

DO THE “APPLES” BAD? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON STUDENTS’ MORAL COGNITIVE ABILITY

SURAIYA ISHAK¹
AHMAD RAFLIS CHE OMAR²
KADIR ARIFFIN¹
MOHD YUSOF HUSAIN¹

¹ School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43650 Bangi
Selangor

² School of Management
Faculty of Economic & Management
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43650 Bangi
Selangor

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action study is to examine the moral cognitive ability among senior students who enrolled to Development Science program in Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to senior students at the end session of the final ethic class. The questionnaire is comprised of 3 sections intended to measure the student’s moral cognitive level, respond on unethical behaviors and demographic section. The findings show the students have reached the conventional moral cognitive level. Most respondents agree that parents is the most important source for moral cognitive development and had moulds their moral characters. In parallel to their moral cognitive level, most students show disapproval to most unethical behaviors listed in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, we also found a trend of ethical relativism in students reasoning. Thus, it signals that improvement is needed in the delivery of ethics subject in order to increase the conventional moral cognitive to the post-conventional level. The post-conventional moral cognitive is required to ensure the moral principles are being upheld at all times and contexts. The originality of this study lies in attempt to investigate on moral cognitive ability based on Kohlberg moral cognitive framework among a group of university students. The topic is also in line with current emphasizes to improve employees ethical behaviors within all organizations.

Keyword: moral cognitive, ethics, conventional, pre-conventional, post-conventional; action study

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Introduction

Ethical employees become the most precious resources that being search by many organizations today (Ashkanasy et al. 2006). Brilliant experts who fail to abide with ethical principles may impose threats to organizations' efficiency and effectiveness. Besides, unethical agents can blow up various social and economics disasters (Schmidt et al. 2009 and Ashkanasy et al. 2006), such happened to Enron (Sridharan 2002 and Vershoor, 2002), Century Bank of Indonesia (Handoyo 2009), Iskandar project of Malaysia (Charles, 2011^{a,b}) and few others (Sira, 2009). All the cases demonstrate that brilliant people with some ethics deficiencies can ruin many of our community system. A study by Trevino and Youngblood (1990) suggested two interesting terms on the discussion of employees' ethical behavior, namely the "bad apples" and the "bad barrels". The "bad apples" represent the analogy of a morally flawed individuals whose personal characteristic lead to the disposition of unethical behaviors. Meanwhile "bad barrels" refers to the organization's environment which had encourage the disposition of unethical choices or behaviors among it' members (Ashkanasy et al. 2006). Apart from that, latest study of Gonin et al. (2012) suggest another item in relation with the discussion of unethical behavior in organization, namely the "larder". "Larder" refers to broader societal context that has shaped the way people and organizations within the context behave. Although Gonin et al. (2012) emphasize the impact of "larder" to the unethical action, we still believe that there are some aspect of individual ability that is individually managed, thus it shapes the "apple" quality as well.

As far as "bad apples" is concern, individual moral cognitive ability is a pivotal individual factor that may determine ethics competency of future employees. Therefore, it is important to investigate the level of university's students' cognitive moral ability as they will be serving most of the future organizations. The investigation provides input for improvement in tertiary ethics education in order to develop more ethical competent professionals for the future.

Literature Review

Cognitive Moral Development (CMD) theory describes on the level of human cognitive ability in moral reasoning. The theory was developed by Kohlberg and widely used in various ethical cognitive studies (Kracher et al. 2002; Schmidt et al. 2009; Ashkanasy et al. 2006). Ashkanasy et al. (2006) study also found that cognitive moral development has significant influence on ethical decision-making. Their study shows that managers with low cognitive moral development behave more unethically when they learn that their organization condoned unethical decisions (behaviors). Contrary, managers with high cognitive moral development make more ethical decisions when they found they are in unethical organization's environment. Besides, study by Talwar and Kang Lee (2008) also shows that children lying behavior associates positively with their cognitive development. Other researchers had also conducted studies to explore moral awareness and moral development among students such as Suraiya and Mohd Yusof (2013); Lowry (2003); Butterfield et al (2000); DesJardins and Diedrich (2003); Maclagan (2003); Mintchik and Farmer (2009). Thus, moral cognitive ability is an important element to be nurtured in current tertiary education structure (Kracher et al (2002).

According to Kohlberg moral cognitive theory, a person's moral ability follows the same growing patterns of the physical, emotional and cognitive abilities (Velasquez 2002 and Ashkanasy et al. 2006). There are 3 levels of moral cognitive development following the Lawrence Kohlberg model:

1. Level 1: pre-conventional stage

At this level the person is in their lowest moral cognitive capability as they only base their moral evaluation on externally imposed expectations, such to obey the rules and regulations or to follow the expectations of the most influential power who can create the pleasant or unpleasant results for them.

2. Level 2: conventional stages

At this level the person tries to maintain the expectations of one's own family, peer group or nation to determine appropriateness and inappropriateness of their actions. They are not only conform to group expectations but also show some degree of loyalty to the group norms.

3. Level 3: post-conventional stages

At this level the person reach to the highest level of moral capability. At this level the person not only accepting the values and norms of their own group, but demonstrates impartial evaluation that concern everyone's interest.

Moral cognitive development discussion also relates to individual moral character. Character refers to an acquired human quality derived from learned practices. Character also includes individual reasoning ability that contributes to the decision of the appropriateness of action and the greatest good (Marshall et al. 2011: 52). Thus, we posit that moral cognitive ability is part of the individual character which has developed since the early age and involved many parties. Amongst potential sources for moral cognitive development are parents, education institutions and approaches, teachers, religious authority, and friends (Velasquez 2002; Marshall et al. 2011; Cheung & Pomerantz 2012; and Klaiber 2009). Marshall et al. (2011) has proposed interesting information on the development of moral character and moral education in schools. According to Marshall et al. (2011), a powerful approach to a successful moral education must include multiple entities such as family, school and peers. The use of school-plus-family approach is found able to boost students' moral behavior (Marshall et al. 2011).

Individual reaction to moral and ethical issues is also determined by the moral issues intensity (Jones 1991). According to Jones Issue-Contingent Model (1991), moral awareness is influence by moral intensity and lead to different reaction towards encountered moral issues. There are 6 factors that contribute to moral intensity in particular moral issue (Jones 1991). The factors are (1) the magnitude of the consequences derived from the behaviors or decisions; (2) social consensus regarding the issue; (3) probability of occurrence of the expected consequences; (4) closeness of time between the behavior or decision and the expected consequence; (5) closeness of the moral issue and the particular agents; and (6) concentration of the expected effect of particular behaviors or decisions. Therefore, the respondents' responds to the three (3) vignettes of unethical behavior may also be influenced by the issue intensity factor.

Methodology

Survey technique had been used to obtain respond from 28 senior students who enrolled to Ethic and Development course during the academic session of 2012/2013. The questionnaire comprised of 3 sections, namely the moral cognitive, respond to ethical or unethical choices and demographic part. The moral cognitive measurement section contain 24 items which aimed to measure each level of moral cognitive comprised of pre-conventional, conventional and post conventional. Each level of moral cognitive comprised of eight (8) questions and respondents gave their answer on 5 point scale that ranged from (1) totally disagree to (5) totally agree. The Cronbach alpha for moral cognitive measurement is 0.748.

Meanwhile, ethical choices section had comprised of three (3) unethical hypothetical scenarios. The students were required to state their approval (disapproval) in two respond modes - (1) the behavior can be done or (2) the behavior cannot be done), as well as the reason for such selection. The three unethical scenarios comprise of situations presented as follows:

Case 1:

Mr. X used the office photocopy machine to make 5 copies of his personal documents for his family house mortgage.

Case 2:

Mr. R was sent as Melor Sdn Bhd representative to discuss on a new bridge project with company XYZ. The discussion is successful and agreement had been signed between company XYZ and Melor Sdn Bhd. Mr. R take the opportunity to promote XYZ to purchase construction material from company RPK in which owned by his brother. Such construction material is known by Mr. R as necessary in the project.

Case 3:

Mrs. Z make an extra claims compared than the real expenses amount. She said the action was to compensate her rights due to the failure of the firms to pay bonus despite making great profit for consecutive years.

Finally, the demographic part includes demographic variable including a question on “the most influential source of moral education throughout individual life experience”. The data has been analyzed descriptively. In order to facilitate the analysis of the open-ended respond, all the respondents’ answers were re-coded into a specific dummy classification.

ANALYSIS

Sample Characteristic

Table 1 presents the sample characteristic of the respondents. The male students had composed 46 percent of the respondents, while 54 percent are females. About 68 percent of the students have working experience in various temporary jobs.

Table 1 Respondents’ Characteristics

Sample characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
N= 28		
Gender:		
Male	13	46
Female	15	54
Working experience:		
Yes	19	68
None	9	32

Further analysis is elaborate in particular sub-topics as follows.

Moral Cognitive

Based on the information in Table 2, the highest mean for moral cognitive level is the conventional level (mean=30.14, $\delta=8.72$), next is post-conventional (mean=27.86, $\delta=2.70$) and pre-conventional (mean=24.22, $\delta=5.19$). Therefore, most students have reached the satisfactory level of moral cognitive as showed by respective mean value. The median value for each conventional and post conventional is 28, while pre-conventional median is only 24.

Table 2 Moral Cognitive Development

N= 28	Pre-conventional	Conventional	Post Conventional
Mean	24.22	30.14	27.86
Median	24.00	28.00	28.00
Standard deviation	5.19	8.72	2.70

The one-sample Kolmogorov –Smirnov result in Table 3 indicates that the students are similar in their pre-conventional and conventional moral cognitive level (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z = 0.519 and 1.273, p= 0.950 and 0.78; p> 0.05). Nevertheless, there is significant differences among the students in post-conventional level (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z = 1.589 and p= 0.013). Thus, the result shows that the students are not significantly different in pre-conventional and conventional moral cognitive level, but few of them may have reached a significant level of post conventional cognitive moral development compared to others.

Table 3 One Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

N= 28	Pre-conventional	Conventional	Post Conventional
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	0.519	1.273	1.589
Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed)	0.950	0.078	0.013
<i>Test distribution is normal</i>			

Therefore, it shows that most students have achieved the minimum level of early adults' moral cognitive level when they tried to match behaviors according to the normal expectations of their immediate family, organizations and community.

Priority in Students' Source of Moral Cognitive Development

Most respondents had chose "parent" as the most important source for their moral character development. About 93 percent ranked "parent" as the most influential (rank = 1) moral source throughout their life experience (see Table 4). Meanwhile, another 7 percent ranked "parent" as the second and third priorities. Thus, it proves that parents play major role to instill moral and ethical cognitive development throughout their child upbringing.

Table 4 Description of Priority of Development of Moral Character: Parents

Priority rank	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
1	93	93
2	3.5	96.5
3	3.5	100

"Religion and moral teachers" have been ranked by 61 percent of the respondents as the second important source in their moral character development (Table 5). Meanwhile, "schools and academic teachers" is ranked as number 3 by 54 percent of respondents, followed by religious institutions (61 percent) and friends (92%).

Table 5 Description of Priority of Development of Moral Character: Religion/Moral Teachers

Priority rank	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
1	3.6	3.6
2	60.7	64.3
3	25.0	89.3
4	10.7	100

Friedman Test had been conducted on 4 most important priorities as ranked by the respondents, comprise of parents, schools, religious teachers and religious institutions. Table 6 indicates the means rank of each top four priorities selected by the respondents.

Table 6 Mean Ranks Result for Top Four Moral Teaching Sources

N= 28	Mean rank
Parents	3.89
School and Academic teachers	2.00
Religion/moral teacher	2.61
Religion institutions	1.50

Based on Table 6, we found the mean ranks for “parents” is the highest among other choices (mean = 3.89). The second highest mean rank is for “religion/moral teachers” with a mean= 2.61. In addition, Friedman rank test result in Table 7 has also shows significant differences among the importance of the top four moral sources ($X^2(3, N=28) = 53.786, p=0.000, P<0.05$).

Table 7 Friedman Test Result

N	28
Chi-Square	53.786
DF	3
Asymp. Sig.	0.000

Although most moral inputs were received during the elementary school level, the most influential effect of moral education to individual character happened during their tertiary education level (see Table 8). In Table 8, mode 1 represent of the “elementary school”, while 3 represent the “tertiary- college & universities”. A cumulative percentage of 71 % indicates that the most moral inputs are received during at the elementary and secondary schools. Meanwhile, 39 percent of the respondents agree on the response that the most influential stage of moral education to develop their moral character is at the tertiary education level.

Table 8 Most Influential Ethics Education

N=28	Most moral input received	Most influencing of moral education
Mode	1 (elementary)	3 (tertiary)

Respond to Ethical Scenarios

Table 9 shows students’ respond for each of the unethical scenarios. Based on Table 9 information, we found most students evaluated the conducts in the three scenarios as unethical. Surprisingly, quite a big number of respondents (43 percent) had evaluated conduct in scenario 2 as “can be done and not a big issue”. Besides, 36 percent of the respondents also consider issue in scenario 1 and 3 as “can be done and not a big issue”.

Table 9 Respond on Ethical Scenario

Sample characteristic N= 28	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Case 1		
Can be done & not big issue	10	36
Cannot be done	18	64
Case 2		
Can be done & not big issue	12	43
Cannot be done	16	57
Case 3		
Can be done & not big issue	10	36
Cannot be done	18	64

The reasons for approving the behavior are shown in Table 10. As shown in Table 10, there are 3 themes found to be the underlying reason for unethical behaviors approval. The themes comprises of immaterial losses, accelerating project efficiency and acquiring employees right.

Table 10 Reasons for Approving Unethical Behaviors.

Case	Most given reason for conduct approval	Themes
Case 1: Mr. X used the office photocopy machine to make 5 copies of his personal documents for his family house mortgage.	1. The conduct does not jeopardize the company’s performance. 2. The conduct does not affect the company at all. 3. It is not significant because only for 5 copies of document are made.	The immaterial losses or minor effect for companies.
Case 2: Mr. R was sent as Melor Sdn Bhd representative to discuss on a new bridge project with company XYZ. The discussion is successful and agreement had been signed between company XYZ and Melor Sdn Bhd. Mr. R take the opportunity to promote XYZ to purchase	1. It can expedite the process of getting the construction material and project implementation. 2. The project need the particular construction material, thus it is helpful to provide a suggestion.	Accelerating project efficiency.

construction material from company RPK in which owned by his brother. Such construction material is known by Mr. R as necessary in the project.

3. Mr. R is only promoting and suggesting to XYZ and the final decision is in XYZ management. Therefore, nothing wrong in the action of promoting and recommending specific companies.

Case 3: Mrs. Z make an extra claims compared than the real expenses amount. She said the action was to compensate her rights due to the failure of the firms to pay bonus despite making great profit for consecutive years

1. The bonus is employees' right. Acquiring the employee's right.

The cross tabulation between ethical respond intensity and moral cognitive indicates conventional cognitive has dominated all choice of ethical respond (Table 11). Therefore, it shows that most senior students in this study had achieved satisfactory level of moral cognitive development and conventional cognitive level has influenced their ethical consideration. The current cognitive moral development had resulted from moral teachings that mostly obtained during the elementary and secondary schools and mostly acquired from parents and religion teachers.

Table 11 Cross Tabulation Between Moral Cognitive Types & Approving Unethical Behavior Trends

	Lean towards approving the unethical behaviors	Lean towards disapproving the unethical behaviors	Totally disapprove the unethical behaviors	Total
Pre-conventional	2	3	0	5
Conventional	4	8	6	18
Post-conventional	1	3	1	5
Total	7	14	7	28

DISCUSSION

This study provides descriptions about the cognitive moral development (CMD) among a small group of university students. The students CMD is emphasize due to the closeness of the group to future employment market. The students will soon merge into various organizations and positions as well as to exercise discretions that may involve ethical issues. Thus their CMD is particularly important to ensure more responsible judgment regarding critical ethical issues. As far as Malaysian education system is concern, most moral inputs are being cultivate during basic education level comprises of the primary and secondary school level. The school syllabus has includes moral and religion subjects to be taken by all school students. Although the religion and moral subjects are compulsory to be taken by school students, its' emphasize has been relatively minimal compared

to the academic subjects. Nevertheless, the existing syllabus has contributed positively to the development of students' moral character and paved the way to the attainment of conventional moral cognitive level. Besides, the parents' role as the moral developer of their children is indeed important. This has been supported by our finding which shows that parents and religion teachers serve as the most influential moral source in the students' life. The attainment of conventional level of CMD reflects that most of the students are "good apples", as they are able to appreciate the values of their groups, such as one's family, peer group and larger group such as organization's and nations expectations. In order to ensure effective moral cognitive development for our future human resource, all significant parties such as the parents, religion & moral teachers, schools and religion institution must participate in the moral education programme as suggested by Marshall et al. (2011).

Despite satisfactory level of cognitive moral development (CMD), our findings indicate a worrying trend that may impose negative consequences to the future community system. The respondents' responses show that 43 percent of the respondents evaluate conduct in scenario 2 as "can be done". Besides, it is surprising to find out that 36 percent of the respondents also consider issue in scenario 1 and 3 as "can be done and not a big issue". Some of the students had associated the unethical conduct approval to reasons that contain the element of "subjectivity" and "relativism". For example in case 1, despite viewing the conduct as basically unethical, approval was given due to the consideration of amount involved. The amount was seen as immaterial, thus approval was given to the transgression of stewardship principle. In case 2, the reason had been linked to accommodating project efficiency. Such reason may lead towards approving more serious unethical behavior such as lack of integrity and bribery due to prioritization of the technical justification. Meanwhile, responses in case 3 show the tendency to exercise self-corrective action to the perceived injustice. Although the responses had represented students' opinion regarding unethical conduct of other people and not of theirs, the reasoning pattern had exposed the potential of self-adjustment or self-accommodating act in ethical conflicts. As far as universal principle reasoning is concerned, changes are needed to develop post-conventional moral cognitive ability among the university students prior entering the job market.

The respondents' reactions had also proved Jones Issue-Contingent Model (1991) regarding the influence of magnitude of consequence derived from particular unethical behaviors or decisions on human ethical reasoning. In case 1, most respondents had included reasons such as "the amount is too small and cannot bring negative impact to organization" or similar meaning as their approving comments. Besides, social consensus within the local practice may also influence moral intensity of particular behaviors. For example in case 1 the behavior of using the organization's immaterial assets had been frequently occurred in most organizations. Thus, it mitigates the "bad" image of such behavior as most people recognize it as a normal course of behavior in workplace.

Limitation & Suggestion

The first limitation of this study is it only involved senior students of the Development Science Programme. Therefore, generalizability of the study is limited and future studies are encouraged to replicate this study to larger samples from various programmes and faculties. The second limitation, this study only included three ethical scenarios to capture students' responses on ethical evaluation in specific context. As far as exploratory study is concerned, the design is sufficient to determine relevancy of phenomenon for further explanation. However, future studies are encouraged to identify more and diverse ethical issues as this study had only included minor ethical issues such as using minor company assets. More serious issues such as abuse of power and organization theft can be included in future studies. Besides, future study can also develop a more holistic framework that includes independent variables such as the moral cognitive level and other individual factors simultaneously to explain better on ethical behavior phenomenon among future professionals.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to evaluate the moral cognitive ability among university students. Our finding indicates that most respondents had reached the conventional level of moral cognitive. It represent that current moral education system especially at the school level have been effectively instilled the values. We also found that parents and religion teachers have become the influential source of moral character development among the students. Nevertheless, the reasoning of the students in their moral judgment indicates worrying pattern. The reasons indicate some element of subjectivity and relativism to endorse some unethical behavior (actions) as permissible due to technical and utility justification.

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