

Exploring Adolescent Moral Reasoning in Middle School: Relational Systemic Paradigm Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe the level of moral reasoning of adolescents in Yogyakarta with different levels of education as a measuring tool for comparison of results and examine them using a systemic-relational paradigm. The research design was a quantitative descriptive survey of adolescents in three secondary schools using purposive sampling. There were 94 junior high school, 93 high school, and 90 vocational high school students. The instrument used in this study was Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT2) to measure adolescent moral reasoning. The results showed that students' ethical reasoning at different levels of education was mainly at level II (conventional), with stage 4, which was oriented towards legal, social, and religious order, or law and order. The data were then analysed and reviewed using a relational systemic paradigm approach to determine the factors that influence the moral reasoning of adolescents at school. Students' moral reasoning is influenced by their interactions with their environment, family, peers, educational institutions, personal experiences, culture, religion, and perceptions of justice and truth. This paradigm recognises that moral reasoning is not only the result of individual processes but is also influenced by broader environmental factors. Therefore, moral education must focus on students' social and ecological contexts to facilitate the development of better moral reasoning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Moral reasoning includes a person's ability to consider moral values, norms, and principles when making correct and responsible decisions. Situations and problems require individuals to consider various hypotheses for true and false values. Individuals must be able to provide appropriate and accurate consideration responses so that their decisions or behaviours align with the rules, norms, customs, laws, and laws that exist in society. The way individuals make decisions about actions in the face of moral dilemmas is heavily influenced by their moral reasoning. Reasoning or ethical

considerations arise when faced with an event, situation, reality, problem, or need related to an ethical dilemma (M. J. Abdolmohammadi & Baker, 2006).

Moral reasoning plays a significant role in the decision-making process in determining the right, wrong, and best course of action to take in situations that contain moral dilemmas. Moral reasoning is an individual's way of thinking. It is a basis for ethical behaviour, namely, behaviour that is by social and religious norms that are generally related to valuable actions, such as respect for others, empathy, and mutual help (Rose, 2012). Moral reasoning is critical as one of the cognitive abilities functional for related lives in dealing with situations that contain ethical dilemmas (Lakhani, 2013). In addition, individuals with high moral reasoning are needed in the world of work and can easily empathise with them (Lewis & Young, 2000). Ethical reasoning can be developed so that children have a conscience and can distinguish between right and wrong to fend off bad influences from outside (Borba, 2008). In addition, moral reasoning can benefit personal and social life (O'Flaherty & Gleeson, 2014). Moral reasoning correlates significantly with student discipline behaviour (Ilham, 2012). The higher the level of adolescent moral reasoning, the lower the premarital sex behaviour, and vice versa. The lower the level of moral reasoning in adolescents, the higher their premarital sex behaviour (Purwanti, 2013). Bullying behaviour is high if moral reasoning is humble (Basyiruddin, 2010). Adolescents who bully their friends tend to have poor moral reasoning abilities (Perren et al., 2012). For this reason, moral reasoning plays a vital role in shaping the behaviour and characteristics of young people.

Individuals with a high level of moral reasoning will behave differently when faced with situations that cause a dilemma; individuals can decide what actions to take responsibly (M. et al., 2002; Ponemon, 1992). According to Candee and Kohlberg, 1987 (Horstink, 2011), people with higher moral reasoning are more consistent when facing moral dilemmas. Individuals with high moral reasoning tend to behave ethically and vice versa (Xu & Ziegenfuss, 2008). Adolescents face various developments and changes in all individual aspects, especially in biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional aspects, that are not easy to control (Santrock, 2012). The conditions of the pandemic and post-pandemic periods have greatly affected the characteristics of today's youth, who easily complain, are lazy to fight, and surrender to circumstances; it is straightforward for teenagers to expect more (Pratiwi, 2021). The development process only sometimes runs smoothly, requiring assistance or guidance from parents, teachers, and the surrounding environment. With the characteristics of adolescents still looking for their own identity, it will undoubtedly be straightforward to fall into negative things and violations at school and in society. Violations committed by students show a poor understanding of moral values in social life (Hurlock, 2010).

Kohlberg (Duska et al., 1982; Stams et al., 2006) stated that although many factors cause juvenile delinquency, a high level of moral reasoning is an obstacle to juvenile delinquency. One characteristic that students must possess is critical thinking as a form of moral reasoning. (Beerthuisen, M. G., Brugman, D. & Basinger, 2013) Moral reasoning predicts juvenile delinquency behaviour; the lower the moral reasoning of adolescents, the higher the delinquent behaviour. Good moral reasoning abilities enable students to weigh everything related to morals and which actions are good and impaired by the values of the norms they adhere to and those in their community (Joanne, 2014). Students' moral reasoning in education is essential because it significantly impacts social and cultural life. A lack of prosocial behaviour can also indicate low moral reason (Spenser et al., 2022). Moral-related values deserve more attention from moral development research because they relate to sensitivity and justice behaviour (Strauß & Bondü, 2022).

This study used the systemic-relational paradigm as a theoretical framework to understand how interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and school culture affect moral reasoning among adolescents. The systemic-relational paradigm views individuals as part of a more extensive social system and understands that individual experience and development are influenced by the systemic factors surrounding them (Cottone, 1992). This paradigm emphasises the importance of social relations, interactions between individuals and the social environment, and interpersonal relationships. Students'

moral reasoning is understood as a social construction influenced by various factors, such as values, norms, religion, experience, and social and cultural contexts.

The systemic relational paradigm assumes that individuals cannot be understood separately from their social and cultural environment. The systemic relational paradigm also emphasises the importance of considering various perspectives to assess the moral situation and make correct and responsible decisions. Thus, this study is expected to increase our understanding of the factors that influence the moral development of adolescents in secondary schools. For this reason, it is essential to answer the question of moral reasoning and what factors influence the development of this student's moral reasoning. The following discussion will examine moral reasoning seen from the paradigm of the relational system.

2. METHODS

The research design was a quantitative descriptive survey of the level of adolescent moral reasoning in Yogyakarta. The sample for this study were students at the junior high school level VIII class with a total of 94, high school class IX with a total of 93, and vocational high school class IX with a total of 90. The instrument in this study used Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT) to measure the understanding of adolescent morals developed by Rest (Wahyuningsih et al., 2019). The internal consistency of Cronbach's Alpha in DIT was above 0.70. DIT is an objective multiple-choice test based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Currently, there are two versions of the DIT-1 and DIT-2. This study used the short DIT-1 version (Short Form). DIT-1 consists of three stories or social dilemmas about morals, each accompanied by 12 statements. These statements reflect a particular stage of moral development or a specific type of moral understanding. For each subject, comments must choose one of five considerations available: very important, significant, somewhat important, less important, and not necessary.

The next stage is determining the order (ranking) in which the statement, according to the subject, is the first most important, second most important, third most important, and fourth most important information. Moral understanding in this study is shown through the P-value of the DIT. The P value indicates the principle of morality, namely the ability of a person to decide on social problems related to the morality he faces by considering his moral principles. The instrument was distributed online using Google Forms. The research data analysis procedure was divided into three stages: (1) data verification, (2) data assessment, and (3) grouping and interpretation of instrument data.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Moral Reasoning Level Profile

Based on the results of the distribution of the moral reasoning instruments, we used the DIT-1 test. As shown in Table 1, the moral reasoning profiles of grade VIII junior high school students, IX grade high school students, and IX grade vocational high school students are as follows.

Table 1. Level of Moral Reasoning

Levels of Moral Reasoning	Stages	Middle School level (SMP)		High School level (SMA)		Vocational School Level (SMK)	
		Amount (f)	(%)	Amount (f)	(%)	Amount (f)	(%)
Pre-conventional level	Stage 2	30	32%	17	18%	10	11%
Conventional Level	Stage 3	32	34%	29	31%	25	28%
	Stage 4	13	14%	18	19%	23	26%

	Stage 5a	10	11%	10	11%	12	13%
Post Conventional Level	Stage 5b	8	8%	12	13%	9	10%
	Stage 6	1	1%	7	8%	11	12%
Amount		94	100%	93	100%	90	100%

These results show differences in moral reasoning at each level of education. The SMP level is as high as 32% in Stage 2, 34% in Stage 3, 14% in Stage 4, 11% in Stage 5a, 8% in Stage 5b, and 1% in Stage 1. At the SMA level, 18% were in stage 2, 31% in stage 3, 19% in stage 4, 11% in stage 5a, 13% in stage 5b, and 8% in stage 6. At the SMK level, 11% were in stage 2, 28% in stage 3, 26% in stage 4, 13% in stage 5a, 10% in stage 5b, and 12% in stage 6. If visualised in Diagram 1, it is as follows:

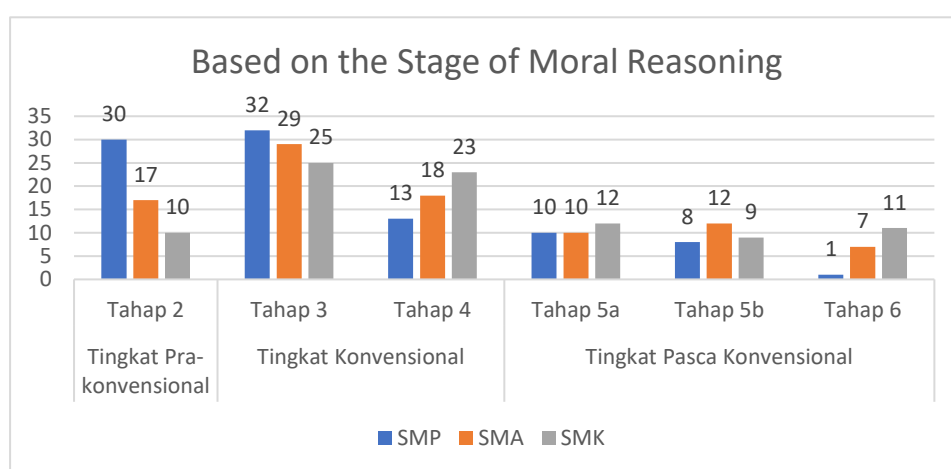


Diagram 1. The Moral Reasoning Stage

An overview of the moral reasoning abilities of SMP, SMA, and SMK students in Yogyakarta, based on the level of moral reasoning, can be described as follows:

1. The pre-conventional levels were stages 1 and 2. Stage 1 was not used in this study because, according to Kohlberg, stage 1 belongs to early childhood. Stage 2 is called the relativist-instrumental orientation.
2. The conventional levels were stages 3 and 4. Stage 3 is called the orientation of harmony or an excellent boy-nice girl orientation, while stage 4 is called the orientation of community order.
3. The post-conventional or autonomous level includes stages 5A, 5B as the orientation stage, and stage 6 as the universal ethical principal stage.

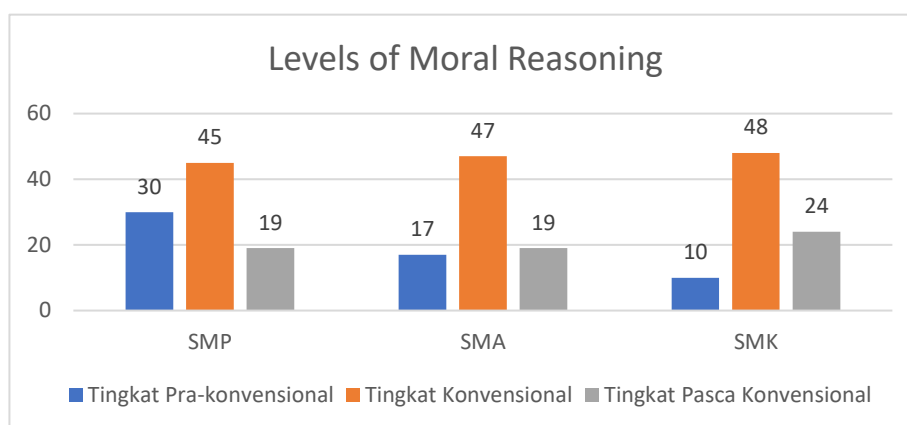


Diagram 2. The Stage of Moral Reasoning

The research findings show that students in class VIII SMP and IX SMA IX SMK in Yogyakarta are primarily at level II (conventional) at stage 4, which is oriented towards legal, social, and religious order, or law and order. Students are in their teenage years and start expanding their relationships with their peers in a new social environment. Therefore, peer groups still play an essential role in realising the developmental tasks of students, especially regarding matters of a social nature. At this time, the growth of a sense of loyalty/solidarity begins to dominate, so the associations that arise in them seem to follow the same. There is. In this case, even though students are already at the appropriate level of moral reasoning, namely the post-conventional level and high spiritual intelligence, they still tend to break the rules because of following their peers.

3.2 Exploring Student Moral Reasoning in Education

Educators who aim to increase moral reasoning in students must provide opportunities to explore their values and beliefs, engage in discussions with peers with different views, and develop sensitivity to the complexities of moral issues (Killen & Smetana, 2022). Moral development is significant for adolescents, especially as a guide to finding their identity, developing harmonious personal relationships, and avoiding role conflicts that always occur during transitional times (Desmita, 2009). Moral reasoning is not good or bad but how someone decides that something is good or bad. Moral reasoning is a reason for or considering why something is good or bad (Vaughn, 2016).

There are several problems in the development of moral reasoning in education. Limited application of moral values in students' daily lives. Students often only learn moral values in class but find it challenging to apply them in real life—a lack of development of students' moral reasoning abilities. Many students do not consider multiple perspectives in moral situations—reliance on existing authority or rules. Students often follow the rules or norms set without considering the moral values contained therein. Cultural differences and moral values exist among students, teachers, and educational institutions. Culture shapes how people interpret the behaviour of others (Senzaki et al., 2022).

The educational process needs to build moral awareness at an early age. Moral awareness must be made early by providing moral education to children. The implementation of moral education must be carried out continuously because the results of moral education cannot be seen in a short time. However, developing a child's moral attitudes and habits (Khaironi, 2017). This can be achieved by giving examples of good moral actions and teaching positive moral values daily.

The development of critical thinking skills should complement moral education. It can help individuals understand other people's perspectives and consider the consequences of their actions. Critical thinking is interrelated with how individuals develop moral reasoning (Bernardi et al., 2008). Critical thinking is a high-level thinking skill that plays a role in moral development (Siti Zubaidah, 2010). Effective moral education must also be student-centred, not just the teacher. Teachers should facilitate students in developing their moral reasoning abilities and provide opportunities to discuss and consider different points of view. Developing student-centred learning can improve students' reasoning abilities

(Santayasa, 2015). Teachers can act as moral role models for students. They must practice moral values daily and teach students how to do so. Students' moral reasoning experiences a significant increase with treatment in the form of using the human modelling method by the teacher in learning (Toifur, 2017).

Moral education must be included in the curriculum and taught at every level. This enables students to understand critical moral values and practice them daily. In addition, teachers must help students develop a sense of empathy toward others. This can help students understand other people's perspectives and consider the impact of their actions on others. A conducive situation in a school environment can support students' moral development. This can be achieved by applying favourable rules and norms and rewarding students who practice good moral values. This is an essential concern for educators to pay attention to in helping develop students' moral reasoning.

3.3 Student moral reasoning in the study of relational systemic paradigm

In studying the relational systemic paradigm, students' moral reasoning can be understood as part of interpersonal relationships and family systems that affect their mental health and quality of life. Environmental factors can influence moral reasoning, especially interpersonal relationships in the family and social environment. Changes in the systemic relational paradigm occur in individuals, settings, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, changing the patterns of interpersonal relationships in the family and social environment is necessary to improve students' moral reasoning. Moral reasoning in the systemic-relational paradigm is essential for understanding the complexity of social and cultural relationships in everyday life. Mature people will consider ethnic or cultural closeness to their community as a basis for making moral decisions (Pandya et al., 2023).

In an educational context, moral reasoning based on a systemic relational paradigm can help increase students' understanding of moral values, norms, and principles in complex and diverse social relations. Parents' respect for children, children's prosocial behaviour, and respect for the family can also influence the development of children's moral reasoning (Maiya et al., 2022). This relational systemic paradigm focuses on how to move from an individual to a relationship. Relationships with individuals can be seen as healthy or unhealthy. An unhealthy relationship is associated with behaviour that may be considered a symptom in some social or cultural contexts. Some factors that influence the development of moral reasoning are seen in the relational systemic paradigm, among others.

1. Life experiences and culture influence how a person perceives values and considers moral actions. Culture can affect the values and moral norms adopted and how these values are internalised. The social environment, which includes family, friends, school, and society, can influence a person's values and moral attitudes. This social environment can shape and influence moral reasoning.
2. Education: Moral education affects the development of students' moral reasoning. Good moral education helps students understand moral values and consider appropriate moral actions.
3. Cognitive factors: Cognitive factors, such as the ability to think abstractly, logic, and memory, can influence a person's ability to consider moral actions properly.
4. Situational context: Situational contexts, such as social pressure, emotional state, and physical state, can influence a person's moral reasoning in making moral decisions. According to Barger and Pitt (2013), moral reasoning is related to emotional conditions in determining moral dilemma decisions, and the content of moral dilemmas influences the mood in making or determining a moral decision.
5. Religion or belief: Religious or personal beliefs can influence a person's moral reasoning and how they consider moral actions consistent with their beliefs.

Remember that These factors are interrelated and influence each other in forming moral reasoning. Therefore, moral education must focus on these factors to develop good moral reasoning skills among students. In addition, moral reasoning in a relational systemic paradigm can help build students' ability to consider diverse perspectives when assessing moral situations and making appropriate decisions.

3.4 Interview Results and Thematic Analysis

This study uses the Relational Systemic Paradigm to explore the moral reasoning of adolescents in middle school. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, several key themes emerged, which help explain the complexity and nuances of adolescent moral reasoning development.

3.4.1 Moral Dilemmas in Everyday Life

Adolescents frequently encounter moral dilemmas in their daily lives, which significantly shape moral reasoning. A moral dilemma, an ethical quandary, is an inherent aspect of everyday life (Bang et al., 2023). This situation sometimes involves complex and conflicting principles of ethical behaviour, where there are no clear guidelines or guidelines on how to act or respond (Anggraeni & Widayanti, 2019). Ethical decision-making is essential in addressing these dilemmas since it can shape our character and values while impacting those around us. Moral difficulties, such as personal relationships, professional environments, and social interactions, can arise in everyday life. Ethical dilemmas frequently arise from conflicts between loyalty and honesty in intimate relationships. For example, a participant presented a scenario in which they were faced with the choice of helping a friend involved in cheating during an exam or reporting the act to the teacher. It illustrates teenagers' challenges in dealing with conflicts between conflicting moral principles and the tension between loyalty and honesty. Social influences, cognitive abilities, and moral values shape the moral reasoning process of adolescents, and they influence the value of honesty in adolescence (Giovannelli et al., 2018).

3.4.2 Peer Influence and Social Context

The influence of peers and the broader social context on moral reasoning must be addressed. In the study, there was a significant influence between peer group activities and moral reasoning (Obiageli & Nasiru, 2021). Adolescents frequently engage in the process of adapting their moral reasoning to conform to the prevailing values upheld by their peer group. Our research findings indicate a positive correlation between the likelihood of adolescents engaging in morally dubious behaviour and their experience of social pressure or a desire for peer acceptability.

3.4.3 Family Roles and Parental Values

The family plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents' moral reasoning (Azhar et al., 2020). Parental values and guidance provide the basis for moral development (Hou, 2023). Adolescents who report open communication and parental support demonstrate higher levels of moral autonomy and a deeper understanding of ethical principles.

3.4.4 Moral Reasoning and Emotional Intelligence

Moral reasoning in middle school adolescents is related to emotional intelligence (Athota et al., 2009). Study results reveal that adolescents who are more emotionally aware and have better emotional regulation skills are likelier to make the right moral decisions in emotionally charged situations (Dewi et al., 2023). This relationship between emotional intelligence and moral reasoning emphasises the importance of holistic character development.

These findings underscore the complexity of adolescents' moral reasoning in the middle school context. This shows the need for educators and parents to recognise the importance of moral education and its essential role in guiding adolescents through the challenges of moral development.

4. CONCLUSION

Students' moral reasoning is influenced by broader environmental factors, including interactions with the environment, family, peers, educational institutions, personal experiences, culture, religion, and perceptions of justice and truth. Students need a positive and supportive social environment to develop better moral reasoning abilities. Family, school, and community environments can influence young students' moral reasoning abilities, especially in broadening their perspective and increasing their ability to consider the social realisation of moral decisions. The Relational Systemic Paradigm model can provide a valuable framework for understanding how the social environment influences the

development of moral reasoning in adolescent students. Some recommendations for further research can be made to study how the family, school, and community environment specifically affect the moral reasoning abilities of adolescent students and how these factors can be utilised to facilitate the development of better moral reasoning. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to understand how the moral reasoning abilities of adolescent students develop over time and how environmental factors influence this development. Research should be conducted to study how the use of technology and social media affects the moral reasoning abilities of young students and how society can facilitate the responsible and ethical use of technology.

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