Moral Conflicts as a Motor of Moral Identity Development at Work: Self-Awareness and Micro Processes in Weekly Experiences

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Based on the identity process model, we investigated developmental differences in moral identity between leaders by analyzing their personal experiences of and reactions to actual moral conflicts at work. Using a longitudinal (16-week) qualitative design, we collected weekly moral conflict stories from ten leaders. First, after an inductive exploratory analysis we found that the leaders showed different levels of awareness (descriptive, reflective, and evaluative) with regard to how far they were able to identify their own role, values, feelings, and behaviors in each moral conflict. Second, after a theory-driven analysis, the integrated model of the micro processes of identity development was found applicable to the moral domain: Assimilation, accommodation, and withdrawal were identifiable from the leaders' reactions to moral conflicts. In addition, we identified subcategories of defensive, self-protective, and morally courageous responses to the conflicts. Leaders were more likely to use a variety of ways to maintain their existing value framework than to show major changes in their personal values. Thus, a prerequisite for moral identity development seems to be the ability to reflect and evaluate one's moral framework from multiple viewpoints, as this can lead to more flexibility, and eventually, a readiness for change.

Moral identity includes a personal sense of morality and the degree to which being a moral person is important to the individual's identity (Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008) and it has been shown to positively predict moral behavior (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). However, surprisingly little academic attention has been paid to moral identity formation during adulthood (Krettenauer & Hertz, 2015; Krettenauer, Murua, & Jia, 2016), although understanding more about these processes would be important in preventing unethical behaviors. Unethical behaviors can be especially harmful in the context of work, where they can range from single acts of deviance (e.g., the inappropriate use of company resources) to major corporate scandals (e.g., Volkswagen emissions scandal) with a range of undesirable consequences, such as financial loss, reputational damage, and reduced employee commitment.

Work-related moral problems can differ significantly from other everyday situations (Crane & Matten, 2007) as individuals may face a range of conflicting expectations, demands and values (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Nielsen, 1987; Waters, Bird, & Chant, 1986). Therefore, we need more understanding on how moral identity manifests and develops among working adults in organizations (Jennings, Mitchell, & Hannah, 2015). However, most previous moral identity studies have focused on only a limited set of moral concerns, such as specific moral values (such as fairness and justice), and they have mostly been based on student samples or scenarios (Jennings et al., 2015). Given the general paucity of moral identity research concerning adults in organizational contexts, using pre-defined constraints may lead to a narrow focus which "may obscure or fail to reveal differences in the construction and functioning of the moral self across individuals" (Jennings et al., 2015, p. S153). To understand more about moral development at work we need to study adults at work, and use a broad range of real life moral concerns and contents.

This qualitative study contributes to previous research by focusing on actual moral dilemmas experienced by leaders in their work. Leaders are especially vulnerable to identity-challenging moral conflicts because of the paradoxical nature of their work. On the one hand, leaders have positional power to influence their organization through their personal moral decisions. On the other hand, they also have numerous commitments to different organizational roles, with potentially conflicting expectations from several stakeholders, which can limit their ability to act according to their moral identities (Weaver, 2006). In analyzing the leaders' personal descriptions of moral conflicts, we used a weekly diary study design, which enabled us to capture how they negotiate real-time moral demands over an extended period of time.

The Concept of Moral Identity

Moral identity refers to the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Values are at the heart of moral identity and people vary in how integrated moral values (such as being honest, fair, and concerned about the welfare of others) are to the person's self-system (Blasi, 1995). The more central and integrated moral values are to a person's motivational and emotional systems, the more likely he or she is to want to achieve these self-ideals through agentic processes and personal responsibility. Individuals whose identity is centered on morality will show high motivation for moral actions because they experience the desire to live according to their sense of self (the tendency towards self-consistency; Blasi, 1983, 2004). Especially in the organizational context, moral identity is often defined as a two-dimensional construct: internalization refers to the degree to which moral traits are central to the self-concept, and symbolization refers to the degree to which these traits are expressed publicly through a person's actions (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

However, the moral identity measure by Aquino and Reed (2002) focuses only on few qualities that would be attributed to a moral person (such as being caring, friendly, and kind) and on activities that might not be the best representation of moral engagement (e.g., whether people purchase products or wear clothes that represent their moral traits). These might represent more superficial or weaker motives for moral actions in the work context (see Jennings et al., 2015). This two-dimensional model also does not take into account how changes in internalization and symbolization occur or whether and how a person could progress toward a stronger moral identity. It has been suggested that a higher level of moral centrality develops through a process of integration (Blasi, 1995), where the individual's sense of self is infused with moral convictions, concerning both agentic (self-advancing) and communal (other-advancing) motivations. This intra-individual process results in inter-individual differences, "where some individuals [are] able to achieve a higher level of morality-self integration than others" (Krettenauer et al., 2016, p. 972). However, we have little understanding of the actual processes through which this kind of integration of moral convictions takes place.

In the next section we argue that to get this understanding, it is relevant to investigate how leaders engage with moral problems at work, as conflicts are likely to trigger (moral) identity-related developmental change (Bosma and Kunnen, 2001). Examining individual responses to conflicts could inform us about moral identity processes and give more insights on how intra-individual changes and inter-individual differences in moral identity integration and symbolization appear.

The Role of Conflicts in Triggering Moral Identity Processes

Moral conflicts are often situations where the person's values are not compatible with external expectations or demands, or people cannot express their personal values in their actions. Such examples could be having to lay off employees who are good people but

who don't make enough contribution to the business, finding ways to intervene in and negotiate a conflict in the work community, or balancing between scarce resources and personal standards for doing one's job with high quality and integrity. Thus, these conflicts can present a threat to the existing moral identity, and be the trigger for change. The notion that conflict is the motor of all developmental changes can be found already in the theory of Piaget (1977). Disequilibrium triggers doubt about existing ways of thinking and opens the possibility of developing new and more mature ways of thinking. Disequilibrating events (such as divorce or job loss) can trigger identity reformulation (Marcia, 2002). Therefore, a focus on moral conflicts that people experience may help to better understand the development of moral identity in organizations.

The notion that to understand identity development on a macro-level we have to focus on real time micro events stems from the dynamic approach to identity (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Kunnen & Bosma, 2000; Lichtwarck-Aschoff, van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008). This approach emphasizes the iterative character of identity processes, which means that development is perceived as a step-by-step. In this way, long-term development emerges from a sequence of short-term experiences. Each experience may result in a good fit between existing commitments and the contextual demands, or in a mismatch or conflict. A fit strengthens the existing identity, whereas a mismatch or a conflict may trigger change (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Kunnen, 2006).

Applied to moral identity, a good fit between personal commitments and contextual demands means that a moral situation can be solved satisfactorily by using the moral value framework that the individual already has available. Such an outcome confirms the individual's existing moral identity and commitments. A mismatch or conflict means that a moral transaction cannot be solved using the existing personal

moral framework, which can threaten the person's current commitments and be the starting point for change. In Blasi's (1995) terms, the internalized values that were previously a central feature of the person's moral identity become susceptible to change.

In case of conflict, the identity process model (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001, Kunnen & Wassink, 2003) distinguishes between three possible types of action. First, people try to resolve their problems by means of *assimilation*: they try to change their perception or interpretation of the situation (or, if possible, the situation itself). This is in line with Blasi's (1983, 2004) notion of self-consistency. For example, people may try to find explanations for why they had to act in ways that do not fit their moral identity: they may label the situation as highly exceptional or they may attribute the decision to force majeure or to other people. If assimilation is successful, current commitments are confirmed and there is no need for change.

Assimilation may be effective, but if the conflicting situation returns, it will become more and more difficult to handle it by means of assimilation. This will increase emotional distress and, in the end, continued assimilation is impossible. If assimilation is not successful, *accommodation* comes into play (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Accommodation means that the conceptual framework of the person is adjusted. Applied to moral situations, accommodation means that moral identity is adjusted in such a way that it offers better possibilities for handling conflicting situations. However, this does not happen very often: people do not change their commitments easily, especially in adulthood (Marcia, 2002). Finally, the third potential reaction, *withdrawal* means finding an escape from certain environmental demands that the conflict represents. In the moral domain this may mean that the individual tries to delay making any decision in the conflicting situation or passes on responsibility for the solution to someone else (e.g., to a higher level leader).

The identity process model states that inter-individual differences exist with regard to the preference of people for assimilation or for accommodation. Too much assimilation would lead to rigidity, whereas too much accommodation would mean having chaotic and superficial commitments. Thus, a balance should include openness to new experiences and new information, a readiness to change, but also forces that maintain individual commitments and prevent long-term instability and diffusion (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). We argue that a similar balance would mean that individuals have personal moral commitments (i.e., central moral values), but they are also willing to be influenced by relevant experiences or information. For example, they would be ready to re-evaluate their values if they encountered a new moral question that could not be solved on the basis of their previous commitments.

Research Aims

The aim of the current study was to investigate the moral conflicts that leaders had on a weekly basis, as described by leaders themselves. Because people are likely to differ in the type of experiences that represent a moral conflict for them, we did not want to restrict the variety of these experiences by pre-defining the moral content that the participants should focus on. Rather, we used an inductive approach and investigated what kinds of content categories we could distinguish from these experiences: how the participants described the moral conflicts they had faced, and their thoughts and behaviors in these different situations.

Although we use a process-oriented model, we focus on developmental differences between people as an indirect indication of the developmental process, and not on developmental change within people. The reason for this is a practical one: to get insight into individual development we would need intensive time series of data over long periods of time. This would be too time consuming for the participants in our study

with busy jobs. This means that we will get only indirect evidence of the developmental process.

We adopted a theory-driven approach in investigating whether the micro process model of identity (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001) could be applied to the leaders' experiences in moral conflicts. Moral conflicts are likely to represent situations that could not always be solved with the leaders' existing moral framework. Thus, we examined whether assimilation, accommodation and withdrawal would be identifiable from the leaders' descriptions of moral conflicts. When we were applying the model to the participants' stories, we still kept a qualitative, open attitude to the data instead of forcing it into predefined concepts. This meant that in addition to testing the fit of the model to the data, we allowed potential new categories to emerge.

Finally, we examined how open the leaders were to changing their commitments (as opposed to maintaining their values) when facing different conflicts over time (the leaders were followed over four months). For this we included a descriptive, quantitative analysis in order to compare individuals in terms of how often they used certain processes in reaction to the varying conflicts.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample was collected from a municipal organization with approximately 7000 employees in a medium-sized city in Finland, where all employees working in a supervisory position were sent an invitation to participate in the study. This email included a description of the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and information about confidentiality. The initial convenience sample included 17 leaders, who contacted the researcher and volunteered to take part in the research. Finally, 13 leaders participated in the diary study, three of whom we excluded because they

participated for only one measurement point. The final sample included 10 leaders: six

women and four men, whose ages ranged from 38 to 65 years ($M = 53$, $SD = 9.2$). They

represented different lines of work, e.g., daycare, health care, youth work, and

emergency services and had on average 57 direct subordinates (range 8 – 300, $SD =$

87.1). Their length of service in their current job varied from one to 40 years, being on

average 11 years ($SD = 13.0$).

Data collection started in March 2017 and continued until June 2017. The

participants were asked to fill out a weekly online questionnaire that was sent to them

by email. The questionnaire contained a qualitative section and a quantitative section, of

which we used the quantitative section only for descriptive purposes. This was because

there was a lot of variation in how much each participant contributed to the study

(response rates varied from 13 to 81 %). Thus, the small sample with the amount of

missing information meant that statistical testing was not possible.

Questionnaires were chosen instead of other methods (e.g., personal interviews)

as it made possible to collect weekly data in almost real time. Diary studies enable

assessing phenomena in their natural settings, with less retrospective bias (see Ohly,

Sonnentag, Niessen, & Zapf, 2010). Thus, leaders could report a moral conflict each

week soon after the actual experience took place by filling out an online form. Carrying

out interviews every week with each participant would not have been possible, and

recollecting experiences of moral dilemmas from several weeks before in a single

interview would have been more vulnerable to cognitive biases. The duration of the data

collection resulted from trying to get as many responses per individual as possible while

at the same time reducing the risk of dropout: four months was estimated to be the

maximum that the participants could commit to the study. All the participants were

rewarded with a gift certificate for a bookstore and they received personalized feedback based on their responses to the questionnaire.

Measures

To find situations in which individuals felt that their personal moral identity and value commitments might be at stake we wanted personal descriptions of moral conflicts. We used the same open-ended question every week, stating:

"A moral challenge means a situation where you do not know what is the right way to act or you feel that for some reason you cannot act as you would see right. These situations also require making a decision where you have to choose between alternatives that are equally good or equally bad. These decisions have consequences for someone: the person who is the target of the decision, other individuals who are involved, or you as the decision-maker. These situations are also often defined by time pressure and conflicting expectations, interests, or values. Describe an experience (moral decision) that happened this week. Choose an experience that you feel is important, maybe because it evoked strong feelings, or maybe it was memorable for some other reason. If you want, you can also describe a smaller, more mundane work-related ethical decision that you made. When describing the experience you may tell about the following characteristics: What was the experience? What was the situation? Who was involved? What did you feel and think about it? How did it end?"

This question was designed to prompt thoughts and reflections related to a conflict because, as theorized in the micro process model (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001), only situations that the individual cannot solve with their current commitments will cause emotional reactions and have the potential to trigger identity-related mechanisms. We also asked the participants to give numerical ratings on the importance of the event

("How important was this experience for you?"). This item was answered with a six-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very important).

Analyses

We had altogether 56 data units (individual stories) that were nested within the 10 participants; response rates varying from 13 to 81 percent (see Table 3). To maintain the anonymity of our participants we refer to them by their study identification number (ID). We analyzed the data using a three-step content analysis (Berg & Lune, 2012; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) both in an inductive content analysis (categories were derived from the data without any predefined coding criteria) and in a theory-driven analysis (testing the fit of the micro process model of identity to the data). Finally, after identifying relevant themes based on both inductive and deductive analyses, we used the categories to code the whole data. We analyzed descriptively how often individuals were coded for each category and how they evaluated the importance of the moral conflicts.

Inductive Content Analysis

First, the transcripts were broken down into "thought units" (Butterfield, Treviño, & Ball, 1996; Gioia & Sims, 1986). The first author read all the stories, examining common themes related to the way leaders described their moral conflicts. Here the text units varied from single phrases to longer, possibly several, sentences. In this preparation and unitizing phase, seven distinctive themes were identified. Four categories represented individual reflection, where the leaders (1) described different points of view to a given situation (perspective taking); (2) described personal values, motives, and goals, and how they affected the decision-making; (3) recognized personal emotions that the situation evoked; and (4) described the situation using a broad time-

frame (reflecting on the past, present and future). Three different categories were created based on how the participants described the role of other people in a given situation: (5) the feedback they got from others (which either supported or challenged their personal views), (6) the information they received and/or how they made joint decisions with others, and (7) the pressure others brought to the situation (e.g., by restricting available resources or by presenting conflicting demands).

Second, both authors took part in an iterative, intersubjective categorizing process. The similarities and differences among thought units were discussed and organized into further categories. Individuals differed in the way their descriptions demonstrated the capacity for broad, all-round reflection and flexibility, which directed the analysis to be more focused on the different types of reflection (whether the leaders focused on behavior, values, emotions, goals, etc.). As a result, the following categories were created: reflection on personal values, personal behavior, personal emotions, potential outcomes of the situation, actual outcomes of the situation (retrospective evaluation), and different viewpoints related to the situation/decision (perspective-taking). After re-reading the data several times and negotiating any differences, the authors agreed that the code 'reflection' did not cover all the different types of awareness and thinking that were present in the stories. After a more detailed analysis of the types of awareness, codes for *description, reflection*, and *evaluation* were assigned to the data.

The third and final step was classification and abstraction. The authors agreed that the levels of awareness (description/reflection/evaluation) captured the differences in individual reactions to conflicts more accurately than the objects of these thought processes. For example, each level can include several different contents (behavior, emotions, thoughts, goals, etc.), but the level of awareness of personal processes seemed

to be essential in understanding the developmental levels of moral identity. At this point

two different levels of awareness were coded for: first, description that had to do with

the *outside* (the context: e.g., what happened, what kind of behaviors took place), and

second, descriptions related to the *inside* (personal: e.g., thoughts, feelings). The final

coding is presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

Deductive Content Analysis

The micro process model of identity development (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001) was used

as a starting point for our theory-driven approach to the data. Again, the preparation and

unitizing phase included reading the transcripts and breaking them down into thought

units. We used an unconstrained categorization matrix (see Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), where

all the data were reviewed for content and coded for correspondence with the identified

micro process categories (whether assimilation, accommodation, and withdrawal were

identifiable in the data), but also different categories were created within its bounds,

following the principles of inductive content analysis.

In the categorizing stage, we found that all the three main mechanisms of

assimilation, accommodation, and withdrawal were applicable to the data. Following

our reading of the data, a fourth mechanism code, "on-going process", was added to the

categories. It described stories of unsolved moral conflicts, which the leader had not yet

decided how to solve. In addition, we found different, more detailed types of

assimilation related to inflexibility or resistance to change (defensive assimilation),

ownership to be able to act according to his/her values (moral courage), and self-

protective/rationalizing assimilation. These categories are described in more detail in

the results section.

Finally, in the abstraction phase, we wanted to make sure that we could reliably code and distinguish defensive actions (e.g., not seeing that there could be other perspectives in a certain conflict) from morally courageous ones (e.g., where the individual chooses to follow personal values despite facing pressure to do differently). We therefore applied Blasi's (1995) differentiation between self-advancing and other-advancing motivations. This showed a good fit with the data: defensive thinking related to self-advancing goals, whereas morally courageous actions related to other-advancing goals. The final coding is presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 near here]

Coding reliability and descriptive analysis

The final coding principles were used to test for inter-rater reliability and to enable use of the coded data in our quantitative, descriptive analysis. For this purpose we randomly selected ten stories we had not used when creating the coding system. This provided an adequate sample size for reliability testing (17.9% of the full sample, 10/56 stories), as the recommendation is to use no less than 50 data points or 10% of the full sample (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2010). We coded each story for (1) the level of awareness, (2) the main mechanism, and (3) the specified mechanism. This coding round resulted in 83% (25/30) agreement between the two independent coders. The coding system was then finalized by reaching an agreement on how to apply it (for example, agreeing on that in ambiguous situations, the highest level of awareness would be coded for). All the final codes are presented in Table 3.

Lastly, we investigated the dynamics of individual moral identity processes across the follow-up period of our diary study. For this purpose, we calculated the frequencies of moral conflict stories that each participant had produced, and investigated the levels of awareness and the variety of mechanisms (assimilation,

accommodation, and withdrawal) they used for describing and handling each conflict. Our aim was to gain preliminary, descriptive information about the differences between the leaders in terms of their openness to changing their commitments when facing different conflicts over time. We also investigated leaders' self-rated mean levels of conflict importance in order to complement our interpretations with participants' numerical evaluations (see Table 3).

[Table 3 near here]

Results

Self-awareness in Moral Conflicts

We distinguished four main themes of the conflict contents. Hierarchical conflicts related to restrictions and boundaries that came from higher organizational levels and which the leader had to negotiate, such as following orders from upper management or dealing with scarce resources that were provided for the leader's work unit. Employee-related conflicts included different decisions that the leader had to make concerning, for example, relationships between employees (interfering to a work place argument) or unethical employee behavior (confronting an employee who misuses work time responsibilities). Client-related conflicts dealt with people who the leader worked with, such as students in a school or children and their families in social care. In these conflicts the leader often faced conflicting interests between hierarchical expectations (scarce resources), employee benefits (work arrangements), and the best of the clients (receiving flexible services). The last content category was the leader's own role in a given conflict. This meant that the leader described uncertainty about how to react and position oneself in the situation. For example, whether to give more responsibility to the employees to solve a work place conflict or to interfere more , or how strict boundaries

the leader wants to keep in relation to personal issues (in comparison to sharing things more openly with the employees).

Some leaders described a similar conflict theme several times in their stories, whereas others described a wide variety of different moral questions that they had recognized and experienced as personal conflicts during the study period. These differences might relate to moral awareness (see, e.g., Rest, 1986; Reynolds, 2006): individuals differed from each other regarding what kinds of situations they recognized as moral issues. This means that one person can demonstrate great ethical awareness in one situation and still be quite ethically insensitive in others, whereas another person can have high ethical sensitivity in a range of different situations (for example, being aware of the moral nature of their decisions in several different contexts).

Leaders differed in the levels of awareness they showed when describing these situations. The first level was descriptive, and this was further categorized into descriptions about outer, contextual events and those about personal, inner states. All of the participants' stories included contextual descriptions, as this was often the starting point for framing the moral conflict in the story: what had happened, who was involved, what kind of behaviors took place. For example, one leader began her story by providing a short context of the moral conflict from her point of view: "*This week I've mostly been thinking about the situation of our temporary staff. This person hasn't been able to do what (s)he should have been capable of handling easily*" (ID 4).

A majority of the participants also described their inner states, such as the feelings, thoughts and perceptions the moral conflict had provoked. This kind of awareness of personal reactions can be found from the following example, where the same leader went on to describe the conflict on a more personal level, acknowledging different viewpoints and thoughts that the conflict evoked: "*I've been wondering if I*

should use the possibility of ending the probation period contract or if I should give them another chance, even though it is a strain for the rest of the team. Which is more important: the individual employee's rights or the team, which is already tired out and is now even more stressed?" (ID 4)

The second level of awareness included personal reflection about the moral conflict: the participant described *why* they had felt or thought in a certain way. Thus, the reflection focused on individual processes (not the reasons behind contextual events). For example, the leaders reflected on why they had experienced a value conflict with their employee, why they had felt that the personnel were being treated unfairly in a certain situation, or why they had experienced feelings of anger and irritation on account of a moral conflict. This was demonstrated by the leader cited above, who continued her story by reflecting on why she felt conflicted in the situation: *"I felt even more conflicted as I was afraid that I'm giving too much time to the employee because I don't want to admit to myself that I made the wrong decision"* (ID 4). Reflection was less common among the leaders than description (see Table 3).

The third level included evaluation of personal values, thoughts, and behaviors, combined with an acknowledgement of other viewpoints or options that might be equally possible in the given situation. This was by far the rarest form of awareness, as only four participants and six of their stories were coded for evaluative thinking. These leaders talked about how they "might be wrong about it [their solution]", or they were "not able to handle [the] situation as a grown-up", realizing that there could be different ways of solving the conflicts. One leader described how she had critically evaluated her own thought processes: *"After reflecting on this, I don't feel that this is the case; I would be able to admit to myself that I'm fallible"* (ID 4).

Micro Processes of Moral Identity

Situations where the leaders described being able to solve the conflict so that they maintained their personal values and acted according to them were coded as assimilation (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). For example, one leader described how she had hired a new employee who had demanded many flexible work arrangements from the very beginning of the contract. The employee then decided to quit the job in order to get a better, fixed-term position, appealing to the leader to reduce her time for giving notice to less than was required by law, for personal reasons. Although it left the leader with the bother of finding a new employee for their work unit, she wanted to be flexible towards the employee. She put a lot of effort into finding a solution to the conflict that aligned with her personal moral values: "*Because I try to do my best for the staff, my conscience didn't allow me to leave this person in trouble. Although I had to do a lot of work to be able to find another substitute to replace this person, I managed to find someone*" (ID 7).

Accommodation was a rare way of reacting to a moral conflict, as it was coded for in only four stories told by three leaders. In these stories, they did not explicitly mention changes in their values, as we would have expected, following Bosma and Kunnen's (2001) model. Instead, these stories were about more subtle changes in their perceptions, such as increasingly sharing issues that were a little more personal with employees in order to create a friendlier and more sympathetic atmosphere at work or changing one's initial reaction towards employees' ways of arranging their work, and giving them more responsibility. One leader had started to re-evaluate his participation in employees' mentoring groups: "*I've started to question my own role in these [mentoring] groups. … I've started to wonder what kinds of processes could begin without me present in the groups and if the time is right for this kind of change*" (ID 1).

These leaders were flexible in their commitments rather than feeling a need to rigidly maintain their viewpoints.

Withdrawal was also rare in the data; only three stories included a clear description of this reaction. First situation dealt with a conflict between employees, where the leader described how she "*listened to the issues and wishes of two of my staff, but made no promises to the one side or the other*" (ID 9), thus avoiding taking responsibility of the decision. The second story showed how a leader refrained from expressing her personal view in a meeting, which resulted in a feeling of powerlessness. The third story was about avoiding a difficult discussion with an employee, and postponing it to a later occasion (see also Table 2).

In addition to the theoretically driven main processes (assimilation, accommodation, and withdrawal) that were found in the data, a typical story type was a description of an on-going process that was still unresolved at the time of writing. For some, on-going decision-making related to postponement, which can also be interpreted as a form of withdrawal: "*some of my staff are clearly not following commonly agreed rules, but intervening in this is difficult. At this point, I've just been listening to what they have to say. The situation isn't settled yet*" (ID 4). Also uncertainty of how to resolve the issue lead to on-going conflicts: "*How can I, as a supervisor, best influence my work community so that I don't encourage the creation of cliques but still promote my personal aims in a determined manner?*" (ID 1). This sometimes included deep consideration and reflection of the situation, such as the following leader who wondered about the reasons behind an employee's long sick leave and her own role in the situation: "*Is it right that I have a bad conscience because of doing my job and carrying out my responsibilities? If I hadn't intervened in the situation* [long sick leave]*, how much would it have strained the rest of the work team and what kind of example would*

it have given to the other employees?" (ID 7). The leader recognized several viewpoints

and personal thoughts, but had not reached any resolution to their personal dilemma.

Finally, sub-categories were inductively identified from the data: self-protective,

defensive, and morally courageous actions (see Table 2), which were all mostly coded

together with assimilation. Some leaders described being unable to act according to

their values, which led them to change their interpretation of the situation by using *self-*

protective mechanisms. In order to retain a positive self-concept even when having to

act against their personal values, some of the leaders used rationalization as a way to

justify their decisions. They described finding reasons to see their actions as acceptable,

such as referring to scarce resources, to the good of the organization, or to the benefit to

employees. For example, one leader decided to fill open positions without a formal

recruitment process. She described how "*in general I think that everybody should have*

the possibility to apply for open positions, also temporary posts. However, I currently

have two temps whose contracts are about to end and I do not think that starting a

massive recruitment process would be reasonable now, as we have work available for

two people in the autumn. I justify this - mostly to myself - by stating that we do not

need to familiarize these employees to their jobs and that they have done their work well

thus far. And what's most important, we need to guarantee the continuity of our

services." (ID 4)

Two leaders persisted to solve conflicts according to their personal views

although they acknowledged that the situation could also be interpreted in a different

way. We interpreted this as defensive assimilation: these leaders showed rigidity and

were not open to new or differing opinions (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Both of these

leaders talked about a conflict related to structural changes in their workplace, which

the employees were resisting: "*I see that we will have to start this new way of working.*

However, the major obstacle to this lies in the staff's fears and their personal commitment to a certain client or colleague. As a leader, I'm in a tough situation trying to carry out this change" (ID 5). Thus, defensiveness seemed to relate to the role of the leader as promoting change in the face of opposition from employees.

Three leaders described situations in which they followed their personal values in order to help another person, despite contextual obstacles or pressure. We interpreted this as moral courage. They did this even though they recognized that "*a poor outcome can harm the credibility of both me and my unit*", or when they "*got negative feedback from a member of my own work community*", or when the decision "*costs significantly more*" to the organization. One leader who worked in a school described this kind of situation in the following way: "*I refuse to put one of my students into a regular teaching group without any extra support. In this case, I believe that everyone would be more stressed; I don't think this kind of arrangement would work. So I'm keeping the student in the small group even though it will cost [the employer] significantly more*" (ID 10). Our interpretation of the differences between these two categories were based on Blasi's (1995) theoretical distinction: defensive thinking was similar to Blasi's self-advancing goals whereas morally courageous actions related to other-advancing (communal) goals.

Frequencies of Self-Awareness Levels and Identity Processes

We can draw together some descriptive similarities within and between individuals, based on typical patterns in the moral conflict stories (see Table 3). First, IDs 2 and 6 did not use level 2 awareness at all in their answers; all of their stories included only the descriptive level. IDs 2, 5, 7, and 10 used mostly assimilation as their main process when describing their reactions to moral conflicts. Of these leaders, IDs 5 and 7 had the highest rates among all of the participants for using the self-protective strategy to enable

assimilation (7/10 and 3/6 of stories, respectively). IDs 1, 3, and 4 showed the largest

variation in their stories: they used a number of different mechanisms, and they were

also the only ones who were coded for accommodation. ID 4 had the highest frequency

of both reflection (level 2) and evaluative thinking (level 3), and even though IDs 1 and

3 provided fewer stories than ID 4, they too were coded for these higher levels of

awareness. Thus, the individuals who used a variety of mechanisms to deal with moral

conflicts also used reflective and evaluative thinking when describing these conflicts.

Accommodation associated clearly with the evaluative level of awareness, as they were

both often coded for the same stories. Here it is worth noticing that ID 6 had, on

average, clearly the shortest stories (66 words) compared to other leaders, whereas IDs

1 and 7 had the longest responses (217 and 203 words) compared to others. Thus, it

seemed that low self-awareness (ID 6) associated with short moral conflict descriptions

whereas both high awareness (ID 1) and high self-protectiveness (ID 7) related to longer

stories. Finally, based on self-rated importance of the moral conflicts, we can conclude

that on average, the leaders reported situations that were personally important to them:

the mean ratings were mostly above 4 (out of 6).

Discussion

We analyzed the leaders' experiences of actual moral conflicts in their work in three

different ways. Firstly, we used an inductive categorization method with a focus on

levels of awareness, and secondly we used a deductive theory driven approach in which

we tested the applicability of the core concepts assimilation, accommodation and

withdrawal from the identity-related micro process model (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001)

within this context. Finally, we investigated in a descriptive way whether the different

categories (which resulted from both inductive and deductive analyses) were related to

each other. Here we found that being able to think about personal values and attitudes

when facing a conflict is associated with the potential to adapt one's attitude in the given situation. Especially the tendency to use evaluative reflection, that is, to have the flexibility to look at the conflict from various points of view, seemed to relate to a new, adjusted way of handling moral conflicts. We have summarized our main findings in Figure 1 (the adapted model of micro processes related to moral identity), which we will next discuss in more detail.

Self-awareness as a Precondition for Flexible Value Commitments

We started with an open inductive analysis to avoid imposing a theoretical frame that misses relevant characteristics of the data. Level of awareness (descriptive, reflective, and evaluative) came up as a relevant characteristic that might reflect different levels of maturity. Approaching a moral conflict only on the contextual descriptive level does not take the individual him- or herself as the object of awareness. Awareness becomes more personal when individuals have the ability to recognize internal states, thoughts, and emotions the conflict elicited within them. Reflective awareness goes a step further than this, as it includes acknowledging the reasons behind the personal perceptions and reactions. The evaluative level represented the most mature form of awareness, as these leaders were able to compare their own understanding with other potential viewpoints and see that other solutions or views of the conflict could be just as good as their own. Both reflection and evaluation also include self-agency, a sense of authorship over one's thoughts and actions.

The levels of awareness show resemblance with levels of developmental maturity as described in the literature. As individuals develop, they increasingly acknowledge their own role in their perceptions and interactions in the world (the growing awareness of one's subjectivity in the processes of meaning making; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; see also Kegan, 1994). That is, they increasingly understand that their

view of the world is a personal view, and not "the world". This leads to a heightened

awareness of one's own role in conflicts, in the interpretation of specific situations, and

in the actions one takes (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). In line with the idea that maturity

associates with increased flexibility, those leaders who showed the greatest variety in

their ways of reacting to different moral conflicts also showed the most mature levels of

awareness (personal reflection and evaluation). This kind of ability to take multiple

perspectives in a particular situation and the capacity for complex thinking are both

related to mature moral reasoning with prosocial aims striving for the common good

(Skoe, Pratt, Matthews, & Curror, 1996). As shown in Figure 1, the level of awareness

was related to the micro processes assimilation, accommodation, and withdrawal which

we will discuss next.

Assimilation of Moral Values Enables Experiences of Coherence

Assimilation was clearly the most common micro process (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001) in

our leaders' stories. This confirms the notion that moral values and behaviors are not

easily changed, but people strive to maintain their established value framework. We

identified three specific forms of assimilation that appeared to be distinctive to moral

identity. The first two, defensive and self-protective assimilation, allowed individuals to

maintain their coherent experience of their moral self even when they were faced with

conflicting expectations or conflicts that did not allow them to follow their personal

values. By taking a defensive stance, the leader can continue to follow his or her

personal moral values even though the situation includes contradictory pressures, such

as employees resisting change. The risk in this defensive approach to moral conflicts is

a lack of flexibility: continually choosing to reject other points of view can lead to rigid

moral structures that are applied unquestioningly across different situations.

The self-protective form of assimilation seemed to enable individuals to avoid feelings of anxiety and guilt when a situation pressurizes them into making decisions that are not in line with their moral values. Offering post-hoc explanations and rationalizations of their decisions enabled leaders to cope with contextual demands, such as when they were forced to make compromises between equally bad options or when they had to decide how to allocate scarce resources. However, the risk with using this mechanism is that leaders might even sometimes resort to making unethical decisions, which they could still rationalize to themselves as being justifiable (see, e.g., Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010). We found that the tendency to resort mainly to self-protective or defensive processes co-occurred with predominantly descriptive levels of awareness. It may be that an individual's unpreparedness or unwillingness to reflect on their personal values associates with less flexible moral identity processes: the individual might prioritize maintaining their moral values, perspectives, and ways of acting over having room for re-evaluation or change.

The third assimilation type was moral courage. In these stories, the leaders chose to follow their moral values and act for the benefit of others, regardless of the situational pressures. This kind of behavior seems to relate to other-advancing motivations (Blasi, 1995), and thus to high moral centrality, strength, and maturity. It has been suggested that this kind of moral courage is an important quality in leaders (Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009).

Moral Conflicts Can Elicit Accommodation or Withdrawal

Within our sample, only those leaders who were coded for the most mature self-awareness, the evaluative level, also showed the ability to use accommodation, that is, an adjustment in their moral reasoning. However, we saw only minor adjustments in leaders' behaviors or attitudes, not major changes in personal values. This is in line with

the general idea of identity development in adulthood, where a change in personal commitments happens neither easily nor often, even when the person is confronted with a conflict situation (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Marcia, 2002). It is also possible that by examining only the experiences of ten leaders over a period of 16 weeks, our research setting did not allow for enough variety in the experiences of moral conflict to enable us to capture more distinctive changes in moral values. We can still conclude that evaluative self-awareness is likely to enable the re-evaluation of personal commitments, which can associate with individual flexibility regarding moral values.

Also withdrawal was rare response to the moral conflicts – that is, finding an escape from the situational demands. It is possible that the leaders who voluntarily participated in the study were probably already highly motivated to think about their personal experiences of moral conflicts at work. Therefore they might not be representative of leaders who have a tendency to avoid moral questions and use withdrawal as their main mechanism. It is also possible that leaders found it easier to write about a situation that they had somehow tackled rather than talk about an event from which they withdrew or the situations from which they had withdrawn were not so salient in their experience, leading them not to write about these occasions.

A specific form of withdrawal were descriptions of situations where the leader wanted to postpone making a decision. These on-going processes as a response to a moral conflict included talking about the event but not being willing to make a decision and act. It could also indicate that these leaders were able to utilize the weekly questionnaire to reflect on and 'think aloud' their reactions to and ideas about the conflict even though they had not yet decided how to solve it. In this sense, the study might even have worked as a mini intervention, providing the leaders with a brief opportunity to think through their moral decision-making.

A more negative interpretation of withdrawal is to see it as a form of moral disengagement (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008): a coping strategy that individuals can use when they face moral conflicts that cause discomfort. Withdrawal helps to dismiss the conflict and thus can free the person from the situational distress without their having to question or accommodate their values. Self-protective assimilation can also be interpreted as a form of moral disengagement. In these responses the leaders used cognitive reconstruction of behavior (Bandura, 1986), such as moral justification or rationalization. This enabled them to keep their positive self-image even when they had acted against their values. We identified three leaders who frequently used self-protective and defensive processes, while most leaders used it never or once (see Table 3). Thus, it is possible that some individuals have a stronger drive to maintain their self-consistency which manifests in self-protective or defensive behavior. This can lead to the risk of unethical actions (for example give in to the immoral pressure), because it enables a person to justify their decisions whether they were ethical or not.

Contributions

Our results suggest that a prerequisite for development is the ability to reflect and evaluate one's moral framework, as this can lead to a readiness for change (accommodation). Facing and acknowledging moral conflicts can bring about processes that might lead to changes in commitments. Our results also suggest that most individuals are inclined to maintain the status quo. This can include self-protecting and defensive mechanisms in order to hold on to their existing moral framework, regardless of the situation. This suggests that value change (and thus moral identity development) is not easily accomplished in adulthood. Our findings are thus in line with the general notion that especially in adulthood, identity is quite resistant to change (Marcia, 2002). That is, in order to detect significant changes in moral identity, the person must feel that

there is a lot at stake in the situation (such as a large magnitude of consequences resulting from the leader's decision). Although the leaders did give quite high ratings of the importance of the conflicts they described, it might still be that several rounds of high intensity conflicts are needed before a macro-level developmental change in identity structure emerges. This, then, might eventually result in a transformation, although identity change is not necessarily a radical change but rather a gradual evolution of its previous forms (Marcia, 2002).

As Bosma and Kunnen (2001) have stated, an optimal developmental outcome of personal identity would include a balance between assimilation and adaptation: having strong commitments but also being open to change. In line with this notion, we suggest that moral identity maturity is characterized both by flexibility and adaptability based on reviewing what information is relevant in the particular situation and being open to several viewpoints, and also by a personal commitment that promotes other-advancing behaviors (i.e., moral courage). However, practical implications on how to support adults in gaining this desirable level of maturity is beyond the scope of the current study. As we will discuss in the next section, our study provided preliminary findings about the importance of flexible and many-sided moral decision-making, but before applying this knowledge further, more studies should be conducted.

Limitations and Future Research

Our findings were based on retrospective descriptions and personal evaluations of moral conflicts that the participants themselves chose. The strength of this approach was that, contrary to the hypothetical scenarios often carried out among student samples, these dilemmas were personally significant for the leaders, and they depicted a variety of real-life work-related conflicts. However, we could not investigate actual longitudinal change within one individual because this would have posed a too large demand on the

participants in the study. Our assumptions concerning development are therefore based on developmental differences between people, not on developmental change in people. In addition, our approach might not capture all the potential processes that other, different conflicts might have elicited among the leaders. For example, the leaders who were coded mainly for self-protective assimilation in this study might also be able to use other mechanisms when encountering different moral conflicts. Thus, future studies could use longitudinal designs that would capture moral identity processes in more detail as a function of personal identity development across different moral conflicts.

Our conclusions are based on the self-descriptions that the participants gave, and we did not have access to any information about their actual behavior. Using retrospective accounts can increase the risk of individual rationalizations or other disengagement techniques that can arise in participants' answers: participants might carefully choose which past events to talk about and describe them so that the conflict does not threaten their self-concept and identity. All leaders in our study were voluntary participants, who might represent a biased sample because of their interest to take part in an interview and diary study that was announced to focus on moral issues. However, we were able to identify different styles of approaching moral conflicts – even leaders with low moral self-awareness. Thus, even though we used a small convenience sample, it provided evidence of a variety of styles on how people deal with moral conflicts at work. However, future studies should aim for using more representative samples so that the broader generalizability and applicability of our findings could be further tested.

In order to avoid self-selection, future research could focus on conflicts that are more objective, for example, by investigating how different leaders make moral decisions in the same situation, such as when the organization faces downsizing or restructuring. In addition, leaders' experiences could be complemented with employee

evaluations, which could give insight into how others perceive the leaders' moral awareness and decisions and how the level of awareness and willingness to change is related to leadership quality in the eyes of others.

Finally, our findings were based on qualitative material from ten voluntary participants, which has limited transferability. When the goal of a diary study is to investigate different processes, obtaining data from several measurement points is more crucial than the number of participants (see Ohly et al., 2010). However, the limitation in our data was that there was large variation in the amount of stories that each participant produced (from two to 13). Therefore further studies are needed in order to show the developmental processes in more detail (e.g., using data with more consecutive conflict events per individual to enable an investigation of intra-individual variability and trajectories over time).

To conclude, any attempt to understand moral identity development among working adults should begin by acknowledging the individual's tendency to maintain a coherent self-image even in the face of moral conflicts, which can give rise to even unethical behaviors. Having the flexibility to consider differing viewpoints and being open to change gives room for accommodation which, combined with moral commitment, results in a mature moral identity.

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Table 1. The coding of empirical data for levels of awareness when describing moral conflicts.

Citation (meaningful unit)	Interpretation	Level of awareness	Specification
My work is busy throughout the year, but I need to have a holiday at some point. ...	The participant describes what happened in the moral conflict objectively: the facts of the situation, the kind of behaviors that took place, etc.	Level 1: Descriptive acknowledgement	1A: description relating to the *outside* (context)
I had a discussion with myself about whether or not I can take my holidays at a different time than the staff. ...	The participant describes what happened regarding his or her inner states: feelings, thoughts, and perceptions.		1B: description relating to the *inside* (personal)
I'm on vacation this week and I'm wondering if this is a good time for it, when other people are at work. Then again, I have to use my vacation days, and I'm sure the staff will cope with the work for the one week that I'm on holiday. ...	A deeper level of personal consciousness and reflection that describes why the participant felt/thought/behaved etc. in a certain way. Thus the reflection focuses on individual processes.	Level 2: Reflection	
I'm not sure if I'm thinking about these issues too much or if I'm feeling insecure, but I do think I should be more able to leave these issues behind me.	An even deeper level of consciousness that includes personal evaluation of values, thoughts, behaviors, etc. It includes the potential for change. Here, the individual acknowledges that their point of view might not be the (only) right one.	Level 3: Evaluation and potential for change	

Note. The citations are from a continuous story from the same participant.

Table 2. The coding of empirical data for processes that the moral conflicts elicit.

Citation (meaningful unit)	Interpretation	Main mechanism code
I discussed with a member of staff how important it is to let me know about different patient cases, so that I'll be aware of how serious some of the patient-related issues are that we handle here. … We agreed that from time to time it's good to stop for a minute and talk about what's going on in patient work: what the nurses are experiencing, and whom they meet.	The participant describes a decision or behavior where they were able to maintain their personal values and act according to them.	Assimilation
I have to use my vacation days, and I'm sure that the staff will cope with the work for the one week that I'm on holiday. I've also taken care of who will take my calls and other things that need to be handled during my time off. … I'm now feeling positive about taking this holiday. I'm sure it will give me more strength to face future challenges and the working weeks ahead.	The situation includes (even minor) changes in personal behavior or values	Accommodation
How can I, as a manager, best influence my work community so that I don't allow cliques to form but still promote my personal aims in a determined way? How can I find the strength to cope in this situation as a supervisor?	The person describes a situation that is still on going and does not explicitly describe any solution that took place in the moral dilemma/conflict.	On-going process
I had to think whether I should raise the issue with the member of staff on the spot, or when I see her/him next time, in over a week. I decided on the latter option because I know that talking to this person will take a lot of time. My choice was also partly affected by my personal uncertainty about how best to raise this issue with her/him.	The participant describes an active attempt to get out of the situation (avoid it), e.g., by actively postponing the decision or choosing not to act.	Withdrawal

Table 2 continues.

Citation (meaningful unit)	Interpretation	Specification code for the main mechanism
I feel that I was being unjust towards the other member of staff. … However, I can't do anything else at this point than promise that we'll try to do everything we can to reduce his/her working time when we're making the shift rotas.	The person describes acting in a way that is not aligned with his or her own values. However, they also describe using different disengagement techniques to be able to justify their actions in that situation.	Self-protective
I've been listening patiently to the staff's worries for a long time. Is there an end to this, if the staff don't even want to move on? I've made my decision and it was well justified. … However, I stayed and answered everyone's questions, although my answers were such that they didn't want to hear or understand them.	The person does not consider any other options in the situation. Even though there might be some reflection on different viewpoints, their actual behavior is based on what the participant sees as right.	Defensive
I've been wondering if I should use the possibility of terminating the probationary period contract or if I should give [the employee] another chance, even though it puts a strain on the rest of the team. … After all, we all have the right to be ourselves also at work. That's why I'm giving the person the chance to finish the probationary period as agreed. I want to give them the chance to prove that they can learn and manage well in the job.	The situation includes a description of acting according to personal values, but the situation demanded moral ownership or courage to be able to carry out this decision/behavior.	Moral courage

Table 3. Managers' experiences of moral conflicts: Frequencies of moral conflict stories, levels of awareness in the situation, and mechanisms for handling the conflict.

ID	Stories		Story length (words)		Self-rated importance of the conflict[b]	Level of awareness				Main mechanism				Specification of the main mechanism		
	N	(%)[a]	M	Range	M	L1A	L1B	L2	L3	Assimilation	Accommodation	On-going	Withdrawal	Self-protective	Defensive	Moral courage
1	4	(25)	217	172–287	5.25	4	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	1
2	4	(25)	169	140–197	4.00	4	2	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	3	-
3	3	(19)	122	43–208	4.50	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	1
4	13	(81)	170	99–263	3.31	13	11	9	3	8	2	2	1	1	-	-
5	10	(63)	177	55–263	4.95	10	8	1	-	7	-	3	-	7	1	-
6	3	(19)	66	55–78	5.50	3	2	-	-	2	-	1	-	-	-	-
7	6	(38)	203	52–289	3.64	6	5	4	-	5	-	1	-	3	-	-
8	2	(13)	130	37–223	4.00	1	2	2	1	2	-	-	-	1	-	-
9	9	(56)	171	97–296	5.11	9	8	3	-	3	-	5	1	1	-	-
10	4	(25)	154	79–327	4.88	4	3	3	-	3	-	1	-	-	-	1

Note. ID = identification number; [a]the response rate (%) represents the number of responses out of the total 16 weeks of data collection; [b]each conflict was rated between 1 (not at all important) and 6 (very important); L1A = descriptive acknowledgement referring to the outside; L1B = descriptive acknowledgement referring to the inside; L2 = reflective acknowledgement; L3 = evaluative acknowledgement.
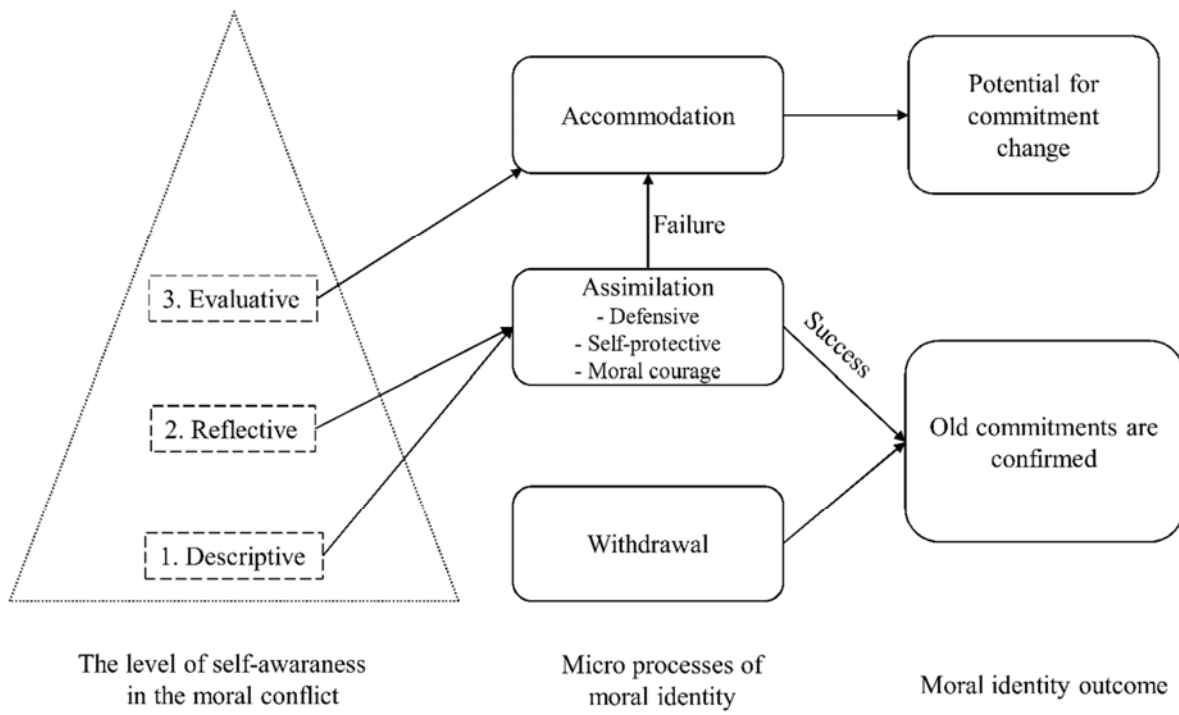
Figure 1. The integrative model of self-awareness and micro processes of moral
identity.