

## **Association Between Severity of Adolescents' Peer Problems and Moral Judgment Development**

**Najia Zulfiqar**

University of Haripur

Previous studies supported that adolescents' moral judgment decreases as their peer problems increase in severity. The objective of the present research was to examine peer problems as a predictor of adolescents' moral judgment development based upon Jessor's problem behavior theory and Gibbs moral development theory. It was hypothesized that moral judgment increases with growing age and thus, older adolescents are expected to be at higher stages of moral judgment development than younger adolescents. It was also assumed that adolescents with severe peer problems will be at lower level of moral judgment development than their counterparts. The younger adolescents ( $n = 140$ ;  $M = 13.1$  year) and older adolescents ( $n = 147$ ;  $M = 19$  year) were compared on measures of Index of Peer Relations and Padua Moral Judgment Scale. The findings showed that adolescents' moral judgment development declined with an increase in peer problems, particularly during late adolescence. Adolescents who reported having moderate and severe peer problems had lower level of moral judgment development than those with no and mild peer problems. Findings provided guideline for future researchers and practitioners.

*Keywords:* peer problems, moral judgment development, adolescence, age differences

Understanding moral development process is essential for shaping upright moral character among adolescents and reforming society (Levesque, 2002). Though 45 years of research on moral judgment development demonstrates that peers are primary influences on how the sense of right and wrong develops during adolescence (Harris, 1995), yet there is a little research how severity of peer problems predicts the level of moral judgment development. The objective of present research was to examine the association between severity of peer problems and level of moral judgment development during early and late adolescence periods.

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Najia Zulfiqar, Department of Psychology, The University of Haripur, Pakistan.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Najia Zulfiqar, Department of Psychology, The University of Haripur, Pakistan.  
E-mail: [najia.zulfiqar@pern.onmicrosoft.com](mailto:najia.zulfiqar@pern.onmicrosoft.com)

The present study empirically examined the theoretical constructs of Jessor's behavior system in the problem-behavior theory and Gibbs moral development theory. Jessor and Jessor (as cited in Donovan, 1996) proposed problem-behavior theory to explain the socio-psychological process of adolescents' involvement in problem behaviors, which are considered undesirable as per societal norms and elicit some forms of social sanctions. Problem behavior theory posits about three major systems that can either protect against or increase the risk of an adolescent's engaging in problem behavior. The *perceived environment system* consists of factors which are linked to an individual's behavior models, such as social controls. The *personality system* includes an individual's personality characteristics, temperament, as well as moral values or beliefs, whereas the *behavior system* entails the actual behaviors, either conventional or problematic, that an individual engages in (Jessor, 1991). Karaman (2013) empirically testing problem behavior theory found that the probability of exhibiting problem behaviors increased with an increase in risk taking behavior among Turkish high-school students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

Gibbs moral development theory is based upon revision of Kohlberg's (1976) proposition of three levels of conventional moral development. Gibbs (2013, p. 17) defined moral judgment as "the cognitive evaluation and justification of the prescriptive value of right and wrong". Gibbs, Basinger, Fuller, and Fuller (2013) presented two developmental levels of immature and mature moral judgments across four stages. These stages are power (might makes right), deal (you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours), mutuality (treat others as you would hope they would treat you), and systems (are you contributing to society?). Children display superficial judgment of moral issues during childhood stages of power and deal; and start gaining maturity during adolescence, treating issues with mutuality and system. Gibbs (2013) emphasized the development of more mature moral cognition through experiences of taking others' perspectives such as peers. The present study aimed to collect data only from adolescents as they are expected to be on mature level of moral development.

Adolescents spend more time with their peers and peer relationships increase in intensity and frequency with growing age (Baumrind, 1971). Likewise, Kohlberg (1973) claimed an age-related increase in moral judgment development that was empirically supported by other researchers (e.g., Bruess & Pearson, 2002; Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005). Positive peer influence was found to be more connected with protective behaviors and negative peer influence was more connected with involvement in

risky behaviors among adolescents during grades 6, 8, and 10 (Tomé, De Matos, Simões, Camacho, & AlvesDiniz, 2012). On one hand, empirical literature on association between peer relationships and moral development reveals that a number of close friendships and socializing activities (Schonert-Reichl, 1999) and overall friendship perspective-taking experiences (Glover, 2007) were significant positive predictors of moral judgment development. Peers or friends share one another's moral conflicts to evaluate their own moral standards (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hardup, 1998). On the other hand, density of friendship networks among college students (Derryberry & Thoma, 2000) was found as a significant negative predictor of moral judgment development. Adolescents can form relationships with deviant peers and are more likely to adopt morally wrong behaviors, being less mature in their reasoning about moral issues (Jannsens & Dekovic, 1997). Moral judgment levels were inversely related to objectionable moral behaviors (Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004), and problematic peer relationships among adolescents (Thomas, 2011). Thus, these contradictory empirical findings compelled interest to examine the association between severity of peer problems and adolescents' moral development during early and late adolescence periods among Pakistani sample.

Majority of studies supported the notion of growth in moral judgment from childhood to adolescence to adulthood (Bruess & Pearson, 2002; Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2005; Mason & Gibbs, 1993). An empirical study supported a linear increase in the social perspective-taking from childhood to adulthood, including advances for many individuals from adolescence into adulthood (Selman, 1980). In contrast, findings from some studies refuted differences between younger and older adolescents in their moral judgment (e.g. Fang, Fang, & Keller, 1994). The number of studies that compared age-related differences in moral development during adolescence is small and the sample characteristics and measures are largely varied.

The findings of a longitudinal study supported that adolescents were more likely to be similar to friends in socialization of moral disengagement between age of 9-10 years than 13-14 years (Wang, Ryoo, Swearer, Turner, & Goldberg, 2017). They accepted more peer pressure between ages 10 and 14 or between 18 and 30 than between ages 14 and 18 of middle adolescence (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). In contrast, Caravita, Sijtsema, Rambaran, and Gini (2014) found that older adolescents disengaged more moral standards to permit immoral conduct than younger adolescents, which was positively correlated with bullying and aggressive behaviors. The main objective of this

research was to examine peer problems as a predictor of the level of moral judgment development among younger and older adolescents.

### **Hypotheses**

Following hypotheses were formulated on the basis of previous literature:

1. Adolescents peer problems predict their level of moral judgment development and adolescents with severe peer problems will be at lower level of moral judgment development than their counterparts, irrespective of their age.
2. Moral judgment will increase with growing age and older adolescents will be at higher stages of moral judgment development than younger adolescents.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Data were collected from 304 adolescents through convenience sampling from nine different schools and colleges in the district of Abbottabad, Pakistan. Younger adolescents ( $M = 13.1$  years;  $n = 140$ ) made up 49% of the sample and were studying in middle school grades. The older adolescents ( $M = 19$  years;  $n = 147$ ) made up 51% of the sample and were drawn from grade 12, first year, and second year of college education. The inclusion criteria for sample selection was meeting age limits for younger and older adolescence.

#### **Measures**

**Padua Moral Judgment Scale (PMJS).** This is a self-report moral judgment test developed by Comunian and Gielen (2006) at Padua University, Italy. Its Urdu translation was used in the present study. It has four subscales that are adapted as developmentally progressing four stages including Power, Deal, Mutuality, and System of Gibbs theory. The subscales 1 and 2 are regarded as measures of immature moral judgment and subscale 3 and 4 are regarded as measures of mature moral judgment. Some of the sample items include ‘You help your parents because children must do what their parents tell them’ (Stage I); ‘You do not take other people’s things because if you steal from others, they may steal from you’ (Stage 2); ‘You keep promises to friends because friendship ought to be sincere’ (Stage 3);

and 'You tell the truth because it is a principle, which governs relationships between people in society' (Stage 4). Each subscale has seven items with 4-point ratings (1 = *not at all* to 4 = *very much*). It has a possible score range of 28-112 and the higher score indicates an advanced level of moral development. The mean score on seven items of each subscale was calculated to check the intensity level of each stage. Then, the mean scores of four subscales provided a summary score that represented the overall stage of moral judgment development. The Cronbach's alpha was .82 for total scale, .51 for Power, .42 for Deal, .64 for Mutuality, and .51 for System.

**Index of Peer Relations-Short Form (IPR-SF).** This is one of the nine scales of a clinical measurement package developed by Hudson (1993) to measure the degree and severity of peers' problems in adolescents' relationships. It is a unidimensional measure of 25 items rated upon a 5-point Likert scale. Twelve items were negatively scored that included 1, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, and 22. The score range of IPR-SF was 0-100. The score range of 0-30 was an indicator of non-problematic peer relationship; 31-50 indicated mild problems; 51-70 indicated moderate problems; and 71-100 indicated severe problems in peer relationships. The Cronbach alpha for IPR-SF was  $\alpha = .89$  that indicates the index as highly reliable.

## Procedure

The inclusion criteria for the selection of academic institutions was having at least one class of targeted grades. Nine schools meeting the inclusion criteria, were shortlisted for data collection. The administrators of participating institutions were informed about the purpose of study and their permission was sought for data collection. After receiving parental permission and ensuring participants' willingness and informed consent, data were collected from 304 adolescents both in groups and individually. The data forms with incomplete, missing or leftover information, and non-serious attempt were discarded from the data pool. The sample size reduced to 289 participants. The data were screened for the assumptions of normality and two cases were removed to fix the skewness in data. The cleaned data from 287 participants were then used for further analyses.

## Results

The objective of the present study was to examine association between severity of peer problems and adolescents' moral development during early and late adolescence periods. The descriptive statistics

were computed before conducting correlation and regression analyses of the variables. The difference between younger and older adolescents on both measures was computed using *t*-test.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Measures of IPR and PMJS (N = 287)*

Sub/scales	N	M	S.D
Index of Peer Relations			
No	230	13.80	7.77
Mild	42	40.38	6.49
Moderate	11	53.27	1.90
Severe	04	73.50	2.08
Total	287	45.49	15.52
Padua Moral Judgment Scale			
Power	0	-	-
Deal	22	18.60	3.43
Mutuality	218	17.24	3.94
System	47	19.80	3.45
Total	287	73.11	11.80
Index of Peer Relations on Padua Moral Judgment Scale			
No	230	74.04	11.75
Mild	42	72.38	11.07
Moderate	11	78.00	13.67
Severe	04	69.50	14.79

*Note.* IPR = Index of Peer Relations; PMJS = Padua Moral Judgment Scale.

Table 1 shows mean and standard deviation scores for different groups of adolescents based upon self-reports to the measures of peer problems and moral judgment development. The scores are affected by the sample size and demand careful interpretation of the findings. Majority of adolescents are not reporting to have peer problems. Findings in Table 1 also show that all participants have progressed beyond power stage of moral development and a larger majority of participants are at mutuality stage. Lastly, the mean scores of adolescents' moral judgment are calculated with reference to reports of severity of peer problems. The low mean score of adolescents with severe peer problems indicates their being at lower level of moral judgment development than their counterparts.

Table 2

*Correlation Matrix of IPR and PMJS Along With Subscales (N = 287)*

	Variables	Deal	Mutuality	System	PMJS
1	Power	.54**	.56**	.46**	.77**
2	Deal		.55**	.55**	.79**
3	Mutuality			.52**	.83**
4	System				.75**
5	IPR				-.03*

*Note.* IPR = Index of Peer Relations; PMJS = Padua Moral Judgment Scale.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2 shows significant positive correlation of PMJS with all its subscales. As many of the participants were at third stage of moral development that is, Mutuality, the correlation between scores on PMJS and subscale Mutuality is highly significant ( $r = .83^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) than other correlation coefficients. The inter-correlation between Power and System though significant, is less than all other correlation coefficients. Findings show that PMJS and IPR are negatively correlated ( $r = -.03^*$ ) as expected.

Table 3

*Summary of Hierarchal Regression Analyses for IPR Predicting Moral Judgment (N = 287)*

Model	$R^2 \Delta$	$\beta$
Peer Problems		
Step 1. No IPR	.002*	.41**
Step 2. Mild IPR	.000*	.005*
Step 3. Moderate IPR	.479**	-.692**
Step 4. Severe IPR	.270**	-.519**
Age Difference		
Step 5. Younger adolescents	.000*	-.010*
Step 6. Older adolescents	.012*	-.11***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3 shows the hierarchal regression analyses across four groups of peer problems and two groups of younger and older adolescents. Results show significant negative relationship between these constructs and remarkable difference in standardized regression coefficient values among four groups. At step 1 and 2, no and mild peer problems are used as predictors of moral development, controlling for all other variables, and the models do not explain significant variance in adolescents' moral judgment development. Next, moderate peer

problems are tested as predictor of moral judgment development and the model explains 47% of variance in moral judgment development. Step 4 contributed 27% of variance in moral judgment development being predicted by severe peer problems. Thus, with one standard deviation increase in peer problems, the level of moral judgment decreases 51% and 69% respectively, among adolescents with moderate and severe peer problems.

The next two steps are applied to determine age differences and results show that peer problems do not contribute to variance in moral judgment development of younger and older adolescents. The age difference was further tested through *t*-test (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Difference Between Younger and Older Adolescents on IPR and PMJS (N = 287)*

Variables	Younger ( <i>n</i> = 140)	Older ( <i>n</i> = 147)					95% CI	
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> (285)	<i>p</i>			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Peer Relations	20.79(15.34)	19.32(14.95)	.82	.41			-2.05	4.98
Moral Judgment	77.91(11.46)	70.05(10.75)	6.00	.01*			5.28	10.44

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 4 shows significant differences on moral judgement between younger and older adolescents. Younger adolescents scored higher on moral judgement which implies that moral judgment do not increase with age. The differences between two groups on peer problems are nonsignificant.

## Discussion

The present research was designed to examine association between peer problems and moral judgment development of younger and older adolescents. The findings showed that peer problems and moral judgment development were negatively correlated and adolescents with more severe peer problems were developmentally behind in moral judgments than their counterparts. In this section, the findings are discussed in the light of two main hypotheses being linked with previous empirical literature.

The first hypothesis of the study was to examine that adolescents' peer problems predict their level of moral judgment development and adolescents with severe peer problems are at lower level of moral judgment development than their counterparts. The findings supported



this hypothesis that peer problems were significantly negatively related to moral judgment and appeared as its significant predictor. This finding is consistent with Thomas (2011) that problematic peer relationships among adolescents were inversely related to objectionable moral behaviors. Interestingly, all the participants had progressed beyond immature stages of moral judgment particularly, power stage and only a few participants reported having severe peer problems. Yet, findings supported the assumed relationship between the constructs under study. In continuation of the first hypothesis, findings also supported lower level of moral judgment development among adolescents with more severe problems than their counterparts. Regression analysis revealed that the level of moral judgment decreased with an increase in peer problems specifically among adolescents with moderate and severe peer problems.

The second hypothesis of the present study was that moral judgment will increase with growing age and older adolescents will be at higher stages of moral judgment development than younger adolescents. The findings did not support the hypothesis and in contrast to assumption, younger adolescents had higher level of moral judgment than older adolescents. Though this finding is aligned with Fang et al. (1994) finding of nonsignificant age differences in adolescents' moral judgment but is controversial to mainstream Western notion of moral development in the light of existing theoretical and empirical literature (Bruess & Pearson, 2002; Eisenberg et al., 2005; Gibbs, 2013; Kohlberg, 1976). Therefore, the analysis and interpretation of the finding demand consideration of indigenous cultural values of Pakistani population as well as cross-cultural differences. It is plausible that middle adolescence, which is not examined in the present study, is marked with significant changes in the moral judgment development of Pakistani participants or the collectivist Eastern family culture is a reason for producing an inconsistent finding.

The Western children associate with their peers in an early age. As a child enters in adolescence, he/she begins to form an identity apart from family and peer groups become a strong influence on developing morality (Schonert-Reichl, 1999). In line with it, Tomé et al. (2012) stated that adolescents spend less time with their parents than children and consequently, are more influenced by their peers. The Pakistani parents discourage adolescents to develop closer contact with peers particularly, adolescent girls have less frequent peer interaction. Overall, the Pakistani adolescents remain intact to their parents and family's value system. They are obedient to the authority of parents and do not blindly accept what their close friends suggest them. Adolescents are mindful to counter the positive and negative influences of their

peers upon general behavior and moral judgment. Therefore, if younger adolescents are not much affected by their peer problems and have higher level of moral development than older adolescents, the results seem to be aligned with the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. Though hypothesis is disapproved yet this finding opens horizons for new researches.

### **Limitations and Future Recommendations**

As nothing is perfect, so like other researches in social sciences, the present study also has certain limitations. A few recommendations are provided to improve the future studies.

1. Both instruments were foreign-made English measures and their Urdu-translated versions were used for participants' better understanding. There is need to develop and adopt culturally relevant measures.
2. Participants were instructed to keep in mind their close friends while responding to Index of Peer Relations but their perception of close friends was not known. It is probable that participants provided responses about different friendship relations in specific or peer problems in general. Some measures should be taken to assess similar perception of adolescents' peer relations in future studies.
3. Participants were less acquainted about research significance, procedures, and ethics. They had difficulty to understand the use of response categories. The non-serious attitude, and giving less importance to the research might have distorted the results. It is recommended that participants should be acquainted with significance of an empirical study and reinforced to maximize their cooperation.
4. Though younger and older adolescents were carefully selected to trace development of their moral judgment. Yet, sample showed homogeneity that led to spurious findings. The smaller sample size prevented the detection of significant group differences. A future recommendation is to take larger sample size, collecting data from different areas of the country with varied sample characteristics.

### **Implications**

The current study provided valuable information about adolescents' peer relationships and consequent level of moral judgment development in the cultural context of Pakistan.

It not only filled gaps in empirical literature but also identified gaps for future research. The findings of present research can be matched with cross-cultural studies on adolescents' moral judgment to sort out the underlying causes for inconsistencies in research findings. The uplift of morality is highly important for the uplift of society and protecting youth from bad company. Results can be taken as enriched guidelines for parents, teachers, policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers for prevention and intervention of problematic peer relationship and poor moral development.

### Conclusions

Morality is a private, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon; and its component moral judgment development demands personal decision-making. The current study concludes that peer problems and adolescents' moral judgment were negatively correlated. Most of the participants were on "mutuality" stage on PMJS and others were in transition to fourth stage of moral judgment. Adolescents with severe peer problems were at lower level of moral judgment as expected but younger adolescents were morally more mature than older adolescents. The study highlights socio-cultural values and behavior patterns with respect to adolescents' parenting, peer relationship, and moral judgment development.

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