

SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW OF MORAL CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL INTERACTION AMONG STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper focussed on the review of moral character development from sociological perspective. It adopted a literature review approach to examine moral character disposition among students as conceived by scholars in the field of psychology such as Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg among others. It was interesting that moral virtues and habits remain conceptually unclear in the realm of psychological science. Examined against the determinants of moral character development which include ethical sensitivity, ethical judgement, ethical motivation, and ethical action, moral character development was found to be influenced by external factors such as peers and family as well as environment which function in time, situation and culture and these functional determinants underlie the processes of social conditions that account for the moral character dispositions among students. Thus, the emergence of patterns of response in social interaction over time becomes the primary evidence of the student's moral character development. It was therefore recommended that teachers should be aware that situation and culture are social context that can influence moral character development as this would enable them manage the moral character development among diverse students in the school.

Keywords:

Social Interaction, Moral Character, Education, Students

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Introduction

Generally, the relevance of moral character development in day-to-day human social activities cannot be overemphasized. It is an important aspect of individual's social action at the micro level of society, influenced by factors such as the family, school, and peers among other social groups (Fang, 2020; Mitchell, 2015). It influences how individuals engage with their

society/communities (Zhu, Shek & Yu, 2022). While there are several conceptual frameworks on moral character development, specifically from philosophical and psychological perspectives, literature on sociological perception of how moral character development entwined around social interactions appears to be scanty. This paper therefore aimed to synthesize the existing perceptions on moral character development in order to show how moral character development is shaped by the inherent elements of social interactions.

Understanding the Concept of Moral Character Development

Moral character development is a concept that has continued to generate great interest among various scholars due to its ideological perspectives. For instance, Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) have offered a traditional definition of moral character to involve a manifestation of certain personality *traits* called *virtues* that dispose one to *habitual* courses of action. They however posit that traits, virtues and habits are conceptually unclear in the realm of psychological science, and that this has led to an over-emphasis on strict behaviourism in psychological programmes of character education. Despite the unclear conceptualization of the phenomenon, Diener, Lucas and Cummings, (2019) have suggested that character traits differ among individuals and that it is a function of time, situation and culture.

Perspectives of Moral Character

Scholars have offered a varied perception of moral character development by stressing rather on what might likely be the attributes of moral character. These perceptions are categorised into moral value relativism and universal moral values. However, while the liberal scholars favour moral relativism, the conservatives subscribes to universal moral values because they are assumed to be applicable to all who are similarly situated in any culture and group (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). The attributes of universal moral character dispositions are said to be prescriptive in nature in that people are told what they ought to do and they generally override other kinds of judgments such as one's personal preferences. For instance, while Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) perceive moral character to involve a manifestation of certain personality *traits* called *virtues* that dispose one to *habitual* courses of action, they however posit that traits, virtues and habits are conceptually unclear in the realm of psychological science. The authors submitted that the divergent view about moral character has led to an over-emphasis on strict behaviourism in psychological programmes of character education.

Piaget's Perspective of Moral Character Development

Piaget was one of the earliest proponents of moral character development who observed that the perception of morality among individual groups changes over time (Cherry & Gans, 2020). The author had earlier perceived moral development as a product of motive and completed action (McLeod, 2024) of an individual who attains an ideal reciprocity otherwise referred to as 'autonomous morality' level. In the contemporary society, it can be observed that the perception of being moral continues to change over time across cultures. For instance, we see certain practices like homosexuality and lesbianism activities that were considered as moral taboos in the time past being socially and morally accepted in certain cultures. Yet, such permissive practices are not always generally acceptable among all the various groups of

society. That is why the concern of social interactionists, for instance, about moral character development is not about the completed moral actions but the processes.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Perception of Moral Character Development

Lawrence Kohlberg postulated a moral character development that is based on moral judgment of values of right and wrong (Kurt, 2020). According to this perspective, moral character development entails the stage at which a student expresses fear of consequences of actions and inactions. In other words, the student anticipates punishment/sanction on the one hand and reward and commendation on the other hand – a more of appeal to token economy strategy. Sociologists however generally advocate for sanctions in order to maintain social order and social integration in the society. For instance, students who have an ideal moral upbringing are expected to act, not out of fear of consequences of an action, but in consistency with what they have been instructed. Thus, Kohn (2015) stresses that attempt at moral character development should be without inducement in order to avoid what is termed “self-defeating strategy”. Accordingly, Altikulac (2016) succinctly perceive a moral individual as someone who is not only honest but also diligent, obedient, and patriotic because these virtues reside in the affective domain.

Determinants of Essential Elements of Moral Character Development

The determinants of the essential elements of moral character development are perceived to be inherent in moral self-relevance (Bian, Li, Sun, Deng, Li, Zang, & Yan, 2019) and they include ethical sensitivity, ethical judgement, ethical motivation, and ethical action. These moral character elements are influenced by external factors such as peers and family as well as environment. Ethical sensitivity takes into cognizance the individual's moral disposition towards self, friends, and strangers in terms of exhibition of moral justice and care orientation under cultural value conditions. Ethical judgement entails knowing the right and doing the right irrespective of cultural or individual differentiation (Gibbs, 2010). Ethical motivation defines the individual's moral character disposition which emanate from empathy and compassion while, ethical action entails the ability to follow through on moral decisions. Thus, moral character is the interpenetration of habits which can be read through the medium of individual acts (Diener, Lucas & Cummings, 2019) as well as the ability to eliminate barriers to maximising resources and goal attainment (Dawd, 2017).

The review thus far suggests that irrespective of the divergent views about moral character, the phenomenon is not only predictable, but can be moderated. Yet, there are divided views about whether moral character is inherent or a result of social interaction. Notwithstanding, the sociological perspective holds that moral character disposition is a reflection of the role model that is imitated. Thus, it could be reasonable to suggest that the emergence of patterns of response in social interaction over time becomes the primary evidence of the student's moral character development. For instance Banicki (2017) maintains that character is a complex psychological concept, that entails the capacity to think about right and wrong, experience moral emotions (guilt, empathy, compassion), engage in moral behaviours (sharing, donating to charity, telling the truth), believe in moral good (honesty, altruism, responsibility) and other

characteristics that support moral functioning. It is crystal clear that character assumes perspective taking, it is developmental, and it begins with the young at home interacting with parents, family members, and friends. Hence, the young develop the habits, skills, and virtues/vices of character, good and bad, formal and informal, by observation, imitation, repetition, reading, writing, and experiences encountered in families, schools, groups, and the culture in which they live.

Theories of Moral Development

The use of theory as a general body of ideas to explain a phenomenon cannot be overemphasized. In order to have in-depth understanding of moral character development, a number of theories are reviewed. These theories include Robert Merton's strain theory, cognitive-moral development theory, social cognitive theory of moral thought and action, and integrated ethical education theory of moral character development.

Robert Merton's Strain Theory

Merton's five stages of goal-attainment for individuals in society is viewed in this review as constituting important aspects of moral character that individuals eventually develop. Merton maintains that individuals experience a state of emotional disturbance known as strain when they are not able to achieve their culturally and socially-acceptable goals through socially-acceptable means (Nirula, Mofitt & Cena, 2022). Merton argues that when individuals experience strain, as a result of their inability to attain their set goals through culturally and socially accepted means, they tend to take either of the five available options which include, conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion (Nirula, Mofitt & Cena, 2022).

There is no doubt that each of the categorization of the means to relieve the strain individuals experience in society describes the various character dispositions observed among individuals and groups in society. It is the expressed view of this paper that Merton's perspective can be applied to explain the social vices observed in schools such as, examination malpractices and cultism. However, whether or not Merton's perspective is sufficient to explain all forms of immoral character disposition in society remains a matter of empirical enquiry.

Cognitive-Moral Development

One of the leading theorists of cognitive moral development was Lawrence Kohlberg (Kurt, 2020b) who built his perspective based on the cognitive development understandings that was introduced by Piaget together with Kantian concepts of justice. Kohlberg identified six stages in the development of moral reasoning. The six stages were grouped into three major levels to indicate the progressions through the stages as they reflect cognitive development in the understanding of moral issues. The stages progress from pre-conventional level to conventional level and to post-conventional level. The progression from one level to the other depends on the widening cognitive ability of the individual to understand the perspective of others from their actions. At the Pre-conventional level for instance, moral reasoning is characterized by a concrete, egocentric perspective.

However, individuals at the conventional level appear to gain the ability to understand the perspectives of others as well as having an understanding of the norms and laws that are necessary for society to function effectively. At the post-conventional level, moral reasoning is based on an understanding of the principles of justice and social cooperation that underlie the norms and laws of society. Most students at the secondary school level are expected to operate at this stage of moral reasoning. There appear to be two key concepts, rooted in a Kohlbergian framework that aligns with sociological perspective of symbolic interactionists that will assist in developing an understanding of moral reasoning in students. First, symbolic interactionists hold that people construct their framework for reasoning about moral issues through their interactions with others and these interactions are shaped by their level of cognitive development (Sule, 2010).

Integrated Ethical Education Theory

Attempt has been made to accommodate the divergent assumptions of moral character development such that the views could be complementary rather than opposing to each other. Narvaez's (2006) theory of integrated moral education is one of the theoretically elaborated merger attempts into the enquiry of moral character development. Using the integrated ethical education theory, Narvaez formulated four ethical skills with focus on reasoning and knowledge expertise. The author categorized the formulated four ethical skills as determining, solving, prioritizing, and staying on task (Narvaez, 2006). Furthermore, the theory was applied in the enquiry on moral character development using social psychology's insights on the ubiquity of automatic processes. Accordingly, Narvaez posits that a moral expert is someone who can morally reason and make decisions quickly and automatically. However, there have not been many studies, if any, about how automatic moral judgments or the automatic activation of attitudes should fit into the intervention on moral character development (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008b).

Nevertheless, Narvaez's (2006) approach, similar with Kohlberg's just communities, acknowledges the importance of the social environment of moral development, but the development itself, that is, from moral novice to moral expert, is strictly individualistic. Thus, in considering moral character development, the most contentious issue is to determine, for instance, whether students' intuitive moral reactions should be based on in-group, authority and purity cultivated, or should intervention in moral character development consist in exposing students to how to suppress and reason past such reactions? The moral concerns covered by Narvaez are overwhelmingly dyadic - That is, teaching the individual student how to treat others fairly and avoid harming them. For instance, Narvaez cites the findings of evolutionary psychology, which opined that communal values are embedded in our genetic code and species memory (Narvaez, 2006, p. 722). In addition, another skill, Connecting with others, could qualify if used in more than a dyadic way. It is the expressed view of this paper that connecting with others, could be a function of social interaction intervention.

Overview of Social Interaction

It is generally agreed that human existence would almost be impossible without social interaction. Ironically, despite the relevance of social interaction, most people find it difficult to coexist with others. Interestingly, people learn how to relate well or not to relate well with others from what they perceive of others. This aspect of the human nature makes social interaction an interesting sociological subject. In sociology, social interaction is a dynamic sequence of social actions between individuals or groups who modify their actions and reactions due to actions by their interaction partners (Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012). It is the process by which people act and react to those around them. Social Interaction is two or more people taking one another into account in building up their relationship. In a nutshell, social interaction includes those acts people perform toward each other and the responses they give in return. Social interactions can be differentiated into accidental, repeated, regular and regulated (Ajuzie, 2011; Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012). The main goal of sociology is to explain social action which is anything people are conscious of doing because of other people.

The concept of social interaction was propounded by a renowned sociologist, Erving Goffman in 1959 in a new field of study called micro sociology also known as social interaction (Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012). In the study, Goffman used theatre as an analogy for social interaction in which it was observed that people's interaction showed patterns of cultural scripts. In the theatre role performance, it was assumed that an individual may not know what part to play in a given situation and may therefore have to improvise the role as the situation unfolds. Hence, social interaction includes a large number of behaviours such that in sociology according to Brouwer, Drummond, and Willis, (2012), interaction is usually divided into five categories. These are: exchange, competition, cooperation, conflict and accommodation.

Exchange according to Brouwer, Drummond, and Willis, (2012), is the most basic type of social interaction which occurs whenever people interact in an effort to receive a reward or a gesture in return for their actions; in this case, we can say that an exchange has taken place. Exchange is a social process whereby social behaviour is exchanged for some type of reward for equal or greater value (Ajuzie, 2011). The reward can be material (a token of biscuit or pen and paper for good character) and nonmaterial (a clap or standing ovation from classmates for an outstanding conduct). Another category of social interaction is competition. Competition as a concept of social interaction is a process by which two or more people attempt to achieve a goal that only one can attain. Most sociologists view competition as a positive thing as it can motivate people to achieve set goals.

It can be inferred that when applied among students, competition could bring about the best in students both in the areas of their academic achievements and their social activities such as debate or essay and quiz competitions. However, when competition is not regulated, it can lead to social alienation and psychological stress (Omeghi, Brockmeier & Grazzani, 2014; Gibbs, Staiger, Gold, Johnson, Macfarlane, et al, 2012) which could result in lack of cooperation in academic and social relationships. It can equally result in inequality and conflict which is often

a common feature, particularly, in games of football involving inter-school competitions among students. Competition is said to be a common feature encompassing social relationships that go on in the economic and political sphere of society and it is said to be the bedrock of the capitalist economic system and all forms of democratic system of government (Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012).

Cooperation as a concept of social interaction no doubt, is an important aspect of the social process in which people, particularly students, work together to achieve shared goals (Legoff & Sherman, 2006; Ajuzie, 2011). The goal of schooling is academic success which every student strives to attain. There is no doubt that in the efforts to attain academic success students encounter certain difficulties which require working with other students in order to resolve such academic challenge. Cooperation is one aspect of social interaction that requires skills from students in order for them to get along with fellow students especially in meeting up with social and academic challenges. But more often than not students do not explore the virtue of cooperation in terms of attaining academic goal probably due to their self-esteem or that they see those students who can help them as unapproachable. Cooperation as a social process invariably involves combined efforts in getting things done (Legoff & Sherma, 2006) and this can be a basic virtue for the overall attainment of the school academic and moral standard as no group or organization can achieve its goals without cooperation from its members.

Oftentimes, cooperation works together with other forms of interaction, such as competition. For example, in the game of football, a team will work together (cooperation) while attempting to achieve a victory (a goal that only one team can attain). The element of competition which is embedded in cooperation is a concern for the intervention of students in this aspect of social interaction in order to maximize the benefits of cooperation especially in the school. This is because the effectiveness of cooperation as a component of social interaction rests on the students understanding of the roles expected of them as they engage in their academic and social activities. Cooperation can help to stabilize the moral and academic expectations of the school.

While the main emphasis in competition is on achieving the goal, conflict emphasises on defeating the opponent. Conflict is the deliberate attempt to control a person by force, to oppose someone, and to harm another person. Unlike competition, conflict has few rules of conduct, and even these rules are often ignored. Conflict may range from the deliberate snubbing of a classmate to the killing of a perceived enemy. Although conflict is often thought of as negative, some sociologists have pointed out that conflict serves some useful purposes. For example, conflict is said to have functional role of reinforcing group boundaries and strengthening group loyalty (Bochatay, Bajwa, Blondon, Perron, Cullati, & Nendaz, 2019) by focusing attention on an outside threat. Focusing on an outside threat also draws attention away from internal problems. In addition, conflict can also lead to social change by bringing problems to the forefront and forcing opposing sides to seek solutions.

Accommodation as a form of social interaction is a state of balance between cooperation and conflict (Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012; Ajuzie, 2011). When applied to the school, the type of social interaction that goes on in the school generally among members of the school community can be described as that of the members merely accommodating one another. For instance, students are in school because they have enrolled to be in school under certain regulations. Likewise, the categories of staff in school are there because they are under obligation since they have signed some contract with the education authority or the government. Both students and staff are bound by certain rules and regulations and any violation will necessarily result in conflict situation. The ensuing conflict could be query for erring staff and suspension/expulsion for erring students. In whichever situation, the role of mediation which is a social interaction skill comes into play in order to reach a compromise.

Importance of Social Interaction

The importance of social interaction in society cannot be overemphasized. Social interaction is one of the key sociological insights for the understanding all forms of human actions in society (Lieberman, 2013; Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012; Ajuzie, 2011). Indeed, it is said that without social interaction we may as well not talk of having a society in which humans inhabit because social interaction processes involve exchange of communication between two people or groups of more people. Put succinctly, what we refer to as 'society' is made up of social activities of many different kinds of which the most basic of all these human needs is the need to understand and be understood. When people do not understand themselves by what they communicate with each other, then living together as distinct groups become almost impossible. According to Lieberman (2013) being social and connecting with others is as fundamental a human need as food, shelter, and water. This is because we feel social pain, such as the loss of a relation.

The importance of social interaction is equally stressed by the fact that human beings are social animals who love to live among people and keep in touch with each other (Lieberman, 2013). Social interaction is an exchange between two or more individuals and it can be a building block of society (LibreTexts, 2021). Hence it uses symbols to communicate the expectations of a given society to those new to it. Social interaction can be studied between groups of two (dyads), three (triads) or larger social groups (LibreTexts, 2021). By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live. Although in today's modern world of technology, information and technology gadgets are fast replacing face-to-face social interaction. But in spite of this social change, there is a gap that remains to be bridged, which can only be realized by human physical contact.

Human social milieu such as, the school, workplace, family, and others where face-to-face social interaction is inevitable has not ceased to exist (LibreTexts, 2021; Brouwer, Drummond, & Willis, 2012). Such social environments show just how important direct social interactions can impact on individuals' perception and their overall wellbeing. Equally, the importance of social interaction can be stressed on the fact that it provides for all facets of human challenges and conflicts that could occur in the course of exchange of actions that go on among groups in

society. Goffman posits that the seemingly insignificant forms of social interaction are of major importance in sociology and should not be overlooked. Social interaction provides great opportunity to understand various kinds of people, their mannerisms, and personalities, as well as their thought processes among others. Social interaction develops better understanding of human perspectives and attributes.

Social interaction can also be a great tool for development of self-confidence and self-esteem. Social interaction can be a great means of maximizing emotional, physical and academic support particularly among students. For instance, a student who is emotionally down and upset with something can get relief by engaging in interaction with his/her colleagues who can help him/her overcome the difficult period. The group can cheer up and provide the required encouragement needed to bring back the zeal and enthusiasm of the affected student. Usually, students come to school in a group of two, or three or more groups; they play games with each other, engage in a group discussion, are involved in clubs and societies, they go for picnic and excursions. These are some of the means social interaction can be channelled towards moral character development of students.

Conclusion

Moral character development is shaped by the inherent elements of social interactions which characterize the day-to-day activities engaged in by individuals, particularly students. Although it is psychologically perceived as virtues which are inherent, and as motive and completed action, moral character disposition is sociologically observable only when individuals are engaged in social interaction among groups/communities to which they belong. Notwithstanding that moral character traits differ among individuals, it is a function of time, situation and culture which underlie the processes of social conditions that can account for the moral character development particularly among student groups over time.

Recommendations

1. It is important for teachers and school managers to understand that moral character development is influenced by social interactions, and by so doing, they would be able to moderate students' behaviours by emphasising on behaviours that are desired and curtailing those abhorred in the school and the larger society.
2. It is also important for teachers to be aware that situation and culture are social context that can influence moral character development as this will enable them manage the moral character development among diverse students in the school.

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