C.IV Research Group “Moral Courage”

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The research group Moral Courage was formed in March 2017. Besides its core members, the group also includes an associate postdoctoral researcher through external funding. Based at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Dr Anna Halmburger coordinates the project “moral courage” within the Beacon Project on moral excellence, funded by the Templeton Foundation (www.moralbeacons.org).

**Integrative Goals and Lines of Research**

The research group Moral Courage is dedicated to investigating the psychological processes of bystander intervention against norm violations. As first steps, the group has developed a working definition of moral courage as distinct from related phenomena such as social control and helping. A theoretical framework based on this definition allows categorization of types of situations in which moral courage can be displayed. This framework will serve to integrate several lines of research that have progressed in isolation from each other (e.g., on whistleblowing, objection to racism or ostracism, non-conformity, or third-party punishment) and detect blind spots concerning situational constellations that have not been addressed by psychological research. Within this framework, our research aims at refining a process model of moral courage (Halmburger, Baumert & Schmitt, 2017). In particular, the group will engage in four related lines of research.

**C.IV.1 Ambiguity of Norm Violations**

Previous research has paid only limited attention to the way in which information revealing a norm violation unfolds over time. Whereas typical research designs have tested reactions to disambiguated constellations, norm violations may remain ambiguous in everyday life because relevant information is lacking, covered by noise, or is only available over time in a nonlinear fashion. Differences in the degree of ambiguity of the norm violation, together with the timely dynamics of relevant information, might account for discrepant findings on the prevalence and determinants of real intervention behavior, in contrast to self-reported reactions to written descriptions of the same situation (Baumert et al., 2013) or to punishment behavior in the lab under clearly specified rules.

We build on research, conducted at the MPI for Research on Collective Goods, which addressed the potential impact of uncertainty about a recipient’s endowment on dictator game giving (Engel & Goerg, 2015), as well as on our own research on inter-individual differences in attention toward, memory of, and interpretation of information potentially indicating injustices (Baumert & Schmitt, 2009; Baumert et al., 2011, 2012; Maltese, Baumert et al., 2013, 2016). In a study sampling witnessed norm violations in everyday life over three weeks (experience sampling), we tested the association between the subjective ambiguity of a norm violation and the likelihood of intervention.

Currently, we are investigating whether self-reported behavioral intentions map more closely on patterns of real intervention behavior in realistic settings, to the extent that the vignette (the description of a hypothetical situation) simulates the timely dynamic of information unfolding in the real situation. For this purpose, we employ video vignettes that present the situation to participants from the perspective of a bystander within the situation. These video vignettes allow the manipulation of the degree of ambiguity of the norm violation (by covering information with noise), as well as the timely dynamics (by shortening or enlarging time gaps between relevant information). In future studies, these materials will be employed to test the impact of ambiguity and timely dynamics on cognitive, affective, and motivational reactions to the norm violations.
In addition, building on Engel & Goerg (2015), we are testing how ambiguity of the norm violation, coupled with uncertainty of negative consequences of intervention, shape third-party punishment in economic games. Moreover, we investigate whether these factors change the external validity of those games for predicting reactions to norm violations in realistic settings.

C.IV.2 Emotion and Emotion Regulation

Process models of moral courage have neglected emotional processes in intervention behavior. In contrast to helping behavior, anger and moral outrage should play particularly important roles in facilitating bystander intervention against norm violations (Halmburger, Baumert & Schmitt, 2015). However, depending on the context, expressing anger can be less desirable due to potential social sanctions, and therefore downregulated (Sasse, Spears & Gordijn, 2017; Sasse, Spears & Gordijn, 2017a; Sasse, van Breen, Spears, Gordijn, 2017). To the extent that anger facilitates intervention, we hypothesize that tendencies toward downregulating such negative emotions should be a barrier to intervention. This hypothesis is scrutinized in a current lab study involving a staged fraud. Immediate affective and physiological reactions are assessed, and intervention behavior is coded through video ratings.

In future studies, we aim to understand “the positive side of anger” by investigating whether anger promotes selective searches for information that confirms that a norm violation has taken place, thereby facilitating intervention. In addition, we will explore how anger affects the effectiveness of intervention behavior.

C.IV.3 Interpersonal, Intragroup, and Intergroup Processes

Cutting through all lines of research presented above, we investigate whether and how psychological processes underlying intervention against norm violations differ between interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup situations. In situations where social groups are salient, belonging to “perpetrator groups”, “victim groups”, or “bystander groups” has been shown to have a substantial impact on the processing and reactions of witnesses of norm violations (Li & Leidner, 2017a; Li et al., 2017; Li, Leidner & Fernandez-Campos, 2017; Li, Leidner, Petrović & Prelic, 2017; for a review, see Li & Leidner, 2017).

Within the theoretical framework of moral courage, mentioned above, we are currently elaborating the roles that social identification processes can play. Importantly, whether personal moral beliefs are compatible or in conflict with moral, social, or legal norms should have downstream implications for the perception of a potential norm violation as well as subsequent reactions. Existing social psychological models of intervention behavior within group contexts have not paid sufficient attention to these distinctions, hence drawing possibly incomplete pictures of the consequences that levels and qualities of identification with a particular social group might have.

Methodological Contributions

Besides substantive contributions to theory-building, these lines of research aim at developing valid and efficient methodological approaches to the investigation of moral courage (Baumert et al., 2013, 2014). In the past, psychological research has heavily relied on hypothetical reactions to written vignettes, while economic research focused on financial decisions in unambiguously circumscribed games in the lab. To understand and overcome the limitations of these setups, we employ multi-method approaches, combining self-report and reaction time-based measurement of personality dispositions, decisions in economic games,
physiological assessment of immediate reactions to norm violations, and systematic behavioral observation under highly controlled and standardized situations in the lab. Beyond the study of moral courage, our research contributes to social, psychological, and economic research by scrutinizing and optimizing external validities of assessment tools.

Outlook

In sum, the research group Moral Courage aims at advancing insights into the psychological processes of bystander intervention against norm violations, in fundamental ways. Our working definition of the phenomenon – in a precise distinction from separable concepts, such as social control and helping – as well as our theoretical framework of situational constellations and our process model will integrate various lines of research. This way, those lines of research, disconnected thus far, can fertilize each other in synergistic ways, and previous blind spots of psychological research can be detected. In our research, we aim to overcome severe methodological limitations that have hampered progress to a substantial degree. Through multi-method approaches, we pay close attention to how validity and efficiency of assessment can be simultaneously optimized.

References


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