A vigilante serial killer as ethics educator? An exploration of Dexter as a tool for moral education in the professional domain

Merel van Ommen, Serena Daalmans, Addy Weijers, Allison Eden, Rebecca N. H. de Leeuw & Moniek Buijzen


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2017.1338558
A vigilante serial killer as ethics educator? An exploration of *Dexter* as a tool for moral education in the professional domain

Merel van Ommen, Serena Daalmans, Addy Weijers, Allison Eden, Rebecca N. H. de Leeuw and Moniek Buijzen

*Communication Science, Radboud Universiteit Behavioural Science Institute, Nijmegen, the Netherlands; College of Communication Arts and Sciences, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA*

**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to inform the discussion over the proposed merit of morally ambiguous dramas as a tool in moral education in the professional domain, by providing insight into student groups' moral evaluations of *Dexter*. In-depth interviews (*N* = 61) were conducted among a diverse sample of law and (developmental) psychology students. The results demonstrate differences in moral evaluations, according to the degree of 'professional' experience. Remarkably, law students follow the unlawful reasoning of vigilante killer Dexter instead of their own moral make-up; yet slowly develop a professional, strict procedural, point-of-view during their education. Conversely (developmental) psychology students ground moral evaluations instantly in professionalism, but proceed from an idealistic to a more realistic and nuanced point-of-view. To fully reach its potential as a launch pad for discussing professional predicaments, we recommend that *Dexter* is incorporated later in the curriculum after both student groups have had more experience in the field.

College is one of the best places to encourage moral development, specifically the development of professional ethics (Perry, 1999). Concerning this topic, college teachers have recently turned to drama series that are situated in a professional setting for input in their classes on professional ethics (e.g. Weaver, Wilson, & Langendyk, 2014) for three main reasons. First, as teaching aids for their class discussions (cf. Vitz, 1990). Second, students enjoy series that are contextually related to their future profession (*House M.D.*, *Dexter*, *Suits*) (e.g. Czarny, Faden, Nolan, Bodensiek, & Sugarman, 2008). Third, students continuously make moral judgments based on their own 'pre-professional beliefs and experiences (i.e. 'professional’ beliefs and experiences of students still acquiring education) (van Ommen, Daalmans & Weijers, 2014).
Interestingly, research shows that television series featuring so-called 'morally-ambivalent characters' (MACs), constitute a good way to assess and discuss moral judgments of students as part of students’ ethical education (Vanderford, 1999). Despite these findings, experts still voice concerns about the effects these MACs might have on young professionals (Czarny et al., 2008). Unlike traditional hero characters, MACs have flaws and often behave in immoral ways, even though they have redeeming qualities that differentiate them from traditional villains (Eden, Daalmans, & Johnson, 2016; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). For example, the main MAC of highly popular crime series *Dexter* is both a vigilante serial killer and a blood spatter expert for the Miami Police Department—and, therefore, cannot be seen as an unambiguous professional role model from an ethical point of view.

*Dexter* might be a notable case for moral education in various educational settings by its questioning of moral concepts, such as vigilantism, normality, nature and nurture (cf. Gregoriou, 2012). The series continuously discusses moral values, which are relevant to professional domains such as law enforcement and (developmental) psychology. It does so by expressing conflicting viewpoints on these moral topics in the narrative's *moral reasoning*, embodied by the moral dilemmas of the main characters in *Dexter* (Smith, 2012).

To illustrate, as a crime scene investigator *Dexter* couples the moral certainty of police procedural series with the moral uncertainty of a morally ambiguous drama (cf. Lane, 2001). Dexter's murdering is motivated by ‘The Code’: his own reason-based ethics and strictly imposed moral rules by only killing the immoral (Gregoriou, 2012). On the one hand, the narrative gives viewers a psychological explanation for Dexter's serial killing urge (childhood trauma), and a morally ‘right’ reason for Dexter's unlawful behavior. On the other hand, the show problematizes the justness of Dexter's actions by showing that he sometimes executes innocent people, and that the killing is also motivated by self-interest rather than merely the need for justice (Gregoriou, 2012). Additionally, Dexter has moral deliberations about his actions (Smith, 2012).

How can the partly ‘immoral’ behavior of MACs in *Dexter* constitute a good way to assess and discuss and reflect on professional behavior as part of ethical education related to the professional context? If *Dexter* is able to convincingly articulate various moral stands, watching an episode of *Dexter* could evoke various moral evaluations in viewers. In doing so, viewing and discussing *Dexter* could create an ethical laboratory, a moral playground for students in which moral views could be argued about and put to the test based on various (moral) grounds. This study aims to determine whether students come to various ‘moral judgments about the action and motives of the protagonists’ (i.e., *moral evaluation*, Raney, 2005, pp. 351–352) and subsequently ground it in their personal or their (pre-)professional beliefs. To substantiate this aim as broadly as possible, we map the moral grounds that play a role in coming to moral evaluations of an episode of *Dexter* by different student groups, who share professional dispositions and are educationally related to the moral dilemmas as presented in *Dexter*. The results can serve as a foundation for advice on implementing TV-series with MACs, such as *Dexter*, in a pre-professional moral education program.

**Theoretical frame**

Earlier research on moral evaluations of MACs, built on the idea proposed by Zillmann (2000) that viewers of drama series function as ‘untiring moral monitors.’ Viewers continually
judge what they see on screen, and their ongoing verdicts influence the valence and intensity of affective dispositions toward the protagonists (e.g., Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). Affective Disposition Theory ([ADT] Raney, 2004, 2005; Zillmann, 2000) states that the enjoyment of a narrative depends on the congruency between a viewer’s affective disposition toward a character and this character’s actions, motivations, and outcome within the narrative.

However, Zillmann (2000) also asserted that moral judgment may vary across morality subcultures, which share different relevance structures, moral orientations and patterns of moral justice and sanctioning. In this seminal paper, he called for exploration of these morality subcultures. Furthermore, ADT literature, such as Extended ADT (EADT) by Raney (2004), has outlined that viewer groups engage differently with morality in the text. In addition to moral evaluations as a result of viewers’ self-morality, Raney questioned if viewers’ moral judgments arise out of the narrative experience—via a notion of closeness with the moral reasoning in the narrative, which Bilandzic (2006) termed mediated closeness. Bilandzic further explained how viewer characteristics might affect a type of closeness towards events portrayed in the narrative, by emphasizing viewers’ personal biographical situation in relation to these events (‘experiential closeness’).

Building on (E)ADT, we illustrate three separate routes of students to come to moral evaluations—via moral reasoning in the narrative, via students’ own experience, (pre-professional) knowledge and moral make-up, or via the relationship between both moral reasoning and students’ characteristics—and discuss these three routes in terms of (E)ADT (Raney, 2004, 2005; Zillmann, 2000). The various theoretical notions on those three routes are summarized in Figure 1.

![Diagram](image)
Dimensions of moral evaluation

If viewers' moral grounds for moral evaluation are derived from the story, then the moral evaluation is primarily guided by the narrative structure. Raney (2004) argued that the affective evaluation of the main character precedes the moral judgment, because the (strong) narrative structure can create an affective disposition toward a character. According to Bilandzic (2006) this specific disposition is the result of mediated closeness: the process that comes into play when viewers have the feeling of presence in the story (see Figure 1).

Mediated closeness to the narrative could lead to moral evaluations based on the relevance structures of the main characters or protagonists; that is, dilemmas Dexter is facing and as a result the explanations for character’s conduct presented by the story (Donnelly, 2012). It is likely that a clear moral of the story will have a major impact on viewers' moral evaluation.

However, what happens if the narrative's protagonist is morally ambiguous and, at some point in the story, commits unlawful and gruesome acts? Perhaps, viewers, then, may be forced to set aside their own moral judgments, or to morally disengage (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013) in order to be able to enjoy the narrative (Raney, 2004).

This poses the question: Can unlawful and murderous behavior, as part of moral dilemmas that MACs in Dexter face, overrule contrasting pre-professional beliefs, experiences, and knowledge of different groups of student viewers? Or will they uphold their personal or (pre-)professional moral beliefs?

A linguistic analysis of Internet forum messages about Dexter uncovered the ways in which viewers actually respond to the serial killer-related beliefs in Dexter, and how viewers do that with respect to their own attitudes toward crime and victim typology in society (Gregoriou, 2012). Viewer groups might, for example, have a specific moral make-up that (oppositely) relates to the experience, perception, and moral framework of the MACs of Dexter. The moral evaluation is then primarily guided by the viewer's moral make-up and/or the viewers’ past experiences (see Figure 1).

Moral make-up is a result of and mediated by a person's experiences and based on community or (professional) group norms and the social and ideological positions that person adheres to (Tamborini, Eden, Bowman, Grizzard, & Lachlan, 2012). According to Zillmann (2000) great variance exists between individuals with regard to this basal morality; therefore, we assume that judgments about the ambiguous justice presentations in Dexter may vary greatly between different moral subcultures, such as different student groups, who share (pre-)professional dispositions.

Moreover, we assume that as a result of experiences in the educational domain, college students in particular morally mature from a position in which they see the world in polar terms of good and bad, towards a position in which they understand the affirmation of (professional) identity with multiple responsibilities and commitments (Perry, 1999). Considering these experiences, involvement with the media content may be based on experiential closeness (Bilandzic, 2006), and not so much on mediated closeness. Experiential closeness focuses on the personal experiences and knowledge that come into play when evaluating a television program. Van Ommen, Daalmans, and Weijers (2014) found a differentiation in the degree of experiential closeness related to the degree of professional (theoretical and practical) experience viewers showcased about an episode of medical series House M.D. The experienced physicians evinced a more nuanced view of the profession and professional ethics than medical students. Differences in biographical context (in this
case the educational background of students of different stages in their education) create differences in experiential closeness towards morally ambivalent drama that focuses on moral dilemmas related to their future professional field. These differences may result in different routes towards viewers’ moral evaluation and gives rise to the question: How are situations in Dexter related to students’ own experiences in the field?

In addition to moral evaluations being cued by either narrative or viewer characteristics, it might also be the case that moral judgments and evaluations arise because of interplay of these narrative and viewer characteristics. In this form of interplay, the life experiences of the viewer including his or her (professional) moral make up as well as the power of a specific story to transport viewers to the narrative world will meet in a specific reading of the text. We assume that viewers will to a greater or lesser extent enter into the way of thinking of the protagonist (Cohen, 2001), but don’t have to accept the moral reasoning of the text. Furthermore, the presentation of justice in Dexter can be seen as an ambiguous statement about what is counted as fair, ‘normal’ and appropriate retribution, especially when Dexter himself faces moral predicaments. Morally ambiguous TV shows demand complex judgment, for example, taking into account the often unclear or unresolved consequences for other characters (van Ommen et al., 2014).

In addition to Bilandzic’s (2006) distinction between mediated and experiential closeness, van Ommen et al. (2014) specified ‘indirect’ experiential closeness, whereby viewers have the willingness to put themselves in a protagonist’s position. Viewers’ responses might be guided by internal questions, such as: What would I do if I were the protagonist in this particular situation, or what if I were confronted with this type of problem or dilemma? The moral evaluation in this case is a result of the negotiation of the moral make-up of the viewer with the moral dilemmas presented in the narrative. If this is the case for students, this might be a point of moral engagement on ethics in the professional field.

**Research questions**

Because the narratives in Dexter are morally ambiguous, we assume that there will be differences in moral evaluations by different groups of students as a result of their distinctive viewer characteristics, such as moral make-up, real-life knowledge and experiences with regard to the actions and motivations of MACs in Dexter. The broad range of possible theoretical routes towards moral evaluations, as outlined in this theoretical frame and summarized in Figure 1, leads us to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do different student groups (law and [developmental] psychology students) in different stages of their education come to moral judgments about an episode of Dexter and what are the grounds for their judgments?

RQ2: Could Dexter be an effective and desirable tool to fuel moral discussion and broach professional moral dilemmas with students in their ethical education?

**Method**

**Overview**

The study was based on 61 semi-structured in-depth interviews with law and (developmental) psychology students in different years of education. The purpose of this qualitative
research was to describe and understand moral evaluations in terms of the meaning law and (developmental) psychology students bring to or derive from them (Boeije, 2010, p. 9).

The research questions were studied through flexible methods enabling contact with viewers of morally ambivalent series to an extent that is necessary to grasp what is going on in the field (Boeije, 2010, p. 11). It involved a cyclic process in which the data gathering and analysis alternated, and were guided by continuous reflection and interpretation through the identification and coding of themes and categories of grounds for moral evaluations (Boeije, 2010).

**Materials**

The pilot episode of *Dexter*’s entitled ‘Dexter’ (s01e01) was sampled. This episode was screened before the interviews took place. In this episode Dexter kidnaps Mike Donovan, a choirmaster who rapes and murders young boys, takes him to a remote cabin, and forces him to look at the bodies of his victims. Before sedating him, Dexter explains that he could never kill a child, because he abides by a moral code. Moreover, the episode hints towards Dexter’s traumatic childhood and explains the predicaments of his stepfather Harry in dealing with Dexter’s murderous urges. As such, the episode is a mixture of moral certainty (solving a murder, killing by a strict moral code) and moral uncertainty (Dexter’s struggle with his urges).

Before conducting the interviews, we conducted a qualitative narrative content analysis on the episode (van Ommen et al., 2014) in order to unravel the moral dilemmas the main characters face. Based on the analysis potential topics of discussion as well as probing questions were distilled to be included in the interview guide (Table 1).

**Interview guide**

The results from the content analysis coupled with the theoretical assumptions about moral evaluations, formed the input for the interview guide for the qualitative in-depth interviews (Table 1). The semi-structured interview contained fixed topics followed by probing tactics based on respondents’ moral judgments. We applied triangulation in data collection by approaching moral evaluations via three different angles. Respondents were asked to: (1) describe a character they strongly liked or disliked and why; (2) then to reproduce the different storylines in their own words (implicitly inciting moral opinions); and (3) to talk about specific scenes in which the character takes explicit moral standpoints. A selection of visuals (stills) based on the content analysis was used as stimuli to help the respondents recall the narrative and get the interview started (Collier, 1967). These visuals were also implemented as a method of recall, and thereby a reliability check.

**Participants**

In association with the moral reasoning of *Dexter*, we expected that law and (developmental) psychology students share specific real-life (pre-professional) knowledge and experiences with regard to the moral make-up, dilemmas and experiences of the MACs and the represented professional situations in *Dexter*. Therefore, these groups may be conceptualized as different morality subcultures (e.g., Tamborini et al., 2012). Our sample of students of
Table 1. Condensed interview guide/topic list moral evaluations of *Dexter*. Contact corresponding author for complete version.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Semi-structured interview with fixed topics and partly fixed follow-up topics/questions. Questions are asked on multiple entry-levels to discern the moral evaluation of the respondents (<em>triangulation</em>): the character-level (individually and compared with each other), the storyline and specific scenes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>‘Purpose of the study is to discern what viewers think about <em>Dexter</em> (Don’t mention “morality” or “moral evaluation” before or during the interview). We will be studying the opinions of different viewer groups, such as men/women, fan/non-fans, students in different years etc. (Don’t mention their study before the interview.) We want your opinion, so it is important that you understand that there are no right or wrong answers.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First phase: Characters</td>
<td>Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make the topic of moral evaluation as concrete as possible. Observe the interviewee while he is watching the episode</td>
<td>The interviewer shows the respondent the chart with names and pictures of the important characters in the episode and starts by asking if the respondent could point out the characters that he likes or dislikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second phase: Storylines</td>
<td>To discern if and which moral aspects from the storyline play a role in the interviewee’s moral evaluations of the characters and their conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third phase: Concrete scenes</td>
<td>Cueing direct moral reactions about characters, storylines, conduct that has not or has not fully been discussed so far</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
different stages in their education builds on the research of van Ommen et al. (2014), and can be classified as a purposeful sample (Patton, 1990). Our goal was to reach saturation of our main concepts. For an overview of the background characteristics (group size, sex, age, year of education, familiarity with the show) see Table 2. First, law and psychology students were recruited via snowball sampling from the social networks of the interviewers as well as the interviewees. This sample was based on the motivation that their potential distinctive frame of reference and relevance structures would match the moral reasoning and relevance structures of MACs in Dexter to a certain degree. After reaching saturation and analyzing the first round of interviews, we noticed that many psychology students discussed the moral predicaments of Harry Morgan as a father and nurturer. Therefore, we also approached and interviewed respondents whose education explicitly referred to Harry’s parental moral dilemmas, that is developmental psychology students (n = 10; with socio-demographic characteristics as similar as possible to the other students).

Quality measures: Validity and reliability

The interviews were conducted by students who received 9 hours of interview training, in which they were trained how to use the interview guide and practiced conducting in-depth interviews. In this context, the internal validity as well as the reliability of the study were secured by peer debriefing: during the process of interviewing interviewers constantly reflected on their work in consultation with the main researchers, to ensure that the topic list (see Table 1) was consistently used (Boeije, 2010; Patton, 1990). The setup of this study also enabled researcher triangulation. The use of several interviewers and the involvement of several key-researchers in the analysis of the data compensated for single-researcher bias (Boeije, 2010). The internal validity was also secured by member checks: the researchers reported back to the participants to provoke critical response (Boeije, 2010; Patton, 1990). This process strengthened the accuracy, fairness, and validity of the data.

Analyses

In-depth interviews were held in Dutch, audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed using the qualitative data analysis program MaxQDA. The analysis was grounded in two distinct phases (Boeije, 2010). In the exploration phase the researchers formulated as many codes that could be relevant in view of grounds for moral evaluations. In the subsequent specification phase, axial or focused coding was used to further specify the concepts and categories in relation to the central questions and related topics, such as moral evaluations driven by moral reasoning, viewer characteristics and interplay of both. Thus, the codes and categories were ordered in a way that would describe the aspects relevant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. General characteristics of respondents.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex: ♂/♀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with show: Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of education: (1/2/3/4/4-up)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to the research questions (Boeije, 2010). This phase resulted in two specific models that demonstrate the variation in grounds for moral evaluation over different viewer groups (law and [developmental] psychology students of various years of education).

**Results**

The results revealed that law students on the one hand (developmental) psychology students on the other distinctively vary in their grounds for moral evaluations; therefore, we ordered the results in these two groups of student viewers. Moreover, the main routes per different viewer group are summarized in conceptual models (Figure 2 for law students, and Figure 3 for [developmental] psychology students), which specify and deepen the model outlined in the theoretical framework (Figure 1).

**Law students**

Roughly speaking, the main routes towards moral judgments of law students were mainly driven by the morally ambiguous text characteristics of *Dexter* (left side of the theoretical framework; see Figure 2). We could distill two major routes from the data. First, moral evaluations of law students were primarily based on the moral relevance structures of *Dexter* as a character: the strict guidelines of The Code versus Dexter’s moral predicaments and morally ambiguous motivations and justifications as articulated in the narrative, which leads in the end to nuanced moral judgments (see Figure 2). Second, specifically the more experienced law students also grounded their moral evaluation in their own ‘pre-professional’ moral toolbox, which emphasized a procedural way of thinking and acting. As a consequence, this

---

**Figure 2.** Routes of coming to moral judgments on actions and motivations of characters in *Dexter* by law students.
particular group of law students made an explicit distinction between Dexter as character and Dexter as professional role model, and compared The Code with the procedures of law to come to moral judgments. This specific moral evaluation leads in the end to very clear-cut and strict moral judgments about the actions and motivations of Dexter (see Figure 2).

**Moral evaluations driven by The Code and moral relevance structures of Dexter**

It was surprising that—despite their educational background—most of the law students strongly liked vigilante killer Dexter as a character, specifically in his role as murderer (16 out of 28). As a result of this identification, the rules of Dexter’s Code mainly guided their moral evaluations. If the killing of Dexter was explicitly and strongly rejected it was mostly because of the horridness and vividness of the killing, instead of the unlawfulness of the murdering act (two out of 28).

Due to a positive disposition towards the protagonist in the story and his moral predicaments, many law students would justify or would refuse to unambiguously condemn Dexter’s ‘immoral’ behavior (21 out of 28). Most law students trivialized the murdering of Dexter in comparison with other ‘real’ murderers (e.g. murderers without ‘morals’) by referring to his vigilante goals and motives or mitigating circumstances. In the following quote, the interviewee places a tremendous amount of ‘weight’ on the fact that Dexter upholds the value of vigilantism, which leads to a very nuanced moral evaluation of Dexter’s murdering behavior. The moral rules that were violated by Dexter are acknowledged by the respondent, but eventually are deemed as less important:

R: … ehm, well yes, I think that Dexter as killer spoke to me the most, just because he truly kills only bad people. And ehm, he does meticulous research and does not act rashly. … It might be difficult to have sympathy for a serial killer, they should not live a normal happy life I think after

---

**Figure 3.** Routes of coming to moral judgments on actions and motivations of characters in *Dexter* by (developmental) psychology students.
the killing. … So I do not condone what he does, however I mean … on the other hand I also fully understand his behavior. (Female, 18 years, first year law student, not familiar with show)

Despite the fact that the respondent finds murder in general immoral, she characterizes Dexter as moral and careful, signifying empathy for the character. When everything—including his murdering—is considered, Dexter’s behavior is understood.

In its extreme form, mediated closeness towards Dexter led to, for mostly first and second year law students, explicit anticipation of Dexter’s success in achieving his vigilante goals:

I really felt that by following the main character, you actually hope that he will catch the murderer and that he will torture him is of secondary importance. You just want him to catch the killer and succeed. … And what Dexter does after he catches him does not bother me at all … (Male, 19 years, first year law student, not familiar with show)

As a consequence, many law students (15 out of 28)—specifically viewers who liked Dexter in his part as murderer—lawfully disengage (for justice purposes): They set their personal beliefs about the immorality of murder aside in order to be able to enjoy the narrative from the point of view that they have come to share with Dexter.

**Mediated dialogue: The Code versus law procedures**

Primarily law students further along in their curriculum not only grounded their moral evaluations in morally ambiguous relevance structures of the narrative, but correspondingly referred to a specific frame of mind that they acquired during their study. This group of law students referred to legal protocols as a rational moral system, and evaluate the behavior in the story based on these morally clear-cut procedures. When the professional opinions were at odds with happenings in the text, there was no room for nuance in the judgment. The respondent then distanced himself from the text, but still used the text, specifically the procedure of The Code, to illustrate the (rightness) of professionally held opinions. Specifically, law students further along in the curriculum disapproved of The Code. This disapproval was not rooted in differences between The Code and personally held beliefs, but in conflicts with a professional view of ethics.

I: And how do you feel about the way in which Dexter decides someone's guilt?

R: Well, there is no room for the adversarial process and that is wrong. It’s rather simple, when there are three parties involved … well I mean two parties and a Judge. Someone who prosecutes and someone who defends. The victim and the accused. There are two independent parties who state and work their case without interference of emotions. Thorough research and the possibility that the accused may speak up. Well, Dexter doesn’t give them that possibility. The guy is not able to talk, due to the stupid plastic thing in his mouth. (Male, 20 years, third year law student)

This interviewee, for example, considered Dexter as a ‘bad’ professional role model, because his behavior was not in correspondence with the formal and objective procedure of defense: Dexter does not give the accused murderer the possibility to speak out in a court setting.

**(Developmental) psychology students**

Interestingly, in contrast to law students with limited experience, almost all of the (developmental) psychology students immediately expected to see elements of their own future
career portrayed in the morally ambiguous professional lives that they were watching. Even almost all the first-year students morally evaluate Dexter from a professional point-of-view as if he were a ‘real’ patient who should be treated by a ‘real’ psychotherapist. As a consequence, both psychology and developmental psychology students grounded their moral evaluations far more in professional moral beliefs (see Figure 3) than the moral relevance structures in the narrative than law students. This professional moral judgment entailed a moral evaluation that explicitly arose from the professional identity or role of the psychologist and/or pedagogue (in training), his or her theoretical or practical knowledge, and the strong belief that psychotherapy is in the end effective.

As a consequence, there was more distancing from the narrative. Instead of mentioning main protagonist Dexter as most appealing like the majority of the law students and (developmental) psychology students liked a broad variety of different other characters, and their judgments were mostly grounded in viewer characteristics. Dexter’s stepfather Harry Morgan (eight out of 34) and/or Dexter as a child (eight out of 34) were most appealing to both psychology and—relatively even more strongly—developmental psychology students (nine out of 10).

Professional moral judgment as ground for moral evaluations included two different starting points for these evaluations: referencing to diagnostics and professional ideals and self-referential professional engagement. The first route is grounded in clear-cut professional guidelines that distinguished between non-pathological (moral) and pathological (immoral), which leads to rather clear-cut diagnoses and connected moral judgments. The second route is grounded in recognizing the complexity of underlying moral dilemmas and different moral perspectives in the narrative from a professional and realistic point-of-view.

**Moral evaluations grounded in diagnostics and professional ideals.** When the moral evaluation was guided by the professional guidelines regarding pathology, the viewer used characteristics, traits and symptoms belonging to certain psychological disorders to evaluate Dexter’s behavior. Especially first and second year (developmental) psychology students (12 out of 14) were eager to reason by diagnostic ‘flowcharts’ to identify Dexter’s pathological personality. Dexter’s urge to kill was seen as obsessive and since he seems to kill for pleasure (even as a child), his behavior is characterized as pathological. According to these interviewees Dexter’s moral misbalance should be seen a result of his specific mental disease:

… he is completely fascinated by how people commit crimes and kill. He enjoys the ways in which the blood flows and congeals. To him that is art and well that is … pathological. (Male, 21 years, first year psychology, not familiar with the show)

These students morally evaluated from a professional distance from the text and the characters, thereby exalting not only professional diagnostic instruments, but also strict professional ideals about *healing* these mental abnormalities of the ‘diagnosed’ characters with therapeutic treatment. Moreover, they distanced themselves from the idea that even though Dexter’s urge to kill is limited and focused, it is still not a possibility for him to suppress this urge completely. They grounded their strict moral judgment in the ideal that psychotherapy in the end can help to fully control pathological impulses. One respondent (female, 19 years, first year psychology student) morally approved of The Code, however revealed a distinct belief in the idea that Dexter’s behavior and urges could have been modified and suppressed by means of therapy from a young age:
I: How do you feel about that? The Code of Harry I mean?

R: Well, I think that it is good. However, it would have been preferable for him to have had a fitting form of therapy which is obviously out there … that way they could have explored if anything other than The Code could have helped him, that would have been my first idea … [laughs]

By offering an even better solution for Dexter’s problems the respondent actually distanced herself from Harry’s actions, thereby showing an absolute belief in the healing power of psychotherapy.

Moral evaluations grounded in self-referential professional engagement

This concept means that the respondents referred to ‘theoretical experiences’ (the retrieved theoretical knowledge that is applicable to the professional field) or cases that he or she encountered while in residency or in the educational field. Contrary to the first and second year students, it seems that the more experienced students recognized the underlying moral complexities of the actions and motivations in Dexter and other MACs as presented in the narrative and showcased a greater willingness to engage with the moral deliberations in the text, and less distance towards the characters.

For example, many master students refer to complicating conditions that might prevent the professional to reach his or her goal, such as finding the right diagnoses. This group of respondents explicitly questioned the context of Dexter’s behavior by their professional knowledge and were aware of subtleties and complicating circumstances that are not addressed in general diagnostic guidelines. A respondent articulated Harry’s despair as a parent, underlining that the pathological behavior of his son would be something ‘that he would have to deal with on a daily basis’ and acknowledges that finding the ‘right’ therapy could be a struggle (male, 25 years, fifth year psychology student, not familiar with show). While another master student (female, 23 years, fourth year developmental psychology student, not familiar with show), stressed the complex influence of nature versus nurture in the formation of character and is hesitant in judging or placing blame.

Discussion

This explorative study aimed to map the moral grounds that play a role in coming to moral evaluations of an episode of Dexter by different student groups that are educationally related to the ethical dilemmas, ethical violations, and moral standards presented in the show. Our analysis provides support for the notion that student groups with varying educational backgrounds indeed employ different conceptions of morality. They value different protagonists and elements of the narrative, have different moral orientations, and they evaluate at different levels of moral ambiguity (cf. Tamborini et al., 2012; Zillmann, 2000), for example in their appeal and acceptance of vigilantism, murder, and (ab)normality.

First year law students were, in general, guided by the morally ambiguous relevance structures of vigilante killer Dexter as presented in the show, and neglected the law as a system in their moral evaluations. In contrast, first and second year (developmental) psychology students mainly focused on care, holding strong moral beliefs especially about their profession that guided them in their moral evaluations. Instead of following the moral reasoning
of the text, they refer to a norm-based professional world governed by clear-cut diagnostic instruments and corresponding therapy. The actions of the MACs in the storyline do not meet their ideas of the professional standard or personal ideal, and they rely on a sense of moral certainty. The stringent and disapproving moral evaluations of the morally complex show by first and second year (developmental) psychology students are mainly based on their strongly idealized images of the profession, diagnostic protocols, and therapy.

However, most older law students are far more strongly driven by rule-driven ideas of the professional standard or ideal of their future profession compared to first-year law students. The law and law-related procedures seem to provide them with a sense of (external) moral certainty, whereby the law seemed to be an end in itself rather than a means to an end (justice). They contrast the moral relevance structures of MACs with the law, and therefore use a procedural way of moral reasoning that they are taught in school (Willging & Dunn, 1981; see Figure 4). As they move further along in the curriculum they are therefore less open to the morally ambiguous and vigilante reasoning in Dexter than less experienced law students.

Experienced (developmental) psychology students appear to have a more abstract and developed reasoning in moral evaluations than experienced law students (cf. Kohlberg, 1969), which is marked by a growing realization of the moral complexities, context and inconsistencies of their professional rules and regulations in reality. These students showcased less idealistic moral evaluations than less experienced (developmental) psychology students. Despite the fact that they still strongly believe that Dexter's mental disorder is treatable, they also recognize the dilemmas that Dexter and his surroundings are facing, evincing a more nuanced and realistic view of the profession and professional ethics, rooted in both theoretical (students' retrieved theoretical knowledge that is applicable to the professional field) and practical experiences.

In general, it seems that there is a sliding scale in moral evaluations. As students gain more experience in the field, their moral evaluations slowly become less black-and-white, less idealistic. At the same time, moral evaluations become more grounded in multiple and conflicting perspectives and students' professional experiences (cf. Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Perry, 1999). As a consequence, the moral predicaments in Dexter create an ethical playground for moral discussion. We conclude that the route a specific student takes
in forming moral evaluations, is dependent on the amount of ‘pre-professional’ experience (cf. van Ommen et al., 2014). An integration of routes towards moral evaluations by law and (developmental) psychology students in different phases of their moral professional development is presented in Figure 4.

Interestingly, even though there are differences in pre-professional experience and preferences in protagonists, psychology and pedagogy sciences students showed remarkable similarities in the grounds for moral evaluations of Dexter. An explanation for this intersection could be that the study programs of psychology and developmental psychology strongly overlap on aspects that are related to the moral predicaments in Dexter.

It is also notable that law students initially lack the professional frame of reference in their moral evaluations. An explanation could be that the professional frame of reference which first year (developmental) psychology students express is not really ‘pre-professionalism’, but merely a stronger idealism relative to first law students. Strong idealism for offering—psychological—therapeutic care seems to verify the results from the study by Becker et al. (1961), in which they charted medical students’ strong idealistic perceptions about the medical care profession at the start of their education.

Furthermore, because the (Developmental) Psychology group is biased with regard to gender, the observed differences in moral evaluations might reflect gender differences in moral reasoning. For example, Jaffee and Hyde (2000) found differences in the care orientation favoring females and small differences in the justice orientation favoring males. Also, literature that specifically focuses on moral reasoning of law students found a relationship between conceptions of the law and gender (Janoff, 1991). However, during the curriculum the care perspective of women decreases, and after one year there are no significant gender differences because all students mainly embrace the justice oriented moral reasoning (Janoff, 1991). Therefore, specifically for our findings on students further in their curriculum, it is unlikely that that gender differences play a prominent role.

All in all, in line with previous research in other professional domains our results seem to suggest that those teachers and critics who favor using audio-visual and morally ambiguous narratives, such as a crime drama as Dexter, for the ethics education of students are on the right track (cf. Weaver et al., 2014). By using the series as an elicitation technique to spark discussion about how moral judgments about certain professional issues come about, it is possible to reveal how law and (developmental) psychology students conceptualize and structure the professional world they are becoming part of and the moral problems they will come to face. The moral uncertainty of Dexter as a text makes it more interesting as a stimulus in a teaching environment because it will not cue a certain moral evaluation pattern with the viewer (cf. Lane, 2001), and the moral evaluations will be cued mostly by professional knowledge and experience or a lack thereof. This enables teachers to engage in discussions about what certain professional rules and regulations mean, why they are in place, and whether students understand them correctly, hopefully creating an even better ethical awareness within a new generation of professionals.

Building on our results, we would like to give teachers three recommendations. Firstly, we recommend making use of the moral deliberations in the show. Our narrative analysis revealed that Dexter develops according to a classic Hollywood model (Weijers, 2014), in which (moral) choices have to be made by the main character. These choices continuously articulate a latent conflict of values. Teachers could stop the show on these choice moments, and zoom in on the complexities of the moral predicament of the protagonists and the
various perspectives on this predicament by other characters, for example in the setting of a role-play. Secondly, teachers should make use of the differences in moral evaluations of different groups of viewers, by confronting students with moral interpretations of specific professionals with different backgrounds and experiences. Lastly, we recommend that such shows be incorporated in the later years of the education, since the first-year students lack the frame of professional reference or nuance to actually see to the heart of the professional dilemmas at hand.

As with all studies, this project was not without limitations, which open up interesting avenues for future research. This study argues that theoretical experience increased the moral tolerance and nuance of (developmental) psychology students and decreased it for law students. This might be influenced by other factors such as age (because most of the less experienced students in the sample were considerably younger than the more experienced) and the specific learning objectives of the education program (see Armon & Dawson, 1997).

Despite its limitations, the explorative study provides a substantial empirical base for the use of contemporary TV-shows featuring MACs as protagonist(s) as effective tools in moral education programs. This fits in nicely with a line of teaching, particularly in the medical domain, where teachers of medical and nursing students, have already turned to fictional shows featuring MACs for input in their classes on medical ethics and diagnostics (see for an overview: Hoffman et al., 2017). Furthermore, it seems that in the psychological domain experts also start to approach morally ambivalent drama series as a helpful and adequate tool to reflect on professional dilemma’s. In the book The Psychology of Dexter (DePaulo, 2012) several psychologists and criminologists shed their light on the challenging and profound psychological complexities of Dexter, and discuss and analyze Dexter Morgan as if he is a ‘real’ patient.

All in all, the results of our research show empirical support for the assumption that TV-shows can trigger various well-founded moral evaluations. Dexter (and other morally ambiguous shows referring to different professional settings) could provide for the necessary ingredients for debate, a moral playground for students in which moral views could be argued about, explored and put to the test.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes on contributors**

Merel van Ommen (MSc *cum laude* 2011) is a PhD in Communication at the Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University and a lecturer at the Communication Science department at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Her research focuses on the way in which viewers come to moral evaluations about television drama. She is also working as a television- and film critic for several Flemish and Dutch magazines.

Serena Daalmans (PhD 2016) is a researcher working at the Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University and a lecturer at the Communication Science department at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Her research focuses on morality in television content.

Addy Weijers is a lecturer in Communication Science at the Radboud University Nijmegen and teaches script writing at the International Media and Entertainment Management Academy of the
NHTV in Breda. Qualitative content analysis of morality in TV-narratives and the way viewers deal with moral topics in drama, are the main focus of his research.

Allison Eden (PhD, 2011) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Michigan State University. Her research interests include media psychology, entertainment effects, and morality.

Rebecca de Leeuw (PhD, cum laude, 2011) is an assistant professor of Communication Science, Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University. She devotes her research to the role of parenting and media in relation to well-being in children and adolescents, with a special focus on positive media psychology.

Moniek Buijzen (PhD, 2003) is a professor and chair of Communication Science, Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University. Her research focuses on young (media) consumers within the paradigm of positive communication science. Buijzen strives to apply insights on communication processes to improve child and adolescent well-being.

References


DePaulo, B. (2012). The psychology of Dexter. Dallas, TX: SmartPop.


