

Immornormalcy: a Conceptual Paper on the Normalization of Immorality Among Student Populations and Its Theoretical Foundations

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ABSTRACT

Moral decay within educational institutions is no longer a prophecy, it is an observable, measurable, and alarmingly normalized reality. Yet mainstream psychological and educational scholarship continues to treat this decay as an extension of existing constructs such as moral disengagement, normalization of deviance, or amorality, failing to recognize that a categorically distinct psychosocial phenomenon has emerged: one in which immorality is not merely practiced but actively normalized, socially rewarded, and institutionally tolerated. This paper introduces Immornormalcy as a novel psychosocial construct defined as the collective normalization, social acceptance, and perceived ordinariness of behaviors and attitudes. This kind of attitudes traditionally regarded as immoral, unethical, or deviant within a given social context, particularly among student populations. Drawing on Social Norms Theory, Moral Disengagement Theory, Normalization of Deviance, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Learning Theory, this paper establishes the theoretical architecture of Immornormalcy, delineates its three core dimensions; Normalization, Social Acceptance, and Perceived Ordinariness, and advances six theoretical propositions linking Immornormalcy to student behavioral and institutional outcomes. This work contributes a new lens for understanding the moral crisis facing contemporary educational settings and provides a rigorous conceptual foundation for future scale development and empirical validation.

Keywords: *immornormalcy, moral normalization, academic dishonesty, normalization of deviance, moral disengagement, student ethics, social norms*

ABSTRAK

Kemerosotan moral dalam institusi pendidikan telah menjadi fenomena yang dapat diamati dan menunjukkan kecenderungan normalisasi yang semakin mengkhawatirkan. Namun, literatur psikologi dan pendidikan masih cenderung menjelaskannya melalui tafsiran seperti pelepasan moral (*moral disengagement*), normalisasi penyimpangan (*normalization of deviance*), dan amoralisme (*amorality*), yang belum sepenuhnya menangkap kondisi ketika perilaku tidak bermoral dinormalisasi secara kolektif, diterima secara sosial, dan ditoleransi secara institusional. Artikel ini memperkenalkan kata *Immornormalcy* sebagai tafsiran psikososial yang merujuk pada normalisasi kolektif, penerimaan sosial, dan persepsi kewajaran terhadap perilaku dan sikap yang dipandang tidak bermoral, tidak etis, atau menyimpang dalam konteks sosial tertentu, khususnya di kalangan mahasiswa. Berlandaskan teori norma sosial, teori pelepasan moral, normalisasi penyimpangan, teori tindakan yang direncanakan dan teori pembelajaran sosial. Artikel ini mengembangkan kerangka teoretis *Immornormalcy* dengan mengidentifikasi tiga dimensinya: normalisasi, penerimaan sosial dan kesan biasa - serta mengajukan enam proposisi teoretis mengenai keterkaitannya dengan perilaku mahasiswa dan dinamika institusional. Konseptualisasi ini menawarkan perspektif baru dalam memahami normalisasi perilaku tidak bermoral di lingkungan pendidikan sekaligus menyediakan landasan bagi pengembangan instrumen dan validasi empiris pada penelitian selanjutnya.

Kata kunci: *immornormalcy, normalisasi moral, kecurangan akademis, normalisasi perilaku menyimpang, pelepasan moral, etika siswa, norma sosial*

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INTRODUCTION

Moral development among students in Ghanaian schools and university has become an increasingly crucial concern, particularly in relation to the changing norm that shape students' academic and social behaviour. Cheating, for example, is deemed as a form of collaboration, while the exchange of sexual favors for academic grades is framed as networking. Similarly, disrespectful attitude shown to the faculty members may be interpreted as assertiveness. Further, sharing fake identities and using content online without permission are considered as creativity. The consumption of alcohol and drugs at academic events has been normalised. Moral deviation such as bribery, dishonesty, and manipulation reflects the complex ways in which problematic behaviours may become socially rationalised. More concerningly, the institutions responsible for fostering students' moral development appear to be increasingly indifferent to these behaviours. These behaviours may reflect a broader systemic, structural, and sociologically entrenched collapse of moral normativity. However, literature treats it as though existing constructs are sufficient to explain what it is, by any honest assessment, a categorically new phenomenon.

This erosion extends across multiple domains of student behaviour, indicating that practices such as bribery, academic misconduct, and disrespect toward lecturers have become normalized within the university environment. Decades of studies, one of which is Bandura's (1986, 2016) moral disengagement on how individuals unlock their internal moral values to commit detrimental acts without guilt, have given us powerful tools. Vaughan's (1996) normalization of deviance clarifies how organizations drift into accepting dangerous shortcuts. Social Norms Theory (Cialdini et al., 1990) illuminates how misperceptions of peer behavior drive individual conduct. These studies are valuable, but may still be insufficient. None of them apprehends the full sociological gravity of what is now unfolding in student communities across the globe, where immorality is not merely practiced and rationalized, but has been normalized and accepted as the ordinary and expected fabric of social life. A phenomenon that is also known as Immornormalcy.

The term Immornormalcy is derived from the conjunction of "immoral" and "normalcy" refers to a psychosocial phenomenon in which behaviours that were once universally condemned become the new normal through repetition, social endorsement, and institutional inaction. This phenomenon is increasingly evident within university settings. Critically, Immornormalcy is distinguished from prior constructs not merely by scope but by its central emphasis on a positive reinforcement dynamic. In conditions of Immornormalcy, students are actively rewarded socially, reputationally, and sometimes materially for engaging in immoral conduct. This social reward system represents a qualitative departure from Bandura's (1986) moral disengagement, which addresses how individuals suppress the negative affect of guilt, and from Vaughan's (1996) normalization of deviance, which concerns incremental organizational tolerance of safety violations. Immornormalcy describes a community that has progressed beyond tolerating immorality to celebrating it.

This paper argues for the development of a construct within moral psychology and educational ethics that can more adequately capture and explain the complexities of contemporary moral behaviour and its normalization within educational contexts. The purpose of this paper is therefore threefold. *First*, to introduce and conceptualize Immornormalcy as a distinct construct; *second*, to ground it rigorously in established theoretical frameworks; and *third*, to propose a conceptual model and theoretical propositions that will guide future empirical investigation. The significance of this issue extends beyond academic inquiry, as understanding and clearly conceptualizing the phenomenon is essential to developing effective responses to it.

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper employs conceptual analysis as its primary methodological framework. Conceptual analysis is an established and rigorous scholarly methodology appropriate when the research objective is to identify, clarify, and integrate theoretical ideas into a coherent new construct (Olsthoorn, 2017). Rather than collecting empirical data, this approach develops original theoretical contributions by systematically reviewing, critically evaluating, and synthesizing interrelated bodies of literature across moral psychology, sociology, educational ethics, and behavioral theory (Tähtinen, 2019).

The present paper follows a structured conceptual development procedure. Beginning with a critical review of existing constructs, moral disengagement, normalization of deviance, moral relativism, and amorality. This paper demonstrates collective inadequacy for capturing the phenomenon under investigation. It then constructs a new definition, articulates a dimensional structure, grounds the construct in five established theoretical traditions, and advances six directional theoretical propositions. This procedure is consistent with recognized best practice in construct introduction (MacKenzie et al., 2011; Suddaby, 2010) and with the broader tradition of conceptual contributions that reframe previously fragmented phenomena within a coherent new framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To convey a new construct, one must intellectually and honestly weights a thorough examination of what already exists. There is a legitimate and important scholarly predisposition to resist construct proliferation, the unnecessary multiplication of terms that are simply repackaging of old ideas. This paper admits that instinct and takes it seriously. The argument, however, is that Immornormalcy is genuinely novel, not because it shares no DNA with existing constructs, but because it occupies a conceptual space that none of them, alone or in combination, adequately fills.

Bandura's (1986, 1991, 2002, 2016) theory of moral disengagement is perchance the most well-developed individual-level account of how people commit immoral acts without experiencing the self-condemnation that their internalized moral standards would typically produce. Through mechanisms such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, displacement of responsibility, and dehumanization, individuals selectively

disengage the moral self-regulatory functions that ordinarily restrain harmful conduct. The empirical evidence for these mechanisms is robust, and their applicability to academic dishonesty (Murdock & Anderman, 2006), aggressive behavior (Bandura et al., 1996), and white-collar crime (Moore et al., 2012) is well established.

But here is the critical limitation: moral disengagement is fundamentally an individual cognitive process. It explains how a single person navigates the internal tension between wanting to act immorally and not wanting to feel bad about it. Immornormalcy, by distinction, defines a social-level phenomenon. In conditions of Immornormalcy, the individual does not need cognitive tricks to suppress guilt, because the social environment has already eliminated the moral tension. The behavior is not disengaged from moral scrutiny; it has simply been removed from the moral domain altogether. Moreover, and most distinctively, Immornormalcy foregrounds a positive reinforcement architecture: individuals are not merely excused from guilt but are actively rewarded for immoral conduct through social esteem, peer admiration, and practical advantage. Bandura's theory addresses internal mechanisms for avoiding negative affect; Immornormalcy addresses the external social reward system that has made internal suppression unnecessary.

Vaughan's (1996) concept of normalization of deviance, emerging from her forensic analysis of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, describes how organizations can drift, through a series of incremental decisions, toward accepting behaviors and conditions that violate established safety standards. Her work is brilliantly diagnostic of how well-intentioned professionals can, through repeated exposure and institutional habituation, come to treat dangerous anomalies as acceptable variance. Subsequent scholars have extended this framework to healthcare (Banja, 2010), aviation, and other high-risk industries.

The construct is powerful. However, its domain is organizational, its context is professional, and its primary concern is with safety and technical standards rather than moral ones. It does not speak to the peer dynamics, social reward structures, and identity-level processes that characterize how Immornormalcy develops in student communities. Moreover, normalization of deviance does not foreground the moral character of the behaviors being normalized, but rather it treats any deviation from accepted standards as equivalent. In the case of Immornormalcy, it insists on the distinctively ethical nature of what is being normalized, and situates this normalization within the developmental and social context of emerging adulthood. Most importantly, Vaughan's framework is silent on the positive reinforcement dimension: organizational drift proceeds through tolerance and habituation, not through the active social celebration of norm violations. Immornormalcy describes communities that reward, not merely permit, immoral conduct, a sociodynamic that demands its own conceptual vocabulary.

Moral relativism, as a philosophical position, holds that moral judgments are not universally valid but are relative to the culture, context, or individual making them (Wong, 2006). As a descriptor of intellectual positions, it is valuable. But it is a philosophical stance, not an empirical social process. People experiencing Immornormalcy are not, for the most part, philosophical relativists who have carefully reasoned their way to the conclusion that morality is culturally constructed. They are social actors embedded in communities where certain behaviors have simply become the expected norm. The difference is crucial, relativism is reflective and deliberate while Immornormalcy is ambient and unreflective. Students living in conditions of Immornormalcy often know, at some level, that what they are doing is wrong, but that knowledge has been rendered socially irrelevant, so in this case if it has been rendered irrelevant and everyone is doing it without any remorse or been judged then doing it also is socially accepted.

Amorality refers to the absence or indifference to moral standards. This refers to a state in which individuals lack any operative moral framework, a condition that is both psychologically rare and of limited analytical relevance to our purpose. Most students in conditions of Immornormalcy are not amoral. They retain moral sensibilities, they would object to extreme violence, express concern for social justice causes, and articulate clear ethical commitments in abstract domains. What characterizes Immornormalcy is not the absence of a moral framework, but its selective and socially-negotiated suspension in particular behavioral domains. This is far more nuanced, and far more dangerous, than simple amorality. It means that the problem cannot be solved by simply introducing students to ethics, they already know the ethics. The problem is that the social environment has made acting on those ethics costly and deviant.

What none of these constructs captures is the collective process through which social groups, shaped by peer dynamics, institutional cues, repeated exposure, and reward structures, come to regard immoral behavior as ordinary rather than justified, rationalized, or endorsed. This is the conceptual space that Immornormalcy is designed to fill. It is not an individual-level construct. It is not an organizational-level construct. It is a social community-level construct that describes the moral climate of a student group, a campus, or an educational culture and its effects on the individuals embedded within it.

The Ethical Framework of Immornormalcy

Any conceptual paper that employs the term "immorality" bears an obligation to specify the ethical framework within which that designation is made. Without such an anchor, the construct risks sliding into subjectivity, a charge this paper takes seriously and directly addresses.

Immornormalcy is grounded primarily in a Virtue Ethics framework (Simpson, 1992; MacIntyre, 2013), supplemented by Deontological constraints (Benlahcene, 2018). Virtue Ethics holds that the good life is constituted by the exercise of human excellences, honesty, justice, courage, and practical wisdom and that moral character is developed

through habituation within a community. This framework is particularly well-suited to Immornormalcy for two reasons. *First*, Virtue Ethics is inherently social where virtues are cultivated in community, and a morally toxic community actively degrades virtuous character formation. *Second*, Virtue Ethics provides a developmental standard against which Immornormalcy can be measured. It defines not merely what behaviors are prohibited, but what kind of person and community the educational environment ought to be producing.

Deontological constraints supplement this framework by providing a set of duties that hold regardless of social consensus: academic honesty, respect for persons, and the avoidance of deception are not merely social conventions but moral obligations that social normalization cannot dissolve. The combination of Virtue Ethics and Deontology allows Immornormalcy to be defined with reference to both the developmental purpose of education (virtue cultivation) and the categorical moral duties that educational communities are obligated to uphold.

This framework does not require moral universalism or cultural imperialism. It acknowledges that some behaviors labeled "immoral" in one context may be morally contested in another. However, the behaviors that Immornormalcy primarily addresses, academic fraud, sexual exploitation, bribery, deception, and disrespect for persons, are condemned across the full spectrum of major ethical traditions, including Confucian, Ubuntu, and Islamic ethics, as well as Western philosophical frameworks. The cross-cultural consensus around these core violations provides the ethical foundation for the construct without requiring adjudication of more contested moral questions.

Immornormalcy is defined as a psychosocial phenomenon characterized by the collective normalization, social acceptance, and perceived ordinariness of behaviors and attitudes traditionally regarded as immoral, unethical, or deviant within a given social context, particularly among student populations, such that these behaviors are no longer experienced as requiring moral justification, social defense, or individual guilt.

This definition demands careful unpacking. *First*, Immornormalcy is psychosocial, simultaneously a property of social environments and a psychological condition of individuals shaped by those environments. It cannot be reduced to either the individual or the social alone as it exists precisely in the interface between them. *Second*, the definition emphasizes collective normalization, not one individual deciding that cheating is acceptable. Though, a community arriving, through social process, at a shared understanding that cheating is simply what one does. *Third*, the definition specifies that these behaviors are traditionally regarded as immoral. This anchors the construct in recognizable ethical territory without requiring the researcher to adjudicate metaphysical questions about moral realism. *Fourth*, these behaviors are no longer experienced as requiring moral justification.

The last element is what truly distinguishes Immornormalcy from moral disengagement. The morally disengaged individual still needs to justify their behavior, to themselves if not to others. In conditions of Immornormalcy, justification itself has become unnecessary. The behavior has crossed the threshold from "regrettable but understandable" to simply "normal". This is a qualitative shift, not merely a quantitative one, and it demands a distinct conceptual vocabulary. In short, immornormalcy is when people start seeing wrong or immoral behavior as normal, acceptable and nothing to feel bad about, especially among students. More appropriately, it may be understood as the normalization of immoral behavior.

Dimensions of Immornormalcy

Consistent with contemporary construct development methodology (MacKenzie et al., 2011; Netemeyer et al., 2003), Immornormalcy is proposed as a multidimensional reflective construct comprising three interrelated but theoretically distinct dimensions. The normalization dimension captures the process by which previously unacceptable behaviors become routinized, expected, and stripped of their moral distinctiveness through repeated exposure and social reinforcement. Normalization is the mechanism the "how" of Immornormalcy. It describes the trajectory from initial deviance to standard practice. Drawing on Vaughan's (1996) work on incremental boundary shifts and Cialdini et al.'s (1990) analysis of how descriptive norms shape behavior, Normalization describes the mechanism by which behaviors move from the category of "deviant exception" to the category of "standard practice."

In student populations, normalization manifests in the regularization of academic dishonesty as a study strategy, the routinization of substance use as social bonding, the habituation of disrespectful classroom conduct, and the embedding of digital ethics violations into everyday digital life. The key psychological signature of normalization is desensitization, the progressive erosion of the moral signal that once accompanied these behaviors, such that they no longer produce the affective responses of guilt, shame, or social anxiety that would, in a functioning moral community, serve as deterrents.

Second, the social acceptance dimension captures the degree to which a social community, through explicit endorsement, implicit tolerance, or the absence of sanctioning, communicates that immoral behaviors are acceptable, expected, or even admirable. This dimension maps onto what Cialdini et al (1990) call injunctive norms; that is perceptions of what others approve or disapprove of. Yet it extends beyond injunctive norms by incorporating the social reward structures through which Immornormalcy is actively reproduced.

In communities characterized by high social acceptance, students who cheat are respected for being clever; students who manipulate their social environment are admired for their strategic acuity; students who reject these norms risk social exclusion and stigmatization as naive or self-righteous. This is a profound inversion of conventional moral community dynamics, and it has devastating implications for the moral development of individuals embedded in such environments. Kohlberg (1981)

demonstrated that moral development is fundamentally a social process, which means that socially toxic environments do not merely fail to promote moral development; they actively undermine it.

Third, the perceived ordinariness dimension captures the subjective cognitive state in which immoral behaviors are experienced as unremarkable, commonplace, and devoid of moral salience. perceived ordinariness is the individual's internalized reality the "what it feels like from inside." This is the cognitive endpoint of the Immornormalcy process, the point at which the individual has so thoroughly absorbed the social normalization of immoral behavior that it no longer activates moral cognition at all. The behavior has been assimilated into the individual's cognitive scripts of "how things are done here."

Perceived ordinariness draws theoretically on Bandura's (1986) concept of cognitive scripts and on Rest's (1994) model of moral action, which identifies moral sensitivity as the ability to recognize that a moral issue is present as a prerequisite for moral action. In conditions of high perceived ordinariness, moral sensitivity has been effectively nullified. The individual simply does not perceive that a moral issue is at stake. This is not ignorance and not deception but the product of sustained immersion in a morally permissive social environment.

The three dimensions are conceptually distinct and non-redundant. Normalization describes what is happening at the social level over time (process), while social acceptance describes the community structure that sustains it (environment). Perceived ordinariness describes the outcome at the level of individual psychology (internal state). This tripartite structure provides both theoretical precision and a clear blueprint for scale development, with each dimension requiring its own set of measurement items.

Meanwhile, rigorous construct development requires not only defining what a construct is, but clearly delineating what it is not (Suddaby, 2010). Several distinctions are therefore essential. *First*, Immornormalcy should be distinguished from moral disengagement. Moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986) involves active cognitive mechanisms to suppress guilt about specific acts. Immornormalcy, by contrast, describes a social climate in which such cognitive work is no longer necessary because the community has already defined the behavior as acceptable. Thus, moral disengagement is an individual coping strategy, whereas Immornormalcy is a social structural condition.

Second, Immornormalcy differs from conventional forms of deviance. Classical sociological theories of deviance (Merton, 1968) describe behaviors that violate social norms but remain recognized as violations. Immornormalcy, in contrast, specifically describes conditions in which the behavior has ceased to be experienced as norm-violating the norm itself has shifted.

Third, Immornormalcy should not be equated with specific forms of misconduct, such as academic dishonesty, substance use, or incivility. These are behavioral domains

in which Immornormalcy may manifest. Immornormalcy refers to the underlying psychosocial climate through which such behaviors become normalized. In this sense, the construct represents an explanatory condition rather than the behavior being explained.

Finally, Immornormalcy is neither permanent nor irreversible. While the construct describes a powerful social dynamic, it does not imply inevitability or fixity. Social norms can be recalibrated through deliberate intervention (Berkowitz, 2004), institutional redesign, and moral education (Narváez & Lapsley, 2008). Recognizing Immornormalcy as a construct is the precondition for developing effective responses to it. The integrated model is described below and summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Model of Immornormalcy

Social Learning Theory → Social Norms Theory → Moral Disengagement Theory → Normalization of Deviance → Theory of Planned Behavior → IMMORNORMALCY
(Peer modeling & positive reinforcement → Descriptive & injunctive norm shift → Individual cognitive disengagement → Institutional habituation & erosion of sanctions → Attitude/norm/control shift → Normalization + Social Acceptance + Perceived Ordinarity)
Note. Bidirectional feedback loops operate between Immornormalcy and all antecedent processes; the model depicts the primary developmental pathway.

Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Model if Immornormalcy

The model integrates several complementary theoretical perspectives. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides the entry mechanism—students observe peers engaging in immoral conduct and receiving positive social rewards, generating behavioral modeling and vicarious reinforcement. This observational learning feeds into Social Norms Theory (Cialdini et al., 1990), as repeated exposure to rewarded immoral conduct creates and entrenches both descriptive norms ("everyone does this") and injunctive norms ("this is admired"), often amplified by pluralistic ignorance. The resulting shift in perceived norms then activates the individual-level mechanisms described by Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura, 1986, 2016). Students who have not yet fully absorbed the social norm must cognitively manage the residual tension between their prior moral standards and their observed social environment. Over time, as Normalization of Deviance (Vaughan, 1996) processes entrench the behavior through institutional habituation and the erosion of sanctions, individual moral disengagement mechanisms become less necessary—the social norm has done the cognitive work collectively. The behavioral consequences of this process are captured by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) whereby attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control all shift in the direction of facilitating immoral conduct. The endpoint of this chain is Immornormalcy; that is a social equilibrium in which the three dimensions—Normalization, Social Acceptance, and Perceived Ordinarity—have fully crystallized.

Immornormalcy does not emerge from a theoretical vacuum. Its conceptual architecture is grounded in and builds upon several major theoretical traditions in psychology, sociology, and educational research. The following theoretical foundations are not merely decorative citations, they provide the mechanistic scaffolding that explains how and why Immornormalcy develops, persists, and produces the outcomes it does.

Social Norms Theory (Cialdini et al., 1990; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986) provides the foundational social-cognitive mechanism through which Immornormalcy operates. The theory distinguishes between descriptive norms, what most people do, and injunctive norms, what most people approve of. Both types of norms exert powerful behavioral influence, and both are susceptible to systematic distortion. Central to Social Norms Theory and directly relevant to Immornormalcy is the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance (Prentice & Miller, 1993); the condition in which members of a group privately hold more conservative attitudes than those they perceive their peers to hold, but each individual, assuming their own discomfort is idiosyncratic, conforms to the (misperceived) group norm. Applied to Immornormalcy, pluralistic ignorance helps explain how moral communities can deteriorate far more rapidly than the individual attitudes of their members would predict. Each person individually disapproves of the normalizing behavior but acts as though they approve, because they believe everyone else approves. The result is a self-reinforcing social system of apparent moral permissiveness sustained by largely private moral discomfort.

Immornormalcy extends Social Norms Theory by arguing that the misperception of norms is not merely an innocent cognitive error. It is a condition that can become structurally embedded through institutional inaction, peer reward systems, and the social visibility of deviant behavior. Once embedded, it takes on a momentum that exceeds what the original misperception would suggest.

Bandura's (1986, 1991, 2002, 2016) moral disengagement theory provides the individual-level psychological mechanisms through which people in conditions of Immornormalcy navigate their residual moral sensibilities. While Immornormalcy is a social-level construct, it has profound implications for individual psychological processes, and moral disengagement explains the individual-level dynamics that both contribute to and are shaped by conditions of Immornormalcy.

In early stages of Immornormalcy development, individual moral disengagement mechanisms are actively deployed. Students justify cheating through moral justification ("the exam is unfair"), euphemistic labeling ("it's just collaboration"), and diffusion of responsibility ("everyone does it"). However, as Immornormalcy deepens, these mechanisms are needed less frequently, because the social environment increasingly handles the moral work at the collective level, leaving individuals without the internal tension that moral disengagement mechanisms were designed to resolve. This theoretical integration provides a richer account of moral erosion than either theory offers alone.

Vaughan's (1996) normalization of deviance provides the processual account of how Immornormalcy develops over time. Her analysis of the Challenger disaster demonstrated that organizations can drift into catastrophic risk-acceptance through a series of decisions, each individually justifiable, that cumulatively redefine acceptable standards. The mechanisms identified such as routine, precedent, habituation, and structural secrecy, are directly applicable to educational communities.

In educational contexts, the normalization process proceeds through stages: initial deviance is recognized and occasionally sanctioned; repeated occurrence with inconsistent consequences reduces the perceived seriousness of the violation; peer communities develop informal norms endorsing the behavior; institutional responses become increasingly perfunctory; and, eventually, the behavior becomes embedded in the social fabric of the educational community. Vaughan's framework provides the temporal architecture for understanding how Immornormalcy develops, even as the construct itself extends her analysis into the explicitly moral domain.

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) posits that behavioral intentions, the most proximate predictor of behavior is determined by three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms (perceived social pressure), and perceived behavioral control. The TPB has been extensively applied to academic dishonesty (Beck & Ajzen, 1991), substance use (Conner & Armitage, 1998), and various other domains relevant to student moral conduct.

Immornormalcy interacts with all three components of the TPB in ways that are theoretically significant. First, it reshapes attitudes. In conditions of Immornormalcy, students develop more positive or neutral attitudes toward immoral behaviors as a direct result of social normalization. Second, it transforms subjective norms where perceived peer approval of immoral conduct increases as Social Acceptance deepens. Third, and most subtly, it affects perceived behavioral control. In communities characterized by Immornormalcy, engaging in immoral behavior becomes easier, there are established social scripts for it, protective social networks around it, and reduced fear of institutional sanction. The TPB, thus, provides a well-validated framework through which the behavioral consequences of Immornormalcy can be theorized and empirically tested.

Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory holds that behavior is learned through observation and modeling, and that the consequences observed for modeled behavior, vicarious reinforcement or punishment, powerfully shape the likelihood of behavioral imitation. Applied to Immornormalcy, Social Learning Theory explains the role of peer reinforcement in the consolidation and reproduction of normalized immoral conduct.

When students observe their peers cheating successfully and being socially rewarded for it, they receive a powerful social learning signal. This behavior is effective, safe, and socially sanctioned. When institutional responses to misconduct are weak, delayed, or publicly invisible, the social learning environment communicates that consequences are negligible. Over time, through repeated observational learning experiences, Immornormalcy becomes self-reproducing. Each wave of students entering a community characterized by Immornormalcy is socialized into its norms through the same mechanisms of modeling, vicarious reinforcement, and peer norm transmission.

The Digital Context: How Online Environments Accelerate Immornormalcy

Contemporary student populations inhabit a dual social environment, physical and digital, and any adequate account of Immornormalcy must address the role of digital contexts in accelerating its development. Three digital mechanisms are particularly salient.

First and foremost, anonymity and reduced accountability. The relative anonymity of online environments weakens the social inhibitions that might otherwise constrain immoral conduct. Contract cheating platforms, essay mills, and answer-sharing networks operate in digitally anonymous spaces where the social visibility of misconduct is decoupled from personal identity (Newton, 2018). This anonymity accelerates the Normalization dimension of Immornormalcy. Students can observe immoral conduct at scale without those acts being attributed to identifiable individuals who bear social consequences.

In addition, scale and speed of social reinforcement. Social media platforms provide mechanisms for the rapid, large-scale positive reinforcement of immoral conduct. When a student publicly posts about successfully deceiving a faculty member or shares illicitly obtained examination content, and receives social approval in the form of likes, shares, and affirming comments, the Social Acceptance dimension of Immornormalcy is reinforced at a speed and scale impossible in pre-digital environments. The reward signal is immediate, quantified, and publicly visible, a far more potent reinforcement mechanism than the diffuse social approval of a peer group.

Furthermore, cyberbullying and digital incivility as normalized conduct. Cyberbullying represents a particularly harmful instance of Immornormalcy in digital space, in which harassment, humiliation, and social exclusion have been so thoroughly normalized in online peer communities that many participants do not perceive their conduct as morally problematic (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). The Perceived Ordinarity dimension is powerfully evident in research showing that adolescents and young adults frequently fail to categorize clearly harmful online behavior as bullying or misconduct.

Hence, the digital context does not merely extend Immornormalcy into a new medium. It provides a set of structural affordances, anonymity, scale, speed of reinforcement, and reduced institutional visibility that can significantly accelerate all three dimensions of the construct. Future empirical work should include digital behavioral domains as central sites of Immornormalcy measurement and intervention.

A Philosophical Note: Immornormalcy and the Collapse of Moral Normativity

It is worth pausing to situate Immornormalcy within a broader philosophical tradition of concern about the collapse of moral norms under conditions of social permissiveness and institutional indifference. Nietzsche's diagnosis of the "Last Man", the cultural type that has abandoned the aspiration toward excellence in favor of mere comfort, social acceptance, and the avoidance of moral confrontation provides a philosophically suggestive parallel (Shaw, 2014). The Last Man is defined precisely by the absence of the moral tension that Immornormalcy eliminates, where there is no standard against which conduct is measured, deviance becomes invisible and indifference becomes the highest social virtue. Whether Immornormalcy represents a contemporary instantiation of the Last Man syndrome within educational communities is a question that invites further philosophical inquiry. What is sociologically clear is that the structural conditions Nietzsche diagnosed, the erosion of shared moral standards, the triumph of conformity over principled conduct, and the social penalization of moral seriousness are precisely the conditions that the three dimensions of Immornormalcy describe. This convergence between philosophical diagnosis and empirical construct strengthens the theoretical coherence of Immornormalcy as a framework for understanding moral collapse in contemporary educational life.

Conceptual Model and Theoretical Propositions

On the basis of the theoretical framework developed above, this paper advances the following conceptual model of Immornormalcy and its relationships with antecedents and outcomes. A formal visual model is recommended for inclusion in empirical extensions of this work. The propositions below are theoretical in nature and do not constitute hypotheses. They are directional claims about expected relationships, to be operationalized and empirically tested in future research.

Antecedents of Immornormalcy

Prior to advancing propositions about the effects of Immornormalcy, the model identifies three classes of antecedents: individual-level factors, interpersonal-level factors, and institutional-level factors. This multilevel conceptualization is consistent with the psychosocial nature of the construct.

At the individual level, susceptibility to Immornormalcy is moderated by moral identity centrality (Aquino & Reed, 2002), moral sensitivity (Rest, 1994), and the strength of one's ethical self-concept. Students for whom moral identity is a central and

defining feature of self are theorized to be more resistant to Immornormalcy, even in highly permissive social environments. Conversely, students with peripheral moral identities and high susceptibility to peer influence are predicted to be more rapidly socialized into Immornormalcy.

At the interpersonal level, peer group composition, the perceived behavior of reference groups, and the social rewards associated with participation in normalized immoral conduct are primary drivers of Immornormalcy development. Consistent with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), students embedded in peer networks characterized by high rates of moral norm violation and low social consequences are at elevated risk.

At the institutional level, the consistency and credibility of enforcement, the visibility of academic integrity policies, and the moral modeling provided by faculty and administrators are critical determinants of whether Immornormalcy takes root. Institutions that respond to moral violations with negligence, inconsistency, or public silence inadvertently signal that such violations are tolerated, a signal that feeds directly into the Social Acceptance dimension of Immornormalcy.

Theoretical Propositions

Proposition 1: Immornormalcy is positively associated with academic dishonesty behavior.

Students who exhibit high levels of Immornormalcy, characterized by perceiving immoral conduct as prevalent, socially accepted, and ordinary are theorized to be significantly more likely to engage in academic dishonesty. This proposition integrates Social Norms Theory (Cialdini et al., 1990), the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), and empirical work on the relationship between perceived peer behavior and academic dishonesty (McCabe & Treviño, 1997; Whitley, 1998). It also extends these foundations by arguing that the relationship is mediated by the erosion of moral sensitivity, consistent with Dimension Three of the Immornormalcy construct.

Proposition 2: Immornormalcy negatively predicts ethical decision-making quality.

Drawing on Rest's (1994) four-component model of moral action moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character this proposition argues that all four components are systematically attenuated in conditions of high Immornormalcy. Students cannot act on moral standards they have ceased to perceive as operative; they cannot reason about moral dilemmas they have pre-categorized as non-moral; and they cannot sustain moral motivation in social environments that actively penalize it. The result is a comprehensive degradation of ethical decision-making capacity.

Proposition 3: Institutional factors moderate the relationship between Immornormalcy and student behavior.

This proposition acknowledges that Immornormalcy does not develop or operate independently of institutional context. Institutions characterized by rigorous, consistent, and visible enforcement of academic integrity policies, strong faculty moral modeling, and a culture of ethical accountability are theorized to attenuate the behavioral consequences of Immornormalcy not by eliminating the phenomenon, but by maintaining sufficient institutional moral presence to counteract the most extreme behavioral manifestations. This proposition grounds the construct in practical institutional relevance and frames a clear agenda for intervention research.

Proposition 4: Immornormalcy mediates the relationship between peer group moral norms and individual immoral behavior.

This proposition advances a mediational claim. The well-established relationship between peer group norms and individual moral behavior (Brown et al., 2008) operates, at least in part, through the mechanism of Immornormalcy. In other words, peer group moral norms do not translate directly and automatically into individual behavior. They first reshape the individual's perception of what is normal and acceptable the core of Immornormalcy and this recalibrated perception then drives behavior. This mediational model is consistent with Social Norms Theory and adds theoretical precision to the existing literature on peer influence and moral conduct.

Proposition 5: Immornormalcy develops through a stage-sequential process of normalization.

Drawing on Vaughan's (1996) processual analysis and consistent with the theoretical discussion of developmental stages above, this proposition asserts that Immornormalcy is not a static condition but a dynamic social process with identifiable stages: initial deviance, increased exposure, social validation, normalization, and institutionalization. This processual model has significant implications for intervention timing interventions at the initial deviance stage will be far more effective than those attempted after institutionalization has occurred. This proposition also grounds the construct in a temporal framework that future longitudinal research can test.

Proposition 6: The relationship between Immornormalcy and moral development is bidirectional and mutually reinforcing.

While Immornormalcy is theorized to suppress moral development, the relationship is not unidirectional. Consistent with Kohlberg's (1981) social-interactionist model of moral development, students at lower stages of moral reasoning are predicted to be more susceptible to Immornormalcy, while students at higher stages who reason from principled ethics rather than social conformity are theorized to be more resistant. This bidirectional relationship may create what can be termed "moral development traps," in which low moral development contributes to high levels of Immornormalcy, which in turn inhibits further moral development and thereby reinforces Immornormalcy. Understanding this dynamic is essential for designing effective moral education interventions.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The introduction of Immornormalcy as a construct makes several important contributions to the theoretical landscape of moral psychology and educational ethics. First, it provides a community-level unit of analysis that complements the predominantly individual-level focus of existing moral psychology. The field has excellent accounts of why individual people commit moral violations; it has far less adequate accounts of why entire communities come to regard moral violations as normal. Immornormalcy fills this gap.

Notwithstanding, Immornormalcy advances the integration of moral psychology with social norms research. These two fields have developed largely in parallel, with moral psychology focused on individual cognition and affect, and social norms research focused on perception and behavior. Immornormalcy provides a construct that explicitly bridges these domains, suggesting new theoretical connections and empirical opportunities.

Furthermore, by specifying the construct's dimensions, boundaries, and theoretical foundations with precision, this paper provides the conceptual infrastructure necessary for rigorous scale development. Without a clear definition of the construct, measurement remains inherently arbitrary. A well-defined construct, by contrast, enables the development of robust instruments that can meaningfully advance understanding of the phenomenon. The path from this conceptual paper to a validated Immornormalcy Scale (INS) is direct, theoretically grounded, and practically urgent.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of Immornormalcy extend far beyond the academic literature. If the construct is valid and the theoretical case for its validity is substantial then educational institutions are facing a challenge of a different character than conventional academic integrity scholarship has recognized. The problem is not merely that some students choose to cheat. It is that in many educational communities, the social environment has so thoroughly normalized cheating that individual students lack the social resources to resist it. Interventions designed for a world of individual choice may be systematically ineffective in a world of social normalization.

Effective institutional responses to Immornormalcy will need to operate at the community level, not merely the individual level. Social norms marketing approaches (Berkowitz, 2004), which correct misperceptions of peer behavior, have shown promise in reducing substance use and may be directly applicable to academic dishonesty. Institutional integrity initiatives that make enforcement consistent, visible, and meaningful can disrupt the institutional permissiveness that feeds Immornormalcy. Pedagogical approaches that explicitly address the social construction of moral norms

rather than simply asserting moral rules may be more effective in building student resistance.

Perhaps most importantly, institutions must recognize that faculty behavior matters profoundly. Faculty who publicly ignore academic dishonesty, who are themselves perceived as ethically compromised, or who communicate through their conduct that rules do not apply consistently, are actively contributing to the conditions of Immornormalcy. Moral community requires moral modeling, and the responsibility for that modeling cannot be delegated to honor codes and academic integrity offices alone.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued, without equivocation, that the moral landscape of contemporary educational institutions is characterized by a phenomenon that existing scholarly constructs cannot adequately name, explain, or measure. Immornormalcy, the collective normalization, social acceptance, and perceived ordinariness of behaviors traditionally regarded as immoral, is not an extension of moral disengagement, normalization of deviance, moral relativism, or amorality. It is a distinct psychosocial construct that describes the community-level moral climate that results when these processes have run their course and the community arrives at a new, morally eroded equilibrium.

The theoretical case for Immornormalcy is grounded in five major theoretical traditions: Social Norms Theory, Moral Disengagement Theory, Normalization of Deviance, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Learning Theory. Its three dimensions, Normalization, Social Acceptance, and Perceived Ordinariness are conceptually distinct, theoretically grounded, and operationalizable for empirical measurement. Its six theoretical propositions provide a coherent framework for future empirical research. Its practical implications demand urgent institutional attention. The field of moral psychology and educational ethics has the tools, the theoretical traditions, and the empirical methodologies to take this construct seriously. What it has lacked, until now, is a name for what is happening, a name precise enough to anchor measurement, generate hypotheses, and guide intervention. This paper provides that name.

Immornormalcy is not a metaphor. It is not an exaggeration. It is a description of a reality that anyone who works in contemporary educational institutions can recognize and that the scholarly literature has, for too long, looked past. That needs to end. The students in our care deserve an educational field that is willing to call things by their names, however uncomfortable those names may be.

Future Research Directions

This paper has introduced Immornormalcy as a theoretical construct and established its conceptual foundations. The work ahead is substantial and multi-directional. The following research agenda is proposed, roughly ordered by logical priority. The most immediate priority is scale development and validation. The theoretical dimensions articulated in this paper, Normalization, Social Acceptance, and Perceived Ordinarity, provide a clear blueprint for item generation. Following established scale development methodology (DeVellis, 2016; MacKenzie et al., 2011), initial item pools should be generated from the theoretical framework, subjected to expert review for content validity, refined through cognitive interviewing, piloted with small student samples for item analysis, and validated with larger samples using Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Convergent validity should be established through correlations with the Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et al., 1996), academic dishonesty measures (McCabe & Treviño, 1997), and social norms assessment instruments. Discriminant validity should be demonstrated through low correlations with constructs outside the nomological network.

Following scale development, longitudinal process research is needed to test Proposition 5's stage-sequential model of Immornormalcy development. Cohort studies tracking entering students through their college years would illuminate how quickly Immornormalcy develops, which students are most vulnerable, what early warning signs are detectable, and whether the process can be interrupted. This research agenda has genuine practical urgency: understanding the developmental trajectory of Immornormalcy is a prerequisite for designing early intervention.

Cross-cultural research is also a critical priority. Immornormalcy has been conceptualized primarily with reference to Western educational contexts, but its dynamics will almost certainly vary across cultural contexts with different relationships to authority, collective identity, and moral individualism. Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, particularly individualism-collectivism and power distance, provide an initial framework for generating cross-cultural hypotheses. Research examining whether Immornormalcy is more prevalent, more rapidly developing, or more resistant to intervention in particular cultural contexts would substantially enrich the theoretical framework.

Finally, intervention research is urgently needed. The practical stakes are too high to await comprehensive theoretical consensus. Quasi-experimental studies testing social norms marketing interventions, honor code redesigns, faculty development programs, and pedagogical approaches to moral community building would provide actionable evidence for institutions seeking to address Immornormalcy now.

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