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From moral judgments to prosocial behavior: Multiple pathways in adolescents and different pathways in boys and girls

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ABSTRACT

Moral judgments are positively associated with prosocial behavior in adolescents, but how they are associated and whether there are gender differences in the pathways are not clear. The present study aimed to clarify whether moral judgments were associated with prosocial behavior both directly and indirectly through emotional factors, self-esteem and empathy in adolescents and whether the pathways were different for boys and girls. A total of 494 adolescents completed scales that assessed moral judgments, prosocial behavior, self-esteem and empathy. Path analyses showed that self-esteem and empathy partially mediated the relationship between moral judgments and prosocial behavior in the adolescents. Moreover, multi-group analyses indicated that the associations among moral judgments, empathy and prosocial behavior were moderated by gender. Self-esteem and empathy totally mediated the relationship between moral judgments and prosocial behavior in the girls, and moral judgments were directly associated with prosocial behavior in the boys. Thus, the present study indicates that there are multiple pathways from moral judgments to prosocial behavior in adolescents and different pathways in boys and girls.

1. Introduction

Prosocial behavior is a voluntary action that is aimed at benefiting others (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). From childhood to adulthood, prosocial behavior is associated with positive developmental outcomes such as happiness (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008), emotional well-being (Martin & Huebner, 2007), and peer acceptance (Bowker et al., 2010).

Prosocial behavior is also very important for adolescents. Studies demonstrate that prosocial adolescents perform better academically in school (Caprara et al., 2014), are less at risk of problem behavior (Bandura, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1999), and have better peer relationships (Markiewicz, Doyle, & Brendgen, 2001).

Different mechanisms have been proposed to explain prosocial behavior (Ceschi, Hysenbelli, Sartori, & Tacconi, 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2010; Hardy, 2006; Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2013). Kohlberg (1969) argued that rational thinking is important for prosocial behavior, and that moral judgments are among the most critical factors for prosocial behavior. Consistent with this argument, studies show that moral judgments are positively associated with prosocial behavior in adolescents (Erkut, Jaquette, & Staub, 1981; Hing, 2003; Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Cole, & Cerniglia, 2013). However, some researchers believe that emotional factors are very important for

individuals to conduct prosocial behavior (Ceschi, Scalco, Dickert, & Sartori, 2015; Eisenberg, 2000; Scalco, Ceschi, Sartori, & Rubaltelli, 2015). In addition, some studies also show that both cognitive and emotional factors are important for prosocial behavior (Carlo, 2011; Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, et al., 2013). According to Hoffman (2000), “cool” moral principles can motivate individuals to behave prosocially only if they are transferred to emotional experiences.

Therefore, previous studies suggest that there may be multiple pathways from moral judgments to prosocial behavior. Based on Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1969), there exists a direct pathway from moral judgments to prosocial behavior. According to Hoffman (2000), moral judgments may be associated with prosocial behavior through emotional factors. Adolescents' prosocial behavior is found to be positively related to emotional factors, especially self-esteem (Fu, Padilla-Walker, & Brown, 2017; Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004; Lindsey, Colwell, Frabutt, Chambers, & MacKinnon-Lewis, 2008) and empathy (Berger, Batanova, & Cance, 2015; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, et al., 2013). Self-esteem refers to positive and negative feelings and evaluations of the self (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Individuals with higher moral standards have higher self-esteem (Yang, Stoeber, & Wang, 2015) because these individuals may be aware that they are morally good persons and thus have positive evaluations of themselves. Thus, moral

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judgments may positively influence self-esteem. Compared to individuals with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem feel more confident about their abilities to understand others' perspectives and thus are prone to behave prosocially toward others (Zuffianò et al., 2016). Previous studies also show that individuals with high self-esteem engage in more prosocial behavior (Laible et al., 2004; Lindsey et al., 2008; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Thus, self-esteem may facilitate prosocial behavior. Taken together, self-esteem may mediate the relationship between moral judgments and prosocial behavior. Moreover, empathy involves understanding and experiencing the emotions of other people (Eisenberg et al., 1996; Eisenberg et al., 2006). Individuals with moral judgment abilities can better understand others' needs or distress (Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001) and thus may empathize with others. Empathetic feelings of sorrow or concern for someone are thought to be an important motivation to alleviate others' distress and thus facilitate helping or caring behavior (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2011; Eisenberg, 2000; Van der Graaff, Carlo, Crocetti, Koot, & Branje, 2017). Therefore, moral judgments may promote prosocial behavior through empathy.

In addition, according to Gilligan (1982), girls tend to care for and be responsible for others, while boys follow an ethic of righteousness and justice. In other words, girls are more emotional, and boys are more rational. Studies also indicate that adolescent girls have stronger empathy than boys (Bojana, Jasmina, Valentina, & Ilija, 2016; Davis, 1983; Mestre, Samper, Frías, & Tur, 2009). Moreover, girls are more sensitive to interpersonal stimuli and are concerned about emotional reactions of others (Cunico, Sartori, Marognolli, & Meneghini, 2012). In contrast, boys are considered to be more assertive (Benetti-McQuoid & Bursik, 2005), detached and tough (Saxena, Tripathi, & Madnawat, 2017). Thus, the associations among moral judgments, self-esteem, empathy and prosocial behavior may be different for adolescent boys and girls. Indirect pathways from moral judgments to prosocial behavior through emotional factors may exist in adolescent girls. For boys, moral judgments may be directly associated with prosocial behavior. In other words, the associations among moral judgments, emotional factors and prosocial behavior may be moderated by gender.

In sum, the present study aimed to examine whether moral judgments were associated with prosocial behavior both directly and indirectly through emotional factors, self-esteem or empathy in adolescents and whether the pathways were different for boys and girls. It was hypothesized that there would be both direct and indirect pathways from moral judgments to prosocial behavior with self-esteem or empathy as the mediators in adolescents. Moreover, it was hypothesized the pathways from moral judgments to prosocial behavior would be indirect for girls but direct for boys.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 494 adolescents (287 girls and 207 boys) participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 15.28 to 17.99 years ($M = 16.62$, $SD = 0.62$). These adolescents were recruited from two senior high schools. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Department of Psychology of Captain Normal University.

2.2. Measures and procedure

2.2.1. Moral judgments

Moral judgments were assessed with Krettenauer and Eichler's (2006) four moral vignettes. The reliability of the moral judgment test was 0.63 (Krettenauer & Eichler, 2006). In the present study, the reliability of the test was 0.85. In each moral vignette, a person committed an immoral act in order to satisfy his or her personal needs. After reading each moral vignette, the participants were asked to answer two

questions regarding moral judgments. The first question involved right/wrong moral judgment ("Was the person right to do what he or she did?"). The participants were asked to provide their answer by choosing "yes" or "no". Twenty-five participants did not judge that the person was wrong to do what he or she did in at least one moral vignette; thus, they were excluded from the statistical analyses of the results. The second question involved confidence in moral judgments ("How certain are you that your view is correct?"). Participants responded on a 6-point scale from 1 (uncertain) to 6 (absolutely certain). The total scores ranged from 4 to 24. Because these scores reflected individual differences in moral judgments, they served as the moral judgment scores.

2.2.2. Prosocial behavior

Prosocial behavior was measured with the Chinese version of the Prosocial Tendencies Measure (Kou, Hong, Tan, & Li, 2007) which is a revised edition of Carlo and Randall's (2002) measure. The Chinese version, with 26 items, measures six types of prosocial behavior; each subscale has good reliability (altruistic subscale: $\alpha = 0.76$; public subscale: $\alpha = 0.71$; emotional subscale: $\alpha = 0.73$, dire subscale: $\alpha = 0.56$; anonymous subscale: $\alpha = 0.78$; compliant subscale: $\alpha = 0.74$) (Kou et al., 2007). The participants responded on a 5-point scale from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 5 (describes me greatly) on all items. In the present study, the reliability values of the altruistic subscale, public subscale, emotional subscale, dire subscale, anonymous subscale, compliant subscale and whole scale were 0.77, 0.76, 0.73, 0.60, 0.80, 0.75 and 0.93, respectively. The total scores ranged from 26 to 130 and served as the prosocial behavior scores.

2.2.3. Self-esteem

Self-esteem was assessed with the Chinese version of the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Wang, Wang, & Ma, 1999), which is a revised edition of Rosenberg's (1965) scale. The Chinese version, with 10 items, has good reliability ($\alpha = 0.77$) (Wang et al., 1999). The participants responded to the items on a 4-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale in the present study was 0.86. The total scores ranged from 10 to 40 and served as the self-esteem scores.

2.2.4. Empathy

Empathy was measured with the Chinese version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Huang, 2013) which is a revised edition of Davis' (1980) index. The Chinese version, with 28 items, measures four aspects of empathy; each subscale consists of 7 items and has good reliability (perspective taking subscale: $\alpha = 0.64$; fantasy subscale: $\alpha = 0.82$; empathic concern subscale: $\alpha = 0.76$, personal distress subscale: $\alpha = 0.74$; the whole scale: $\alpha = 0.83$) (Huang, 2013). The participants responded on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for all items. In the present study, the reliability of the perspective taking subscale, fantasy subscale, empathic concern subscale, personal distress subscale, and whole scale was 0.65, 0.75, 0.71, 0.56 and 0.78, respectively. The total scores ranged from 28 to 140 and served as the empathy scores.

2.3. Data analysis

IBM SPSS 19.0 was used to preliminarily analyze the relationships between the variables. Mplus 7.0 was used to conduct path analyses to further test the mediating and moderating effects.

3. Results

Twenty-five participants judged that it was right to conduct immoral behavior in the first question in at least one moral vignette. Subsequent moral judgments confidence scores of these participants reflected their confidence in incorrect moral judgments. Therefore, these 25 participants were excluded from the statistical analyses of the

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