

Examining Personal Values and Moral Competence of Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose: This research aims to investigate whether personal values such as intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness are predictors of moral competence. The research also aims to discover if moral competence score is significantly different for students of different faculties.

Design/methodology/approach: We conducted questionnaire survey to respondents in a university, covering demographics and two moral dilemma scenarios based on Lind's moral competence test (MCT).

Findings: Among some of the findings was that moral competence scores was positively correlated with personal values. However, only religiousness, honesty and self-control were predictors of moral competence. We also discovered significant difference in moral competence scores of respondents based on faculties.

Research limitations/implications: The findings may only reflect the specific university students' perceptions and may not be representative of all university students in Malaysia. Results of group moral competence cannot be used to impart a person's moral competence score.

Practical implications: Hypothetical moral dilemmas in MCT may be too abstract to create enough emotional salience that can replace personally-experienced moral dilemma.

Originality/value: The findings provide new empirical evidence on factors affecting students' moral competence.

Paper type: Research paper

Keywords: Personal values, Intellectualism, Honesty, Self-control, Religiousness, Moral competence, MCT

Introduction

Personal values is a guiding principle that directs human behaviour into making decision in a particular situation. Personal values will probably be indicators of attitude and actual behaviour (Alleyne, Cadogan Mc-Clean, & Harper, 2013). A person's personal values influence his or her moral competence. Personal values play an important role for undergraduate students, as they will become future leaders. Lind (2019) further claims that a high moral competence is better than a low moral competence. Literature uncovers that personal values impact moral competence (Douglas, Schwartz, & Davidson, 2001).

Moral competence is very important especially for undergraduate students because they are going to enter into the working world, which is going to lead to a lot of judgement based on their own personal values. Research revealed that a person's moral and good judgement affect her or his assessments of issues and practices. The issue assessed might be an action, person, institution or state of affairs, and the attribute might either be general (such as rightness or badness) or specific (such as loyalty or injustice) (Cullity, 2004). Moral competence is very important because it could harm someone, especially loss of life or other physical harm, loss of rightful property, loss of privacy, or other threats to autonomy (Bartels, Bauman, Cushman, Pizarro & McGraw, 2015)

Despite the fact that we give careful consideration to help undergraduates to grow ethically, Derryberry and Thoma (2000) remind us that we have no particular guidance from the writing on planning projects to encourage moral competence. Rest (1986) posits that despite various elements are known to impact moral competence, we cannot decide why (Thomas & Dunphy, 2017).

Further Forsyth (1992) claims that a person would use their moral competence in evaluating and deciding the morality of their actions when dealing with ethical matters. Guffey and McCartney (2008) posit that moral competence plays a big part in deciding individual's actions. For example, a student who is aware that it is unethical to cheat on examinations from other students' exam sheets (moral judgment) will still cheat (lack of demonstrating behavioural actions). As a result, the students' refusal to do the 'right' thing is due to their individual interests. Lan et al. (2009) claim that personal values determine a person's character and action may be controlled by their surroundings.

This study investigates whether personal values such as intellectuality, honesty, self-control and religiousness; contribute to moral competence of students in Malaysia. Findings from the research may shed light on whether a person's moral competence is influenced by personal values. Personal values consists of intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness (Scott, 1965). Findings of this research may be used to assess moral competence of university students and to take necessary measures to inculcate healthier moral aptitude among students and help the university strategise ways to improve and develop students' moral competence.

Literature Review

According to Lind in his book *How to Teach Morality: Promoting Deliberation and Discussion, Reducing Violence and Deceit*, moral competence is "the ability to resolve

problems and conflicts on the basis of inner moral principles through deliberations and discussions instead of violence and deceit” (2016, p.16).

Therefore, it is essential to determine whether this is true so that something can be done to improve students’ personal values (Alleyne et al, 2013). Once we discover the variables that affects moral competence, we would be able to realign and focus on enhancing core competencies to mould our students into competent professionals with integrity in a profession. Our research used Scott (1965) four subscales to evaluate personal values such as intellectualism, honesty, self-control religiousness and intellectualism. The personal value sub scale will help us to evaluate the judgement made by the individual.

Theoretical Framework

Personal Values

Personal values is a guiding principle that directs human behaviour into making decision in a particular situation. Our research used Alleyne et al. (2013) four subscales to evaluate personal values such as intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness. Intellectualism refers as the ability for reasoning, understanding and rationalising. Honesty refers to an aspect of good character and suggest positive and idealistic characteristics such as trustworthy, sincere and genuine. Self-control is characterised as the capacity to practice restriction or control over one’s reactions, feelings and emotions. Religiousness is explained as the trust in devotion of, or compliance to, supernatural powers or powers contemplate to be divine or to have power over human destiny.

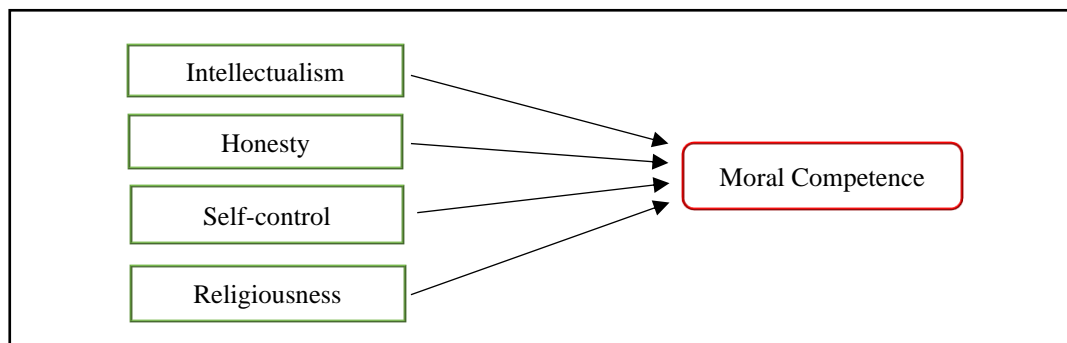


Figure 1: Schematic Diagram

Hypothesis Development

Personal Values and Moral Competence

Personal values was found to be associated with moral competence (Schepers, 2003). Apart from that, Douglas et al. (2001) discovered that students’ moral competence were significantly influenced by their personal values. Other research discovered that personal values impact humans on their observations, interpretation of circumstances and henceforth coordinate individuals in their decision-making process and also their action afterwards (Rokeach, 1975) Homer and Kahle (1988) recommended that values frame the establishment for improvement of person’s attitudes that direct a particular decision-making conduct. It is assumed that personal values are in charge of the arrangement of observations, assessments, judgements, and responsibilities. Thus, the hypotheses generated from this assessment is:

H₁: Personal values are significantly associated with moral competence.

H₂: Personal values predict moral competence.

Significant Difference of Moral Competence across Colleges.

Previous studies found that course of study determines the students' moral competence. Based on previous study, accounting students are more imaginative and responsible compared to non-accounting students (Baker, 1976). Besides, accounting students ranked ambition, comfortable life and responsibility, which are higher than non-accounting students are. Apart from that, socialisation process amid the four-year program made students more mindful of making a moral judgment based on their experience and learning consistently (Clikeman & Henning, 2000). Study also found that non-accounting students are more focused on achievements, power, pleasure and happiness and less focus on universalism than accounting students (Gandal, Roccas, Sagiv, & Wrzesniewski, 2005). Besides, honesty and self-direction are major values for undergraduate students (Giacomino, Brown, & Akers, 2011).

Overall, the above writing bolsters the view that there are critical contrasts amongst various college students based on their moral judgement. Hence, the hypothesis derived is whether:

H₃: There is significant difference in moral competence scores across colleges.

Methods***Population and Sample***

Targeted population for the research are undergraduates of a private university in Malaysia, consisting of students taking accounting, engineering and information technology. The university was chosen because it offers courses in three different fields and it was more convenient and easy to access.

The sampling technique used is non-probability sampling. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) posit that the minimum sample that can represent the maximum population is 384. Thus, the sample size of 444 collected was sufficient to represent the university population.

Data collection instrument

We used questionnaire survey as data collection method. This method provides speedy data collection as opposed to other methods such as interviews.

The questionnaire consists of three parts: demographics, personal values, which consist of 12 question subscales consisting of intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness. We adopted personal values subscales from Alleyne et al (2013), who adopted Akaah and Lund (1994) subscales. The moral competence questions were adopted from Lind's Moral Competence Test (MCT, formally known as the Moral Judgement Test; 2008). The MCT is a well-used questionnaire that has been tested on various disciplines such as business, engineering, life sciences and social sciences.

A pilot test was earlier conducted to validate the questionnaire prior to mass distribution. Cronbach alpha results showed that the subscales had good internal consistency, where the alpha scores were between .68 to .74. These results were slightly different from Alleyne et al (2013), where their alpha was between .58 to .84. Lind's (2008) moral competence alpha score was .91.

Data Collection Process

The research uses primary data. Primary data are data that are collected for a particular research problem at hand, using procedures that fit the research problem more ideally (Henle, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2005). Questionnaire survey was used as the main instrument in collecting the primary data to enable us to achieve the objective of this study. We choose this method of data because of its suitability for this study which using descriptive research. Descriptive research represents as simple the attempt to determine, describe or identify what is, in generating hypothesis.

The questionnaire made up of four sections. Section One covers demographics of respondents. Section Two covers personal values scale adopted from Alleyne et al (2013) and Section Three represents Moral Competence adopted from Lind’s (2008) MCT consisting of two short cases on worker’s and doctor’s dilemmas adopted from Lind (2008). The 500 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and 444 responses collected were deemed usable.

Measurement of Variables

The research collected data via questionnaire survey. The first part of the questionnaire covers demographics such as age, gender, year of study, CGPA, race and whether the student took Islamic/moral and ethics subjects.

The other part of the questionnaire covers questions relating to the independent and dependent variables. Likert scale is used to assess the personal values (independent variables), namely intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiosity as well as moral competency (dependent variable).

Table 1: Personal Values & Moral Competence

Variables	Measurements
Personal Values (Alleyne et al, 2013): • Intellectualism • Honesty • Self-control • Religiosity	1 = Completely dishonest 2 = Dishonest 3 = Neutral 4 = Honest 5 = Completely honest
Moral Competence (Lind, 2008)	-4 - Completely Unacceptable -3 - Unacceptable -2 - Moderately Unacceptable -1 - Mildly Unacceptable 0 - Neither acceptable nor unacceptable +1 - Mildly Acceptable +2 - Moderately Acceptable +3 - Acceptable +4 - Completely Acceptable

Findings

Demographics

Demographics of the respondents are available in Table 2. Nine statistical characteristics of the respondents were collected covering the demographics analysis. The aspects include location, college, gender, age, nationality, race, year of study, CGPA, taken Islamic/moral studies and taken any ethics subject.

Table 2: Demographic Analysis (n=444)

		Freq.	%			Freq.	%
Gender	Male	200	45.0	Age	18 & below	2	0.5
	Female	244	55.0		19 – 23	375	84.5
College	Business & Accounting	148	33.3	24 – 29	66	14.9	
	Engineering	147	33.1	30 & above	1	0.2	
	Computing & Informatics	149	33.6	Year of Study:			
Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA):				1 st Year	59	13.3	
	Below Average (0-1.99)	5	1.1	2 nd Year	86	19.4	
	Average (2.00-2.99)	89	20.0	3 rd Year	128	28.8	
	Good (3.00-3.49)	200	45.0	4 th Year	171	38.5	

Excellent (3.50-4.00)		150	33.8	Taken Islamic/Moral studies: No	8	1.8
Race	Malay	326	73.4	Taken any ethics subject: Yes	436	98.2
	Chinese	28	6.3	No	23	5.2
	Indian	84	18.9	Yes	421	94.8
	Others	6	1.4			

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis incorporates both independent variable and dependent variable. This segment outlines the results of the variables through minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation.

Table 3 provides the result based on minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation for the four subtheme of personal values namely intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness. The minimum and maximum values are measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The highest mean is 3.68 for intellectualism, indicating that the students as having strong intellectual curiosity, where they constantly try to invest time and energy into learning more about a person, place, thing or concept. The highest mean for honesty is 3.52 for statement “speaking one’s mind truthfully, without regard for the consequences”. This indicate that the students believe that speaking truthfully without concerning the consequences will improve their moral competence. For self-control, the highest mean was 3.77. This may indicate that the students believe that controlling themselves will eventually help them to make a better decision when it comes to a moral competence. The highest mean for religiousness is 3.75, which shows that students are having faith in being greater than man. Student believes that having faith in religion is greater for being a normal human being.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of Personal Values

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Intellectualism					
Having an active interest in all things scholarly	444	1	5	3.50	.813
Having a keen interest in international, national and local affairs	444	1	5	3.60	.749
Developing an appreciation of the fine arts-music, drama, literature and ballet	444	1	5	3.49	.949
Having a strong intellectual curiosity	444	1	5	3.68	.821
Honesty					
Never cheating or having anything to do with cheating, even for a friend	444	1	5	3.35	1.018
Always telling the truth even though it may hurt one’s self or others.	444	1	5	3.51	.908
Speaking one’s mind truthfully, without regard for the consequences	444	1	5	3.52	.848
Volunteering information concerning wrongdoing, even if friend is involved	444	1	5	3.50	.819
Self-control					
Never losing one’s temper, no matter what the reason	444	1	5	3.41	.968
Practicing self-control	444	1	5	3.77	.875

Not expressing anger, even when one has reason for doing so	444	1	5	3.33	1.000
Replying to anger with gentleness	444	1	5	3.44	.975
Religiousness					
Being devout in one's religious faith	444	1	5	3.60	.826
Always living one's religion in one's daily life	444	1	5	3.67	.889
Always attending religious services regularly and faithfully	444	1	5	3.58	.907
Having faith in a being greater than man	444	1	5	3.75	.892
Valid N (list wise)	444				

Moral Competence

Moral competence point to the perceptual orientation to perform altruistic behaviours and the potentiality to judge moral issues logically. Table 4 shows the statistics for moral competence's C-score.

Table 4: Moral Competence (C-score)

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
C-Index	444	.08	100.00	54.4024	29.69025

The minimum score is 0.08 and the maximum is 100. Lind (2019) informed that a person's moral competence noticeably improves if their moral competence goes beyond this score.

Correlation Test

Spearman's Rho test results indicate that the independent variables (IV) of intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness are significantly associated with moral competence (DV) ($p < .01$). Therefore, H_1 is supported.

Table 5: Correlation analysis

	(IV)	Moral Competence (DV)
Spearman's rho	Intellectualism	.161**
	Honesty	.224**
	Self-Control	.250**
	Religiousness	.253**

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

Regression Analysis

A multiple regression test was performed to predict moral competence based on intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness. A significant regression equation was found ($F(4, 439) = 11.313, p=0.000$) with an $R^2 = .093$ (refer Table 6). The predicted moral competence is $-9.997 + 7.254$ (Religiousness) $+ 5.552$ (Self-Control) $+ 4.467$ (Honesty). However, no significant relationship was observed for intellectualism, denoting that it is not a determinant of moral competence. Therefore, we can define the moral competence model as:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Moral Competence}_i &= b_0 + b_1\text{Religiousness}_i + b_2\text{Self-Control}_i + b_3\text{Honesty}_i \\ &= -9.977 + (7.254\text{Religiousness}_i) + (5.520\text{Self-Control}_i) \\ &\quad + (4.467\text{Honesty}_i) \end{aligned}$$

Table 6: Regression Analysis for Predictors of Personal Values on Moral Competence

	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)	-9.977	-.956	.340
Intellectualism	.883	.324	.746
Honesty	4.467	1.835	.067
Self-Control	5.520	2.424	.016
Religiousness	7.254	3.068	.002
R ²	.093		
Adjusted R ²	.085		
<i>F-value</i>	11.313		

The *b* value informs us about the relationship between moral competence and each predictor. The values indicate that there are positive relationships between moral competence and three predictors being religiousness, self-control and honesty. This means that, as religiousness increases, the moral competence score increases; as self-control increases, moral competence score also increases and as honesty increases, moral competence score also increases. For example, the religiousness value of 7.254 indicates that as religiousness increases by 1 unit, moral competence score increases by 7.254 points.

Test of Significant Difference

We conducted test of significant difference to investigate whether there is a difference in moral competence score among the three different faculties at the university (business, engineering and IT). Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in moral competence score between the business and IT colleges, $H(2) = 7.388$, $p = 0.026$, with mean moral competence scores of 50.14 for business and 59.73 for IT respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

The first objective of the study is to investigate whether personal values, namely intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness are associated with moral competence. Results show that personal values (intellectualism, honesty, self-control and religiousness) are significantly associated with moral competence. The result is consistent with findings from Alleyne et al. (2013), Giacomino and Akers (1998), Lan et al. (2009), Keljo and Christenson (2003).

The second objective was to find out the predictive influence of intellectuality, honesty, self-control and religiousness on moral competence. Results revealed that only religiousness, honesty and self-control predict moral competence.

The last objective was to test whether there is a statistically significant difference in moral competence of students across colleges. We discovered that there was significant difference in moral competence score (C-score) between students in the business and IT faculties, where the IT students C-score was higher than the business students were. Nevertheless, this does not indicate that the IT students are morally superior to the business students. As Lind (2008) pointed out “a person's moral competence score (C-score) can be lower than his or her real competence because of circumstances which may depress the test score”.

Theoretical Implications

This study enriches the current literature, particularly in a Malaysia context, where studies that combines personal values and moral competence is scarce. However, it should be mentioned that sometimes respondents may “depress” their answer especially when they feel that they will be judged by the answers they chose (Lind, 2020). Further, even though the C-score results

cannot be generalised based on study major, it can provide a sign of how important it is to encourage moral competence among students who will become professions of the future.

Practical and Social Implications

As mentioned earlier, it is important that moral competence is nurtured at tertiary level to equip students when they join the working fraternity. According to Giacomino et al. (2011) who did comparative study on students moral competence based on different decades, they saw change in value systems where students were seen to be more concerned about achieving social goals through competence than with achieving social goals for moral reasons. Although their results are inconsistent from our respondents' C-scores, the implication for educators is that they will need to give greater emphasis on ethics/integrity lessons, either stand-alone or embedded in other subjects to develop students of high moral principles.

Practitioners should also be mindful of the importance of integrity and professionalism at the workplace. They should include workshops covering moral competencies and ethics in their CPE hours.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The most important limitation that may affect the results of this research is “proper” response from respondents – where students were unable to provide a proper response. As the MCT is rather lengthy, there is the possibility that respondents may not be committed into completing the questionnaire and answer the questions without properly reading and understanding, which may lead to inaccurate results. Lind (2019) also suggested this issue.

We suggest that future research that wants to use MCT as a research instrument would properly plan appropriate respondents. Thorough explanation of the test and matching respondents' ability to understand the questions, carefully choose answers and free of feelings of intimidation or pressure. This may help in churning findings that are more genuine.

Besides that, we recommend for universities to introduce moral competence-related subject in the syllabus, as this method has proved highly effective to students in improving their moral competence.

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