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The Development of Moral Reasoning in Singaporean Youths

Caroline Koh

A large body of Western research literature has provided extensive discussions on the development of moral values, moral education and moral reasoning in adolescents and youths. Of particular interest, are the theoretical frameworks proposed and/or debated by researchers such as Kohlberg, Gilligan, Rest Lickona and Lipman. Whereas Kohlberg is credited as the originator of the theory of moral development, purporting six stages the cognitive development of moral judgment, his epic work has been critiqued, refined and improved over the years. In Asian contexts, however, research in these areas is still at the stage of early progression and expansion. Nevertheless, values education and moral development are two pertinent aspects in the citizenship building agenda of young nations such as Singapore. This paper explores the moral development of Singaporean youths using a Kohlbergian research framework, with the aim of providing an Asian perspective to the existing model. It presents an overview of the role of moral development in the Singapore educational context, before describing the methodology used and the interim results obtained.

Key words: development of moral reasoning, moral and values education, ethics, Kohlberg, adolescents.

Recent world events, such as the spate of terrorism and the current global financial crisis, have rekindled an accrued interest in the role of ethics and moral values in daily life. The need to inculcate the right values and moral code of conduct in present and future generations of youths has been emphasized by political and religious leaders. As such, educational administrators, teachers, parents and others working with young people have been spurred into action, in the attempt to develop effective programs and strategies to develop a morally upright generation of youths. Although most people will agree to the importance of ethics in everyday life, there is a divergence in views regarding the nature of ethics. Some authors view the terms “ethics” and “morality” as interchangeable¹, while others view morality as a broader concept, of which ethics describes a more specific aspect. Thus, morality is defined descriptively as a code of conduct put forward by a social group or by an individual for his/her own behaviour, or normatively as a code

of conduct put forward by all rational beings in specified contexts². Likewise, ethics describe standards of conduct, but these are derived on the basis of the universal principles of right and wrong³. In the quest to promote moral and ethical behaviour in societies, three domains of moral development should be integrated in the curricular or program framework: moral cognition, emotion and action^{4, 5}. This paper explores how the development of moral reasoning, moral feeling and moral action is achieved through the Civics and Moral Education (CME) program in the context of Singapore. It discusses research findings on the stages of development of moral reasoning of adolescents, before giving an overview of the various instructional strategies used to produce a comprehensive moral development program.

1. Kohlberg's theory of moral development

Although the concept of ethics has a long history, dating from the times of the Greek philosophers, a systematic study of the development of moral cognition only started in the 1950s, with Lawrence Kohlberg's⁶ groundbreaking doctoral dissertation entitled '*The development of modes of moral thinking and choice in the years 10-16*'. In the years following his dissertation, Kohlberg produced a series of influential writings that were to generate half a century of research and debate over the issue of one of Kohlberg's central concerns, 'How does man become moral?'. Kohlberg's theory of development of moral reasoning is an attempt to answer this question by proposing a framework describing the six stages of moral judgement in the development of moral thinking. These stages are grouped into three developmental levels: preconventional (Stages 1 and 2), conventional (Stages 3 and 4) and postconventional (Stages 5 and 6). Thus, at the preconventional level (applicable mainly to children), the individual's moral judgements are based on the avoidance of punishment or personal reward orientation. At the conventional level (applicable to adolescents and adults), moral reasoning focuses on what benefits and is approved by others, as well as strict adherence to societal rules and laws. At the postconventional level, the individual progresses to the social contract orientation, whereby decisions are made from a democratic viewpoint, with the aim of achieving the greatest good for the majority or the society. The highest stage of moral development involves the display of a universal ethical orientation whereby universal principles determine decision making, regardless of personal sacrifice. Kohlberg claimed that the stages are hierarchical and irreversible, although not all individuals can attain the highest stages.

Though highly acclaimed for his ideas, Kohlberg's approach was nevertheless critiqued by other researches on a number of issues, such as an apparent disregard for the role of the morality of care and community⁷, an over-

reliance on hypothetical situations rather than real life contexts, excessive emphasis on the cognitive perspective at the expense of the affective and the practical aspects⁸. Nevertheless, Kohlberg's ideal goal was to provide a comprehensive theory unifying "the relation of the development of moral thought to moral conduct and emotion,"⁹ although he recognized the difficulty in achieving this when he wrote, "the relations between moral thought and moral actions are surely too complex and interesting to be considered primarily in terms of ability to predict choice in action from choice in thought."¹⁰ To date, Kohlberg's concern with the integration of thought, emotion and action in moral development remains a challenge to educators and researchers. The following sections of this paper describe how attempts to produce such a comprehensive developmental program were carried out in Singapore schools. First, an overview of the Singapore education system is presented to familiarize the reader with the context of the current study. This is followed by an account of research findings on the assessment of moral reasoning amongst a sample of secondary school students. Finally, I will discuss the various strategies and approaches to promote a holistic moral development amongst students.

2. The Singapore education system

In Singapore, formal education begins with a six year primary/elementary school program, at the end of which, a student sits for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The PSLE scores determine student placement in one of the four courses offered at secondary/high school level. Two of these options, the 'Special' and 'Express' courses are four-year programs offered to students within the 60th percentile of the PSLE scores. The Special course allows the top 10% of the cohort to study the second language (Mother Tongue) at a higher level. The Normal (Academic)/ N(A) and Normal (Technical)/ N(T) courses are offered to students who are unable to meet the requirements for the Special/ Express stream, and hence follow a program catering for their pace of learning. At post-secondary level, the top 25 to 30% of the secondary school graduates are offered a two-year course in the Junior Colleges, in preparation for university admission. There are also a number of privately-funded, independent schools which offer a six-year program that sees students through secondary and junior college education. The rest of the students may apply for courses in the polytechnics or the Institute of Technical Education, both of which offer practice-based, skills-training courses.

3. Research methods

Participants

This study involved the participation of 60 Secondary 3 (9th Grade) students from a state secondary school. This sample consisted of 29 male and 31 female students. Of these students, 16 males and 15 females were from the Express course and 13 males and 16 females from the Normal (Academic) course. The mean age of the students was 13 years.

Survey procedure

The survey items were adapted from the Moral Judgement Interview (MJI) used by Kohlberg⁶. Whereas Kohlberg used the MJI in the form of an oral, tape-recorded conversation between interviewer and respondent, the current study used the written form of the interview, whereby survey forms containing the interview questions were distributed to the participants, who were then instructed to respond by writing out their answers. This method was chosen over the oral interviews as it allowed collection of data from a large numbers of subjects.

The MJI consists of three parallel forms (Forms A, B and C), each of which presents the participant with three scenarios. Each of these scenarios poses a conflict between two moral issues, and hence a moral dilemma. The respondents' answers to the MJI questions are reflections of their moral reasoning and can thus be translated into a moral judgement stage score. The current study made use of Form A, which focused on the issues of Life v/s Law (Heinz dilemma), Morality and Conscience v/s Punishment (Judge's dilemma), Contract v/s Authority (Joe's dilemma).

Survey Form A was administered to the participating students in quiet, classroom conditions under the supervision of the researcher and the students' teachers. The students were informed that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions, and were encouraged to respond honestly and to ask for clarifications if necessary.

The MJI responses were analysed and coded using the Standard Issue Scoring¹¹. This scoring procedure involves three phases: (a) breaking down the survey responses into discrete judgments; (b) linking these survey judgments to the criterion judgments described in the scoring manual; (c) using the matches between survey and criterion judgments to allocate stage scores at the issue and global levels. Thus, the first step undertaken by a scorer is to determine the respondent's chosen issue on a dilemma, e.g. in the Heinz dilemma, the respondent may choose either the Life or the Law issue. The respondent's answers to the dilemma questions are classified under either the chosen or the opposing issue, and then assigned the relevant stages according to the guidelines of the Standard Issues Scoring. This process is repeated for the other two dilemmas in Form A. The stages assigned can be

categorized as 'pure' (stages 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) or transitional (e.g. 1.2, 2.3 etc.). A transitional stage implies that the survey participant demonstrates moral judgments that fall in more than one developmental stage. When all the responses on the three dilemmas have been scored, the stage scores for each issue are calculated using the method prescribed in the Standard Issue Scoring guide. The stage scores calculated for the six issues can then be used for the computation of the global stage score for the survey participant.

4. Results and discussion

Figure 1 presents the proportion of students from each of the two secondary courses at each stage of moral reasoning. The data shows the percentage of male and female students at the different stages, measured in terms of global scores.

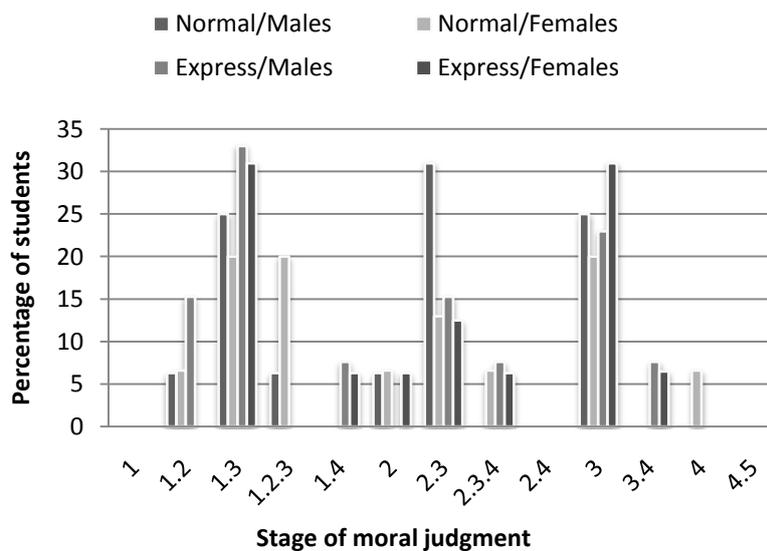


Figure1. Percentage of students at each moral judgment stage for each gender and academic course.

As shown in Figure 1, the highest distribution of the students (irrespective of gender and course) was observed at Stages 1.3 (25.0 %), 2.3 (18.3%) and 3 (25%). Only 5% of the students reached levels higher than Stage 3. This is in line with earlier studies¹², whereby fairly similar trends were obtained. In line with theoretical assumptions, each stage consists of a structured entity, with a given individual's score being at a single 'pure' stage or at a transitional

stage between two *consecutive* stages. The findings of this study reveal, however, that a sizeable number of participants showed scores at three transitional stages (e.g. 1.2.3) instead of two. Furthermore, some participants with transitional stages showed discontinuity within the scores, e.g. 1.3 or 1.4. A few possible explanations can be advanced for this seeming anomaly. For instance, given the small sample size, there is the likelihood that the aberrant scores could be due to error in scoring and/or measurement, or lack of clarity in the survey responses. Nevertheless, the high percentage of subjects at Stage 1.3 does insinuate an alternative explanation. As Colby et al.¹² and Kohlberg¹³ pointed out, the observed sequence anomaly in the stage score can be interpreted as a real phenomenon, where the subject demonstrates unusual heterogeneity in thinking, resulting in disjunction in stage sequence. Although further investigations with larger samples are needed before any definite conclusions can be put forward, these observations do point to the possibility that there is more flexibility in Kohlberg's hierarchical framework than might have been assumed.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of 'Normal' students at the various stages of moral judgment, while Figure 3 shows that of the 'Express' students and their respective stages.

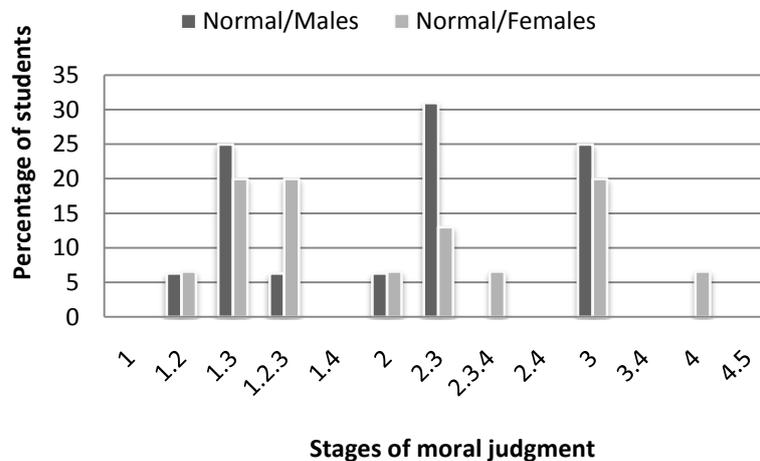


Figure 2. Percentage of 'Normal' students at each moral judgment stage.



Figure 3. Percentage of 'Express' students at each moral judgment stage.

The above figures show that for the Express course, moral judgment development amongst male students follows a similar trend to that of their female counterparts. The same is true of students in the Normal course, with the exception that some of the 'Normal' female students reached a stage higher than their male counterparts. These findings suggest that, at least for young adolescents and in the current context of Singapore, Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview does not discriminate against female subjects at the higher stages of moral judgment, as some of the early critics⁷ had argued.

Figure 4 compares the stage distribution of male students in the Normal course with those in the Express course, while Figure 5 does the same for the female samples. Although the profile of the 'Normal' students follows closely that of their 'Express' counterparts in terms of their stages of moral judgment, the data seems to suggest that 'Express' male students are marginally ahead of their 'Normal' peers whereas the contrary seems to hold for the female students.



Figure 4. Percentage of male students at each moral judgment stage.



Figure 5. Percentage of female students at each moral judgment stage.

5. Promoting moral development in Singapore schools

The fact that 55% of the survey participants remain below Stage 3 indicates that there is an imperative need for the implementation of strategies to enhance moral development amongst the youths. For the past decade, the

Ministry of Education in Singapore has put together a comprehensive Civics and Moral Education (CME) program. The rationale was to equip students with the relevant values and competencies that will enable them to make wise choices amidst a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. The program focuses on the development of a set of core values (e.g. respect, responsibility, integrity, care, resilience and harmony), using strategies designed to nurture moral knowing⁶, moral feeling and moral action¹⁴. A number of strategies have been used to facilitate the acquisition of skills and the internalization of values, with some having been implemented more successfully than others¹⁵. The following are some of the more effective methods:

- (i) Cultural transmission – this involves the nurturing of values which stem from one's cultural heritage and which are socially desirable. The transmission of these values can be achieved through the sharing of cultural practices and traditions, as well as role-modelling family members and peers.
- (ii) Story-telling – this approach is particularly effective at primary school level, whereby pupils have the opportunity to identify values and develop personal beliefs through narratives.
- (iii) Perspective-taking – this encourages students to put themselves in the shoes of others and to develop empathy and consideration for others.
- (iv) Moral reasoning – this allows students to make use of moral dilemmas to develop sound moral judgments and to progress from pre-conventional to post-conventional moral reasoning.
- (v) Community involvement – students are given the opportunity for moral action as they volunteer their time and effort towards community development and welfare.
- (vi) Service-learning – this is a structured approach towards experiential learning, whereby students learn authentic life skills through the development and implementation of a community involvement project.

6. Conclusion

This paper presents interim results from a study on the development of moral reasoning amongst Singaporean youths. Although the findings indicate that in general, young Singaporeans show a similar pattern of moral development as their western counterparts, they have raised new questions that remain to be answered. Are the inferences gleaned from the results applicable to other age groups? Are the observed anomalies in the stage sequences reproducible? Is the hierarchical progression in moral development applicable to all individuals? These questions warrant further research.

Notes

- ¹ P Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993.
- ² B Gert, 'The Definition of Morality' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E N Zalta (ed.), 2008, retrieved 6 January 2009, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/morality-definition/>>.
- ³ M Josephson, *Making Ethical Decisions*, W Hanson (ed.), Josephson Institute of Ethics, retrieved 6 January 2009, <<http://josephsoninstitute.org/MED/index.html#contents>>.
- ⁴ E Turiel, 'Foreword', *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 37, September 2008, pp. 279-288.
- ⁵ T Lickona, *Educating for character: how our schools can teach respect and responsibility*, Bantam, New York, 1992, pp. 53-62.
- ⁶ L Kohlberg, *The development of modes of moral thinking and choice in the years 10 – 16*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958.
- ⁷ C Gilligan, *In a different voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1982.
- ⁸ E Turiel, op. cit.
- ⁹ L Kohlberg, 'The development of children's orientations toward a moral order, 1: Sequence in the development of moral thought, *Vita Humana*, vol. 6, 1963, p.12.
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- ¹² A Colby, L Kohlberg, J Gibbs, M Lieberman, 'A longitudinal study of moral judgment', *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, vol. 48, 1983, pp. 1 -124.
- ¹³ L Kohlberg, 'Continuities in childhood and adult moral development revisited' in P B Baltes, K W Schaie (eds.), *Lifespan developmental psychology: Personality and socialization*, Academic Press, New York and London, 1973.
- ¹⁴ K Ryan, T Lickona, 'Character development: the challenge and the model', *Character Development in Schools and Beyond*, the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Washington DC, 1992.
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