Moral Conceptions and Parent-Adolescent Congruence: What does it mean to be a moral person?

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## Background
In recent years scholars have argued for the importance of greater understanding naturalistic conceptions of moral maturity (Walker & Pitts, 1998). However, given the limited work done thus far in this area, we still know very little about how these conceptions of morality develop. Further, most prior studies of lay conceptions of morality have involved adults (e.g., Smith, Smith, & Christopher, 2007; Walker & Pitts, 1998). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship between adolescent's conceptions of morality and how it relates to their parents'.

## Method
### Participants
- Late Adolescents N=240
  - 52.3% female
  - 61.4% European American
- Early Adolescents N=272
  - 45.8% female
  - 71.7% European American

### Procedure
- Participants completed demographic questions.
- Participants completed a survey in which they rated how much certain character traits describe a moral person.
- Asked to "rate each trait according to how well it describes a highly moral person," Scale from 1 (does not describe a highly moral person at all) to 7 (describes a highly moral person very well).
- Example of traits participants rated: hard-working, modest, kind, doesn't do drugs, forgiving
- These character traits were sorted in clusters revealing 4 clusters of traits which early adolescents felt described a moral person and 5 clusters of traits which late adolescents felt described a moral person.
- The parents of the adolescents completed the same survey by indicating which traits describe a moral person.
- Analyses
- Pearson's correlation between adolescent, mother, and father ratings of moral conceptions for early/late adolescent cluster variables.

## Results
### Within subject cluster correlations
- Adolescents
  - All clusters were positively correlated at the p<.01 level
- Mothers
  - All clusters were correlated at the p<.01 level
- Negative correlations: early adolescent clusters: loving with honest, loving with integrity, knows right with honest, and knows right with integrity
- Fathers
  - All clusters were positively correlated at the p<.01 level
- Between subject cluster correlations:
  - Adolescent-Mother
  - Late adolescents were more frequently correlated with mother than early adolescents
  - 58.5% of the clusters were significantly correlated
- Adolescent-Father
  - All significant correlations were with late adolescents
  - 29.2% of the clusters were significantly correlated
- Father-Mother
  - Parents were more likely to be correlated on late adolescent measure
  - 75.4% of the clusters were significantly correlated
- Negative correlations: early adolescents cluster integrity mother with loving father and integrity father, late adolescent cluster honesty mother with integrity father

## Discussion
Within subject correlations show that the different dimensions of what it means to be a moral person are related to each other. There were some negative correlations for mothers indicating that there was a negative relationship between mother's conceptions of honesty and integrity with the loving and knows/chose right clusters. The negative correlations we find between parents indicates that mother's honesty and integrity clusters are negatively related to the father clusters loving and integrity. This might indicate that mothers have a different conception of morality such that they identify moral people to be less honest. One explanation might be that mothers identify a moral person as being sensitive to others feelings and should be less honest to that person in order to make them feel better. Other interesting findings are that mothers and adolescents are more likely to have similar moral conceptions than adolescents have with their fathers. This might be due to mothers spending more time with their children and so the greater congruence might be a function of time spent with their children. The finding that parents have more in common with the moral conceptions of late adolescents than early adolescents can be explained by the fact that moral sophistication increases with age. Late adolescents had more moral trait clusters and are more likely to have advanced moral reasoning akin to their parents.