

The Influence of Positive Emotion Interventions on Human Morality

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Abstract. Research on emotions and morality has shown correlations between specific emotions with certain moral inclinations. This literature review adopts the positive emotion taxonomy from Keltner and Cowen to discuss how four key positive emotions (compassion, awe, contentment, and gratitude) and their corresponding positive emotion interventions influence human morality. Drawing on several empirical studies, this literature review marks out four key mechanisms (prosocial behavior, compassion and moral expansiveness, emotional regulation, and social connectedness) that interact with each other within a feedback loop, which further provide cues for predicting moral inclinations via positive emotions. However, among most empirical studies, the causational relationship between positive emotions and human morality is still underexplored. Also, the suggested correlations are often limited to a bounded pair of emotion and moral aspect. Researchers should further look into the application of those relationships in real-world circumstances, such as morality cultivation for educational purposes. Overall, this review emphasizes the validity of applying positive emotions as cues in predicting people's moral inclinations and possible moral responses.

Keywords: positive emotions, moral inclination, human morality, positive psychology interventions

1. Introduction

Moral psychology inevitably involves the discussion of emotions. Emotion is often considered an intuitive response that either facilitates or inhibits certain actions and decision-making processes. It has been difficult to determine an exact point at which the effect of emotions occurs in people's responses to moral scenarios. Within the rapid and complex process of decision-making, emotion can play a role in interpreting the scenario or question, producing moral judgment, or acting out responses [1]. These possible roles sophisticate the discussion of emotions in morality. Though the timing issue is unresolved, neurobiological findings indicate that emotion-associated neural circuits occur in moral computations. Therefore, a previous study suggested that emotion might not operate within the unconscious "causal-intentional representation" of moral judgment, but could motivate actions and imply certain inclinations [1].

Avramova and Inbar's analysis confirms a co-occurrence between emotion and moral judgment, and further indicates that a corresponding relationship exists between specific moral transgressions

and specific emotions [2]. According to functional brain imaging, brain regions associated with emotion appear to be active when the person is considering personal dilemmas, which refers to the direct and personal agency of pushing a person in the footbridge dilemma. The activity of those brain areas is positively correlated with consequentialist responses; in other words, more utilitarian decisions. Also, studies typically show the degree of severeness is often judged according to the emotional state [2]. Emotions can reveal an evident preference towards reward and punishment. This is prominent in emotions such as outrage and disgust [2].

Nevertheless, the effect of emotions is multidimensional. Emotions need to be examined accordingly, exploring how a specific emotion type corresponds to the specific effect and mechanism.

As positive psychology has grown to be a popular field in recent years, many studies are interested in the influence of positive emotions on human morality. Rather than focusing on the relief of negative affect, it suggests cultivating and elevating positive emotions. Since positive emotions often lead to creative thinking and unusual cognitive associations, it is plausible to bring similar insights when experiencing moral scenarios [3]. One prominent connection between positive psychology and moral psychology is the study of prosocial behaviors. Positive emotions are shown to foster interpersonal communications, cooperation, and helping behaviors [3]. In recent decades, positive emotion interventions have become popular in various fields—medical, psychological, religious, etc. — as approaches to emotional regulation. These interventions regulate people’s emotional states in two ways: changing the external environment and altering internal responses. Often, it is difficult to modify complex external situations, which are similar to the perplexing moral scenarios that force people to make decisions. Once no better situation can be chosen, people need to redirect their emotional states to accommodate the established situations. Therefore, positive emotion interventions aim to help people make decisions to approach or avoid certain situations. Hence, the emotions might be capable of forecasting moral inclinations, and positive interventions can be the driving force towards predicting and even shaping human morality. In this review, the issues to be discussed are: what specific positive emotions are related to specific moral consequences? How do different positive emotion interventions in positive psychology impact different moral motivations or behaviors? What are some underlying mechanisms that connect emotions and human morality?

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical frameworks

Table 1. Discussion structure of the connection between positive emotions and human morality from the perspective of a social functional framework

Positive emotions	Category	Connection to the social functional framework
Compassion	Individual attachment	Altruism and prosocial motivation
Awe	Group relations	Moral expensiveness and ‘small-self’
Contentment	Goal and challenges	Satisfaction and relational stability
Gratitude	Gratitude/other-praising	Reciprocity and social moral responsibility

Emotions can appear in numerous forms and unique types. This review adopts the positive emotion taxonomy by Keltner and Cowen to differentiate emotions in categories [4]. Drawing on

empirical mapping, this taxonomy gives in total 11 states of positive emotions in a social functional framework. For these 11 states, this taxonomy is further divided into three relation types: attachment, group, and individual navigating environment. Such categorization takes into account the societal perspective, exhibiting a developing and convergent model for positive emotions. The ‘attachment’ category is more internally oriented, presenting emotions that could sprout individually. Within this category, compassion will be specifically discussed in this paper. ‘Group’ involves the necessity of others, relating to power and social-cultural practice. Awe from this category will be further explored. The third category reflects goals and challenges, in which contentment will be the main focus. Finally, though not included in Keltner and Cowen’s taxonomy, gratitude will be examined in this paper. As a popular concept in positive psychology, gratitude can be framed as a separate group in terms of its social exchange property. Gratitude involves emotions both received from others and developed internally.

From the perspective of intrapersonal effects and interpersonal effects, van Kleef and Lelieveld also proposed a social functional framework [5]. In this framework, functional trade-offs occur according to different social contexts, and decisions are calculated consequences of the trade-offs. They suggested that both personal experience and others’ expressions of perceived emotions can promote helping and prosocial behaviors. This framework helps to show dynamic social relationships, reflecting the complex reality of moral scenarios and decisions.

Between the relationship of positive emotions and moral scenarios, previous literature demonstrated the specific properties of emotions leading to different consequences in moral contexts [6]. For instance, mirth leads to higher tolerance to deontological violations, yet elevation, another type of positive emotion, promotes rejection of such violations and adherence to norms. Therefore, such functional specificity suggests the connection between the motivational tendencies in positive emotions and morality. This emphasizes the importance of targeted emotion in reviewing the effect of specific interventions on morality.

2.2. Roles of emotions

Compassion refers to the protective responses towards the vulnerable [5]. ‘Empathetic concern’, a word similar to it, refers to the short-term concern of others’ welfare; while ‘compassion’ is a more persistent attitude. Connecting compassion to moral behaviors, a previous study applied a 2-week compassion training using contemplative practices [7]. It is demonstrated that this short-term compassion intervention not only increased altruistic behaviors in the economic decision-making game but also altered neural responses to suffering. This presents a direct positive connection between compassion and prosocial behaviors. The social-cultural operation of compassion triggers mutual trust and cooperation, thus promoting prosocial behaviors and enhancing morality. It is sensitive to harm and violation of norms. In the short term, improved compassion experience is effective in facilitating interpersonal cooperation and helping behaviors.

Awe can elicit a metaphorical sense of smallness of self, and reduce the attention to oneself [5]. Keltner and Cowen describe it as “collective action and identity”, which transcends the self and orients oneself towards collective values [4]. Therefore, awe can minimize individual interests and enhance the group interests. Moreover, it sometimes even involves self-degradation for pursuing higher principles. A study demonstrates that awe induction leads to a sense of smallness and elevates the level of generosity [8]. Piff and his colleagues believe that the sense of smallness promotes altruism [8]. As triggered by the external environment, awe of nature or heroic models, awe seems to enlarge the scope of ‘self’. In other words, one’s focus shifts to a grander social-cultural group and considers oneself as represented by the group. When incorporated into a bigger circle, strangers

become in-group members; thus, promoting prosocial behaviors and lowering expectations of benefits. It can appear to be sharp in moral condemnation in terms of its high principles. These suggest that awe expands the social moral circle through the sense of smallness, pointing out its unique orientation towards group relations.

Contentment is the sense of satisfaction with situations [5]. Satisfaction via contentment can facilitate harmonious relationships and foster a stable social bond. Compared to awe, it offers a more tender emotion that helps to release tension and enhances trust and cooperation. There is a wide range of satisfied needs, including mental and physical aspects. A recent study has demonstrated that enjoying sweetness, a physically manipulated contentment, can facilitate prosocial behaviors [9]. On the other hand, bitterness, as a feeling opposite to contentment, can trigger moral disgust and further affect moral decisions. Though this sweetness study does not directly link to human morality with contentment, it still suggests an indirect association related to social and relational stability. Thus, increased contentment can build up the satisfaction level and foster people's moral drives and stable interpersonal relationships.

Studies have demonstrated that gratitude facilitates prosocial behaviors via motivated reciprocity to kindness [5, 10]. This motivation, internally, helps an individual to obtain self-efficacy, and externally, an individual gains social worth [10]. Both elevated self-efficacy and social worth can foster prosocial behaviors. Additionally, gratitude implies reciprocity and pulls in more individuals into the benefactor group of the reciprocal behaviors. Then, the bonds of cooperation are enhanced and broadened. Therefore, gratitude embeds the norm of reciprocity and fairness in interpersonal interactions and monitors these moral duties.

However, Zhu and colleagues found opposite effects of gratitude: gratitude can sometimes induce moral violations [11]. Interestingly, this type of moral violation occurs to be still in accord with the reciprocal theory. In the gratitude conditions, individuals are willing to help their benefactors at the cost of violating some moral norms [11]. In other words, though the in-group cooperation is reinforced, a broader norm of fairness is undermined. This further indicates how gratitude is a highly relational-limited emotion since people value their duties that occur in the reciprocity relationships. Even though the violation occurs, its social function continues to be identified as social promoting [11].

2.3. Roles of interventions

Studies have demonstrated that mindfulness training (or contemplative practices) is an effective intervention in promoting compassion [12, 13]. Its training mechanism fosters present-moment attention and inward body awareness. In the 10-week intervention session, mindfulness training helped to decrease empathic distress, which mediates the increase in self-compassion. Therefore, mindfulness training is effective in promoting acceptance to thereby raising one's compassion. A study from 2011 applied a one-day compassion-enhancing training developed in Buddhist contemplative traditions [13]. This practice aims to achieve "an attitude of emotional positivity, benevolence, and friendliness towards oneself and others" [13]. To test the prosocial behavior changes, this study introduced the Zurich Prosocial Game (ZPG). It is a treasure hunt game designed for two players, aimed at gaining as much money as possible in a short amount of time. The experiment group had a short-term compassion training while the control group had a one-day memory training, as a parallel to the compassion training. The findings showed that short-term compassion training is effective in promoting prosocial behaviors in ZPG, as those participants provided more help to their co-players compared to the control group. Additionally, a more recent study also indicated that a 2-week short-term compassion intervention significantly increased

participants' moral expansiveness [14]. Thus, compassion intervention, often in the form of mindfulness training, is shown to be effective in broadening individuals' moral inclusiveness by putting aside relational obligations. To conclude, compassion interventions can be used as systematic training for enhancing moral concern and moral motivation via the increase in compassion.

Awe induction is an intervention that typically employs nature experiences, immersive media, or reflective writing to induce feelings of vastness and smallness of self. It often involves the experience of self-transcendence. One study had found that experimentally induced awe increased generosity and prosocial actions, mediated by a sense of small self, a reduction of self-importance [8]. Another study from 2023, extended these findings, found a positive association between awe induction and moral expansiveness [15]. Participants were presented with videos related to nature awe, such as its destructive power and majestic beauty, non-nature awe, extreme slow-motion of water-droplets, and the Virtual Reality (VR) simulation showing an astronaut's vision of the Earth from space. After experiencing these different types of awe inductions, participants in different conditions all reported enhanced emotion of awe, though the negative-nature awe condition (the destructive power of Mother Nature) facilitated greater awe than the other conditions. Additionally, it argued for a difference in the effect of 'small-self' on human morality compared to the previous study. Rather than the reduction of self-importance, this study from 2023 found that it is the 'vastness vis-à-vis the self', a transcendent experience of feeling connection to a greater whole, in the 'small-self' that significantly predicted the moral expansion. Interventions on awe induction highlight how self-transcendent emotions extend morality beyond immediate intimate relationships, thus, similar to the compassion intervention, motivating broader moral concerns and ethical commitments.

Savoring intervention targeted at the elevation of contentment. It focuses on attentiveness to the present and amplifying positive experiences. A study in 2022 found that savoring interventions increased positive affect and resilience after social stress [9]. Also, another study from the same year suggested a positive correlation between prosocial behaviors and mere positive sensory experiences [16]. Therefore, savoring can indirectly support moral behaviors by strengthening emotion regulation. Additionally, savoring not only promotes positive emotions but also helps people to be less susceptible to social stress when facing moral dilemmas or other ethically concerning circumstances.

Gratitude practice is prominent in positive psychology interventions. It often takes the form of gratitude journaling, writing letters of thanks, or other forms of reflection on gratefulness. Algoe and Haidt showed that gratitude, elevation, and admiration reinforce moral emotions directed at others' virtuous actions, motivating prosocial actions [17]. Gratitude can indirectly predict initiatives on prosocial behaviors. A recent study, specifically targeting adolescents, found that gratitude practices (of 2-week gratitude journaling) decreased moral disengagement and aggressiveness [18]. Tested adolescents showed greater resistance to their self-justifying mechanism, which is responsible for unethical behaviors. Hence, it suggests that gratitude fosters greater moral accountability and discourages disengagement from moral norms. This aligns with Algoe and Haidt's broader perspective on gratitude, a sub-aspect of the 'other-praising' emotion, which orients individuals toward recognizing and valuing the moral excellence of other people [17]. Gratitude intervention serves as a motivational force to human morality. It not only promotes individual well-being, but also contributes to the collective social moral life by reminding individuals of virtues and moral principles. Therefore, gratitude intervention bridges the individual emotion regulation and social moral responsibility, and promotes prosocial behaviors.

These interventions demonstrate that positive emotion cultivations have distinct interactions with morality. The social functional specificity of each emotion suggests different morally relevant outcomes. Positive emotion interventions shape morality through varying impacts and help to predict moral inclinations.

2.4. Mechanisms

Each positive emotion, compassion, awe, contentment, and gratitude has corresponding interventions. Positive psychology interventions for enhancing those emotions are demonstrated to facilitate certain moral actions and can help to predict certain moral inclinations. A few underlying mechanisms that connect emotion cultivation with moral consequences can be concluded: prosocial behavior, compassion and moral expansiveness, emotional regulation, and social connectedness. These mechanisms capture the primary paths of how specific emotion interventions influence morality.

Prosocial behavior offers the most prominent link between positive emotion interventions and human morality. Because it has direct and observable measures and can provide more quantitative moral outcomes. A variety of interventions explicitly aim towards enhancing prosocial actions, such as helping others, cooperation, and the sense of fairness. Positive affect states guide individuals to an outward-thinking mechanism, making them more aware of others' needs and expectations; thus, motivating one's moral tendencies.

Compassion and moral expansiveness are highly intertwined components, and can be grouped together as the second primary mechanism between positive emotions and morality. Compassion interventions, often in the form of mindfulness (or contemplative practices), and awe inductions both bring moral expansiveness, to which people's emotions resonate beyond their intimate and immediate group. Similar effects of expanded moral inclusion appeared in both compassion and awe interventions, leading to more prosocial behaviors. It is plausible to consider compassion or awe as the foundation for certain types of prosocial actions. However, moral inclination fostered by compassion or awe is more inclusive than the general prosocial tendencies. For instance, compassion-related moral inclination specifically highlights the protective responses from parasympathetic activation [5].

Another highlighting mechanism of positive emotion interventions is enhancing emotion regulation capability, one of the rudimentary purposes of designing these interventions in positive psychology. It helps to lead people away from aggression, physical avoidance, or moral disengagement. Therefore, the regulatory skill on emotions helps people to avoid overwhelming emotional states and is supportive in making rationalized moral decisions.

The four mechanisms interplay with each other, creating a mutually-influencing system in practice. According to van Kleef and Lelieveld's framework, emotions are socially functional [5]. Hence, strengthening social bonds and interpersonal relationships are key outcomes of positive emotion interventions. Compassion and moral expansiveness directly foster prosocial actions. Through cultivated compassion and extended in-group thinking mode, these two mechanisms further strengthen social connectedness. By providing a sense of belongingness, increased social connectedness reminds people of their social moral responsibilities. With reciprocal influences, emotional regulation also facilitates the expression of prosocial behaviors, moral expansiveness, and social moral responsibility. Because a well-regulated individual can better deal with morally challenging contexts and respond to them with more morally rational and constructive decisions and action. Social connectedness, similarly, reinforces prosocial behaviors, emotional regulation, and moral expansiveness by providing an inclusive environment for people to practice their positive

emotions, such as gratitude. Consequently, these mechanisms form a dynamic loop, running from positive emotions to related moral responses. There are multiple pathways for a specific positive emotion to result in certain moral actions. In sum, those positive emotions function as social signals, assigning instructions to related mechanisms, and often have an amplified influence on individuals in the social groups. Therefore, positive emotions are often accompanied by certain moral responses and can be a valid element to predict people's moral inclinations.

3. Discussion

Though with considerable progress in learning positive emotion interventions and human morality, current research still faces some theoretical and practical limitations.

The most prominent limitation is the data collection from self-reports of short-term effects. In most literature, researchers assess moral outcomes either immediately after the interventions or within a month. Additionally, positive emotion studies were mainly conducted in a lab setup within a short period, lacking long-term tracking of results and exploration in realistic situations. Thus, little is known about the durability of the intervention effects and to what extent such effects are applicable in a real-world environment. Future research should employ more longitudinal and behavioral methods to observe realistic reactions in different real-world contexts. It is interesting to explore whether a higher rate of practice, such as a 7-times-a-week intervention schedule, can have more or less salient effects on predicting moral inclinations.

Secondly, future research should include more cross-cultural designs. Many studies are conducted in Western and well-educated populations, which do not generalize to other excluded populations. Samples from Eastern countries or from a low-educational-level region might differ in their emotional roles towards morality. For instance, compared to an individualist society, awe induced in a collective society might emphasize more on obedience than reverence, thus eliminating moral expansiveness instead of reinforcing broader moral concerns. Expanding research to more diverse cultures and socioeconomic populations will provide a more comprehensive understanding of interventions shaping morality.

Focusing on detailed outcomes, studies often examine a single emotion in isolation. However, this overlooks the interplay between different positive emotions. Emotions differed in nuances, and a single intervention can sometimes activate mechanisms from various emotions. Though this orientation of multiple emotions can be practically sophisticated, it is still an interesting topic if future works can capture the interactive effects of emotions on human morality, and whether the outcomes make emotions more reliable predictors of moral inclinations.

All the literature mentioned only suggests correlations between positive emotions and morality, lacking clear causal relationships. Conclusions remain tentative without experimental paradigms to assess the relationship between interventions and direct moral judgment tasks. Current findings only suggest emotions as possible predictors, but future research requires better-controlled designs to measure causal results for moral judgments.

4. Conclusion

Literature on the influence of positive emotion interventions on human morality highlights links between specific positive psychology practices and moral outcomes. This paper marks out four main underlying mechanisms: prosocial behavior, moral expansiveness, better emotional regulation, and elevated social connectedness. Positive emotions (compassion, awe, contentment, and gratitude) not only provide affective states but also serve as social and moral regulators that often facilitate

‘morally good’ actions. Namely, cooperative and ethical ones. Therefore, intentional cultivation of positive emotions via different interventions can meaningfully and effectively enhance moral inclinations and actions.

Considering the practical benefits of the findings, early emotion cultivation in adolescents might foster prosocial behaviors and interpersonal cooperation skills. Also, similar effects could be generalized to workplaces as well. Interventions such as awe induction and gratitude practice may strengthen cooperation and trust in teamwork, and facilitate an efficient working environment. Hence, learning the cultivation of positive emotions can be a practical strategy for building more ethical and tightly bonded societies.

In conclusion, intentional emotion cultivation via positive psychology interventions offers an insightful pathway for enhancing human morality in most situations. Literature acknowledges emotions not as individuals’ private state representations but as moral predictors with their specific social functions. This literature review emphasizes the potential of using positive emotions as indicators in predicting moral inclinations, offering new directions for future interdisciplinary morality studies and their applications.

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