Moral awareness among future development agents: an action study

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Abstract The aim of this article is to describe the moral awareness of future development agents in Malaysia. This study involved a group of senior students from the Developmental Studies program of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia. The underpinning theories for this study have been based on the Rest's model on moral decision-making and Kohlberg's moral on cognitive development theory. The moral awareness of the students is considerably at high level scores. However, there are some elements of ambiguity in terms of perceiving whether the encountered issue is merely violation of laws or ethical violation as well. This article is innovatively reviewing moral awareness of the future development agents based on theories of Rest and Kohlberg. As far as promoting a responsible and ethical decision-making are concerned, this article would render the present value of moral awareness in order to improve the scopes and approach of development education based on current needs and gaps.

Keywords Moral cognitive development · Moral awareness · Development ethics · Developmental studies · Development agents

Introduction

Development conflicts may potentially arise due to differences in values and priorities. In order to ensure high quality of development effect, agents must possess a certain level

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of technical and moral capabilities. Moral capability is important, whereas most of the development decisions are aimed at others agents (external stakeholders) who are not part of the development agents. Hence, development agents need to have moral awareness and moral cognitive abilities in order to generate rational decisions that conform to universal moral values. Unless the development agents possess such awareness and ability, the country's development policies and programs will only be made to serve majority expectations (needs) at the expense of vulnerable groups' interests. The purpose of this article is to evaluate moral awareness of future development agents and to promote a more structured program to strengthen the students' moral cognitive capacity.

Development and ethics

Ethics is necessary in development. According to Clark (2000), the developmental ethics momentum has proliferated since 1970s due to Amartya Sen's idea of development which emphasizes on the expansion of human potential. Besides, ethics adequacy is one of the three criteria for development sustainability (DesJardin and Diedrich 2003: 35). According to DesJardin and Diedrich (2003), development policies must address the real need of those who are relatively vulnerable and to adhere to standards of social justice. Therefore, development discretion must entail both technical and ethical conscience.

What is ethics all about? De George (1990: 19) defines ethics as “a systematic attempt to make sense of our individual and social moral experience, in such a way as to determine the rules that ought to govern human conduct, the values worth pursuing, and the character traits deserving development in life”. Similarly, Velasquez (2002: 11) defines ethics as “a discipline that examines one's moral standard or the moral standards of society and (to) investigate whether those standards apply to our lives or specific situation”. Therefore, ethics is a kind of deliberate attempt to integrate moral standards into human matters including their work and professional discretion.

How is ethics relevant to development issues? According to Goulet (2006), Gasper (2004) and Clark (2000), development is a value relative to societal improvement which resulted in the absence of single solutions for pursuing its' objective. Therefore, any development policies or actions are subjected to some form of evaluations, discussions, and fact-based arguments. The underlying premise for such deliberation activities would require for human conscience which transcends the technical form of evaluation. Furthermore, development strategies may impose a simultaneous contrary effect to different parties that result in some form of benefits as well as human cost and sufferings (Goulet 1971). Hence, the selection of the most appropriate solutions must be in the light of holistic and prudent evaluation criteria. Besides, in order to execute a development plan effectively, it is also compulsory to have excellent ethical development agents. This was parallel to Trevino and Youngblood (1990) who suggested that unethical people would lead their organization towards destruction and vice versa. Therefore, the arguments have justified the

need for qualified ethical development agents as well as to highlight the raising concern on their moral awareness and moral cognitive level.

Moral reasoning, moral awareness, and moral cognitive development

Moral reasoning could improve the quality of decisions especially in conflicting situations as expressed by Gasper's (2004: 15):

“Development ethics is in large part about choices; choices about values and about strategies. Ethical discussion about development only has much point because there are real, serious choices to make....”

Velasquez (2002: 30) describes moral reasoning as “the reasoning process by which human behaviors, institutions or policies are evaluated in parallel or violation of moral standards”. From the evaluations, judgments on the appropriateness of particular policies can be determined prior approval or implementation. Moral reasoning is relevant for development decisions with respect to Goulet's definition of ethical development (cited in Gasper 2004, 18) which had been stated as “the investigation of ethics and value of the development theories, planning and practices”. Thus, it reflects the requirement for an applied normative ethical evaluation in development discretion. According to Rest (1986), there are four stages in ethical decision-making (see Fig. 1).

The first component of the four-stage model is moral sensitivity. It refers to the awareness or recognition of the moral issue(s) in a particular situation. Lowry (2003: 9) describes moral awareness as the ability to recognize the moral characteristic of the situations and is pivotal in ethical decision-making process (Butterfield et al. 2000: 983). The second component is moral reasoning which involve a situational critical

Fig. 1 Components of rest ethical decision model. (Gaudine and Thorne, 2001)

evaluation such the moral principle that has been violated, the severity of its impact, and the conclusion on the appropriateness of particular development policies (decisions or actions). The third component comprises ethical motivation, which involves intrinsic drives that motivate actual ethical (unethical) behaviors or decisions. The fourth component is ethical character which refers to the actual behavior or decision taken by the respective individual.

The persons who acted ethically in earlier stages will unnecessarily react in the same mode at their latter stages. Within the four-process model, moral reasoning can only be performed when the person is able to transcend the first stage—the ability to discern moral issue(s) in a particular conflict. This has been in line with Butterfield et al (2000: 984) who suggested that moral issues are usually embedded and hardly traced in most conflicts; thus, it justifies a close relationship between the ability to discern moral issue and moral reasoning. Although moral sensitivity is needed prior to resolving an ethical dilemma, most previous investigations, however, have been focusing on moral reasoning which was the second component of Rest's model and none thoroughly examined the moral awareness stage of activities (Jordan 2009: 238). Therefore, this article attempts to fill the gap by studying ethical sensitivity or moral awareness of the developmental studies students.

Moral awareness is the special encoding process that leads a person's attention to process the incoming information and to recognize it as the moral issue. As a result, the encoding process requires a certain stimulus that will attract the person's attention to visualize the corresponding issue beyond its visible appearance. According to Jones' Issue-Contingent Model (1991), moral awareness is influenced by moral intensity and leads to different reactions towards the encountered moral issues. There are six factors that contribute to moral intensity, in particular moral issue (Jones 1991). The factors are: (1) magnitude of the consequences derived from the behaviors or decisions, (2) social consensus regarding the issue, (3) probability of occurrence of the expected consequences, (4) closeness of time between the behavior or decision and the expected consequence, (5) closeness of the moral issue and the particular agents, and (6) concentration of the expected effect of particular behaviors or decisions.

Butterfield et al. (2000: 987) viewed that the early stage of moral awareness is influenced by two factors known as issue-related factors. The issue-related factors comprise magnitude of consequences and issue-framing. Issue framing is related to how the issue was presented such as the nature of discussion or the words/sentence used to deliberate the issue. In addition, Butterfield et al. (2000: 989) mentioned that perceived social context has a pivotal role to explain individual moral awareness. The perceived social context that stems from the external environment may influence moral awareness by providing cues regarding how the issues should be interpreted. The perceived social cue is similar to the social consensus mentioned by Jones (1991). Therefore, it justifies the use of newspaper reports on few national controversial issues in the country as to evoke our respondents' feedback.

According to Velasquez (2002), human moral ability follows the same growth patterns as the development of human physical, emotional, and cognitive

abilities. There are three levels of Kohlberg's moral cognitive development which comprises:

1. Level 1: preconventional stages

At this level the person is in the lowest moral cognitive capacity as they can only base their moral evaluation on external forces such as obeying the rules and regulations or to obey the influential power that determines the pleasant or unpleasant results for them.

2. Level 2: conventional stages

At this level the person tries to fulfil the expectations of their family or peer group in order to determine the appropriateness of their actions. They show conformity to the group's expectations as well as loyalty to the groups' norms.

3. Level 3: post conventional stages

At this level the person's moral cognition transcends the higher level due to their ability to incorporate impartial reasoning standards such universal ethical principles.

The level of moral cognitive development will influence the person's ability to integrate moral criteria in their professional discretion. As a result, it is fundamental to develop moral cognitive ability through a systematic learning approach. Learning refers to some kind of positive change or doing something better than before (Lewin, 1952: 65). Hence, the ability to make moral reasoning can be improved through a suitable learning mode (Maclagan, 2003 and Desjardin and Diedrich, 2003).

Method

This study that leads to this article had been conducted on a sample of 34 senior students enrolled to the program of the Developmental Science of Faculty of Social Sciences of the National University of Malaysia. The students have completed most of their technical development courses. During the final semester, the students are required to take the Ethics and Development course for 14 weeks.

The questionnaire is divided into two parts and enclosed with three articles related to development conflict. The students were required to read the article and to answer the first part of the questionnaire which concern on their moral awareness level. The scale ranged from (1) totally agree to (5) totally disagree. The selected cases have been obtained from the local daily newspaper which covers three issues:

1. The collapse of a new bridge which killed two children

The dilemma is about the collapse of a newly built bridge due to discrepancies in its main structures.

2. The exploitation of foreign workers in a national project

The dilemma is about foreign workers (some of them are illegal workers) lamenting for not receiving their salary for some period of time.

3. The consequences from the new dam development which involve the acquisition of the local people's land

The dilemma is about some negative impacts of the project to the local residents' lives and properties.

The second part of the questionnaire consists of items that measure three levels of moral cognitive development (preconventional, conventional, and postconventional). The scale ranged from (1) totally agree to (5) totally disagree. Descriptive analysis has been used to describe the collected data.

Analysis

Moral awareness

Cronbach's Alpha for the ten-item moral awareness measurement is 0.68. In addition, factor analysis was used to identify the underlying factors contained in the data. The factor analysis result is shown in Table 1.

Five factors had been extracted based on the eigenvalues which are greater than 1. The five-factor model contributes about 80.4% of variances in the students' moral awareness. The rotated component matrix is shown in Table 2. zBased on the rotated component matrix, each item can be reclassified into classes of factors as in Table 3.

The mean score of the students' moral awareness is 40.4 with a standard deviation of 3.9. The minimum score is 31, while the maximum score is 50 (see Table 4). The result indicates the students' moral awareness is considerably at a high level. The results for each item are shown in Table 5.

Based on Table 5, most students showed their disagreement to most of the statements. As a result, it explains that their moral awareness is at a high level. However, a different pattern was found in factor 5. Under factor 5, the item stated as “the issue in the particular case is merely a violation of rules/laws” has gained 53% of cumulative response between “totally agree” and “maybe agree”. This shows that the respondents are unaware of the ethical elements contained in the issue. This situation is as expected, since ethics involve subjective and gray areas. The ambiguity could later inhibit their ability to either proceed with moral reasoning or integrate ethical principles in resolving the issues. This finding shows that more normative and applied inputs must be included in the teaching of developmental ethics. The students need to be exposed to more real case studies in order to stimulate their moral cognitive ability.

An independent sample of Mann–Whitney *U* test was also conducted to examine differences in moral awareness across gender groups. The result of the Mann–

Table 1 Total variance explained

Component	Initial eigenvalues		
	Total	Percentage of variance	Cumulative variance
1	2.953	29.529	29.529
2	1.685	16.855	46.384
3	1.327	13.266	59.650
4	1.072	10.720	70.369
5	1.002	10.019	80.388

Table 2 Rotated component matrix

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
MA1	0.181	0.813	0.077	-0.169	-0.346
MA2	0.243	0.668	0.538	0.026	0.127
MA3	-0.089	0.836	-0.022	0.260	0.120
MA4	-0.008	0.115	0.122	0.933	0.079
MA5	0.718	-0.233	0.099	0.359	-0.268
MA6	0.175	-0.055	0.087	0.061	0.909
MA7	0.797	0.207	0.069	-0.216	0.133
MA8	0.795	0.119	0.184	0.027	0.303
MA9	0.175	0.030	0.818	0.247	-0.072
MA10	0.045	0.080	0.847	-0.055	0.139

Whitney test shows insignificant differences among the male and female students with a p value of 0.463 ($P>0.05$) and thus proves that the students are of the same

Table 3 Factor and items

Factors and items	Summary description of factors
Factor 1:	
1. The main issue of the article has nothing to do with moral	Inability to discern moral issues or to justify moral applications for particular situations
2. The circumstances do not require moral evaluation	
3. Moral standard is irrelevant in the evaluation of development actions	
Factor 2:	
1. The issue does not attract my attention	Degree of self-interest, egocentric perspective, and incapability to feel sympathy for the misfortune of others
2. The issue in the articles does not touch my emotion	
3. I think the issue is unimportant to me	
Factor 3:	
1. I should not bother about such cases as it was beyond the scope of my study	Reluctant to view things in a holistic manner
2. The issue has nothing to do with the developmental studies	
Factor 4:	
1. I think the issues are unimportant as they do not involve me or my immediate family's stake	Selfishness
Factor 5:	
1. The issue in the particular cases are merely a violation of rules/laws	Ignorant on the relevancy of the application of ethical principles in the development discretion/evaluation

Table 4 Descriptive analysis of students' moral awareness

	Moral awareness
N	34
Mean	14.47
Standard deviation	2.09
Minimum	31.00
Maximum	50.00

group in relation with their moral awareness. Table 6 shows the result according to the three levels of moral development.

The mean of 14.47 in the preconventional moral cognitive level shows that the respondents possess a higher level of moral cognitive development which transcends the line of egocentric basis. The high mean of 18.97 in the conventional level demonstrates that the students have exceeded the limit of group-centric perspective. However, despite the satisfactory level of preconventional and conventional cognition, the students are yet to reach the postconventional moral development level. As a result, their moral development ranged in the continuum of the latter stage of the conventional level to the early stage of the postconventional level. Thus, this explains the ambiguity shown in factor 5 of the moral awareness in Table 6. In addition, the Mann–Whitney U test also revealed that the level of moral cognition was indifferent between the male and female groups ($p=0.132$). A Spearman's correlation analysis was conducted in order to evaluate the relationship between each stage of moral cognitive level. Table 7 shows the result of the correlation analysis.

Table 5 Summary of item frequencies, $n=30$

Factors and items	Agree	Disagree
Factor 1:		
The main issue of the article has nothing to do with moral	14.7%	85.3%
The circumstances do not require moral evaluation	14.7%	85.3%
Moral standard is irrelevant in the evaluation of development actions	23.5%	76.4%
Factor 2:		
The issue does not attract my attention	32.4%	67.6%
The issue in the article does not touch my emotion	23.5%	76.4%
I think the issue is unimportant to me	14.7%	85.3%
Factor 3:		
I should not bother about such case as it is beyond the scope of my study	1.9%	97.1%
The issue has nothing to do with developmental studies	11.7%	88.2%
Factor 4:		
I think the issues are unimportant because they do not involve me or my immediate family's stake	9%	91.1%
Factor 5:		
The issue in the particular cases are merely a violation of rules/laws	52.9%	47.1%

Table 6 Descriptive analysis on stages of moral cognitive development

	Preconventional	Conventional	Postconventional
N	34	34	34
Mean	14.47	18.97	23.00
Standard deviation	2.09	3.44	4.70
Minimum	9.00	8.00	3.00
Maximum	20.00	27.00	30.00

From Table 7, a correlation between preconventional and conventional stages of moral cognitive development was also found ($r=0.342$, $p=0.048$).

Therefore, it proves that moral cognitive development follows a certain sequence of development stages. Those with a preconventional level of moral cognitive condition most probably move to another stage which is the conventional level.

Discussion

This study shows that the students have reached the basic ability to identify ethical dilemma. Their moral awareness and moral cognitive abilities are indifferent across genders. However, further enrichment is needed in order to boost their moral awareness to a higher level which refer to the postconventional moral cognitive level. The postconventional level would allow for integration of universal moral basis in their moral reasoning. This is crucial as Malaysia is undergoing a tremendous development progress; thus, ethical consideration is essential to balance any conflict especially when dealing with minorities and vulnerable group issues.

Moral awareness and moral cognition can be developed through proper learning approaches. Development of moral cognitive ability is necessary to enable the person to move from a basic moral cognitive level (preconventional) to a higher reasoning level (conventional), as recognized by the correlation between the preconventional and conventional stages of moral cognitive development. It shows that the students manage to assimilate their group norms following their previous learning experiences. However, the transition from conventional to postconventional stages of moral

Table 7 Spearman's correlation analysis on moral cognitive development

		Preconventional	Conventional	Postconventional
Preconventional	Correlation coefficient	1.00	0.342*	0.143
	<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>		0.048	0.419
Conventional	Correlation coefficient	0.342*	1.00	0.117
	<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>	0.048		0.511
Postconventional	Correlation coefficient	0.143	0.117	1.00
	<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>	0.419	0.511	

* Significance at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

cognitive development will be very much dependent on the ability of current and future developmental studies curriculum and learning approaches to inculcate the adoption of universal moral values among the students.

In order to raise the level of moral sensitivity, the students must be exposed to development conflicts more frequently with some effort to provoke their ethical evaluations and reactions. For example, there are many ethical dilemmas encountered in our development process such as infrastructure advancement at the expense of minorities' rights (interests), attainment of economic achievement at the expense of social justice, and promotion of commercial objective at the expense of community heritage or ordinary people's rights. The students must be exposed (either directly or indirectly) to the development dilemma in order to evoke their ethical sensitivity and moral reasoning capability which are the first two important processes in Rest's ethical decision-making model (see Fig. 1). This is in line with the adoption of Kolb's experiential learning approach as explained by Ahmad Rafli et al. (2010). Therefore, case studies are a promising method to be used in order to expose the students indirectly to development ethical conflict as well as to promote analytical thinking in solving the case problems where it was widely adopted in business ethics teaching (Jordan 2009; Lowry 2003; Butterfield et al, 2000; Maclagan, 2003 and DesJardins and Diedrich, 2003). The use of case studies are more relevant due to most development conflicts being confidential in nature and most Malaysian organizations/agencies still being reluctant (unwilling) to share (or disclose) their internal information with outsiders.

Limitations and suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has its limitations. Firstly, the students may answer the questionnaire in light of social desirability bias. According to Trevino and Weaver (2003), study on ethics could not avoid the social desirability bias. The respondents may answer the questions in an ideal manner and attempt to abide with their group/society's norms rather than exposing their true reactions. The expected social desirability bias had been minimized by assuring anonymity to all respondents.

Secondly, this study is an early attempt of its kind in the discipline of developmental studies. As a result it only included a cross-sectional data from 34 students who enrolled into the program in a particular year. Future studies are encouraged to replicate the investigation thoroughly by including a longitudinal observation such as comparison of moral awareness before and after enrolling in the course or before and after graduation. In addition, future studies could also involve large pools of social sciences students as moral awareness is important for all fields and careers. Future studies should also examine the impact of moral intensity on one's moral awareness, as different intensities would pose different levels of moral awareness. For example, main issues portrayed in different modes of presentation may potentially capture different levels of moral awareness. The similar issue presented to different types of audience backgrounds (for example, between development students versus nondevelopment students such as business students) may also create differences in their moral awareness due to the closeness of an issue to particular agents. Thus, it is expected that different fields would have different moral issues emphasized and

therefore, future studies should firstly understand their target respondents' background before selecting appropriate cases.

Conclusion

Moral awareness is essential in order to maintain the quality of future development policies (actions). Too many rampant developments have resulted in negative consequences due to the agents' ethical ignorance. As far as true development is concerned, developmental curricular must emphasize the teaching of ethics in the normative mode rather than philosophical as well as selecting the appropriate teaching (pedagogical) approach. The development students must be exposed to the real development cases which enable them to have a clearer picture on the development–ethical conflict and to provide a critical opinion regarding its solutions. It does not mean that the students must be exposed directly through a participatory observation (especially when direct observation is impractical to be executed), but the exposition is considerably sufficient if it is made through the reflective exposition mode.

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