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ABSTRACT

This document describes the use of the case study method of behavioral science research in an investigation of exceptional moral commitment. The aim of the study was to learn more about the nature, development, and expression of this kind of exceptional commitment. The paper discusses why this particular research method was chosen as the most appropriate for the researchers' question, what they were able to learn from it, and what its limitations were. The study consisted of lengthy interviews with 23 people identified as "moral exemplars" according to criteria contained in the author's book "Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment" (1992), but not included in this paper. The subjects had contributed to a number of fields including civil rights, civil liberties, poverty, and the environment. From these 23, five people were selected for more intensive study, and were interviewed several times. Excerpts from interviews with one of these subjects, civil rights activist Virginia Durr, is used as illustration in the document. The researchers used oral histories, autobiographies, interviews with co-workers, and others documents when available. Analysis was approached through descriptive accounts of the subjects' own perspective on their lives, moral goals, and work toward these goals and their representations of the mental strategies they used to maintain their commitment under difficult circumstances. The case material illustrates a developmental process of the transformation of goals through social influence. Positivity and unity of self and moral goals are discussed. (DK)

Case Studies of Exceptional People: What Can They Teach Us?

Anne Colby

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SRCD 1993
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I will describe in this paper one use of the case study method, for a very particular purpose, the investigation of exceptional moral commitment. The aim of the study, which I did with my collaborator Bill Damon, was to learn more about the nature, development, and expression of this kind of exceptional commitment. The study illustrates one approach to the use of case study material. I will discuss the reasons we chose this method as the most appropriate one for our research questions, what we were able to learn from it, and what its limitations have been.

We used multiple cases because we wanted to see whether we could identify common features of moral commitment that would cut across a group that was diverse in other ways. Yet we also wanted to illuminate the particular adaptations that characterized the individuals in the study. In this sense, our approach was both nomothetic and idiographic.

We chose this method as best suited to our research questions for several reasons. They include the following:

(1) We were interested in sustained, long-term moral commitment, expressed in significant and complex sets of activities in relation to such real-life concerns as poverty or civil rights. We, therefore, assumed that we needed to study many facets of the exceptional individuals' approach to morality, not just particular isolated elements such as moral judgment. In fact, we needed to know a great deal about the individuals even before determining whether they met the criteria we had established for inclusion in the study. (We were interested in commitments that endured over many years and the process of engagement, the means by which the commitment was sustained.)

(2) In attempting to understand the development of these extraordinary people and how their deep commitment is formed over time, we needed to look at their moral goals and the transformations in these goals over the course of their lives, and at the patterns of social influence that contributed to the transformations. We thus needed to have information that would allow us to describe their goals over time, within the context of their life histories, social relationships, and other influences.

(3) We needed to have rich phenomenological data, because

we were interested in the development of these people's moral beliefs, commitments, and goals and the conscious strategies that they used to sustain their commitments over time, in the face of very difficult challenges. (We were not seeking to explain the existence of the phenomenon from a different level of analysis but to understand the conscious psychological processes.)

(4) One of the main drawbacks of the method we used was its reliance on retrospective data. We did not consider this to be a critical flaw, because we were interested in the exemplars' reconstructions of their lives and their current sense of what had been important in their pasts. Still, it would have been very advantageous for our analysis of the developmental changes the exemplars exhibited to have, along with their current reconstructions, longitudinal data on their goals, preoccupations, personalities, and self descriptions.

Normally, this would call for an effort to locate existing longitudinal data sets that could be reanalyzed with our questions in mind. But unfortunately, we were unable to use existing longitudinal samples for the study, because exceptional moral commitment is a relatively rare phenomenon and to our knowledge no existing prospective study has sufficient numbers of such highly committed people in its sample to make such a study feasible.

The Study

We conducted lengthy interviews with 23 people identified as "moral exemplars" according to criteria discussed elsewhere. (See Anne Colby and William Damon, Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment, Free Press, New York, 1992.) The study participants were white, black, and Latino. They came from a range of religious and political perspectives; and they were mostly in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. Their education ranged from high school drop-out through professional degrees. They had contributed to a number of fields, including civil rights, civil liberties, poverty, peace, the environment, and the sanctuary movement.

We chose five people for more intensive study, and these we reinterviewed several times. We also used oral histories, autobiographies, interviews with co-workers, and other documents whenever they were available. Our approach to the analysis of the case material involved a descriptive account of their own perspective on their lives, moral goals and work toward those goals, and their representations of the mental strategies they used to maintain their commitment under difficult circumstances.

In the five intensive cases, we negotiated our interpretations with the exemplars, treating them as collaborators in our effort to understand their life patterns. Although we did not end with the exemplar's own account (we had, after all, our own theoretical framework that we wished to elaborate through this study), we did wish to begin there. This meant taking seriously the exemplar's own interpretations. It also meant trying to capture the unique meaning that each exemplar had constructed for his or her individual life and all the events that constituted it.

Transformation of Goals

In our study of moral commitment, Bill and I used the case material in part to illustrate and flesh out a theoretical account of a developmental process we call "the transformation of goals through social influence. This is a concept that we had originally developed by looking at a single case, in fact a case of someone we had not even studied directly -- Andrei Sakharov. That this theoretical account was such a good fit with the lives of the individuals in our moral exemplars study obviously was not a finding of the study. But it did help us to articulate the developmental process in greater detail and to get some initial sense of its usefulness across a diverse range of life patterns.

Let me offer two examples of the application of this concept of transformation of goals to the life of one of the women in our study -- Virginia Foster Durr. Virginia Durr is a white woman from Alabama born in 1903. She grew up in a pervasively racist society and held racist and segregationist views herself until her early 30s. In her 30s she gradually changed her perspective on race and became from then on for more than 30 years a major figure in the civil rights movement. She worked for many years to abolish the poll tax which was used to prevent women, blacks, and poor people from voting in the south and also worked to desegregate the District of Columbia and Alabama. Her story is one of dramatic change, and we argue that the concept of transformation of goals through social influence provides a plausible account of a key process through which that change occurred.

The following incident is typical of many that we identified in the lives of all of the participants in this study:

Upon entering her sophomore year at Wellesley College, Virginia moved into the dormitory and went down to the dining room that evening for dinner. "The first night, I went to the dining room and a Negro girl was sitting at my table. My God,

I nearly fell over dead. I couldn't believe it. I just absolutely couldn't believe it. .... I promptly got up, marched out of the room, went upstairs, and waited for the head of the house to come. .... I told her I couldn't possibly eat at the table with a Negro girl. I was from Alabama and my father would have a fit."

The head of the house calmly explained that the rules of the college required her to eat at that table for a month and if she did not comply, she would have to withdraw from college. This was the first time that Virginia's values had ever been seriously challenged and she stayed awake all night worrying about the dilemma. She was afraid of angering her father, yet she enjoyed Wellesley and very much wanted to stay. "Now I was having the time of my life at Wellesley. I had never had such a good time. I was in love with a Harvard law student, the first captain of Virginia Military Institute, and life was just a bed of roses. But I had been taught that if I ate at the table of a Negro girl I would be committing a terrible sin against society. About dawn, I realized that if nobody told Daddy, it might be all right. That was the only conclusion I came to. I didn't have any great feeling of principle. I had not wrestled with my soul." Virginia stayed at Wellesley and spent a month eating at the table with the black girl, whom she came to like and respect. "That was the first time I became aware that my attitude was considered foolish by some people and that Wellesley College wasn't going to stand for it. That experience had a tremendous effect on me."

This incident illustrates what we are calling the transformation of goals as it applies to Virginia's development, a process that we consider to be central to moral development, especially in adulthood. By transformation of goals, we are referring to a process in which development occurs as a result of the interaction of the goals, motives, values, and beliefs that a person brings to a situation and the social influences she encounters when she engages with the situation and the activities it entails. People enter situations in order to meet a particular set of goals and then by engaging with the situation and the people in it, their goals are changed, in the case of people who are developing morally, the goals are becoming elevated and broadened.

Virginia's goal in agreeing to sit at the dining table with the black student was very clearly to be allowed to remain at Wellesley, in large part so that she could continue her active and entertaining social life. The result was not an immediate awakening to a new perspective on race relations and civil rights. The incident did move Virginia along a

perceptible step in that direction, however. She was forced to interact with an educated, middle class black girl for the first time and realized that the girl was intelligent and civilized. She became aware of the fact that her views on segregation were not shared by the community she had joined, a community she prized very highly. Although this incident did not change Virginia's racial views overnight, it did sow the seeds of doubt about the beliefs she was raised with.

Virginia's involvement in the fight against the poll tax provides an even more illuminating example of the transformation of goals because it took place over such an extended period of time.

After Virginia's marriage to Clifford Durr, the couple moved to Washington, DC where Clifford was a member of Roosevelt's New Deal administration. This was a very exciting time to be in Washington and Virginia wanted to participate in what was going on. She decided to join the Women's Division of the National Democratic Committee, in part so that she would have an opportunity to work with Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she admired very much, so that she could meet and work with some other interesting women, and so that she would have a role in the political excitement of the day.

Virginia soon became intensely involved in the fight for women's right to vote, but was not at first sympathetic to blacks' struggle for equal rights. When she began working with the National Democratic Committee, Virginia was still, from her own subsequent point of view, "an absolute Alabama racist." Although she very much admired Mrs. Roosevelt and the other women on the committee, she initially disagreed with them completely on the race issue. She worked closely with these more liberal white women over an extended period, and also became acquainted with such important black women leaders as Mary McLeod Bethune and Mary Church Terrell. "And I'm absolutely positive that the reason I changed is because I was working with all these women in the Democratic Committee and women whom I admired. And I was, all of a sudden, you know, here I was working with women who thought my whole tradition was wrong. I admired Mrs. Roosevelt tremendously, and she thought I was wrong."

Because of the coalitions that formed around the voting rights issue, Mrs. Durr soon began to work closely with black organizations and distinguished black women such as Mrs. Bethune. The activities of the committee itself violated segregation laws, because the committee held integrated meetings in cities that outlawed them, held meetings in hotels reserved for whites only, and the like. In part through her

association with the leaders of these organizations, Mrs. Durr became very much involved not only with voting rights but other civil rights issues as well, especially the issue of desegregation.

Combined with an intellectual awakening on these issues stimulated by her more enlightened friends in Washington, the opportunity and need to work closely with black people on the poll tax issue led to a transformation of Virginia Durr's goals that changed her life dramatically, indeed changed fundamentally who she was.

Virginia describes her experience of change this way:

AC: Now, before I start asking the questions that I came with, I would like to hear a little bit more about your experience of not having made choices, as you put it. Maybe you could just talk about that a little bit. You've mentioned that a couple of times...

VD: You make, I suppose you make choices every day of your life. But the thing is, as far as the decisions I made concerning my part say in the racial struggle in the south, it wasn't a decision, it was something that grew over a period of years and one thing led to another. But I never (like Paul on the road to Damascus, was it?) thought that I saw a revealing light and just all of a sudden saw the light. But it was over a period of a number of years that I began to change my feelings. And the same thing was true really about - well in a way, it was true about so many things. I changed as things happened. Rather, things happened and I changed because they happened.

In addition to elaborating a theoretical idea that we had begun to describe earlier, the use of 23 diverse cases allowed us to identify common characteristics that cut across all or almost all of the interviews. The three themes that we identified were so dramatically evident in the case material that we were able to identify them with very little systematic coding or analysis of the interviews.

Again, let me give you an example from the case of Virginia Durr. Because of the principled stands on race and civil liberties that they took, Mrs. Durr and her husband lived for most of their adult lives with very little money, sometimes so little that they could not afford to maintain an independent household. When they had moved back to Alabama from Washington and were involved in the desegregation of Montgomery and Birmingham, they encountered a great deal of

hostility and social isolation and their children were treated so badly by their friends and teachers that the two youngest had to be sent north to live.

In thinking back on the difficult times and what it was that kept her going, Virginia Durr talks most about her absolute certainty that what she was doing was right. "I knew that the things we were working for were right. When times get bad, you only have one thing to fall back on -- that you believe in what you are doing. My children, as they reached young adulthood, would sometimes say they wished I had stayed at home and baked brownies as other mothers did. But what good were brownies in a society that tolerated poverty and denied people the education that enabled them to get out of poverty. What good were brownies in a society that denied people the right to vote?"

Like so many of the other exemplars in this study, Virginia Durr denies having questioned or struggled with her beliefs. She knew what was right to do and knew that she was responsible to carry it out. To a large extent, she disregarded the costs and dangers entailed, although she was well aware that they existed. That is, she did not weigh the costs strategically against the benefits when issues of principle were at stake.

AC: When you were working on all these things and so on, were there some times when you weren't sure what you should do? It seemed that many times it seemed very obvious what you needed to do and so on, but were there times when you really felt in a dilemma, you had trouble making decisions or you found it difficult?

VD: No, I can't remember that. I remember people saying, "You can't be self-righteous, you're so self-righteous. You know you're right." Well I did know I was right and I felt that denying anybody the right to vote was wrong. I felt to segregate people was wrong. I never had any doubts about it. You see, you're terribly criticized when you do these things that are against the majority. If you don't know you're right, you have nothing to fall back on. I knew I was right. I was actually certain of it; I never had any doubts.

When she thinks back on the pressures of the times, Virginia Durr realizes that if she had it to do over again, she would no doubt make the same choices:

AC: Would you really, do you think, remembering the urgency of what was going on, do you think you would have made

different choices?

VD: Well, there were no choices to make.

All of our other exemplars echoed almost exactly these words.

Two other characteristics stood out in the same dramatic way. They are positivity, which refers to the exemplars' positive approach to life, enjoyment of their work, and optimism; and unity of self and moral goals, which refers to the central place of the exemplars' moral goals in their conceptions of their own identity and the integration of their personal and moral goals. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate further on these two ideas. (See Some Do Care for a full discussion.)

These characteristics showed up very clearly in the 23 cases we carried out. The next step should have been to look at a number of matched comparison groups to see how the exemplars resembled or differed from such groups as ordinary people, fanatics, and people who are highly committed to pursuits that do not have a strong moral cast. Unfortunately, given the labor intensive nature of the case studies and limitations of our funding, we did not have the resources to collect data from comparison samples. Perhaps someone else will do this comparative study. Our guess about this is that some of the qualities we saw in the exemplars would indeed be shared by highly committed artists, scientists, and the like, and that some would be shared by fanatics, but that the full configuration we have described is particular to people who are highly morally committed.

Throughout the study, we combined standardized and individualized procedures for examining the exemplars' lives. Our wish to do so reflects our belief in the usefulness of both nomothetic and idiographic approaches to broad questions of human development. From the beginning, we rejected the traditional split between these approaches that has long hindered American social science. In fact, we have argued that Wilhelm Windelband, the turn-of-the-century German philosopher who introduced these terms, never intended a dichotomy in the first place (in contrast with Gordon Allport who popularized them in this country in a way that did seem to imply more of a dichotomy). The point of Windleband's essay was that every predictive scientific enterprise requires both nomothetic and idiographic inquiry. In this way one determines the general laws as well as their rules of application to individual cases. If one wishes to predict the speed of various falling bodies, one needs to know both the law of gravity and the

specific properties of each body in which one is interested.

In considering the use of case studies, it is important to keep sight of the obvious fact that this approach, like all research methods, is always a means to a broader scientific end, not an end in itself. In this, the case study differs from psychobiography, the purpose of which is often seen as the illumination of a particular life.

Our use of case studies to illuminate general theoretical issues is part of a broader rediscovery of the usefulness of this method for developmental psychology. Reasons similar to those that brought us to the case study method have also drawn to this approach a number of developmentalists interested in exceptional talent or achievement in other areas, often conceived in large part as the study of creativity. Notable examples include the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Howard Gruber, and Howard Gardner.

Howard Gardner, for example, has used a case study method to look at instances of outstanding creativity. He uses the lives of such figures as Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein to look at repeated patterns of social influence, at the creative people's own representations of their goals, what they tried to accomplish and what they did accomplish, as a critical avenue for understanding creativity. He justifies the use of the case study approach in a way that parallels our reasons for using it. If we substitute the word morality where he says creativity, the following statement would describe well our rationale for carrying out case studies of exceptionally moral people in an effort to understand moral development more generally:

> Inasmuch as creativity is difficult to define and challenging to investigate, it is prudent to begin on solid ground -- with individuals and bodies of work that are uncontroversially creative. I shall term this a holistic approach, contrasting it with more atomistic views of creativity, where the instances or elements studied may appear remote from universally acknowledged instances of creativity. In my view, students of creativity at this point need to develop a framework by which one can adequately conceptualize lifetime achievements of the magnitude of Freud's. We can then determine if it is possible to lower our sights or atomize our instances, still retaining what is integral to the processes of creativity and what is central to persons we deem creative.

Although the adoption of a holistic stance makes a priori

sense, particularly in the study of unusual forms of behavior, it may fly in the face of approved scientific practice. Should one approach creativity in the established manner of a cognitive psychologist, a psychometrician, or for that matter, a geneticist or an anthropologist, there would be certain prescribed disciplinary options to follow. Typically, it would be necessary to study only a very small component of the creative process, (e.g. the moment of conscious insight or even to focus on entities that might not be accepted as exemplifying creativity.) Nor, following the conventional procedure, could insights obtained from a range of disciplinary perspectives be readily combined to illuminate the creative processes in question. By adopting a holistic approach, one encompasses creative phenomena at their full level of complexity -- yet at the cost of spurning methods that are more rigorous but less encompassing.

It may be especially appropriate to use a case study method to create an initial description of an understudied phenomenon, particularly when mapping out a phenomenon that occurs relatively infrequently. This allows you to elaborate theoretical ideas in the context of very clear-cut cases. These ideas may then be extended and modified as they are applied to other, less dramatic contexts. Thus normal processes may be illuminated in sharp relief after they have been identified in clear cases. Once an issue or theme emerges dramatically in a single life story, it is less likely that you will miss it when it occurs in a context where it may not be quite as salient. In this sense, the use of case studies is often a first step that must be followed with investigations using other methods. This is certainly the way we see our study of twenty-three moral exemplars.