A comparison of moral competence between Iranian male and female elementary students

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Abstract

The main aim of current research was to compare moral competence between male and female students. Among all elementary students in Birjand, Iran; 200 students (100 boys and 100 girls) were selected as sample of the research. Both male and female students responded to Lind's (2006) Moral Judgment Test (\( \alpha = 0.62 \)). The results indicated significant difference between moral competence in male and female students. But, none of the variables parents’ education, and parents’ job could significantly predict the moral competence in students. So, it is necessary to provide relevant moral educational contents and methods according to developmental needs of both male and female students.

1. Introduction

Throughout human history, communities have been concerned with the type of person with proper moral values. Kannan (2006) declared that the study and development of morality and moral values, is of paramount importance in the educational times. This is because of the demands modern society puts on students.

Morality can be defined as principles we use to distinguish right from wrong (Eysenck, 2004). According to Sigelman (1999) and Eysenck (2004), human morality has three components:

2. \textit{Emotions}: Feelings, such as guilt, connected to moral issues. Emphasized by Freud.
3. \textit{Behavior}: How we behave, and the extent to which we behave honorably or not. Emphasized by social learning theorists.

However, most of the studies in the area of moral development have based on the cognitive component and by measuring moral judgment (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2007). Based on a review of Kohlberg’s definition of moral judgment competence and subsequent attempts to measure it, Lind (1987 – 2002) proposed the \textit{dual-aspect theory} of moral behaviour and development. Lind (2008) believes that Affective and cognitive mechanisms are inseparable, although distinct. Moral affects (values, ideals) are exhibited in moral behaviour in various ways depending on the
individuals’ cognitive structures and competencies. Moral competencies, on the other hand, cannot be defined and measured without reference to an individual’s moral ideals or principles.

As it is summarized in Figure 1, to be moral, a behaviour needs to be guided by moral ideals or principles (affection), yet in order to be morally mature a behaviour must also be informed by developed reasoning competencies (cognition). But note that moral principles and competencies are not, as this model may suggest, separate things, but just different aspects of behaviour (Lind, 2008).

Although individuals may have different behaviors in different moral situations, there are several factors that contribute to development of moral competence. Some of these factors are: cognitive growth (Kohlberg, 1976; Silverman, 1994; Lovecky, 1997), parents' role and family system (Freud, 1930; Kiser & Black, 2005), formal education (Rest, 1986; Thorkildsen, 1994; Derry Bery & Thoma, 2000), role taking (Kohlberg, 1976; Leman, 2001), and also, gender (Eysenck, 2004; DeWolfe, Jackson, & Winterberger, 2004).

Effect of gender on moral judgment is an ambiguous and arguable subject among developmental psychologists (see Gilligan, 1982; Sayers, 1986, Garmon, 1996). When it comes to gender differences in moral judgment, we have thorough information about this matter (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2007).

Narvaez (1993), in a research to study the effect of gender on moral reasoning, did not discern significant differences between gifted female and male students. Räsänen, Tirri, & Nokelainen (2006) classified the Defining Issues Test (DIT) scores into four classes on the basis of the quartiles. No statistically significant difference between the DIT scores of male and female respondents was found. A study was carried out by Zakerian (2009), to investigate moral competence in gifted and normal students in an Iranian sample, indicated that gender could not significantly predict moral competence.

Rest (1986) reported the meta-analysis of 56 DIT studies, where he concluded that, females actually score higher in moral judgment than males, but gender accounts for no more than 0.9% of the variance in DIT scores. Results of a research was performed by Tirri & Nokelainen (2007) among 249 academically average and gifted students showed clearly that female participants estimated their ethical skills higher than males. Female students were more likely to read and express emotions, take the perspectives of others, and also more caring by connecting to others than their male peers. Females in this sample self-reported themselves to be more effective workers with interpersonal and group differences than males. They declared that this tendency could be explained by the nature of items measuring ethical sensitivity skills.

DeWolfe, Jackson, & Winterberger (2004) in a research on criminal men and women concluded that moral judgment, internal control, and role taking in men are higher than women. But women are better in socialization and emotional empathy. In a Finnish study by Tirri (2003), both sixth- and ninth-grade girls were shown to be more care oriented in their moral orientation than their same age male peers, who were clearly justice oriented.

In according to this variety about the effect of gender on moral judgment, it is important to investigate it in different cultures and societies. Also, family is the first context to form and develop morality in children (Zern, 1996). Investigation of parents’ job and education effects on moral judgment is a preferred subject.

Lovecky (1997) found that it is the process of early attachment between mother and child that leads to the formation of moral identity. He declared that being responded to in a closely imitative manner, and developing the

Figure 1. dual-aspect theory (Zakerian, 2009)
capacity to follow the parent's lead, allows the child to experience moral characters. He believed that these stimulations and interaction are more necessary for gifted children. Hart, Atkins, & Ford (1999), in a study to assess the influence of family environment on moral identity formation, explained that cognitively- and socially-rich family environments and high levels of adolescent-parent joint activity facilitated the formation of moral identity.

In spite of that, the results of Zakerian (2009) revealed that parents' job and education could not significantly predict moral competence in Iranian gifted and normal students. He expressed that similarity of strong cultural and social factors in his sample caused that parents' situation did not interfere in moral competence.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of gender and parents' job and education on moral competence in a sample of elementary students in Iran. This provides the opportunity to determine whether gender difference was related to differences in students' moral competence across Iranian culture. Also, it clarifies if parents' job and education could affect moral competence.

2. Materials and methods

**Sample:** This study was carried out in 2008 – 2009 educational year. Participants in the study were 200 Iranian elementary students at primary schools from Birjand (Southern Khorasan province), Iran selected by cluster sampling. The sample consisted of 100 male and 100 female students from grade five (age 11).

**Scale:** Moral Judgment Test (MJT) was developed by Dr. Jorge Lind (1977 – 2006) which could make it possible to assess the ability of people to judge arguments pro and contra a controversial moral problem on the basis of their own moral principles, that is, irrespective of their opinion on the particular problem. The MJT confronts individuals with a situation which puts a high demand on them. The two sets of arguments (pro and contra) are matched to represent the same qualities or levels of moral reasoning though with opposing implications. The MJT uses moral dilemmas, which is a situation in which a person cannot make a decision without transgressing an important moral rule or principle. In the standard MJT, two dilemmas are used, the mercy-killing dilemma and the worker's dilemma. The moral task of the MJT is contained in the arguments that are subsequently presented to the participants. For each dilemma, the participants have to say how much they accept or reject a set of 12 arguments. Six of these arguments are in favour and six are against the doctor and the workers, respectively. They are to decide on a difficult moral dilemma and then to rate arguments in favour and against this decision on a scale from “I strongly reject (-4) to I strongly accept (+4)”. The MJT can be used with children as young as 10 years of age if they have no learning deficits and upwards. The moral competence score or "C- score", which indexes the subjects' moral judgment competence, can range from 1 to 100. The C- score is sometimes categorized as very low (1-9), low (10-19), medium (20-29), high (30-39), very high (40-49) and extraordinary high (above 50). Persian form of MJT which was proved by Prof. Lind was used in this research.

Over the past 30 years the MJT has shown to be very useful for testing theoretical assumptions about moral behaviour and development and about the effect size of certain educational programs (Lind, 2005).

The MJT is reliable in the sense that neither its administration nor its scoring involve a "human factor" as is the case in open interviews, and also, the test instruction and the test stimuli do not change at all (Lind, 2005). In spite of these, Lerkiatbundit et al. (2006) reported a reliability coefficient (test-retest-correlation) for the MJT of $r = 0.90$. In current research internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.62.

3. Results

**Gender effect on moral competence:** to compare male and female students on moral competence, an independent sample T-test was conducted. Means and standard deviations of moral competence for male and female students are shown in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>16.39</td>
<td>10.16</td>
<td>-2.397</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>0.017</td>
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As it can be seen in table 1, the results indicate that moral competence between male and female students is significantly different. The results indicate that just as in some other studies (e.g., Tirri, 2003; DeWolfe et al., 2004; Tirri & Nokelainen, 2007), and is inconsistent with the findings of some another researchers (e.g., Narvaez, 1993; Zakerian, 2009). According to the content of the MJT, and to the age of participants, it might be interpreted that female students responded more emotionally than their male peers. So, this finding can approve that girls are more care oriented in their moral judgments.

**Effects of parents’ job and education on moral competence:** Multiple regression was used to investigate the effects of parents' job and education on children's moral competence. Results of multiple regression for fathers' and mothers' job and education are shown in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2, The results of multiple regression</th>
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<tr>
<td>constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother's job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father's education</td>
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<td>Mother's education</td>
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</table>

These findings express that non of the variables father's job, mother's job, father's education, and mother's education can affect significantly moral competence in students (F(4 , 194) = 0.730 , P = NS). These findings are inconsistent with most of researchers (e.g., Silverman, 1994; Lovecky, 1997; Hart et al., 1999), but the same of the results of Zakerian (2009). Perhaps, the strength of socio-cultural factors in a little city like Birjand affects the role of parents in moral development of their children (see Zakerian, 2009).

4. Discussion

These findings declare that gender difference affects moral competence in students. This should be notified in formal education, specifically. It is necessary to pay special attention to characteristics of both male and female students in moral training programs. To provide need based educational content, and apply relevant teaching methods according to each group (male and female) are very important in moral education planning. Obviously, it can improve and accelerate moral development in both male and female students.

On the other hand, parents' emphasizing on formal education, and prevalence of similar socio-cultural factors causes that parents' job and education cannot affect moral competence as opposed to what was expected. School consultants, media, and etc. should aware parents about their great role in children's moral development.

Research on similar sample (non-western sample) is required to verify present findings. It is also suggested that future research consider the interaction of socio-cultural factors and moral development in non-western samples.

References


