



Exploring Pro-Social Moral Reasoning of Sri Lankan School Children Using Eisenbergian Dilemmas

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1 INTRODUCTION

According to Eisenberg (1991), prosocial behaviour is “voluntary behaviour intended to benefit another...there are different kinds of prosocial behaviours, for example, helping, sharing and comforting.” However, a more important distinction among prosocial behaviours revolves around the actor’s motive for his or her behaviour. Prosocial behaviours can be motivated by a variety of factors including “egoistic concerns (the desire for reciprocity, a concrete reward, or social approval), practical concerns (e.g. the desire to prevent damage to an object), other-oriented concern (e.g. sympathy) or moral values (e.g. the desire to uphold internalized moral values)”. Prosocial moral reasoning is a zone that is supported through past research as having gender, age and cultural variations (Abdullahi, I., and Kumar, P., 2016; Chadha, N., and Misra, G., 2004; Eisenberg, N., 1991). However, it has not been studied extensively in the Sri Lankan context. The present study explores the prosocial moral reasoning of Sri Lankan school children using Eisenbergian dilemmas (acquired as a result of correspondence between the researcher and Eisenberg) by taking age and gender as the independent variables. The primary objectives of the study are to explore the pro social behaviours of Sri Lankan school children and look into the possibility of applying Nancy Eisenberg’s

stages of moral development application in developing a moral framework for Sri Lanka. The significance of this study is that it looks at this conceptualization of morality in regard to the local Sri Lankan context and tries to critically analyse the application and usage of western theories in a non-western setting. The prominent feature of this study is that no similar research has been conducted in the Sri Lankan setting prior to this. Therefore this is the first step in conceptualizing a moralistic framework for Sri Lanka.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants and Materials

The participants of this study were 86 school children representing grades five (n = 32; Girls = 20; Boys= 12), eight (n = 25; Girls=11; Boys=14), and eleven (n = 29; Girls =12; Boys=17). Four stories from Eisenberg’s original study were culturally adapted based on WHO standards (Process of translation and adaptation of instruments, n.d.) and were administered as a paper-pencil measure to the participants. The final tool consisted of 4 stories that described different scenarios that ultimately require the reader to decide whether the protagonist should help the



character in need of help or not. Additionally, the reader was asked to give reasons for his/her decision. It was important to emphasize to the students that in the stories they only had the options of either helping the protagonist or not and that there was no middle path option. It should be noted that to promote gender neutrality the gender of the protagonist of the stories matched that of the participant. A data sheet accompanied the stories to collect demographic details of the school children.

2.2 Data analysis

The responses of the stories consisted of three variations such as 'helping, not helping and rejected (responses that had chosen both the alternatives of helping the protagonist and completing one's own business). The story responses were coded as, Helping = 1, Not helping = 0, Rejected = 2.

Secondly, the reasons that the participants provided for either helping or not helping the story's protagonist were coded into categories. CATEGORY 1 = 1 (Hedonistic reasoning), CATEGORY 2 = 2 (Needs-oriented reasoning), CATEGORY 3 = 3 (Stereotyped / approval oriented reasoning), CATEGORY 4 = 4 (Empathy oriented reasoning), CATEGORY 5 = 5 (Strongly internalized stage)

After assigning a category for all the reasons, scores were calculated for the five categories using a scale of 1-5 where 1=no use of reasoning, 2=use in 1 story, 3=use in 2 stories, 4=use in 3 stories, 5=use in 4 stories. A composite index for each and every individual was obtained for the five categories in order to get a clear understanding on where each participant stood on the different levels. The composite index was analysed to obtain the dominant category and lowest category for each individual.

Composite index = x/y

x = that particular reasoning type's total for the individual

y = total scores for all categories of reasoning

After procuring all the needed scores, chi-square analysis was run to look at the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. A comparison was made between the findings of the present study and the original study of Eisenberg.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Helpful behaviour was used by the majority of the sample across all stories except for the third story where 'helping' would result in losing a cash prize. Many of the participants had chosen the 'not helping' option and had given the losing of the cash prize as the reason for the decision.

Results conveyed that there was a cultural difference in the development of prosocial reasoning. Majority of the participants were in level 3 of Eisenbergian dilemmas (e.g. -approval seeking and stereotyped orientation). Similar to the original study, participants showed a gradual increase in their level of morality with age but in fewer numbers. No significant relationship was found between the responses of the four stories with that of age and gender. When comparing the categories of the stories with gender and age, data conveyed a significant relationship between the stories 2 and 3 categories with age. The second story relates the encounter with a bully and it may be speculated that with age we develop the courage to deal with bullies. In story three, the relative importance posed by the cash prize to the different age groups may vary. This may be the reason behind the significant relationship observed between story 3 and age.

Similar to the original study, not one



single category of reasoning was used by individuals in all 4 stories. The categories changed from story to story for all individuals. Even though the researchers were able to determine a dominant category for each of the participants, none of the participants had used that particular type of reasoning in all the four stories.

As shown in table 1 the participants, irrespective of gender and age differences, are dominated by category 3 reasoning. According to Eisenberg (1986) the three age groups should be dominated by needs oriented, approval oriented and empathy-oriented type of reasoning. But in the study, all age groups were dominated displaying approval oriented/stereotyped orientation.

Table 1: Comparison between the original study and the present study

		Eisenberg’s Model	Present Study
Dominant Category	Grade 5	Category 2 Needs-Oriented Orientation	Category 3 Approval/Stereotyped Orientation
	Grade 8	Category 3 Approval/Stereotyped Orientation	Category 3 Approval/Stereotyped Orientation
	Grade 11	Category 4 Empathic Orientation	Category 3 Approval/Stereotyped Orientation

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The inability to replicate the original study implies the significance of cultural variables in shaping the prosocial moral reasoning of children in Sri Lanka.

Further studies are required to decide the generalizability of the results.

All these differences highlight the need to develop a separate theoretical model for non-western cultural settings for prosocial behaviour.

Future studies should focus on the cultural implications of pro-social morality of Sri Lankan children. Sri Lankan children’s tendency for approval seeking and stereotypical reasoning should also be explored.

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