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Association of Normative Moral Character and Prosocial Behavior – Moderators of Personal Moral Character and Sociodemographic Factors

Abstract

Compliance with social norms is deemed one of the important drives for prosocial behavior. However, studies on the bystander effect hint at another possibility of not complying with prosocial norms due to responsibility diffusion. Additionally, little is known about how individuals' susceptibility to normative influences in prosociality varies according to personal attributes. Thus, this study tested the relationship between perceived moral-character norm (i.e., normative moral character) of general peer and prosocial behaviors and moderating roles of personal moral character and sociodemographic variables. Based on a sample of 2,474 secondary-school students, we found a significant interplay of normative moral character, personal moral character, and sociodemographic backgrounds. Specifically, among female or

poor students who had relatively negative moral characters, the better they evaluated their peer's moral character to be, the less they exhibited prosocial behavior. This study sheds light on a nuanced relationship between normative moral character and prosocial behavior.

Keywords: Normative moral character; personal moral character; prosocial behavior; peer influence; Chinese adolescents

Introduction

Researchers have proposed multiple accounts of prosocial behavior, one of which is rooted in social norms, a collection of customary rules informing the prevalence, acceptability, and desirability of behaviors in a group or society (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; House, 2018). According to social norm theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), observing others' prosocial behavior enhances individuals' likelihood of exhibiting prosocial behavior (Nook et al., 2016). However, it remains unclear whether everyone follows the prosocial social norms. The personality perspective of morality (Fleeson et al., 2014; Morse & Cohen, 2015) posits that despite situational variations, prosocial behavior is based on a relatively stable and enduring moral character, defined as characteristics descriptive of affections, motivations, thoughts and behavior that are morally valued (Fleeson et al., 2014). These two perspectives give rise to the question of whether moral character is a factor that influences individuals' susceptibility to social norms. Despite considerable research investigating the effects of social norms and moral

character on prosocial behavior separately (e.g., Nook et al., 2016; Reimer et al., 2009), their unique effects and their interactive effects remain open for exploration.

Furthermore, social norm studies have focused mainly on behavioral norms as a predictor of prosocial behavior (e.g., Lay et al., 2020; Nook et al., 2016). However, decision of conducting prosocial action or not may not be made according to others' behavior since their behavior might not be present. We contend that people may infer the social norms based on their understanding of the moral character of others (i.e., are others good persons or not?). Therefore, this study investigated a rarely examined social norm – moral-character norm.

Based on a large sample of secondary school students in Hong Kong, we attempted to understand the roles in predicting prosocial behavior of both normative moral characters of perceived peers (i.e., moral characters of general Hong Kong youth) and personal moral character. Adolescence is a time of increased sensitivity to peer influence and social norms (van Hoorn et al., 2016), which makes it necessary to understand how adolescents' normative perceptions of peers' moral characters affect their own prosocial behavior, and how those effects vary as a function of their personal moral character along with other sociodemographic factors.

Perception of Normative Moral Character as a Predictor of Prosocial Behavior

Social norms can be categorized into two forms: descriptive norms and injunctive norms, with the former referring to perceptions about what is and the latter referring to what

ought to be in a given society (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Descriptive norms usually inform how a typical societal member looks and what most members think and do, while injunctive norms usually convey what most members approve and disapprove of in their society (House, 2018). Prosocial behavior refers to voluntary, intentional behavior that leads to the benefit of others (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Substantial research has demonstrated that descriptive norms serve as an account necessary for prosocial behavior in samples of adults and adolescents (e.g., Nook et al., 2016; van Hoorn et al., 2016).

However, these studies conceptualized norms in the context of actions (Cialdini, 2005) and rarely considered norms about personality or character as predictors of behavior. The perceived normative character of a large group is often understood through character stereotypes, which are expectations regarding characteristics true of members in a given society or culture (Jussim et al., 2015). Much of this line of work concerns the accuracy of such descriptive norms in terms of their consistency with group-aggregated, self-reported personality (e.g., Jussim et al., 2015), leaving unclear its functional relevance to behavior. Nonetheless, Heine et al. (2008) found that perceptions of national conscientiousness (i.e., the level of conscientiousness of a typical member in one's own culture) were positively related to the pace of life at the national level, suggesting the possibility that perceived character norms reflect behavior. Therefore, instead of focusing on behavioral prosocial norms, the present

study examined the associations between adolescents' perceptions of the moral character of their peers and their prosocial behavior.

How do adolescents respond to normative moral character? According to the social norm theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), people usually tend to adjust their behavior to their perceptions of normative behaviors, because those norms indicate the popular, desired, and approved behaviors in the contexts they are situated. As for descriptive norms, imitating the typical characteristics or behaviors of peers makes adolescents more likely to receive positive social evaluation and support, and less likely to receive social criticism and rejection (Baumgartner et al., 2011). Studies have shown that adolescents who observe the prosocial behavior of peers tend to show more prosocial behavior themselves (e.g., van Hoorn et al., 2016). From this perspective, adolescents should be more likely to exhibit moral behavior if they perceive good moral character as a characteristic typical of their peers.

However, studies of the bystander effect indicate possible deviations from the social norm hypothesis. Many experimental and field studies have found that individuals' likelihood of helping decreases with the presence of other people, because they expect that others will offer help (for a review, see Fischer et al., 2011). One of the accounts is responsibility diffusion (Latané & Nida, 1981). When they perceive or anticipate that others will help, individuals feel less responsible for the event. Although there is evidence challenging the bystander effect (e.g., Philpot et al., 2020), supporting evidence from neuroimaging and behavioral studies have been

accumulating (see Hortensius & de Gelder, 2018). According to this view, adolescents are less likely to conduct moral behavior if they assume that their peers possess better moral character. Considering the contrasting views, it is necessary to empirically test the relationship between normative moral character and prosocial behavior.

Susceptibility to the Influences of Perceived Normative Moral Character

Research suggests that susceptibility to the influence of social norms may vary across individuals depending on their personal characteristics, including personality (Poškus, 2020). We posit that moral character is a plausible factor influencing people's susceptibility to normative influences. Individuals who have higher levels of moral character possess a number of traits or virtues that motivate them to conduct good deeds and enable them to execute those deeds, such as kindness and honesty. Several studies have demonstrated positive associations between personal moral character and prosocial behavior among adolescents (e.g. Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014; Reimer et al., 2009). Additionally, people who have good moral character clearly know what is right and wrong and adhere to a set of ethics and moral values (Fleeson et al., 2014; Morse & Cohen, 2015). Consequently, they are less likely to rely on norms as behavioral guides of morality. Descriptive norms may become a more effective behavioral guide when people do not possess strong good moral characters. Lay et al. (2020) provide indirect support by finding that people's willingness to donate depended on the interplay of the descriptive norms regarding donating to certain targeted groups and the

individuals' empathetic responses to those targeted groups. Thus, the present study attempted to examine both normative moral character and personal moral character as predictors of prosocial behavior and explored their interactive effects.

Furthermore, age, gender, and economic status are three potential factors that might differentiate individuals' susceptibility to social and normative influences (vs. personal standards). First, the identity development theory (Newman & Newman, 2001) suggests that conformity to peer norms increases during early and middle adolescence but declines during late adolescence, because younger individuals have a stronger need to acquire a sense of identity through affiliation with peers. Therefore, with increasing age, moral character is expected to become more directive of moral action, while normative moral character less so.

Second, according to gender role theory (Eagly, 2009), females are more susceptible to social influence than males due to the distinct social roles. The employment role makes males more likely to show independence and autonomy and to act according to personal standards, while the care-giving role makes females more likely to focus on relationships and to regulate their behavior with reference to others' expectations and evaluations. Accordingly, it is expected that the association between moral behavior and personal moral character will be stronger in males, and the association between moral behavior and normative moral character will be stronger in females.

Third, according to the social-cognitive perspective of socioeconomic status (Kraus et al., 2012), people of higher economic status are more likely than those of lower economic status to attune their behavior to social influences. Compared with the those of higher economic status, people of lower economic status's shortage of physical and psychological resources cause them to have contextualist tendencies, which are manifested in a stronger focus on other people and external social forces (Kraus et al., 2012). Therefore, it is expected that relative to better-off people, worse-off people are more likely to show moral behavior more according to normative moral character and less according to their personal moral character.

The Present Study

This study aimed to investigate the role of normative moral character in prosocial behavior as a function of the personal moral character and demographic factors (i.e., grade, gender, and economic status) among secondary-school students. Adolescence is a time of growing sensitivity to peer influence, as social orientation is shifted from parents to peers (van Hoorn et al., 2016). Therefore, in this study, we operationalized normative moral character in the context of the moral character of general peers. Based on the reasoning above, we sought to test the following hypotheses.

H1a & 1b: Based on the social norm theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), normative moral character will be positively associated with prosocial behavior (H1a). Based on the

diffusion of responsibility proposition (Latané & Nida, 1981), normative moral character will be negatively associated with prosocial behavior (H1b).

H2: Personal moral character will be positively associated with prosocial behavior.

H3: Personal moral character will moderate the association between normative moral character and prosocial behavior; specifically, when adolescents have strong (vs. weak) moral character, their perception of normative moral character will be less likely to influence their prosocial behavior.

H4a, 4b, 4c: Sociodemographic characteristics will moderate the relationship between normative moral character and prosocial behavior, with the relationship being stronger when adolescents are younger (H4a), female (H4b), and experiencing poverty (H4c).

H5a, 5b, 5c: Sociodemographic characteristics will moderate the relationship between personal moral character and prosocial behavior, with the relationship being weaker when adolescents are younger (H5a), female (H5b), and experiencing poverty (H5c).

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study is part of a project concerning the development and education regarding moral character of Hong Kong adolescents. We recruited participants from 20 local secondary schools with varying levels of academic prestige (i.e., six high-banding schools, eight medium-banding schools, and six low-banding schools)[1]. In each school, depending on its size, we

randomly selected three to five classes of students (N = 3,057). A total of 2,474 students participated in this study (mean age = 14.76, SD = 1.82; female: 1,271; Male: 1,123) with a response rate of 80.9%. Among them, 1,336 and 906 students were from junior grades (grades 7 to 9) and senior grades (grades 10 to 11), respectively. Additionally, we defined poverty in terms of receipt of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), a governmental financial aid provided to individuals or families with financial difficulty. Students who reported that their families were receiving CSSA were regarded as the ones experiencing poverty (n = 239), compared with those reporting not receiving CSSA (n =1,738). Students completed a battery of self-administered questionnaires during school hours in a classroom setting where a trained research assistant was present. School, parental, and student consent had been obtained before the survey was administered.

Instruments

Moral character. Students were asked to evaluate their own moral character using the personal moral character scale and that of Hong Kong adolescents using the normative moral character scale, basing both on a list of 25 moral traits identified as morally valued characteristics in the literature (Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Chen, 2008; Schwartz, 1992). Students reported the degree to which each moral characteristic (e.g., justness, generosity, kindness, and honesty) was true of their characters and of the characters of Hong Kong adolescents in general (1 = not true at all; 5 = highly true). We took a mean score across the 25

items to indicate overall personal moral character and normative perception of the moral character of Hong Kong adolescents, respectively, because exploratory factor analysis yielded one dominant factor (see online supplementary materials).

Prosocial behavior. Students' engagement in prosocial behavior was measured using five items derived from the Adolescent Behavior Questionnaire, developed for Hong Kong adolescents (ABQ; Ma, 1988). The students were asked to report the frequency of five prosocial acts (e.g., doing volunteering work) in the past year (0 = none; 6 = more than 10 times). We took a mean score across the five items to indicate past experience of prosocial behavior.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents descriptive information regarding the study variables. The zero-order correlations showed that personal moral character (PMC) was positively associated with normative moral character (NMC) ($r_{(2468)} = .33$, $p < .001$), and PMC ($r_{(2437)} = .24$, $p < .001$) and NMC ($r_{(2435)} = .04$, $p < .05$) were positively associated with prosocial behavior.

Main Analyses

We performed a series of path analyses using AMOS 21.0 (Arbuckle, 2012) to examine the effects of NMC and PMC on prosocial behavior. Table 2 presents the results. First, we predicted prosocial behavior using NMC, PMC, and their interactions based on the overall

sample. To control for multi-collinearity, we standardized the variables and used the standardized scores to compute the interaction term. These three predictors were allowed to be correlated. The results showed that NMC was negatively but PMC was positively associated with prosocial behavior; therefore, Hypotheses 1b and 2 were supported. The interaction effect of the two was not significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Next, we conducted multigroup path analyses to examine whether the proposed relationships varied as a function of various social groups, including grade (junior vs. senior), gender (female vs. male), and economic group (experiencing poverty vs. not experiencing poverty). Model comparison was conducted between two models. The first model involved the structural paths free to be estimated and the second model invovled the structural paths constrained to be equal across the two groups. A group difference would be identified if the constraints led to a reduction in model fit that was indexed by a significant $\chi 2$ change (Byrne, 1998). If the constraints caused no cost to the model fit, the constrained model would be chosen as the final one for interpretation.

In the model with grade as the moderator, the constraints on the effect of PMC ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.83$), NMC ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = .53$), and their interaction ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.25$; $ps > .05$) resulted in no significant reduction in model fit. The final constrained model revealed that NMC was negatively associated, but PMC was positively associated with prosocial behavior, and the

interaction effect between PMC and NMC was not significant. These associations were true for both junior- and senior-grade students. Therefore, Hypotheses 4a and 5a were not supported.

In the model with gender as the moderator, the constraints on the effect of NMC ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.16$, $p < .05$) and the interaction effects of PMC and NMC ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 6.27$, $p < .05$) resulted in a significant reduction in model fit. Therefore, we used a less-constrained model with only the effect of PMC constrained to be equal across the female and male groups. This final model revealed that in the female group, the effect of NMC was negative and significant, the effect of PMC was positive and significant, and the interaction effect was positive and significant. However, in the male group, only the effect of PMC was positive and significant. We further decomposed the interaction effect by examining the simple slope effects of the female group (see Figure 1), which showed when female students reported higher levels of PMC, NMC was not related to prosocial behavior (b = -.024, SE = .035, β = -.022; p >.05) and when female students reported lower levels of PMC, NMC was negatively associated with prosocial behavior (b = -.180, SE = .047, β = -.171; p <. 001). Therefore, Hypotheses 3, 4b, and 5b were supported.

Similarly, in the model with poverty as a moderator, the constraints on the effect of NMC ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.06$, $p < .05$) and the interaction effects of PMC and NMC ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 26.35$, $p < .001$) resulted in a significant reduction in model fit. Therefore, we used a less-constrained model with only the effect of PMC constrained to be equal across the groups. Specifically, in

the poverty group, the effect of NMC was negative and significant, and the effects of both PMC and the interaction effect were positive and significant. In the non-poverty group, only the effect of PMC was positive and significant. The analysis of simple slope effects (see Figure 1) showed that when students experiencing poverty reported higher levels of PMC, NMC was not related to prosocial behavior (b = .101, SE = .085, β = .092; $p > .05$) and when students experiencing poverty reported lower levels of PMC, NMC was negatively associated with prosocial behavior (b = - .490, SE = .098, β = -.449; $p < .001$). Therefore, Hypotheses 3, 4c, and 5c were supported.

Discussion

Together with previous studies on adolescents (e.g., Marino et al., 2016), the present study suggests that adolescents behave with reference to both internal personal attributes and external social influences. Adolescents who have better moral character reported more prosocial behavior, which is consistent with the results of previous studies that linked moral self-attributes to prosocial behavior (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Fraser, 2014; Reimer et al., 2009). However, the relationship between perceived normative moral character and prosocial behavior is in contrast with the social norm theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

We unfolded the deviance from norms in female and underprivileged adolescents, especially those with relatively weaker moral characters. When it comes to good normative moral character, female and underprivileged adolescents, particularly those with weak moral

characters, may interpret it as an excuse to pass the responsibility to others. This phenomenon can still be understood in terms of gender role theory (Eagly, 2009) and the social-cognitive perspective of socioeconomic status (Kraus et al., 2012), respectively. Female adolescents might be concerned about their ability to conduct prosocial actions in public (measured in this study), which requires greater assertive qualities crucial to the male gender role. Previous research has found that males are more helpful than females when it comes to situations that call for greater initiative and assertiveness (Eagly, 2009). In the case of poor adolescents, financial deficiency might make them more concerned about the physical or psychological resource invested in these prosocial actions, therefore making them more likely to adopt a responsibility-free interpretation. Fortunately, good moral character may counteract such negative social influences. When adolescents possess high levels of moral character, their engagement in prosocial actions may not be affected by how moral or immoral they consider their peers to be. Adding to the literature documenting the boundary conditions of bystander effects or responsibility diffusion (see Fischer et al., 2011), our findings suggest the need to consider how personal moral character, moral-character norms, and demographic background interplay in the prediction of responsibility diffusion in prosocial involvement.

Altogether, these findings point to a need to understand normative influence on prosocial behavior as a function of personality and sociodemographic factors. Different responses to social norms might be hidden if these personal factors are not considered. In

addition, moving beyond prior studies that documented the accuracy of the perceived shared characteristics of typical members of a given society or culture (Jussim et al., 2015), this is the first study linking normative perception to individual behavior. Indeed, the behavioral cues of others are not always present in a decision-making scenario, and thus people likely refer to others' characters, which represent a certain pattern of behavioral responses to different situations. This study opens up a new direction that uses descriptive norms about personality or character as an explanatory factor in prosocial behavior.

The current study is subject to several notable limitations, each indicating an important avenue for future research. First, the cross-sectional design with self-report renders unclear the causality in the relationship between variables. Reverse causality might exist because participation in prosocial activities such as voluneteering possibly changes adolescents' moral character and perception of moral norm. Also, self-report possibly involves socially desirable responses and common method bias that leads to overestimated correlations among variables. Nonetheless, Harman's Single-Factor Test (Tehseen et al., 2017) found that eight distinct factors accounted for 55.3% of the total variance of all items of variables, indicating that the common method bias in this study was not severe. Future studies will benefit from multi-informants in the reports of moral character and moral behavior as well as longitudinal cross-lagged design or experimental design (van Hoorn et al., 2016). We also suggest including social desirability as a covariate in future studies. Second, this study focuses on descriptive norms,

while little is known about whether injunctive norms confer a similar effect. These two norms may play distinct roles in guiding behavior (Baumgartner et al., 2011) and deserve further investigation. Third, it should be noted that the current study does not probe moral identity, as it is debatable whether the definition of moral character should include an identity component (see Cohen & Morse, 2014; Reimer et al., 2009). It is challenging to ask adolescents to infer the moral identities of general peers. Focusing on the personality aspect of moral character makes the perceptions of personal moral character and normative moral character comparable. Nevertheless, future research may explore boundary conditions of relationship between moral identity and moral behavior.

Despite these limitations, the current study is a pioneer endeavor that includes the normative influence of moral character to explain prosocial behavior and detect individual differences in susceptibility to normative influences. By doing so, we open the study of moral character to the theories, constructs, and methodological techniques of normology, which extends our understanding of individual differences in prosocial behavior.

Footnotes

1. Hong Kong adopts a school-banding system, in which secondary schools are classified into three levels of banding (i.e., high-banding, medium-banding, and low-banding) primarily based on students' performance on the entrance examination to college (i.e., Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination). We did not performed multi-level analyses with individuals nested in the school because the random-incept model showed that intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC = .01) is very low, suggesting that school-level factors may not explain the variance in the intercept of prosocial behavior.

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