

Smartphone app used by experimenters to learn more about aspects of morality

September 12 2014, by Bob Yirka



Image of the Smartphone Experience-Sampling Signal (SMS linking to smartphone survey). Credit: Wilhelm Hofmann

(Phys.org) —A team of researchers with members from the U.S., Germany and the Netherlands has uncovered some new ideas about the nature of morality by using a smartphone app. In their paper published in the journal *Science*, the researchers describe how they enlisted a large group of people to serve as volunteers in a morality experiment, and what they learned as a result. Jesse Graham, of the University of Southern California offers a Perspective piece in the same journal issue.

Morality clearly plays a role in modern society, in many instances, it might even be cited as one of the prime preventers of chaos—people

see, hear and engage in things that they deem moral, or immoral, and tend to respond in certain ways because of it. But because of its ephemeral nature, scientists have had difficulty not only defining and measuring it but perhaps more importantly, finding the ways in which it works in people and in society as a whole. In this latest effort, the researchers sought to learn more about how [morality](#) works by periodically asking people directly about their observations, feelings and acts.

In the experiment, 1,252 people found via social media, agreed to download an app to their phone that allowed the researchers to query them at random times regarding moral acts they engaged in or witnessed during the prior hour, how it made them feel and how they responded. Text messages were sent to the volunteers and received from them over a period of three days. Afterwards, the researchers analyzed the 13,240 messages they'd received from the volunteers to see if they could spot patterns, trends or other pertinent information.

Among the host of findings, the team discovered that those who considered themselves religious didn't necessarily commit more or less moral or immoral acts than those who did not. They also found that people who were the target of a moral act tended to feel better about themselves than did those who committed a moral act themselves—and those same people tended to also be more likely to commit a moral act later on—social scientists call it moral contagion.

The [researchers](#) also found evidence that suggests political affiliation had an impact on morality as well—those of a liberal persuasion, for example, tended to focus more on fairness between people, while those who saw themselves as more conservative tended to respond more strongly to acts of respecting authority or the status quo.

The study marks a new foray into sociological testing techniques using

new technology and might just be one of many to come that seek to better define the rules by which people behave in society.

More information: Morality in everyday life, *Science* 12 September 2014: Vol. 345 no. 6202 pp. 1340-1343 [DOI: 10.1126/science.1251560](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1251560)

ABSTRACT

The science of morality has drawn heavily on well-controlled but artificial laboratory settings. To study everyday morality, we repeatedly assessed moral or immoral acts and experiences in a large (N = 1252) sample using ecological momentary assessment. Moral experiences were surprisingly frequent and manifold. Liberals and conservatives emphasized somewhat different moral dimensions. Religious and nonreligious participants did not differ in the likelihood or quality of committed moral and immoral acts. Being the target of moral or immoral deeds had the strongest impact on happiness, whereas committing moral or immoral deeds had the strongest impact on sense of purpose. Analyses of daily dynamics revealed evidence for both moral contagion and moral licensing. In sum, morality science may benefit from a closer look at the antecedents, dynamics, and consequences of everyday moral experience.

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Citation: Smartphone app used by experimenters to learn more about aspects of morality (2014, September 12) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-smartphone-app-experimenters-aspects-morality.html>

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