

# The Influence of Moral Identity on Altruistic Behavior of College Students Receiving Assistance: An Empirical Study Based on Moral Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

To explore the mechanism of the dual dimensions of moral identity (internalization and symbolization) on the altruistic behavior of college students receiving assistance, based on classic moral philosophical frameworks such as deontology, virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and social contract theory, the author has conducted a cross-sectional survey of 600 college students using the "Moral Identity Scale" and the "College Student Altruistic Behavior Scale". The research results show that there is no significant difference in the score of moral identity internalization between assisted college students and ordinary college students, and the score is significantly lower in the symbolic dimension. This study systematically explains the core characteristics of "stable implicit moral identity and insufficient explicit moral practice" among assisted college students from the perspective of moral philosophy, providing theoretical support and practical paths for the cultivation of moral practice in university virtue-fostering education.

**Keywords:** College students receiving assistance, Moral identity, Altruistic behavior, Moral philosophy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

Against the backdrop of deepening the funding and education system in universities, the altruistic behavior of college students receiving assistance (i.e. the group of college students receiving economic assistance) is not only an outward manifestation of their moral literacy, but also a core indicator of the effectiveness of the funding policy from economic assistance to value guidance. Moral identity, as a key mediator connecting moral cognition and behavior, is defined as the "degree to which individuals integrate moral traits into their self-concept". Aquino and Reed's (2002) dual-dimensional model (internalization, symbolization) provides a classic framework for analyzing this process - the internalization dimension points to the core penetration of moral principles into self-awareness, while the symbolization dimension focuses on the tendency to display moral identity through external behavior, language, etc.[1]

Existing research has confirmed a significant positive correlation between moral identity and altruistic behaviors such as volunteer service and charitable donations. However, there are obvious limitations in research on the beneficiaries: firstly, most studies focus on gratitude awareness and feedback behavior, lacking a systematic examination of the differences in the dual dimensional structure of moral identity; Secondly, the explanation of the mechanism of difference formation mostly stays at the description of phenomena, without delving into the theoretical roots of moral philosophy; Thirdly, the selection of measurement tools lacks specificity and fails to fully adapt to the altruistic behavior characteristics of college students. Based on this, this study adopts the "College Student Altruistic Behavior Scale" developed by Li Yanfang, combined with the four core theories of moral philosophy, to explore the intrinsic relationship between the moral identity and altruistic behavior of assisted college students. This not only fills the theoretical gap in the study of moral identity of the assisted group, but also

provides empirical evidence for the cultivation of moral practice in the "sponsored education" work of universities.

## 1.2 Literature Review

### 1.2.1 Research Progress on the Dual-dimensional Theory of Moral Identity

The research on the structural dimensions of moral identity has undergone a paradigm shift from single-dimensional to dual-dimensional. Early research viewed moral identity as a single-dimensional psychological structure, emphasizing the overall impact of moral values on self-concept. Aquino and Reed (2002) first proposed a dual-dimensional model of moral identity based on social cognitive theory, and achieved operational measurement of dimensions through the development of the MIM scale. The internalized dimension focuses on the importance of moral traits to oneself, while the symbolic dimension focuses on the explicit expression of moral identity.[2] The study conducted by Xiang Yanhui et al. (2022) on 387 college students found that the internalization dimension of moral identity plays a mediating role between social support and moral sensitivity, while the mediating effect of the symbolic dimension is not significant, indicating that there is differentiation in the impact mechanism of the two dimensions on moral related behavior.[3]

### 1.2.2 Research Status on Moral Identity and Altruistic Behavior of College Students Receiving Assistance

Further research on the college student population suggests that the dual dimensions of moral identity have a "situational dependence" on altruistic behavior.[4] For ordinary college students with relatively superior economic conditions, the cost of symbolic behavior (such as publicly participating in public welfare and donating property) is lower, so the correlation between their symbolic dimension and altruistic behavior is stronger; For college students receiving assistance, economic resource constraints and time cost pressures (such as the need to work part-time to earn living expenses) may inhibit their symbolic behavior, leading to a special pattern of association between the two dimensions and altruistic behavior. Han Lili et al. (2022) pointed out that although the financial support work of colleges and universities attaches great importance to economic support, the cultivation of the moral and practical abilities of

assisted students is insufficient, resulting in a disconnect between some assisted students' inner identification with altruism and a lack of practical behavior.[5] The reason may be related to factors such as economic resource constraints and time allocation pressure,[6] but the underlying mechanism of this phenomenon has not yet been explained from a moral philosophy perspective.

### 1.2.3 Theoretical Correlation Between Moral Philosophy and Altruistic Behavior

The four core schools of moral philosophy provide important theoretical support for explaining the relationship between moral identity and altruistic behavior. Deontological ethics, represented by Kant, emphasizes that the core of moral behavior is the adherence to the universal law of obligation. It believes that the internalized essence of moral identity is the rational acceptance of the universality of altruistic obligations, which has stability beyond context. Virtue ethics originated from Aristotle's "Ethika Nikomachea"[7], which advocates that moral behavior is the outward practice of virtue, emphasizing that "virtue needs to be cultivated through repeated actions". The symbolic dimension of moral identity is essentially a concrete manifestation of virtue practice. Utilitarianism, represented by Bentham and Mill, holds that the value of moral behavior lies in the maximum amount of happiness it generates,[8] and that the symbolic behavior of beneficiaries may be suppressed due to cost-benefit calculations[9]. Social contract theory, represented by Rousseau, proposes that the "general will" is the core of the moral community, and individuals form a common moral code through contracts.[10] As beneficiaries of social resource redistribution, the internalization of moral identity among beneficiary students may stem from their recognition of the "fair cooperation system", while symbolic behavior is influenced by the supportive environment of the community. Existing research has not yet integrated the four major theories into the study of moral identity among college students receiving assistance, lacking a systematic theoretical explanation.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

### 2.1 Subject

The research used stratified sampling method to select 600 college students from 12 universities (including key undergraduate, regular

undergraduate, and junior college) in S city as participants. Among them, 302 college students received official economic assistance such as national scholarships, school scholarships, and social donation scholarships, with a duration of  $\geq 1$  academic year, and 298 ordinary college students did not receive any form of economic assistance. Basic characteristics of the sample: The gender distribution is 304 males (50.7%) and 296 females (49.3%); The grade distribution is 152 freshmen (25.3%), 148 sophomores (24.7%), 151 juniors (25.2%), and 149 seniors and above (24.8%); The distribution of school types includes 201 key undergraduate students (33.5%), 199 regular undergraduate students (33.2%), and 200 associate degree students (33.3%). All participants voluntarily participated in the survey, with no history of cognitive impairment or mental illness, and complete and valid data filling. In this study, demographic variables were only included as control variables in the analysis and will not be discussed in detail.

## 2.2 Measurement Tools

In terms of measuring moral identity, the research used a Chinese version scale developed by Aquino and Reed (2002) and revised by Chinese scholars, consisting of 10 items, divided into two dimensions: internalization (5 items) and symbolization (5 items). The research used a 5-point scoring system (1=completely disagree, 5=completely agree), the higher the dimension score, the higher the corresponding level of moral identity. In this research, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.78, the internalization dimension alpha was 0.75, and the symbolization dimension alpha was 0.73. Both reliability and validity met the requirements of psychometrics. In the measurement of altruistic behavior, a scale developed by Li Yanfang (2008)[11] was used, consisting of 20 items covering five dimensions: "responsibility dimension", "respect and care for others dimension", "concern and attention to oneself dimension", "altruistic behavior performance dimension", and "egoistic behavior and concept dimension". The research used a 5-point scoring system (1=almost never, 5=almost always), the higher the total score, the higher the level of altruistic behavior. In this research, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.83, and the alpha coefficients of

each dimension ranged from 0.76 to 0.81, indicating good reliability and validity.

## 2.3 Data Processing

The questionnaire was processed using SPSS 26.0 software. The specific analysis steps include: descriptive statistical analysis of the basic characteristics of the sample and the distribution of each variable; Independent sample t-test to compare the dual dimensional differences in moral identity between assisted college students and ordinary college students; Pearson correlation analysis examines the correlation between the dual dimensions of moral identity and altruistic behavior. The significance level is set to  $\alpha=0.05$ , with a two-sided test.

# 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

## 3.1 Common Method Deviation Test

The research used Harman single factor test to test for common method bias. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on all scale items without rotation, and the results showed that a total of 12 common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted. The variance explained by the first common factor was 18.7% (less than the critical criterion of 40%), indicating that there was no significant common method bias in this study.

## 3.2 Descriptive Statistics

Data analysis shows ("Table 1") that the scores of college students receiving assistance in the internalization dimension ( $M=3.82$ ,  $SD=0.51$ ) are similar to those of ordinary college students ( $M=3.79$ ,  $SD=0.48$ ); In the symbolic dimension, the scores of college students receiving assistance ( $M=3.21$ ,  $SD=0.53$ ) were significantly lower than those of ordinary college students ( $M=3.58$ ,  $SD=0.49$ ); In terms of the total score of altruistic behavior, the scores of college students receiving assistance ( $M=3.35$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ) were lower than those of ordinary college students ( $M=3.62$ ,  $SD=0.52$ ).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students receiving assistance and ordinary students on various variables ( $M \pm SD, n=600$ )

Variable	College students receiving assistance (n=302)	Ordinary college students (n=298)
Moral identity - Internalization	$3.82 \pm 0.51$	$3.79 \pm 0.48$
Moral identity - Symbolization	$3.21 \pm 0.53$	$3.58 \pm 0.49$
Total score of altruistic behavio	$3.35 \pm 0.57$	$3.62 \pm 0.52$

### 3.3 Correlation Analysis

The independent sample t-test results ("Table 2") show that there is no significant difference in the score of moral identity internalization between college students receiving assistance and ordinary college students ( $t=0.72, p=0.47>0.05$ , Cohen's

$d=0.06$ ); On the symbolic dimension, the scores of college students receiving assistance were significantly lower than those of ordinary college students ( $t=-4.31, p<0.001$ , Cohen's  $d=0.35$ ), and the effect size was at a moderate level, indicating that this difference has statistical and practical significance.

Table 2. Dual-dimensional difference test results of moral identity between students receiving assistance and ordinary students

Variable	t value	p value	Cohen's d
Moral identity - Internalization	[0.72.]	[0.47.]	[0.06.]
Moral identity - Symbolization	[-4.31.]	<0.001	[0.35.]

## 4. RESEARCH DISCUSSIONS

Moral identity, as an important component of individual self-concept, has a profound impact on the altruistic behavior of college students receiving assistance. Moral identity holds special significance among the group of college students receiving assistance.

### 4.1 The Philosophical Essence of the Undifferentiated Internalization Dimension of Moral Identity: the Consistency of the Core of Moral Identity

The consistency in the internalization dimension of moral identity between college students receiving assistance and ordinary college students essentially lies in the fact that there is no difference in the degree of acceptance of moral core values between the two groups.

Aristotle believed that the internalization of moral identity is the formation of the "moral core"[7] - when an individual identifies with altruistic virtues such as "generosity" and "justice" and regards them as the "core of their own character", the internalization process is completed. In this study, the lack of differences in the internalization dimension indicates that although college students receiving assistance face economic difficulties, they do not deny the core value of altruistic virtue due to resource shortages. Most beneficiaries still consider "helping others" as a necessary condition for "becoming a good person", which is consistent with the understanding of "moral core" among ordinary college students. From the perspective of deontological ethics, Kant defined the internalization of moral identity as "the autonomous acceptance of the universal law of obligation".[12] When individuals recognize that "helping others is a universal moral law" and view it as a "choice of their own will" rather than an external constraint, internalization is completed. In this study, both college students receiving

assistance and ordinary college students were able to accept the universality of altruistic obligations from the perspective of "practical rationality". Most beneficiaries recognize that "accepting funding means assuming a duty of giving back," and this recognition does not stem from external pressure of "fear of being blamed," but from an inherent understanding that "duty is a moral value in itself". Rawls' theory of "fairness and justice" further confirms that as beneficiaries of social resource redistribution, the internalization of "altruistic obligations" by college students receiving assistance is essentially their recognition of the "fair cooperation system".[13] Individuals realize that they have benefited from the altruistic behavior (support) of others, and therefore need to maintain fairness in the system through altruism. This sense of obligation based on justice is consistent with the internalization logic of "altruistic obligation" among ordinary college students, and ultimately achieves dimensional consistency.

Based on the perspective of emotionalism, Hume regards the internalization of moral identity as the fusion of sympathetic emotions and self-awareness.[14] When an individual identifies that "sympathy for others' difficulties is worth transforming into self-worth", internalization is completed. The lack of difference in internalization dimensions in empirical evidence indicates that both assisted college students and ordinary college students are able to empathize with others' difficulties and regard this empathy as the "core part of self-emotion". Due to their own experiences of difficulties, beneficiaries are more likely to develop empathy towards those in similar situations. This "empathy of personal experience" actually strengthens their internalization of the "empathy value" and forms a dimensional consistency with ordinary college students. Smith's "bystander perspective" further explains that the internalization of moral identity is an individual's self-projection towards the "ideal bystander".[15] When an individual agrees that the ideal me should empathize with others' difficulties, empathy is integrated into their self-awareness.

#### **4.2 The Philosophical Root of Significantly Low Symbolic Dimension: Theoretical Deconstruction of the Triple Blocking Mechanism**

The significant underestimation of moral identity symbolization among college students receiving assistance is not due to the "internal

deficiency" of moral identity, but rather to the hindrance of "internal identity transforming into external manifestation".

The first is the lack of moral practice caused by resource constraints. Aristotle emphasized that the symbolic essence of moral identity is the manifestation of moral practice. Virtue needs to be manifested through "repeated moral actions", and without practical opportunities, inner virtue cannot be transformed into symbolic behavior. The core dilemma faced by college students receiving assistance is the dual constraint of economic and time resources, which leads to a lack of opportunities for symbolic practice. From the perspective of economic resources, symbolic behavior often requires certain material support (such as participating in public welfare donations, purchasing moral propaganda materials), but college students receiving assistance are forced to give up such behavior due to tight living expenses; From the perspective of time resources, symbolic behavior requires time investment (such as participating in public welfare activities and long-term volunteer service), while college students receiving assistance often need to earn living expenses through part-time jobs, resulting in fragmented time and inability to participate in symbolic practices that require sustained investment. MacIntyre referred to this "lack of practice" as the "contextual rupture of moral manifestation".[16] The symbolization of moral identity needs to rely on the support of a "community of practice" (such as schools providing public welfare platforms and peers participating in symbolic behavior), but college students receiving assistance find it difficult to integrate into the "community of symbolic practice" due to resource constraints, ultimately leading to a lower dimension of symbolization.

The second is the "symbol display inhibition" caused by identity anxiety. The symbolization of moral identity is the "outward expression of moral emotions", which requires a "positive self-image cognition" as a prerequisite. The special dilemma faced by college students receiving aid is the anxiety caused by their "beneficiary identity", which leads to their inhibition of the display of symbolic behavior. On the one hand, college students receiving assistance may inhibit symbolic behavior due to concerns about being misunderstood. When individuals openly participate in altruistic symbolic behavior (such as organizing public welfare activities), they may face the questioning of "why do they still need to help

others even though they need help themselves". This potential negative evaluation triggers identity anxiety, prompting them to choose to "quietly hide" rather than "actively display"; On the other hand, college students receiving assistance may inhibit symbolic behavior due to "self-value doubt". Some beneficiaries equate "accepting help" with "insufficient self-ability", which leads to self-doubt and avoidance of symbolic behavior, avoiding the embarrassment of "failure due to insufficient ability". Individuals, concerned about the negative evaluation of their symbolic behavior by ideal bystanders, actively reduce their outward expression, ultimately leading to a lower level of symbolic dimension. This also explains why college students who receive aid are more inclined to "help others privately" (such as anonymous donations, silently helping classmates) rather than "publicly display".

The last is the weakening of instrumental cognition and the dissolution of symbolic meaning. Kant emphasized that the symbolization of moral identity should be a "pure practice of the law of obligation", transcending the calculations of instrumental rationality. The special dilemma faced by college students receiving assistance is their instrumental cognition of "symbolic behavior", which weakens their identification with symbolic meanings and thus reduces their behavior display. Some college students receiving assistance view "symbolic behavior" as a "tool for obtaining external rewards" (such as "participating in public welfare to earn scholarship points" and "displaying moral images to avoid being accused of ingratitude"), rather than a "natural expression of internal moral identity". When this instrumental cognition is formed, if external rewards are lacking, individuals will reduce their symbolic behavior. Some college students receiving assistance bind the symbolic practice of altruistic obligations with the acquisition of personal interests. When interests do not exist, the symbolic expression of obligations loses its motivation, ultimately leading to a lower symbolic dimension.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Combined with deontological ethics, virtue ethics, utilitarianism, etc., improving the university funding system is crucial for cultivating altruistic behavior among college students receiving assistance. On the one hand, it is necessary to reduce the worries of college students receiving assistance by increasing funding intensity and

improving funding accuracy. On the other hand, when cultivating altruistic behavior among college students receiving assistance, it is also necessary to not only focus on cultivating their sense of moral responsibility and obligation, but also guide them to recognize the positive significance of altruistic behavior for others and society, strengthen moral education, and promote the emergence of altruistic behavior.

The limitation of this study is that a cross-sectional survey design was used, and variables such as "funding type" and "funding duration" were not included in the study, making it difficult to explore their moderating effects on moral identity; Although the analysis is based on the theory of moral philosophy, the interaction between different philosophical perspectives has not been further explored, and the analysis from the perspective of moral philosophy mainly focuses on theoretical interpretation. Future research can adopt a longitudinal tracking design to verify the causal chain between symbolic dimensions and altruistic behavior, and intervene in symbolic practices through experimental methods to observe changes in altruistic behavior. Qualitative research methods can also be combined, such as conducting in-depth interviews to further explore the psychological mechanisms of moral identity and moral cognition and behavioral choice logic of college students receiving assistance, thereby promoting their altruistic behavior.

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