Analysis of the Relationship between Moral Judgment Competences and Empathic Skills of University Students

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse whether there is a significant relationship between moral judgment competence and empathic skills of the students studying at Uludağ University. In this article, the results of two researches carried out on two different samples are presented. In the first research, data were collected using David's Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and Lind's Moral Judgment Test (MJT) and the participants were 68 female and 61 male students between the ages of 20 and 29 (average: 22.85) who are studying in different departments in the Faculty of Education at Uludağ University. The second research was conducted on 294 female and 141 male students between the ages of 18 and 30 (average: 22.30) who are studying in different faculties of Uludağ University. Data were gathered by using Dökmen's Empathic Skill Scale (ESS) and Lind's Moral Judgment Test (MJT). In the two separate studies there was no significant relationship between students' moral test points and their general empathy points. The analysis of the relationship between the moral judgment test points of students whose Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) points are between the top and bottom 27 percent segments revealed a significant negative relationship (r=.45.6; p> 0.01) between the points students got from the 'personal distress' subscale and the ones they got from the 'workers' dilemma' subscale of the moral judgment test. Data were discussed in accordance with the relevant literature that focuses on the relationship between moral judgment and empathy.

Key Words

Moral Judgment Competence, Moral Development, Empathy, University Students.

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Morality and empathy are among important the social competences that have roles in the evolution and social development of human beings (Changeux, 2002; Hogan & Emler, 1978). Development of the competence of moral judgment and empathy in an individual is important for the development and democratization of societies. Many philosophers and sociologists see the core of human societies in the creating a moral order (Durkheim, 1973; Mead, 1962/1934; Rousseau, 2004/1762). There are many debates about about the definition of morality and about the sources of the different definitions and the relativity. Yet, it is certain in every case that morality is very significant for societies and for the sustainability of social life (Heidbrink, 1991). Kohlberg, who criticized the definition of morality of Hartshorne and May (1930) as "internalized values" and the research models of that time based on "super-ego", developed the most complex theoretical model which becomes a key resource for all the following theories. According to Kohlberg (1995/1968), morality is the competence to make judgments, take decisions and act in line with the universally valued principles with which the individual identifies him/herself. To Kohlberg, (1995/1968) the relationship of an individual with others is shaped in accordance with his moral judgment level. Our moral judgment tells us what to do when demands, represented by different people, conflict with each other (Kohlberg, 1974/1969; Kohlberg, Levine & Hewer, 1996/1984; Kohberg & Candee, 1984/1996; Kohlberg, 1986). Although it is debated as to whether or not the post-conventional level in a hierarchic model consisting of three levels and six phases (Gielen, 1996; Kuhmerker, Gielen & Hayes, 1996; for detailed information about the steps in Turkish see Çiftçi, 2003a, 2003b, 2009) is considered as a progressive stage (Puka, 1986), it is pointed out that to reach that stage, it is necessary to live in a complex society and at a high cultural level (Garz, 1998; Lind, 2009, Reed, 2008).

There was a tendency to define empathy as only cognitive or only affective process, but today it is acknowledged that emphaty is a multidimensional structure including both cognitive and affective aspects (Barnett, 1990; Bernadett-Shapiro, Ehrensaft, & Shapiro, 1996; Borke, 1971; Davis, 1983, 1996; Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Eisenberg, 1986; Eisenberg & Strayer,1990; Eisenberg et al., 1989; Feshbach, 1997; Feshbach & Roe, 1968; Hoffman, 1975, 2000; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Empathy can increase with age and can be taught as well (Yüksel,

2004). Eisenberg and others (Eisenberg, 1986; Eisenberg et al., 1989) stated that empathy is one of many indirect emotional reactions. They described empathy as an emotional reaction that is compatible with the emotional situation of another" or from another's condition or emotional response that stems from that condtion. Empathy, considered as one of the important prosocial behaviours (Batson & Shaw, 1991), is among the basic moral emotions in addition to the feelings of guilt and embarrassment (Batson, Fultz, & Shoenrade, 1987; Behrmann, 2001). Individuals with high moral judgment and empathetic competences prefer democratic ways to violence for dealing with problems (Lind, 1993; 2000; 2002; 2008b). They are also able to establish interpersonal relationships (Damon, 1999; Hoffman, 1994; Lind, 2003; Tangney, 1991). Many psychologists and therapists have emphasized on the importance of moral reasoning and empathy competence while defining the mental and psychological health of individual (Adler, 1969; Fromm, 1947; Horney, 1945; Kalliopuska, 1992; Preston & Waal, 2002). Claimed to be complex (Matarazzo, Abbamonte, & Nigro, 2008) and rational (Regenbogen, 1984). Kohlberg's model is believed to open a new avenue for moral psychology studies (Reed & Stoermer, 2008; Turiel, 2008). In the model the importance of feelings are not rejected, on the contrary, their roles are acknowledged when it comes to respect for human pride or responsibilities between people. Yet, according to Kohlberg (1968/1995) feelings are constructed in cognitive processes. A feeling constructed with cognition can reflect itself as empathy felt for a victim, as anger felt for a torturer or as sense of responsibility for others (Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969/1996). While the fact that Kohlberg's emphasis on judgment is interpreted as a negligence of feelings and get is criticized (Greene & Haidt, 2002), in his dual aspect model Lind states that cognition and feelings are different but important structures inseparable from each other (Lind, 2003).

While the findings of evolution psychology and primatology tend to explain the root of morality in the human being as something growing relative to the development of cognitive skills - such as interest in others' well-being, altruism, sympathy, collaboration, feelings of shame, gratefulness and revenge - quests for combining feelings with judgment/reasoning began (Haidt, 2001) with an emotion series (Pinker, 1997; Prehn et al., 2006), in the aftermath of the feelings revolution of the 1990s. The relationship of moral judgment and empathy that has

become more important in recent years is worth analysing because the relation between moral judgment and empathy is crucial in filling the gap between moral judgment and action (Oser & Althof, 2001), and the role and place of feelings is considered significant in the process of passing from moral judgment to action (Frimer & Walker, 2008; Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Lapsley & Hill, 2008; Narvaez, & Vaydich, 2008; Reed, 2008). The scrutiny of the role of empathy in the development of moral judgment attracts the attention of researchers because of the belief that empathy is a significant precursor of moral judgment and helping behaviour. That is why, feeling and empathy are common research subjects in the field of morality and moral development (Gibbs, 1991; Hoffman, 1987, 1994).

Hoffman (1987) pointed out that it is crucial for a comprehensive moral theory to include empathy. The author also emphasized the importance of feeling, empathy, socialization and situational cues in selecting moral principles. For most of moral development theorists, internalizing moral values and moral principals entails perspective-taking skill which is also defined as empathic reaction. This skill is necessary for an individual to concentrate on others' needs instead of one's own (Grief & Hogan, 1973; Eisenberg, 1987, 2000; Gibbs, 1987, 2003; Haidt, 2001, 2003; Hoffman, 1976, 2000; Pizarro, 2000; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003).

Pizarro (2000) objected to the idea that cognition is adequate for moral judgment and that feelings hinder the moral judgment process. He states that potential moral dilemmas can appear through emotions such as empathy and that when feelings intervene, the harmony between moral judgment and moral behaviour is strengthened. Without taking perspective and developing empathy skills, it is impossible for a person to reach high levels of moral judgment.

Although empathic response is seen as related to moral development (Eisenberg, 1987, 2000; Gibbs, 1987, 2003; Haidt, 2001, 2003; Hoffman, 1976, 2000; Pizarro, 2000; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003) it is not sufficient for moral judgment. Moral judgment itself is inadequate for predicting moral behaviour (Blasi, 1983; Haidt, 2001, 2003; Krebs & Denton, 1997; Krebs & Rosenwald, 1994; Swanson & Hill, 1993; Turiel, 1990). Doris (2002), Turiel (1990), Turiel, Smetana and Killen (1991) emphasized the role of social conditions in the relationship between moral judgment and moral behaviour. Moral judgment is necessary but not sufficient for moral behaviour. Thoma (2000) claimed that in addi-

tion to moral judgment, feelings, personality and social conditions are related to moral behaviour. While moral judgment is mostly based on cognitive skills, moral behaviour can be guided by empathy and social pressure (Blakeney & Blakeney, 1991). McNeel (1994), Rest and Narvaez (1991) found out that in college students as perspective taking and empathic skills increase, moral judgment increases, too and this shows the contribution of both cognitive and emotional components in the development of moral judgment.

Eisenberg (2000), Pizarro (2000), Hoffman (1976, 1984, 2000) and Walker (2002) determined the role of empathy as catalyst for moral judgment.

In different studies by researchers in different countries, empathic influences on moral development in adults and students were analysed, and it was found that empathy has positive effects on moral development (Bowman & Reeves, 1987; Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes & Shell, 1996; Upright, 2002; Verducci, 2000).

In Turkey, Akkoyunlu (1987) in her study examined the relationship between moral development and moral judgment. It is the only study in the Turkish context that has scrutinized the relationship between the moralities and affective empathy of students. As a result of this study, a significant relationship between moral judgment and affective empathy was found.

Other studies that analyse the relationship between moral judgment and empathy in adults and adolescents also yielded positive relationships (Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & Van Court, 1995; Eisenberg et al., 2002; Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, NcNalley, & Shea, 1991; Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Haidt, 2001, 2003; Hoffman, 1976, 2000; Kalliopuska, 1983; Pizarro, 2000). In an 11-year study conducted with adolescents,Eisenberg et al. (1991) it was found that an increase in perspective-taking skills facilitates the development of age-bound moral judgment. The analysis of the results of this longitudinal study revealed that empathic interest and perspective-taking reactions support the ongoing development of moral judgment positively, but personal distress response is likely to impede the development of moral judgment.

At the end of their study, Shelton and McAdams (1990) evaluated the components of perspective taking and empathic interest and concluded that they are significant predictors of moral judgment, but that

the components of personal distress and fantasy are not. In a study conducted by Kalle and Suls (1978) the hypothesis that "there is a positive relationship between moral judgment level and affective empathy" was partly supported. The authors found a significant relationship only between the fourth step and affective empathy. In another study, with university students, McDaniel (2007) found no significant relationship between empathy and moral judgment.

As stated in the relevant literature section of this study, a great emphasis is placed on the relationship between moral cognition and feeling and the role of emotions to overcome the gap in the process of passing from moral judgment to action. It is also emphasized that there is a need to formulate a comprehensive theory analysing moral judgments and action processes (Frimer & Walker, 2008; Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Lapsley & Hill, 2008; Narvaez & Vaydich, 2008; Reed, 2008). In the mentioned studies, the role of feelings in the process of passing from moral judgment to action is brought to the forefront. In Turkey, moral judgment and empathy have not been examined as intensively and deeply as they have been in other countries and very few studies on moral judgment and empathy have been conducted. Moral judgment and empathy skills are important not only for the psychological health of people in establishing sound interpersonal relationships, but for the development of community as well. The aim of this study is to analyse the relationship between moral judgment and empathy skills of students in the light of theoretical and empirical data collected with the use of two different empathy scales. This study aims to find answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between the moral judgment point averages as measured by the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) and the interpersonal reactivity (empathy) point averages as measured by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)?

2. Is there a significant relationship between the moral judgment point averages as measured by the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) and the interpersonal reactivity (empathy) point averages as measured by the Empathic Skill Scale (ESS) using the subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), i.e., considering another's viewpoint, fantsy, empathic concern and personal distress?

3. Is there a significant relationship between the moral judgment point averages as measured by the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) and the empathic skills point averages of the Empathic Skill Scale (ESS)?

4. When the top and the bottom 27 percent segments of the empathic points scale are examined separately, does a significant relationship emerge between the empathic points and the moral judgment points of the students in the two segments?

Method

In this study the focus is on the analysis of 'Moral Judgment Competence' and 'Empathic Skills' of students. The findings of two different studies examining the relationship between Moral Judgment and Empathy in two different sample groups are presented together. To measure moral judgment competence, participants were given the Moral Judgment Test developed by Lind. In order to determine the empathic skill, the first group was given David's Interpersonal Reactivity Index whereas the second group was given Dökmen's Empathic Skill Scale - B Form. The participants of the first group consist of 68 female and 61 male students between the ages of 20 and 29 (average: 22.85) studying in different departments in the Faculty of Education of Uludağ University. The participants of the second group consisted of 294 female and 141 male students between the ages of 18 and 30 (average: 22.30), studying agriculture, economics and administrative sciences, architecture or education in different faculties of Uludağ University.

Data Collection Instruments

To measure moral judgment competence, all students were given the Moral Judgment Test developed by Lind (1978, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, 2003, 2008a). Validity studies of this test in Turkish were conducted by Çiftçi (2001a, 2001b). To measure empathic skill, the first study group was given Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index (1983) whose validity studies were conducted by Özbay and Yıldırım (2005). The second group was given the Empathic Skill Scale developed by Dökmen (1990).

Results

By applying the single sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the data were collected by using the Moral Judgment Test and Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which showed that the data were not distributed normally. For this reason, the Kendall test was implemented in order to determine the relationship between moral judgment test points and empathy scale points. The analysis produced no significant relationship. The Pearson Correlation Test was used to analyze the relationship between empathic points of students in the bottom 27 percent segment of Davis's Empathy Scale and the points they got from the moral judgment test. A significant negative relationship (r=-,456; p> 0.01) was found between the 'personal distress' subscale points of students in the bottom 27 percent segment of Davis's Empathy Scale and their moral judgment points belonging to the 'workers dilemma' subscale of the moral judgment test. A significant relationship was not found between the interpersonal reactivity points of students in the top 27 percent segment and their moral judgment points.

In the second study, the aim was to determine the relationship between moral judgment competence and empathy skill through a different empathy scale. A total of 435 students from different faculties and in different grades were given Lind's Moral Judgment Test and Dökmen's Empathic Skill Scale. The analysis of data with the Kendall Correlation Test yielded no significant relationship. Two groups emerged after the empathy points were distributed to the top and bottom 27 percent segments and empathy points and moral judgment points were tested separately by using the Kendall Correlation Test for two groups – the students in the top 27 percent segment and those in the bottom 27 percent segment. The results showed no significant relationship between moral judgment points of the students and their empathy points. According to the gender variable also no difference was found between the moral judgment points of students and their empathy points.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that no significant relationship exists between moral judgment and empathy. Some researches in the same field, which have been conducted in Turkey as well as in other countries, reveal the same findings. McDaniel (2007), in one of his studies with

287 university students, determined the moral judgments of students by using Lind's Moral Judgment Test and their empathic skills by using Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index. At the end of the study no significant relationship between moral judgment and empathy was found. McDaniel stated that this result can be attributed to the scales. Contrary to the finding of this study, when the literature is taken into consideration, there exists some theoretical and empirical studies supporting a strong relationship between moral judgment and empathy (Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg, Carlo et al., 1995; Eisenberg, Guthrie et al., 2002; Eisenberg, Miller et al., 1991; Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Haidt, 2001, 2003; Hoffman, 1976, 2000; Kalliopuska, 1983; Pizarro, 2000). One reason for this lack of a significant relationship might be the structure of the scales and the homogeneity of the sample group.

While the Moral Judgment Test is a rational test emphasizing the cognitive dimension of morality, the emotional dimension is highlighted in the empathy scales applied. When the items in Davis's Empathy Scale are analysed, the scale and its structure determine what the scale wants to measure and render the direction of the correct answer predictable. For example, an item states: "I do not feel sorry for a person who is victimized by another". It is almost impossible for a participant to answer this question as "yes, it is completely right for me, I do not feel sorry when I come across a person who is victimized"; or the participant is likely to hide his own feelings as he guesses how he will be evaluated if he replies 'yes' to this question. According to Lind,* competence of moral judgment and empathy should be at a high level for an individual to honestly tell the truth even if he makes guesses about what the scale is about to measure. However, in such a situation the participant can give a different answer.

While the moral judgment test is a rational test, Davis's scale is a likert type-scale. In Dökmen's scale, in the six stories given at the outset the people are having problems expressing themselves in the counselling process. All the people in the stories have emotional problems, their social status is rather homogenous (student and housewife, or mostly young people and students) and the majority are young. The problems of students and housewives are the topics of the stories. The scale aims at the measuring of empathic skill, which is a kind of counseling skill especially for psychological counseling candidates. Besides, the stories

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* The interview of Lind, by N. Çiftçi Arıdağ

are similar to university students' problem areas so they can identify with these stories. Sentences in the scale are similar to the sentences expressed between client and consultant in the consultation relationship. A form based on the daily lives and existential/life-sustaining problems of ordinary people of different social statuses, age groups, and socioeconomic levels could be developed, particularly using examples that do not comply with the characeristics of the individuals in the sample group, thus increasing the empathy points and making it possible to obtain different results.

Homogenity of the sample group: The greater part of the group consists of the students of the Faculty of Education. Students who are teacher candidates take courses that make them sensitive towards human feelings. Throughout their University education, they take some courses based on communication and empathy. This may have helped them understand the aim of the scale through increasing their sensivity towards the subject.

The use of one scale as a data collection instrument, and the use of one scale for both variables and not using other measurement methods can explain why a relationship could not be found.

The moral judgment and empathy levels are expected to be high in an individual who can make an honest evaluation of him/herself. On the other hand, particularly in the emphatic measuring, when there is a low level of agreement between the actual and the perceived personality, the way is opened for the individual to assess himself in a very different way [thus producing different test results...].

The relationship between 'personal distress' subscale points of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and moral judgment points of the 'workers' dilemma' subscale of the Moral Judgment Test was found to be significantly negative. This finding is consistent with the findings of Shelton and McAdams (1990) that the personal distress reaction can hinder the development of moral judgment. Empathic interest and perspective-taking reactions provide the viewpoints of others in making decisions, whereas, an individual concentrates completely on himself when a personal distress reaction is experienced (Baston, O'Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas and Isen, 1983). In this situation the individual tries to calm himself down instead of helping the other person. When an individual focuses on others' distress instead of his own, moral judgment is more likely to

be apparent. In the event that the individual focuses on others' distress instead of his own, he tries to solve the problems by taking others' lives into account. This shows that a high level of moral judgment can be associated with seeing others' points of view and finding solutions instead of implementing the rules only. Thus, in this way, we can explain the fact that people with high personal distress reaction points have lower moral judgment points.

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