

## A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS ON THE MORAL JUDGMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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### **Abstract:**

*A developmentally constrained progression exists in moral development whereby conditioned behavior precedes explicit thought; and through social learning that takes place in adolescence, thoughts and behaviors become associated with emotions. This produces socially appropriate behaviors with relatively little cognitive influence. The present study is an attempt to understand the moral judgment of high school children within a city. A student data base was prepared from 10 schools within the city and 207 students randomly selected from the source list. They belonged to co educational as well as unisex schools. After obtaining their informed consent, the Moral Judgment Test was administered on small student groups within a period of 3 weeks. Findings show that scores on moral judgment were well within normal cut offs. On using the two sample's t test no significant gender difference was found. This implies that girls and boys have reasonably good moral judgment abilities with no marked variation.*

**Key words:** Adolescence, moral judgment, children

### **Moral judgment among high school students: a qualitative analysis**

A developmentally constrained progression exists in moral development whereby conditioned behavior precedes explicit thought; and through social learning that takes place in adolescence, thoughts and behaviors become associated with emotions. This produces socially appropriate behaviors with relatively little cognitive influence. The present study is an attempt to understand the moral judgment of high school children within a city. A student data base was prepared from 10 schools within the city and 207 students randomly selected from the source list. They belonged to co educational as well as unisex schools. After obtaining their informed consent, the Moral Judgment Test was administered on small student groups within a period of 3 weeks. Findings show that scores on moral judgment were well within normal cut offs. On using the two sample's t test no significant gender difference was found. This implies that girls and boys have reasonably good moral judgment abilities with no marked variation.

### **A qualitative analysis on moral judgment among high school students**

Human beings are not born with a moral sense. We are, however, given an innate capacity to develop one; much in the way we have now come to view language acquisition. "Morality is an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others, and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2002). It can be taken to mean that morality guides behavior that is regarded by an individual as overriding and that he wants it to be universally adopted. In this sense of "morality," it refers to a guide to behavior accepted by an individual rather than that put forward by a society or any other group.

Adolescence brings new challenges and opportunities for understanding oneself within our social context. Developmental shifts in met cognitive and representational capacity that occur during adolescence promote a more highly differentiated and complex view of the self and others (Harter, 1990, Moretti & Higgins, 1999). The aim of the present study is to understand these cognitive and social transitions of the adolescent period that offer opportunities to explore new personal and social roles and to negotiate new and different complex relationships. A key challenge of adolescence is the integration of new, complex and sometimes conflicting information about the self within the social context (Collins, 1990). It is not surprising that this developmental period is characterized by intense self-preoccupation (Elkind, 1985) as adolescents attempt to understand, integrate and

solidify their identity and their position in relationships with those around them. As adolescents differentiate their own beliefs and values from those of parents, peers and other social figures, there is an increased likelihood that they will detect conflict between these diverse sources of information (Collins, 1990; Moretti & Higgins, 1999). Conflict between one's own values and beliefs, and those of parents, peers and other significant social figures, is particularly acute during early to mid-adolescence when the capacity to represent multiple and possibly conflicting views outweighs the cognitive capacity to integrate these divergent perspectives (Harter & Monsour, 1992).

Empirical studies of parenting style have established that responsive parental involvement, encouragement of psychological autonomy, and demands for age appropriate behavior combined with limit setting and monitoring ("authoritative" parenting) contribute to good psycho-social, academic and behavioral adjustment (Baumrind et.al 1995). With respect to adolescent adjustment, parental warmth/involvement and behavioral control are associated with greater social competence, autonomy, positive attitudes toward school and work, academic achievement and self-esteem, as well as with less depression, school misconduct, delinquency and drug use (Lamborn et.al 1996). The child's early whole-hearted, committed compliance with the parent results in the child forming a view of oneself as a good, moral child-a moral self-which, in turn, promotes future rule-compatible behavior (Kochanska, 2002). An impaired conscience is a core aspect of conduct disorders, antisocial development, and psychopathy (Lykken, 1995). Conversely, the capacity for remorse and empathy, an appreciation of right and wrong, and engaging in behavior compatible with rules all marks successful adaptation.

Psychoanalytic models (Sagan, 1988) tend to focus on internalized societal norms for behavior (i.e., conscience or superego) and the corresponding emotions of self-reproach (guilt). Behaviorists (Pelaez-Nogueras & Gewirtz, 1995) focus on overt behavior as the core of psychological morality; e.g., sharing, helping, cheating, etc. Socio-cultural theorists emphasize the role of cultural transmission of values, personality traits (moral character), and cognitive patterns (Staub, 1979). Biologists tend to focus attention on evolutionary functions, genetic selection of moral characteristics, hormones, and neuroanatomy (Alexander, 1987). Cognitive psychologists emphasize moral reasoning and decision-making (Kohlberg, 1976). This heterogeneity results in a confusing picture of the moral person (Berkowitz, 1997). The study of emergent morality in the second year of life (infancy) by necessity emphasizes empathy and self-other differentiation, whereas the study of pre-school morality focuses, appropriately, on perspective-taking, self-control, and social behaviors such as sharing. Those who study moral development in adolescence, by contrast, might focus instead on ethical philosophy and moral identity. The moral nature of a person is thus fully integrated with other aspects of that person's psychological make-up. There are eight aspects of moral functioning. The first four are meta-moral characteristics (social orientation, self-control, compliance, self-esteem) and the next four are components of psychological morality (empathy, conscience, moral reasoning, and altruism). Understanding them is important for explaining how parents influence their children's moral development. All of these components are well-researched areas with clear relations to parental behavior. Furthermore, all are evident during childhood and collectively span the entire range of childhood, beginning with the first appearance of an attachment bond and a moral sense in infancy (Lamb & Feeny, 1995) and ending with puberty (adolescence).

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Probability sampling is the sampling design used, also called as 'random' sampling. Ten schools within the city were chosen for the study comprising of children within age groups of 14 to 18. Six of the ten schools were co educational institutions and four were not. Student records were accessed and children with behavioral problems and poor academic performances, health issues etc were excluded. The final sample consisted of 500 students from which 207 students were randomly

selected for the study. A name list was prepared for each school and the students were asked to report on the day specified.

### Tools

#### 1.The Moral Judgment Test (MJT):

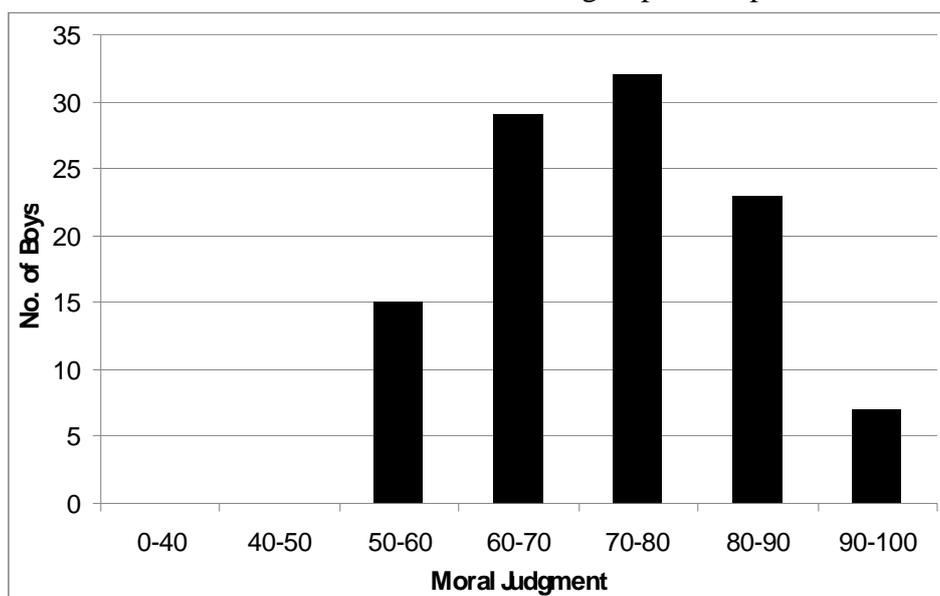
The present MRT has been developed as the direction suggested by Johnson, (1962). The test consists of stories that have been reorganized according to the Indian conditions by K.M Ranjana Gupta, keeping the Indian Culture as well as social norms in mind. The reliability of the Moral Judgment Test has been computed by two methods of reliability the Split –Half and the Test-Retest reliability. The present test was administered to 100 adolescents (age range 14 to 19 years, both male and female in equal number) belonging to rural as well as urban areas. The Spearman Brown Prophecy formula was used which yielded coefficient of correlation for each subtest. The split half reliability was found to be 0.53 and test retest reliability to be 0.49. The validity of the test is 0.50. The administration takes 35 to 40 minutes. The Present Moral Judgment Test provides the score of moral judgment in terms of (i) Immanent Justice (ii) Moral Realism. (iii) Retribution vs. Restitution (iv) Efficacy of severe punishment and (v) Communicable Responsibility. A total composite score gives the moral judgment of an individual.

#### Procedure

The Moral Judgment Test was administered on 30 students each day over a period of 1 month. The test administration took about 30 to 40 minutes. Instructions were read out from the test booklet and students were encouraged to give their first response and not to ponder too much about their responses nor discuss it with their peers. After administering the tests, students were debriefed. Similar sessions were held for student groups over 3-4 weeks days. The mean differences were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the independent sample's 't' test.

### Result and Discussion

From Fig.1 we observe that all students' score above 40 up to a maximum of 100. Scores below 40 indicate inadequate reasoning skills and scores above 102 suggest moral rigidity according to the MJT (Moral Judgment Test). From the distribution we understand that most students score values ranging from 70 to 80 indicating good reasoning abilities. The average score or the mean value of the sample is calculated to be 74.45. The trend of the curve thus seen in Fig.1 is a Gaussian/Normal distribution showing the maximum scatter of scores around the mean and the extreme values at the tail end of the distribution. The standard deviation for the group is computed to be 11.523.

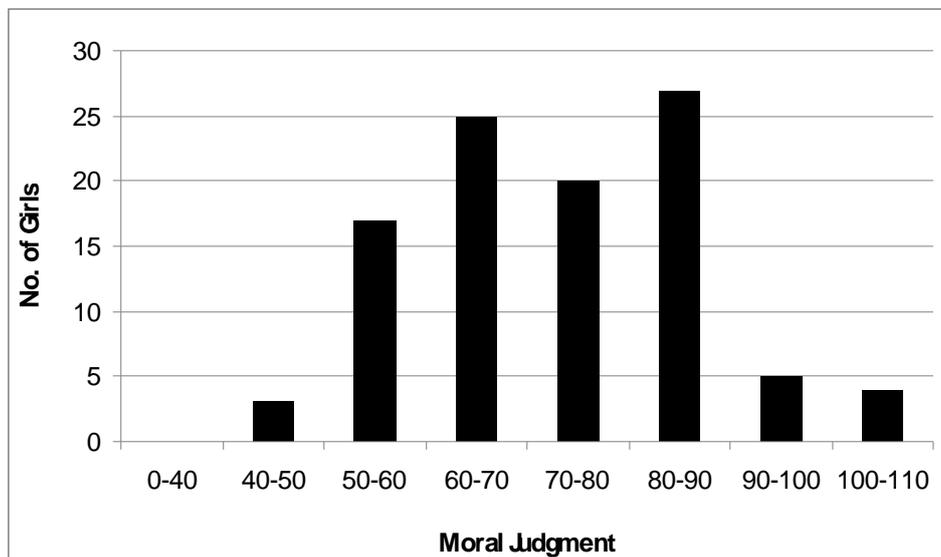


**Fig.1 Represents the frequency distributions of moral judgment scores among high school boys**

Children chosen for the study, belong to English medium and the Tamil medium of instructions and come from co educational as well as unisex schools. Although parental roles play a dominant role, it should not be discounted that schools contribute greatly to the character development. Schools are the primary environments conducive to developing social and emotional adjustment. Peers also provide necessary scaffolding for moral development as social conflicts and the resolution of such conflicts facilitate the development of moral reasoning and within peers. Children in a sound and healthy environment necessarily develop good morals. They have better communication skills, conflict management abilities and emotional maturity than others in disturbed or less than optimal environments. The type of social feedback received by these children is probably healthy and constructive because it helps adolescents develop mature social skills like empathy, perspective taking, and good listening skills.

Marian Sigman and Albert Erdynast (1987) studied a group of emotionally disturbed adolescents and found that those adolescents who were socially engaged showed higher levels of moral judgment and interpersonal understanding than socially withdrawn adolescents. These findings suggest that social involvement is particularly critical for the development of social and moral judgment. Good reasoning ability is also facilitated by teachers who play a crucial leadership role in promoting rules and norms which have a concern for justice and community, and ultimately enforcing the rules. These factors do have an influence on laying the foundations for a sound moral judgment among students.

For the sample of girls seen in Fig.2, the scores range from a minimum of 40 on moral judgment to a maximum score of 102. The curve shown, takes an upward trend with most values falling around the mean and then the curve gradually tapers down assuming a bell shaped Gaussian distribution. Once again, we observe that most of them have sound moral judgment skills similar to the sample of boys. The standard deviation of the group is computed to be 14.110.

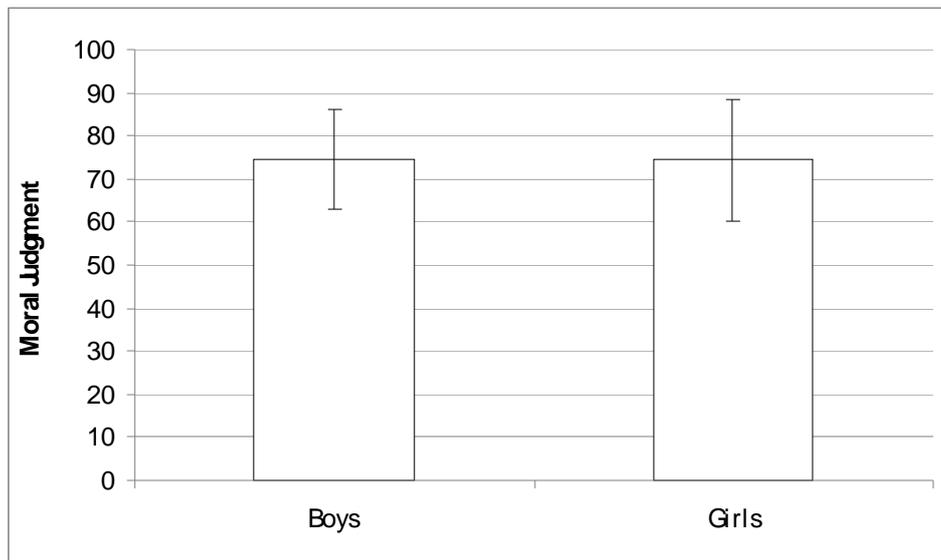


**Fig.2 Represents the frequency distribution of moral judgment scores among high school girls**

Here too, we may agree that parental, school and peer factors have contributed greatly to good scores on moral reasoning. The findings of this study validate similar inferences obtained by Damon and Hart (1988) who studied the moral judgment of 167 college students. Data revealed that moral judgment is a result of better self-understanding. Most adolescents seem to have better adjustments towards the end of schooling and thus appear to have mature adult like reasoning abilities. Patricia Polovy (1999) studied the moral development and personality in adolescents. Findings indicated that those who preferred principled levels of moral reasoning were seen as being

dependable, rational, creative, intelligent, and accepting of rules and constraints of society, but at the same time are also able to think independently and are aware of the need for change.

From Fig.3 we observe the means and standard deviations of the two groups of students. The independent sample's t-test is used to determine the t, as well as the p value. Using Matlab the p value was found to be 0.9569. It is found that at the 95 percent confidence interval the null hypothesis suggesting that there is no significant difference between the means of the two groups is thus accepted.



**Fig.3 Represents the mean and standard deviations of boys and girls on moral judgment**

We therefore find that there are no gender differences. This observation is similar to the findings of Wark and Krebs (1996). The results of the study do not also validate Gilligan's perspective in gender and role differences in moral judgment as reported among school students.

### Conclusion

Results show that there is no significant gender difference. The null hypotheses at the 95 percent confidence interval have been accepted since  $p > 0.05$ . Children of either gender seem to have good reasoning skills probably contributed by their parental involvement, peer relationships, effective conflict resolution strategies and also social competence. This in turn promotes a mutually responsive orientation (Kochanska, 2002) and thus an overall good conscience. Children are therefore more open to embrace parental values and rules. Future research will also need to consider the network of early relationships in a broader ecology of development. Almost nothing is known about the differential impact of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers, such as grandparents or day care providers, on the child's conscience and moral development. It may also be interesting to further pursue how these variables influence moral judgment across cultures.

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