



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VALUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

**Development of Implicit Measure for Virtue based
on Ancient Indian Scripture:
Issues and Challenges**

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These are unpublished conference papers for the 'Can Virtue Be Measured?', held by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values at Oriel College, Thursday 9th – Saturday 11th January 2014. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.

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Running head: VIRTUE IMPLICIT ASSOCIATION TEST

Development of Implicit Measure for Virtue based on Ancient Indian Scripture:

Issues and Challenges

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my colleague Rajesh S.K. who first found out the information about the conference “can virtue be measured?”, and continued encouraging me to participate. I sincerely thank my colleague Judu for his guidance and inspiration in completing this paper. Because of his patience and extensive knowledge on my subject of virtue and Implicit Association Test (IAT), this work could come out in a good form. Without their support, I would not have determined to attend this conference. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and thank my PhD research guide Dr. Ramamchandra G. Bhat who suggested and encouraged me to take up this research topic on virtue and to develop a measuring tool. I thank all of them for their presence in my life helping me to grow intellectually and emotionally. Thank you.

Om Tat Sat

Abstract

India is a country where rich literary resources regarding virtue are available. We begin our virtue research based on ancient Indian scriptures from the need of the following reasons. First, we attempt to convey a message to people why we should be virtuous. Second, we address the necessity of developing a culturally relevant and appropriate psychological tool to assess virtue based on Indian indigenous concepts and ethos. Third, to minimize the threat of various response biases in self-report assessment method, we propose that Implicit Association Test (IAT) would be immensely useful in measuring virtue. Along with the movements of positive psychology and Indian psychology, we hope that this project could contribute to the development of positive qualities of people and inspire them to progress in the life journey. Further, our research based on Indian indigenous concepts of virtue would support the advancement of Indian psychology.

Development of Implicit Measure for Virtue based on Ancient Indian Scripture:

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Introduction

India holds one of the great traditions of moral thought and ethics in world philosophy. Its own insights influenced thinkers in early Greece, Europe, Asia, and the New World (Bilimoria, 2007). Indian ethics mainly deals with concepts like life-values, virtues, *karma*, *dharma*, renunciation, and enlightenment (Bilimoria, 2007). As ancient Indian scriptures also offer teachings and practices on these regards, it has been acknowledged its significant status in world philosophy and religion.

Virtue Research in India

Every system of ethics compiles a series of virtues. Strangely all such catalogues are same even though their prophets belonged to different times and places (Chinmayananda, 1996, p. 1041). Like different streams having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea. Recent advances in the positive psychology movement, pave a way to understand and develop programs to enhance virtues. The experts in positive psychology have done a consensual classification of human virtues (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). This convergence suggests a nonarbitrary classification of six core virtues: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence.

Eastern philosophy has its tradition based on its classical scriptures. One of the most consecrated ancient texts, the *Bhagavad Gita*, describes the virtues in its unique ways. The very same qualities are still regarded as virtues, and even today, those who live them are considered

virtuous and noble (Chinmayananda, 1996, p.1041). Chapter 16 of the *Bhagavad Gita* enumerates instructive and significant qualities to attain happiness, prosperity and blessedness (Sivananda, 2000, p. 115). Comprehensive summary emphasizes two sets of qualities of opposite kinds, divine (virtue) and demoniacal (vice). Further it urges us to eradicate the latter and cultivate the divine qualities. The sixteenth chapter of *the Bhagavad Gita*, the first verse begins with,

Fearlessness, purity of the inner sense, steadfastness in the discipline of knowledge, charity, self-control, sacrifice, study of the scriptures, penance, straightforwardness, non-violence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, peacefulness, absence of crookedness, compassion to living beings, uncovetousness, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, vigour, forgiveness, patience, purity, absence of hatred and pride (Chinmayananda, 1996, p.1043).

Above mentioned characteristics describe divine traits. Further, chapter 13 and 10 also articulate the virtues extensively. However, we can observe an overlap of certain virtues with one another.

For better understanding, virtues in the *Bhagavad Gita* can be classified (Bina, 2006) into self-regarding virtues (e.g. patience, self-control, endurance, restraint, simplicity) and other-regarding virtues (e.g. forgiveness, compassion, friendship, amity, non-hatred, non-anger). Alternatively, virtues can be classified (Bina, 2006) into the virtues of the mind (e.g. Amity, modesty, non-greed, humility, renunciation), body (e.g. Simplicity, abstinence, non-violence) and speech (e.g. truthfulness and absence of fault finding). The former classification is centered around myself and other-self, and the latter classification is based on various levels of expression.

Apart from *Bhagavad Gita*, there are more ancient Hindu texts which offer insights on virtues. In *Ramayana*, one of the ancient epics in India, King Rama's virtuous character is depicted relative to Ravana's vicious character. The main Yogic text *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra* teaches about *Yamas* and *Niyamas*, Yogic disciplines of Dos and Don'ts. *Manu smrti* prescribes 10 essential *dharmas* to observe. In more recent times, Swamis (Hindu religious teachers) deliver messages on the significance of maintaining life values and virtues in spiritual pursuit; Swami Sivananda's "how to cultivate virtues and eradicate vices"; Swami Dayananda's "the value of values" are the resources of teachings on virtues.

The Need for the Study

There has been a need for, and also remarkable growth in making the discipline of psychology culturally more relevant. People vary according to different cultures and customs, so it is difficult to say that western theories of personality, which emerge from mainstream psychology, can completely represent the universal mind of people. Researchers generally investigate someone's mind and behaviors, come up with conclusions, and theories were established and generalized. No doubt, these theories are being cross validated across the cultures, there still remains a need to search for an indigenous scheme based on various cultures.

The current movement of Indian psychology approaches the human mind based on eastern philosophy's holistic and integrated view. Indian psychology based on Indian traditional knowledge, looks at exploring more of subjective and inner domain of personality while establishing psychological theories and models (Cornelissen, 2007).

To support the above idea, the issue of developing culturally appropriate psychological measure in the socio-cultural context emerges. In order to solve the problem, we need culturally

integrated psychological measure based on indigenous concepts and ethos. As a result of considering cultural aspects, better meaning for the assessment can be attributed. This would facilitate to develop culturally supportive, integrative tool.

In line with this trend, there have been attempts by researchers to assess certain Indian indigenous constructs by developing questionnaires; *Ahamkara* (the eastern concept of “ego”), *Karma* (action, deed), *Purushartha* (4 types of human life values), *Dukkha* (unhappiness, suffering, pain), *Samskara* (imprint of the mind), *Swadhyaya* (self-study), *Triguna* (*Vedic* personality theory), *Yama and niyama* (Yogic disciplines of Dos and Don'ts) (Kumar, 2010).

As we see above, India has rich literary resources regarding virtues. However, for the researcher the question that how much is actually practiced in real life in modern times is valuable. And why should we follow the teachings and practice to cultivate virtues? What would be the advantages? It is known that spiritual strives and growth would bring about positive changes in inner personality of a person and bring us up nearer to divine personality (Sivananda, 2011, p. 7). From this inquiry, the necessity of assessing or measuring the virtue construct in people arises.

Those virtue traits are very abstract, subtle, and dynamic just like many Indian indigenous concepts. This may cause difficulty in responding by respondents. In addition, self-report measures always carry measurement errors like self-presentation biases and impression management. Therefore, to develop measure to assess spiritual growth and to minimize response biases, we propose that implicit measures would be immensely useful.

Implicit Association Test (IAT)

IAT was developed by Greenwald and his colleagues to capture implicit (automatic, indirect, non-conscious) cognition process (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). It is a computerized test in which latency of response is recorded on a task of associating between target concepts and stimuli. IAT started from the idea that people would have easier and faster time associating the concepts that are more strongly connected relative to the concepts which are weakly associated. In other words, if you like a particular object, you tend to associate that object with positive qualities. On the other hand, any disliked object, you would tend to associate that with negative qualities (Na & Kwon, 2002). Also any stronger associations would be more accessible because there is more possibility of automatic activation. The stronger strength of the associations (more learned and repetitive) gives rise to shorter reaction time (Fazio, 1986, 1989).

The subjects will be asked to press one key for the compatibly combined concepts (congruent) and the other key for incompatibly combined concepts (incongruent). The mean latency difference between these two blocks will be analyzed and the results can indicate whether an individual prefers any particular target. Since the participant has to respond to shown stimuli as quickly as possible without conflicts and delay, it is presumed that this type of test setting will be less susceptible to participant's control and manipulation of the answer.

The use of IAT in psychology research increased rapidly by complementing the limitations of self-report measures by capturing people's implicit preferences and attitudes which are not under awareness.

IAT Procedure

IAT is designed to have five or seven blocks of tests consisting of combination of practice and the test blocks. The first step in IAT is to categorize the target concepts and the attribute concepts. The target concepts are which researcher is interested in finding out people's attitude toward that particular concept (flower/insect or Black/White). And the attribute concepts qualify the target concept by classifying into two 'good' and 'bad' or 'pleasure' and 'unpleasant' category. In the IAT, the strength of association between the target and attribute categories is assessed.

1. First block: practice block to classify target concepts (flower/insect)
2. Second block: practice of attribute (pleasant/unpleasant)
3. Third block: practice of combination of target and attribute (congruent block)
4. Fourth block: same as the third block, but this is a test block.
5. Fifth block: practice of target with reversed key assignments (incongruent block)
6. Sixth block: combined practice block with reversed target keys
7. Seventh block: same as the sixth block but a test block

Expecting Issues and Challenges in Developing Virtue-IAT

Why implicit tool? Why not only explicit tool?

Assessments of virtues usually follow the development of explicit tools like questionnaires. In recent times implicit tools were found to immensely complement explicit assessments. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is one of the strongest tools to assess implicit preferences of a person (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

In self-report assessment method, respondents are asked to report their subjective thoughts and feelings. Self-report measures have two main pitfalls. First, it is susceptible to various response biases. Second, there are some constructs which are difficult to access and self-introspect by the participants (Banaji, Greenwald, 1995). These factors can hinder the process of providing direct information about behavior and motivation, which are crucial components of virtues (Templeton, 2013). In addition, self-report measures are found to be highly dependent on occasion and timing, also on the willingness of the participants (Egloff & Schmukle, 2005). Due to the threat of social desirability and self-presentation bias, implicit measures are preferred in certain domains like personality, and especially, socially sensitive issues like race, gender, age, ethnicity, prejudice, bias, and stereotypes studies.

Development of IAT began as a tool to explore the unconscious roots of thinking and feeling. IAT helps us to investigate the two main areas. First, we prefer not to exhibit our private, inner attitude. Second, we are not always aware of all parts of our awareness and intentions behind our attitudes (Project Implicit, 2008). IAT seeks to discover that hidden area of human cognition which is outside of awareness consciousness and control. This ‘implicit cognition’ or ‘implicit attitude’ is defined (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995) as "introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects".

Assessing Virtue and IAT. Assessing virtue in people means asking whether they are virtuous or not, in a simpler way, it means directly asking people whether they are good or bad. In this type of questionnaire, almost no one would want to report them as not a virtuous person to others. While assessing virtue in people, which is measuring goodness or strength of one’s

character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), higher response bias is expected due to the characteristics of its construct.

As Rowatt et al. (2006) puts it in his article of the development of an implicit measure of humility, “people who want to be perceived by others as desirable or virtuous may deliberately control responses or behaviors to make it appear that they possess more humility than they actually do”. Implicit association method intends to reveal attitudes and other automatic associations even for subjects who prefer not to express those attitudes (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Virtue is a social desirable construct, and constructs of virtues are difficult to self-report and self-introspect. Therefore, implicit tools should be considered along with explicit measures to assess them.

Existence of construct

There are many types of virtues. By positive psychology group, six main virtues and 24 sub-categories virtues are compiled. And, there are at least more than 30 virtues mentioned in *Bhagavad-gita*. But how are those concepts clearly constructed in an individual's mind to be tested? It is known that concepts like attitudes, goals, identity, and stereotypes as operating nonconsciously and also have active existence distinct from conscious, deliberate, and intentional experience (Nosek, 2007). This gives one more reason that measure of virtue also has to be implicit.

Then, what does it mean to measure an attribute or a trait in an individual? How do we know that certain construct exist? As a researcher, if you expect an outcome from a measure, there has to be the presence of the construct which you are interested in measuring. There are many virtues and each virtue can be a construct. In order to assess each virtue by using a

suitable tool, we must precisely understand what each virtue (e.g. compassion) conceptually mean. And the next question comes, how can we operationalize them? Thus, the operational definition of a virtue construct becomes essential.

De Houwer (2009) gives a definition of a psychological measure as “which are meant to reveal internal psychological attributes of individuals. And, an ideal psychological measure should provide an exact index of the extent to which an individual possesses the psychological attribute that the measure was designed to capture”. Borsboom (2004) further pointed out that a valid test measures an attribute if (a) that attribute exists, and (b) variations in the attribute causally produce variations in the outcome measurements.

The existence of an attribute that causes influences on the outcome of the measurement procedure is a crucial issue in establishing the validity of the tool. This is called an ontological claim meaning that one claims for something really exist and proving it has relations to each other (Borsboom 2004). With regard to the existence of construct, there are theories (nomological network) about whether any target attribute should or should not be related to other attributes (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). It is considered to be a valid measure if the measure of the target attribute correlates in the expected way with measures of other attributes (De Houwer, 2009).

Choice of words (Choice of stimuli)

For a successful implicit evaluation, it is very essential that subjects recognize shown stimuli and cognitively associate them with the construct. If this mapping is weaker, then the implicit tools may yield poor results. Like other personality traits, these virtues may be overlapping among themselves, and thereby giving additional challenge.

IAT requires stimuli words that would invoke the meaning and induce association in the participants. IAT measures can be influenced by choosing stimulus items that contradicts the expected valence of the category label (Govan & Williams, 2004). Hence it is very essential to select stimuli which uniformly match with each other with respect to valence mapping with the category labels (De Houwer, 2001). A method of using reviewer's selection for the choice of words seems to be a good option.

Pratkanis (1989) notes that attitudes can have a 'unipolar structure' and a 'bipolar structure'. The concepts of virtue and vice have the structure of 'bipolar', two opposite side quality 'good' and 'bad'. This bipolar structure may have cognitive benefits and easier automatic evaluation. Unipolar constructs give less reliable attitudes, or are more malleable to situational influences (Nosek, 2005). For this reason, items or words in IAT's evaluation, if they have more bipolar structure than unipolar qualities, they are expected to induce greater correspondence among automatic evaluative processes. However, situational needs may sometimes favor unipolar IAT than bipolar IAT. Choice of one among them is an important aspect of virtue IAT development.

Stability of the construct

It is evident in the literature that implicit tools for personality constructs have weaker reliability. The main reason being definition of the construct. While developing an implicit measure, assessing the stability of the attribute present in a person, durability of the constructs, is important in terms of reliability concerns.

In a study of developing an implicit measure of dispositional forgiveness (Buechsel, 2010), they have made a distinction between forgiveness as an action responding to an

interaction or transgression, state forgiveness. On the other hand, ‘dispositional’ forgiveness refers to a dispositional trait that is stable across time and situation (Berry et al., 2001). This term ‘dispositional’ was introduced to make distinctions between a simple act of forgiving and the innate personality trait of forgiving (Roberts, 1995). Likewise, in assessing any other virtue characteristics, the implicit tool should be able to measure dispositional qualities in individuals, which are relatively consistent over time and situations.

In an example of self-esteem, ‘implicit self-esteem’ was originally conceptualized as being automatic, it was assumed to be a quality that is deeply ingrained and stable (Gawronski & Payne, 2010). Any attitude that is operated without conscious effort, that evaluation is considered to be habitual and over-learned. As this view suggests, virtue IAT will be successful to the extent it focuses on concepts which are stable in the person's cognitive system.

Cultural specification

Virtue is considered to be a concept or a quality that exists globally and universally which all humans possess. So, it is questionable that when a measure is developed to capture this concept within a limited place under particular circumstances, would it be applicable to people of other places of countries who live and grow up in different cultures? Any successful theory or a psychological measure should be able to predict general behavior of humans.

In an example of a study of *Guna* (Vedic personality traits; *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*) the implicit measure IAT was used, because of its unique concept and the characteristics that the three *Guna* possess which is socially sensitive construct (Ilavarasu, unpublished thesis, 2013), Guna-IAT (G-IAT) would be useful only among people who are familiar with those concepts in Indian population. So, in the virtue measure of implicit also, similar issue may be encountered.

Especially, those virtue concepts that are originated from Indian philosophy like *Dharma*, *Tyaga* (detachment, renunciation), *Ahimsa* (non-violence) etc.

As a category label is very important because it is through this the associative links in the brain are activated. Hence it is very essential that the subjects recognize the category label. Therefore, virtues may be universal but the way they are represented in different cultures may vary and a virtue IAT should accommodate this aspect.

In addition, since there are various groups of people in India with different local languages, using English as their second language, choosing appropriate languages and words in designing IAT seems to be an important issue. Cross-cultural research emphasizes that different cultural groups are likely to have different conceptions. Especially with regard to implicit measures, different level of mental representations cause changes in IAT scores (Feroni, Bel-Bahar, 2010). Hence while developing virtue IAT in an Indian population, we should consider the possible influence of language in the study.

Whether we would be able to develop IAT which can be used globally remains challenging due to above mentioned reasons. We must be judicious in what we are measuring and how that trait or attitude was formed in different individuals in different cultures, and make sure the tool universally is implementable.

Conclusion

Through this research work, we encourage people to be more aware of the teachings of the great souls in India who were enlightened and lived virtuous, inspiring, and divine lives. To fulfill the need of developing an appropriate scientific measurement tool for virtue, we propose

the possibility of immense usefulness of IAT. We also hope that our research on virtue can contribute people to look at their positive side of qualities and personalities and try to develop those traits. Positive wins negative. Along with positive psychology movement, this research gives an opportunity to explore the goodness of people instead of emphasizing and fixing the negatives. Furthermore, we expect that our work based on Indian indigenous concepts of virtues also be a supportive work for advancing of Indian psychology.

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