior can be conceptualized as reflecting moral courage (Miller, 2000). Moral courage is striking because it does not directly serve an actor’s self-interest, but instead puts the individual’s (physical, social, psychological, or financial) well-being at risk. Still, when thinking of hypothetical moral breaches, most people are convinced that they would become active to stop the perpetrator, by directly confronting, calling-out, or reporting to authorities. Behavioral observations, however, indicate that very few people actually overcome the psychological barriers to intervention (e.g., Baumert, Halmbruger, & Schmitt, 2013). On a societal level, individual acts in defense of moral principles can be essential for maintaining cooperative relations and a peaceful world (Fehr & Gächter, 2002; Staub, 1993; Yamagishi, 1986). Understanding the psychological factors and processes that impede or motivate such behaviors is, thus, a socio-psychological task with high societal relevance.

So far, progress in theory and research on moral courage has been hampered by fuzzy or narrow conceptualizations, coupled with limited methodological approaches characterized by heavy reliance on self-reported intentions in reaction to hypothetical scenarios. A central aim of this special issue is to bring together research on intervention against moral transgressions across a wide range of contexts. Up to the present, these interventions have been the subjects of different lines of research that have been pursued orthogonally, using diverging labels for phenomena that each have consistent with the definition of moral courage. As a result, this special issue brings together research on acts as diverse as whistleblowing (Dungan, Young, & Waytz, 2019), objection to discrimination and prejudice (Goodwin, Graham, & Diekmann, 2020; Kutlaca, Becker, & Radke, 2019; Szekeres, Halperin, Kende, & Saguy, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020), and interventions against bullying (Pouwels, van Noorden, & Caravita, 2019). It presents research that investigates different types of intervention by initially uninvolved observers (direct confrontation of perpetrators, defending of victims, reporting to authorities) against different moral transgressions (fraud, bullying, sexism, racism, unfair work practices) in various contexts (school, workplace, online interaction). Integrating these lines of research allows for new insights into generalized and specific processes that drive behavior intended to stop, prevent, or redress different kinds of moral transgressions in different settings. All the contributions to this special issue also employ sophisticated methods that allow for an ecologically valid picture of moral courage, because they examine actual reactions to real or staged transgressions, rather than relying only on imagined responses to hypothetical transgressions.

In the following, we summarize the central advances of the special issue. First, several articles investigated the importance of moral motivations as facilitators, but also barriers to moral courage. Second, social and normative influences emerged as important contextual factors that influence interventions against others’ moral breaches. Third, the reputational consequences for those who act morally courageously were investigated. Lastly, we discuss the implications for methodological advances as exemplified by articles compiled in this special issue.

2. Moral motivation as a double-edged sword

Moral motivations play an integral role in whether individuals stand up against perceived transgressions (Halmbruger, Baumert, & Schmitt, 2017; Li, Sasse, Halmbruger, & Baumert, under review). Indeed, several articles in this issue highlight the importance of individual-level moral dispositions. Dungan et al. (2019), for example, found strong positive associations of concern for the fair treatment of others with whistleblowing at the workplace. Similarly, Goodwin et al. (2020) showed that individuals who endorse fairness as a moral principle were more likely to report and confront sexism in online interactions. Pouwels et al. (2019) found that, among schoolboys, defending against bullying in the classroom was predicted by (low) dispositional moral disengagement. Szekeres et al. (2019) further found that intended and actual confrontation of racist discrimination were positively correlated with dispositional moral identity and moral convictions against prejudice. Across divergent moral breaches, intervention methods, and social contexts, the degree to which individuals endorse relevant moral principles and resist disengaging from them predicts the potentially costly protection of those principles.

Going beyond endorsement of moral principles as a positive predictor of moral courage, the current contributions also add complexity to the role of moral motivations. Szekeres et al. (2019) examined the effects of having a moral loss mindset, or concern about losing one’s moral self-worth in case of non-intervention. Participants highly committed to non-prejudice were more likely to confront racism when reminded of the potential moral failure if they did not intervene, compared to their counterparts in the control condition. Importantly, participants reminded of the moral gain from intervention (i.e., living up to one’s moral principles) did not differ significantly from those in the control condition. These findings suggest that acts of moral courage are fostered not only by the desire to act morally, but also by the concern that one might lose a sense of moral integrity if one fails to act.

The articles by Dungan et al. (2019) and Goodwin et al. (2020) also offer novel insights into how moral motivations influence the decision to intervene. Much of the existing research suggests that inaction in situations that require moral courage can be attributed to moral disengagement or a lack of moral convictions (e.g., Baumert et al., 2013; Halmbruger et al., 2017; Niesta Kayser, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2019).
In the context of whistleblowing in the workplace, Dungan et al. (2019) demonstrate that the decision to not blow the whistle was predicted by low moral concerns for fairness, but also by strong concerns for loyalty to one’s organization. In an entirely different context, Goodwin et al. (2020; Study 2) similarly showed that endorsement of loyalty as a moral principle negatively predicted intervention against sexual harassment, whereas endorsement of fairness positively predicted intervention. These findings thus provide converging evidence that moral courage or the lack thereof can reflect a tradeoff between competing moral principles that are equally relevant in a given situation, such as a commitment to fairness versus loyalty.

3. The role of social and normative influence

In addition to moral motivations, contextual factors such as social and group norms also play crucial roles in fostering and hindering acts of moral courage (e.g., Galdi, Maass, & Cadini, 2017; Oswald, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010). The articles of the special issue shed new light on the power of social norms in shaping intervention behavior in situations that require moral courage. Pouwels et al. (2019) investigated how different classroom norms influenced peer intervention against bullying. Among girls, victim defending was more likely in classrooms where bullying was more common. Both boys and girls were more likely to defend against bullying in classrooms where bullies were less (rather than more) popular. Interestingly, the effects of group norms on defending were stronger among boys who strived less (as opposed to more) for peer status, suggesting the importance of considering individual-level and contextual factors in tandem when understanding morally courageous behaviors.

In the context of confronting prejudice in online settings, Thomas et al. (2020) extended the past research on group norms by focusing on the impact of emotion-based social influence. In a series of studies, they showed that observers’ actions to confront (humorous and non-humorous) disparaging remarks online were facilitated by the angry responses of other bystanders. Bystander confrontation was also more intense when one’s own anger was validated by the angry reaction of other bystanders. The findings of Pouwels et al. (2019) and Thomas et al. (2020) therefore not only demonstrate the importance of social and normative influence, but also highlight that individual-level motivations and social context can jointly impact acts of moral courage.

4. Insights into the evaluation of morally courageous acts

The observation that social and normative influence can shape the occurrence of morally courageous acts reflects that individuals strive for social acceptance and, conversely, aim to avoid social disapproval. Put differently, witnesses of moral transgressions are likely to be concerned that intervention may be associated with social costs. Such concerns may be warranted, as evidenced by previous research on do-gooder derogation (Minson & Monin, 2012) and the rejection of moral rebels (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). For the special issue, Kutlaca et al. (2019) investigated the evaluation of those who act morally courageously to determine whether such behavior was met with societal backlash. In the context of sexism and racism, they scrutinized how confrontation by a member of the disadvantaged group (i.e., a target) or by the advantaged group (i.e., an ally) was perceived by members of the disadvantaged and advantaged group. Consistent with their hypothesis, the authors found differential effects as a function of group membership. Confronters were generally perceived as overreacting by members of their own group. In particular, allies of the disadvantaged group appeared to be judged especially harshly by other members of the advantaged group. By shifting the focus to the evaluation of those who show moral courage, these results show that concerns about societal backlash may be justified. However, they also caution to take the social context and contextual features into account.

5. Methodological contributions

In addition to advancing our understanding of moral courage as reflected in risky intervention against others’ moral transgressions, our special issue showcases how methodological challenges in studying moral courage can be overcome. Past research has relied heavily on self-reported imagined reactions to written descriptions of hypothetical transgressions. However, empirical evidence suggests that this approach has limited validity for studying moral courage (Baumert et al., 2013; Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009; see also in this issue Goodwin et al., 2020 and Szekeres et al., 2019).

The studies in the special issue exemplify an array of alternative methods that can be used to obtain scientific insight into factors and processes of moral courage. Goodwin et al. (2020), Szekeres et al. (2019), and Thomas et al. (2020), for example, created online settings to obtain behavioral measures, such as written comments directed at an (ostensible) perpetrator or an authority. In these settings, participants were required to interpret the situation as a norm transgression and to decide how to respond without explicit prompts, rather than imagining a response to a hypothetical scenario. Such online settings appear to be suitable and fruitful for research on moral courage. There is a plethora of settings, such as chat rooms or online forums, familiar to participants in the present digitalized world, which can be used to study diverse transgressions and reactions. Other clear advantages of online settings are that they can be realized economically, facilitating data collection from sufficiently large samples, while assuring observation of meaningful behavior in realistic contexts. At the same time, any staged setting relies on its credibility, so ensuring that participants do not doubt the existence of their interaction partners is crucial.

Besides clear advantages, staged transgressions of any sort necessarily come with limited severity of transgressions and risks posed by intervention, due to practical and ethical considerations. For this reason, it is important to study reactions to actual transgressions in real world settings. For this purpose, retrospective self-report (Dungan et al., 2019) can be complemented fruitfully by peer-report of intervention behavior (Pouwels et al., 2019). As a particular strength, shared method variance is minimized, if, for example, predictors are measured by self-reports while behavioral outcomes are captured by peer-reports. Adopting a multi-method approach in the same study will be a fruitful path forward for the study of moral courage.

6. Future directions

Beyond the various advancements achieved by the current special issue, we will highlight two major gaps in the existing research that deserve particular attention in future research. First, although moral courage has been investigated in a variety of social contexts (as demonstrated in this special issue), research has been largely confined to behaviors that are typically considered prosocial, or beneficial for promoting peaceful and democratic societies. Moral courage, however, might also be found in behaviors that are destructive or even evil by conventional moral standards (Skitka, 2012). Moral convictions, for example, can motivate not only courageous resistance to authorities and harmful group norms, but also support for violence and vigilantism to defend one’s convictions (e.g., Skitka & Houston, 2001). Research on moral courage can thus benefit from expanding beyond socially accepted behaviors and exploring how the same moral motivations can lead to both constructive, prosocial behaviors, as well as destructive, anti-social behaviors.

The second gap is concerned with the broader societal context where we study moral courage. Including the contributions in this special issue, the vast majority of empirical research on moral courage has been conducted in Western democratic societies where the personal costs of defending perceived moral violations are reasonably low (see Li et al., 2020, for a similar argument). A better understanding of moral courage and its underlying mechanisms, we argue, requires insights...
into relatively high-risk contexts, especially those that do not value or even actively suppress individual or collective resistance. Given the well-documented role of social and normative influence on individual behaviors, high-risk contexts are particularly important for investigating how individuals overcome the powerful influence of social, cultural, and political norms and the significant risks associated with going against these norms.

7. Conclusions

We believe this special issue makes valuable contributions to the research on moral courage in several ways. First, the individual contributions advance our understanding of moral courage by shedding new light on factors that facilitate or hinder moral courage, as well as perceptions of morally courageous behaviors. The special issue further presents a range of different methods suitable for studying moral courage, with a special focus on behavioral measures, which may serve as inspirations for future research. Lastly, by providing a forum for research on diverse phenomena that fall under the framework of moral courage, this special issue helps stimulate fruitful collaborations between related, yet previously disconnected lines of research. As such, we hope the special issue serves as both a collection of most recent contributions and a starting point for future research on the striking phenomenon of moral courage.

References


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