Dissertation Proposal

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"Detecting the Moral Character of Strangers:
The Hidden Information Distribution and Evaluation (HIDE) Model"

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We do not know whether we can accurately evaluate strangers' moral character, nor do we know how to elicit relevant information from strangers. The proposed research is designed to remedy this dearth in our understanding of moral character judgments in settings where judges need to make prompt evaluations based on limited information they obtain from strangers.

In Chapter 1, I develop the HIDE model, which posits that evaluations made by targets and judges, respectively, capture unique insights because some information is hidden from one party and is detectable only by the other. Applying the HIDE model to moral character judgments, I propose that judges who do not know the targets are able to detect aspects of moral character that target individuals incorrectly know (misconstrue) and/or are unaware of themselves. To elicit information about targets' moral character in "zero-acquaintance settings" (i.e., settings where judges need to make evaluations from the limited information they might obtain from strangers), I develop character interview questions designed to reveal targets' moral character through their spontaneous written responses to interview questions. I propose that impromptu thinking and language usage in answering these questions reveal information about moral character that targets are unaware of themselves and thus less able to control but that judges can use to make accurate character judgments.

In Chapter 2, I examine the validity of moral character judgments based on targets' written responses by using behavioral prediction of unethical conduct. In Study 1 and 2, I investigate the accuracy of moral character judgments in a laboratory experiment in which target participants had the opportunity to over-report their performance on a problem-solving task to earn additional money. Judges' moral character evaluations negatively and significantly predicted the extent to which targets cheated on the problem-solving task. In Study 3, I investigate the predictive validity of moral character judgments with counterproductive work behavior (CWB) as a criteria. CWB, also known as workplace deviance, includes a wide range of harmful work behaviors, such as falsification of expense reports, stealing, absenteeism, and interpersonal abuse. Judges evaluations of targets' moral character from their written interview responses negatively and significantly predicted the frequency that targets reported engaging in CWB.

Having established the possibility for accuracy in moral character judgments via

prediction of unethical behavior, in Chapter 3, I focus on how such accurate judgments occur and how to improve the accuracy of moral character judgments. I posit that evaluations of strangers' moral character are based on perceptions of two latent dimensions: moral values and self-regulatory ability. The moral values dimension has two components—care and justice—and one's perception of strangers' moral character is determined via the interplay between these two components. In Study 4 of this dissertation, I plan to conduct latent semantic analyses for targets' written interview responses to test whether moral values related to care and justice and self-regulatory ability emerge as cues to moral character judgments and whether evaluations based on these cues are positively associated with global ratings of moral character. In Study 5, I plan to test the relationship among judges' perceptions of moral values related to care and justice, self-regulatory ability, and moral character to test the hypothesis that self-regulatory ability is under-utilized when judges make global moral judgments about targets. In Study 6, I will build on Studies 4 and 5 by testing whether the accuracy of moral character evaluation can be improved by providing a rater training intervention designed to help judges to optimally weight moral values and self-regulatory ability in making moral character evaluations.