BEHAVIOR

Morality beyond the lab

Much of moral life involves attending to our own good deeds and to the bad deeds of others

By **Jesse Graham**

Morality may be of the highest importance to us, as Einstein put it. But how often do we actually experience morality in our day-to-day lives, and what forms does this experience take? The science of morality has flourished in recent years as methods from social psychology, behavioral economics, neuroscience, experimental philosophy, and cultural anthropology have been applied to the study of moral thought and behavior (*1*). So far, most of this work has used artificial stimuli, such as hypothetical dilemmas about runaway trolleys or sex with a dead chicken, in artificial environments such as laboratories or medical imaging scanners. On page xxx of this issue, Hofmann *et al.* (*2*) move morality science out of the lab and to the street, office, kitchen, bar, or wherever people happen to be when their cell phone rings.

Prompted at random intervals over 3 days, participants recorded any moral or immoral events they experienced: acts that they committed or were the target of, that they witnessed directly, or that they heard about. Using this approach, the authors replicate several findings from laboratory studies, including moral contagion (being the target of a good deed makes us pay it forward, subsequently doing good for others), moral licensing (doing good makes us feel entitled to do bad later in the day), and political differences in moral values and concerns.

The study also sheds light on the mysteries of morality. For instance, laboratory studies have shown a "holier-than-thou" effect, in which people overoptimistically predict their own future moral behavior but accurately predict the not-so-moral future behavior of others (*3*). Hofmann *et al.* show that this asymmetry does not only apply to predicted behaviors. Whereas the moral far outweighed the immoral in participants'

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reports of their own acts, this was not the case for reports of others' acts. In fact, the study suggests that moral life can largely be characterized by two kinds of events: noting one's own good deeds, and gossiping about the bad deeds of others.

The results also affirm the value of moral pluralism (*4*), the idea that there are many different moral values, which may come into conflict between cultures or individuals and even within a single person; this is in contrast to moral monism, the idea that all morality can be reduced to a single principle. Analysis of the reported events revealed a rich variety of both moral and immoral acts. Whereas moral psychology has concentrated on immoral acts (particularly those involving harm or unfairness), participants most often encountered acts of care, generosity, and kindness.

Here the study introduces some new mysteries for future research. Although care far outweighed harm in participant reports, the immoral outweighed the moral for every other type of moral concern (unfairness outweighs fairness, dishonesty outweighs honesty, etc.). Why is this? Are we typically noting minor acts of kindness or helpfulness when noting our own good deeds, but including all the intensity and variety of lies, cheating, betrayals, and acts of degradation in our gossip about others' misdeeds? Would other people be more likely to agree with our moral assessments of others' behavior than our assessments of

our own behavior? Would others even categorize our acts of self-assessed moral kindness as morally relevant at all?

Some of these questions may be answered with further analyses of Hofmann *et al.*'s rich (and publicly available) data set, but the study also points to future research directions. First, although the authors' use of experience-sampling methods and open-ended responses provided a much more ecologically valid picture of moral life, the study nevertheless relied on self-reports. Future investigations could get around self-report biases with unobtrusive observations of daily life (*5*), informant reports (*6*), or text analyses of online behavior (*7*). Second, surprisingly little is known about the relations between moral judgment and moral behavior (*8*). Experimental manipulations applied with Hoffman *et al.*'s smartphone app could elucidate whether and how moral judgments affect behavior; for example, people could be randomly assigned to attend to either moral or immoral events, to test whether this affects subsequent actions and perceptions. Similarly, field experiments using this method could clarify the causal directions among daily moral events, happiness, and sense of purpose.

By taking the study of morality out of the lab and into the stream of life—and by leaving it to participants to define "moral" and "immoral" themselves—Hofmann *et al.* have moved the field forward while demonstrating the generalizability of past work. Moral events are indeed commonly experienced in everyday life, and these events are consequential for both self and others. Future work using this technology and approach can begin to unpack how moral events are construed by individuals and cultures, and which conditions foster different forms of moral behavior. ∎

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