



Finding the Silver Lining in Every Cloud: Dispositional Optimism as a Virtue

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What psychological processes realistically explain the extraordinary actions of moral exemplars? These courageous individuals engage in behavior that promotes others' betterment but, at the same time, invariably involves considerable cost for them. Their behavior fascinates and inspires us because it is largely outside of our own lived experience. Moral exemplarity is so enigmatic, but its study has the potential for considerable advances in our understanding of human nature, its development, and our collective efforts to promote civil and caring societies.

One aspect of the character of moral exemplars is their proclivity for optimistic construals. In this paper, we explore the ways in which these individuals frame their life experiences and relationships, and in doing so attempt to explain how this framing provides the impetus for moral action. Our contention—with supportive evidence—is that the dispositional tendency for moral exemplars to make positive construals of life events is a powerful virtue underlying moral action.

Moral action here was instantiated by people recognized for their extraordinary and virtuous moral behavior—moral exemplars. It may be appropriate right at the outset to advance the case for the study of moral exemplars.

- First, moral exemplars have engaged in real-world behaviors that have obvious validity and significance (in contrast to behaviors in the lab involving inconsequential experimental manipulations).

- Second, understanding the character of moral exemplars helps to inform our ethical ideals by revealing what is humanly attainable and what various forms that might take.
- Third, empirical comparisons contrasting exemplars with ordinary folk essentially serve to amplify effects (since these represent relatively extreme groups), allowing operative processes to be more clearly identified.
- Fourth, comparisons of different types of moral exemplars can reveal what they have in common (and thus foundational to moral functioning) and what is distinctive.

Walker and Frimer (2007) assessed the personality functioning of two quite different types of moral exemplars (brave vs. caring), albeit ones vetted through the same honors system with similar numbers typically being recognized annually. The brave heroes had engaged in a single, momentous act where they had risked their own lives to save others. The caring exemplars had engaged in long-term caring action in support of individuals, groups, communities, or humanitarian causes. Comparison participants, individually matched on several demographic variables, also were involved in the personality assessment. This assessment took the form of lengthy Life Story Interview in which participants were prompted to relay the chapters of their life story and to discuss a sequence of critical life events. Thematic coding of these interviews was then conducted for five different aspects of personality reflective of dispositional proclivity for optimism. In this paper our focus is on the ways in which individuals' framing of their life experiences is an indication of their character, and how this can provide the impetus for moral action.

Attachments and Helpers in Childhood

Obviously, beneficial and formative relationships in childhood may very well be indicative of the developmental roots of moral exemplarity (Dunn, 2014; Thompson, 2009;

Walker & Frimer, 2011), particularly secure relationships and influential mentors. McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) first articulated the notion of an early advantage in life that can contribute to a “commitment story,” a life narrative in which one recalls a positive and benevolent childhood and in which one constructs a personal ideology centered on prosocial commitments, personal goals that expand one’s circle of care for others. McAdams et al. identified a cluster of themes indicative of early life advantage, including secure attachments in significant relationships and the presence of helpers who in some way scaffold development (along with the relative absence of enemies).

In Walker and Frimer’s (2007) analysis of early advantage in the lives of moral exemplars (in contrast to comparison participants) it is important to note that there was no explicit questioning in that regard and, indeed, these notions arose unprompted in the interview, mitigating concerns about demand characteristics. Coding of these variables was based on spontaneous and incidental recall of important relationships and experiences in the early-life portion of the interview. The first variable was the quality of attachments, which was assessed for six different significant relationships in childhood. The second variable coded was the frequency of explicitly identified helpers (those who influence in an clearly positive way) versus enemies (those who are detrimental to their well-being).

It cannot be determined from Walker and Frimer’s (2007) data whether these recollections of childhood represent actual experiences or rather construals made in the framing of present understandings; regardless, there are clear indications of early advantage. Irrespective of their factual veracity, such intimations do reflect important components of moral character. In contrast to comparison participants, both brave and caring exemplars were rated as evidencing more secure attachments in early-life relationships and the frequency of helpers in their life

stories was almost three times greater.

These developmental roots for moral exemplarity suggest a positively valenced childhood characterized by secure, nurturing, and scaffolding relationships. Such a context for development may prompt an early realization that one is in some way advantaged and that realization may serve to foster an identity that encompasses a sense of efficacy, prosocial motivation, and a pervasive commitment to moral concerns.

Redemption, an Important Form of Optimistic Construal

At the foundational core of moral functioning, Walker and Frimer's (2007) data revealed not only aspects of early-life advantage but also the personality variable of redemption. In assessing the impact on personality of various transformative life events, McAdams (2006) contends that it is not so much the concrete details of these recounted events themselves that are important but rather how these events are construed and what personal meanings are discerned from them. In his conceptualization, redemption is considered to be the construal of transformative life events such that a demonstrably negative situation is salvaged or redeemed in some way that reveals a positive benefit. In a complementary manner, contamination refers to the construal of an initially positive state such that it is irreconcilably tainted or contaminated by a perceived negative outcome. The suggestion here is that the ability or conscious choice to construe some benefit out of challenge may be adaptive and help to sustain moral action.

McAdams's (2006) review of the available evidence suggested that redemptive construals are associated with well-being whereas contaminative construals tend to be more associated with psychological distress. Further, redemption seems to be a prevalent theme in the psychological functioning of generative adults (McAdams et al., 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001).

Walker and Frimer (2007) found that common to both brave and caring types of moral exemplars (and in contrast to their comparison groups) was the prevalence of redemption sequences in their life stories and the relative absence of contamination sequences. Quite strikingly, the narratives of moral exemplars had 66% more redemption and 51% less contamination than the narratives of comparison participants. The finding references the significance of the capability and often intentional choice to construct some positive benefit from critical personal experiences. The dispositional tendency for reframing, either of emergencies in which people's lives were gravely endangered or of situations in which people suffered disadvantage or adversity, was an important feature of the character of moral exemplars. Note that it was not the case that these people were minimizing or delusional about the challenges they encountered, rather they had a propensity to "spin" these challenges redemptively and optimistically to feature some positive benefit. This adaptive form of psychological functioning helps to both instigate and sustain moral action in difficult situations.

Affective Tone

Another personality variable, related to redemption, that was assessed in Walker and Frimer's (2007) study of moral exemplars was the overall affective tone of the life narrative; that is, the degree of optimism versus pessimism expressed. There is considerable evidence that dispositional optimism is associated with adaptive coping and better psychological adjustment (Peterson, 2000; Zaslavsky et al., 2015). Certainly, the case studies reported by Colby and Damon (1992) and Oliner (2003) suggest the significance of hopefulness, forgiveness, and positivity as factors underlying extraordinary moral commitment.

In Walker and Frimer's analysis, caring exemplars evidenced a generally more optimistic affective tone to their life stories than brave exemplars whose narratives tended to be more

neutral or mixed in affectivity. The life stories of brave exemplars perhaps entailed more negativity because their heroic rescues often were accompanied by tragic outcomes.

Pervasive optimism in the context of extraordinary caring service may be somewhat surprising given that these volunteers often labored in situations that entailed destitution, disenfranchisement, and despair. These caring exemplars defy their environments in engendering positivity. This implies the working of an agentic personality that transduces the negativity of trying circumstances into behaviors that exude hope and affirmation.

Death of a Child

A serendipitous and quite unanticipated finding from Walker and Frimer's (2007) study was that a disproportionate number of the caring exemplars had experienced the death of one or more of their children (more than their comparison group and more than the brave heroes). The death of a child is an out-of-time, out-of-sequence traumatic life event with which most people typically have great difficulty coping, even over the long term; often falling into despair, anger, and self-absorption (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). These extraordinary people seemed to have coped with this personal tragedy by discerning some meaning or benefit from it and deliberately fostering a positive attitude toward their life circumstances.

A case-study analysis of one of these caring award recipients who had suffered the death of her adult child (Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2015) intimated that the construction of a redemptive narrative—one in which the tragic death is framed as contributing to prosocial behavior—and incorporating it into one's life story is essential to sustaining this behavior pattern following a traumatic experience. It does so because it imparts moral action with a sense of meaning and purpose.

Concluding Thoughts

These variables include ones pointing to the developmental roots of moral exemplarity in secure relationships and influential mentors—a beneficial childhood that cultivates an enduring sense of being advantaged and framing life optimistically. Also core to moral exemplarity is a redemptive disposition that tends to construe some positive benefit out of transformative life events and imbues life, in general, with optimism. Such positivity presumably fosters prosocial action in the face of challenge. Moral exemplars do possess a number of character-defining qualities but, in particular, the dispositional proclivity to frame life experiences and relationships optimistically is an obvious and significant virtue, as it seemingly provides compelling impetus for a morally exemplary lifestyle.

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