AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ADOLESCENT MORAL IDENTITY
AND ITS RELATION TO SOCIAL JUSTICE AWARENESS

by

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for the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

The present mixed-methods study examined adolescents’ moral identity development and its relation to their awareness of problems of social justice. Fifty-eight inner-city adolescents in Grades 9 and 12 ranked personal values according to their self-relevance or importance and a sub-sample also provided responses to interview questions that were coded qualitatively for maturity of moral identity. A written questionnaire assessed the adolescents’ awareness of issues of racism, sexism, and classism. It was found that adolescents held moral values at significantly higher levels of importance than non-moral values, with no differences between grades. However, trends suggested that females placed somewhat greater emphasis on moral values in terms of centrality or importance to the self and also expressed slightly more mature explanatory responses than males. Adolescents’ moral identity and social justice awareness were not correlated. These findings highlight the need to foster the development of morally motivated, socially aware individuals.
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INTRODUCTION

An ever-present challenge in society is to foster morally inclined, socially cognizant citizens. Within the field of sociomoral development, a proposed connection has recently surfaced between the domains of moral development and identity formation, opening new avenues of investigation. Moral identity is a construct that defines the developing adolescent’s sense of self as a moral person – that is, the extent to which one’s moral values and goals are integrated into one’s self-identity (e.g., Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Moral identity has emerged as a factor to consider in the promotion of moral behaviour in today’s complex society (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998). In this context, the quality of intergroup relations and attitudes that likely influence behaviour is also important to consider in diverse cultures, as is the case in North America (Killen & Smetana, 2010; Quintana et al., 2006). Issues of social justice, such as racism, sexism, and classism, are abundant, and adolescents may or may not be aware of these challenges or how to respond to them (Killen & Smetana, 2010). Research in the area of moral identity is essential, as a developed moral identity has potential implications for adolescents’ appreciation for human rights and equality, their moral motivations, prosocial actions, and moral conduct.

In the Western World, diversity has become the norm, and adolescents in these countries are faced with the added challenges that pluralistic societies present. Adolescence is a time when one’s self identity and understanding of his/her social world emerges (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Moshman, 2011). This period of development for adolescents in the United States and Canada takes place in a context where individuals vary greatly in terms of social characteristics such as race/ethnicity, social-economic positions, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. These social characteristics begin to take on additional importance during adolescence as they become
factors in the development of one’s identity (Quintana, 1998). Moreover, these social differences surface in interpersonal relationships. Adolescents are challenged to learn to act morally towards all people, no matter their background. They are also challenged to recognize and appreciate the differences and commonalities they share with those around them, and how those factors may influence the treatment of individuals and groups.

Hart, Atkins, and Ford (1998) have addressed the issue of the perceived ‘lack of morality’ among American youth, and a need for improvement in this regard. However, Hart et al. contest this negative perspective, and argue that it is the moral strengths of adolescents that should be of focus. Rather than focus on punitive repercussions for moral failure, attention should be given to providing opportunities for adolescents to develop their moral character. It may be beneficial to support adolescents’ integration of morality into their sense of self, as moral identity can be seen as “a particular type of moral strength that often binds the adolescent to facets of the public community” (Hart et al., 1998, p. 514). Along with this, the development and internalization of moral traits may also have wide reaching implications, as some theorists advocate promoting the development of fundamental traits of character (e.g., Turiel, 2006). Thus, moral identity development may hold a fundamental importance for political socialization and the development of morally motivated individuals. As well, this applies to the development of character education efforts and finding ways to encourage moral behaviour and prosocial values.

The present study was exploratory in nature, with the primary objective being to examine the potential association between adolescent moral identity development and social justice awareness in a sample of mid-to-late adolescents in an inner city environment. Two goals were addressed in this research project. The first goal focused on adolescents’ moral identity development, and the question of differences based on age and gender.
A second goal of this study was to explore potential links between adolescent moral identity and social justice awareness. Specifically, a measure was used to gauge adolescents’ awareness of three issues of social justice: racism, sexism, and classism. In looking at the link between moral identity and social justice, associations may be seen such that those individuals who place greater importance on moral values may also show greater awareness of the social justice issues of racism, sexism, and classism. Awareness of issues of social justice can be seen as a first step in a process of promoting a just society. When adolescents become aware that such issues exist, they can also be taught skills to cope with life in a society where these issues persist, and skills to help them work towards an equitable society. There is a need for interventions that can lead to a long-term impact on intergroup relations and achieving social justice. For achieving such goals, promotion of adolescents’ moral values as personally relevant or important to their sense of self is a potentially powerful avenue to consider.

This research also considered the possible influence of a social desirability bias on both adolescents’ portrayal of the importance of their moral values and their awareness of social justice issues. A social desirability bias refers to a response pattern that reflects an individual’s desire to portray himself in a positive light or to provide what would be deemed to be a “socially correct” response (Beretvas, Meyers, & Leite, 2002). When adolescents are asked to reveal their opinion on personal values and perceptions of their social world, there is a salient opportunity for socially desirable responding to be seen. Including a measurement of this bias allows for an exploration of the associations between the constructs under investigation, and it adds an additional level of control for ensuring the measures are providing pure portrayals of the topics at hand. Thus, research of this sort helps to advance both the moral development and social justice
fields with practical implications for character education and fostering the development of moral individuals.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following is a review of the existing theoretical and empirical research that provides the necessary foundation for the study of adolescent moral identity and its potential association with social justice awareness. The review begins with a focus on moral identity development – how it can be defined and measured, and its outcomes and implications. Next, this review will extend into the social justice domain to lay the foundation for exploring moral identity and its potential links to adolescents’ awareness of the social justice issues of racism, sexism and classism.

Moral Identity

Defining the Construct

The concept of moral identity has been defined in various ways, but it generally refers to an individual’s sense of self as a moral person and the extent to which one’s moral values and goals are integrated into and important to one’s self-identity (e.g., Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Blasi’s self-model has been widely cited, and it points to the importance of individual differences in the extent to which being moral is central or essential to one’s sense of self (Blasi, 1994; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Maclean, Walker, & Matsuba, 2004; Moshman, 2009). This holds great significance, as according to Blasi, moral identity influences the judgments individuals make leading to their decisions of whether or not to behave morally. Moral identity therefore also relates to motivation, such that “when a person’s identity is centred on morality, the desire to live in a manner consistent with one’s sense of self can serve as a key moral motivation” (p. 212). This perception of ‘consistency within the self’ is in keeping with Colby and Damon’s (1992) explanation of moral identity as being “the unity of the moral and self-systems.” Colby and
Damon argue that what differentiates highly moral people from others is the degree to which they experience unity between their sense of morality and their personal goals. Having this unity and integration of personal and moral goals can lead to moral motivation and commitment to moral behaviour.

Though moral identity can be considered a matter of individual difference, this view may be too limited and ignore the broader contexts of development (Hardy & Carlo, 2005). The work of Hart (2005) suggests that moral identity is linked to contexts, social relationships, and opportunities, which would not fit completely within an individual differences approach. Identity contributes to both moral failure as well as motivation. That is to say, even those who are said to have strong moral identities can demonstrate moral collapse, and so the construct of moral identity may benefit from being more broad and flexible to account for this. Hardy and Carlo (2005) put forth that identity can be a product of development towards integration, agency and synthesis, but to them, “identity is less an enduring achievement than an evolving construct” (p. 260). Hart suggests reframing moral identity as a social construction rather than an endpoint of development. Therefore, moral identity can be interpreted as a continuum along which individuals vary depending on the centrality of morality to their developing identities, as shaped by their contextual circumstances.

*Age and Gender Differences in Moral Identity.* Research suggests that moral identity formation is a developmental process with roots in childhood and key emergence in young adulthood (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Moral identity formation can be conceptualized as the merging of moral development and identity development, rather than being a unique developmental system unto itself, or these two processes may be viewed as components of the same developmental system (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Hardy and Carlo also point out that there is
some evidence for the presence of early precursors of moral identity in childhood, where for instance, children begin to see themselves as “good” when they comply with rules. Also emerging early in life and developing over time are the affective bases of moral identity (such as empathy, guilt, and shame) (Kochanska, 2002). These integrate with moral ideals and with one’s sense of self, which is fundamental to moral identity formation. Turiel (2006), for example, outlines the developmental nature of internalization: “morality entails the acquisition of a conscience serving to internally regulate conduct consistent with societal values, norms, or rules” (p. 802). There is a gradual developmental shift from external to internal regulation that allows a child to conduct him- or herself in accord with societal standards even in the absence of external monitoring. The ability to internalize things such as moral norms likely facilitates moral identity development.

Furthermore, Hardy and Carlo (2005) point out that identity emerges as an important source of moral motivation in young adulthood: “moral motivation stemming from identity results when a mature identity is centred on moral concerns” (p. 238). They also explain that the strong desire to maintain consistency with one’s sense of self as a moral person is not typically experienced at least until adolescence, if ever experienced at all. In the present study, it was valuable to look for participants’ external or internal explanations for adherence to moral values as well as evidence for concern with moral adherence to maintain consistency within one’s self. From the literature reviewed, it is important to acknowledge the developmental nature of moral identity, beginning in childhood, becoming more apparent in adolescence, and still progressing throughout adulthood. The present study compared students in Grade 9 with those in Grade 12, and this provides insight into development from mid-to-late adolescence.
Johnston and Krettenauer (2011) did explore the moderating role of age in the proposed relationship between adolescents’ moral self and their (im)moral behaviour. Although they hypothesized that the relation of these variables may undergo change during the course of adolescent development, they found consistency in this association across the students in Grades 7, 9, and 11. Therefore, Johnston and Krettenauer suggest that the moral self may already be established in early adolescence and not undergoing a process of elaboration and consolidation in these years. However, in agreement with Lapsley & Hill (2009), they do acknowledge that developmental data regarding the moral self are largely missing; therefore, this interpretation remains speculative and calls for future research investigation. The focus of Johnston and Krettenauer’s study was on the relation of adolescents’ self-importance of moral values and behaviour and emotional expectancies. Thus, it did not look at changes within moral identity itself, and it does call for further investigations of this sort.

The possibility of gender differences in adolescent moral identity is also an interesting consideration, and research on this thus far has shown variable findings. Kochanska’s (2002) empirical research with young children (i.e. age 14 to 56 months) looked at emerging indicators of “moral self” and the influence of committed compliance or opposition on the child’s emerging view of self. Their study found that girls were marginally higher on the measure of moral self and significantly higher on internalized conduct. Thus, there is some evidence for gender differences beginning early on in life.

Similarly, gender differences were found in the work of Hart, Atkins, and Ford (1999). They researched moral identity development in adolescence using voluntary participation in community service as a marker of moral identity development. Their findings consistently showed that girls were more likely to volunteer to help others than were boys. However, among
undergraduate students (i.e. mean age 20.1 years) in Aquino and Reed’s (2002) study of the self-importance of moral characteristics, no effect was found of gender on internalization of moral values. Taken together, this work suggests that gender differences pertaining to moral identity development may exist, with evidence favoring females’ development relative to males’. The present study further explored this matter within the critical period of mid-to-late adolescence.

Moral Identity and Behaviour

In reviewing the work on moral identity, it is also valuable to consider its important relations with moral behaviour. A number of authors have investigated the implications of having a developed moral identity. Frimer and Walker (2009) address theories of self-interest agency and communally focused morality as motivators for action, and say that these two seemingly opposite interests can be integrated and linked when morality is developed. Their reconciliation model points to adaptive integration of agency and communion. Frimer and Walker discuss identity development and morality, suggesting that mature people decide to do the right thing because of who they are as persons, because of their identity. With agency and communion developing separately and in tension, a disequilibrium is created that must be resolved. The resolution can be in the form of unmitigated agency, unmitigated communion, or an integration of agency and communion – that being an adaptive integrated identity.

Moreover, in Frimer and Walker’s (2009) work, moral identity integration was manifest as the tendency for individuals to weave motives of both agency and communion into the same thought. This integration was positively associated with measures of morally relevant behaviours. Frimer and Walker believed this to be the first empirical evidence of the identity integration phenomenon. In addition, Hart and Fegley (1995) compared care exemplars (i.e. those who demonstrate unusual altruistic commitments) to comparison adolescents in their
investigation of self-understanding, moral judgment, and dedicated prosocial behaviour. They found that care exemplars were more likely to include moral personality traits and goals in their self-descriptions; perceive continuity of the self across their pasts and futures; think of themselves as incorporating their ideals and parental images; and articulate theories of self in which personal beliefs and philosophies are important.

As discussed previously, Hardy and Carlo (2005) provide an overview of empirical research into moral motivation, specifically addressing identity as a source of moral motivation, behaviour and commitment. Hardy and Carlo suggest that moral identity becomes integrated with one’s motivational and emotional systems, is used actively, and is taken as a basis for the construction of one’s self-concept. Furthermore, when morality is central to one’s sense of self, it heightens one’s desire to live and behave in accord with moral concerns. The authors suggest that moral identity becomes a greater factor in moral motivation later in young adulthood. In linking moral identity and moral behaviour, based on their review, Hardy and Carlo concluded that “teens and adults who reported moral values and virtues as being more important to their self-concept or more central to their identity also more frequently engaged in moral behavior” (p. 242).

Similarly, Johnston and Krettenauer (2011) cited research that points to the moral self as a regulator of moral conduct, and they sought to elucidate the link between the self-importance of moral values and (im)moral behaviour. As with previous research, this study offered support for the role of the moral self in prosocial behaviour: prosocial behaviour was best predicted by one’s self-importance of moral values. Advancing the field, this research was conducted with a general adolescent population, as opposed to studies that used highly selected samples (e.g., clinically referred delinquent boys or moral exemplars). The existing literature linking moral
identity to positive outcomes such as prosocial and moral behaviour points to the importance of such a construct, and the need for a greater understanding of how it develops.

Challenges to the Study of Moral Identity

As has been the case within the study of identity formation, so too has the field of moral development been challenged to find valid and reliable ways to operationalize the construct of moral identity. However, a number of attempts have been made to devise or capture moral identity in empirical research. For example, some of these techniques have utilized moral values or traits. The approach used in the present investigation was originally developed by Arnold (1993, 2000) as a “Good-Self” Assessment and subsequently adopted by Gibbs’ (2010) measure of “Moral Self-Relevance.” Similarly, Aquino and Reed (2002) developed a measure of moral identity by identifying traits that people often consider to be characteristic of a moral person. For traits to then be used as identity-invoking stimuli in subsequent studies, they had to be traits that mapped primarily onto moral identity, and were mentioned by at least 30% of respondents (traits such as caring, fair, generous, and honest met criteria). Moral identity could then be gauged by assessing respondents’ self-importance of the stimulus traits. This measure was also able to assess the degree to which the traits are reflected in the respondent’s actions in the world (symbolization) and the degree to which moral traits are central to one’s self-concept (internalization).

Another technique that is beneficial in assessing adolescent moral identity is the narrative response technique. Reimer and Wade-Stein (2004) employed the narrative technique in their exploratory study investigating how moral identity is evident in the social understandings of adolescents. They looked at a matched sample of 15 care exemplars and 15 comparison adolescents from ethnically and socioeconomically diverse urban neighborhoods. Participants
were given a semi-structured interview based on a well-known study of adolescent moral identity by Hart and Fegley (1995), described above. Interview questions were designed to elicit representations of self and other using a narrative response technique. More specifically, the participants were asked to provide ‘free descriptions of self’ and their responses were coded for typical activities as altruistic or non-altruistic, personality traits, and goals. Reimer and Wade-Stein’s findings indicated that care exemplar adolescents integrated parent and peer representations into descriptions of their actual selves, whereas comparison adolescents did not. This integration illustrates the internalization of social influences on adolescents’ developing moral identity.

Furthermore, the work of McAdams (2009) provides additional validity for the use of narrative response techniques in the study of the construct of moral identity. McAdams (2009) discusses Erikson’s views of identity, being “a special arrangement of the self” (p. 18). As identity develops, fidelity, or commitment to a particular arrangement of selfhood must develop as well. Individuals look for the meaning in their lives across development, and begin to weave it into a story of ‘who I am, was, and will be’. This is said to be an internalized and evolving story of the self that begins being constructed in the early adult years. At this point, adolescents can gain greater perspective on their lives and can formulate stories that incorporate their past, present, and future, and may reflect on their self-importance of morality.

Taken together, the work of Aquino and Reed (2002), Reimer and Wade-Stein (2004), Hart and Fegely (1995) and McAdams (2009) provide convincing rationale for the use of trait and narrative based investigations of moral identity development and indicate that adolescents can provide great insight into their “self” through their explanatory responses. In the current investigation, participants were asked to discuss moral values, the importance of the values to
who they are, and give examples of when they acted in accordance with a value. As participants discussed their self-importance of moral values, it was beneficial to look at indicators of how their depictions reflect prosocial values, other-oriented thinking, references to close relations, as well as their degree of self-importance of values and principles.

Moral Identity and Social Justice Awareness

In extending the work on moral identity, the current investigation explored the relation of this construct to the context of social justice, as research has not yet explored this potential link. Moshman (2008) explains that ‘social justice’ differs from ‘justice’ in that the former includes an awareness of societal treatment of others from a justice perspective, this being distinct from how one views just treatment of others. Among the relevant literature, Killen and Smetana (2010) have reviewed existing research on how social environments and the diversity of children’s experiences contribute to their emerging awareness of social justice and experience of differential treatment. The experiences young people have while growing up have implications for their future attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (positive or negative) toward social justice. These authors also address research on how prejudice, bias and discrimination are reflected in inter-group relations, between genders and between cultures. This paper is relevant to the current research as it outlines a number of foundational theories about how differences in race/ethnicity, gender, and status impact social justice. To further the scientific understanding of these concepts, research into the relation between adolescents’ moral identity and their awareness of social justice issues is highly beneficial.

Additional considerations should be made pertaining to the environmental context of moral identity research and social justice. It is thought that adolescent choices about difficult
social actions and decisions can be influenced by social, cognitive, cultural and contextual factors. Feigenberg, Kinga, Barr, and Selman (2008) suggest that “adolescents who feel their social environment welcomes participation, and is open to being transformed, are more likely to get involved when they witness exclusion or other acts of injustice” (p. 178). In relation to moral behaviours, one’s perceived ability to effect change will influence the decision to act morally, which may vary according to social background. Feigenberg et al.’s study offers useful background on the contextual influences of race, socioeconomic status, and gender on moral processes. Linking this to the current investigation, comparisons should be made between adolescents from different cultural contexts. Although the comparison is not discussed here, the current research project was conducted in multiple schools – one an inner city school, with a more diverse student body and lower socioeconomic status, and the other a more suburban school, with less diversity, and higher socioeconomic status. The present investigation drew on a diverse sample of adolescents living in an inner city, metropolitan area, many being of minority groups and relative newcomers to Canada. This research project helps to advance the understanding of how moral identity and social justice concerns are realized in different environmental contexts.

Research (e.g., Killen & Smetana, 2010; Quintana, 1998) suggests that growing up in diverse environments may lead to positive or negative outcomes: exposure to numerous beliefs, values, and customs may encourage tolerance in adolescence; but in contrast, experience with dissimilar others is linked to increased instances of social injustice (i.e. stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination). Thus, it is essential to uncover the factors that promote positive attitudes towards the fair and just treatment of others. As moral identity has been linked to prosocial behaviour, it may also play a part in contributing to tolerance and deterring acts of social
injustice. Moreover, it may relate to the belief system, thoughts and perceptions of adolescents. The present investigation addressed the matter of social justice in terms of the developmental emergence of the awareness of social justice issues.

The association of moral identity and social justice awareness is also supported by the theory of Beliefs in a Just World (BJW), which refers to the perception that the world is orderly and just (Oppenheimer, 2006). Oppenheimer purported that just world beliefs can be thought of as “primitive beliefs that lose their importance across age as they become replaced by more sophisticated forms of reasoning enabling individuals to handle a world that is neither orderly nor just” (p. 665). These just world beliefs are also thought to relate to perceptions of inequality in society, and by extension, they may relate to recognition of social injustices. In Oppenheimer’s cross-sectional, developmental study spanning ages 12 to 22 years, he found that beliefs that the world is just begin to lose their importance around the age of 12. Personal beliefs in a just world (that the world is just ‘to me’) begin to lose importance around age 16 years. Oppenheimer concluded the following:

This finding suggests that secondary school is still perceived as an ordered and stable (i.e. just) environment by pupils, whereas the more self-focused (i.e., individualistic) aspect of higher education make adolescents more aware that order and stability (i.e., ‘justice’) are not inherent in society itself but are in part constituted by one’s own actions and experiences. (p. 666)

Thus, while beliefs in a just world may decrease, making individuals more able to see the social injustices in society, it is unclear whether or not this would be accomplished in the high school years and how it would relate to the development of moral identity and social justice awareness.
Social Desirability

An additional consideration in this research concerns the potential threat of social desirability in the investigation of adolescent moral identity and social justice awareness. Although measures of social desirability bias are typically used to provide support for measurement validity, it is a particular concern in this area of research. Furthermore, it has not always been addressed in moral development research. Social desirability bias (SDB) has been defined as “the inclination to respond in a way that will make the respondent look good” (Beretvas, Meyers, & Leite, 2002, p. 570). One challenge to measurement in research of this sort is the obvious opportunity for participants to provide the “right” answer. Adolescents may be concerned with self-presentation in an interview situation, and so a social desirability response bias needs to be taken into consideration (Krettenauer & Eichler, 2006). Including a measure of social desirability bias serves as a means to ascertain the discriminant validity of the measures used to explore the potential impact that the SDB may have on the research questions at hand (Beretvas, Meyers, & Leite, 2002; Keillor, Owens, & Pettijohn, 2001).

Rare instances of the use of measures of social desirability bias have been incorporated into previous research with adolescents in the areas of morality (Johnston & Krettenauer, 2011; Krettenauer & Eichler, 2006). Although not a focal point of Johnston and Krettenauer’s (2011) empirical work, described above, they included a measure of social desirability as a control variable. With the controls of age, gender, and social desirability in place, they found that “the score representing participants’ moral self remained significant in predicting self-reported prosocial behaviour, while none of the control variables contributed significantly to the model” (p. 237). In this case, the social desirability bias was not found to be at play. Krettenauer and Eichler (2006) also addressed the SDB as they investigated adolescents’ self-attributed moral
emotions following a moral transgression. The SDB was shown to influence the relation between the intensity of adolescents’ moral emotional attributions and their confidence in their moral judgments, as well as their self-attributed moral emotions following transgressions. This is to say that the tendency to provide socially desirable responses was related to adolescents’ reporting of their emotions and opinions. In the present investigation, the concern existed that participants may have wanted to portray their moral selves and awareness of social justice issues in a way that society would find appropriate, rather than express what is true for them.

Summary

Moral identity has surfaced as a new frontier of moral development research to better understand how individuals develop a commitment to moral ideals and act in accord with them. Individuals’ moral values, internalization of these standards, and integration into their self-concepts may have far reaching implications in relation to their reasoning, judgments, and behaviours. Moral identity gradually develops, with foundations forming in childhood, and becoming more present in adolescence. Devising measurement techniques that accurately and holistically capture the construct is challenging, yet trait based and narrative techniques have been utilized successfully. The moral identity construct holds promise to better understand social attitudes and behaviour. Some previous research has investigated its relation to conduct, but not the beliefs and attitudes that may influence those behaviours. Thus, in advancing the field, research into the relation between moral identity and issues of social justice is beneficial. This is especially pertinent when addressing the diverse considerations in a multicultural society. It is essential to understand the factors that contribute to adolescents’ development of an
appreciation for human rights and equality and how they become morally motivated, and moral identity may serve as an essential facet of this equation.

Research Goals and Associated Questions

The primary objective of the present study was to explore moral identity development in mid-to-late adolescence and its potential relation to social justice awareness, also considering the possible effects of any social desirability bias. More specifically, the study addressed the following two goals and associated questions:

Goal 1: Moral identity development

(a) What values do adolescents identify as “most important” or core to the self, and to what extent do they differ in their selection and expression of the importance of moral (versus non-moral) values to the self?

(b) Are there grade or gender differences in these aspects of adolescents’ moral identity?

Goal 2: Moral identity and social justice awareness

(a) To what extent are adolescents aware of issues of social justice, and does their awareness differ by grade or gender?

(b) Does adolescents’ moral identity relate to their overall awareness of social justice issues and their awareness of specific areas of social justice, i.e. racism, sexism, and classism?
METHOD

Participants

The sample of participants included 58 adolescents in Grades 9 and 12 from two moderately sized, inner city high schools. Both schools were centrally located in Toronto, Canada, a large metropolitan city in the Canadian Southeast. Students of these two schools had similar family demographics and neighborhood environments. Among Grade 9 participants, there were 14 males and 11 females (n = 25), and the Grade 12 participants consisted of 19 males and 14 females (n = 33). Grade 9 participants had a mean age of 14.40 years (SD = 0.58), while Grade 12 participants had a mean age of 18.06 (SD = 1.20). Participants self-identified as belonging to a variety of racial/ethnic groups including, South Asian (22%), White (21%), Southeast Asian (19%), Black (12%), Eastern Asian (12%), Hispanic/Latin-American (4%), and Middle Eastern (4%). A significant portion of the sample (48%) had been born in a country other than Canada. Among adolescents whose families had immigrated, 75% (n = 21) had lived in Canada for less than half of their lives, and 25% (n = 7) had spent over half their lives living in Canada. All participants reported that they were fluent in English. Participants’ diverse cultural backgrounds reflected the two schools’ student populations. As of 2008, 67% and 54% of students at these respective schools spoke a primary language other than English at home. Students were predominantly from lower economic and middle class families, as reflected in published school board demographics.

Following ethical approval by the University of Toronto and the central school board, participants were recruited through schools that agreed to partake in the study as part of a larger research project. Prior to participation, adolescents who were 18 years of age provided informed consent, while parental consent was obtained for youth under the age of 18 years. Grade 12
students were compensated for their time with community service hours towards their graduation requirements.

Design

To assess adolescents’ moral identity development and awareness of issues of social justice, a mixed-methods design was used. Research conducted using a mixed methods approach typically incorporates data collected and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively (Creswell, 2009; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). This approach has been gaining favor among social science researchers, as it makes it possible to access a construct from multiple angles (Creswell, 2009).

In the present investigation the combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a more extensive assessment of adolescent moral identity development and awareness of social justice. Traditional qualitative research techniques including some aspects of grounded theory were used to inform the qualitative data collection and analysis processes (Charmaz, 2006; Cresswell, 1994; Cresswell & Clark, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved systematically gathering and analyzing data through the research process, while developing and revising meaningful categories of analysis. This approach works from the “bottom” up, or as Cresswell and Clark explain, “using the participants’ views to build broader themes and generate a theory interconnecting the themes” (2007, p. 23). Through an iterative process, qualitative data are sampled, categorized, and compared as theory is refined, and therefore ‘grounded’ within the data (Cresswell, 1994; Cresswell & Clark, 2007). Moreover, this research approach reflects the constructivist approach, through which broad patterns and theory are drawn from individual perspectives collected with qualitative measures (Cresswell & Clark, 2007).
Procedure

Data were collected in the spring of 2011 as part of a larger study on adolescent social awareness and understanding in the context of social justice, and collection occurred in two phases. In the first phase, participants completed a package of paper-and-pencil measures, consisting of a demographic questionnaire, a measure of social justice awareness, and a series of standardized assessments not considered in this thesis. Students completed the measures individually, in their classroom setting. This phase of data collection lasted approximately 45 minutes.

The second phase consisted of a one-on-one, semi-structured interview, administered in a quiet location within the participants’ schools. Interviews were conducted by trained graduate students and were scheduled in regular intervals during school hours over a one-month period. Interviewer and participant gender were matched. Before the interview began, adolescents were told that there would be a number of topics covered, through which the researchers sought to learn their opinions and hear their ideas. Instructions informed students that there were no right or wrong answers to any of the questions they would be asked, and they were reminded that they could refrain from replying to any question. Furthermore, participants were assured that their responses were coded anonymously, and that their participation would remain confidential. The moral identity assessment and a number of other measures were then administered. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length. Upon completion, adolescents were debriefed about the nature of the study and thanked for their participation. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim for subsequent coding and analysis.
Measures

Moral Identity

A “Self-in-Relationships” task was designed to assess adolescents’ personal identification with moral and non-moral qualities or values and their understanding of the relative importance these qualities hold for them as individuals. This measure was originally developed by Arnold (1993, 2000) as a “Good-Self” Assessment and also adapted by Gibbs (2010) as a measure of “Moral Self-Relevance.” Participants were given a pictorial diagram of four concentric circles representing varying degrees of importance to the self. Along with this, they were provided an envelope containing 10 labels of personal qualities with equal number of moral (e.g., Honest, Independent, Kind or Caring) and non-moral (e.g., Independent, Creative, Hard Working) qualities. They were instructed to identify and place their “Most Important” or central quality in the innermost circle of the diagram and then to allocate the remaining 9 qualities in equal number in the 3 outer circles (i.e., “Very Important,” “Less Important,” and “Least Important” circles).

They were next asked to respond to interview questions and explain the reasoning behind their arrangement of the values, with responses coded qualitatively for maturity of moral identity. Particular emphasis was placed on explaining the self-importance or meaning of the “Most Important” quality. Students were asked why that particular value was “Most Important,” and encouraged to discuss what it means to them to hold that value (“Why is being ___ so important to you?”). Prompts were used to encourage deeper thought into participants’ commitment to actually being this kind of person (“What difference would it make if you weren’t _______?”). As well, participants were prompted to reflect on the importance and relevance of the value to daily life (“Can you think of an example of your being _______ – a time in the recent past when your behaviour illustrated how important being _______ is to...
you?”). As moral values were of particular interest, all students were asked to comment on the self-importance of one additional moral value: Respectful to Others, or Fair to Others if Respectful was already discussed as the “Most Important” value. Prompting ensued once again to ascertain their personal meaning of the value. The full interview protocol for this measure can be found in Appendix A.

**Coding of Moral Identity Assessment**

A total of three indicators or indices of moral identity development were defined. The first index focused on adolescents’ selection of their core, “Most Important” value, with particular attention to whether participants selected a moral or non-moral value as most central to the self (i.e., score of 1 for a moral value, score of 0 for a non-moral value).

For a second index, points were awarded to each of the 5 moral values on a scale of 1 to 4 based on their placement position in the diagram to form an overall moral identity score. A moral value in the centre circle received 4 points, values in the second innermost circle a 3, values in the third ring received a 2, and values in the outermost a 1. These scores were then summed to create a ‘Sum of Moral Value Placement’ score. The maximum possible score was 15 (when moral values were all clustered around the centre) with a minimum of 7 (when all moral values were in the outer two circles).

A third index involved coding of the qualitative data. In order to gain a deeper, more holistic impression of adolescents’ moral identity development, participants were asked a number of follow up questions to further discuss the self-importance of the values. In this thesis, qualitative data coding was only conducted for responses of adolescents who selected a moral value in the centre, “Most Important,” position. A 5-point scale was developed using the qualitative analytic techniques described above, which reflects varying degrees of moral identity
maturity. Three primary levels emerged from the data and were coded as Levels 1 (lowest), 3 (middle), and 5 (highest), with 2 or 4 awarded when responses were in between levels. Detailed explanations for the coding levels will follow in the Results section.

Social Justice Awareness

The measure of social justice awareness employed presently was developed for the purposes of this research project. This measure, which is called “My Beliefs about the Social World” was designed to assess adolescents’ general awareness of three areas of social justice within contemporary society – racism, sexism, and classism. “My Beliefs about the Social World” is an 18-item measure, with 5 items for each of racism, sexism, and classism, as well as 3 ‘dummy’ items intended to provide indication of the seriousness with which participants complete the task (e.g., “In our society, rich people have more money than poor people”). Examples of items for each area of social justice include: Racism—“In our society, getting ahead in life depends very little on the colour of your skin”; Sexism—“In our society, women are paid less than men for the same work”; and Classism—“In our society, rich people are usually treated more politely than poor people”. Instructions ask participants to rate how strongly they agree or disagree with a given statement on a 6-point Likert scale (1=Disagree strongly to 6=Agree strongly). For each participant, points awarded to each item were summed to create a total score as well as sub-scores for each social justice area, with potential ranges of 15-90 and 5-30, respectively. This measure typically took students about 15 minutes to complete. This social justice awareness measure can be found in Appendix B.

Social Desirability

In order to examine a potential social desirability bias in adolescents’ responses to the moral identity and social justice awareness measures, the Reynolds Short Form of the Marlowe-
Crowne Social Desirability Scale was used (Reynolds, 1982). This measure consists of 12 true or false items (e.g., “I sometimes feel resentful when I don’t get my way”; “Sometimes I say things just to impress my friends”). The instructions provided to students explain that they are being provided with a number of statements concerning personal attitudes and characteristics. They were told to read each item carefully and decide whether the statement was “true” or “false” as it relates to them personally. Two of these items were adopted from the Crandell Social Desirability Test for Children. For each participant, one point was awarded for each item answered in a socially desirable way, resulting in a possible range of scores from 0 to 12 points. This measure took about 5 minutes on average to administer. This measure was entitled “Personal Reaction Inventory” for distribution to participants, and it can be seen in Appendix C.

Analysis

Qualitative

As discussed earlier and described above, the coding scheme for the analysis of interview data was devised using established qualitative techniques (e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2009). With this inductive analytic approach, qualitative data were repeatedly analyzed to comprehensively extract meaning. Throughout the analytic process, participants’ responses were contrasted within and between interviews in order to draw out similarities and divergences (Charmaz, 2006).

Coding incorporated both an ‘open’ and ‘focused’ approach and was conducted independently by two researchers. Data were first coded in an ‘open’ way in order to extract and develop a scoring scheme. Reviewing a subset of approximately a dozen, randomly selected interviews, raters identified themes pertaining to adolescents’ self-importance of moral values
and indications of moral identity development. After initial coding, the researchers met to review, compare, and confirm recurrent themes and categories emerging from the data.

The resulting framework was then used to perform ‘focused’ coding, allowing for the scheme to be developed further using a greater portion of the data. At this stage, categories of moral identity development were increasingly refined and differentiated. Researchers collaborated and developed categories to be used in coding the remaining data. Scoring was reviewed regularly to compare coding for each interview and to reconcile any discrepancies. The coding scheme also evolved through the course of analysis, and prior scores were reevaluated through this recursive process. This coding strategy was used to code adolescents’ explanations of the importance or self-relevance of their selected moral values, independently and blind to participants’ grade and sex.

Inter-rater reliability was calculated using a subset of approximately 30% (12 interviews) of the total dataset ($n = 39$). Two raters had exact agreement across the five levels in 75% of cases and differed by one level in the remaining 25% of cases. The estimated Cohen’s Kappa coefficient was .67.

**Quantitative**

Quantitative analyses were conducted using traditional descriptive statistics, univariate and correlational analyses, and ANOVA. These techniques were employed to explore possible grade and gender differences, and to examine the potential relation of moral identity development to adolescents’ awareness of social justice, and the possible effect of social desirability in this research.
RESULTS

Goal 1: Moral Identity Development

The first objective of this study was to explore variability in adolescents’ moral identity. Employing a variation of a moral identity task that has been used in the past, the study explored ways to distinguish between adolescents with regards to their moral identity development and its relation to grade and gender. As explained earlier, students were asked to position 10 values (5 moral; 5 non-moral) in accordance with the importance of the value to the self, with one value as most central, and the remainder comparatively less so, and then were asked to discuss the importance of this value to them. Three indices were used to explore moral identity in adolescence and the differences across grade and gender.

Index 1: Adolescents’ “Most Important” Value Selection

(a) The first question focused on adolescents’ value selections, looking in particular at the value they selected as their “Most Important” or core quality. Of key interest was the comparison of moral versus non-moral values placed in this most central position. That is, what values do adolescents identify most frequently as “Most Important” or core to the self, and to what extent do they identify with moral versus non-moral values?

Figure 1 depicts the proportion of adolescents who chose each of the 10 values, with the five moral values listed first. The value most frequently chosen across participants was Honest, a moral value, which was selected by 36.2% of participants. The second most frequent was also a moral value, Respectful of Others, chosen by 19% of participants. The third most frequently chosen was the non-moral value of Independent (10.3% of students). Two values were not chosen at all, one moral, one non – Generous and Creative, respectfully. Finally, relatively few
adolescents chose the remaining 5 values, 2 of which were moral (Fair to Others and Kind and Caring), and 3 of which non-moral (Hard-Working, Sociable, and Intellectual).

![Graph showing value selection among adolescents](image)

*Figure 1. Adolescents’ “Most Important” value selection (n = 58)*

When a comparison was made between adolescents’ selection of any one of the five moral values as opposed to a non-moral value as “Most Important” to the self, a substantial majority (70.7% of all participants) selected a moral value as core or “Most Important”, as shown in Figure 2.
(b) Are there grade or gender differences in adolescents’ selection of a moral or non-moral value as core or “Most Important” to the self?

A Chi Square analysis indicated that adolescents’ selection of a moral (versus non-moral) value as “Most Important” did not differ based on their grade, Pearson $\chi^2 (1, N = 58) = 0.64$, $p = .439$, Cramer’s $V = .439$, with 77% of Grade 9 students and 68% of Grade 12 students choosing a moral value as “Most Important”. Similarly, there was no significant gender difference in the proportion of students choosing a moral vs. non-moral value as “Most Important”, Pearson $\chi^2 (1, N = 58) = 1.84$, $p = .175$, Cramer’s $V = .175$, with 64% of male students and 80% of female students choosing a moral value as “Most Important”.

Index 2: Cumulative Moral Value Placements

(a) In contrast to the previous analyses focusing on adolescents’ selection of a single, “Most Important” value as central to the self, a second index of moral identity assumed a more holistic approach. In the analyses to follow, comparisons were made based on scores that account
cumulatively for adolescents’ placement of all five moral values with regards to their proximity to the centre of the diagram. It addressed the question, to what extent do adolescents vary in their placements of the five moral values in terms of centrality to the self?

As described previously, points were awarded to each moral value based on its proximity to the centre and then summed for each participant to form a Cumulative Moral Value Placement score (Placement Score), which ranged from a possible low of 7 to a maximum of 15. As seen in Figure 3, this distribution is negatively skewed, with nearly one third of the overall sample having the highest concentration of moral values in the central area (i.e., inner circles) of the self-diagram (M = 12.67, SD 2.20). The highest proportion of participants had the maximum Placement Score of 15, which is to say that all 5 of the moral values were placed as close to the centre as possible.

![Cumulative Moral Value Placement scores across all adolescents (n = 58)](image)

Figure 3. Cumulative Moral Value Placement scores across all adolescents (n = 58)

(b) Are there grade or gender differences in adolescents’ cumulative scores for their placements of all of the moral values?
To address this question, a two-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the variability in adolescents’ Moral Value Placement Scores as a function of grade and gender. There were no significant main effects for Grade, \( F(1, 54) = 1.91, p = .172 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .034 \), or for Gender, \( F(1, 54) = 3.07, p = .085 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .054 \), nor was there a significant grade by gender interaction, \( F(1, 54) = 0.16, p = .70 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .003 \). However, the results do suggest there is a trend approaching a difference in Gender \( (p = .085) \), with females \( (M = 13.30) \) tending to have higher Moral Value Placement Scores than males \( (M = 12.29) \).

**Index 3: Qualitative analysis of adolescents’ expression of importance of moral values**

(a) A more refined qualitative analysis was conducted to further distinguish between adolescents on the basis of their moral identity development. This provided the opportunity to move beyond positioning of values on the self-diagram, and delve deeper into adolescents’ understandings of their moral selves. The interview questions called for introspection, and participants’ articulation of these reflections offered a rich set of data. For this analysis, a subset of the participants \( (n = 39) \) was used, including only those who selected a moral value as their “Most Important” or core value. Of this subset, 10 adolescents were Grade 9 males, 9 of them were Grade 9 females, 11 were Grade 12 males, and 9 were Grade 12 females. When asked to elaborate on the self-importance of their “Most Important” value, what explanations and justifications do adolescents provide?

Results of this analysis revealed three main levels of explanations that emerged within adolescents’ responses, with two intermediate levels, resulting in a 5-point scale. These levels are described below and also further summarized in Table 1.

**Level 1.** At the lowest level, the adolescents’ responses were centred on a self-focused, opportunistic or pragmatic basis for value selection, rather than any personal meaning or internal
importance. Personal gain and advancement served as motivators for students at this level, as seen by students who expressed that their moral value of choice should be upheld because “people will like you better,” or “in the long run it will get you farther.” Within Level 1 responses it was common for references to be made to one’s ‘image’ and the desire to preserve one’s image (i.e. “[if you were not respectful] people would talk bad things about you”). Moreover, preserving personal relationships was also a driving factor, and this was evident in comments focusing on family or friends and an interest in maintaining friendships and avoiding enemies. At no point did students at this low level refer to their sense of self or ‘who they are as a person’ in describing the values’ meaning to them. Furthermore, these students did not refer to moral reasons for upholding a value, nor did they express any personal meaning or significance of the value.

An example of an adolescent whose explanations were at a Level 1 was Participant 20. This participant was a Grade 9 male who selected “Respectful of Others” as his central, “Most Important” value. Participant 20 put forth that being respectful is important for social gain and preservation, such that not being respectful will end friendships and create enemies. Moreover, “people will talk bad things about you,” and revealed a concern for his self-image. Participant 20 also spoke about the personal gain achieved by being respectful, providing the example that being respectful of a teacher will lead her to give you more chances. At no point in his response did he reveal any personal meaning of the value to his sense of self, nor did he place any personal weight on it, nor express any internally drawn motivation to uphold it.

**Level 3.** Responses at the mid-level reflected self-importance of the value driven by external motivation, and the values at this level were also being held for reasons other than ‘personal significance’ of the value. Students at this mid-level upheld values “because it’s right,”
and their source of motivation often stemmed from teachings of and lessons learned from their parents, religion, or teachers. As such, students at this level did provide some good rationale for supporting a moral value, but they did not make the connection to the self or the kind of person they want to be. Another common element central to Level 3 responses was reciprocity, where adolescents would argue for acting in accord with a moral value because that is how they would like others to treat them. Level 3 responses differed from Level 1 in that they began to reveal a connection between the value and the self, but a key differentiator between this and a higher score was that Level 3 responses lacked evidence of strong personal meaning or self-importance.

Participant 16 provided a response at this mid-level. This participant was also a Grade 9 male, and he chose “Honesty” as his “Most Important” value. Conceptually, Participant 16 recognized that “lying is not good” and upholding a value such as this one is a matter of right and wrong. When encouraged to elaborate on this, he expressed that being untruthful would be a bad thing because then “no one knows the real you.” By referring to the real you, Participant 16 made a connection to the internal nature of such a value, and a desire to project an authentic version of himself. However, he did not move beyond this to articulate any strong, personal investment in the value. As well, his response did have some element of reciprocity, explaining that one should give respect in order to receive it in return. Finally, Participant 16 also conveyed his external motivation by expressing that “this is the way that I was brought up.” This participant showed more indicators of a personal self-relevance, but his response lacked a personal investment in the moral value.

Level 5. Responses at the highest level demonstrated significant evidence for moral identity development. Setting these responses above the others was that adolescents’ responses included references to personal meaning and internal importance of the moral value (e.g., “It
bothers me on the inside”). Moreover, these responses indicated that adolescents’ sources of
motivation were internally drawn, for example, the adolescents who expressed that it is
important to act morally because it is “who I am.” Adolescents’ motivation to act in accord with
moral values was also drawn from a desire to maintain consistency with one’s self-image or
values (e.g., “I’d be less of a person than I am”). Level 5 responses also showed evidence of a
broader appreciation of the moral value on a more societal or global scale, beyond concern for
immediate relations (e.g., “I believe all of us are all equal and we should be treated equally”).
Thus students at this level of moral identity development were able to express a personal
relevance of moral values, internal motivation for upholding them, and developed understanding
of the value.

A case that is representative of a Level 5 response was Participant 8, a Grade 9 female.
Participant 8 selected “Respectful of Others” as her core, “Most Important” value. She began
her explanation for selecting this value by describing her interpretation of being respectful, and
how she believed that being respectful is essential because it involves upholding other important
values (such as honesty, fair, kind, etc). Moving beyond that, Participant 8 pointed out that when
someone acts respectfully, this is an indicator that he or she is “a good person on the inside.”
Further to this, she expressed her personal self-importance of the value by saying that she would
be “less of a person than [she] is” if she were not respectful. Participant 8 spoke with conviction
in describing her personal significance of the value and demonstrated her personal investment in
upholding it. Incorporated in this personal significance was also the notion of a need for global
equality, as “all of us are equal and should be treated equally.” This example of a high level of
moral identity development showcased the adolescent’s personal meaning for the value, internal
connection to it, and motivation to uphold the value for its importance to the self.
Table 1

**Qualitative Analysis of Adolescents’ Responses to Moral Identity Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>- Self-focused, opportunistic or pragmatic motivation</td>
<td>- “People will like you better”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Preserving relationships</td>
<td>- “It’s better if you [have] this quality [Honest], you can make friends better”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>- Motivational source extrinsic to the self</td>
<td>- “It’s what my parents taught me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Emphasis or deferral to reciprocity</td>
<td>- “When you treat someone with respect, they have to treat you with respect back too”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>- Self-relevance</td>
<td>- “I’d be less of a person than I am”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Internal source of motivation</td>
<td>- What it means to be honest: “It means you have a lot of self … like you really believe in yourself, and you know that you have the power to tell the truth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Reference to societal and global importance</td>
<td>- “You need to respect others and in the society there’s a lot of people who don’t respect each other and I think if we respect each other, then we can lead to a better life… just be respectful and have respect for others, even though we don’t know them”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 shows the distribution of scores on the 5-point scale. The distribution had a slightly greater proportion of students with scores at the lower end (1- or 2-points) as compared to the higher end (4- or 5-points) \( (M = 2.92, SD = 1.31) \). It can also be seen that the peak of scores was at the 2- and 3-point marks, and these low-mid level scores were the most common.
(b) Are there grade or gender differences in adolescents’ articulation of the self-importance of their moral values in the qualitative responses they provided?

A two-way analysis of variance examining the effect of grade and gender on adolescents’ Qualitative Interview Scores revealed no significant main effects for Grade, $F(1, 35) = 2.56, p = .122$, partial $\eta^2 = .067$, or for Gender, $F(1, 35) = 1.41, p = .243$, partial $\eta^2 = .039$, and no significant grade by gender interaction, $F(1, 54) = 1.72, p = .198$, partial $\eta^2 = .047$. However, the gender effect approached significance, with females scoring somewhat higher on their Qualitative Interview Scores than males.

Goal 2: Moral Identity and Social Justice Awareness

A second research goal for the current study was to investigate the possible link between adolescents’ moral identity development and their awareness of problems of social justice,
Morality defined for this study as racism, sexism, and classism. Looking first at the Social Justice Awareness Scale scores, good variability was shown across the sample with scores ranging from 24 to 76 (possible range of 15 to 90), and a mean of 54.90 ($SD = 11.68$). Participants’ mean scores reflected the range of possible scores on this measure (see Figure 5). The descriptive statistics for the overall social justice measure as well as the three subscales of racism, sexism, and classism (possible range of scores being 5 to 30 points) can be seen in Table 2, and a corresponding histogram can be seen in Figure 5.

### Table 2

**Descriptive Statistics for Social Justice Awareness Scores and Subscales** ($n = 58$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall Social Justice</th>
<th>Racism Score</th>
<th>Sexism Score</th>
<th>Classism Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>54.90</td>
<td>18.59</td>
<td>16.95</td>
<td>19.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Std. Deviation</strong></td>
<td>11.68</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minimum</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maximum</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are there grade or gender differences in adolescents’ social justice awareness?

A two-way analysis of variance indicated a significant main effect for Grade, $F(1, 58) = 4.37, p = .041$, partial $\eta^2 = .070$, with Grade 12 participants showing higher social justice awareness scores than Grade 9 students. No significant main effect was found for Gender, $F(1, 58) = .26, p = .613$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$ and there was no interaction between Grade and Gender, $F(1, 58) = 1.10, p = .301$, partial $\eta^2 = .018$.

No significant relation was found between adolescents’ social justice awareness and their social desirability scores, $r(56) = .05, p = .737$.

Does adolescents’ self-importance of moral values relate to their awareness of the social justice issues of racism, sexism, and classism?

In order to answer this question, correlational analyses were conducted with each of the three indices of moral identity (i.e. the single “Most Important” value, cumulative moral value

*Figure 5. Frequency distribution of overall Social Justice Awareness scores ($n = 58$)*
placement, and qualitative interview responses) to test for associations with awareness of social justice scores. Surprisingly, none of these analyses revealed a significant association: moral vs. non-moral values in the “Most Important” position, \( r(56) = -0.084, p = 0.529 \); cumulative moral value placement score, \( r(56) = -0.074, p = 0.583 \); expressions of importance of moral values, \( r(37) = -0.111, p = 0.501 \). To add further specificity, correlational analyses were also run to investigate the association of these three social justice subscales (racism, sexism, and classism) with each of the indices of moral identity development. As shown in Table 3, all were non-significant.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Justice Awareness</th>
<th>Moral as “Most Important”</th>
<th>Moral Placement Score</th>
<th>Qualitative Interview Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racism Score</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism Score</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classism Score</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Social Justice Awareness</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

Exploration of Moral Identity Development

The first objective of the present investigation was to explore moral identity development in mid-to-late adolescence. Moral identity was assessed using three indices, two of which were quantitative and one qualitative. With the objective of eliciting adolescents’ importance of moral values to the self, each of these indices has a degree of face validity. Looking at the quantitative measure, where adolescents were to select values to reflect their relevance or importance to the self, there is good face validity in the task’s low-level of demand. Adolescents were encouraged not to over think their decisions and to follow their instincts, and with this, the intent was to tap into an adolescent’s view of his or her “self”. Thus, whether the level of focus was the single “Most Important” value, or the placement of all the moral values, this index was able to assess the centrality of moral values to the self.

The results of the quantitative moral identity task revealed adolescents’ centrality of moral values. As seen in the work of Acquino and Reed (2002), moral identity can be gauged by assessing respondents’ self-importance of stimulus traits. On the moral identity index where a comparison was made between adolescents’ selection of any one of the five moral values as opposed to a non-moral value as “Most Important” to the self, a substantial majority selected a moral value as core or “Most Important.” Moreover, when the positioning of all five of the moral values was looked at (using the Moral Value Placement index), nearly one third of the overall sample had the maximum possible Placement Score. These two indices suggest that moral values are held as significant ones to adolescents at the beginning and the end of the high school years. Moreover, the moral values (e.g., Honest and Respectful of Others) took precedence over non-moral values (e.g., Independent and Hard-Working). Thus through the
quantitative measures with the present sample, adolescents could be said to provide some evidence of moral identity development.

The third index drew from adolescents’ qualitative responses, and face validity could also be seen here, possibly to a greater extent than was seen through the quantitative measures. The third index delved deeper into students’ understandings of their moral selves by requiring them to provide verbal, explanatory responses to probing questions about their selection of a moral value as “Most Important”. As the literature indicated, adolescents are able to provide a great deal of insight into their “self” through their explanatory responses, (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Reimer & Wade-Stein, 2004).

Calling on students to provide verbal explanations for their self-importance of moral values provided them with the opportunity for and challenge of articulating facets of the “self.” A number of indicators of moral identity development were seen, including expressions of one’s personal significance of prosocial values, internal motivation, and other-oriented thinking. Consistent with the work of Hart and Fegley (1995) and Reimer & Wade-Stein (2004), the themes adolescents recounted in their verbal responses were useful to ascertain their moral identity development. The third index drew from the rich body of qualitative data. This mixed methods design allowed for a more fine-tuned approach to moral identity investigation, and valuable information was extracted regardless of how moral identity was targeted.

An objective of the present research was to explore the developmental nature of moral identity through comparisons of students in Grade 9 and 12. Research has indicated that moral identity formation is a developmental process with young adulthood being a key period of emergence (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Adolescence has been pointed to as a significant period for moral identity development, as it is at this time when moral motivation may become more
internally driven, and a mature identity may become centred on moral concerns (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Turiel, 2006). As such, it was interesting to see if there were differences between adolescents in Grade 9 compared to those in Grade 12. However, no such differences emerged in the present study.

One possibility as to why grade differences were not found is that this three-year window may be too narrow to detect any significant developmental shift. In order to investigate this possibility further, future research could use an expanded age range to include younger, elementary school aged children, and/or older, university aged participants. Another possibility is that a change does exist within the high school years, but that it is too small to detect, or the measures employed were not sensitive enough to detect them. Using a larger sample in future research would add power to increase the likelihood of detecting a less pronounced effect, and measures capturing other aspects of moral identity may also be beneficial. It is also important to recognize the limitations of a cross-sectional design, such that the comparisons are across individuals rather than within, thus limiting the ability to draw conclusions regarding change over time. A longitudinal design would be best to gain a more accurate sense of change across development. Although it may have been possible to see evidence in the present study of the developmental process of moral identity across adolescence, consistency was detected, rather than difference.

Along with differences in grade, gender differences were another area of moral identity development under investigation. The literature to date has revealed mixed evidence for gender differences in this domain. Some research has found no relationship between gender and internalization of moral values (Aquino & Reed, 2002). However, in cases where significant gender differences were detected, they revealed higher levels of moral identity development for
females as compared to males (Hart, Atkins, Ford, 1999; Kochanska, 2002). Consistent with the literature, no significant gender differences were detected in the present study; however, the trend here too was for females to score higher than males. This finding held irrespective of the index of moral identity used. Similar to the case of comparisons based on grade, moral identity appears to be more consistent across genders rather than different. Nonetheless, the trend for females to outperform males, as seen here and in the literature, does indicate that further research using different measures, a wider age span, or larger sample may help clarify this picture. Thus, the variability in moral identity development could not be accounted for using grade or gender, but calls for future research to further explore this construct.

*Moral Identity and Social Justice Awareness*

The second objective of the present investigation was to expand on the moral identity construct by exploring its possible link to the social justice domain, as moral identity has the potential to be an influential force in promoting social justice. Previous literature has revealed relations between measures of moral identity with those of moral emotions, actions, and behaviour (Bergman, 2002; Stets & Carter) and there was reason to expect that a relation may also exist between moral identity and social justice awareness (Killen & Smetana, 2010). Specifically, it was plausible to expect that those adolescents who evidenced higher levels of moral identity development would also be more likely to show greater awareness of social justice issues (racism, sexism, and classism). However, no significant relations were found in the present investigation.

In interpreting this finding, one factor to consider is the social justice measure used in the present investigation. The social justice awareness measure is a newly developed tool, and although it has shown solid indices of validity and reliability, it has not been examined beyond
this project. More specifically, there is good variability within the measure, and it appears to be
tapping into social justice awareness, but the possibility does remain that it is not assessing what
it was expected to be assessing. It is also pertinent to address the aspect of social justice
measured. Perhaps there may in fact be no relation in this period of adolescence between moral
identity and awareness of social justice issues. However, a different aspect of social justice that
may warrant investigation is adolescents’ judgments or evaluations of these characteristics of
society. The measure used in this study only looked at awareness, but it is possible that a
relation to moral identity may be found when an evaluative component is included. That is to
say, two adolescents may both recognize that social justice issues exist, but they may differ in the
extent to which they deem this to be problematic. The field would benefit from future research
into different areas of the social justice domain, as moral identity may be playing a significant
role in adolescents’ perspectives about, and behaviours towards, the world around them.

The present social justice findings can be related to the belief in the just world (BJW)
theory. Oppenheimer’s (2006) work on the development of BJW across adolescence and early
adulthood found that just world beliefs begin to decrease in the adolescent years, but that it is in
the years following that period when individuals begin to recognize that the world is not as
inherently stable and just as they once thought. It was hoped that the present investigation would
help shed light on this developmental process during the Grade 9 to 12 years. Across the sample,
social justice awareness scores had a relatively normal distribution, with a slight skew towards
the socially aware end of the scale, and no significant differences were found across grades.
Thus, it might be said that adolescents may hold a moderate level of just world beliefs, but that
they are also able to recognize some degree of social injustice. This may be in keeping with
Oppenheimer’s work, as the fading out of just world beliefs only begins in the high school years.
Looking at the demographic characteristics of the sample, the majority belonged to “minority groups”; thus it is possible to think that their life experiences may have disposed them to be more aware or susceptible to seeing the injustices around them. This may serve to neutralize the changes across the high school period. As elaborated in the limitations section to follow, future research would benefit from looking at a sample with a broader range of social backgrounds.

Social Desirability

Adding to the field of moral identity and social justice research, the present investigation included a measure of social desirability bias. Social desirability bias measures are used to detect the tendency for a respondent to provide what they would consider to be the “correct” or “socially approved” answer (Beretvas, Meyers, & Leite, 2002). The distribution of social desirability scores of this sample approximated the normal curve, providing good variability from which to detect effects. No significant gender or grade differences were found, but there was a trend for females’ scores to be higher than those of males, similar to the findings above for moral identity development.

By correlating adolescents’ social desirability scores with their moral identity and social justice scores, the possible influence of a bias in adolescents’ responses could be examined. None the indices of moral identity correlated significantly with the social desirability measure, nor did the social justice awareness scale. The lack of a correlation here provides evidence for discriminant validity. This indicates that moral identity scores were not confounded by adolescents’ desire to respond in a “socially desirable” way, and provides greater confidence in the authenticity and validity of adolescents’ responses. Moreover, given that newly developed and adopted measures were used in this project, the non-significant correlations with the SDB lends some credence to the claim that they measure what they purport to be measuring.
Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations to the present study and room for development with future research. Looking first at the number of participants sampled, one concern is that the sample size dropped from 58 to 39 participants for all measures incorporating a qualitative element. This was necessitated by the task demands of the interview, wherein moral identity development could only be adequately evaluated for interviews that focused on a moral value ranked in the “Most Important” position. The smaller sample size begs the question of a loss of power. As such, it is possible that an effect may exist, but due to the reduced sample size, the ability to detect significant effects was diminished. Future research with a larger sample may help clarify this matter.

Concerns also arise from the specificity of the inner city sample used, particularly the influence of the demographic profile of participants on findings and the resulting limits to generalizability. Participants were recruited from two ethnically and racially diverse, inner city schools within a large metropolitan city, of which families were predominantly of lower- to middle-class background. Perhaps the experiences and circumstances (i.e., facing and/or overcoming adversity) lived or observed by these students has influenced them in a way so as to develop their moral identities to a greater extent and to become more aware of social justice issues at an earlier age. Thus, for this particular sample, it is possible that adolescent moral identity and social justice awareness levels were more consistent across grade and gender because of the common influence of contextual factors. It would be useful to compare these adolescents with students of different backgrounds to better understand possible contextual influences, and to be able to extend results more broadly.
Moreover, the element of ethnic diversity, in particular, also may influence findings and generalizability. A substantial majority of participants were from ethnic minority families. Although this diversity is characteristic of modern Canadian cities, the research would have benefited from incorporating a larger proportion of ethnic majority (i.e. White) adolescents. It is also noteworthy that about 30% of participants declared that they had been living in Canada for less than half of their lives, thus these findings may not be representative of Canadian society at large. There is also a potential influence of these factors on the assessment of moral identity development. That is, with recently immigrated families, the influence of the culture of origin may be strong, and with some cultures this may result in a greater emphasis on moral values. Thus far in the moral identity literature, research has yet to explore moral identity development across cultural backgrounds in North America, and this link should be explored in future research.

Methodological limitations should also be considered and guide future research. The present study would have benefited from additional controls: a measure of participants’ intelligence and English language proficiency, and a word count for interview responses. An intelligence measure would have helped ensure that moral identity development was not confounded by intelligence, oral expression capabilities, or other processing abilities. Similarly, an English language screen would have been useful to ensure that adolescents had a comparable and adequate level of English proficiency. This would be warranted as many participants reported speaking a language other than English at home.

Educational / Clinical Implications and Future Directions

As adolescents experience a great deal of psychological, social, and emotional growth throughout the high school years, it is logical to assume that development of moral identity may
be seen in this period as well. Given the consistency across grade found here, one could say that intervention may be able to boost moral identity development from Grades 9 to Grade 12. Looking at adolescents’ qualitative responses pertaining to their sense of moral identity also provides direction for educators and clinicians to follow. Mature moral identity was defined in terms of students’ expression of moral values that were held with high self-relevance and came from internal sources of motivation; moral tenets were internalized and seen by adolescents as a central aspect of their sense of self. This can be considered to be a goal for moral growth that should be fostered. Moreover, students at the highest level also made reference to the importance of moral values on a global scale, speaking to a need for them to be held and applied at a societal level. These findings offer guidance for the direction of educational and clinical practices in moral education.

In terms of direct application, school programs could be run that serve to help adolescents reflect upon their moral selves, and encourage them to find additional personal meaning in moral tenets, thus internalizing them into their sense of identity. One program type that has been linked to the promotion of value internalization is participation in community service (Delve, Mintz, & Stewart, 1990). Community service has also been considered a correlate and marker of moral identity development, so although the directionality may be unclear in terms of the relation between community service involvement and moral development, this link is one worth considering for fostering development (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1999). Moreover, as there is a great deal of diversity within the Canadian population, especially within the province of Ontario, a structure should be put in place to help adolescents gain awareness of their social context, its implications, and the role they can play within it. There is a need for empirical research to be
conducted pertaining to this issue and the role the educational system may play in fostering adolescent sociomoral development.

This research may also have implications for the mental health field. It has been said that racism poses mental health risks for individuals, in terms of the internal stresses it generates, and negative influence on general emotional experiences and expressions, health and psychophysiology (Rollock & Gordon, 2000). Moreover, Rollock and Gordon point out that “isms” such as classism and sexism have many elements in common with racism in terms of their impact on mental health, as well as the most appropriate interventions for reducing negative outcomes due to experienced oppression. Psychologists can play a role in helping improve the lives of those living in conditions of social and economic inequality and future research would benefit from investigating the influence of moral identity development on mental health. Methods for combating inequality, promoting social justice, and reducing psychological distress must be considered, and fostering the development of socially aware, morally motivated individuals is certainly something that may help work towards this more just society.
References


Appendix A

Self-in-Relationships Task

This task is designed to assess adolescents’ personal identification with moral and non-moral qualities or values and their understandings of the relative importance these qualities hold for them as individuals.

Participants are given a pictorial diagram of concentric circles representing varying degrees of importance to the self and an envelope containing 10 personal qualities (e.g., Honest, Independent, Kind or caring). They are asked to identify and place their ‘Most important’ quality in the innermost circle of the diagram and then to allocate the remaining 9 qualities in equal number in the 3 outer circles (i.e., ‘Very important,’ ‘Less important,’ and ‘Least important’). They are then asked to explain the reasoning behind their arrangement of the values.

Script:
We all have lots of good qualities—and different qualities have different degrees or levels of importance to us. I’d like you to imagine that this is a diagram of you and the circles represent different levels of importance to you as an individual.

This envelope contains 10 personal qualities or values, on sticky labels, that many people think are important. We’d like you to empty them out on the table, think about them, decide their level of importance to you, and then stick them on the diagram. Choose one quality for the innermost circle—your ‘Most important’ quality—and then arrange the 9 other qualities, with 3 qualities in each of the other circles—your other ‘Very important, then ‘Less important,’ and finally ‘Least important’ qualities. After you’ve done this, we’ll ask you some questions about your choices. Any questions?
Appendix A (Continued)

ID #: __________
Appendix A (continued)

Questions:
1. Of all the qualities you might have chosen, you picked (or identified) __________ as the 
   quality that is most important to you. Why is being __________ so important to you?
   [Possible prompt: What difference would it make if you weren’t __________?]
2. Can you think of an example of your being __________ – a time in the recent past when your 
   behaviour (or actions) illustrated (or showed) how important being __________ is to you?
3. Now, as a contrast, let’s consider the degree of importance you’ve given the quality 
   ‘Respectful of others,’ which you’ve put in this circle. Why is this quality placed here?
   [If ‘Respectful of others’ is chosen as the participant’s ‘Most important’ quality, then ask 
   about ‘Fair to others’ as a contrast.]

Notes:
Synonyms re “most important” quality could be “the quality that best describes the essence of 
you as a person” (for older kids) or “the quality without which you wouldn’t be you.”
Use the same generic probe questions or prompts as used for the vignettes (e.g., Can you say 
more about that? etc.). However, in this case, remember that we’re aiming for responses that 
give evidence of self-understanding and/or identity-in-the-making – i.e., the adolescent’s sense 
of the kind of person he/she has decided it’s important to be. So try to use the kind of follow ups 
and prompts that get at this.

Qualities/Values in the envelope:

Moral
Kind or caring – showing genuine concern for the interests and well being of others, even if they 
aren’t your friends
Honest – being truthful and trust-worthy in your relationships with others, in all areas of your life
Fair to others – making sure to give other people the same opportunity as you yourself to get 
what they want or need
Generous or giving – sharing what you have with other people, especially people in need
Respectful of others – showing everybody the same or equal consideration, even those who are 
really different from you

Non-moral
Hard-working – working diligently and reliably to achieve your personal best, even if it’s not 
always enjoyable
Creative – being imaginative and inspired to use your personal skills to create new and original 
things
Independent – being self-sufficient and able to take responsibility for your own decisions and 
actions
Sociable – being outgoing and enjoying in the company of other people, even when you don’t 
know them all that well
Intellectual – liking to think and to learn new and different things, both in and out of school
Appendix B

**My Beliefs about the Social World**

We all have different beliefs and opinions about our social world. Listed below are examples of some people's social beliefs. Please read these beliefs carefully and then circle the number that matches your personal agreement or disagreement with each of them. There are no right or wrong answers here—only personal opinions!

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<td>1</td>
<td>In our society, women are paid less than men for the same work.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>In our society, getting ahead in life depends very little on the colour of your skin.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>In our society, rich people are usually treated more politely than poor people.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>In our society, white people have more opportunities than people of other skin colours.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>In our society, women are respected and valued just as much as men.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>In our society, many people must work at more than one job to make a living.</td>
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<th>6</th>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>In our society, people pay more attention to what white people say than to what people of other skin colours say.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>In our society, rich people have more money than poor people.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>In our society, men and women do not have the same opportunity to be the boss of a large company.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>In our society, white people experience discrimination (unfair treatment) just as often as people of other skin colours.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>In our society, welfare programs make it easy to get out of poverty.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>In our society, women are usually taller than men.</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>In our society, people pay more attention to men than to women, even when they say the same thing.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>In our society, it is very difficult for people to change the colour of their skin.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>In our society, rich people can get away with crimes more easily than poor people.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>In our society, most important decisions are made by white people.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>In our society, rich and poor people have the same opportunity to go to the best quality schools.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>In our society, many people think men are superior to women.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
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Appendix C

Personal Reaction Inventory

Listed below are a number of statements concerning personal attitudes and characteristics. Please read each item and circle whether the statement is TRUE or FALSE as it relates to you personally.

1. It is sometimes hard for me to do my homework if I am not feeling up to it.

2. I sometimes feel resentful when I don’t get my way.

3. There have been times when I felt like disobeying my parents even though I knew they were right.

4. No matter who I’m talking to, I’m always a good listener.

5. Sometimes I say things just to impress my friends.

6. I’m always willing to admit it when I make a mistake.

7. I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget.

8. I am always polite even to people who are not very nice.

9. I have never been bothered when people expressed ideas very different from my own.

10. There have been times when I was quite jealous of the good luck some people have.

11. It sometimes upsets me when people ask me to do things for them.

12. I have never said something on purpose to hurt someone’s feelings.

Thank you!