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Toward a Psychology of Moral Expansiveness

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Abstract

Theorists have long noted that people's moral circles have expanded over the course of history, with modern people extending moral concern to entities—both human and nonhuman—that our ancestors would never have considered including within their moral boundaries. In recent decades, researchers have sought a comprehensive understanding of the psychology of moral expansiveness. We first review the history of conceptual and methodological approaches in understanding our moral boundaries, with a particular focus on the recently developed Moral Expansiveness Scale. We then explore individual differences in moral expansiveness, attributes of entities that predict their inclusion in moral circles, and cognitive and motivational factors that help explain what we include within our moral boundaries and why they may shrink or expand. Throughout, we highlight the consequences of these psychological effects for real-world ethical decision making.

Modern moral sensibilities have expanded far beyond the standards of past generations. Along a familiar path to the rights revolutions of the 20th century (e.g., civil rights, gay rights; Pinker, 2011), we continue to observe illustrations of what some refer to as society's moral progression. These historical shifts have raised ethical dilemmas that were unthinkable for our ancestors. Today, hundreds of millions believe it is unethical to consume animal products, a practice our species has engaged in for millennia. Across the globe, advocacy groups are campaigning to see chimpanzees obtain basic human rights (Greenwood, 2013) and have successfully fought for elements of the natural environment to be given the same rights we give people (ABC, 2017). Moreover, a growing number of people believe they have an unwavering ethical obligation to offer half their livelihoods to save the lives of complete strangers (Singer, 2015). In short, our moral circles are expanding.

Although this trend has been noted by prominent theorists (Bloom, 2010; McFarland, 2011; Pinker, 2011; Singer, 1981), the *psychology* of moral expansion has only relatively recently been given due consideration. Empirical research to date has identified determinants of moral inclusion (Opotow, 1993), shown that moral boundary judgments are flexible (Bastian, Costello, Loughnan, & Hodson, 2012; Laham, 2009), and revealed that individual differences in moral expansiveness are a powerful predictor of decision making and behavior (Crimston, Bain, Hornsey, & Bastian, 2016). Theoretical work has considered a range of topics to explain why people differ in how broadly they extend their moral concern; these topics include potential drivers of moral change (e.g., contact and persuasion; Bloom, 2010), the tension between resource conflicts and expansive moral decision making (Bastian & Crimston, 2016), and the

impact of competing moral motivations on moral consideration (Graham, Waytz, Meindl, Iyer, & Young, 2017).

We have two goals in the current article. The first is to review the recent history of conceptual and methodological approaches for understanding moral boundaries, with a particular focus on a recently developed scale of moral expansiveness. The second is to assess evidence of variability in moral expansiveness. In doing so, we examine the question: When and why do people's moral circles shrink or expand?

Moral Expansiveness: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches

The term *moral circle* is often used to denote the breadth of people's moral concern for others, particularly the boundary distinguishing entities that are worthy of moral concern from those that are not (Singer, 1981). Initial explorations treated the boundaries of a person's moral circle as binary, with people selecting those entities they would include or exclude from their moral circle depending on the perception that they were worthy or unworthy of moral concern (Bastian, Costello, et al., 2012; Laham, 2009). Using an alternative approach, Schwartz (2007) inferred the scope of people's moral circles by asking them to endorse specific "moral" values as guiding principles in their lives (e.g., valuing equality or protecting the environment). Other approaches to understanding moral concern for others have focused on specific entities, often involving more graded and continuous judgments about the extent of moral concern. For example, Opotow (1990) revealed a collection of attitudes that determine moral inclusion: (a) believing that considerations of fairness apply, (b) a willingness to share community resources, and (c) a willingness to make sacrifices in order to foster well-being. Others have examined how strongly people value entities typically considered to lie at the periphery of moral circles,

as expressed by people's identification with all humanity (McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2012); solidarity with, and moral inclusion of, animals (Amiot & Bastian, 2015; Opotow, 1993); and connectedness to nature (Mayer & Frantz, 2004).

In sum, existing measures have typically focused on many entities but used dichotomous judgments or have used continuous judgments but focused on specific targets. What these approaches lack is an overall perspective on how broadly (and intensely) people extend moral concern across an extensive range of entities. The Moral Expansiveness Scale (MES; Crimston et al., 2016) was designed to capture this breadth and depth of moral consideration. It examines a wide range of entities (typical of the original moral circle approach) and combines this with a graded conception of moral concern, varying from basic moral rights to deep and personally binding moral obligations. The MES also incorporates consideration of the potential costs of moral inclusion (e.g., time and money to benefit the welfare of others; Opotow, 1993; Singer, 1981). This approach allows for novel examinations of the structure, limits, and predictive power of moral expansiveness.

In the MES, breadth is achieved by asking participants to make judgments about a representative spread of human and nonhuman entities (e.g., family and friends, out-group members, animals, plants, the environment). Depth is measured by placing entities within four defined boundaries expressing the extent of moral concern afforded to them, as well as the willingness to defend these convictions and the cost of doing so.[1] These four boundaries of moral consideration are graded, with the aggregate score indicating the overall expansiveness of an individual's moral world (Crimston et al., 2016).

Using the MES, we found a reliable structure of moral priorities (see Fig. 1; Crimston et al., 2016). People have a tendency to put their family and friends at the center of their moral circle, with other human groups afforded lower levels of priority. In-group members are more central than out-group members, followed by highly sentient animals, the environment, animals with low sentience, and plants (villains, interestingly, often lie outside people's moral circles altogether). These overall tendencies, however, obscure a wide range of variability, with some individuals holding expansive moral boundaries that lie outside of what Singer (1981) specified as biologically predictable (i.e., beyond one's devotion to kin and in-group).

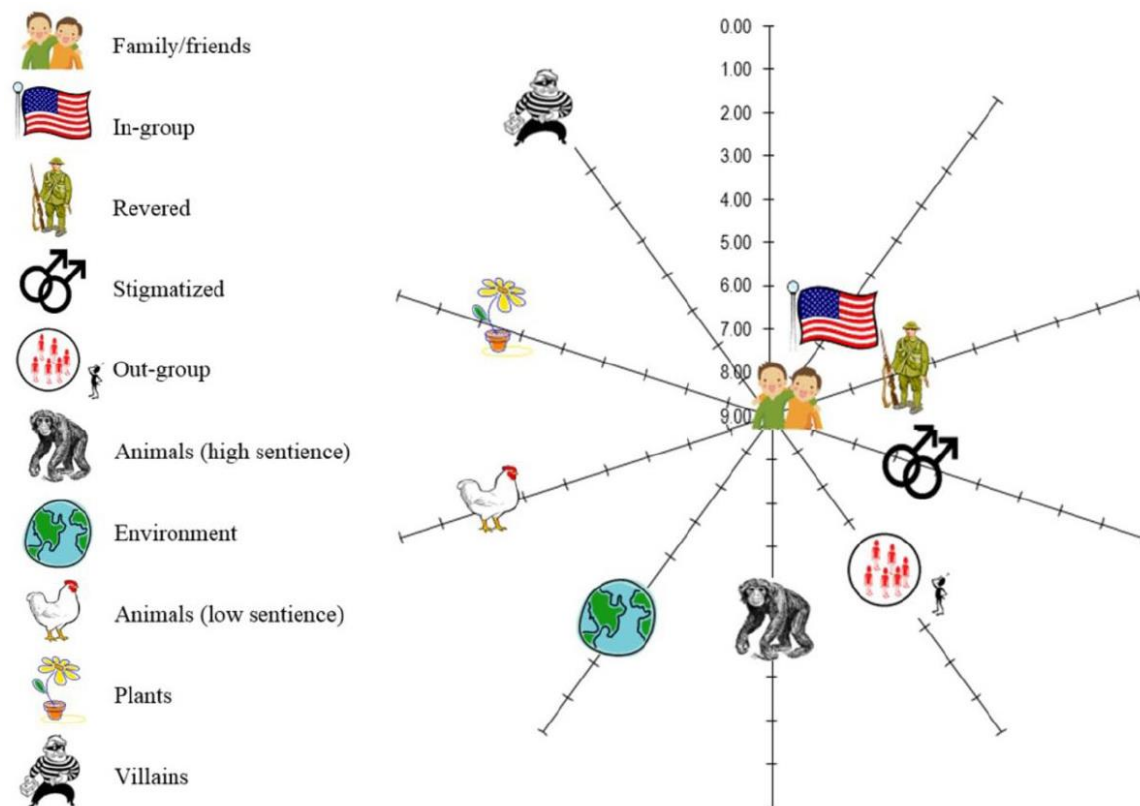
Fig. 1. Normative pattern of entities on the moral circle, as indicated by ratings on the Moral Expansiveness Scale (Crimston, Bain, Hornsey, & Bastian, 2016). Family and friends are at the center of the circle, where moral concern is greatest (9.00); other entities rank lower depending on how strongly they figure in individuals' moral priorities. (Figure reprinted from Crimston et al., 2016.)

The aggregate MES score can be a powerful predictor of altruistic moral decision making. Over and above established moral constructs,[2] the MES predicted the willingness to prioritize humanitarian and environmental concerns over personal and national self-interest, a willingness to donate resources to protect the lives of entities in need (e.g., financial and kidney donations), volunteering, and the willingness to sacrifice one's life to save others (Crimston et al., 2016). In short, moral expansiveness captures a unique dimension of our moral cognition, and the MES offers a useful tool to examine the implications of more expansive (or restrictive) moral worlds.

Variability in Moral Expansiveness

Why do some people cast wider moral boundaries than others, and when do our moral boundaries shrink or expand? An emerging body of ideas and studies has examined variability in moral expansiveness and the mechanisms responsible for it. This literature can be separated into four areas: (a) individual differences in moral expansiveness, (b) cognitive factors that influence decision making, (c) motivational factors, and (d) target attributes that influence perceptions of moral standing.

Individual Differences

Theorists have proposed that empathy, compassion, perspective taking, creativity, loyalty to one's in-group, moral identity, and egalitarian values may all contribute to the variation we see in the scope of moral boundaries (Bloom, 2010; Graham et al., 2017; Pinker, 2011; Reed & Aquino, 2003; Singer, 1981). We found evidence to support many of these claims (Crimston et al., 2016). Across multiple studies, greater moral expansiveness was associated with increased empathic concern, perspective taking, moral identity, identification with all of humanity, connection with nature, endorsement of

universalism values, and increased use of harm and fairness principles as foundations for moral decision making (see Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Not only were these individual difference variables associated with higher MES scores, but many were also positively associated with other indices of moral expansiveness, such as volunteering behavior and the willingness to sacrifice one's life in order to protect human and nonhuman others. Conversely, scores on the MES tended to be lower the more people endorsed loyalty and purity as moral foundations, suggesting that those who prioritize in-group over out-group concerns and who are prone to viewing moral issues through the lens of disgust and contamination have more restrictive moral boundaries.

When considering variability in the scope of moral boundaries, we acknowledge that the impact of situational influences is likely dependent on trait-level moral expansiveness. Specifically, it seems plausible that individuals with low moral expansiveness will be more susceptible to forces that shape the limits of moral boundaries. For example, the motivation to restrict moral concern under conditions of conflicting needs (e.g., concern over the well-being of animals vs. desirability of consuming animal products) is likely to be stronger among people with low moral expansiveness, compared with those with high moral expansiveness.

Cognitive Factors

Moral boundary judgments are susceptible to a variety of subtle and often unconscious cognitive influences. For example, the size of our moral circle can shift depending on the mind-set we adopt; deciding which entities to exclude from moral consideration produces larger moral circles than deciding which entities to include (Laham, 2009). Moreover, adopting an exclusion mind-set can produce spillover effects that can influence future

moral judgments. For example, when deciding whether various nonhuman animals should be excluded from our moral circles, we are subsequently more likely to increase our moral concern toward human out-groups (i.e., different ethnicities and beliefs). Similarly, the ease with which we can retrieve entities that are potentially worthy of moral inclusion subsequently increases the size of our moral circles: Laham (2013) found that participants who were asked to generate 3 moral circle exemplars reported larger moral circles than participants who had the more challenging task of generating 15. Further evidence suggests that inclusion within our moral circle can be influenced by framing effects; for example, comparing animals with humans results in more expansive moral concern than the reverse, comparing humans with animals (Bastian, Costello, et al., 2012).

Motivational Factors

The decisions we make regarding another entity's moral worth can shift as a result of motivational influences. For example, to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with harming conscious beings, we are less likely to incorporate animals within our moral boundary if we are about to consume meat (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012). Similarly, we are more likely to deny an entity moral standing if its needs conflict with our own, such as when there is a conflict of interest over a scarce resource (e.g., economically valuable land vs. animal habitat; Opotow, 1993). In line with realistic-conflict theory, situations in which competition over scarce resources is high can prime out-group biases (Rodeheffer, Hill, & Lord, 2012) and increase the perception that out-group members are exploitable and undeserving (Opotow, 1990).

Mortality salience can also motivate us to reconsider our moral priorities. Terror management theory posits that in order to reduce the anxiety associated with this existential threat, we are more likely to emphasize our own cultural worldviews and prioritize in-group concerns. As a consequence, being primed with reminders of our own mortality can lead to the exclusion of out-group members (Castano, 2004) and increased distinction between humans and nonhumans (Beatson, Loughnan, & Halloran, 2009).

Equally, we can be motivated by factors that increase our moral circle. Building on the finding that the association that empathy and compassion can increase moral concern (Graham et al., 2017; Pinker, 2011), research has shown that inducing empathic states can reduce negative attitudes toward stigmatized out-groups (Batson et al., 1997). Further, motivation to expand our moral boundaries can appear in contexts in which our basic needs have been satisfied. Studies have found an association between motivation to engage in prosocial behavior (e.g., donating and volunteering) and self-reported relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Gagné, 2003). Similarly, experimental research has shown that increasing participants' feelings of relatedness and connection with others results in increased intentions to volunteer (Pavey, Greitemeyer, & Sparks, 2011; but see Waytz & Epley, 2012).

Target Attributes

Our decisions regarding the moral worth of human and nonhuman entities (*targets*) also depend on perceptions of whether they possess morally relevant attributes. Most prominently, the extent to which certain qualities of entities trigger the perception that they are in possession of a mind is strongly linked to our attribution of moral rights to these entities (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). When we "see" minds—and, in turn, the

capacity to feel pain, pleasure, or fear—we are more likely to extend greater moral concern to those entities.

Our moral circles may shrink in situations conducive to dehumanizing others. When entities (human or otherwise) are portrayed as lacking fundamental human traits such as emotionality, warmth, or higher cognition (Bain, 2014), this can reduce our willingness to defend these entities if they are treated immorally (Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011). Similarly, when physical appearance becomes a focus (for any gender), objectification can lead to depersonalization, reduced mind perception, and a denial of personhood and moral status (Loughnan et al., 2010). In contrast, when certain targets are especially amenable to anthropomorphism—whereby distinctly human capacities of intentionality and emotion are attributed to them—we are more likely to afford these entities moral care and concern (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2010). Likewise, perceived similarity with humans has been found to influence the moral inclusion of nonhuman animals and elements of the natural environment (Opotow, 1993, 1994).

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that people's moral boundaries have been expanding over time. Equally, we see great variation in moral-boundary decision making. The existing research demonstrates the extent to which moral expansiveness can vary across people and situations, emphasizing the graded, impressionable, and fluid nature of our moral boundaries. This emerging body of work not only represents a unique element of moral cognition, but also has substantial practical consequences. Social inequality, competition for limited resources, and demand for global humanitarian and environmental action are

growing. The psychology of moral expansiveness can help us navigate through the tricky moral terrain associated with these global changes, identifying barriers to moral concern and suggesting ways that some of these barriers can be overcome.

Recommended Reading

Bloom, P. (2010). (See References). A short and punchy article on the issue of moral expansion and moral change throughout history.

Crimston, D., Bain, P. G., Hornsey, M. J., & Bastian, B. (2016). (See References). An article that comprehensively covers the validity of the newly developed Moral Expansiveness Scale and its place in the literature.

Graham, J., Waytz, A., Meindl, P., Iyer, R., & Young, L. (2017). (See References). A very interesting recent piece discussing the notion of competing moral forces influencing our decision making and offering evidence for their appearance throughout development.

Opotow, S. (1990). (See References). An article providing extensive coverage of the proposed antecedents, symptoms, and processes relevant to moral exclusion.

Singer, P. (1981). (See References). A highly recommended book for those interested in the recent origins of the moral circle concept.

1. The four boundaries are an *inner circle* (entities worthy of the "highest level of moral concern and standing . . . and a moral obligation to ensure their welfare"), an *outer circle* ("these entities deserve moderate moral concern and consideration . . . however, moral obligation is reduced"), the *fringes of moral concern* ("these entities deserve minimal moral concern and standing . . . [there is] no personal moral obligation"), and an area *outside the moral boundary* ("these entities deserve no moral standing . . . concern for their moral treatment is nonsensical"). These boundaries are graded as follows: inner circle = 3, outer circle = 2, fringes of moral concern = 1, outside the moral boundary = 0 (Crimston et al., 2016).

2. The MES added predictive value over and above the following established moral constructs: moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009), moral identity (Reed & Aquino, 2003), universalism values (Schwartz, 2007), moral patience (Gray et al., 2007), empathy and identification with humanity (McFarland et al., 2012), and connectedness to nature (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Though not specifically a moral construct, social closeness is related to moral judgments (Linke, 2012) and likely contributes to an individual's perceptions of moral worth—particularly in regard to human entities. Existing research suggests that an individual's level of moral expansiveness is determined by a collection of morally relevant perceptions (e.g., warmth and sentience; Crimston et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2007). Though currently unexplored, perceived social closeness is likely to be an additional contributing factor to be examined in future research.

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