

RESEARCH REPORT

Development Psychology

Editor

Vera Lucia Trevisan de Souza

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The research data are available on request from the corresponding author.

Received

February 23, 2022

Approved

March 26, 2023

Moral Identity and the different ways of integrating moral values into self-representation

Identidade moral e as diferentes formas de integração de valores morais à representação de si

Marco Antonio Morgado da **Silva**¹ , Ulisses Ferreira de **Araújo**² 

¹ Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Educação, Departamento de Filosofia da Educação e Ciências da Educação. São Paulo, SP, Brasil. Correspondence to: M. A. M. SILVA. E-mail: <marcomorgado.s@gmail.com>.

² Universidade de São Paulo, Escola de Artes, Ciências e Humanidades, Programa de Pós-Graduação. São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Article based on the thesis of M. A. M. SILVA, entitled “Integração de valores morais às representações de si de adolescentes”. Universidade de São Paulo, 2020.

How to cite this article: Silva, M. A. M., Araújo, U. F. (2026). Moral Identity and the different ways of integrating moral values into self-representation. *Estudos de Psicologia* (Campinas), 43, e220024. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0275202643e220024>

Abstract

Integrative analysis of studies on moral identity suggests that moral values can be integrated into self-representations in various ways. However, the predominance of quantitative research with closed-ended instruments limits the advancement of knowledge about this phenomenon. This paper aims to explore the various ways in which moral content can be integrated into self-representation through a qualitative approach. The instrument consisted of an open-ended questionnaire, administered on two different occasions to a total of 42 high school students from a Brazilian school. The analysis of the 84 questionnaires, based on the Theory of Organizing Models of Thinking, identified that moral contents can be integrated into self-representation in various ways: as an attribute of identity; an action; a judgment; through autobiographical events in which the individual was an agent, a recipient, or a spectator of moral or immoral action; as life goals; a prototype of behavior; as political ideology; as feelings; and as a project for society.

Keywords: Moral development; Self; Morals; Values.

Resumo

A análise integrada dos estudos sobre identidade moral sugere que valores morais podem ser integrados à representação de si de diferentes formas. Contudo, a predominância de pesquisas quantitativas baseadas em instrumentos fechados limita o avanço do conhecimento acerca desse fenômeno. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi explorar as diferentes formas de integração de conteúdos morais à representação de si por meio de uma abordagem qualitativa. O instrumento de coleta de dados consistiu em um questionário aberto, respondido em dois momentos distintos por 42 adolescentes estudantes do Ensino Médio de uma escola brasileira. A análise dos 84 protocolos, fundamentada na Teoria dos Modelos Organizadores do Pensamento, possibilitou identificar que conteúdos morais podem estar integrados à representação de si de diferentes

formas: atributo da identidade; ação; juízo; eventos autobiográficos em que o sujeito foi agente, objeto ou espectador de ação moral ou imoral; objetivo de vida; protótipo de conduta; ideologia política; sentimento; e projeto de sociedade.

Palavras-chave: *Desenvolvimento moral; Self; Princípios morais; Valores.*

The work of Damon (1984), Colby and Damon (1992), and Augusto Blasi (1983) inaugurated a new field of study in moral psychology by proposing that the integration of moral content into self-representation or identity is a fundamental component of moral functioning and an important key explanation for the motivation behind moral actions. According to this perspective, for some people, moral values are closely integrated into self-representations and are thus central to their identities, whereas for others, the integration of moral content into self-representation and its importance for identity are peripheral. The centrality of moral content to self-representation is what defines a moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

As illustrated by several literature reviews (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Jennings et al., 2015; Lapsley & Stay, 2014; Silva & Araújo, 2020), various theoretical formulations and methodological approaches have been used to explain and investigate moral identity. However, the predominance of quantitative approaches in these studies – which, in general, predetermine the set of moral content to which the participants may attribute importance – highlights the need for qualitative research (Jennings et al., 2015; Lefebvre & Krettenauer, 2019; Silva & Araújo, 2023) that explores how moral content is spontaneously mobilized by individuals in their self-representations.

The integrative analysis of these perspectives (Jennings et al., 2015; Silva, 2023; Silva & Araújo, 2020) reveals that moral identity is a complex and multidimensional construct, requiring studies that combine different approaches. Such studies suggest that moral values can be integrated into identity and manifest this integration not only as a self-schema of moral traits – the perspective adopted by most studies (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016) – but also in different (and complementary) forms, such as feelings, moral autobiographical events, and life goals (Silva, 2020; 2023).

This article explores the various forms in which moral content can be integrated into self-representation. To accomplish this task, we systematize data using a qualitative, microanalytical approach that applies the Theory of Organizing Models of Thinking (TOMT) as a tool for studying moral identity (Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023).

The TOMT (Moreno et al., 1998; Moreno & Sastre, 2020) is a theory of psychological functioning based on Jean Piaget's epistemology and Bärbel Inhelder's work (Inhelder & Cellérier, 1992). It adopts as its unit of analysis the representations individuals construct to understand and act upon themselves and the outside social and physical world. This theory provides a methodological foundation for an inductive approach to the detailed exploration, description, and explanation of psychological functioning both in terms of content (social knowledge, values, feelings, etc.) and its organization in the construction of self-representations; as such, it is a theoretical-methodological tool that can be used to study moral identity and the forms in which moral content is integrated into self-representation (Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023).

The integration of Moral Values Into Self-representation

Personal identity is a mature systematization of self-representations elaborated from adolescence onward. It is characterized by the individual's commitment to a central content domain (moral, family, career, religion, etc.) that provides a sense of psychosocial unity and organizes their role in society (Blasi & Glodis, 1995; Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2015).

Studies on moral identity suggest that what is integrated into self-representations are principles of conduct (Blasi, 2004), communitarian interests (Frimer & Walker, 2009; Frimer et al., 2011), moral schemas (identity traits, prototypes of conduct, and action scripts) (Krettenauer, 2020; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004), life ideals (Hardy et al., 2014), and autobiographical events (Lapsley, 2010; Pratt et al., 2009), among other elements of moral content to which individuals are attached because they attribute importance to them. In our view, the various theoretical propositions above can be synthesized into the idea that moral content is integrated into self-representations as moral values.

Moral values are constructed through the affective bond and the personal significance individuals attribute to moral content, which manifests in various objects of knowledge, including situations, people, ideas about life, personal experiences, and actions (Blasi, 2004; Piaget, 1954; Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023). These values become organized within self-representations in a dynamic and open system of values that includes different types of moral and nonmoral values in varying interrelationships – some more central, others more peripheral (Damon & Colby, 2009; Nisan, 2004; Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023).

Moral values may become part of an individual's self-representations from middle childhood, forming a moral self (e.g., when children view themselves as someone who helps others in distress) (Kochanska et al., 2007; Krettenauer, 2022). However, only in the transition from childhood to adolescence does the integration of moral content into self-representations begin to occur consciously and systematically (Blasi & Glodis, 1995; Damon, 1984; Harter, 2012; Moshman, 2011), thereby providing the conditions for the development of a moral identity (Moshman, 2011).

Since morality is not a unitary concept, it is not possible to define moral self or moral identity as a generic and unitarian moral self-schema. Affirming that moral values are integrated into self-representation and identity means acknowledging that a moral identity can encompass various types of moral values – such as social justice, solidarity, and care – which are not integrated into self-representations as abstract entities but rather as part of elements referenced in personal experience (Blasi, 2004). In addition, we agree with Jennings et al. (2015) and Silva (2023) in viewing moral identity as a system that includes more than the moral traits that individuals use to describe the attributes of their personal identity – a perspective widely adopted in studies on moral identity (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Jennings et al. (2015) and Silva (2023) point to the need to investigate other ways in which moral content is integrated into identity.

Based on an integrative reading of various perspectives on moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Jennings et al., 2015; Silva & Araújo, 2020) and a literature review, this study is grounded in the premise that moral values can be integrated into self-representations and manifest in different (and complementary) ways (Silva, 2020):

- Goals, interests, and life projects (Colby & Damon, 1992; Frimer & Walker, 2009);
- Formal principles, norms, and ideologies (Blasi, 1983, 2004; Moshman, 2011);
- Prototypes of conduct and scripts of moral action (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004);
- Moral traits of social identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002);
- Moral self-ideals (Hardy et al., 2014);
- Moral beliefs and judgments that we accept as part of who we are (Blasi, 1983; Jennings et al., 2015);
 - Moral emotions that define us (empathy and compassion) and that regulate our self-esteem and actions (guilt and shame) (Kristjánsson, 2009);
 - Autobiographical moral events, which include moral and immoral actions of which we were a spectator, agent, or recipient (Blasi, 2004; Lapsley, 2010; Pratt et al., 2009).

This study aims to explore this phenomenon through a qualitative analysis of self-representations based on the TOMT (Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023).

The Theory of Organizing Models of Thinking in the Study of Moral Identity

The TOMT is inspired by Jean Piaget's theory and builds on the work of Bärbel Inhelder (Inhelder & Cellérier, 1992), who emphasized, as a complement to Piaget's focus on epistemic subjects and logical-mathematical structures, the analysis of the psychological subject and cognitive microgenesis – that is, the psychological functioning underlying the representations, meanings, and procedures mobilized by individuals in the process of interpreting and solving situations or phenomena in specific contexts (Moreno et al., 1998; Moreno & Sastre, 2020).

The TOMT adopts organizing models of thinking as the unit of analysis of cognitive functioning, defining them as organized and dynamic systems of mental representations that individuals develop to understand, interpret, and act on the outside world and on themselves. These models are composed of four functional components: I) the elements (or data) that individuals select from one situation, among many possible, because they consider them to be significant. This selection process, or abstraction, has its origins not only in logical structures but also in beliefs, feelings, and values; II) the meanings they attribute to the elements, which may include conceptual definitions, descriptions of their function, functioning, or importance, a feeling, or another type of significance; III) the organization they give to the whole by relating elements and meanings; and IV) the implications they can draw from this organization. The TOMT's analytical method consists of inductively identifying how each of these components are operated by the individual and, from this basis, deducing their organizing model about a given phenomenon (Arantes et al., 2017; Moreno et al., 1998; Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023).

Most studies on moral identity use quantitative approaches, selecting a predefined set of moral values to measure their centrality using scales (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016; Jennings et al., 2015; Lefebvre & Krettenauer, 2019). Despite their importance and contributions to this field of study, these approaches do not make it possible to investigate which moral values are integrated into self-representations or how they manifest spontaneously. To address this gap, this study adopted an analytical procedure based on the TOMT for the study of moral identity (Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023). Data were collected from a longitudinal study carried out as part of a doctoral thesis on the integration of moral values into adolescents' self-representations (Silva, 2020).

Method

Most studies on moral identity use quantitative approaches and select a predefined set of moral values to measure their centrality using scales (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016; Jennings et al., 2015; Lefebvre & Krettenauer, 2019). Despite their importance and contributions to this field, these approaches do not allow for the investigation of which moral values are integrated into self-representations or how they manifest spontaneously. To address this gap, and with the goal of exploring the various ways in which moral values are integrated into self-representation, this study adopted a qualitative methodological approach grounded in the TOMT.

Participants

The study population consists of 42 adolescents (21 males and 21 females), aged 16 to 18 years, attending the third year of high school at a private school for middle to upper-class students in the city of São Paulo (Brazil).

Instruments

For data collection, an open-ended questionnaire was administered (Table 1). It consisted of 10 questions corresponding to various dimensions of self-representation, designed to encourage spontaneous responses related to moral content, without explicitly prompting them. The development of the instrument was inspired by tools used in research on moral self (Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon, 1984; Frimer & Walker, 2009).

Table 1

Questionnaire about self-representations

Dimension	Questions
Self-definition	1. How would you describe yourself? What kind of person are you? What do you think and feel about yourself? 2. What are the most important characteristics of your personality/identity, without which you wouldn't be who you are?
Explanation of values	3. What is most important to you in your life? 4. How do you feel about each of these things and why this has become important to you?
Concerns and Responsibilities	5. What are the things you are most concerned about today? Why? 7. What are the things you feel responsible for today? Why?
Transforming experiences	6. Describe three important things that you have done in your life that have changed the way you think or who you are. What was it like to live in each of these situations? Why did they change the way you think / who you are?
Future life	8. What do you want for your future life? What kind of person do you want to be? What do you want to accomplish?
Presence in the world	9. How do you see yourself and your actions in the world? How do you feel about that? 10. What would you like to be different in the world, and what have you done to make it happen? How do you feel about that?

Procedures

The instrument was administered during a 1.5-hour high school class in two phases (pretest and posttest), with a 10-month interval between them. To ensure spontaneity in the responses, participants were informed that the research focused on identity but were not told that the emphasis was on morality. Data collection strictly adhered to Resolution 510/2016 of the National Health Council, and all participants and their parents provided informed consent. The study was approved by the board of the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo (Brazil) (Silva, 2020).

Time was not considered as a variable in this study. The data from both phases of data collection were analyzed together, without distinction between the phases, totaling 84 questionnaires.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a qualitative and microanalytical procedure that adopts the TOMT (Moreno et al., 1998; Moreno & Sastre, 2020) as a tool for studying moral identity (Silva, 2020; Silva & Araújo, 2023). By identifying the elements and meanings that comprise self-representations, the TOMT makes it possible to explore the types of moral contents that individuals select for their self-representations and the meanings they attribute to these contents when integrating them into their identity.

The first stage of analysis involved identifying the elements and meanings present in the responses and highlighting those with moral content. In the following example, a participant

abstracted the element altruism and assigned it the meaning of an identity attribute. In the excerpt, the element is highlighted in bold, and the meanings are underlined: “I would describe myself as an **altruistic person**”. To give another example, when another participant answered a question about the most important things in their life, he/she abstracted the element of knowledge and attributed meaning to it as a source of pleasure and value: “**Learning** new things or **deepening knowledge** is one of the most pleasurable and important things”.

Next, the moral content expressed through various words and statements was grouped into categories of moral values, based on the type of moral value they referred to (e.g., terms such as class equality, social exclusion, and poverty correspond to the value of social justice). This grouping was followed by an analysis of the meanings attributed to elements pertaining to moral content or to nonmoral elements whose meanings contain moral content (e.g., the element knowledge – which is nonmoral – interpreted as a way of helping people – which has moral content).

Results and Discussion

Identity Attribute

One way a moral value can be integrated into self-representation is as an identity attribute, that is, as a characteristic or trait the individual highlights as part of their personality or identity. Aquino and Reed (2002), along with various studies that have used their instrument and approach (for a meta-analysis, see Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016), have selected this expression of moral identity as their unit of study.

This form of integration was primarily observed in responses to questions 1 and 2 of the questionnaire, where some participants abstracted elements of moral content, attributing to them the meaning of an identity attribute. The following excerpts illustrate how the elements of altruism and honesty, which represent homonymous moral values, were viewed as identity **attributes**: “I would describe myself as **an altruistic person**” (Participant 41, male); “I have always been a very **honest person** (...) I think this is a characteristic that defines me a lot” (Participant 7, female).

Moral Judgment

Some participants integrated moral values into their self-representations through judgments made about moral issues when answering questions about themselves. Here, “judgment” refers to the evaluative and qualifying assessment one makes about a given object of analysis by drawing an inference from it (Moshman, 2011). In this context, we consider the judgments individuals formulate in their self-representations, that is, how these judgments shape part of what they think about themselves and are therefore linked to them as moral beliefs (Blasi, 2004).

The following examples illustrate judgments made by participants when interpreting moral issues that they abstracted as part of their self-representations: “I worry about the **politicians who have made conditions increasingly difficult for those who were already very disadvantaged by the system**” (Participant 10, female); “I would like **the system to be different. Only by changing this system** can we change the quality of life of the vast majority of people, who are exploited, subjugated and excluded on a daily basis by those in power” (Participant 33, male).

In both examples, the abstracted element and the object of judgment is the system, which both individuals perceived as a producer of social inequalities, generating concern in Participant

10 and, in Participant 33, a desire for change stemming from the belief that it is the only means of overcoming inequalities. Thus, in these excerpts, the moral value of justice is integrated into and expressed in these participants' self-representations as a judgment on the system and on social inequalities. In line with Blasi's (2004) theoretical propositions, these and similar cases identified in participants' responses show that moral judgments and beliefs can – when individuals recognize them as their own and form a personal attachment to them – constitute a link between moral values and self-representation.

Moral Actions

Another way in which moral values were integrated into participants' self-representations, as evidenced in the questionnaire, was through mentions of concrete moral actions carried out in the present toward tackling specific moral demands, whether in the public or private sphere. In the following excerpts, moral action appeared as an element or as the meaning attributed to an element related to what the individuals aspired to change in the world:

I'm particularly bothered by discrimination against minorities (women, black people, the LGBT community, etc.). I don't think I do enough to combat this, apart from reading and discussing the subject, taking part in some protests and the feminist collective at school. (Participant 9, female)

I would like to see a big reduction in social inequality and less power for big capitalist corporations and the media. I try to interfere in matters of oppression, teaching about inequalities. (Participant 29, male)

The excerpts describe actions linked to the moral values of justice and tolerance. Moral actions, in these cases, manifest the recognition of oneself as a consequent moral agent and suggest some degree of personal bond with or commitment to moral values.

Autobiographical Events

The integration of moral values into self-representations can also manifest through moral events in autobiographical memories and narratives recalled by the individuals, and which are prominent in their self-representations because they play an important role in their personal constitution (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Lapsley, 2010; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; McAdams, 2018; Pratt et al., 2009).

The analysis enabled the identification of moral values integrated into self-representations through autobiographical events that some participants abstracted as significant for promoting personal transformation. Examining the meanings attributed to these events allowed to identify differences in the roles participants occupied in each of these events, such as spectators of a moral event; recipients of moral or immoral action by others; agents of moral action; or agents of immoral action.

In the following excerpt, the participant abstracted the perception of social inequalities as an experience that promoted personal transformation. In this case, the participant occupied the role of spectator, someone who observes and interprets moral facts without directly participating in them: "Another experience that changed my way of thinking was a visit to a homeless occupation, just this year, which made me think about my place of privilege in society and everything I can do to 'change' or 'mitigate' this" (Participant 1, male).

In this example, the element “visit to a homeless occupation” represents the value of justice.

Similarly, some participants described events in which they were the target of immoral actions. In the following excerpt, the elements of intolerance and prejudice, which represent the value of tolerance, were abstracted by the participant as a concern stemming from personal suffering, having been the target of such actions: “I worry about **intolerance and prejudice**, because I know what it’s like to suffer from it and I don’t want anyone to go through that” (Participant 21, male).

The performance of moral actions was also highlighted by some participants who recounted experiences that led to personal transformations. The following example illustrates how the moral value of care (Benhabib, 1992), enunciated by the element “Preventing a close friend from committing suicide,” was integrated into the participant’s self-representation as a significant memory of a moral action that provoked a sense of responsibility toward others: “**Preventing a close friend from committing suicide** also made a big impression on me, in the sense of understanding the responsibility that friends have toward each other” (Participant 37, male).

If an individual’s affective bond with moral content is a key mechanism in the construction of values (Blasi, 2004; Piaget, 1954), then engaging in moral action, recognizing oneself as a moral agent, and valuing a moral action in which one is the protagonist seem to be powerful vectors for integrating moral values into self-representation. Moral actions carried out by oneself become a point of reference and support for one or more values in self-representation through memory and autobiographical narrative. In fact, some studies have shown that engaging in moral actions is an important agent in the constitution of the moral self (Pratt et al., 2003; Silva & Araújo, 2021) and in incorporating moral values into life narratives (Cox & MacAdams, 2012).

We also identified a case in which the values of tolerance and benevolence were linked to one or more immoral actions committed by the participant:

I want to get rid of as many **prejudices and oppressions** as possible. (...) Since I’ve cultivated a lot of guilt within myself, I want **to do as much good as possible for everyone** (...) **my dating experience** has changed me a lot, in the sense of being aware of my small attitudes and understanding how I affect others emotionally. (Participant 37, male)

This example corroborates Lapsley’s (2010) proposition that an experience of moral failure, once recognized and incorporated into the autobiographical narrative, can promote the resignification of oneself as a moral agent and unfold in the elaboration of moral schemes about how one should or should not act morally.

In summary, whether the individual occupies the role of spectator or agent, whether in the context of a moral or immoral action, the narrative of morally relevant life experiences expresses the recognition of oneself as a moral agent and the configuration of moral schemes that synthesize concerns, commitments, and behavioral scripts (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Lapsley, 2010).

Life Goals

The integration of values into self-representations also manifested as a projection of the future: what individuals aspire to achieve and the type of person they strive to become. Several authors have indicated that the construct of moral identity is revealed in the alignment of personal goals with the self-ideal and moral values (Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon & Colby, 2015; Hardy et al., 2014).

Participants' responses revealed that various elements were attributed meanings that referred to future aspirations and a self-ideal linked to moral values. Consider these two examples:

I want to be a **respected psychologist** who has enough experience to carry out social projects and help any type of person. (Participant 40, female)

I want to be able to help people in some way and do something to end or at least reduce animal abuse and social inequality. (Participant 32, female)

In the first example, the profession of psychologist is the abstracted element, to which Participant 40 attributed the meaning of a means to carry out social projects and help people in the future. In this case, the value of solidarity is integrated into self-representation as something the participant aspires to in her future life. In the second excerpt, the participant mobilized the values of solidarity, animal welfare, and justice as values linked to her goals.

Conduct Prototypes

Another expression of the integration of moral values into self-representation appeared in the form of conduct prototypes – moral schemes that simplify principles, norms, or ways of life in the form of models of conduct present in one's culture that give precise direction to moral purposes and actions (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Puig, 1998). The following examples involve two responses in which the participants mobilized moral prototypes to express their future aspirations:

I want to be a **positive influence in the world**, like Gandhi, the Buddhas, and Christ once were. (Participant 26, male)

I want to be **the type of person who makes others feel good about themselves, who always welcomes those in need.** (Participant 40, female)

The mention of figures such as Gandhi, the Buddhas, and Christ is an eloquent example of the integration of moral values through conduct prototypes. Participant 26 referenced these personalities as a way of synthesizing values that are important to him (likely altruism and compassion), taking them as moral role models of what he aspires for his future life. In the second example, the participant used the term “the type of person” to allude to a model or conduct prototype, although in this case, the prototype is more generic.

Political Ideology

When we talk about political ideology as a way of integrating moral values into self-representation, we refer to a conceptual scheme (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004) that synthesizes a set of ideas with which individuals identify. Unlike the previous prototype, this one pertains to the social system.

In the data analysis, we found responses where this form of integration appeared, referring to the concepts of communism, feminism, and conservatism:

I would like rich people in general to understand **the oppression** they practice toward **the poor** and that we could live in **a functional communist system.** (Participant 37, male)

Getting in touch with **feminism**, which has helped me to accept myself and others more, but which also makes me question everything around me a lot. (Participant 11, female)

In response to what he would like to see change in the world, Participant 37 abstracted communism as an element, attributing to it the meaning of a desired change. This adolescent viewed communism as a prototypical social system capable of overcoming oppression and inequality. In this way, he appropriated the value of justice through a political ideology, a conceptual scheme that encapsulates what the individual wants for the world in which he lives. Similarly, feminism synthesizes a set of ideals that Participant 11 used to describe a significant event in her life.

Moral Feelings

Given that the affective bond that an individual establishes with an object of moral content is a key mechanism in the construction of moral values (Blasi, 1995; Piaget, 1954), mentioning feelings associated with moral content in self-representation is a significant expression of the integration of moral values.

Different feelings were identified in participants' responses that denoted a link with moral content, including empathy, concern, responsibility, happiness, pride, impotence, anger, sadness, and guilt. Empathy appeared as both a self-defined emotion (Kristjánsson, 2009) and an identity attribute, as seen in Participant 1's response to a question about the characteristics of his identity without which he would cease to be who he is: "I also think that without the good humor and empathy that I believe I have, I would cease to be who I really am" (Participant 1, male).

Emotions also manifested in the form of feelings of concern and responsibility, which some participants expressed in relation to moral issues or people: "I'm concerned about the lives of the working class and the struggle for their emancipation" (Participant 33, male). "I feel responsible for people who live in poverty and don't have access to education" (Participant 10, female). In these examples, the feelings of concern and responsibility are meanings attributed to elements associated with the value of justice, serving as affective expressions of the individual's involvement with this value.

In addition to these feelings, the data analysis revealed that some participants mobilized feelings of positive valence as part of the meaning attributed to moral content. The following is an example of a feeling of pride: "I would like to see less social inequality and the end of machismo. In an attempt to achieve this, I try to help deconstruct people. I'm proud of that" (Participant 34, female). In this example, the elements of social inequality and machismo allude to the values of justice and pride, which appear as a result of the moral actions that Participant 34 claimed to take to address these issues. Thus, we observe the integration of the value of justice in two forms: as an action and as a feeling.

Moreover, expressions of the integration of moral values into self-representation were not limited to positive feelings. Some responses revealed feelings such as sadness, anger, impotence, and guilt linked to moral content. Although these emotions are culturally perceived as negative, the meanings attributed to them suggest, through antagonism, the participants' positive attachment to the moral content they relate to. Consider the following example of this phenomenon:

I would like to see a world without inequality and oppression. I try to contribute by showing empathy for others and respect in social relationships (...) but sometimes I feel powerless in the face of a consolidated social structure that is beyond my strength. (Participant 1, male)

The integration of moral values into self-representation in the form of feelings is in line with Kristjánsson's (2009) propositions, in which the moral self unifies cognition and emotions. Some emotions operate in the constitution and functioning of the moral self, thus being present at the

level of consciousness and operating together with rational mechanisms in the constitution of the self-concept and in the regulation of thoughts and actions.

Project for Society

The last form of integration of moral values identified in participants' responses was as a project for society – that is, what the individual envisioned as ideal for the society in which they live. This form of integration is exemplified in the following excerpts, which reflect the integration of the values of justice and citizenship:

I would like there to be no **inequality in the world**. (Participant 17, female)

I would like to see more **young people politically engaged**. Not necessarily in large-scale politics, but in what is more accessible, like their own school, fighting for their needs and rights. (Participant 36, female)

In these excerpts, the elements of inequality and engagement, which allude to the values of justice and citizenship, were attributed the meaning of a desired change for the world, demonstrating that these values have been integrated in the form of a project for society.

Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the different ways in which moral values can be integrated into self-representations, highlighting each form and providing an example of a value, element, or meaning category, along with an excerpt from the corresponding response.

Table 2

Summary of the forms in which moral values are integrated into self-representation. São Paulo, Brazil, 2020

Forms of integrating	Moral value category	Element	Meaning	Example
Identity attribute	Empathy	Empathy	Identity attribute	"The main aspects of my personality are [...] empathy"
Moral action	Justice	Teaching about social inequalities	Action taken to promote a desired change in the world	"I always try to intervene in matters of oppression, teaching about inequalities"
Judgment	Justice	Socio-political system	Produces inequalities	"I'm worried about the politicians who have made conditions increasingly difficult for those who were already very disadvantaged by the system"
Autobiographical event (spectator)	Justice	Visiting a homeless occupation	Experience of personal transformation	"Another experience that changed my way of thinking was a visit to a homeless occupation [...]"
Autobiographical event (recipient/target of a third-party action)	Tolerance	Intolerance and Prejudice	Experience of suffering that generated concern	"I'm worried about intolerance and prejudice, because I know what it's like to suffer from it and I don't want anyone to experience that"
Autobiographical event (moral agent)	Care	Stopping a friend from committing suicide	Experience of personal transformation	"Stopping a good friend from committing suicide also made a big impression on me [...]"
Autobiographical event (immoral agent)	Altruism	Doing good for others	Desire resulting from experiences that have produced guilt	"[...] Since I've cultivated a lot of guilt inside me, I want to do as much good as possible for everyone"
Life goal	Solidarity	Becoming a Psychologist	Aspiring to help people in the future.	"I want to be a respected psychologist who has enough experience to carry out social projects and help anyone"
Prototype	Altruism	Gandhi, Buddhas, and Christ	Desire to shape a better future through positive influence.	"I want to be a positive influence in the world, as Gandhi, Buddhas and Christ once were"
Political ideology	Justice	Communism	Desired change for the world	"I wish [...] we could live in a functioning communist system"
Feeling	Justice	Poverty	Responsibility	"I feel responsible for the people who live in poverty and don't have access to education"
Project for Society	Citizenship	Youth's political engagement	Desired change for the world	"I'd like to see more young people politically engaged"

The analysis of the meanings participants attributed to elements of moral content, in light of the TOMT, revealed multiple ways in which moral values can be integrated into self-representations. While much research on the moral self and moral identity has focused on certain expressions of these constructs – whether as a moral trait of social identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Aquino et al., 2009), a moral self-ideal (Hardy et al., 2014), moral schemas (Hardy and Carlo, 2011; Krettenauer, 2020; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004), or moral events in autobiographical narratives (Lapsley, 2010; McAdams, 2018; Pratt et al., 2009) – the qualitative, microanalytical, and exploratory analyses based on the TOMT have revealed a plurality of forms of integration.

The variety of ways in which moral values can be integrated into self-representations highlight the complexity of this phenomenon and the importance of investigating it by considering its multiple expressions. Self-representation is a complex system of interconnected self-representations (Harter, 2012) that the integration of moral values seems to accompany (Silva, 2023). This system includes not only the various forms of integration identified but also the observation that they are not watertight and self-enclosed. On the contrary, the data suggest that individuals often evoke and articulate multiple forms of integration within the same linguistic utterance (or throughout the questionnaire) (Silva, 2020). The following example illustrates this concept, as the participant integrated the value of otherness both as a feeling and as an autobiographical event by articulating, in the same response, his concern about intolerance and prejudice alongside a personal experience related to these elements: “I worry about intolerance and prejudice because I know what it’s like to suffer from it and I don’t want anyone to go through that” (Participant 21, male).

Thus, the same value can be integrated in different ways by the same individual (through the different meanings attributed to it) and can share different forms of integration with other values, both moral and nonmoral. When this happens, the value establishes multiple anchoring points and a comprehensive and cohesive degree of integration into the individual’s system of self-representations, indicating the centrality of the value’s integration into self-representation (Blasi, 2004; Silva & Araújo, 2023).

The varied forms in which values can be integrated into self-representations highlight the relevance of qualitative analysis and the approach used to capture the wealth of content that shapes the moral self and moral identity. They also reveal that the concepts of moral self and moral identity should not be thought of as totalizing categories but rather as diverse psychosocial constructs with nuances in terms of the types of moral values, their forms of integration and – though not explored in this article – the centrality with which they are organized in self-representations (Silva & Araújo, 2023).

On the one hand, questionnaires that use closed instruments and include a large number of participants have the merits of statistical rigor and the ability to generalize the results. On the other hand, by presenting a predefined list of values, they may overlook those most relevant to the individual, failing to capture the meaning attributed to each value and, therefore, its various forms of integration. Consequently, such approaches may be less effective in identifying certain specificities of moral functioning that warrant further exploration (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016; Jennings et al., 2015).

Conclusion

By adopting the TOMT as a tool for analyzing moral identity, this study demonstrates that moral content can be integrated into self-representation in various forms: as an identity attribute;

an action; a judgment; autobiographical events in which the individual was the agent, recipient, or spectator of a moral or immoral action; a life goal; a prototype of conduct; a political ideology; a sentiment; or a project for society. This finding paves the way for further investigation into how moral identity functions and is constituted. Furthermore, it corroborates the findings of aforementioned studies by indicating that the TOMT is a valuable theoretical-methodological tool for the qualitative, in-depth study of moral identity, broadening the range of possibilities in moral identity studies and complementing the quantitative studies that predominate in this field of study.

However, given the exploratory nature of this study, further research is needed on the ways in which moral values are integrated into self-representation – both in different populations and contexts and in combination with statistical analyses – to corroborate and complement our findings, enhancing their generalizability. Such research could bring important conceptual and methodological advancements to the field of moral identity studies in particular and moral psychology in general.

References

- Aquino, K., & Reed, A. (2002). The self-importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(6), 1423-1440. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.6.1423>
- Aquino, K., Freeman, D., Reed, A., Felps, W., & Lim, V. K. G. (2009). Testing a social-cognitive model of moral behavior: The interactive influence of situations and moral identity centrality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(1), 123-141. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015406>
- Aranes, V., Araújo, U., Pinheiro, V., Moreno, M., & Sastre, G. (2017): Youth purpose through the lens of the Theory of Organizing Models of Thinking. *Journal of Moral Education*, 46, 245-257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2017.1345725>
- Benhabib, S. (1992). *Situating the Self: gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics*. Routledge.
- Blasi, A., & Glodis, K. (1995). The development of identity. A critical analysis from the perspective of the self as subject. *Development Review*, 15(4), 404-433. <https://doi.org/10.1006/drev.1995.1017>
- Blasi, A. (1983). Moral cognition and moral action: A theoretical perspective. *Developmental Review*, 3(2), 178-210. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297\(83\)90029-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297(83)90029-1)
- Blasi, A. (1995). Moral understanding and moral personality: the process of moral integration. In W Kurtines (Org.), *Moral development: an introduction* (pp. 229-254). Allyn and Bacon.
- Blasi, A. (2004). Moral functioning: moral understanding and personality. In D. K. Lapsley & D. Narvaez. (Eds.), *Moral development, self, and identity* (pp. 335-347). Psychology Press.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. Free Press.
- Cox, K., & McAdams, D. P. (2012). The transforming self: Service narratives and identity change in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 27(1), 18-43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558410384732>
- Damon, W., & Colby, A. (2015). *The power of ideals*. Oxford University Press.
- Damon, W. (1984). Self-understanding and moral development from childhood to adolescence, In W. M. Kurtines & J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Morality, moral behavior and moral development* (pp. 109-127). Wiley.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: youth and crisis*. Norton.
- Frimer, J. A., & Walker, L. J. (2009). Reconciling the self and morality: an empirical model of moral centrality development. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(6), 1669-1681. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017418>
- Frimer, J. A., Walker, L. J., Dunlop, W., L., Lee, B. H., & Riches, A. (2011). The integration of agency and communion in moral personality: evidence of enlightened self-interest. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(1), 149-163. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023780>
- Hardy, S. A., & Carlo, G. (2011). Moral identity: what is it, how does it develop, and is it linked to moral action? *Child Development Perspectives*, 5(3), 212-218. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00189.x>

- Hardy, S. A., Walker, L. J., Olsen, J. A., Woodbury, R. D., & Hickman, J. R. (2014). Moral identity as moral ideal self: Links to adolescent outcomes. *Developmental Psychology, 50*(1), 45-57. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033598>
- Harter, S. (2012). *The construction of the self: developmental and sociocultural foundations*. Guilford Publications.
- Hertz, S. G., & Krettenauer, T. (2016). Does moral identity effectively predict moral behavior? A Meta-Analysis. *Review of General Psychology, 20*(2), 129-140. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000062>
- Inhelder, B., & Cellérier, G. (1992). *Le cheminement des découvertes de l'enfant*. Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Jennings, P. L., Mitchell, M. S., & Hannah, S. T. (2015). The moral self: A review and integration of the literature. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 36*(51), 104-168. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1919>
- Kochanska, G., Aksan, N., & Joy, M. E. (2007). Children's fearfulness as a moderator of parenting in early socialization: Two longitudinal studies. *Development Psychology, 43*, 222-237. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.43.1.222>
- Krettenauer, T. (2022). Development of moral identity: From the age of responsibility to adult maturity. *Developmental Review, 65*, e101036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2022.101036>
- Krettenauer, T. (2020). Moral Identity as a goal of moral action: A self-determination theory perspective. *Journal of Moral Education, 49*, 330-345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2019.1698414>
- Kristjánsson, K. (2009). Putting emotion into the self: A response to the 2008 Journal of Moral Education special issue on moral functioning. *Journal of Moral Education, 38*(3), 255-270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240903101374>
- Lapsley, D. K. (2010). Moral agency, identity and narrative in moral development: Commentary on Pasupathi and Wainryb. *Human Development, 53*(2), 87-97. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000288210>
- Lapsley, D. K., & Narvaez, D. (2004). A social-cognitive approach to the moral personality. In D. K. Lapsley & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Moral development, self, and identity* (pp. 189-212). Psychology Press.
- Lapsley, D. K., & Stay, P. (2014). Moral self-identity as the aim of education. In L. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education*. Routledge.
- Lefebvre, J. P., & Krettenauer, T. (2019). Linking moral identity with moral emotions: A meta-analysis. *Review of General Psychology, 23*(4), 444-457. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1089268019880887>
- McAdams, D. P. (2018). Narrative identity: What is it? What does it do? How do you measure it? *Imagination, Cognition and Personality, 37*(3), 359-372. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236618756704>
- Moreno, M., & Sastre, G. (2020). *Por qué vemos dinosaurios en las nubes: de las sensaciones a los modelos organizadores del pensamiento*. Gedisa.
- Moreno, M., Sastre, G., Bovet, M., & Leal, A. (1998). *Conocimiento y cambio: Los Modelos organizadores en la construcción del conocimiento*. Paidós.
- Moshman, D. (2011). *Adolescent rationality and development: Cognition, morality, and identity* (3rd.). Taylor and Francis.
- Nisan, M. (2004). Judgment and choice in moral functioning. In D. K. Lapsley & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Moral development, self, and identity* (pp. 133-160). Psychology Press.
- Piaget, J. (1954). *Les relations entre l'affectivité et l'intelligence*. Sorbonne.
- Pratt, M. W., Arnold, M. L., & Lawford, H. (2009). Growing towards care: a narrative approach to prosocial moral identity and generativity of personality in emerging adulthood. In D. Narvaez & D. K. Lapsley (Eds.), *Personality, identity, and character: Explorations in moral psychology* (pp. 295-315). Cambridge University Press.
- Pratt, M. W., Hunsberger, B., Pancer, M. S., & Alisat, S. (2003). A longitudinal analysis of personal values socialization: Correlates of a moral self-ideal in late adolescence. *Social Development, 12*(4), 563-585. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00249>
- Puig, J. M. (1998). *A construção da personalidade moral*. Ática.

- Schwartz, S. J., Luyckx, K., & Crocetti, E. (2015). What have we learned since Schwartz (2001)? A reappraisal of the field of identity development. In K. C. McLean & M. Syed (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of identity development* (pp. 539-561). Oxford Library of Psychology.
- Silva, M. A. A., & Araújo, U. F. (2020). Self moral e identidade moral: integração entre perspectivas. *Psicologia USP*, 31, e200055. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0103-6564e200055>
- Silva, M. A. A., & Araújo, U. F. (2021). Aprendizagem por projetos sociais: integração de conteúdos morais à representação de si de jovens. *Educação Temática Digital* (Campinas), 23(4), 1061-1078. <https://doi.org/10.20396/etd.v23i4.8659662>
- Silva, M. A. M. (2020). *Integração de valores morais às representações de si de adolescentes* [Tese de Doutorado]. Universidade de São Paulo.
- Silva, M. A. M., & Araújo, U. F. (2023). The Theory of Organizing Models of Thinking as a Tool for the Qualitative and Microanalytical Study of Moral Identity. *Identity*, 23(3), 224-241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2023.2218878>
- Silva, M. A. M. (2023). Moral Identity as a System of Self-representations Centrally Integrating Moral Values. *Trends in Psychology*, (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43076-023-00354-z>

Contributors

Conceptualization: M. A. M. SILVA and U. F. ARAÚJO. Data curation: M. A. M. SILVA. Formal analysis: M. A. M. SILVA. Investigation: : M. A. M. SILVA. Methodology: M. A. M. SILVA and U. F. ARAÚJO. Supervision: U. F. ARAÚJO. Validation: U. F. ARAÚJO. Writing – original draft: M. A. M. SILVA. Writing – review & editing: M. A. M. SILVA and U. F. ARAÚJO.