THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL JUDGMENT COMPETENCE AND EMPATHY: A COMPARISON OF THREE AGE GROUPS

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Abstract: This study investigated relationships between emphatic skills and moral judgment competence among 180 adolescents, 170 early adults, and 150 adults (N = 500). Participants completed a battery of measures including the Basic Empathy Scale, the Moral Judgment Test, and the Demographic questionnaire. Results of this cross-sectional study have confirmed the expected findings. Adolescents' and early adults' moral judgment competence was positively correlated with cognitive, and affective empathy. Results from an adult sample showed positive relation between moral judgment competence and cognitive empathy and negative relation between moral judgment competence and affective empathy. In conclusion, implications for moral education are discussed.

Keywords: moral judgment competence, cognitive empathy, affective empathy, adolescent, adult

1 Introduction

Moral judgment competence and emphatic skills are among essential the social competences that have roles in the evolution and social development of human beings. Development of the competence of moral judgment and empathy in an individual is substantial for the development and democratization of societies. Morality requires that the actions of an individual are "rational, motivated by purpose or intent, and carried out with autonomous free will" (Arnold, 2000, p. 367).

In the 1970s, Lind developed a new concept and evaluation of morality, centring on moral judgment competence (Lind, 2008a). Based on Kohlberg's (1964; 1984) definition of moral judgment competence, Lind created the dual-aspect theory of moral development. Kohlberg (1964) defined moral judgment competence as "the capacity to make decisions and judgments which are moral (i.e., based on internal principles) and to act in accordance with such judgments" (p. 425). Lind's dual-aspect theory made it clear that the moral person must not only realize what is moral, he or she must also have the capacity to actually act upon it. Moral judgment competence also specifies morality in the context of a person's intrinsic feelings of what is allowable, not only the understanding of social norms and values. Accordingly, the concept of moral judgment competence establishes together the affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of morality into one component to be measured as a whole.

It has been proposed (Stotland, 1969) that all moral or altruistic behavior is based on empathy. There were many debates about the definition of empathy. Empathy can be seen as one of the basic human characteristics, and the ability to feel empathy for fellow human beings is an important aspect of positive social exchanges (Mehrabian & O'Reilly, 1980). The term empathy has been defined in several ways. One definition highlights the cognitive component of empathy, because it views empathy as the willingness and ability to put oneself in another's place (role-taking) (e.g., Hogan, 1969). Other researchers have used a definition of empathy stressing its emotional aspects (e.g., Stotland, 1969; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Hoffman, 1977). They defined empathy as a vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experience of others. In the past there was a trend to describe empathy as only cognitive or only affective process, but at present it is revealed that empathy is a multidimensional construct involving both cognitive and affective dimensions (Boston, 2007; Hoffman, 2000). Empathy as one of the significant prosocial behaviors (Batson & Shaw, 1991) is among the fundamental moral emotions in addition to the feelings of guilt and embarrassment (Behrmann, 2001). Persons with high moral judgment and emphatic competences choose democratic ways to violence for dealing with problems (Lind, 1993; 2000; 2003). They are also able to set up interpersonal relationships (Tangney, 1991; Hoffman, 1994; Lind, 2003).

1.1 Is empathy necessary for morality?

Empathy and moral judgment competence have been studied extensively as separate topics, but little research has considered the association between the two concepts. Researchers and theorists generally agree on the positive role empathy plays in moral development. Hoffman (1987) detected that it is important for a complete moral theory to involve empathy. He argued that empathy contributes to the development moral reasoning because it stimulates internalized moral judgments reflecting concern for others' welfare. The author also accented the significance of feeling, empathy, socialization and situational cues in selecting moral principles.

For most of moral development theorists, internalizing moral values and moral principles require perspective-taking skill, which is also outlined as emphatic reaction. This ability is necessary for an individual to focus on others' needs in place of one's own (Eisenberg, 1987, 2000; Gibbs, 2003; Hoffman, 1976; 2000; Pizarro, 2000; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003).

Theoretical research points to a possible positive correlation between empathy and moral judgment competence. Eisenberg (2000), Pizarro (2000), Hoffman (2000) and Walker (2002) detected the role of empathy as catalyst for moral judgment. In addition, empathy has been linked to relatively high levels of moral reasoning and social competence, and to low levels of aggression and antisocial behavior (Eisenberg, 2007; Carlo, 2013).

Similar relations between empathy and moral reasoning have been found in other samples of adolescents in the United States (e.g., Carlo, Eisenberg, & Knight, 1992; Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978) and Brazil (e.g., Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001). In various studies by researchers in various countries, emphatic impact on moral development in adolescents and adults were analyzed, and it was exposed that empathy has positive effects on moral development (Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes, & Shell, 1996; Upright, 2002; Verducci, 2000). Researchers Shelton and McAdams (1990) encourage using empathy to create effective programs that promote prosocial behavior. In their Visions of Morality Scale (VMS) they include empathy as one of the dimensions that are necessary for everyday morality.

The results of the study of Berenguer (2010) indicate that participants who showed a high empathy level provided more arguments of moral reasoning than those in the low empathy group.

A lot of psychologists and therapists have accented on the significance of moral reasoning and empathy competence while defining the mental and psychological health of individual (Adler, 1969; Fromm, 1947; Horney, 1945; Kalliopuska, 1983; Preston & Waal, 2002).

The main purpose of this study was to look at the empathy–morality relation in three age groups. The aim of this study is to analyze whether there is a significant relationship between moral judgment competence and emphatic skills among adolescents, early adults, and adults. Finally, the present study sought to address two primary questions around empathy and moral judgment competence. Is there any difference among different age groups with respects to their relationship between moral judgment competence and cognitive empathy? Is there any difference among different age groups with respects to their relationship between moral judgment competence and affective empathy? Finally, the aim of the present study is outlined and hypotheses regarding the relation between the empathy

dimensions and moral judgment competence. Based on the review of literature and on knowledge of the past research conducted on empathy and moral judgment competence as well as a broad understanding of human development, we formulated several hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that the empathy would be positively associated with the moral judgment competence. Second, we expected that differences would arise around the relationship between these two variables with respect to three age groups.

Although the main aim of this study was to look at the empathy–morality relation, we also looked at how age related to moral competence. Research has shown that level of education is a more important determinant of moral competence than age, and that education can stimulate moral competence (Lind, 1993, 2003; Oser, 1986; Rest, 1986). In line with previous research, we expected moral competence to be unrelated to age.

To rule out the possibility that the relationships between moral judgment competence and the empathy dimensions can be reduced to age differences, we checked whether these relations between moral judgment competence and the empathy dimensions remain intact after taking age differences into account. In addition, to rule out the possibility that the relations between moral judgment competence and the empathy dimensions vary by level of age, we tested the moderating role of age.

A cross-sectional study was used to investigate the moral judgment competence and empathy of three age groups.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants in this study included 180 adolescents (Mean age = 16.0; SD = 1.7), 170 early adults (Mean age = 22.0; SD = 2.0), and 150 adults (Mean age = 35.0; SD = 2.3) (N = 500).

Adolescent sample
At the beginning of the September of 2012 teachers of secondary schools were asked to distribute two questionnaires to their students. The sample consisted of total 180 students from various public schools located in the Zilina region of the Slovakia. Out of these students were 46% males and 54% were females. The participants' ages ranged from 15 to 17 years with an average age of 16.0 (SD = 1.7).

Early adult sample
At the beginning of the winter term of 2012 and 2013 undergraduate students were invited to take part in a survey on empathy and morality. Survey participation was voluntary, but students were promised one extra credit point (above the maximum of 100 total points) for taking part in the anonymous survey. A total of 170 early adults participated in the survey. They were asked to give responses according to the instructions provided in the questionnaires. The students were registered in the following majors (fields of study): psychology, social work, educational science, philosophy, religion, and health science. Approximately half (47%) of the students were males, 53% were females. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 23 years with an average age of 22.0 (SD = 2.0).

Adult sample
The adult sample came from a stratified sample based on gender, and age. Psychology students of the Catholic University in Ruzomberok were asked to distribute two questionnaires to adults in the age range of 30 to 40. There were 55% females and 45% males. Their average age was 35.0 (SD = 2.3).

2.2 Measures

Demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire was used to gather information about the participants. Each participant was required to complete a self-reporting questionnaire, which included demographic questions about the participant's age, gender, study specialization.

Empathy. Participants completed the 20-item Basic Empathy Scale (Jollife, Farrington, 2006). The original BES is a 20-item scale, self-rating measure with two subscales: cognitive empathy (9 items, e. g., “I find it hard to know when my friends are frightened”; α = .79) i. e., the ability to understand another person's experiences; and affective empathy (11 items, e. g., “I do not become sad when I see other people crying”; α = .85) i. e., measuring an observer's congruence (emotional) with another person's emotions. Agreement with statements was indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The sum of the cognitive empathy items' ratings was the cognitive factor score (range 9-45), and the sum of the affective empathy items' ratings was the affective factor score (range 11-55); the sum of two factors scores was the total score (range 20-100).
In this study the Cronbach's reliability coefficient for cognitive empathy was α = .72 and affective empathy α = .78. It demonstrates a high level of internal consistency. It took participants on average 10 minutes to complete the BES.

Moral judgment competence. Participants completed the Moral Judgment Test (Lind, 2008a), which consists of a workers' dilemma and a mercy-killing dilemma. For each dilemma, a person has to identify to what degree he/she agrees with the solving chosen by the actor(s). Next, this person is confronted with six arguments pro and six arguments contra his/her opinion on how to solve the dilemma. The person then designates, on a 9-point scale ranging from -4 to +4, to what degree these arguments are un(acceptable). The MJT provides a good task for observing subjects' moral judgment competence, that is, their ability to judge in accordance to moral principles. The C score indexes this ability. The C score (C-index) can range from zero, indicating absence of any moral judgment competence, to 100, indicating perfect judgment competence. The MJT provides a pure measure of moral judgment competence. A high C score indicates that the subject can rate arguments consistently from a moral point of view. Thus, in general, people obtaining the highest moral competence levels are also the ones preferring the most advanced socio-moral perspectives. These results support Kohlberg's presupposed affective-cognitive parallelism. It took participants on average 20 minutes to complete MJT.

2.3 Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 17.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA). Descriptive statistics (including means, standard deviations) were calculated for characterizing the three age groups. For determining the associations and correlations between empathy and moral judgment competence, the bivariate correlations and regression analyses were used. A p-value < .001 was taken to indicate statistical significance for all comparisons. Internal consistency of the questionnaires was evaluated by computing Cronbach's alpha.

3 Results

Validity analyses
The means and standard deviation of the scores on the MJT and the BES are presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1: Mean and standard deviations of the scores on the MJT and the BES

	Sample 1		*Sample 2*		*Sample 3*	
	Adolescents		*Early adults*		*Adults*	
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.
C-index	37.8	6.28	63.2	5.53	47.6	5.34
Cognitive Empathy	30.2	1.99	40.67	3.59	38.7	2.51
Affective Empathy	49.3	1.91	53.62	3.86	50.1	1.69

Table1 shows that participants in Sample 2 obtained significantly higher scores than participants in Samples 1 and 3 for the C-index. There's a difference in the C-index of participants belonging to the individual groups studied ($F_{(2,498)}$ = 18,188; p < .001). Early adults
displayed the highest level of moral judgment competence, followed by adult participants and, finally, adolescents.

The results are in line with previous research that has shown that education is the most important determinant of moral judgment competence (the sample 2 is clearly the best educated sub-group). This testifies to the importance of level of education and shows that the results that we obtain with the Moral Judgment Test are in line with earlier results.

Table 1 demonstrates that, compared with adolescents and adults, early adults achieve the highest average score in cognitive and affective empathy. A more detailed statistical analysis, however, has not confirmed the differences between individual groups in either cognitive ($F_{(2,498)}$ = 23,455, ns.) or affective ($F_{(2,498)}$ = 28, 345, ns.) empathy as statistically significant.

Correlation analyses
Among the adolescent sample, the cognitive empathy and affective empathy subscales were positively correlated (r = .44, p < .001). The cognitive empathy subscale was also significantly positively correlated with the moral judgment competence (C-index) (r = .46, p < .001), and the affective empathy subscale with the moral judgment competence as well (r = .36, p < .001). Descriptive statistics and a summary of the adolescent life stage correlational analyses can be found in the Table 2.

Tab. 2: Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses for the adolescent sub-group

	Mean	St. Dev.	Cognitive Empathy	Affective Empathy	C-index
Cognitive Empathy	30.2	1.99	1		
Affective Empathy	49.3	1.91	.44***	1	
C-index	37.8	6.28	.46***	.36***	1

*** p < .001, two tailed

Results were essentially the same for the early adult sample. Among this sample, the cognitive empathy scale was positively correlated with the affective empathy scale (r = .67, p < .001), and the cognitive empathy scale was also significantly positively correlated with the moral judgment competence (C-index) (r = .42, p < .001). The affective empathy scale was similarly positively correlated with the moral judgment competence (r = .58, p < .001). Descriptive statistics and the early adulthood correlational analyses can be found in Table 3.

Tab. 3: Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses for the early adult sub-group

	Mean	St. Dev.	Cognitive empathy	Affective empathy	C-index
Cognitive empathy	40.67	3.59	1		
Affective empathy	53.62	3.86	.67***	1	
C-index	63.2	5.53	.42***	.58***	1

*** p < .001, two tailed

Interesting differences arose, however, with the adult sample. Within this subgroup, the cognitive empathy scale and affective empathy scale were negatively correlated (r = – .69, p < .001). The cognitive empathy scale was positively correlated with the moral competence judgment (r = .34, p < .001), and the affective empathy scale was negatively related to the moral judgment competence correlated (r = – .41, p < .001). It would appear then, that while the affective empathy during adolescence and early adulthood is predictive of moral judgment competence, doing so during the adult life stage is not.

A summary of the descriptive statistics and correlational analyses for the adult sub-group can be found in Table 4.

Tab. 4: Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses for the adult sub-group

	Mean	St. Dev.	Cognitive empathy	Affective empathy	C-index
Cognitive empathy	38.7	2.51	1		
Affective empathy	50.1	1.69	– .69***	1	
C-index	47.6	5.34	.34***	– .41***	1

*** p < .001, two tailed

Regression analyses
In order to determine (a) whether the relations between both empathy dimensions and moral judgment competence remain significant after controlling for the effect of level of age, and (b) whether level of age moderates these relations, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed. In this analysis, moral competence served as the dependent variable and was predicted by level of age in Step 1, the two empathy dimensions in Step 2, and the two interaction components (level of age by cognitive empathy and level of age by affective empathy) in Step 3. Results show that, after controlling for the effect of level of age (β = .18, p < .01), cognitive empathy (β = .23, p < .001), affective empathy (β = .34, p < .001), and the two interaction components (β = .31, p < .001 and β = .27, p < .001) explained additional variance in moral judgment competence score. The cognitive and affective empathy and the two interaction components as well significantly added to the prediction of moral judgment competence.

4 Discussions

The main aim of the presented study was to analyze the relationship between empathy and moral competence in three different age groups.
The partial results show that participants in Sample 2 (early adults) obtained significantly higher scores than participants in Samples 1 (adolescents) and 3 (adults) for the C-index. A more detailed statistical analysis confirmed the existence of differences in the C-index of respondents from the individual groups, with these differences being statistically significant ($F_{(2,498)}$ = 18,188; p < .001). Level of moral judgment competence was highest in early adults, then adult participants, who were followed by adolescents.
The results are in line with previous research (Lind, 2000; 2003; Schillinger, 2006) that has shown that education is the most important determinant of moral judgment competence (the sample 2 is clearly the best educated sub-group).

The levels of empathy within the individual groups were also subjected to analysis. However, no statistically significant differences in cognitive and affective empathy among the studied groups have been detected.

Our findings supported the conclusions drawn by previous research (Hoffman, 1976; Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Kalliopuska, 1983; Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, NcNalley, & Shea, 1991; Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & Van Court, 1995; Pizarro, 2000; Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg et al., 2002; Haidt, 2001; 2003; Skoe, 2010), which found a positive correlation between empathy (both cognitive and affective) and moral judgment competence. Positive values of correlation coefficient reflect a linear relationship of variables in adolescents, early adults and adults, who, however, showed negative correlation between moral judgment competence and affective empathy. It could seem that with growing levels of affective empathy moral competence, while higher in adolescents and early adults, diminishes in adults. Further statistical analyses nevertheless highlight the fact that the relationship between moral judgment competence and empathy cannot be explained on the basis of different age levels. Regress analysis has equally revealed that the studied relationship between the observed variables does not

vary with age. These findings are in line with previous research, which did not find age to be the most important determinant of moral judgment competence (Lind, 1993; 2003; Oser, 1986; Rest, 1986). Age does not constitute the most important factor in the observed level of empathy either (Schieman & Van Gundy, 2000; Beadle et al. 2012; Grühn, Rebucal, Diehl, Lumley, & Labouvie-Vief, 2008). The relationship between empathy and moral competence is discussed by Hoffman (2000). He elucidates the processes underlying empathy's arousal and its contribution to moral judgment competence. Hoffman (2000) also underlines empathy's contribution to the principles of caring and justice, to resolving caring-justice conflicts, and to moral judgment competence.

The validity analyses that are reported in this article support the claim that level of education can stimulate moral competence (cf. Lind, 1993, 2003; Oser, 1986; Rest, 1986). However, these analyses also make it clear that the empathy contributes to the prediction of moral competence beyond educational differences. In line with this, previous research has shown that it is not merely the amount of education but its quality, which fosters moral judgment competence (Lind, 2008b).

5 Conclusions

This study has provided an insight of the moral judgment competence and empathy of the adolescents, early adults and adults. These findings support the theory that empathy plays a significant (and positive) role in moral reasoning. With a better understanding of moral development and empathy, various counselling or educational implications can be derived for assisting adolescents to develop holistically as they venture into the world of adulthood.

The paper has shown attention to the moral judgment competence and empathy. Apart from assessing the cross-cultural generalizability of our findings, research should further develop the educational programs that are available to stimulate moral judgment competence. Our results suggest that, rather than focusing exclusively on directly facilitating moral development, these programs might benefit from incorporating both a character education and empathy programs. Educators should negotiate these issues in order to cultivate an empathy securely connected to morality.

This article argues in defence of the application of an empathy-based approach to moral education. Incorporating these elements might yield additional beneficial effects on moral development. Many researches (Narvaez, 2013; Cooper & Schwartz, 2007; Derryberry & Thoma, 2000) cite longitudinal empirical evidence which suggests that education curricula that highlight and create an environment that fosters discussion about moral issues, plays a significant role in moral development and is correlated with gains in moral development above and beyond that accounted for by maturation.

It was felt that there were two main limitations of the study. The first limitation was concerned with the sample size of study. Participants came from a limited number of secondary schools and universities in Slovakia. A sample of 250 students was not sufficient for any generalization on all students of similar age groups. Further the samples were drawn from a particular location; it would be more acceptable and representative if the samples were taken from diverse localities with students and adults of diverse backgrounds. A large sample from different schools and universities in xxx could have enhanced the generalizability of the results and increased the power of the study to detect significant differences and associations.

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Primary Paper Section: A

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