

# Immoral Behavior in Everyday Life: Including Citizen Scientists in Moral Psychological Research

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Citizen Science is not yet established in moral psychology, but it has potential, as context and everyday applicability have been neglected frequently in research. There is a gap between moral thoughts and actions, which the theory of moral disengagement (MD) aims to bridge. Its eight strategies enable individuals to behave against their moral compass without a guilty conscience. The goal of this ongoing Citizen Science project is to transfer MD to everyday life. For that purpose, Citizen Scientists document instances of immoral behavior in daily life, stories, and media. Preliminary results revealed relevant contextual factors for MD and differences in judgments of immorality, harm, and intention. These insights can in turn inspire further, more conventional research.

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## 1. Introduction

Psychology typically conducts research *about* citizens, while Citizen Science focuses on research *with* or *by* members of the public. Basic science like social psychology is grounded in theoretical knowledge and strives for a deeper understanding of the world. It is motivated by curiosity, not utility, while Citizen Science is driven by practical issues and usable outcomes [1]. These two positions may appear contradictory, but they also complement each other. Psychology can benefit from Citizen Science in several ways [1]. For instance, Citizens possess valuable expertise in practical issues. Funke named the humanization of work as an example, which was inspired by ideas from affected workers and unions and not primarily driven by scientific psychological theories [1]. Additionally, large bodies of data, such as diaries or social media posts, already exist and can be analyzed with respect to emotions, coping styles, etc. by trained Citizen Scientists [1]. Descriptive data, e.g. stemming from situation sampling, can show the frequency, intensity, and variability of social-psychological phenomena in everyday life [2]. This reveals whether the appropriate research questions are asked and whether an observed phenomenon is already sufficiently covered theoretically. On top of that, laboratory-based effects can be conceptually replicated in real-life situations [2]. This can be a starting point for interacting with policymakers when discussing a social problem at hand [2].

### 1.1 Moral Psychology in Everyday Live

For a long time, moral psychology has primarily focused on moral judgments and responses to hypothetical dilemmas, while disregarding behavior in everyday life [3]. Neglecting factors like context and identity has created a gap between morality as studied and morality as experienced [4]. An additional gap exists between moral thoughts and actions, as individuals frequently act against their moral compass without having a bad conscience. The theory of moral disengagement (MD) [5] bridges this gap. It encompasses eight strategies (moral justification, euphemistic labeling, palliative comparison, displacement or distortion of responsibility, minimizing consequences, dehumanization, and blaming the victim) and predicts immoral behavior in many areas of life [see 6 for a review].

The question remains how MD is applied in everyday life: Can the results be replicated in daily life? Are there differences between contexts? Which strategies are applied? Are some strategies missing?

## 2. Project: Immoral Behavior in Everyday Life

This ongoing project investigates MD in everyday life. For this purpose, we have adapted the methods used by Hofmann and colleagues (2014), who examined everyday moral and immoral behavior [7]. As self-reports are often biased, we focus on observations. Citizen Scientists, recruited via social media, flyers, and websites [8, 9, 10], collect situations in which MD strategies were used. These can be incidents in which they were directly involved, which they witnessed, or which they learned about through reports, media, books, and other sources. We aim to examine which strategies are actually applied in daily life, which context factors play a role, and which factors have been overlooked in previous research.

## 2.1 Methods

As (im)moral behavior is a sensitive topic, individuals may be tempted to give socially desirable answers. To instead encourage open and honest responses, we collect data anonymously, only asking for basic sociodemographic information like gender, age, and political orientation (1 = *left*, 8 = *right*). To gain the necessary theoretical knowledge about the topic, an online questionnaire including explanations of the strategies, examples, and a quiz must be completed (duration  $M = 17.25$  minutes,  $SD = 6.64$ ). Afterwards, events where MD strategies were implemented are reported. In an open format, a short description of the event is given. Single-choice questions indicate the applied strategy, the Citizen Scientist's role, the context, the relationship between the actors, status differences, whether the involved individuals were alone or in a group, and whether they acted in self-interest or to assist others. On a 7-point Likert scale, it is indicated how harmful, intentional, and immoral the behavior was perceived (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very*). Additional information can be given in an open format. In the seven following days, an automated email is sent, assessing these questions. Each time, up to seven events can be portrayed (so far, a maximum of four events has been reported).

## 2.2 Preliminary Results

These preliminary analyses are based on data collected from November 2022 until April 2023 and include contributions of 118 individuals (77.1% female, age  $M = 29.75$ ,  $SD = 10.36$ , political spectrum  $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ , 66.1% had a university degree, 51.7% contributed more than once). Two hundred ninety-eight different events were reported.

In 19.5% of the events, the Citizen Scientists were the actors, in 17.4% the receivers, 20.8% of the events were directly, and 42.3% indirectly witnessed (through social media, TV, stories, etc.). To assess if there were any significant group differences, we performed analyses of variance (ANOVAs) using SPSS 25. Whenever the ANOVA showed statistical significance, we conducted Tukey post hoc tests to specify which of the groups differed significantly from each other [e.g. 11]. Self-administered actions were seen as significantly less harmful,  $F(3, 294) = 11.44$ ,  $p < .001$ , less intentional,  $F(3, 294) = 3.98$ ,  $p = .008$ , and less immoral,  $F(3, 294) = 7.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , than other actions.

In 46.3% of cases, both parties were alone, in a group in 24.8%, in 9.7% the actor was in a group, and in 19.1%, the recipient was in a group. The perceived intention was higher when both were in a group as opposed to being alone,  $F(3, 294) = 2.95$ ,  $p = .033$ . In harm and moral judgment, no differences were found,  $F(3, 294) = 1.08$ ,  $p = .356$ , and  $F(3, 294) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .132$ , respectively.

86.2% of the strategies were used in self-interest. While 20.8% of the actions happened between strangers, 20.7% occurred within partners or families, and 25.8% in the work context. In 64.1%, there was no discernible difference in status between the parties involved. In 26.5%, the actor held a higher status, and in 9.4%, the receiver held a higher status.

## 3. Discussion

While not yet established, Citizen Science has the potential to improve moral psychological research. Using different methods allows us to transfer knowledge between the lab and everyday life. As a consequence, areas of research that warrant further attention can be discovered. Preliminary findings suggest that exploring different contexts, such as family life, could provide interesting insights into moral disengagement, as well as, more generally, the effects of status

differences and group influences. Additionally, the value of analyzing different data sources was shown, as self-reported actions were judged less negatively than otherwise witnessed events.

Although Citizen Science provides great potential, some challenges present themselves. Theoretical knowledge of MD is required before events can be collected, which is a barrier to participation. Another major challenge is data quality [12]. As a process-oriented data validation, data collection is very structured, with only a small number of open questions and a mandatory ‘training’ in the beginning. However, it is worth noting that we did not specify benchmarks for the successful completion of the training. On top of expert review of the data by psychological scientists, data quality could be further ensured through social data validation by Citizen Scientists, e.g. by verifying the correspondence of situational descriptions and MD strategies.

### 3.1 Outlook

Data collection for this project is still ongoing, as a large dataset is crucial for drawing meaningful conclusions. Particularly interesting would be acquiring more descriptions of MD used in social media, as these platforms are part of our current culture and affect all aspects of everyday life [13]. Currently, only 6.0 % of our observations fall into this category.

To make the most of the gathered dataset, the qualitative data could be analyzed further with the support of Citizen Scientists, e.g. with respect to underlying moral values (such as the moral foundations [14]).

### 3.2 Conclusion

When the focus lies on everyday behavior, Citizen Science holds significant promise in moral psychological research. It enables us to explore discrepancies between science and everyday life, bringing to light overlooked aspects. Through different perspectives, new impulses and ideas are gained, which can be further examined in more conventional ways of empirical research.

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